



Neighbors

Author: *Lynn Rhys*

Category: Erotic, Romance, New Adult

Description: Katrina:

I am a recluse. An introvert. I like to keep to myself and I love being in my own little world. One day maybe I'll be a cat lady. No, scratch that, I am not a cat person. Dogs? Fish? Whatever. Point is, because of my past, I don't do well with people. Then one day, in the only place outside of my home I feel comfortable, in walks a man who stops me in my tracks. Of course, he catches me red-handed staring at him. Way to go, Kat. Ugh. On his way out, he even said goodbye and get me to notice him one more time. See? This is why I don't go out. I hate the attention. And now the one place I loved and felt safe, the coffee shop's tainted. Guess I will have to just work from home now. At least I will never see him again.

Bryce:

I was going to ask the woman I loved to marry me until I caught her in bed with my best friend. So, I got as far away as I could. I moved from Florida out west. Everything was great. I was living the single life in Las Vegas, of all places. And by single life, I mean, working and just hanging out with friends. Sure, girls hit on me, but I had no desire to get wrapped up with someone else. That was right up until I met her. Not just any "her". The beauty with the emerald eyes from the coffee shop. Of all places I could have felt an attraction to another person, it had to be when I stopped to get coffee. Turns out she is also my neighbor. Fate. It has to be fate.

Neighbors is a friends to lovers romance book. 70,000+ words. This is a standalone novel with no cheating and a HEA.

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Prologue

Bryce

I survey the rest of the apartment, making sure I'm not missing anything. I've only lived here for a few months, so I don't have many things. It's a small studio apartment, which means I can see everything from the center of the room. I sigh at the thought of leaving the only city I know, Jacksonville, Florida. At least I don't have a lot to move, and I didn't need to rent a big truck. The reason I have to move makes it hard, though.

She broke me. Emma Lane broke me. The last five years had gone up in smoke. My ability to trust went right along with it. She was everything to me and she had burned it all to the ground.

Stepping into the bathroom, I check and make sure I packed everything in there. Once I finish, I move to the kitchen and do the same. When I'm absolutely sure that I have everything, I walk to the door and turn around one last time.

"Here goes nothing," I say, talking to myself and taking a deep breath.

I close the door and lock it, then walk down to the rental office and drop off the keys and sign some papers. With a final look over my shoulder at the apartment, I hop into my truck. Like I said, I had very little in the apartment. Everything I own fits snug in my pickup truck.

Emma got everything.

Except the ring. But she didn't even know that it existed. I never got the chance to ask her, and now I'm glad I didn't.

I open my glove box and pull out the little black box before opening it up and staring inside. A beautiful princess cut diamond solitaire engagement ring stares back. The same one I was going to propose to her with a few months ago. When I get to Vegas, I'll sell or pawn it. I have no use for it anymore. Fuck her.

I shove it back into the glove box and start my truck. This year should not have happened like this. I was going to ask her to marry me. We would have planned a wedding, planned our future. That was how this year should have gone. Instead, I got to plan a move and a job transfer.

On the bright side, it's the beginning of October, so the drive to Las Vegas will be a nice one. Also, since it's October, that means this year is almost over. I am so ready for this year to be over.

I pull out of the parking lot and start heading towards my new home and my new city. As I begin my drive across the country, I turn on the radio to a country station. Seems appropriate to listen to country right now. I shake my head in complete disgust at the thoughts.

My girlfriend and my best friend. I never saw it coming.

Chapter 1

Katrina

"Kat! Your drink is ready!" a barista calls from the pickup window. I walk up to the counter, passing the delicious treats that sit and tease me from their little display window. The theme here is very industrial with a bit of rustic and I love it. The walls

are decorated with reclaimed wood and metal. The ceiling is exposed and painted black. The light fixtures are simple drop down lights with Edison bulbs.

“Thank you,” I collect my vanilla latte and saunter back over to my laptop. I sit down at my spot next to the door and resume my work, humming along to the low music they’re playing over the speakers.

I love coming to OneShot Coffee to get stuff done. It’s a small place, but the atmosphere is great.

This place is made for people to just hang out. The back wall has a long counter for people to plug in and work. There’s little table tops with plush seats for people to gather and hang out. There’s also some hightop tables with stools for people to sit.

Outside they have a patio where you can enjoy the Las Vegas weather. Though, I don’t recommend it in the summer time in the Las Vegas heat.

I need a comfortable environment to do my job, as I’m a freelance book editor. So, sitting and editing pages is more enjoyable because of my surroundings. My apartment is usually where I work, but sometimes I need a change of pace.

My go to option is OneShot Coffee. Plus, they have the best avocado toast. That’s always a bonus.

My latest project is keeping me busy, and I’m truly in the zone. It’s my favorite genre: romance. You know the deal; girl meets boy, they fall in love, something happens, they break up, and then they forgive each other and live a happily ever after. You know, not actual life. There’s a good side to all this, though. My work allows me to live in imaginary worlds.

Staying single in this town is also very easy to do.

It's Las Vegas, after all. Tourists are everywhere. People can come and go so easily. Meet someone on the Las Vegas Strip one night, hit it off, then you find out he's from New York. Maybe they're here for a bachelor party for a weekend.

It's always a variation of that. Same story, different day. Like I said, it's extremely easy to stay single in this town.

My social anxiety also keeps me single.

I've had it for quite a while. Things happened to me when I was younger, and it really makes me fear being around people I don't know.

That's just one reason I like this place, OneShot Coffee. People mind their own business. I can sit in the corner and do my work, and no one will even give me a second glance. It's one of the few public places I actually enjoy going to.

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This place is my home away from home.

I'm okay with being single, too. At twenty-five, I don't really need to get married or anything. Someday, it might be nice to have someone to go home to, but it's just not in the cards right now. One day, maybe, I'll give my parents the grandkids they so desperately tell me I need to give them. One day. Maybe. Honestly, I'm still undecided.

I'm deep in my editing process when I hear the bell for the front door. Two Las Vegas Police officers walk in. I look up when they pass me and do a double take. A legit double take. Of course, like an idiot, I'm not only gawking, but my jaw is on the ground.

I blink and try to refocus on my work.

But that is absolutely impossible. Especially after hearing officer "A" laugh at officer "B." Yup, a laugh that can stop me in my tracks.

That laugh. Oh, that laugh. That deep, rough laugh that soaks into every bone in my body and gives me chills.

I look up as officer "A" laughs. At the last second, he turns and catches me staring, and my heart stops. He gives me a panty-dropping smile. My eyes go wide, and I feel my body heat rising.

Quickly, I glance back at my laptop and try to hide the blush that is definitely creeping up my neck.

Ugh. He just had to look. I feel a little nauseous. My palms grow sweaty and my breathing picks up a bit. I don't like the attention. Of course, I looked at him first. Which I would not have done, if he wasn't so fucking hot.

From the quick glimpse I got, officer "A" is a Greek god. He has dark brown hair that almost looks black. His hair's shaved on the sides but longer on the top. His shoulders are wide, and his arms look powerful. He has a chiseled jawline with lips you could kiss for hours. He's built like a warrior.

Oh, and the glimpse I had of his eyes when he caught me staring? As blue as the ocean. I could get lost staring into them.

All of this, of course, makes him look heavenly in his uniform. I've never been a fan of a guy in a uniform. Yes, I realize I'm strange. I've never been one to follow trends. A man in uniform has just never appealed to me—until now, that is. The sex appeal he radiates from across the shop now makes me a woman who likes a man in uniform. Well, at least that particular man in his uniform.

While trying to find my way back into my focus zone, I don't notice that they moved. It's only when I hear his voice that I realize they're closer to me. Out of instinct, I look up and see that they've sat at the table right next to mine. Officer "A" also took the seat that looks directly at me.

Now, that might be a complete coincidence, but since he keeps looking my way, I'm going to say it was on purpose.

His eyes. Oh, his beautiful blue eyes. I very much want to get lost in them. Before I can continue with these thoughts, I realize I'm staring right at him again. I know this because I see him smile at me.

Immediately, I look back down at the project I'm working on. Fuck. I got

caught. Under the radar, Kat. Under the freaking radar! My breathing picks up a bit, and I count to myself in order to bring my breathing back under control.

Honestly, I'm an awkward person. I haven't had the best of luck with people in my life. I've always been an outcast, so being social is just not something I'm good at.

I have friends, or rather, a friend. Vicki. On a rare occasion, she can convince me to get out, but only at places we have deemed comfortable by my standards. She truly is a saint to put up with me and my bullshit. I just hate being around people. They're cruel and will stop at nothing to cut you down and make you feel you're less than human. Your body, your hair, your clothes, anything to tear you apart.

And so, I stray from the social scene, and to be honest, I like a good book and the comfort of my own home.

Right now, I'm definitely being awkward. Mostly because I am looking at a man who defines sexy, but also because my social anxiety doesn't allow me to just be normal in the world. I can work myself up into a frenzy. I panic at the drop of a hat. Basically, I shut down. Fight or flight situations happen a lot, and I always choose flight.

Focus, Kat. I duck my head back down and return to my project. I'm not sure how long I'm working for, but I hear a shuffle near me. Reacting to the noise, I look up from my screen. Right into officer "A's" eyes. Damn it.

"Miss, have a nice day." Officer "A" nods to me as he and his partner leave OneShot.

My mouth drops open, I'm flustered, but I finally squeak out, "Um, yea. Bye." Remember, I said I was awkward? Yup. I became so panicky I couldn't even say, "Thanks, you too."

When he and his partner leave, I try to regain some sort of composure and sit back in my chair. He caught me staring at him. How embarrassing is that? Then, of course he had to say bye to me. All the people in here and he had to point out that I was staring at him by saying bye. I wrap my arms around my stomach, growing dizzy. Ok, I need to count again.

Instead of counting, though, when I close my eyes, all I can see are his eyes. Those eyes. Those blue eyes. He has me so agitated I can't think. His laugh, his eyes, his face. It's a trifecta of awesomeness that leaves me completely speechless. The other thing that comes to mind is I didn't run. I normally bolt at the first sign of being in an uneasy situation. Instead, I sat there and became locked in his orbit.

There is no way I'm going to finish working. I start packing up my laptop and all my notes and place them in my bag. After that, I walk outside to my car and decide I'm going to head over to Vicki's house for a bit before her shift at the bar, Feisty Dragon.

Vicki Newman and I became best friends in high school during our freshman year. Since then, we've been attached at the hip. We went to the same college and both majored in English. She, however, decided she didn't want to do anything with her degree and wanted to work her nights at, Feisty Dragon. It's a popular bar in the valley for locals that isn't on the Las Vegas Strip. She does well, and she's a social butterfly compared to my hermit lifestyle.

"Hey, Kat. I'm in the bathroom getting ready. I'll be out in a second." she calls out to me after I unlock the door and walk in. I have a key to her place, and she has one to mine. We also have a system to make sure neither of us ends up in compromising positions if the other one comes over while we are "hosting." Though, there are reasons I don't have to worry about that happening. Besides, she usually texts me whenever she has a conquest she's bringing home for the night. Usually, she'll text me in the morning to let me know all about it.

When you walk into Vicki's apartment, you are immediately greeted with the smells of whatever food she had been cooking that day. Vicki loves to cook. That's one of the reasons she loves this apartment. Her kitchen has an amazing stove and double oven.

Her little one bedroom apartment is an open floorplan. From the front door you can see every room but the bedroom and bathroom. A kitchen island is all that separates the kitchen from the rest of the apartment.

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Vicki's sense of style is much different than mine. She prefers more clean lines and modern styles. I'm more eclectic and if I like it, I take it and use it even if it doesn't match everything else.

"No worries. I'm just going to lie on the couch and pray for this day to be over." I throw myself onto the couch face first.

She comes out of the bathroom. "Uh, what happened?"

Sitting up, I place my hands in my head and I tell her the story about my run-in with officer "A". Also how embarrassed I was that he caught me looking and even down to the goodbye he said before he left.

She looks at me, pursing her lips, holding back any judgement. "Well, he was cute, right?"

I shake my head. "Not cute. Painfully hot as fuck. I mean, if what I could see outside his uniform was any sign," Kicking my feet up on her table, I lean my head back against the couch. "Hot. As. Fuck."

"Well, I wouldn't worry about it. I mean, he's probably used to the staring, if he's as hot as you say he is." She tilts her head to the side, flashing a smile.

I shrug. "Yeah, I guess."

The thing about Vicki is she is very confident in herself. She works at a bar and she's absolutely gorgeous. Vicki gets hit on by guys every minute of the day. She is

everything I am not. Being complete opposites, she sometimes doesn't get what I find uncomfortable. So, for her, even the idea that I was staring at officer "A" made sense, since that happens to her all the time.

"I wouldn't worry about it. He probably forgot all about it when he left." she says as she walks into her kitchen.

"Yeah, you're probably right." I get up and scroll through my phone. "I just hate being in the spotlight like that."

Vicki gives me a sympathetic look. "I know."

Why would he even have a second thought about some random weirdo in a coffee house? He wouldn't. I'm sure he and his partner got a solid laugh about the crazy OneShot Coffee girl who couldn't take her eyes off him, when they went back to their patrol vehicle. After that, I'm sure I was a fleeting thought.

Besides, I should do the same. Completely forget that hunk of a man. I mean, it's not like I will ever see him again.

Chapter 2

Bryce

There is no way to unsee them. Those beautiful emerald eyes; they were the tint of a spring clover. They were enchanting. And the woman behind those eyes? She was beautiful. I couldn't stop looking at her. When I sat down, I picked that table on purpose. I knew it would allow me to continue seeing her. Of course, I feel like a complete stalker now, but I couldn't help it. Something had pulled me to her. My mind is in the clouds as I head back to my patrol car with my partner, Austin Hardwick.

“You okay over there, Hawthorne?” Hardwick stops at the driver’s side door and raises his eyebrow at me with a slight grin.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Why?” I shoot back, annoyed at him for even asking.

“Well, you look a little like you’re out in left field. You were fine until you saw that little hottie in there. Though, I don’t blame you. She’s sexy.” He grins and whistles. “Man, she was a sexy thing.”

“She is way too young for you, old man. So, don’t even think about it.” I point at him and narrow my eyes. He is trying to get a rise out of me. It may be working.

“What? She had to be in her early twenties. That would be perfect!” He laughs and gets into the driver’s side of the police vehicle. I follow his lead and sit down on the passenger side. Austin had caught me staring at her inside OneShot, and he also knows we sat right next to her while we were waiting for our drinks. It’s obviously not lost on him I found her extremely attractive.

“Whatever, man.” I sip on my coffee, and we sit there for a minute.

Needing to get my mind off the green-eyed beauty in there, I scroll through some texts from my ex-girlfriend. Anything to pull my mind out of the clouds, and Emma’s texts could definitely bring me back down. After a couple minutes, the door shoots open. I see her come barreling out of the coffee house, looking a little flustered. She doesn’t even notice that we’re still in the parking lot.

This woman is absolutely stunning. Her black hair falls to the middle of her back, and those emerald eyes sparkle bright against the dark of her hair. She’s probably only a little over five feet tall, and she’s tiny. This one hid herself well in her oversized hoodie, trying to hide and blend in, but even I can still see she’s was absolutely beautiful. She had me mesmerized from the moment she looked up and our eyes

locked.

It's been over a month since I have moved out here, and quite a few months since I've been with anyone. Even though I've been out and about on the strip with some guys from the force, no girl has ever truly even held my attention. There hasn't been a single woman I wanted to get to know or tried to talk to that interested me.

This girl is different. I don't know how, and I don't know why. There is just something about her that roots her in my mind. Her eyes tell me something, but I just don't quite know what they're saying. There's an innocence about her, which is hard to find these days.

"Lost deep in thought over there?" Hardwick asks, breaking me out of my thoughts.

"No, just texts from my ex had me thinking." I lied. The only thing I'm thinking about is how could I find this girl again. If I came back here, would she be here? Did she come here often?

I watch her locate her car, get in, and leave. We're too far away for me to get the plates at the angle we're at. Not that I have a reason as to why I would run her plates. However, she drives a black Ford Fusion. At least I have something. I also just became a frequent patron of OneShot Coffee.

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I need to see to see this girl again. Whatever the reason, something about her drew me to her. There had been a weird fluttering in me when we locked eyes. Those eyes, those fucking beautiful eyes. Yeah, I really hope we run into each other again.

* * *

When I finish with my shift, I make my way home and throw my stuff in my bedroom. I then walk over to the bathroom and start the shower. I need to relax and unwind after the day I had, and it had nothing to do with work or the girl from the coffee house.

Emma just won't go away. No matter how far away I am, I guess I'm just still too close. I've tried to ignore her and tell her I have moved on, but nothing keeps her from trying to contact me. She's convinced we can work things out. There was a time, before I found out she had been regularly sleeping with Cameron, that we could have fixed what was wrong. Not that I knew anything was wrong, but I would have listened and tried to work through whatever worries she had.

Once the water gets hot enough, I jump in and stand under the the stream, letting it pelt against me. I feel heavy steam surround me, feel relaxing water run over me, washing away all my problems for the moment. I close my eyes and try to picture anything that can help push away the memories of Emma. It doesn't take long before I see green. Like she is right in front of me, I see those emerald eyes.

Her gaze pierces through mine. Her eyes are a wonderful contrast against her hair. Her long black hair. I want to run my hands through it, grip it tight, and pull her hair back to give me access to her neck. She has plump lips. Lips I want to nibble on, kiss,

and lick. What I wouldn't do to feel those luscious lips wrapped around my cock. That thought causes me to release a groan.

Without realizing it, I began stroking myself. Doing my best to imagine it was her working my cock. I can't stop thinking about how beautiful she is, how badly I want to feel her underneath me.

My left hand slaps against the tile as I draw myself closer to euphoria. My breathing comes faster. I imagine her on her knees, taking me in her mouth. Her warm mouth sucking my cock. Her tongue twirling around me as I push towards the back of her throat. My hands wrapping in her hair, guiding her to take more. My strokes become faster, and I grip tighter until I explode against the wall of the shower.

When I finally come down from the high, I wash off my hand and the wall and finish up in the shower. I get out and wrap a towel around my waist and before going over to my bedroom to get dressed. My phone rings just as I approach my dresser, getting my attention.

Emma flashes on the screen. I sigh and pick it up.

"Yes?" I sound annoyed, because, well, she annoys me.

"Babes, that's no way to say hi to me." Her voice is that whiny voice, the one that sounds like nails on a chalkboard. It makes me shiver when I hear it.

"I'm not your babes. What the fuck do you want, Emma?" God, she pisses me off.

"Well, I miss you. Don't you miss me?"

My answer is immediate, "No."

“Come on. Just talk to me, baby. We should be together. There are no two people more perfect for each other than you and me. Tell me what I can do.” she begs.

“You could leave me alone. You could go back to Cameron because I don’t want you. We’re done, Emma. There is no you and me. We ended the minute you sucked his dick. You did that to us. You ended us. Accept the consequences of your actions.” There is a controlled anger in my voice.

She destroyed everything we had. With that, I hung up.

* * *

Six Months Ago

Tonight is the night. There’s so much energy running through me, I couldn’t stay still at work. I got off work early so I could get the apartment ready for my surprise. Once I get to my truck, I open up the glovebox and pull out the ring. After five years, school, and Police Academy, we could finally take the next step.

Emma and I had always put it off because we wanted to make sure we didn’t have other things holding us back. We wanted to find stable jobs and get comfortable. Emma wanted to make sure we were ready to start a family after marriage, and that required stability.

We’re finally at that point.

To be honest, I would have asked her to marry me six months after I met her. I knew Emma was the one. She was everything in my life. We always knew we would get married, so putting it off was not that big of a deal to either of us. We would marry when the time was right. Well, the timewasright.

I smile at the thought. After today, Emma will be my fiancé.

Everything has to be absolutely perfect for tonight. I place the ring back in the glovebox and run my errands so I can get home and get started. I've already asked her parents for permission. They gladly told me they approve. My parents were waiting on pins and needles to hear that she said yes. Everything was in place, so tonight will be perfect.

After grabbing what I need to, I head back home to get started. I grab the bags and walk into the apartment. I look to the coat hooks and see her purse hanging there. My eyes narrow at the sight. That isn't right.

She should still be at work.

I check my phone. There's no call or text saying she would be home early. When I left this morning, she had already left for work and her purse wasn't there. So, I place all the stuff in the kitchen on the counter and head back to the bedroom.

I stop short near the door. My stomach turns. I can feel the nausea starting. The sounds coming from the room are not ones I should be hearing. Not from our room when I am outside it. When I open the door, my entire world stops.

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Present

I finish getting dressed and text some buddies to see if they want to meet up for some beer. It's been a hell of a day. After a few minutes, a couple of them respond on where to meet up at and what time. I finish getting ready and head out to the living room.

I then throw myself on the couch for a moment and put my head in my hands. In a few short months, I went from having a future to everything being turned upside down and being left with nothing. People I trusted broke every ounce of confidence I had for anyone and everyone. The woman I loved destroyed me. If I couldn't trust those closest to me, there was no hope for anyone. The only person I trusted at this moment was my partner, Hardwick. I had to. Both our lives were in each other's hands.

When I got here in Vegas, there were women everywhere. I could have easily found someone to take out, have a good time with, and maybe call her later. I just don't want that. There's a reason I don't date anyone anymore. There are so many opportunities I have to take a girl out. Girls give me their number constantly. Especially after finding out I'm a cop. There are a plethora of Badge Bunnies. But I just don't want to date. I don't want one-night stands. They all turn me off, anyway. Well, everyone except the gorgeous woman from OneShot Coffee.

I'm not sure what it is about her, but she's the first woman that I actually don't feel repulsed by. She's shy, innocent, and absolutely sexy. Something about her drew me in. Instead of turning away from her, I gravitate towards her.

Laughing, I think back about our encounter. It was absolutely cute when I caught her staring at me. She looked like a deer in headlights. I purposely sat where I did so I could look at her. I needed to keep seeing her; she was a vision. If Hardwick hadn't been there, I would've sat next to her and started up a conversation.

I look at my watch and decide to just head over to the bar early. If I get there early, I can enjoy a beer or two by myself. I walk out and lock the front door, then head over to the stairs and make it down to the first landing, where I freeze in place. My heart stops.

It's her. What the fuck? It's her!

She locks up her apartment and walks out to the parking lot. I don't think she heard me come down; I can see earbuds in her ears, and her head is bopping to whatever she is listening to. Slowly, I move down the steps and face the parking lot to watch her walk out to her car. It's unquestionably the girl from OneShot Coffee. Holy shit. The emerald-eyed beauty.

She lives in this apartment complex. In this apartment building. OneShot Coffee girl lives right below me. Of all the times I had come down these steps, I've never run into her. But sure as shit, she lives here in this apartment complex. And of all things, she is my neighbor.

Today, for the first time, I am a firm believer in fate.

Chapter 3

Katrina

It has been a few days since I saw Officer "A" at OneShot Coffee. Well, to be honest, I haven't been back to said coffee shop. Our interaction was so intense. I just don't

need to have another chance at showing how extremely awkward I am or to set off any more anxiety attacks. I'm sure once he realizes how strange I am and how different I am, he will do what everyone else has in the past. He will put me down or made sure I feel stupid. So, I stay at home, in my leggings and t-shirts, slumming it. Well, working, but without the yummy coffee. So yeah, coffee slumming it. My coffee making skills don't even come close to those at OneShot.

Vicki has made her thoughts known and thinks I'm insane for hiding away. But let's be honest; this is the same Vicki who also thinks I'm insane for still holding on to my v-card. She thinks I just need to give it up and get it over with. It's not like I meant to hold on to it; I'm not a "wait till marriage" kind of person, I just never really liked a guy enough to give it up. Also, once guys get to know me and figure out my social anxiety will hold them back, they call it a day on our relationship.

Though, I give her credit. Vicki has at least tried to help me out. She even had a "Kat's gonna give it up" campaign in college. It didn't last long because I would have to go out and be around people to meet guys to have sex. Eventually, Vicki realized it just would not happen.

So, yes, I am a twenty-five-year-old virgin.

Yep. Virgin. Not my greatest claim to fame, but it's what I have. I know it's incredibly weird, but it's a known fact that I'm incredibly weird, so I guess it fits. There have been guys in my life; boyfriends, dates. None of the guys I dated were the one I wanted to take it any further with other than just casual dating. They just didn't appeal to me. So, I will simply be a cat lady who reads books.

Well, no, that won't work. I'm not a cat person. More of a dog person, really. I just don't know if that has the same effect. Maybe I'll even get a fish. No, I don't want to deal with a fish tank. Well, it doesn't matter. I just will leave this earth decades from now, still a virgin.

I'm sitting on my couch enjoying a book when my phone rings. Vicki flashes on the phone. She's probably going to yell at me or tell me I'm crazy. I roll my eyes and answer.

Before I can even say hello, she is off and running. "Bitch, you still locked away?"

"Hello to you too," I roll my eyes as I respond to her lack of a greeting.

"Well, are you?" she countered.

"First off, I am not locking myself away. I'm just taking some me time. Second, you know drinking coffee at those places is expensive. It's much cheaper to drink coffee at home." Yeah, she probably won't buy what I'm selling. I don't even believe myself.

"You are so full of shit!" Yup, she didn't buy it. "Kat, you can't keep yourself locked away. Cop man probably hasn't even been back. Besides, what would be the harm if he showed up? He was something to look at, right? You said he was sex on a stick, so why not bite yourself off a piece?"

"Vic, I never said he was sex on a stick. You said that. Apart from that, I just don't know how to act around guys unless they're as awkward as me. Even then, they don't last long. He's insanely hot so let's be honest, what in the world would he see in me?" I look down at my feet and frown. There are a lot of times I wish I had more of an outgoing personality. That I could be more like Vicki or girls who aren't afraid to put themselves out there.

"I'm not even going to dignify that with a response." she huffed over the phone.

Ugh. She has a point. I shouldn't be hiding. I just don't know what to do if he comes in again. There is no way he would leave me be this time. "Okay. So, if I go back

there and do my normal stuff, what happens if he shows up? What if I have a panic or anxiety attack? I don't know if I can deal with that kind of embarrassment."

"Well, he's a cop. Pretty sure he can help you through your attack."

I clench my fists and close my eyes, my grip on the phone so hard my knuckles turn white. "You're not helping, Vic! I don't want or need his attention!"

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“Sure. Sure. Look, I doubt he’ll even know. In fact, I bet an enormous bottle of tequila on it. It was just a one off.” She chuckles.

Today is not the day for me to go back, but maybe tomorrow would be a good starting point. I just need tonight to work out my issues and try to calm myself. Also, I need to do a lot of praying. Praying that Officer “A” will not show up tomorrow.

The next morning, I go through my “Pre-Officer A” routine. I gather up my laptop and bookbag that has all my cords and chargers, then I head out to OneShot Coffee.

I can do this.

At least, I think I can. Maybe I should just stay home. I can’t do this.

No, I can definitely do this.

There’s no guarantee that he will be there, anyway. He came there one time, and I’ve been going there for over a year. So, what are the chances he would even be back? Chances are slim. It had to be a fluke. Okay, I can do this.

I get in my car and drive down to OneShot Coffee. My heart is beating fast, and I feel nervous as I pull in. My palms are sweaty, and I need to count to twenty to help calm me. This is my safe spot. I go here to get away from the world. Well, technically where I can be part of the world but left alone.

But nope. Cute as fuck Officer “A” just had to come in and get a caffeine pick-me-up.

As I walk in, I promptly scan the place. He isn't here. Awesome. Smiling, I walk up to the counter and order my latte. Then, I find myself a little corner to hole up in.

My body finally relaxes, so I take out my laptop and wait for my drink. As I open my laptop, I pull up the book I started writing months ago but never finished. My book was about a girl being bullied. While I don't come right out and say it, it's based on my life experiences.

There was a time where I wanted to be a writer, and I sort of still do. I'm just not sure if I want my work out there. There's too much second guessing with my work, so much doubt in my mind. You know when you're in school and you have to turn in a paper or do a presentation, but you're not sure if it's good? I mean you spent weeks and weeks on it, did all your research, and made sure everything was perfect so you could turn in perfection. Until you turn it in, then people tear you down, make fun of you, call your work stupid, and red line the shit out of it. Yeah, that's why I haven't finished my book. People are cruel, and I know all too well what it means to be on the wrong side of their bitterness.

That's why I enjoy editing other people's work. It's someone else's story, and I'm just showing them what to fix. Helping them with the story progression and character building.

"Kat! Drink's ready!" the barista calls from the counter.

I put my laptop down and walk over to pick up the drink and thank her. When I turn back around, I run into a solid wall of muscles. I look up and meet the beautiful blue eyes I've been hiding from. The ones I hoped wouldn't show up today. No such luck.

Shit.

"Hello, there. Kat, is it?" Officer "A" is in full uniform, standing in front of me,

looking sexy as hell.

My eyes just blink over and over. I stand there in front of him, dumbfounded. Finally, I look past him to my spot, wondering how I can get there. My spot would shield and cloak me from him, right? I should make a run for it. No. Don't do that. Just go sit. Yes, I'm going to go sit.

I side-step him, not looking at him anymore, and sit back down at my table. I place my coffee down and try to ignore him.

"Um. Hi, Officer." Okay, so I can't ignore him. Hard to do when he's standing right next to me. My eyes don't meet his. I just can't bring myself to look at him.

"Officer Bryce Hawthorne, but you can just call me Bryce. And you are ... Kat? I'm just guessing here since that is what they called you." He turns to point towards the counter.

"Um, Katrina, actually. But my friends call me Kat. So, yeah. I guess it's Kat." I nod as I ramble. Seriously, it is really hard to look at him and talk. Because of that, I just keep my eyes down.

"Do you mind if I sit?" Bryce pulls out the chair and does just that, not waiting for me to even answer him. The air is growing thick around us with sexual tension. My body's clearly betraying me as I can feel the pulsing between my legs. I rub my hands on my pants, trying to keep them from getting sweaty. It's not working.

My eyes go wide at the swift invasion of this man at my table. Why is he here, sitting next to me? Can he not see that I'm miserable with him being around? Okay, miserable is probably not true. I just don't like how I feel with him near me. I've never felt this way before.

I can feel my skin get hot, my cheeks feel like they are on fire and are probably all red. He's really close to me. My entire body feels like it's going to combust, and I'm not sure if it's from his sexiness or my embarrassment. Well, maybe a bit of both.

"So, Kat, this will sound like a pickup line, but do you come here often?" He rests his elbows on his legs as his mouth turns into a beautiful smile that could weaken any woman. It sure weakens me.

I don't answer right away; I don't know what to say. Yeah, I come here all the time, fancy meeting you here. Or, No, I just come here on days that end in "y." What the hell am I supposed to say? Ugh, my throat is tightening. I can't breathe. No, I am breathing, I just feel like I can't.

"Yeah." That's it. That's all I say. A one-word answer. Remember when I said I was awkward? Well, here is the proof.

"Okay ..." He looks at me. Studies me. I'm sure since he's a cop, it's deep-seated need for him to investigate people. He's going to have his hands full trying to read me. Perhaps he can pick up on how I would like him to leave. "So, do you come here to work, or do you just really like their coffee?"

"Both," I don't think I've blinked since talking to him. My answers are robotic. Though, I'm surprised that I'm even answering him.

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“What do you do for work?” Bryce sits back in the chair and places his ankle on his knee. He then rests his elbow on the arm of the chair and his head against his hand. He clearly getting comfortable while making me feel the complete opposite.

“I edit manuscripts.” Three words! Three whole words! This is progress.

“What do you edit?” He tilts his head, not understanding what I’m telling him.

“Books,” And now we are back to the one-word answers. My normalcy was short-lived.

As if he can sense my weirdness, he shakes his head and gets up. I can’t tell what he’s thinking or if I completely blew it. Well, I’m sure I blew it; I couldn’t even hold a single conversation with him. Did I even care that I blew it? Some of me did. The rest of me is silently cheering that he’s finally going to go away.

“Well, I need to get back to my shift. Good luck with the book editing, Kat. It was nice meeting you. I’m sure I’ll see you around.” He winks at me before giving me that panty-dropping smile.

“Bye,” That is all I can get out while he walks away. One. Word.

When he’s finally was out of sight, I take a deep breath. I close my eyes and place my head in my hands. Why can I just not talk to people? Why does he even want to talk to me? I’m nothing special. A geek. An introvert. A recluse. That man, that Greek god of a man, couldn’t possibly want anything from me.

I text Vicki to let her know that I hate her and that our friendship is on a timeout. She forced me here today, after all. She gets to go sit in the corner until I say otherwise.

All she sends back are laughing emojis. I roll my eyes. Bitch.

I finally compose myself and shake off the encounter with Bryce. I open up my work, crack my knuckles, and attack it head-on. As I attempt to edit, my mind keeps drifting back to those blue eyes. That hearty laugh. Those kissable lips. That body I could get lost in. I shake my head to get me out of my daydream.

I have a feeling my encounter with him today won't be my last. He seems like the type of guy who likes to push buttons—and let's face it, I have a lot of buttons. He's already picked up on the fact that I don't feel comfortable with him in my space. Except, I didn't turn and run. Something caused me to stay rooted. With him, I didn't have my usual anxiety attack. I didn't panic. But I still didn't like it.

I settle back into my work and set a goal for myself on what I want to get done. This is what I'm comfortable with. This is what I can control. Words on paper. Words I don't have to worry about screwing up if they come out of my mouth. Fantasy lives I can just imagine living vicariously through instead of living in the actual world full of disappointment.

Chapter 4

Bryce

So, it's possible that cornering her at OneShot Coffee was a mistake. I had wanted to get her talking, to find out more about her, but she seemed closed off. Almost terrified, even. Maybe it's because I went there in uniform. That could have frightened her. Honestly, I just wanted to talk to her. To try and find a reason I'm so drawn to her. There's just something about her that I can't quite put my finger on it,

but I need to know more about her, nonetheless.

She's an enigma. She's so beautiful yet comes across so innocent. That's actually refreshing. I can tell it isn't an act. She truly is virtuous. She doesn't flaunt her sexy body or flirt with anyone in the room; she just keeps to herself. Her hair falling around her face? It hides her, but I can always see her eyes. They stand out. And then I caught her smiling when she picked up her coffee this morning. It was a gorgeous smile. It stopped me dead in my tracks. So, when I sat down, I wanted her to smile when she talked to me, but she just looked like a deer in headlights.

Something about her invites me to her. I have no clue what it is, but I know it's a carnal need. My body lit up when I saw her the first time and was on fire when I sat next to her today.

Today, she smelled of lavender. It was the most alluring scent. I had to clench my fists to keep from pulling her into me, needing to keep myself in check. It was so hard to resist grabbing her and running my lips along her neck. To taste her. I dug my nails into the palm of my hands just to keep me grounded and aware of the situation.

Of course, I could always simply show up at her door. It's not like I don't know where she lives—though, she has no idea that I know where she lives, of course. The look on her face might just be worth it. She may think I'm a stalker. Though, honestly, with as much as I've been hanging around OneShot, maybe that's a good assumption on her part. If I show up and knock on her door, I might get more than one word out of her if she's in her own space.

I look out my window and I can see that her car is in the parking lot. Good. She's home. Don't do this, Bryce. She's going to think you're crazy. Well, I am. So, she wouldn't be wrong. I should have come up with a reason to be stopping by; just didn't think that far ahead. What if I just go over there and tell her I know where she lives? Then she will surely think I'm a weirdo stalker. I tap my window before

running my hands through my hair. I just need to knock and say hi. Okay, I'll go with that.

My breath is shaky. Never before have I been this nervous. I wring my hands together as I make my way down to the stairs and stand in front of her door. I reach out to knock, but I hesitate. Should I turn and go? Back out? Ugh. Running my hand over my face, I sigh. This is really going to freak her out. But something in me tells me I need to take the risk.

Usually, I would be way more confident. Then again, Emma and I had been together for years. She was all I knew. I dated in high school, some in college, but Emma was a huge part of my life for a long time. I never strayed or looked elsewhere, either. This is the first time I've taken a risk and pursued someone since Emma.

Here goes nothing.

So, I knock three times on the door and wait. I hear a noise in the apartment and a shuffling by the door. My heart feels like it's going to leap directly out of my chest. Then, I hear the deadbolt unlock. My heart stops.

Her look of shock doesn't disappoint me. Once she opens the door, her eyes go wide and her mouth hangs low, forming an "O". She stands there for a minute, trying to regain her composure. Kat quickly closes her mouth, her lips form a thin line, and her brows furrow.

"Hi, Kat." I give her a nod. My hands are in my pockets to look less threatening. I mean, I did just show up at her apartment. She has the door just cracked enough that her head pops out, but she still hides herself behind it for protection.

"What are you doing here?" She appears surprised that I'm standing in front of her. I don't know if the look on her face is pleasant or angry. Either way, it sure is

surprised.

“Well, actually, it’s quite a funny story. Do you mind if I come in?” I gesture into her apartment. Making sure I stand far back again, I try not to look like I’m crazy or act like I’m intimidating her. I’m hoping it’s enough for her to feel more relaxed.

Kat hesitates for a moment, still not breaking eye contact with me. She looks down at her feet, then back into her apartment. Finally, Kat sighs and meets my hopeful gaze. She steps to the side and opens the door all the way.

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“Please come in.” She gestures inside with a wave of her hand.

I step through the threshold, and her home is not at all what I had expected. This woman is a complete nerd. A very hot nerd, at that. It’s adorable. I mean, I know she likes to read—well, that much is obvious by her chosen profession—but this is so different from what I had imagined.

Kat’s walls are covered in Call of Duty imagery and other gaming posters. There are gaming systems taking up every inch of space in her entertainment center, too. I spot a Playstation, Xbox and even an old school Nintendo gaming system. Kat has bookshelves with what has to be hundreds of books filling it to the brim. Her black leather couches stick out in the living room. They look comfortable. Her coffee table is has her laptop on top of it. She was probably working when I knocked. Her place is homey.

She isn’t even dressed like she was when I saw her at OneShot. She has on these cute skull and crossbones leggings with a tight black t-shirt. When I saw her at OneShot, she had on a big sweater and jeans. This is a completely different ensemble, and she looks fucking hot. I shift a bit in my pants because my dick agrees.

Honestly, Kat is the complete opposite of Emma. Emma was tall, blonde, and looked like a supermodel. Emma was all business. She worked in the world of marketing and always had to make sure she looked like perfection. She was also always the center of attention, which I was okay with at the time. I always wanted to support her and help in any way I could with her career.

Kat is down to earth, shy, and quiet. There is an innocence about her, too. She’s

absolutely beautiful with her long black hair. Kat hides in her clothes, hides in her work, and she doesn't seek approval from others. She doesn't like to be the center of attention. Social situations don't seem to be her thing. She's a breath of fresh air.

"How are you?" I ask, looking back at her after taking in her apartment space. She folds her arms over her chest and averts her gaze. Is she ashamed of her place? Maybe she's nervous that I'm here. I need to put her at ease. "This is a nice setup you have. Are you a gamer?"

"Um, yeah, I play when I have some free time." She looks at the ground, shifting from one foot to the other. I can tell she's unsure and nervous about having me here. I need to get to the point of why I visited.

"So, you're probably wondering how I know you live here," I lean my hip against the back of the couch, giving her a slight smile.

"Sure. That would be nice." She bobs her head, still not looking at me.

"Well, I was leaving my apartment the other day and as I came down the stairs, I saw you locking up your own. Turns out I live in the unit right above you." I point at the ceiling. "At first, I was going to say hello to you, but you had earbuds in and you were in your own little world. I didn't want to interrupt." Pausing, I let her take in that information. "I was going to say something at OneShot, but you gave off a vibe that said you didn't really want to talk."

"I, uh... I..." Kat shuts down. Her eyes close and her lips press together. She looks down at the floor. I could see she is trying to make sense of the situation. There's a part of me that's worried she'll say nothing at all. Her head shoots up and she focuses in on me. "Look, it was nice to meet you and all, but I'm really not sure what you want from me." Her voice pitches, probably from fear, and her face has turned deathly pale. She is scared.

That's not my intention. Now I feel horrible that she's freaked out.

"I don't want anything. Honestly, I just moved to Vegas. I'm looking to meet new people, and I want to get to know you." I shrug, moving my hands into my pockets to try to make myself appear as casual as possible. In reality, I'm nervous she'll push me out and not want to talk to me again.

I just want to get to know her. No pressure, no expectations, nothing other than getting to know who Kat is. There's a pull I feel towards her, and I need to know why. So, here I am.

"Okay. You can sit," She points to the couch. I take that as my opening, next sliding over to take a seat. "Do you want anything to drink?" Kat asks, walking towards her kitchen.

"Water, please." I call back to her.

Kat comes back in with two bottles of water and sets one in front of me. She sits on the couch across from me, then places her bottle on the coffee table and stares at her hands.

I relax a bit because it seems I'm at least getting somewhere with her, I just need to keep pulling her out of her shell. Kat invited me in, and she had me sit. Progress. Now I just need to get her talking.

"So you're a book editor. Do you write books too?" I rest my elbows on my legs and my chin in my hands.

She pulls on the bottom of her shirt and looks like she's deep in thought for an answer to that question. Kat chews her bottom lip, which makes her look sexy as hell.

“I ... don’t know how to answer that.” She pulled her knees up to her chest, pursing her lips. It almost seems like that’s her way of hiding in plain sight.

“Well, you either do or you don’t. I don’t know if there’s an in-between.” I tip my head to the side. My eyebrows pull inward, I’m confused.

She sighs. “I’ve some written some stuff. I just won’t ever put it out there. Never.”

“Why?”

“When I edit a book, it’s not my work. Someone else has to worry about whether the story is good or if the characters are relatable. I just look for mistakes, problems with the plot, stuff like that, then I help fix it. With my work ...” She trails off, lost in thought. I can see the blank stare, her eyes fixated on the table in front of her. I know why she doesn’t share her work.

“You’re afraid of judgement.” I answer for her.

She looks up at me, and her eyes soften. “Yes. Exactly.”

“I get it. But if you don’t try, how will you ever know if you’re good or not? I mean, wouldn’t it be worth the risk for at least one book? Maybe you’re just meant to edit, or maybe you’re a best-selling author. Who knows?”

Kat’s lip curls up in a slight smile. “If you haven’t noticed, I am not exactly comfortable in a lot of social situations. So, putting myself out there is out of the question.” She snickers.

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“Why are you so uncomfortable? Is that why you were so quiet this morning?” I unscrew the cap of my water and take a sip.

“Yes. I, uh, I’m just not a very outgoing person. Usually, I just keep to myself.” She looks up at me for a second and I get to see her emerald eyes. But there’s something else I see. A flash of pain in her eyes, but it’s gone as quick as it came.

“Okay, so who do you normally hang out with? Your friends or maybe a boyfriend?” Yup, not being very subtle with the questioning.

“Um, my best friend Vicki and I hang out. No boyfriend, but that’s not to say I haven’t dated. I have. I’m just not dating anyone currently.” Her cheeks flush red. “Do you have a girlfriend or a wife?”

Finally, she’s making conversation with me. I grin. This is good. Inside my mind, I do a little fist pump.

“Uh, no wife, no girlfriend. I actually moved out here because my girlfriend and I broke up. She’s back in Florida. I transferred to the force out here and that’s been it for me since I moved.” I needed to get as far away as I could from Emma. I still couldn’t believe that she cheated on me with Cameron.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that.” Kat says softly. She wraps her fingers around the hem of her shirt. There’s a long pause. We sit there silently until she speaks again, “So, I hate to do this, but I have to handle some work stuff.”

Kat is kicking me out. I’m a little sad that we can’t continue our conversation, but we

made progress. At least there's that.

"Look, I would like to hang out with you sometime. Wherever you may be comfortable when you are not busy," Am I coming off a little needy? I internally cringe. For whatever reason, Kat has this pull on me. She makes me want to dig deeper into her world.

Kat just stares at me, her cheeks a soft shade of red. Did I say something wrong? Before I can over think it, she nods. Kat bites her lip and then heads over to the counter.

"Um, sure. Here's my phone number." She scribbles it on a post-it note that's on the counter before handing the paper to me. "Just text me or whatever and we can decide. But I will warn you, I really do nothing."

"That is completely fine by me. I'm good with low-key." I head over to the door. "Remember, if you need anything, I'm right above you." I flash a grin and point to the ceiling.

"Thanks," She blushes again, and I hold back a groan. That blushing really is sexy on her. Her cheeks pop when they turn pink. It's so easy to tell when she's embarrassed.

"Later, Kitty Kat." I wink at her before starting for the front door. Her jaw drops open, and she stands there in silence. I shut the door behind me and laugh to myself as I wander back upstairs to my apartment.

When I first moved here, I wasn't that thrilled about being in a new place so far away from my home. From my family. But now? Now I'm buzzing with excitement. There's something that shifts inside me when I'm around her. I have this odd need to protect her even though I barely know her. I protect people daily, but this need runs deeper.

My beautiful, introverted, and wholesome neighbor. The lovely Kat. I'll do whatever I can to make her feel safe.

Chapter 5

Katrina

Bryce lives above me. He fucking lives above me. Bryce is my damn neighbor. What the hell? It wasn't enough torture to have him know I go to OneShot, but now he's my neighbor. Just my luck that the hot officer guy lives right above me. Am I being punished for something I did in another life?

I grab my hair and pull. "Ugh!" Maybe it's the lack of what I've done in this one.

This is insane. But I invited him in, and he came in here looking hotter than he did with his uniform. His shirt was nice and tight so I could see how beautifully sculpted he is. His uniform hides a lot of him, unfortunately. He's built like a warrior. It left me wondering if he has a six or an eight pack. Does it matter? All his sexy man looks literally made me even more speechless than I normally am. It managed to fry brains, too. And I just opened the door and let him in. I have never just let a guy in my apartment. Well, okay, no guy has ever been in this apartment. Except now Bryce has. I blame my virgin vagina.

Then we sat here talking, and that was nice. After a while, he made me feel much more at ease. Without even realizing it, I actually talked to him. He probably used his cop tricks to get me to open up.

Well, I was comfortable until he called me Kitty Kat. That ... that was just ... I have no words. I also have no clue what his endgame is. Does he want a friend? A date? A booty call? If he wants a booty call, I am so the wrong person. Though, Vicki would probably just tell me to do it and get it over with.

I pick up my phone and call my bestie. While I'm pretty sure she's just going to tell me to get my sex on with him, I need her input on this.

"Hey! What's going on, Kat?" With the sound of her Mustang GT revving in the background, I can tell she's in her car and possibly on her way to work.

I clear my throat. "Um, are you working tonight? I think I need an intervention." I run my hands through my hair.

"From your books and stuff. Yes. I agree. Girl, you need to get out more. Explore the male population. Get you some dick." She laughs.

"No, that's not ... Listen." I wave her off like she's standing in front of me. "Remember the officer who came into OneShot?"

"Officer 'A'? Yup. The one you need to get it on with. Let him take you for a ride. Or, you can take him for a ride. Either way, sex." Ugh. This girl's mind is seriously all about sex.

I ignore her comments. "Well, he lives in my apartment complex."

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“What? Seriously? Kat! That is awesome! How did you find out? Did you see him or something? Deets, now!” Her voice gets so high pitched, I need to pull the phone away from my ear. I put her on speaker and place the phone on the table.

I try mentally preparing myself for the conversation I’m about to have. I don’t know if Bryce living above me is awesome. Vicki might, once I tell her.

“Well, he saw me one day. Coming out of my apartment, I mean. While he was coming down from his,” I stayed silent for a moment, unsure how to say my next words. Rip the band-aid off, Kat. Rip it. “He lives in the apartment above me.”

I hear nothing for a second, and then my ears get assaulted with Vic’s screams of joy.

“That is divine intervention right there! Fuck, you have got to be kidding me! Kat—that, right there is a sign.” she exclaims, all bubbly.

“A sign of what?” I retort. “All that’s a sign of is that I won’t get rid of him so easily. He knows where I live. He knows where I go to get my caffeine. I pretty much can’t avoid him now. I need to move. Preferably, out of state.”

“It’s a higher power pushing you to expand your horizons, dear. I mean, not only did they put you at OneShot, but they also put you in the same complex and in the same building. With him on top of you, in more ways than one.” She bursts out laughing.

I roll my eyes. “Okay, you’re no help. What am I supposed to do?”

“What do you mean ‘what am I supposed to do?’ You talk to him and get to know

him.”

“Well, that’ll happen whether I want it to or not because somehow I let him talk me into hanging out together. He said he doesn’t care where, either. He just moved here, so he doesn’t know many people.” Honestly, I still want to talk to him. I just felt my anxiety getting bad, and I needed to get him to leave before I had a full-on panic attack.

What’s the real reason he wants to talk to me? Guys don’t really talk to me unless there’s a reason.

“Okay, that’s a good start. Look, in all seriousness, I know you get uncomfortable and that can lead to your attacks, but let’s look at this as a positive event. He wants to get to know you and hang out with you. He wants to be around you. That is a good thing, Kat.” Vicki replies thoughtfully.

“Except you forget my track record with guys. They don’t talk to me unless it’s some kind of evil, sick trick. Or they don’t stick around for long because I’m basically damaged goods. So, what? I’m going to be friends with him only to have him turn around and realize how sad I am?” It’s true. Most guys can’t put up with me not liking to go out as often as they do. Going out, simply makes me panic. I’m antisocial. I prefer to just stay inside, instead of being judged for being who I am.

“Okay, look, those guys were not worth it. Obviously. Don’t put this guy in the same category until you hang out with him. Find out what his deal is.” Her voice grows more serious the more she talks. I know she worries about me.

“Well, I’m sure that he’ll be back at some point. He did mention he was okay with sticking around here and hanging out. Guess all we can do is see where it goes. Please know that I’m not holding my breath.” I want to make it clear it can easily become a “I told you so” situation.

“Why not?”

“Because he’s this extremely good-looking cop who probably has Badge Bunnies throwing themselves at him. I, however, am an introvert homebody. Two opposite ends of the spectrum, Vic.” I stand and start pacing in front of my couch. I have no idea why I’m so worked up over this.

She groans into the phone. “Look, you need to calm down. I can hear you pacing from my car. So I’ll call you a little later. I have some errands to run. Want me to pick you up some condoms?” More giggles erupt, and I roll my eyes.

“Bye!” With that, I hang up the phone. I lay back on my couch, biting my lip.

Some people don’t understand the anxiety I get when I go out. When I was younger, I got bullied so badly that I just stay away from people now. They do nothing but tear you down. When I’m at OneShot Coffee, I don’t get the same anxiety that I usually do. Maybe it’s because everyone gets lost in their own conversations or their own work. It very well could be the atmosphere. I don’t know why I feel fine there, but I do. Well, I did. Until Officer Bryce and his fine ass came in for coffee.

Suddenly, I feel my phone go off in my pocket. It’s a text message from an unknown number. My brows furrow as I swipe it open. Then I see who it is.

Unknown: Hey, Kitty Kat. It’s Bryce. This is my number. Just wanted to text you, so you had it.

Me: Thanks.

I’m not sure what else I should say. Do I invite him over to hang out tomorrow? Wait for him to ask me to hang out? How does this work? This is why I don’t do these things. I don’t know what to do. I can already feel the panic rising in me. Wiping my

hands on my pants, I shake off my insecurities and text him. I only need to sound normal.

Me: So, what are you up to? Or whatever...

Yeah, that sounds normal.

Bryce: Getting ready to go get some dinner. I was going to hit up Winger. It's a wing place if you couldn't guess. Do you want to go?

Me: Um.

Bryce: I don't want to twist your arm. Lol. Seriously, if you don't want to go, you don't have to. Just thought we could hang out ... as friends.

Me: Ok. Yeah, wings actually sound good.

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Bryce: Ok. I'll be down in a few.

Not sure what makes me think this is a great idea, but I'm going. My breathing is coming out a little faster now, so I place my hand over my heart and look at what's around me to help ground myself. I can do this. I can be normal for once. Once I get myself under control, I head to my room to change.

I'm changing into my jeans and my hoodie when I hear a knock at my door.

"Hold on a second!" I yell from my room.

I walk over to the door and pull it open to reveal a drop-dead gorgeous man. How is it possible he looks even better than he did when he was here earlier?

"Hey. Can I, uh, come in?" Bryce waves hesitantly.

Yup, I just got caught gawking at him. I can already feel the heat in my cheeks. I immediately look down and open the door wider so he can walk in.

"Yeah, sorry. Got lost in thought." I admit shamefully.

"Sure," He grins at me as he walks in.

"Okay, um. I'm ready," I grab my purse and make sure I have my phone.

"Look, if you get uncomfortable, just let me know. We can always bring it back here. Just say the word. It doesn't matter where we eat, as long as you're good. That's all I

care about.” Bryce looks at me with sympathetic eyes. That completely throws me off guard. I’m admittedly a bit shocked that he cares enough to make sure I’m alright. That ... that’s not something I’m used to.

“Thank you. That means a lot.” I give him a genuine smile and lead him out the door.

Perhaps this won’t be as bad as I initially thought. It may be nice to have someone other than Vicki to hang out with. Bryce is already accommodating me. The only person who has ever been that way up until now has been Vicki.

Bryce and I might just be good friends after all.

Chapter 6

Katrina

The drive to the restaurant is quiet. I catch him glancing over at me a couple times when we come to a stop at a light. He isn’t trying to make conversation with me, so I take the time to prepare myself. My head is feeling a little light. I need to just focus on Bryce; that might help ground me. As we pull up to Winger, he turns to me and grins. This, apparently, is the highlight of his day.

“Ready to eat? This place has the best wings.” He nearly bounces with excitement. I don’t know if it is the wings that have him this excited or that I agreed to come with him.

“Um, yeah. I’m starving, actually.” On cue, my stomach rumbles.

“Well, let’s get some food then.” He reaches over the center console and squeezes my thigh right above my knee.

I'm stunned for a moment, and I don't move to get out, even then he removes his hand. My leg feels like it's on fire. His touch makes my skin heat up, and all the nerve endings inside me fire off like mad. I breathe and try to gather myself. Once I finally come back down to earth, I stick my hand out to open the door only to find it's already open.

"You alright over there?" Bryce looks down at me as he holds the door open. "Come on," He tilts his head towards the restaurant.

"Thanks," I reply, swallowing hard. He holds out his hand for me to grab while I climb out. As soon as I touch him, I feel a spark. It makes me jump a little from the surprise of it. I don't know if he felt that too, but if he did, he didn't react.

When we reach the door, he steps in front of me and holds it open for me. I walk into the restaurant, which is honestly more like a sports bar. Instantly, my skin itches. I have a sinking feeling that tonight will not end well. Bryce steps next to me and brings his arm around my shoulder to give it a reassuring squeeze. We don't have to wait for someone to seat us, so he finds us a table.

Bryce shrugs off his leather jacket, and I can't help but stare at his muscular body and chiseled jaw. He sits down across from me in the booth and looks at the menu. I'm still in a trance when the server comes up to the table with eyes for Bryce. If she was a cartoon, you would see little hearts where her eyes were. Gag.

And why shouldn't she make googly eyes at Bryce? Most of the female population obviously goes gaga for him. How can you not? Even my body betrays me when I look at him.

"Hello! What can I start you off with to drink?" She only turns towards Bryce. It's as if I don't even exist. The server leans in closer to him, giving him the biggest smile—even licking her lips. Gross. I try to hold back a cringe of disgust.

“Kat, what would you like to drink?” Bryce instead faces me, and he seems a little uncomfortable with the server’s actions.

“Water, please.” I say directly to our flirtatious server. She doesn’t even bat an eye at me. This bitch just keeps looking at Bryce. She doesn’t even acknowledge my order. I feel a burning in my chest. This is not good.

“Same for me, please.” Bryce tells her, glancing from me to her. Now I can see he’s clearly annoyed.

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“You got it, sweetie.” She reaches out and touches his arm before turning away. I roll my eyes, moving to gaze out the window. It may have been a mistake to come here. Out of habit, I run my palms along my pants.

Bryce hasn’t said about the interaction either. His silence doesn’t make me feel any better. He simply looks down at the menu and picks out his wings and sauce.

“What are you thinking of getting?” He asks, looking up at me. For a moment all I see is blue. Those beautiful blue eyes that pierce right through me. Almost instantly, sense of calmness comes over me.

I clear my throat and return my eyes to the menu. “Uh, not sure. I think I’m going to get the boneless ten-piece with Honey Barbecue. What about you?” I look back up at Bryce and I can’t believe I am sitting across from a man who is as good looking as he is. I shake my head at the thought.

“The twenty-piece with half Nashville Hot and the other Sweet Barbecue.” He smiles. “I like it hot.” He wiggles his eyebrows, smirking at the double meaning.

Before I can respond, our “eager to please Bryce” server comes back to take our order. Still having hearts in her eyes for Bryce, of course. And still refusing to look at me.

“What will it be, cutie?” she questions, leaning against the table towards Bryce. She positions herself so it looks like her breasts are moments away from popping out of her shirt. And the shirt is already showcasing the goods. She may as well have simply stripped for him.

He replies, pointing to me, “She’ll be ordering first,.” Bryce gives me a nod, faintly smiling.

Our server, Jessica, according to her name tag that I could now see along with her boobs, turns to me with sheer annoyance.

“For you?” she demands, now tapping her fingernails on the table. She narrows her eyes at me.

I freeze, shutting my eyes for a moment. This is why I don’t enjoy going out. People. People like her. She’s judging me for merely sitting here. I’m merely a hurdle between her getting what she wants: Bryce.

I look up at her again. “Um, uh ...” I can’t get out my words. My throat closes up, and I feel my heart picking up pace. My hand reaches up and starts rubbing my neck, trying to get it to open so I can speak. I grow lightheaded and dizzy, and I start to feel like I can’t breathe. Out of nowhere, Bryce speaks up.

“She will have the ten-piece with the Honey Barbecue. I will have the twenty-piece with half Nashville Hot and the other half will be Sweet Barbecue.” Bryce’s eyes don’t leave me for a moment while he speaks. “Also, you can cut the flirty shit. I’m not interested. As you can see, I’m here with someone. Respect her and be a better person.” He gives her a sidelong glance.

Jessica stands there for a moment in silence, then blinks. Finally she composes herself. “Uh, sure thing. I will get this in for you, swee—uh, sir.” Flustered, she walks away and punches our order into a nearby register.

“You alright, Kitty Kat?” Bryce asks, leaning forward.

“Um ... sure.” I shut my eyes again, trying to calm myself. Internally, I’m counting

to twenty. “Look, I can understand if you want me to go. I can take an Uber home.” My voice hitches, and I mentally curse myself for being so weird in social situations.

“What? Why would I want you to leave?” He cocks his head to the side, confused.

“I told you. I’m not good at being out and about.” My breaths grow shorter. Before I can say another word, Bryce gets up and sits next to me on my side of the booth. That only makes my breathing worse. I close my eyes, realizing how dizzy I am, and I grip the table to keep myself from falling over.

“Breathe. You are having a panic attack. Focus on my voice. Here, lay your head on my heart. Let’s get your breathing under control.” He pulls my head to his chest and grabs my hand, intertwining my fingers with his. “Focus on the beat of my heart and breathe with me. Take a breath when I do.” Bryce rests his cheek on the top of my head.

Closing my eyes, I listen to his heartbeat. Matching my breaths to his, I begin to calm down. After a few minutes, I meet his crystal blue eyes. They flash with concern. I shudder and look away.

“Thank you. Sorry. I really don’t do well going out. Usually, I’m okay if Vicki’s with me, and sometimes even with a little liquid courage can help. Familiarity usually helps too.” I chuckle.

“Ah, so all I had to do was get you a little drunk before we left. I will note that for next time.” He laughs. He still has me wrapped up in his arms, so I can feel his chest vibrating as he laughs. “Do you want to tell me what started all this? Or was this social anxiety something you have always had?”

Frowning, I think about what to say. I don’t want to get into my past at this point. I barely know the guy, after all. He’s nice, and a cop, but I don’t need his pity or to

make him feel like he has to be nice to me.

I shake my head. “No, not right now.”

“All right,” He nods. Bryce stays next to me, not moving back to his seat.

“Um, don’t you want to go back to your side?” I murmur.

He shakes his head, the corners of his lips twitching. “No, I think this might help you a bit. Not feeling so exposed. So, if I sit here next to you, I can kind of shield you. Protect you.”

Turning my head, I meet his gaze again. He gives me a soft smile in return. “T-thank you,” I say nervously. He moves his arm from my shoulder and puts his elbows on the table in front of us. Our eyes lock again, but we don’t say anything.

Once our food comes out, we sit there silently and eat. Bryce doesn’t even break a sweat eating the hot wings. I’m somewhat impressed he can handle the heat. I work through mine and feel better having him sit next to me. His big stature really makes me feel like he’s shielding me; protecting me from the cruelty of others. People like our server. People who put others down and make fun of them.

As we finish up, a few guys walk over to the table. I shiver slightly, but Bryce places a hand on my leg to let me know it will be okay.

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“Hawthorne! Fancy seeing you here,” One guy says as he “bro claps” Bryce on the back. I recognize one of the guys in the group. Officer “B” is standing among them, smirking at me and Bryce. These must be other officers that work with him.

“Hey! What are you all doing here? Oh, everyone, this is Kat. Kat, these are some guys I work with.” He points, starting with the man on the left. “This is Kevin Cook. This here is Rick Nash, and that guy is Tom Gibson. The man in the back you’ve seen before, he’s my partner, Austin Hardwick.”

“Hello,” they all say almost in unison. Each one of them is smiling like they are in on some sort of inside joke.

“Um. Hi,” I mumble. Without thinking, I shift closer to Bryce. He immediately picks up on my apprehensiveness, next reaching under the table to grab my hand and rub circles on my wrist.

“Well, boys, we’re about to leave. We just stopped to get something to eat.” He throws some money down on the table, even though we haven’t received check yet. “I’ll see you all later.”

Bryce gets up, waves goodbye to his buddies, and walks me out of the restaurant with his hand on my lower back.

When we get back to my apartment, I let him come inside for a minute. We said little on the ride home, but I was okay with the quiet. My eyes remained closed most of the ride home, anyway. I needed to recalibrate and get my bearings.

“Hey, listen. I just want to say I’m really sorry about tonight. You know, I didn’t realize it was going to be like that. I just wanted to spend some time with you and get to know you. I really am sorry.” Bryce looks at me with sad eyes. He’s obviously beating himself up over my panic attack.

“It’s not your fault. My anxiety already had me a little on edge, and I should have known better. Besides, I could have said no, but I didn’t. And the server wasn’t your fault either. People are just like that.” I drop my head, looking at my shoes. My hands move to the pocket in my hoodie. I know all too well the things people do to hurt others. To make them feel like less of a person.

He points over to my couch. “Come on, let’s sit. Standing there all upset is really making me feel even worse.”

I nod, moving over to plop down on my leather cushions.

“Kat, I really am sorry.” He grabs both of my hands his face somber.

“You have nothing to be sorry about, Bryce. That was the first time I was able to work through an attack without having to leave the place. You actually helped me. So, thank you for that.” I lock my eyes with his as I speak. I want him to know that none of this was his fault, nor were any of my issues. “Want to watch something? I’ve been on a Battlestar Galactica trip. You can stay and nerd out with me, if you want.”

Bryce doesn’t say anything for a moment. I’m not sure if he’s going to high tail it out of here. His face is completely unreadable. He has also now seen me in full panic mode. Bryce could be like the others. He could simply realize I’m not worth getting to know. I’m not worth his time. I’m not worth anything.

“Yeah, I’d like that. Truth be told, I like that show. I haven’t watched it since it

ended.” He chuckles. Instantly, there’s a spark inside me. A small spark of hope.

“So, you’re a bit of a geek at heart?” I grin back, my eyes full of excitement. Turns out this man who helped me out of an attack today is a bit of a nerd too.

“Could be,” He flashes me his signature panty-dropping smile. Does he even know he has that smile?

I flip on the show. I realize something as we’re both sitting and watching the show. He isn’t running for the hills. I don’t know who this man is, but he came out of nowhere. He’s already done more for me than any guy ever has in my entire life.

For the first time, I sit back on my couch, comfortable, and enjoy the company of a guy.

Chapter 7

Bryce

I get off work and pick up some food to bring over to Kat’s place. The last week has been an enjoyable change of pace from my pre-Kat days. She seems to be more at ease with me, and I finally have someone I can spend some time with. The guys I work with are great, but I don’t always want to hang out at bars and get hit on by women. Yep, I just said that. It’s not as if I don’t enjoy the attention, I just don’t want it.

In fact, these days, I don’t want to do any of that, bars or women. I just want to be with Kat. She’s always on my mind. Kat has officially taken over my thoughts.

I knock on her door. There’s actually an advantage to living so close to her: I don’t have far to travel when I go home. My protective side’s thrilled that I’m close in case

she needs something. I am not sure why, but I seem to have a caveman-like need to keep her close and protected.

I've spent this past week getting to know her more, but she's a tough egg to crack. She keeps things close to the chest. Kat never really talks about her past, and I know that has something to do with why she has panic attacks when she gets in sticky situations outside of her house. Call it a hunch, but I'm sure her past has impacted her and not in a good way.

"Hey! What do you have there?" Kat steps back, raising her brow, and lets me into her apartment after I arrive.

I hold up the white bag and smile. "Food," immediately the smell of the garlic bread and the Alfredo sauce took over the room. Without even opening the bag, the garlic, cheese and seasoning smells surround us. I picked up her favorite, Chicken Alfredo. She loves Tony's Place and eats there at least twice a week.

"Oh! Gimme! Mmm," She moans, sniffing at the bag with a smile. "Italian? Oh! You went to my favorite place. Bryce, you are seriously the best." Her eyes instantly fill with elation. She walks into the kitchen and takes out some bowls to put the food in for the both of us, then makes her way back into the living room. She plops down next to me on the couch.

"How was your day?" I turn and look at her while moving the food around in my bowl with the fork, licking my lips. I'm starved after working all day.

"Uh, it was okay. Finished up some work on one project and started a new project. Nothing exciting. You?" She shoves a load of pasta in her mouth. Kat is not ashamed to eat in front of me, and that is so refreshing. Kat's real, down to earth, and pure.

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“Same ole, same ole. Put bad guys away, helped people. Same shit, different day.” I shrug. Some days are better than others. Being an officer isn’t easy. Some stuff we see, a normal person wouldn’t be able to cope with. There are times we can save people, and sometimes we aren’t able to. It’s not a job for everyone.

“Hm. Okay. Well, what do you want to watch? We have some movies we can put on. Oh! Christmas movies! It is almost December, so we might as well get a head start.” Her eyes sparkle with her excitement. Kat loves this time of the year. She’s already strung up Christmas lights everywhere, and she told me yesterday that the tree is getting put up in the next couple days.

“Do you have Christmas Vacation?”

“Of course I do!” She bounces on the couch as she works to pull up the movie.

It’s one of my favorite movies. I remember watching it with my folks during the holidays. We would put up the tree and decorate the inside of the house. I’m not going back to Florida this year for Christmas, though. This is going to be my first holiday I won’t spend with them. The idea that I won’t be there actually sours my mood a bit, but I try to keep to together for Kat’s sake.

As if she can sense a shift in my mood, she turns to me. Kat frowns and puts down her bowl. “Everything ok, Bryce?” She pauses the movie.

“Yeah, uh, the movie just got me thinking. About my parents. Nothing special,” I look down at the coffee table, trying to avoid her eyes. My food doesn’t really interest me anymore.

“You know, you haven’t told me about your parents. Are you going to see them for Thanksgiving at least?” She sits with her knees pulled up. I notice she does this whenever she’s unsure about something. It’s almost like a defense mechanism.

“No. I mean, it’s next week. So, I’ll probably just pick up a shift at work. I probably won’t go home for Christmas either.” I take a sip of my water. As much as I want to go home, it just isn’t a good idea.

“What? No.” She shakes her head. Her knees come down and there’s a sudden shift in her attitude. “Look, come to my parents’ place for Thanksgiving.”

“No, I don’t want to impose or make anyone uncomfortable. You haven’t known me for that long, and I don’t want you to think you have to invite me. Really, there’s no reason to feel sorry for me. I can work.” Shaking my head, I turn away from her.

“First, you are not imposing. Second, no one will be uncomfortable. Third, I will not allow you to spend your first Thanksgiving away from your family alone. Don’t fight me on this, Bryce.” She furrows her brows, and her lips press together in a thin line.

Kat mutters to herself and picks up her phone. Her fingers fly across the screen as she texts. She bites her lip.

“What are you doing, Kat?” I say a little slower and with a little more unease. Yeah, she is definitely up to something.

She holds up a finger to tell me to wait. She continues to type before looking at me. Kat is all smiles.

“My mom said you are more than welcome to be with us for Thanksgiving. So I told her to expect you.” She gives me an enormous smile and sets her phone down.

“You don’t fight fair, do you?” I poke her in the side, earning a giggle, and I laugh at her.

“Nope. So, you’ll come to Thanksgiving dinner? Please?” She moves to sit on her knees and brings her hands together in a begging position.

“Not much choice since you since you already told your mom I’m coming. Okay, okay. I’ll go. My mom will probably be happy that I’m not spending it alone or working.” My mom is always worried about me. Now that I’m on another coast, she’s had more to worry about. She calls me more, texts me more. She misses me, and I miss her.

“Is your mom back in Florida?” Kat asks in between her bites of pasta.

“Yup. Her and my dad. Gregory and Ruth Hawthorne.”

“What do your parents do for a living? Anyone else in law enforcement?”

“No, I’m it. The only one in the family. Mom is a teacher and Dad is a real estate agent.” My family is small, and I don’t have a lot of cousins. My family also lives in different places in the United States. Maybe that’s the reason I’ve always wanted a big family.

“Any brothers or sisters?” She leans over and places her bowl on the table.

“Nope. Only child. I was a lot to handle as a kid, so I think my parents didn’t want to risk having more than they could handle.” I truly was a lot of work. They always had to keep tabs on me, or else I would get into trouble. They had me in sports and clubs, just to keep me busy. “What about you? What are your parents like? Any siblings?”

“Well, my mom, Elizabeth, is a journalist for a local paper out here. My dad, Mark,

works in the trade show and convention industry, on the sales side. I have an older sister. Jennifer, who's married and a stay-at-home mom. Oh, and she has the cutest little baby girl, Jemma." Kat says before getting up and putting our plates in the sink. She stored the leftovers in the fridge and closed it with a light thud.

"So, we going to watch the movie or what? We talked through that entire meal." I call out to her. Truthfully, I'm surprised she even opened up that much to me. I'm even more surprised that she's bringing me to her family dinner for Thanksgiving.

She walks over and sits next to me, pulls the blanket off the back of the couch, and places it on our laps. Then, Kat picks up the remote and turns the movie back on.

While we watch the movie, I turn to and catch a glimpse of her beauty. She truly is stunning. I don't think she truly knows how tempting she is. But something happened to her. Something happened that dimmed her light. Whatever that was, it keeps her in hiding. She doesn't really like to hang around people; not unless she trusts them enough. Somehow, though, she trusts me. My lips curl up in a slight smile as a warmth spreads all over me. I have a flutter in my chest knowing she trusts me.

I am so caught up in my thoughts that I don't act fast enough. She turns to me and catches me staring at her.

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“What?” she whispers, her eyes now wide and alert. “Why are you staring at me?”

“Oh, no. I was just thinking. I was wondering about something.” Turning my entire body towards her, I prop my arm on the back of the couch.

She hesitates, then asks, “About what?”

“Please don’t take this wrong way. I just want to know what happened that makes you to avoid a lot of public places or being around people.” I don’t want her to panic, so I make sure she understands that I’m not being malicious. “Honestly, I’m just curious. It may help me in the future so I know how to avoid it.” I’m still upset that I put her in that position from last week. She shut down so quickly that she didn’t even feel comfortable when some guys I work with came by.

“Um,” She glances down at the blanket. “I just ... it wasn’t always easy growing up. I really don’t want to talk about it.” She’s shutting down again.

“Hey, come here.” I pull her close and wrap my arm around her shoulder. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t. I just don’t enjoy bringing up my past. Let’s just focus on the movie, shall we?” With that, she turns back towards the TV and nestles closer into my side. I run my hand along her arm while we sit there in silence. Before long, her breathing evens out. I look down and see that she’s fallen asleep.

For a moment, I just stare at her. Taking in her long eyelashes, her soft skin. Kat rarely wears makeup, and she truly doesn’t need it. She’s a goddess without it.

I pick her up, wrapping my arm under her legs and pulling her head close to my chest, and bring her into her room. I pull down her comforter and lay her down in bed, before covering her with the blanket.

I step into the living room, and turn off the movie, and grab her phone. Back in the bedroom, I plug it in and make sure she's warm enough. Even though it's Vegas, it can get cold at night.

"Night, Kitty Kat." I place a kiss on her forehead and turn to leave the room.

In the kitchen, I take her keys off the key ring and leave her a note saying I'll bring them back in the morning. There is no way for me to deadbolt her door unless I take her keys. Maybe it's the cop side of me, maybe it's the side of me that cares for her. Either way, I don't want to do anything that would put her in danger.

After I shut her door quietly, I lock it and send a text to her phone saying the same thing that I wrote in the note.

As I walk into my apartment, she's all I can think about. So often this week, she has been on the forefront of my thoughts, taking up every inch of space in my mind.

Tonight, she did something that meant a lot to me. Kat invited me to dinner with her family for the holiday. We're just friends, and she has no reason to bring me along, but she wants me there. She doesn't want me to be alone. A girl who makes sure she's by herself most days made sure I wasn't for Thanksgiving. That did something to me.

I lay down in bed and stare up at the ceiling. When I first arrived in Vegas, I was merely working to pass the time. I pulled extra shifts and spent the rest of my free hours at the gym. Some days, I would hang out with the guys while other days, I would simply sit at home. Now, it's different. Now, I look forward to getting off so I

can talk to her. I look forward to just being around her, seeing her smile, hearing her laugh. Tonight, when she fell asleep against me, something inside me stirred. She fit me. Kat truly is someone who brings joy into my world. I can only hope I do the same for her, my Kitty Kat.

Chapter 8

Katrina

“So, are you going to invite Bryce out with us?” Vic calls from the kitchen. Right now, she’s mixing us some drinks. Since she’s a bartender, who knows what’s in them?

“Um, I didn’t think to. Should I?”

“You know, I still think that was incredibly sweet that he put you to bed last night. Yes, I think you should invite him out. I think he has a thing for you.” Vicki walks over and hands me her drink concoction. “Here. This is a Purple Gecko.” She hands me my drink and then heads to my room to get dressed.

“Thanks,” I take a sip and my lips pucker. This will no doubt get me drunk. I’ll need to drink this slowly if I want to make it out tonight.

Ugh. We’re going out. To the strip, of all places. Vicki wants to act like tourists tonight. I’m less than thrilled to be going along with her plan. If I have to go out, at least it’s with her. Being around tourists and crowds, I’m really putting myself in an uncomfortable position.

“Okay. Let me text him and see if he wants to go.” A little piece of me is excited at the thought of doing that. I pick up my phone and send a text off to him.

Me: Hey, Vicki and I are going to the strip tonight. She wants to play tourist. Do you want to tag along? Bring a friend, maybe? Let me know.

Bryce: Sure. Sounds like fun. Will you be ok with being on the strip?

I smile at my phone. He's been so amazing and understanding, even now, always looking out for me.

Me: Yeah. I'm drinking now to take the edge off. And I'm fine when I'm with Vicki and even more so with you going. Plus, she knows where the good spots are at.

Bryce: Ok. Mind if I invite Austin?

Me: Sure. Be at my apartment around nine.

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Bryce: See you then.

I put down my phone. “Bryce is coming, and he’s bringing Austin.”

“Austin? I like that name. Who is this Austin?” Vicki calls from my room. She comes back into the living room and sits down on the couch. “Spill.”

“I, uh, don’t know much about Austin.” I think back to the couple of times I’ve met him, but he’s never said a word. “Austin is Bryce’s partner for work, and he’s very quiet. He’s also cute from what I’ve seen.” I shrug.

“So, what are you wearing tonight?” Vic sips her drink. “Oh, this is good!”

I laugh at her. “Probably some jeans and a sweater. Does it matter?”

“No, I guess not. It would be nice to see you in a dress.” She plays with her phone while she knocks back more of her drink.

“You know why I won’t wear a dress. It won’t happen. Ever.” She’s insane if she thought I would step foot outside in a dress. Nothing good ever happens when I’m in a dress. Nothing but pain and humiliation.

“What are you going to do when you get married?”

I frown at her. “Who says I’m getting married? First, I need a man for that. I don’t have one of those. So, I’m not really worried about my wedding day.”

She sighs, gets up, and walks into the bathroom to get ready. She usually gets started before me, as she takes longer to get ready. I try to be as low maintenance as possible. Besides, I'm not out to attract attention like she is.

* * *

There is a knock at the door. I walk over and answer it since Vicki is still in the bathroom getting ready. I open it to find Bryce and Austin. My eyes stop on Bryce as I take him in. He looks amazing. He has on his signature leather jacket with a button-down shirt underneath. It leaves me speechless. That fact obviously doesn't go unnoticed when Bryce rouses me from my trance.

"Can we come in?" Bryce laughs.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry," I step to the side and nod towards the living room.

He bends down to my ear after stepping through the threshold and whispers, "It's okay. You were just checking us out. I can let it slide," Bryce teases. His voice sends shivers down my spine, making my breath hitch.

"I was not!" My mouth forms a thin line as I stare at him. "Whatever," I head back towards the couch and sit, feeling the heat in my cheeks.

Bryce and Austin follow me, but Bryce sits next to me. When he does, I can suddenly smell his cologne. He smells like the woods, like autumn rain. I try to lean closer to get a deeper sniff.

"Are you okay there, Kitty Kat?" Bryce leans into me, narrowing his eyes playfully.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Why?" Abort! Abort! Walk away, Kat. Get up and walk away.

“You’re smelling me.” He lifts his one eyebrow and gives me a smile as he leans in closer.

“Uh, no. I wasn’t. Promise. I was, uh, just stretching. My side was a little cramped.” I said abort, Kat! Ugh. I really should have walked away.

“I’m sure you were.” he says, laughing and patting me on the back.

“All right, boys and girls! I’m ready. Who the hell is this?” Vicki comes out of the bathroom and scowls. She stands in front of Austin.

“Vic, this is Austin and Bryce. Guys, this is Vicki.” I’m slurring my words a bit now, due to whatever concoction she gave me. Both of them greet Vicki, and Bryce gives me a look. I know that look. He lifts his eyebrows at me and smokes.

Leaning into him again, and I whisper, “I’ll be fine. I’ve had a bit of liquid courage. I feel pretty good for now.”

“Yeah, I can tell you’ve had a bit. You keep smelling me.” He grins. “But I’m just checking.” He leads me to the door with his hand on my back. I draw in a sharp breath. His touch creates a pulse of electricity between us.

Bryce drives us down to the strip, and we park in the Harrah’s parking garage. We all get out and immediately you can hear the commotion of the Las Vegas Strip. The cars, the music and the people walking from casino to casino.

Bryce looks towards the open partitions of the garage. His eyes light up with curiosity and a grin stretches across his face.

“What is that thing?” he asks, staring at a giant Ferris Wheel.

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“That would be the High Roller. You can see all of Vegas from that. You want to go on it?” I look over at him curiously. It’s been something I’ve always wanted to try and get on. But being in that small of a space with other people has always keeps me from getting on.

“Maybe later, yeah.” He nods, chuckling. “Have you ever been?”

“Nope. Never had a reason and never really wanted to.” Shaking my head, I look up at Bryce. He hooks an arm over me. Smiling slightly, I lean into him, and we walk into the crowd.

We walk for a while until we get to Harrah’s. It is a little chilly, and there really aren’t that many people out, which is great for me. Those that are out walk around in groups laughing, enjoying the thrills the Vegas has to offer: lights, music, even the possibility of winning millions. The casino floor has gamblers and people walking through to their next destination. Bryce and I walk past a bride and groom taking pictures near a slot machine. Bryce pulls me closer as we walk through the crowds.

We head over to Carnival Court and find a table to sit at. Austin and Vicki head over to the bar to get us some drinks while Bryce and I hang back.

“You doing okay?” Bryce eyes me up and down, biting his lip.

“Yep. The alcohol I had at the apartment helped a bit. Plus, I have you here.” I can’t believe I just said that. I try to keep my face emotionless and stare over at the bar instead of him. I focus on the line of people ordering their drinks and those dancing around to the music. Modern Fingers is on stage playing covers that span from the

nineties to now. People are singing along with the band and shouting the lyrics.

Bryce leans in and puts his mouth against my ear. “Always. You always will, Kat.” Every cell in my body is vibrating in response to his touch and words. I close my eyes and take a couple of deep breaths.

“T-thanks.” I turn back to him and give him a faint smile.

Austin and Vicki soon return with some shots and our drinks. Beer for Austin, a Bloody Mary for me, and a Long Island for Vicki. Everyone but Bryce toasts with a shot. Bryce holds up his water and winks at me.

“To friends,” Vicki says.

“To friends!” We all repeat and knock back our shots. I can feel the warmth from it immediately. I huddle next to Bryce to get some more warmth. Without hesitation, he wraps his arm around me and pulls me closer.

With other guys I’ve been with, I’ve never had this feeling like I do with Bryce. He feels safe to me. He feels comfortable. Being with him just feels right.

I feel like I gravitate towards him without even thinking about it. It’s crazy to think about since we haven’t known each other that long. It could be the alcohol making me feel more at ease with Bryce, but I don’t truly think that’s what it is. I think it’s just him.

After a few drinks, Austin and Vicki take off to go dance to Modern Fingers. She rarely gets to do that when I’m with her. Vicki likes to take me out, but she gets protective because of my past. She usually sticks by me, never leaving my side when we go out. I look around and see shots glasses being held high as people toast and clink their drinks. People around Bryce and I are having fun, laughing and singing.

“Hey, do you want to take a walk? Maybe burn off those shots?” Bryce tips his head towards me, a smile playing on his lips at whatever my expression must look like after all those shots.

“Sure!” Wow. Way too excited there, Kat. Bring it back some. “Sure,” I nod and sound a little more in control of my vocal cords. Bryce chuckles, nodding towards the never-ending crowd.

We get up and walk out around the promenade. He keeps his arm locked in mine, and I can feel his eyes on me, constantly. It’s almost like Bryce is trying to look into my soul. The longer he stares, the more he sees.

“You doing okay?” he asks for the hundredth time.

“Yup. Still as good as the last time. Like I said, when I drink, my worries about what others think goes away. I don’t care if people stare or make me feel small.” I close my mouth tight when I realize what I just said.

“Is that what brings on the anxiety and panic attacks?” He pulls me over to a bench to sit.

With my eyes closed, I sigh. Maybe I should just rip the band-aid off before I get in too deep with him.

“For most of my childhood and up until my teenage years, kids picked on me and bullied me relentlessly. People I thought I could trust, people that were my friends; they turned on me. Talked about me behind my back, said mean things, did mean things to me.” I shake my head, wincing at the memories flashing through my mind.

Bryce says nothing; he just keeps listening.

“There was a party at this camp that my parents sent me to. It was one night where the kids had a giant sleepover. It was fun at first. We had some crafts to do, played some sports, it was a good time. My friends were there, along with some other kids we went to school with. Well, eventually, the counselors went to bed. Of course, you get kids in a room with no supervision and the games start. It started first with Truth or Dare. I had picked truth every time because the dares were, well, not nice or clean. One truth I told was that I’d never been kissed. So after a few rounds, people decided that we had to switch games and play spin the bottle.” I pause for a moment to collect my thoughts.

“I don’t like where I think this is going.” Bryce growls, but I continue.

“I didn’t really want to play, but my friends talked me into it. Well, after a while, I ended up kissing a couple guys on the lips and then some girls changed the rules to every spin was a make out in the nearby closet. Now, mind you, there were no counselors there when there should have been. To this day, I still don’t know why they left. As luck would have it, I was the first one up. I don’t even remember the guy’s name. We walked back to the closet, and we made out. I had no idea what I was doing, I slobbered all over the guy. It was completely embarrassing. I ended up breaking down in the closet because the guy said I kissed like a Doberman. I think I was twelve or something. Of course, I didn’t know how to make out with a guy; I’d never kissed one. So, I finally came out of the area we made out in, and everyone was laughing at me and saying horrible things. I ran back to the dorm areas and cried myself to sleep.” My eyes go glossy for a moment, and I look away, holding back a snuffle.

“Kat ...” Bryce breathes, giving me a somber look. He reaches out to pull me close, and I welcome the gesture gladly.

“When I woke up the next morning, I went to the bathroom to get dressed so I could have the counselors call my parents to come get me. When I looked in the mirror ...”

I tear up. This was the point where I had lost trust in the human population. How can people just demean another person like they did? “‘Slut’ was written across my forehead in giant letters, pictures of dicks were on my cheeks, and just random scribbles everywhere else. They covered me from head to toe in marker.” I could no longer hold back the pain. Hot, salty tears spilled from my eyes and onto my cheeks.

People that I had trusted I had known, destroyed me that day. The worst part is that what happened followed me throughout school for the rest of my life there.

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“Holy shit,” Bryce muttered into my hair, and I cried into his chest, staining his shirt with tears.

“That was the catalyst; the start of it all. Nothing was ever the same, and I was never the same.” I wipe my eyes and turn back towards Bryce. “If you don’t mind, I would like to go back and have a couple shots now, please.”

“Okay, let’s go get you those shots.” Bryce stood up and held out his hand.

We walk back to the table, hand in hand, with me tucked into his side. I don’t know how long he’ll be around for, but I’m going to at least enjoy him while I can. Any day now, he might turn tail and run. Realize I’m a mess. How much of a travesty I am.

I’m not special or important. I’m the joke. Always the joke.

Chapter 9

Katrina

Ugh. My head feels like its being ripped apart from the inside out. I can’t even get enough energy to open my eyes yet. Even with my eyes closed, the light filtering into my room hurts my head. My mouth feels like I swallowed cotton balls and my stomach is rolling. Tequila. It’s definitely the tequila.

I groan, reach down under the blanket, realizing I’m in a t-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms. I don’t remember getting dressed last night at all. In fact, I don’t even remember getting home. How did I get home? At that moment, I feel movement in

the bed next to me. My eyes fly open, and I turn my head to see who it is.

Bryce. It's Bryce.

Bryce is in my bed with no shirt. What did I do? Oh, my God, did we ... no way, that's impossible. My pajama pants are on, but who put them on? God, I hope it wasn't him. I hesitantly pull up the covers. He is in his pajama pants too. I internally sigh with relief. Okay, at least he's half dressed.

Also, he looks amazing. Wow, I can stare at that perfection all day and night. He's sexy as fuck. Now that he's shirtless, I can see the definition in him that's only slightly hidden when he's fully dressed. Holy hell, he is perfection all the way down to the V that leads to ...Stop, Kat. Mind. Gutter. Out.

Ok, then on to the next problem I need to solve. How the hell did I get dressed? Or undressed? I can't even remember if I was wearing my cute bra and panty set last night. I pull up my pants to see that I have on a black thong. My head falls back against the pillow. Well, at least I'm in something cute, but shit, he probably saw my ass.

My head is pounding. What happened last night? I lift my hand to my head and groan again. There is a thrash metal band playing inside my head. I'm sure of it.

"Are you all right?" A hoarse voice coming from man next to me stirs me from my thoughts.

"No. Not at all. Bryce, what happened? And, no offense, but how are you in my bed? Or better yet, why?" I turn to face him. Even first thing in the morning, this man is incredibly handsome. His sharp jaw line is covered in stubble. His hair is a little messed. Whereas I probably look like a raccoon with bed head right now. I know I still have makeup on; I can feel the globs under my eyes.

“Tequila. Tequila happened. You all were very drunk. I dropped Austin and Vicki off at his place to sleep it off, and I brought you back here.” He runs his hand through his hair, just making him drip with more sex appeal than before. Bryce is in my bed. I shake my head, still thinking this is some sort of dream.

“Okay, sounds great. How in the world did I end up in my pajamas? How did you end up in yours?” Not sure if I want to hear the answer, I close my eyes and silently pray.

He gives me a deadpan look. “I put you in them.”

“Wait, why? Why didn’t you just leave me in the clothes I was in?” My eyes go wide, and my voice shakes. I shoot up in bed, utterly embarrassed.

“Because they were a mess. You spilled a drink on yourself, and I didn’t want you sleeping in that. I didn’t look at anything. I did my best to keep my eyes closed, and I dressed you. Promise.” He holds up his hand like he’s swearing on the Bible.

I feel myself flush. Just the thought of him seeing me naked ... Ugh, why me? I put my head in my hands and rub my face. I forget I’m still wearing makeup, so now I probably look like I came out of a horror film.

“Okay, but why are you sleeping here in my bed?” I turn towards him again, eyes blazing.

“That is a simple answer, Kitty Kat. You asked me to.” He gives me a devious grin.

“I ... I ... No way.” Is he serious?

“You asked me to. I assure you, nothing happened. Once I got you dressed, you passed right out. I went up to my apartment, changed, and came back down. I would have slept here even if you hadn’t asked, just so I could keep an eye on you.” He

pauses and looks at me. “You drank a lot last night, Kat. I just wanted to keep you safe.”

My mouth drops open. I can’t believe it. Besides my parents and Vicki, no one ever really cared about my wellbeing before.

“T-thank you.” Tears well up in my eyes, and I fight to hold them back.

He smirks and nudges me on the arm. “That’s what friends are for, Kat. Now, I’m starving, and I’m sure you are too. If not, you still need to eat to help balance you out from last night. Go do whatever it is you women do in the morning, and I’ll make you food.”

There’s no way any of this is real. I must still be in some alcohol-induced dream. This is totally a dream. Bryce walks out to the kitchen, shirtless, and I can hear him as he digs through my refrigerator to find stuff for breakfast.

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I gather a change of clothes and head into my bathroom, and turn on the shower. My head is still pounding, but I'm hoping the hot water from the shower will help.

Once I'm dressed and fully aware that it is not a dream, I walk into the kitchen to greet the food laid out and waiting for me. And Bryce, still shirtless.

"All right, I made you some eggs, cut up some fruit, and made some avocado toast for you. Eat," Bryce commands, pointing to a plate loaded to the brim with food.

I sit without hesitating because I'm way too hungover to fight. Also, I'm starving, and he cooked up a crap load of food for me. As I eat, he brings me some orange juice and Advil.

"Here, take this." He drops the pills into my hand.

"Thank you," I throw them back and down them with the juice. While Bryce and I sit there eating, his phone goes off. He pulls up the messages and scowls.

"Everything okay?" I ask, chewing on my toast.

"What? Oh, uh, yeah. Nothing to worry about." He put his phone down next to him.

"Oh, I sent a message to Austin. Vicki is fine. He'll have her call you when she gets up."

"Oh, thanks. So, what are your plans for the day?"

"Work. I'll come by and check on you tonight. Actually," He looks at his watch. "I

need to go get ready for work. Eat, Kat. Take it easy today, and please call me if you need anything, okay?" He rests his hand on my cheek, his touch sending a jolt through me like a live wire.

"Okay. I will." I mumble. His touch has me off kilter.

Bryce leans forward and places a kiss on my cheek. My body is now ready to combust altogether. With that, he leaves, and I take my time to eat the massive meal that he cooked for me. I need to return the favor. Since I met him, he really has looked out for me and cared for me well beyond what he needed to. There has to be something I can do to make it up to him. But for now, I need to go lay on the couch and hydrate.

While I sit and watch some television in the living room, my phone goes off. I see it's Vicki. "Hey, did you survive?" I ask her when I answer. She's probably is doing about as good as me.

"Girl. Tequila," she groans into the phone.

"Yup. Been saying that all morning." I laugh.

"Okay, so I'm on my way back. I'm taking a Lyft to you since my car is at your place. I don't have to work, so I'm literally going to use you for a couple hours until I can feel at least ten percent better than I am now." She sounds awful; much worse than I do.

"Sounds good. How come Austin didn't just bring you over?"

"I don't want to talk about it. I'll see you in a few." She disconnects the call.

Vicki sure is in a mood this morning. I lay back down on the couch and relax until

she gets here.

I must have fallen asleep, because I wake up when I hear a key being put in the door. I look up to see Vicki coming in and dropping her stuff down on the floor in the entryway. She huffs all the way over to the couch and falls onto it with a dramatic thump.

“What’s going on, Vic?” I sit up and ask.

She throws a hand over her head and sighs. “I don’t know what I did last night, Kat.”

“What do you mean? We went out drinking. From what I remember until our black out, we had a good time. From what Bryce remembers we had a great time even after the blackout.”

She frowns. “No, I mean, I don’t know what I did last night. I remember last night. Clear as day.” She frowns.

“What happened, Vicki?” Now I’m concerned. Austin had told Bryce she was okay, but it doesn’t sound like it.

“Austin and I, well, we had sex. Earth shattering, body rocking, life-changing sex.” She puts her hands on her face and screams into them.

I shake my head in disbelief. “All right, I’m a little confused. You don’t remember or you do?”

“Kat! I slept with Austin. I don’t know why I did that! What did I do? Why?” She bolts upwards. “Honestly, he’s a jerk. No, an asshole is more like it. How could I sleep with him?”

“Vic, you guys seemed to get along great from what I remember last night. I don’t understand how he’s an asshole now.”

“He asked me before I left if I wanted to come back later and fuck him till his dick fell off.” She retorted, scowling.

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I scoff. “Wow, classy.”

“Exactly. Look, I don’t want to give the asshat a minute more of thought. What are we watching? And what are we ordering?”

“Hallmark Channel. You know what time of year it is.” I love the Hallmark Christmas movies. My TV pretty much stays on this channel until January. “And Bryce made me breakfast, so I’m not hungry. I think there’s still some fruit that’s cut up and some toast you can make.”

“He cooked you breakfast, huh? So, what happened last night? Did you give him your v-card yet?” She hops up and wanders towards the kitchen.

I shake my head, though I doubt she can see. “No. Nothing happened. But he undressed me, apparently. I don’t remember it. Then, I guess I asked him to sleep in my bed. That’s pretty much it. And then the breakfast part. When he left, he kissed my cheek.”

“What? Girl!” Vicki stops dead in her tracks and stands in between the living room and the kitchen threshold. “Okay, let’s unpack all this.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Shut up. He undressed you? So, he saw your goods?” Her face lights up.

I grimace. “No, I don’t think he did. He said he closed his eyes and tried to do it all without having to look.”

“Yeah right!” She bursts out laughing. “What guy would not look at what you got going on if he has to dress your drunk ass? I don’t buy it.” She waves her hand in the air dismissively. “Let’s get to the other part of this story. He slept with you in your bed.”

“Yep. He said I asked him to. I obviously don’t remember. Bryce said he probably would have done it anyway since I was so drunk. He wanted to make sure I was okay.” My heart skips a beat at the thought of him caring so much for me.

“Pfft. Oh, please,” Vic walks back into the kitchen just as my phone chirps.

Bryce: Hey, Kitty Kat. How are you feeling? Please tell me you’re staying hydrated?

Me: Hey. Yes, I am. Vicki is here now. We’re both barely functional with our hangovers.

Bryce: Ha. Ok. I just wanted to check in. Hey, Austin has been acting a little strange. Do you know if something happened with him and Vicki?

Me: I think he wasn’t much of a gentleman to her this morning. That may have pissed her off.

Bryce: Yeah. He can be a little rough around the edges. Ok, so I’ll stop by after work with some food. Rest for now.

Me: I am. I have the Hallmark Channel on and I’m watching all the girly, lovey story Christmas movies.

Bryce: Oh no.

Me: Oh yes!

“What are you smiling about?” Vicki emerges from the kitchen with a sandwich, raising a brow at my expression.

“Nothing. Bryce was just checking to make sure I was doing all right.” I shrug, I grab the blanket on the back of the couch and wrap it around me.

“He has a thing for you, doesn’t he?”

“What? No! We’re just friends. I’m not dating material, Vic. You know that. Bryce knows that. I would never be someone he would date. He probably dates the model types.”

“Kat, I love you. For fuck’s sake. Yes, you totally are dating material. You had some shitty things done to you in life, but that doesn’t disqualify you from being loved. If anything, it makes you more lovable.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you value people. You understand how mean they can be or how nice they are. Trust is a big part of relationships, and you’ve had your trust tested so many times. It also means you’ve had enough shit in your life that you deserve to be happy. You deserve that Hallmark shit you watch.” Vicki giggles.

Guys I dated in the past were always in and out of my life in a flash. If they didn’t run because of my issues, they left because I wouldn’t give it up. I’m not trying to hold on to my virginity or wait till I find the one I’ll marry; I just won’t give it up to the first guy who says he wants to have sex.

Bryce seems like he’s sticking around for the long haul. The man is amazing and thoughtful. I’m still not sure why he’s single or how his ex even let him go.

I simply cannot can't lose him as a friend. I can't. Besides, I don't have many to begin with. If things were to heat up, we stand to lose more if we don't work out. I stand to lose more if we don't work out. There's no way I can part with how safe he makes me feel, even at my heart's expense. I would rather long to be with him than hurt because I lost him.

Chapter 10

Katrina

Today is Thanksgiving, and I've been running around my apartment for the last few hours trying to get my nerves to unravel. I've never brought someone to Thanksgiving before, let alone a guy. Or a guy that was as hot as Bryce. I know my parents. This can only end in embarrassment for me.

This seemed like such a good idea at the time I invited him. Stupid, stupid Kat.

I've paced a hole into my carpet by the time Bryce comes down from his apartment. I open the door and let him in after hearing him knock.

"Hey ,Kitty Kat. You doing okay? You look a little pale." He puts a hand on my shoulder.

"No, I am not okay. Just really nervous. I-I've never brought a friend home for anything. Just ... please promise me that if my parents embarrass me, you won't take off." Already, my eyes sting with tears.

"Kat, look at me. I'm not going anywhere. I promise. They can tell me stories or show me baby bath pictures, and that still wouldn't scare me from being your friend. Kat, I promise you." Bryce pulls me into a protective hug. "I'm not going anywhere."

I sniffle. "Okay," I squeeze him back as my head rests against his chest. I can hear his heartbeat, and like many times before, I use it to help steady me. "Okay, let's do

this.”

Bryce takes my hand and squeezes it. I wish I could explain that the last time I brought someone home; I was in high school. The guy wanted to ask me to homecoming. I stupidly agreed to go, and I had no idea I was being set up. After everything that had happened, I should have realized the set up, but I was young. I thought things would change. How wrong I was.

Bryce and I hop into his truck and head out to my parents’ house. I’m not much for conversation right now, and he doesn’t push me. We hop on the highway and are greeted by all the billboards along side it. But behind the signs you can see the beautiful mountains that surround the valley. The blue sky as the backdrop is a beautiful backdrop to them. My parents live close to Lone Mountain, and the scenery there’s so much more different than on the Strip. You’re away from the tourists, away from the hustle and bustle of the casino. It’s quiet and serene. The closer you get to the mountains by my parents’ house, the less like it feels like the city of Las Vegas. It’s cleaner and more suburban. Houses litter the streets, gated communities and parks surround you. There are no crazy lights or billboards, no packs of people hanging over a table waiting for Blackjack, there are zero scape lawns and a sense of calmness. When we’re almost there, his phone dings with an incoming message. I can see his brows furrow and his lips form a thin line. He doesn’t look happy.

“Everything all right? You look mad.” I ask him.

“Yeah, I’m fine. No worries,” He shrugs. I nod and look out the window, wondering what’s ruffled his feathers. Bryce is usually calm and collected. I shake it off, thinking nothing more of it.

After we park, we make our way to the front door. Bryce had stopped to get a couple of bottles of wine for my parents tonight, ones which are now in my hands. I thought that was nice of him to do, and my mother will love the gesture. He’s definitely going

to score points with that.

I open the door and am immediately greeted by the smell of food wafting from the kitchen. I can hear the endless commotion of chatter, clanging dishes, and laughter coming from the kitchen and family room.

“Hello? Mom?” I yell over the sounds of football blaring through the family room TV speakers. I peer around looking for her.

“Katrina! I’m in the kitchen!” my mom yells back.

Bryce and I walk over to the dining room and into the kitchen. I stop in the entryway, grinning wide.

“Hi, mom.” I place the bottles on the counter and run to give her a hug.

“Oh, baby girl.” She squeezes me tight.

“Mom, ribs. Breaking—”

“Oh! Sorry,” She laughs and lets me go. “And who is this handsome gentleman?” my mom asks, turning to look Bryce up and down curiously.

“My name is Bryce, ma’am.” He holds out his hand, but she brings him in for a hug.

“We hug in this family, and it’s Liz. None of that ma’am shit.” She grins.

Bryce nods and gives her one of his signature smiles. “Okay, Liz.”

“Fast learner, this one! I like him already.” She turns to me and points out into the family room. “Your dad is in there. Go take Bryce to meet him and they can watch

the game together while we finish up for dinner.”

“I would be happy to help.” Bryce offered.

“Nonsense. You are a guest in this house, and guests get football. Well, my husband and guests get football. I won’t let that man near the food. He’s always trying to add his own to our tried-and-true recipes.” She shakes her head, rolling her eyes with a smile. “I’ve banned him from the kitchen. Go. Football.” My mom shoos us away.

Bryce and I head over to the family room where my dad and Jonathan, my sister’s husband, sit on the couch.

“Dad, John, this is my friend Bryce. Bryce, my dad Mark and my brother-in-law, John.”

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“Sir, nice to me you. John, same.” Bryce shakes hands with them. My dad turns his attention away from the game for a moment to give him a once over.

“Call me Mark. Would you like a beer, Bryce?” my dad offers.

“No, thank you. A water if you have it, please.” Bryce replies.

“I’ll go grab one for you.” Making my way back into the kitchen, I grab a bottle of water for Bryce from the fridge.

“Hey, mom, where are Jennifer and Jemma?”

“She’s trying to get her down for a nap. Jemma is extra crabby today. I don’t think it’ll work with all the noise, but you know your sister’s as stubborn as they come.” My mom laughs and turns back to finish making the potato salad.

I walk back into the family room, and the men are already talking about football. Setting the water down next to Bryce, I turn and smile. Then, I raise my eyebrows to silently ask if everything is all right. Bryce nods back to me and rubs my back with a playful grin. The gesture sends a shiver down my spine. This man can touch me and send my entire body into shock.

I quickly turn and walk back into the kitchen, needing to cool off.

“Need help?” I grab an apron, trying to catch my breath.

“No, dear. But I could use the company. Sit,” She points to a stool at the kitchen

island. “Tell me about that very cute young man you brought.”

I cringe and realize that this is going to be a very long evening.

* * *

“Everyone to the dining room, please!” my sister calls out.

Bryce, John, and my dad all make their way from the family room while my mom and I finish putting the food on the table. Bryce is to my left, with my two-year-old niece at the end of the table sitting between him and my sister. My mom sits to my right, and my dad takes the spot at the head of the table. Jen and John are across from Bryce and me.

Bryce has found a friend in Jemma. A quick game of peek-a-boo and Bryce is her new best friend. She keeps trying to share her water bottle with him, and he pretends to drink. Bryce has Jemma giggling and belly laughing in no time. Watching him with her makes my heart swell. This man is too good to be true.

After we say our grace, we dig into the impressive spread my mom cooked up for Thanksgiving. The turkey smells amazing and looks mouthwatering and there’s a choice between savory mashed potatoes or potato salad. My mom also made my favorite, creamy green bean casserole. We also have an endless supply of stuffing. Really, I could survive on the casserole and stuffing alone.

We’re quiet and chowing down until my mom probes about Bryce and me.

“So, how did you two meet?” She looks at Bryce, smiling wide.

“OneShot Coffee,” Bryce says, patting his lips with a napkin. “It’s a coffee house. I stopped in with my partner on the police force, and I saw Kat there.” Bryce says.

“Oh, yes. You are always there working, aren’t you? That’s your favorite place.” my mother replies, turning to me.

I shrug, taking another bite of food. “Well, the coffee is superb.”

“So, you two have been seeing each other since then?” My mother makes it sounds like we’re dating, so I need to clarify. My palms immediately get sweaty and I start to worry about what Bryce is thinking about this.

“We’ve been friends since then, yes.” I shoot my mom daggers. Thankfully, Bryce can’t see the look I’m giving her.

“Katrina’s never really brought any friends home.” My mother pauses. “Well, no. That’s not true. There was that boy who came to pick you up—”

“Mom. No,” I interrupt stiffly, gritting my teeth. “Drop it. Please let’s not talk about that stuff. Please.” I feel a little light-headed. My chest is tight. Bryce’s hand is soon on mine under the table. He’s squeezing my hand, realizing that I’m panicking.

I look over at him, and he nods and smiles.

“Sorry, dear. Okay, let’s talk about something else.” The conversation pulls away from me and they focus on John and his job, among other topics.

Once dinner is over, we start on dessert. My mom brings out a couple of pies, ranging from apple, pecan and pumpkin, and we all dig in. I’m moaning as I take bites of my pie when Bryce interrupts me.

“Enjoying yourself?” Bryce whispers, leaning closer.

“I love pumpkin. It’s my absolute fave. I could eat this every day of the year.” I grin

at him between mouthfuls.

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“I can hear that.” He laughs, and I turn beet red. “It’s cute.” Bryce flashes me his panty dropping smile. His voice turns quiet. “You hanging in there?”

“I should ask you that.”

Bryce shakes his head. “I’m fine. Just worried about you. I could sense you getting upset. Want to talk about it?” He tilts his head at the bay window that points towards the backyard.

“Not out there. If they see us, they’ll come.” Laughing, I point to the stairs that are right off the dining room that lead to the second floor. “We can talk up in my old room.”

“You are taking me to your room? Are you allowed to bring boys to your room? Do we have to leave the door open?” Bryce asks, winking at me.

“Shut up and let’s go.” I take him by the hand and drag him upstairs.

“Wow. This room’s not much different from your apartment. Minus the missing gaming consoles.” Bryce says when he walks into my childhood bedroom.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I furrow my brows at him.

“Nothing. It’s you. All these books and gaming posters; this makes me feel like I’m back at your apartment. And I like that. This is all you, and there is nothing wrong with that.” He hip bumps me and walks over to the bed before sitting down on it.

It's a little weird being back in this room. The gray painted walls, the twin bed, and my old dresser with black nail polish stains on it, brings me back to dark time in my life. This was my safe space, my hiding spot when I was younger. Much like my apartment is to me now. It might be why my apartment looks similar to this room, down to the miss-matched furniture. I walk over to the bookcase and pick up my Edgar Allen Poe collection book, running my hand over it. The pages are worn from years of reading these stories and poems over and over.

"So, you want to tell me what that was all about down there? What got you all upset?" He reaches for my hand and pulls me down to sit next to him.

"It's a lot to talk about, and I'm not sure you would enjoy hearing it." I pull my knees up to my chest. Bryce places a hand on my leg.

"Kitty Kat, I am always here to listen. So, just tell me." His eyes soften as he rubs my thigh.

I exhale and prepare to revisit a memory I would rather keep locked away.

That's the thing about Bryce. He seems to make me comfortable enough to unlock my secrets, my pain. I just worry that one day it will be too much. That he'll realize I'm so messed up from it all.

"Remember how I told you the kids made fun of me on the camp trip?" I begin, and Bryce nods. "Well, that stuff followed me to high school. Kids called me names, made fun of me. No one ever wanted to date me or be a genuine friend to me. I had no one. I was an outcast. So, with school functions, I just didn't go."

Bryce props himself up on the headboard and pulls me into him. He wraps his arm around me and rubs my back in a soothing manner.

“It was my sophomore year. There was this kid who was always quiet but hung around the popular kids. He never took part in any of the pranks or said anything mean to me, but he still was friends with them. I held them all at arm’s length. It was a few weeks before homecoming and he came to me to apologize for what his friends were doing. All the torment and bullying. He said he begged them to stop, but they just wouldn’t. So he said he had an idea that could make them possibly stop. Let him take me to homecoming.”

I stop for a moment. Emotions began clamping down on my chest. They feel like weights, making it hard to breathe.

“I hesitated to go, but he had convinced me eventually that he was serious. I was gullible. So, I got a beautiful dress for homecoming. A long, beautiful pink dress. I got my hair done and my sister did my makeup. The guy came and picked me up, and we drove to the dance. When we got there, he said he had to go to the bathroom and then he left. I stood off to the side by myself for most of the dance. The guy never came back, and I didn’t know where he went off to. It’s not as if I had friends to hang out with.”

I stop to wipe the tears that have fallen on my cheeks.

“Towards the end, maybe three quarters of the way through, they were calling the homecoming king, queen, prince and princess. Now, I was a sophomore, so none of this really interested me. That is until I heard my name called for the queen title. I knew something wasn’t right. I had this sick feeling in my stomach. They called me again to come up to the stage, and people turned and looked at me. I was all the way in the back, but I made my way up to the stage. Everyone’s eyes were on me. I remember shaking so bad, waiting for someone to say something or tell me it was a joke. But that wasn’t what they did.

“As I made my way through the crowd, someone tripped me, and I fell flat on my

face. I started bleeding out of my nose, so I stood up and went to walk away before someone stepped on my dress and ripped it open, exposing my backside. My dress was torn and covered in blood, and people stood there laughing at me. Teachers were trying to gain control of everyone, but there was nothing they could do. I ran. Gathered up my dress and ran. I didn't even stop to clean up. I just took off and found a payphone to call my sister to come get me. My parents never knew what happened. The full story, at least. They just think the guy ditched me at the dance."

"Did the school punish those who did it?" Bryce growls, his face growing dark.

"No. No one came forward, and everyone who admitted they saw something said they didn't see who and that it looked like an accident." I leaned into Bryce a little more, taking a deep breath. He responded by holding me tighter in a protective hold.

"I take it that the bullying didn't stop there."

"No, it got worse. I became a hermit. Even though I went to school but also did what I could to hide in plain sight. I ate lunch in one of the empty classrooms, I spent study periods in the library hiding behind books. Whatever I could do to hide, I did. I ... I don't really want to get into anything else that happened right now."

"Okay, we don't have to." He rests his chin on my head and we sat there in comfortable silence. I'm not sure how long we sat like that, but it's nice to at least share that part of my past with someone.

Since I've known Bryce, he's helped to bring me out of my shell a bit. He knocks down my walls and lets me expose my past with no judgement. With him, right now as we are, I feel safe, not judged.

We drive back home, and he walks me to my door and gives me a tight hug. The hug isn't a friendly hug, it's intimate, and my breathing hitches while the butterflies in my

stomach decide to start doing summersaults. He leans in and kisses my forehead, with his lips lingering on me for a beat longer than normal.

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“Night, Kitty Kat.” Bryce says while he walks up his stairs to his apartment. I turn and enter my own and for a moment, I feel like there’s something missing.

That’s when it hits me. The feeling I get when I’m separated from him. That sense of loneliness when he leaves. I feel my heart beating fast in my chest and years begin to well in my eyes. I am falling for Bryce.

Chapter 11

Bryce

I haveno idea what time it is, but I am awoken by the ring from my phone. I don’t even look at it, I just answer.

“Hello?” My voice is hoarse, and I rub my eyes, yawning.

“Bryce? Are you all right baby? You sound sick.” It’s her. Emma. Ugh. Not the wake-up call I need right now.

“What do you want, Emma?” I hiss.

“I miss you, babes. I want to come see you, or can you come back home?” she whines.

“Emma, there is nothing to miss. You and Cameron were keeping each other plenty busy. And I am not coming back. Las Vegas is my home now.”

“What if I was to come see you?” Without even seeing her, I know she has a pout to her face. I roll my eyes nearly into the back of my head and groan.

This woman doesn’t give up. I retort, “Look, I can’t stop you from coming out here, but I want nothing to do with you.”

“You’re being unreasonable, Bryce.” Emma complains. “I just want to come talk to you. We can work on this. You and me. We were good together.”

“Goodbye, Emma.” With that, I end the call. She won’t give up and she’s always so used to getting what she wants, too. Emma simply can’t have me anymore.

As I finish that thought, an onslaught of texts come in begging to get me to take her back. I’m guessing Cameron got bored with her and took his dick elsewhere. Now she’s all alone and trying to crawl back to me. I’m not sad for even a moment about this.

I throw on a hoodie after hesitantly crawling out of bed to brace the morning chill. It’s mid-December, and it’s much colder in Vegas than in Florida. It’s not snowing, but it can get down into the lower thirties at times, and I’m just not used to that.

Looking at the clock, I see that it’s seven thirty. I should still be asleep. Grabbing my phone, I text Kat to see if she’s up.

Me: Kitty Kat, you awake?

Kitty Kat: I am now.

Me: Sorry, got woken up. Couldn’t fall back asleep. Wanted to come down and drink coffee with you.

Kitty Kat: Come on down. Warning: I am not nice when I get woken up. So, you better make the coffee.

Me: OMW down.

Kat and I exchanged keys to each other's apartments a few days ago. We're always together doing something in our apartments, after all. It simply made sense to exchange keys.

I pull on some jeans and put a t-shirt on under my hoodie before heading over to her place. When I get inside, I immediately start the coffee. Kat is still asleep, or at least still in bed. I pour her a cup how she likes it and get my own ready. Once our deliciously dark sludge is prepped, I carry our mugs into her bedroom.

I set hers on her bedside table and then put mine on the other side of the bed. I get under the covers with her and she immediately rolls over and lays her head on my chest.

I think the world of this woman. She's been through so much in her life. So many people did her wrong when she was younger. It's not fair that she had to suffer like that and suffer alone. I'm not sure why she didn't seek help, but I'm sure she had her reasons. It hurts when she tells me what she went through, but it helps me see why she is the way she is. It explains why she feels safe with certain people or places.

OneShot Coffee makes sense. It's quiet, small and intimate. People are busy doing their own thing, and they don't care about other people around them. For her, it's her chance to escape the confines of her house and venture out into the real world without judgement.

I know we're just friends, but there's a connection with her I've never had with anyone in my life. When she curls into me, I feel this need to protect her, to shield her

from all the bad in the world. It's a deep need to keep her safe.

Honestly, I want more than friendship with her. I'm captivated by her. Kat is on my mind all day and night. She makes my heart beat, my days brighter, and my life more complete. Kat has had to deal with a lot of hurt, though. She keeps herself from finding someone to love. I get that. I understand her hesitation. Hopefully, through time, we can take that next step with each other.

"Grrr. Why are you up so early?" I love hearing her first thing in the morning. Her voice is raspy and sexy when she wakes up. It makes my dick stir, which I need to keep under wraps.

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“Woke up and couldn’t go back to sleep.” She knows I have an ex, but I don’t want to bother her with the details. “So, now I’m here. Want me to make some breakfast?”

“Do you have to move? You’re a heater. I’m so warm right now.” She curls tighter into me, and a funny feeling courses, through my chest and stomach. Whatever it is, it feels nice. Like being at home.

I fall into a fit of laughter. “So, you’re just using me for my heating capabilities? I’m hurt.”

“Shush, you brute. Let me use you for your superpower as a human heater.” Kat chuckles.

I wrap my legs around her and try to warm her feet. Resting my head on hers, I close my eyes and realize just how easy it is to lie here with her. Just being with her is simple. All this feels so right. I want to wake up like this every morning with her next to me.

* * *

Austin and I are driving along the highway when we spot a driver weaving in and out of their lane.

“Look, Hardwick. Three lanes, no signal. Wow, and now he went back two. I think someone is having a hard time staying straight. What do you think?” I cock my eyebrow.

“Yup,” Hardwick reaches down and turns on the lights and sirens. We catch up to the vehicle and get the person to pull over to the right side of the highway, and I call in to dispatch.

“Dispatch, 913, out with a possible 409. Occupied one time. California plate seven, George, Ida, Charlie, four, four, three.”

“Car registration comes back clear and current to a Rodrick, Jason out of Orange County, California.” Dispatch responds.

Austin and I exit our squad car, and I walk to the back of the vehicle we just pulled over. As our department protocol requires, I touch the trunk and move to the passenger side. Austin stays back behind the car, watching the occupant.

The occupant of the vehicle begins lowering his window when I hear someone yelling.

“Hawthorne!” Austin calls out. But it’s too late. A SUV blasts into the car, clipping the front left side. The force pushes the car to the right, making it swerve into me. The car hits me, and impact throws me into the concrete barrier behind me.

My head is pounding, my vision blurry, and I soon realize I’m on the ground. I’m trying to figure out what just happened when suddenly I see black spots.

“Kat...” That’s all I get out before it goes dark, and I see nothing at all.

* * *

“I called Kat. Vicki is bringing her to the hospital.” Austin relays to me. The smell of bleach and antiseptic is attacking my nose, making my stomach turn. My body hurts from the impact against the concrete barrier and my head feels like it wants to

explode. The damn beeping from the machine next to me isn't helping my head.

"You didn't have to. I'm fine." To be perfectly honest, I'm annoyed Austin called Kat. She doesn't need to get upset, and she doesn't need more stress right now.

"Look, someone is going to have to be with you and I have to head back to the station to write what happened up. So, she's going to need to listen to what the doctor says. Besides, you're too stubborn to get yourself back here if there are warning signs that something else is wrong." He narrows his eyes.

"I am not stubborn." I run my hands over my face.

Austin just starts laughing. "Yeah. Okay. I rest my case."

About twenty minutes later, Kat comes running in. There is complete and total fear in her eyes. I know she has been crying, as her eyes are puffy and red.

"Bryce!" She runs over to me and hugs me, and I quietly wince in pain. She's holding me tight like she's afraid I am going to disappear. "What the fuck happened?"

Austin answers before I can, "A drunk driver. Well, other than the one we pulled over."

"Okay, I don't want to know." Kat responds, cringing. She squeezes her eyes shut, holding back more tears. I know she's fearing the worst.

"Relax, Kitty Kat. I'm ok. I promise. Here," I take her hand and wrap it around mine. "See? Still here." I slowly scoot over, ignoring the pain, allowing her space on the bed. Kat climbs eagerly next to my side, curling closer. She's trembling so bad that I feel awful knowing it's because of what happened to me.

She needs to feel me and hear my heart to calm down. I don't know why that works, but it does, and I love that it does. I love that I have that calming effect on her. The thing is, I need her too. I need to touch her and hear her voice. After everything today, I need all of her, and I don't want to let her go.

Austin told me what happened once I came to inside the ambulance. A second drunk driver saw the lights of our cruiser and panicked. He lost control of his SUV and smashed it into the vehicle we had pulled over. I had no time to react. I bashed my head and blacked out. Concussion? Yeah, I can deal with that. There are worse things that could have happened. Which I am sure Kat is acutely aware of.

There's a knock on the door and the doctor walks in with a file in his hands. "Officer Hawthorne, do you have your guardian here for the next couple of nights?" The doctor looks around the room.

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I look over at Kat and point to her. “Yep. She’s the lucky one.” Kat gets off the bed and stands next to me but doesn’t let go of my hand. That makes me smile.

The doctor comes over to her and starts rattling off the things she needs to look out for. If I get a headache that gets worse or won’t go away, any slurred speech, constant and repeated vomiting or nausea, differently sized pupils. Kat is diligent and attentive, taking mental notes to make sure she gets everything the doctor is saying.

Then, a thought comes to mind. She gets to be my nurse. I smile like a Cheshire cat. Kat turns to glance at me and gives me a funny look. She has no clue why I’m now grinning from ear to ear.

Once the doctor fills her in, he gets me discharged and eventually, we leave the hospital. Kat is super quiet as she drives us home. I can tell her mind is moving a thousand miles a minute.

Finally, we pull up to the apartment complex and she gets me settled. It’s been a long day. I know she’s exhausted not just from waiting at the hospital but also from the emotional toll this took on her. I feel awful for that.

Kat sets me up in her bed so I can be comfortable. She brings me some water to help keep me hydrated, then gets under the blanket to snuggle in next to me.

I pull her close. She lays her head on my chest and holds on to me tightly. She wraps her leg around mine and lets out a loud sigh.

“Thank you, Kat.” I tell her. The words don’t express how thankful I truly am to her,

though. I don't think words ever could.

"For what?" She tilts her head up to look at me.

"For racing down there to come see me. Just ... thank you." I give her a soft smile.

We lie there quietly for a few minutes when I look down and see she is staring at the wall next to me.

"What are you thinking about, Kitty Kat?" I tap her head. Kat is completely in her own world a lot of the time. Usually worried about things.

"What?"

"I can see the wheels turning, so what is going on in that head of yours?" I repeat.

Kat moves closer to me and lets out a shuddering breath. She grips my shirt.

"When ... when Austin called and said there had been an accident ... I got so scared, Bryce. My panic and anxiety ... I just feared the worst. There was no way to control it. Counting didn't help, Vicki didn't help. I needed you." I can feel her entire body shaking against mine.

My shirt soon becomes wet, and I realize she's crying.

"These last couple months have been the best in my life. I just t-thought I was going to l-lose you. I didn't want to lose y-you." she blubbers, sniffing.

"Shh. It's okay. I'm okay." I run my hand through her hair. "I know it could have been worse, but it wasn't. So, let's be thankful for that. I'm not going anywhere. I'm right here with you. Just breathe."

Kat weeps as I hold her. I do what I can to calm her and assure her I'm okay. Doing what I do, it's not a walk in the park. Being a cop is a very stressful job. In an instant, my life could be over. I have to use my training and instincts every minute of every day.

Today, my life could have ended. It's a scary truth. Even though I'm always aware of my surroundings, I didn't hear or see that SUV coming. I'd only looked up to see what was unfolding when Austin called my name. I'd just walked to the door to get the driver to roll down their window. It was within seconds that all that happened. If that SUV hit differently, or if I stood in a different spot, that outcome could have been deadly for me.

Unfortunately, there's nothing I can really do to put Kat at ease. All I can do is assure her I'm here and that I'm fine.

This moment, however, just reinforces how much I love having her next to me. I wasn't mad at Austin for calling my her and Vicki. He had called my parents first, but there wasn't much they could do with them being in Florida. Had I been conscious, she would have been my first call. I just knew me not being able to talk to her could have triggered an attack, which it did. Thankfully, Vicki could get to her and bring her to me.

Eventually, Kat stops crying, and her breathing evens out. I look down and see that she is sleeping. She is beautiful; a goddess. I'm lying next to a woman who is divine. A woman who wears her heart on her sleeve. Even though people have let her down in the past, she's been herself with me. Kat opens up to me. She trusts me. I will never take that trust for granted.

"I remember saying your name before I passed out." I whisper to her.

She's still sleeping, and I know she can't hear me, so it makes all of this easier to say.

“All I could think of was you. That I needed to get back to you, Kat. When I came to, I fought the medics in the ambulance, the doctors, and nurses to let me go so I could get to you. Eventually, Austin told me you were on your way. As much as I didn’t want you to see me like that, Kat, it relieved me that you were on your way. A sense of calmness came over me.”

I caress her hair, smiling slightly.

“When you came into the room, I knew. My heart tightened the moment I laid eyes on you. Hell, I knew a while ago. Maybe I’m just a dumbass for ignoring all the signs, all my feelings, just everything. I just can’t ignore it anymore.”

Looking down at her, my smile turns wider. Kat’s lips slightly part, and her breaths slow. Every now and then a soft snore escapes her.

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“I love you, Kat. I’m head over heels, crazy in love with you.” I take a deep breath. “I know telling you that while you’re sleeping isn’t ideal. Kat, I know there are things that hold you back from letting someone love you, but I’ll do whatever I need to in order to win your heart. I will spend the rest of my life showing you how much I love you. There will not be a day you don’t feel it. The day I get to say it? The day I tell you to your face I love you? From that day on, there will never be a day you doubt my love for you.”

Chapter 12

Katrina

Christmas time is my favorite time of year. I love the music, the family get-togethers, the gift giving, and the Hallmark movies. Yes, always the Hallmark movies.

Bryce groans when he comes over because I won’t let him change the channel. I make him sit and watch the movies with me anyway. He puts up a bit of a fight, but he eventually caves. We end up lying on the couch together, watching all the Hallmark movies my heart desires.

After his close call a couple of weeks ago, he’s been spending the night here at my place more. I honestly don’t mind. We sleep in the same bed, but in a strictly platonic way. We cuddle and spoon, but that’s it. I don’t even hold his morning wood against him. He’s a guy; they can’t help it. I can’t say I even mind. It gets me a little worked up when I feel it pressed against me. Also, I can tell he’s quite large. Bryce basically is packing a weapon down there.

I wouldn't be honest if I didn't admit that it's hard to keep my feelings to myself. Knowing how I feel about him and trying to keep it on the down low it makes me feel like I'm two different people. I have to put my "I'm not falling for you face" on whenever he's here, but when he leaves, my heart squeezes in pain the minute he walks out the door. The only saving grace is that I know he'll end up sleeping next to me at night.

It scares me how comfortable I am around him too.

No matter how much I try to fight it, I need to be around him. I can't risk losing the friendship we have. There's no way I can lose the safe feeling I have when I'm around him. What if I tell him and he doesn't see me like that? I'd lose him. I just can't take that chance. Though I live in Vegas, I don't like to gamble. Playing it safe and keeping things simple is the best way to go.

The other issue is if he finds a different girl he wants to date. I know that eventually I'll lose him to her. The thought crushes me. I'm damned if I do, and damned if I don't.

Bryce has been on light duty since his recovery. Which I'm kind of okay with. At least my nerves are, that is. His scheduling is a little different due to that change, so it's been nice to have him around more. Downside to that is it's been harder to coordinate his Christmas present. He keeps trying to intercept every single Amazon package of mine, hoping what's inside is for him. His gift is actually very difficult to fit in an Amazon box. I don't even think they make one that big.

Since there's only a week until Christmas and Bryce has this weekend off, we plan on finishing our Christmas shopping today. Normally, I do a lot of online ordering, but Bryce wants us to go head to the mall. I avoid places like that, of course, but I know I'll be with Bryce, and I'm a lot better when I'm in public with him. He knows my tells, and he can see when I panic or am getting anxious. Bryce knows how to help

me come down from my attacks.

I won't even go into public places with my family. There's really no logical explanation why I can with Bryce. Nevertheless, I will not look a gift horse in the mouth.

For a while, I had a hard time trusting that he was friendly with me because he wanted to be. He's proven without a doubt that he truly is my friend. And I trust him wholeheartedly. He's done nothing to hurt or upset me on purpose. He is always looking out for my best interests, too.

Bryce's friendship has made a tremendous difference in my episodes. I've had less of them, even at home. I sleep better at night, and my nightmares have all but disappeared. Truly, I owe it all to Bryce.

Bryce and I have spend a couple hours watching Christmas movies this morning. He decided to jump in the shower before we left and left me curled up in bed. I shift to his side of the bed and lay on his pillow, surrounding myself with his scent. I hear the shower shut off and he walks into my bedroom dripping wet. Bryce walks into the room in his boxers, like he owns the place.

My eyes go wide at the sight of him. I've seen him without a shirt, sure, but the freshly showered Bryce? Holy fuck. My body feels like it's about to combust. I can feel my nipples harden against my bra. A wetness starts to pool between my thighs. My mouth is dry, and I don't think I've taken a breath since he walked out. I am completely lusting after Bryce. I take a deep breath, shake my head, and try to regain my composure.

"You okay there, Kitty Kat?" He gives me a smirk like he knows I reacted to his nakedness. Asshole.

“Yup, fine. Get dressed, would you? We don’t have all day.” I push off the bed and walk into the living room. My body feels hot all over. I know my cheeks are burning; I can feel it. Steading my breaths, I grab my phone from the table and get my purse.

Soon after, I hear him call out, “Okay, let’s go.” Bryce comes around the corner from my bedroom, finally wearing something decent. Most people would think it’s weird that he and I share a bed, but we both need each other. We balance each other. Well, I’m balanced until I see him without clothes.

We drive to the mall and park towards the back. The mall’s packed. Of course it is. It’s the week before Christmas. I shoot Bryce a look. He knows I’m not happy with being here.

“Did you really need to come here to shop? Can’t we just order stuff from Amazon?” I bite the nail on my thumb.

“Hey, look at me.” he orders, and I turn my head towards him. “You’re going to be fine. I’ll be with you the entire time. You can do this.” He reaches over and holds my hand. He circles his thumb over my skin, causing what feels like little shocks of electricity filling my veins. Then, Bryce pulls my hand up to his cheek and I feel a jolt of energy go through my entire body. I quickly pull my hand away.

“Okay, let’s go.” I say, narrowing my eyes at him. He lets out a laugh and we both get out of the truck.

We walk into the mall, and I immediately stop. My throat gets tight, and there is a heaviness in my chest. I close my eyes but before I can open them, Bryce has me wrapped up in a hug and is whispering in my ear.

“Hey, it’s going to be all right. It’s just you and me. We can turn around, but there’s one thing I really wanted to do here with you. I made an appointment, so we don’t

have to wait. We can go do that first.” He pulls back a bit and looks down.

“What is it?” I say, trying to keep my breathing steady.

“You’re curious, aren’t you?” Bryce chuckles.

“Yes.” I say, keeping my face expressionless. I’m not amused with his games, but I let him get away with it anyway.

“Okay, then. Let’s go,” He guides me with a hand on my back. I try to block out the noise around me and listen to the Christmas music that is playing in the mall. Before long, we reach our destination. Santa’s Village.

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“Um, Bryce? What are we doing here?” I ask. This has to be a joke.

He grins. “We’re getting our picture taken with Santa. Duh.”

“Seriously? This is what you had the appointment for?” I narrow my eyes at him.

“Yup. Let’s go, Kitty Kat. It’s our turn to sit with the big guy in the red suit. Question is, have you been naughty or nice?” Bryce says that low and sexy, and then he winks at me. Again, asshole.

I smack his shoulder. Before I know it, we’re in front of the mall Santa. I cannot believe he’s making me do this.

“You’re crazy.” I rub my temples. My hands are shaking.

“Come on, I just want a picture of us with Santa. It’s not like we can get one with him all year long.” He awkwardly rubs the back of his neck with his hand.

“People are staring at us.” I can feel my panic creep up again. There is a huge part of me that wants to run.

“Look at me, Kat. They stare at everyone who sits on his lap. Trust me.” He moves a lock of my hair behind my ear. I shiver at his touch. “Do you trust me, Kat?” Bryce asks.

I say nothing, but I nod. I move gingerly towards the mall Santa and stand next to him. Bryce stands on the other side. The mall Elf stands behind the camera and tells

us to smile. So we do.

Afterwards, Bryce and I walk over to the mall Elf as she prints out the pictures. She's saying things, but I'm too on edge to even notice what is being said. I clench my fists, digging my nails into my palms to distract me. Bryce grabs the pictures and thanks her.

Once we walk away from the crowd waiting, I let go a shaky exhale. We walk further away from Santa's Village when Bryce pulls me in close and turns to me.

"How are you doing, Kitty Kat?" He presses a kiss to the top of my head.

"Um." I wipe my palms on the front of my jeans. "I've been better."

"Here, look." He hands me the pictures.

I stop dead in my tracks and look at the photos. They're adorable. A bit ridiculous, but absolutely adorable.

"These really are cute. Wow. And now we have a brief memory of the time you forced me into a mall where everyone stared at us and we had to make nice with the mall Santa and wait for an unhappy elf to print the pictures." I look up at him and force a smile.

Bryce gives me one of his deep laughs and we begin our stroll around the mall. His arm goes back around me in a protective move. I love being wrapped up in him.

"Do you want to leave? Or would you like to shop? I mean, I still don't see a gift with my name under the tree. Just saying." He smirks.

"Your gift is being taken care of, don't worry. You will have a gift on Christmas

morning. Um, we can do a little shopping. Let's try to stay away from the small stores." The smaller stores make me more nervous. Everyone's so close, there's no room to spread out to get away from people. "But I think I'm good for now. If something happens, I'll let you know."

"I won't let anything happen, Kitty Kat. You're safe with me." He squeezes me tight.

"I know I am." I feel him kiss the top of my head again, and we venture out to explore the crazy Christmas madness all around us.

* * *

Once we make it back to the apartment complex, we head to my apartment. Before I can even say anything, Bryce fires up the Hallmark channel. I smile to myself, thinking how lucky I am to have him in my life.

In the kitchen, I go through the options of what I can make for dinner. I decide on some spaghetti. Easy, simple, and who doesn't enjoy a carb overload? This girl definitely does. I dump some sauce in a pot and pull out a box of pasta.

In all my past relationships, there weren't many homemade meals that I shared with my partners. The guys I dated always wanted to go out. I never felt comfortable enough to do that. So, I would eat alone at my place while they went out. Sometimes, they would come over, other times they were too wasted from a night at the bar. That's another the reason I'd rather be alone. Less disappointment.

"Hey, are you all right?" Bryce leans against the counter, pulling me back to reality and away from the bad memories.

"Uh, yeah." I shake myself out of it, putting the pasta in a tiny pot of boiling water and checking on the sauce. "Just fine."

“Really? You know I can tell when you lie to me. What’s going on?” He steps closer to me, his face full of concern.

“Ugh. My mind sort of started thinking about the past. The guys I dated. You know I’ve had more meals with you than I did with them. They never understood my social issues. They never understood me.” I run my hand over my forehead.

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“Well, that’s why you’re dating any of those guys anymore. They didn’t take the time to understand you. They couldn’t hack it as your boyfriend.” Bryce shrugs.

“Yea, except it wasn’t me doing the leaving. Every single one of them left me. I didn’t date any of them very long, but it still hurt being abandoned like that. It was like a tease of a relationship. Like I got to be normal for a minute and then the rug’s pulled out from under me. And I’ve had so many of those, I just can’t read people anymore.” I stir the sauce and get ready to drain the pasta once the time dings.

“What do you mean?” Bryce moves around me to grab the pot with the pasta and drains it for me while I purse my lips, considering my next words.

“Bryce, there’s still so much you don’t know about me.” I frown.

“Okay, well, tell me. It’s not like I’m going anywhere. We have twenty Christmas movies to watch on the Hallmark Channel. Spill it, Kat.” He flips off the heat for the sauce and starts prepping our bowls. Naturally, he doesn’t forget the most important ingredient, the parmesan cheese. Bryce soon hands me my food and we make our way into the living room.

“Dating for me has been a nightmare. I didn’t date anyone till I was in college. They made me fun of me so much in high school that no boy wanted to be seen with me. Well ... sort of. Long story. Honestly, after homecoming, I didn’t trust the guys in my school, anyway.”

I wipe a tear from the corner of my eye.

“Bryce, when I started dating in college, it was so nice. I felt normal. I didn’t feel so different from everyone. Until they realized I couldn’t be in social situations. I always had my own apartment, my own space. I never stayed in dorms, never went to parties. They just couldn’t deal with it. I don’t know if they all thought I was joking about the social anxiety, but when they got a glimpse, they ran.

“With each guy I tried to make a better choice than the last. I would be upfront about my social anxiety. I would tell them I didn’t really enjoy going out. They were fine with it, for like a minute. Then, well, it would be over. Eventually, I just stopped dating. I didn’t even want to deal with it.”

Bryce puts down his pasta and takes out his phone. He puts on Brett Young’s, *In Case You Didn’t Know*. He holds out his hand to me.

“Come on.” He gestures for me to get up.

I stare at his hand, confused. “What are you doing?”

“Dance with me, Kitty Kat.”

I hesitantly take his hand, and he brings me around the coffee table. One arm goes around my waist while the other takes my hand. He pulls me close as he sways me to the song.

“What is going on? Why?” I ask cautiously.

“Because I want to dance with you. Right here, right now, I want to dance with you.” He leans forward and places his forehead on mine, meeting my gaze.

Our noses touch, and our lips are close. The air between us thick. His hand on my hip is setting my skin on fire. There’s desire in his eyes while he dances with me. My

heart is beating fast. My lips tingle. This is the moment. The moment I know I'll never be the same after. Silently, I beg him to kiss me.

Suddenly, he pulls me into him, and his arms wrap around me even tighter. He sways with me up against him. His cheek rests on my head. My eyes close as I follow his lead, and I take a deep breath. I listen to the lyrics of the song he picked, and I feel like he picked this song for a reason.

"I'll always be here for you, Kat. I promise. You'll always have me. Nothing and no one will ever tear me from your side." He speaks softly against me. I simply shake my head. My eyes spill with tears. There are so many emotions I'm feeling right now, I can't contain them.

When the song ends, he pulls me away slightly and wipes the tears from my face with his thumbs. He leans in and kisses my forehead, holding his lips there. When he breaks away, he brings me back to the couch and we lie down next to each other, spooning.

We turn our attention to the movie, but I can't concentrate on that. My mind is racing through a million thoughts. The song, the dance. Everything. Bryce filled a hole inside my heart I never knew I had. I was fine with being alone until I met Bryce. Now, I can't picture my life without him.

I am completely in love with Bryce.

Chapter 13

Katrina

Today, I'm both excited and insanely nervous. First, it's Christmas. Finally! But that's also why I'm nervous. Bryce might not like his gift. I don't know if I crossed a line or not.

I just know he's done so much for me and it means the world to me how he cares for me, so I had to do something in return. But my plan could backfire. I inhale deep, trying to calm myself.

Bryce can sense that I'm on edge when he comes in from loading the gifts in his truck for the Christmas party with my family. He's going to hate me. I shouldn't have done this. There's no way this can go well.

"Kat ... You ready to go?" He snaps me out of my daze. Bryce puts his hands on my shoulders.

"Um, yeah." Rubbing the palms of my hands against my forehead, I try to release some tension. Totally doesn't work. At any moment, I feel like I could burst with tears. I shake out my hands, grab my things, and Bryce and I head out to my parent's house.

We are driving along when he turns to me and asks, "Are you going to tell me what's bothering you? You've been really off all day. Like you're worried about something. So, talk to me, Kat."

"No." My answer is quick. I know it probably sounds like I'm mad at him. He'll realize I'm not once we get there. At least, I pray he won't hate me.

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“Hmm. Okay. Well, I’m here when you want to talk.” With that, he turns on a random, country Christmas station on the radio. We drive in silence, and I send up a brief prayer that he’ll still talk to me after today. Bryce reaches over and takes my hand, lacing our fingers. It’s a small gesture, but I know he’s worried about me. For a moment, it does the job he wants it to do. I feel a brief sense of calm.

We get to my parents’ place, and my stomach is in knots. I feel so sick; my body’s shaking, and I’m doing all I can to keep it together. There was so much coordination and work done to get his gift here today. So many phone calls, and I worked like hell to make sure he didn’t know what was going on behind the scenes.

I get out of the truck and lean against it for a moment. I send my mom a quick text with trembling fingers to let her know we’re here. Bryce walks over to me and puts his hand on my cheek. I lean into it with my eyes closed.

“Are you sure you’re all right? You look a little pale, Kitty Kat.” Bryce’s lips form a thin line, and his brows furrow.

“Yeah, I just need some fresh air for a minute. Stay with me?” I just need my mom to text that they’re ready, and then we can go in. Hopefully, she’s by her phone.

“Of course. I’m not going anywhere.” Bryce tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear and kisses the top of my head.

My phone pings. I look at the message and see her say that everything’s set up.

“All right, let’s go.” I tell him.

He grabs my hand, and we walk up to the front door. I step through the door first and immediately turn around to see his reaction.

Bryce steps over the threshold and looks up at the people standing several feet away. He stops, his mouth drops open, and his eyes become glassy.

“Mom? Dad? How? What?” His voice is shaking, his lips tremble, and a tear slides down his cheek. I know how much he missed his parents, it’s evident by his reaction to seeing them standing in front of him. He walks over to his mom and dad and gives them both hugs and kisses. I see his shoulders shaking and I know he is beyond emotional over this.

He mentioned so many times how he wished he could visit. All that told me was that I needed to get them out here. I thought Christmas would be the best time to do so. My parents were more than happy to help give them a place to stay for a few days. Getting a hold of them was an entirely different story.

“I don’t understand. How are you here?” Bryce is still reeling at the idea of his parents standing in front of him.

His dad turns to him and says, “You should as that young lady there.” He points to me.

Bryce whips around to face me. He takes a few steps towards me and stands in front of me. Without saying a word, he crashes his lips against mine, devouring me. This kiss is full of heat. This kiss is electric, and my body surges from the touch of his lips. He tastes like cinnamon. My heartbeat’s racing, and my body’s on fire.

When he finally pulls away, he places his forehead on mine and looks directly into my eyes. “Thank you. Thank you so much for giving me this.” He’s crying. I reach up and wipe his tears like he does for me all the time. His arms circle around me,

giving me all of him at that moment.

When we pull apart, we turn to find everyone staring at us. My mom has her hands clasped by her face with a huge grin stretching from ear to ear. My dad smiles and nods at the both of us. His mom is wiping her own tears off her face, and his dad smiles as he wraps an arm around his wife. Everyone seems to have enjoyed that moment along with Bryce and me. Bryce clears his throat, and his embarrassment is made clear by the redness creeping up his neck.

“Come here, dear.” His mom holds her hands out to me. I walk over and embrace her. “Thank you for this. You have no idea how much it means to be able to see my son.” She pulls her head back, and I can see she’s holding back tears too. She kisses my cheek, and then I feel his dad hug the both of us.

“You are very welcome, Mr. and Mrs. Hawthorne.”

“It’s Ruth and Greg. Please” Greg says, waving off the formalities.

Once they let me go, Bryce comes up behind me and pulls me into him. We all walk into the family room, and I offer to get everyone drinks.

As everyone settles in, I head to the kitchen to help my mom prepare Christmas dinner.

“I think he liked your gift.” My mom observes, turning her head towards me while she mashes the potatoes. “You know, I haven’t told you yet, but I am really proud of you for doing that.” She leans over and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

“I didn’t do it for anyone to be proud of me, Mom, I did it because I know he missed them.” I shrug, my lips turn down in a frown. This wasn’t about me. “He won’t go back there because of personal stuff, so I brought them here. Seemed logical.”

“I know, but that meant a lot to him. I mean, that kiss!” My mom is a hopeless romantic. To her, the moment he kissed me, was enough to make her swoon.

“Mom! Enough!” I throw up my hands, my cheeks flushing pink.

“Okay, okay. Seriously, Katrina, he’s nice. That man cares a whole hell of a lot for you. You know that, right? You’ve been so different with him. So much happier. When I see you, you walk on air. That only started when he came into your life.” My mother is right. Bryce has completely given me a new lease on life.

“I know, Mom. I ... I really care about him.” Confessing that feels like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

“He cares for you too.” She leaves it at that.

I walk back into the family room to be greeted by laughter and chatter. I stand in the doorway, watching Bryce with his parents. He sits in between them on the couch. They look so happy to be with him again. They’re obviously so proud of their son; it’s written all over their faces.

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Bryce looks up and sees me watching. He gives me a smile and a wink. His mother leans over and whispers something into his ear. Bryce nods, gets up, and then makes his way over to me.

“Kitty Kat.” he purrs. Bryce runs his hand through my hair. He smiles and leans in, kissing my lips softly. “Thank you.” he whispers against them.

“Dinner time!” my mom calls from the dining room.

“Let’s go eat!” Bryce takes me by the hand and leads me into the dining room.

We all sit down at the table. Bryce sits next to me, reaches over and takes my hand in his beneath the table. He holds on to me tightly, like he’s afraid of letting me go.

Looking out at the table, my mom has outdone herself this year. My eyes make their way around the spread that is before me. My mom made a roasted ham with a bourbon glaze. Next to it sits a prime rib that I can’t wait to dive into. My sister made a sweet potato casserole, this year, which has me drooling. The smells of everything on the table made my stomach rumble. I’m so glad I wore leggings today.

I look around and smile. I feel like I’m floating on cloud nine. It makes me so happy to be able to share this day with Bryce and our families. This all feels like a dream, a really great dream.

“Bryce, sweetie, I am so glad that you’re better from that accident. And thanks to you, too, Katrina, for taking care of him.” Ruth places a hand over her heart. “When I heard Bryce was injured—oh my, I was just devastated.”

“But I’m fine, Mom.” Bryce reassures her.

“I know you are. You know how I worry. I love that you protect people, I just worry about your safety.” she chides him.

“I know, Mom.” Bryce turns to face my parents. “Thank you so much, the both of you, for letting my parents stay here.” He squeezes my hand.

“Bryce, honey, it’s never a problem.” my mom replies with a serene smile.

As dinner goes on, we talk about everything under the sun. Once dinner is over, Bryce and I clean up so that my mom can take a break and our parents can have parent-y conversations. You know, the kind of conversation where they talk and brag about their kids. Yeah, don’t want to be there for that. Especially after our kiss. They’re probably planning our wedding and names for their grandchildren already.

While I wash the dishes, Bryce comes up behind me. He places his hand on my lower back and kisses my head. “I didn’t want you to think I forgot about you, but I wanted to give you your gift when we were alone. I hope you don’t mind.”

I shake my head, scrubbing a plate. “You didn’t have to get me anything, Bryce.”

“Kitty Kat, I never want to hear you say that again.” he growls, giving me a firm look. “I got you something because I wanted to. It’ll never compare to what you gave me, but I think you’ll love it.”

I bite my lip, nodding. “Okay.”

After dinner, cleaning up, and opening presents, it’s time to say goodbye and head home. We hug everyone and make plans to get together over the next few days. Especially Bryce and his parents.

Soon, we back at my apartment, and Bryce stops me at the door. “I need to go run up and grab your gift. I’ll be right back.”

I nod and walk in, setting all the gifts I got down on the loveseat before moving to sit down and let out an exhausted breath from all that socializing. I’m so relieved that Bryce isn’t mad about me going behind his back to bring his parents here.

Bryce strolls in a moment later with a small wrapped gift. He walks over and sits next to me on the couch.

“Here. This is for you. I hope you like it.” He flushes a little in embarrassment. Or maybe he’s excited for me to open it. It’s a little hard to tell.

I tear through the wrapping to find a jewelry box. Not the small kind that contains a lifetime of commitment, though. I glance over at Bryce curiously, and he smiles at me. I open it up, and in the box sits a beautiful white gold bracelet. In the center of the bracelet is a coiling of feathers around an onyx, and from there, it ripples out into countless diamonds.

“This is a rising phoenix.” I look up at him. “Isn’t it?”

Bryce nods and takes the bracelet out of the box to place it on my wrist. “Over the last couple months, I watched you soar, Kat. You’ve come a long way from the day I first met you. You’ve opened up, spread your wings, and risen above what held you back. Kitty Kat, you got dealt a shitty hand in life, but no matter how many times you burst into flames, you rise from the ashes.”

I brake out into tears. This is the most amazing gift I’ve ever received. Bryce reaches up and kisses the tears away.

“I need to tell you something, Kat.” Bryce grabs both my hands in his. Suddenly, I

feel sick. I can feel the color drain from my face.

“Kitty Kat, relax.” He pulls me on top him, so I’m sitting on his lap. “Look at me.” I obey, turning my head towards him.

“I don’t want to be friends. Not anymore,” Please let there be more, I silently pray. Bryce pauses to find his words. “Since you came into my life, I’ve never felt more alive, more at peace, or more at home than when I’m with you. I don’t want to be friends because I want more. I want to hold you and kiss you everywhere. And I want to go to sleep at night knowing you’re mine. I want to wake up as the luckiest man alive, knowing you’re by my side. I want you, Kat. Only you.”

I don’t know what to say. This man has left me speechless. So I do the first thing that comes to my head. I cry some more. How do I still have tears to cry?

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“Oh, Kat, don’t cry. I’m sorry. Did I upset you?” Bryce asks, a hand on each side of my face while he watches me with concern.

“No,” I shake my head, trying to control myself.

“Then please tell me why you’re crying.” Bryce pleads.

“Happy tears!” I get out between sobs.

“You’re crying because of what I just told you? Well, this is a first for me. Never had a girl cry because I told them I wanted to be with them.” His chest vibrates with a chuckle and he pulls me against his chest.

“I’m sorry. I just ...” Tell him, Kat. “Bryce, I wanted more too. I was just afraid that you didn’t. That I would lose you if I said something, and that you didn’t feel the same. I didn’t want to lose you, Bryce.”

“Look at me.” Bryce spins me so I’m straddling his lap on the couch. He puts his thumb on my chin and lifts my face so I can look into his blue eyes. “There is nothing in this world that would make me turn my back on you. I give you my word. Even if this doesn’t work out, I’ll always be here for you. I promise you that, Kat.”

Bryce leans in and brushes his lips against mine, teasing a kiss. “You’re everything to me.” he confides on my lips before kissing me softly. His touch sweeps over my bottom lip, making me to part my lips. Our tongues dance, igniting the fire that has been blazing between us for so long.

Right at this very moment, we connect our souls. Our hearts beat rapidly against each other, and our lips convey everything we don't say.

This is the beginning of everything. The beginning of us.

Chapter 14

Katrina

Before I can suggest it, Bryce lifts me up and carries me into the bedroom. He sets me on my feet and tilts my head up towards him. Our eyes lock, and a million thoughts pass between us. I feel like I can see right into his soul, and he can see right into mine. I felt his thumb trace along my bottom lip, making me quiver. Bryce's lips gently brush mine, and my eyes flutter closed.

Without warning, he presses harder against me. I part my mouth slightly, allowing him access. His tongue strokes mine. The kiss deepens as he explores my mouth.

Bryce pulls back and runs his hands under the hem of my shirt. His touch is fire on my skin. He grips my hips and pulls me closer to him, until there's nothing left between us touching every inch of each other. He lifts his hands from my hips and pulls my shirt up over my head. Bryce tosses it aside, then works quickly to remove my bra. Once it lands on the floor, his hands travel from my sides up to my breasts.

As he cups them, he lets out a groan. "You are absolutely fucking beautiful, Kat." His fingers find my nipples and traces around them. His lips make their way along my jaw and down my neck. I feel his teeth nibble my skin while he makes a path down to my nipples. When his teeth bite down on my nipple, I moan. Bryce runs his tongue around it to soothe the pain.

He pulls back from me, pulling off his shirt and pants. Bryce soon stands in front of

me in nothing but his boxers. Bryce picks me up again and places me gently on the bed, then crawls on top, straddling me. He leans down and presses his lips against mine while his hand makes its way down to my jeans.

I close my eyes and try to control my breathing. My body vibrates from the touch of his fingertips, and I shudder.

Bryce unbuttons my jeans and sits back on his knees. His hands hook through my belt loops, and he slowly peels them off me, throwing them onto the pile on the floor. The room is dark, but I can still see his movements. There is just enough light to see the blue in his eyes, the desire. His hands move back to my thong, and he tears it off me, shredding the material into pieces.

“Hope you didn’t like those.” His voice is husky when he speaks, low and seductive. He gets up to shimmy out of his boxers, kicking them onto the floor. My eyes drop to his erection, and my jaw falls open at the sight of how giant his cock truly is.

He moves back over me and begins kissing me with desperation, which only fuels the ever-growing fire within me. His hand travels lower and finds my entrance. My hands reach out and fold around his neck, and I gasp. My lips part while my breathing speeds up. He nibbles along my chin as his fingers slip through my wet folds. My mouth opens, and I inhale deep, savoring every moment.

I’ve never let a man touch me like this. I feel a little self-conscious, worrying about what I’m doing or if I’m reacting to his touch the right way. Bryce senses my panic and softly kisses my lips, reassuring me.

“Relax, Kitty Kat.” he says, trying to soothe me. “Let me make you feel good.” His hand brushes over my bare pussy, and his fingers grazes my clit. My stomach tightens in response to the pleasure. I don’t know how to respond, but my body does. Every nerve ending lights up, his touch sending sparks through my entire body.

“Look at me, Kat.” Bryce commands gruffly.

I move my gaze to his. I let a moan escape my lips when his finger pushes inside of me. Bryce’s thumb circles my clit, bringing me so close to the edge. As I reach my tipping point, my hips thrust along with his movements. He speeds up, and I feel my muscles contract around his finger.

All at once, there’s an awaking inside of me. A pleasure I’ve never felt before. I grab onto his shoulders, stare into his eyes, and in a flash, I explode. Fireworks go off when my orgasm rips through me, causing my body to arch off the bed.

“Bryce!” I call out his name as I come, my body riding through the tidal wave of bliss.

Slowly kissing my jaw, he removes his fingers. An emptiness nearly consumes me. Panic swells inside me. He doesn’t know about my secret. My virginity. I’m not sure I’m ready to lose it just yet. My body tenses again, and Bryce notices it instantly.

“Are you okay?” He cups my face, his blue eyes worried.

“No. Bryce, I need to tell you something. I’m terrified to tell you.” My voice weakens with fear.

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He pushes himself up on his arms, creating a small distance between our chests. “What’s going on, baby?”

“Please don’t leave me.” I close my eyes tight, bracing myself to feel the loss of him. “I ... I’ve never had sex before. I, um, everything we just did was a first for me, too.”

My eyes stay shut. I squeeze them as tight as I can, not wanting to open them to see his regret. I feel a breath escape him, and I worry he’s going to pick up and leave me. It’s obviously too much to deal with a twenty-five-year-old virgin.

“Kat, open your eyes and look at me.” Bryce whispers.

Slowly, I peel my eyes open to see him staring fiercely back. I shake under him, tears threatening to break free.

“I don’t care that you’re a virgin. Or that this is a first of many for you. I don’t even care if that was your first orgasm. None of that scares me or would make me leave you.” He stops for a moment, and I cut in.

“That was my first orgasm.” I murmur, feeling my entire body flush with embarrassment.

“You’ve never had an orgasm? Not even by yourself?”

“Um, no. I’ve never done that to myself. I always wanted to try, but I’d freak out and be afraid I’d do it wrong.” I was always too embarrassed talk to about these things with Vicki. If she knew I had never given myself an orgasm, we’d be headed straight

to the nearest sex toy store. It's not as if I had friends in school where I could listen in or talk about this stuff with, either. I struggled so much with being alone and trying to survive the bullying. By the time I met Vicki, I just kept it to myself, figuring eventually I would get to experience it all.

Bryce instantly beams. There's a hunger in his eyes when he leans in and softly kisses my lips. He sucks on my lower lip gently.

"I'm going to love watching you experience new things, Kitty Kat." He pulls back and locks eyes with me. "We'll go as slow as you want. There's no pressure to do anything."

My breathing quicken as he runs his hand along my side. "I'm not ready yet." I shake my head. "But can you teach me how to ... you know ... with my hand?" I look down at his erection, biting my lip.

"You want to learn how to get me off ... with your hand?" Bryce asks, kissing my neck again. He moves to my earlobe and softly nibbles on it, sending shivers down my spine.

I let out a throaty moan. "Yes ... yes, I do." Bryce lies on his side and turns me to face him. He reaches out and brings my hand towards him before wrapping it around his manhood. While he's as hard as stone, his skin feels like velvet in my hand.

As soon as I touch him, he groans. He wraps his hand around mine and moves it up and down, causing him to inhale sharply. Bryce's eyes squeeze shut, and his breathing grows short and fast.

"Kat..." he grunts. He lets go of my hand and allows me to take control.

I move faster along his length, squeezing a little tighter. That makes his hips jerk

involuntarily. He moans in satisfaction.

Bryce's head falls back and his lips part as I continue to work him. He soon lets out a pleased rumble.

"I'm gonna come, Kat." His voice is strained. All of a sudden, I feel a warm liquid spilling onto my hands and chest as Bryce roars out in ecstasy.

As he comes down from his orgasm, he leans closer to kiss me. "I'm going to get something to clean us up with. Be right back," He vaults out of bed, heading towards the bathroom, and I get a nice shot of his magnificent ass. I giggle at the sight of it, like a teenager.

When Bryce walks back into the room, he wipes my hand and chest clean with a wet washcloth. Once he's satisfied that it's all off, he tosses the washcloth in the nearby hamper, then slides back into bed with me.

"Thank you," he mumbles against my mouth after he kisses me again, pulling me close.

I raise an eyebrow. "For what?"

"For trusting me with your firsts." Bryce brushes the hair that falls in front of my face away. "I want you to know that I'll do everything I can to make sure that it's special for you, whenever you're ready." His eyes meet mine.

There's no reason to say anything, so I simply nod and press my lips against his. We spend the rest of the night holding each other. He traces his fingers along my skin, leaving goosebumps in his wake.

Eventually, my eyes get heavy. Bryce can tell I'm getting ready to fall asleep. He

takes his thumb and places it on my chin, kissing my lips gingerly.

He cups my cheek and whispers, “Sleep, Kitty Kat.”

Before I can respond, I doze off.

The next morning, I wake to pleasant smells coming from the kitchen. Bryce isn't in the bed, so he must be cooking me breakfast. I get up and put on some yoga pants and his t-shirt. Next, I walk into the bathroom, brush my teeth, and pull my hair up in a messy bun.

I wander out to the kitchen and find him standing over the stove making French toast. For a moment, I take in the sight. He truly is the epitome of sexy. I place my hip against the counter and bite my lip. He's all muscles, but he moves around the kitchen gracefully. He senses my presence without even turning around.

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“Good morning, Kitty Kat.” Bryce looks over his shoulder and smiles. “I’m making you breakfast. It’s almost ready. Also, you look sexy as fuck in my shirt. Feel free to wear whatever of mine you want.” His ocean blue eyes sparkle.

I play with the hem of my shirt, a smile playing on my lips. “You didn’t have to cook breakfast.”

“I know I didn’t, but I wanted to.” He places a couple more pieces of French toast on a plate, pursing his lips while he looks around for maple syrup.

I walk over to the kitchen table and sit. A second later, Bryce comes over and hands me a glass of juice and a cup of coffee. Just how I like it.

“Thank you,” I say when he leans down to kiss me. My heart soars high, I wonder if it’ll ever come back down.

“You’re welcome, baby.” He smiles and returns to the counter, where he’s prepping all the food. Not long after, Bryce brings over a massive plate stacked high with French toast, along with his own coffee. He places a couple pieces on my plate, and I dig in after dousing it in syrup.

“Oh, Bryce.” I moan, licking my lips. The butter and maple syrup dance on my tongue, the bread melts in my mouth, giving my tastebuds a small slice of heaven.

Bryce looks up, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down when he smirks. “Damn, I enjoy hearing you say that.”

I laugh out loud. “It taste’s so good in my mouth.”

“That’s what she said.” Bryce chuckles, sipping his coffee.

I shoot him a look, and then I laugh too. Grabbing my fork, I dig back into my breakfast. Moaning deliberately now, just to drive him crazy.

“I’m going to need a cold shower after eating with you.” he groans. I laugh and shove more food in my mouth.

After breakfast, Bryce kisses me, then leaves to go to his apartment to get ready for work. I call Vicki after heading to the living room to let her know about the latest developments in my life.

“Hey, girl!” She says excitedly when she picks up the phone.

“Hi,” I bite my lip, not sure how to put it.

“Everything okay?” Her voice lowers, she sounds concerned.

“Everything is more than okay, actually. It’s great.” I smile thinking about Bryce and me.

“So, what’s going on? Who are you and what have you done with my Kat?” she jokes. “Tell me what happened! You sound way too happy right now.”

“Because I am. Bryce and I, well, we’re officially dating.”

There’s silence on the phone before Vic lets out a piercing scream of joy. I pull the phone away from my ear and put it on speaker, figuring that I’ll let her finish her celebration.

“I knew it would happen! Oh my God, Kat! Tell me everything! I need to live vicariously through you.” Vicki begs

“Well, after I brought him to my parents’ house—and you know his parents were there—he was so happy to see them.”

“Of course he was.” she retorts. I can practically hear her roll her eyes.

“But he was so surprised to find that I was the reason they were there. He turned around when they told him, and then he ran up to me and kissed me. Like really, really kissed me.” My stomach does flips thinking about it, and I blush.

Vicki squeals into the phone. “Ah! Girl, I’m so excited for you. You both are too cute together. Austin and I had bets on how long it would take.”

My mouth drops open. “Are you serious? His partner?”

“Yeah, unless you know another Austin.”

“Wow, you two are something else. What’s going on with you guys, anyway?” I try to change the subject.

“Oh, no you don’t. Tell me more. Did you fuck his brains out yet?” Vicki cuts to the chase. “Tell me he got your v-card! Did he clear out the cobwebs?”

“Hey! First, there are no cobwebs. Second, no, we didn’t. He’s well aware of my virgin situation but is completely fine waiting until I’m ready. And I’m just not ready yet.” I know he’ll be my first. He’s the only one I’ve ever actually wanted to have sex with. I just need to be ready in my head for that moment.

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“I’m so happy for you, Kat. How about I come over in a couple of hours and we can talk more?”

“Sounds good. I’ll see you soon.” I end the call and sit on my couch.

I curl up against the cushions and turn on the song Bryce and I danced to. Okay, I’ll admit that I immediately downloaded it after that.

Call me crazy, but he gave me something that night: a missing piece of my life. Since I met him, he’s been filling these holes in my life and in my heart, repairing the damage that’s there. I know now that he chose this song, *In Case You Didn’t Know*, for a reason. I didn’t know it when we danced, but lying here listening to the lyrics? Yeah, he chose it with purpose.

Last night, he told me that I mean everything to him. Thinking back over these last couple of months, I’ve been everything to him for a while. Bryce has gone out of his way, time and time again, just for me. Just to see me smile, to know I’m happy, and to hear to me laugh.

There’s no more doubt in my mind for this man. No more doubt with my feelings. No more worries about his intentions.

It was fate the day that he walked into the coffee shop. He was put in my path for a reason. It was to give me a second chance at a life I missed out on. He was also right to say that I’m like a phoenix rising from the ashes. Bryce has awoken a part of me that was hiding away from the world. All it took was the spark of him to ignite the fire inside of me.

Chapter 15

Katrina

It's two in the morning when I hear a key scraping against the lock of the front door. I can hear it open quietly and shut. Suddenly, I feel the bed dip, and I turn over to see Bryce and his signature panty-dropping smile.

"Happy New Year's, Kitty Kat." He bends down and captures my lips in a sweet kiss.

I part my lips to allow his tongue to enter. When the kiss becomes more passionate, I moan. He pulls back and puts his forehead on mine.

"We're going to continue that, but I need a shower first. It was a long night. Don't fall asleep or I'll wake you up with my head in between your legs." Bryce reaches over and grabs my ass to give it a slap.

"Don't threaten me with a good time." I giggle, getting comfortable in the bed and waiting for him to get cleaned up.

After a few hours of celebrating the new year, Bryce and I finally fall asleep, wrapped in each other's arms.

He has today off, so we talk about heading out somewhere, just him and I. He wants to take me to lunch at a little mom and pop shop in Boulder City that he and Austin found one day. I'm hesitant but agree to go.

Bryce and I get up around ten and get dressed. In the early afternoon, we finally head out the door and climb into his truck. When we start moving, he reaches over and covers my hand in his, leading it up to his mouth to press a sweet kiss against my skin.

“I’m so glad that we have the day together.” he admits while we head towards the highway.

I nod, smiling slightly. “So, where are we going?”

“It’s called Little City Grille. The food is amazing. I figured afterwards we could go walk around the city or even head over to the Hoover Dam, if we aren’t too tired.” He turns his head for a moment to look at me, then back at the road.

“Yeah, I wouldn’t mind seeing the Hoover Dam, but it’s New Year’s. There could be an enormous crowd there. Let’s play it by ear.” I suggest, and Bryce nods. I lean my head against the window, closing my eyes.

Apparently, I had fallen asleep, because Bryce opens my door and kisses me to wake me up. “Wake up, Kitty Kat. We’re here.” He tucks my hair behind my ear and kisses the sides of my mouth for good measure, smiling.

My hands stretch above my head, and I yawn. “I guess I fell asleep. Sorry, I’m such a bad co-pilot.”

“You are, but your sexiness makes up for it. You make this little whimper in your sleep. It’s quite adorable.” Bryce teases as he gets out of the truck. He comes around and opens my door for me.

“I do not! There’s no whimpering coming from me! You’re lying!” In shock, I smack his arm when he moves to help me down from the truck.

Bryce grabs me and lifts me out of the truck, and when he places me back down, he traps me against the side of it. He arms box me in, and his face comes close to mine.

“Do you want me to show you what you sound like, sweetheart?” Bryce whispers,

making goosebumps cover my skin.

He runs his nose along my neck, and when he gets to my earlobe, he nibbles on it. He then peppers my jaw with kisses all the way to my lips. I let a little moan go just as his lips crash into mine. He teases my lower lip, pulling on it slightly and sweeping his tongue over it.

“That little moan, my Kitty Kat, is what you do in your sleep. It’s incredibly sexy.” Bryce softly kisses my lips again, then grabs my hand to walk us towards the restaurant.

Bryce has turned me into jello. My bones are no longer doing their jobs; they feel like they’ve turned to rubber. My legs want to give out on me. This man simply makes me weak in the knees when he kisses me.

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When we eventually make into the restaurant, I take a look around at the eclectic decor. Every table and chair is a different style or color, the red walls are covered in Hoover Dam history and pictures. The restaurant is small but people are packed into this place. It's noisy as people all around us are deep in conversation. I grasp Bryce's hand tighter.

We find a table for two in the far corner. The food smells delectable. There's an aroma of spices in the air. I can smell bacon and hamburgers. It's making my mouth water. We look at the menu and order two drinks and two cheeseburgers.

"So, how was last night? Was it pretty calm?" I ask Bryce.

"Nope. It was crazy last night. We arrested forty-three people on the strip." Bryce shakes his head. "People don't know their limits."

"Wow!" My eyes go wide with shock.

"Yeah, the crazy was out in full force last night. Made for an interesting time. What did you do last night?" He reaches across the table and puts my hand in mine.

"Um, nothing." I shrug. There's nothing I really wanted to do last night. Other than cuddle with Bryce, that is.

Bryce tilts his head to the side. "You didn't go by Vicki?"

"No. New Year's Eve really isn't my thing. Actually, I've never celebrated it. You know how it goes with crowds and me, so ..." I trail off. Out on the strip was the last

place I wanted to be with all those people.

The server soon returns with our food and places it in front of us. I reach over and steal Bryce's pickles. He laughs in response, snatching one of my fries.

"The Great Pickle Sniper," The corner of his mouth curls up, and he winks at me.

We eat silently for a few minutes before Bryce finally speaks again.

"I never really had a good New Year's Eve. Probably why I started making sure I worked them every year." He seems heavy in thought.

"What do you mean?" I stop eating for a minute to listen.

"My ex," Bryce clears his throat. "She was an ugly drunk. You know I don't normally drink; it's just not my thing. I see what it does to people, so I always choose to be the one with my head on straight."

He waves his hand around dismissively. I take a sip of my drink, waiting for me.

"Anyway, so parties, holidays, or special occasions, if she drank a lot, there was always trouble." He pauses, his face pulls into a grimace. "One New Year's Eve, we were at a friend's house partying. I, of course, drove us and was the designated driver. My ex drank the moment she walked through the door and by nine, she's completely trashed. At one point, she accused some random girl there of sleeping with me. She started throwing food, throwing punches, and dumping drinks on this poor girl. Surprisingly, we didn't get kicked out for her outburst.

"Then, about an hour later, she was sitting on the couch with some people and leaned over and upchucked all over this other poor woman's dress. I think she was like the aunt or something to the person throwing the party. I can't remember. My ex was an

absolute nightmare.” His eyes appear haunted by all the things he’s remembering from his past. “She was a different person when she drank. She didn’t know her limits. Or if she did, she didn’t care.”

I frown. It breaks my heart to hear that his ex was cruel and selfish.

Finally I compose myself. “And you don’t drink because you’d rather be the one taking care of people than being taken care of, like your ex.” It’s a statement. That bit of him is clear as day. Bryce would always rather help someone than be the one needing help.

He clears his throat, nodding. “She was a complete and total nightmare. Like I said, that’s why I just started working holidays and the day of the parties that I knew about a head of time. Then I wouldn’t have to go.”

“She sounds like a blast, Bryce.” I roll my eyes, and he laughs.

“She still calls me, you know. Texts me, too. She’s thousands of miles away and yet she still bothers me. I thought escaping to this side of the country was enough distance between us, but technology makes us closer than ever.” His words drip with sarcasm.

“She still tries to contact you? Why?” Panic sets in instantaneously. My stomach rolls, and I feel a pressure on my chest.

“First, you have nothing to worry about. I want nothing to do with her. Now, this is just speculation, but I think the guy she cheated on me with cast her to the side. He probably grew tired of her. She wants to crawl back to me now. But she won’t come out here, so I don’t have to worry about it.” Bryce takes a sip of his water.

“Why won’t she?” I inquire curiously. The thought that I won’t have to worry about

her relieves my stress.

“Well, first off, she hates Vegas. She hates the weather, the dryness, and everything about it. Whenever I’s suggest us taking a trip out here, she refused to hear any of it. Second, she hates to fly. It has to be a good reason for her to get on a plane, and I am not that good of a reason, according to her. Neither was a vacation, no matter what she said. She knows and I know that she won’t get on a plane to come here. That’s why she’s trying to get me back to Florida. Third, all her friends and family are out there. She’ll never leave them. Not even for me.”

He chuckles darkly, eating a french fry.

“There was a time where I wanted to apply to other departments, so naturally I had talked to her about where she would move to if we could. She flipped out. She said she would never move; there’d be no way. It’d never happen.”

“Bryce, she sounds a little unstable.” I joke.

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“Not a little. Completely and utterly unstable.” He waves a fry in the air before chomping on it and swallowing. “But thankfully, not dumb enough to come out here. That’s why she’s trying to get me back there. I’m sure there’s some kind of trap she’s planning, too.”

My gaze turns icy cold. “I’ll cut the bitch.”

“Should you be telling a cop that?” He narrows his eyes and leans closer towards me.

“Eh,” I shrug my shoulders, and we both laugh. Finally, we dig into our food. My burger is a little cold after all the talking, but still really good. And the pickles ... oh, the pickles. I nearly laugh at the thought of the nickname he gave me earlier. But his gaze turns thoughtful after a few bites in, and he clears his throat.

“Hey, so been meaning to ask you. Has Vicki said anything about Austin?” Bryce pushes his plate away, folding his hands under his chin.

“Every time I try to bring Austin up with Vic, she changes the subject. You think there’s something is going on with them?” I ask stuffing another fry in my mouth.

“My spidey senses are telling me they’re seeing each other. Austin has been less and less available to head to the gym or hang out. Have you seen Vic lately?”

I sit back in my chair and think about the last few times I saw her. My eyes go wide in shock. “Yes! But it was every time you two were at work!”

Bryce nods, smirking. “Bingo.”

Once we get the check, Bryce pays and we leave. A thought crosses my mind as we are walking towards the truck. I didn't panic inside the restaurant.

I stop and gasp. "Oh my God."

Bryce halts and turns to me, cocking his head. "What is it?"

"I didn't have an attack. Nothing in there bothered me. I ate in there without freaking out." Happy tears begin sliding down my cheeks.

"See? My phoenix." He winks at me and wraps his arm around me.

"I just can't believe it." I shake my head. "That place was small, cramped, and people were everywhere. All of that should've had me panicking. My palms should've been sweaty, my stomach should've hurt, I should've been dizzy. Except, I wasn't. How do you do it?" I look up to him as we stand next to his truck.

He furrows his brows, "Do what?"

"How do you get me to feel so comfortable?" I place my hands on his chest as he wraps his arms around my waist.

"Sweetheart, it's not me. It's you. It's always you. You're stronger than what you give yourself credit for."

Reaching up, I kiss him on his cheek. "Thank you, Bryce."

"Always, Kitty Kat." He places his forehead on mine. "I'm a little tired, to be honest. Should we head back home?"

I nod my head. "Sounds good to me."

We just started our trek back to the apartments when my favorite band plays over the speakers.

“Oh! Oh! I love Evanescence!” I crank up the sound and start belting out Bring Me to Life. I’m dancing in my seat and getting lost in the music. Music has always been something that can help me get out of my head. I can get lost in the music and enter a zone that helps me relax. It’s easy to forget the world around me.

Bryce is grinning ear to ear, watching me completely lose myself. When the song ends, I turn it down and sigh.

“Wow,” He says finally, awestruck.

“What?” I turn to him, a slight smile crosses my face as I can feel my cheeks heat up.

“Kat, I didn’t know you could sing. You’re a powerhouse. Holy shit. Your voice is absolutely beautiful.”

“Thanks,” I say as I blush again and turn towards the passenger window.

A sadness creeps over me, I’ve never been able to see Evanescence live. Though, I had a chance once.

“There was this time, back in high school, when they came to town. These girls from school asked me if I wanted to go with them, since they had an extra ticket. They weren’t the group of popular kids that normally made fun of me, and it would have been a chance to see my favorite band, so I said yes. I was still a little naïve in trusting people.

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“On the day of the concert, I sat around waiting for them to pick me up. By eight at night, I knew they ditched me.” I look down at the floor of the truck, biting my lip to hold back tears. “I cried that entire weekend. That night, I even tried to get a ticket for myself for the next night, but they were all sold out.” And just like that, I am thrown back into my horrible past.

I look over at Bryce and I can see his jaw clenching. His knuckles are white from him gripping the steering wheel so tight. Then, he suddenly hits a button on his dash and says, “Evanescence.” The speakers fill with their music, and he turns to me with a comforting smile.

“Sing away, baby. Sing away.” Instantly, he pulls me from my funk and the music helps me forget.

After who knows how many songs, we finally pull into the complex and park. As we walk up to my door, I take in a deep breath of the air. Today’s been a calm day, which is exactly what we both need. We head to his apartment when we walk in, we take off our shoes and coats and make our way to the living room. His apartment smells like him, autumn rain. He has a giant TV that is mounted on the wall across from two very plush couches. We walk around the coffee table plop down on the couch, nestling into each other. Bryce has his one arm wrapped around my waist while I lay on the other one. He pulls me closer, kisses my forehead, and lifts my chin up.

“Promise me that you’ll always sing for me. I love listening to you sing. Your voice is beautiful. You sound happy; free from everything around you. Promise me,” He puts his lips on mine softly, like I might break at any second.

“I promise. But I’ll only sing for you.” I reply, sighing happily.

“I’m okay with that.” He pulls me close, and we both let our exhaustion get the best of us.

Chapter 16

Katrina

Caffeine. The best stuff on earth—especially if it comes from my favorite place. New year, but same old everything with me. So, I sit here inside the OneShot Coffee, working on a new book I’m editing. For the first time in a long time, I’ve been smiling while I work. One of the regular baristas had mentioned that I looked like a whole new person. That I’m glowing.

Maybe it’s because it’s a new year. Perhaps it’s because I feel different, in a good way, these days. Undoubtedly, it’s because I’m completely in love with Bryce.

Bryce was up early this morning and had to go to work. Of course, not soon after, Vicki texted me to see how I was doing. I know Vicki has been hooking up with Austin. No matter what, I will get it out of her.

“Kitty Kat.” Bryce purrs behind me, startling me. Speak of the devil.

“Hey, baby.” I say as he kisses me tenderly on my temple.

“The usual, Bryce?” Austin asks while walking over to the counter.

“Yep. Thanks.” Bryce moves to sit down next to me. When he does, he leans over and kisses me again, this time on the lips.

“How’s your day so far?”

He shrugs. “Pretty uneventful mostly. Couple calls. That’s about it so far. Nothing exciting. How’s the book?”

“Actually, this one is pretty good. This author’s a really talented writer.” I’ve actually been really enjoying this book, getting lost in the world the author created.

“What’s it about?” Bryce asks, propping his chin up on his hand and his elbow on the table.

“It’s a romance book. About a woman who gets tangled up in a motorcycle club and the president trying to keep her safe, all while falling in love with her.”

Bryce simply nods and smirks. “Have you gotten to the good parts yet?”

“The good parts?” I raise an eyebrow to him.

“Yeah. The sex parts,” He waggles his eyebrows, and I burst out laughing.

“What’s going on over here?” Austin comes over and hands Bryce his coffee.

“Nothing,” I respond innocently. Bryce, however, is still chortling.

“So, Austin, how are things going?” I turn to him while Bryce composes himself.

He sighs, taking a sip from his cup. “Not bad. Been busy.”

“With Vicki?” Immediately, Austin’s cheeks turn pink. I nailed it on the head. “So, what’s going on with you two?”

“Uh, nothing. Just friends,” Austin answers too quickly. I hide a victorious smile.

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“Sure. Sure. But do you mean the type of friends that gossip about boys or the type of friends that have secret, sexy sleepovers?” I tilt my head to side and smile.

Silence. Complete silence. If anything, he only succeeds in averting his eyes. Bryce glances at me, grinning wide. He knows what I’m thinking. They definitely were together in the latter. Austin sits next to Bryce and drinks more of his coffee, not giving away anything.

“Hey, so some of the guys are getting together tonight at that wing place. They’re bringing their women along too. You want to go with us?” Bryce grabs my hand and brings it to his lips. He knows it’s a big ask to get me to go back there.

“Um,” I hesitate only because I remember last time and big-boobed Jessica. But then I also remember what Bryce did for me. Finally, I nod. “Okay. Yeah. Sure.”

Then, I look at Austin. “So, is Vicki going?” I smile. No one says anything for a couple of seconds. Bryce and I simply look at Austin. We hope our glares can break him down so we can find out what’s going on with him and Vicki.

“We need to go.” Austin says, breaking the silence. He gets up, turns to leave, and goes to the squad car. I break out in a laugh.

“See you later, Kitty Kat.” Bryce leans over the table and kisses me.

“Stay safe.” I call out as he walks out of the shop. My smile is still stretched across my face, but seeing him leave makes me feel like a piece of me has left too. I can’t wait to see him again.

About an hour later, I decide to text Vicki to see if I can get her to crack about Austin. They're really cute together, even if he can be a bit of a dick on the personality meter. He obviously doing something right because Vicki wouldn't be sticking around for seconds if she didn't like him.

Me: Hey. What are you doing?

Vicki: Nothing. Just some laundry. You?

Me: Romance story. It's actually a well put together manuscript. Hey, been meaning to ask you... What's going on with you and Austin?

Vicki: Hold on, calling.

No sooner than when I read the text did her picture pop up on my phone.

"Hello?" I answer.

"I don't even know what to say about that man. Kat, he is absolutely a god in bed. His dick ... It just does everything right." She audibly swoons.

"Okay, well, I don't see a problem. Why are you guys not dating or whatever officially then?"

"He doesn't date, or at least that's what he tells me. He doesn't want to get tied down. No marriage, no kids, nothing. So, that's fine and all. I'll just fuck him till his dick falls off."

I burst out laughing, because I know she's serious.

"Look, it is what it is. He wants nothing but my vagina. Right now, I'm okay with

that. When Mr. Right comes along, I'll drop Austin like a bad habit." She lets out a heavy sigh.

"Habits are hard to quit, Vic." Something in me tells me that Vicki and Austin won't be able to keep doing what they're doing. They're both invested in each other; they just won't get on the same page.

"Yeah, but people have quit things before. So, when that time comes, it'll happen. I like him, but he doesn't want to commit. So, whatever."

"I just don't want to see you get hurt, Vic." Vicki has had a shit time with relationships, but she never does casual. That's why I don't understand why she's doing this casual thing with Austin. I know she'll get her heart all wrapped up in him, and she'll end up broken.

"Okay, I'm going to get back to my adulting. I call you later, Kat."

"Bye, Vic." I end the call and pack up my things. I need to get ready to go out tonight.

I'm really nervous to be around these guys and their significant others. Other girls don't really like me. It always ends badly or spitefully. I never had girl friends in school, and when I thought I did, well, it was just to torment me more.

Once I get home, I jump in the shower, then try to find something to wear. I find a black sweater and some skinny jeans. I throw on some knee-high boots and call my outfit complete.

When my hair is dry, I throw on a little eyeliner and some mascara. I'm not one for a ton of makeup on my face. Actually, I would prefer not to wear it at all, but seeing how we're going with some of his cop buddies, I want to make an impression. Or at

least try to. Just as I finish getting dressed, I hear the front door open.

“Hey, sweetheart. It’s me. You ready?” Bryce calls out as he walks across the apartment to my room. He comes through the door and stops dead in his tracks.

“Damn. Kitty Kat, I don’t know if we’re going to make it out of here tonight.” Bryce rushes up to me and crushes his lips into mine. “You look beautiful. Fucking beautiful,” He pushes me back onto the bed and crawls over me. Bryce nibbles on my lower lip, and I part mine in response. He accepts the invitation and explores my mouth with his tongue. Reluctantly, he pulls back, both of us gasping for breath.

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“Okay, I need to go get changed back at my place. I’ll be right back.” He reluctantly pulls himself off me. Pushing up off the bed, I get up too. Though, I really want to stay in bed, with Bryce, naked. Especially since I was now all hot and bothered.

Bryce is pretty quick to change and come back down. When he returns, the first thing he does is kiss me. He wraps his arms around me and tugs me close.

He murmurs, “If something bothers you, Kat, just tell me, okay? I promise, you come before any of those assholes.” Smiling, I nod. We leave the apartment, Bryce locking the door behind us. As we walk out to his truck, his arm comes around my shoulder and he pulls me in and kisses the top of my head.

By the time we pull into the parking lot, my stomach is in knots. I close my eyes and try to control my breathing. Bryce reaches over and runs a hand down my cheek.

“If you want to go, we can turn around and go home.” He says.

I shake my head and open my eyes. I turn my head towards him, “No. I need to do this. I have you, and I know I’ll be fine.”

He nods and smiles, “Always, Kitty Kat. You will always have me.”

We walk into Wingers, and I immediately see Austin and the other guys that I met the last time. They’re all hanging around a couple of pool tables with their significant others. Well, everyone but Austin.

“Hey, everyone. This is Kat. Kat, you know the guys, but this right here is Kevin’s

wife, Leslie,” Bryce points to a blonde woman who’s built like she lifts weights for a living. “This here is Rick’s girlfriend, Michelle.” I shake her hand. She’s a short brunette who looks like she’s a soccer mom. “And this one here is Tom’s wife, Diane.” Diane is a knockout. She has beautiful blonde hair, and she’s prettiest one of them all.

“Hi, nice to meet you all.” I mumble, tucking closer to Bryce’s side.

The guys take turns playing with each other at the pool tables. I stay close to Bryce when it isn’t his turn. I try to be a good listener with the girls, but my heart is racing, and I’m doing what I can to keep calm. That is, until they started asking me questions.

Leslie grins at me, “So, Kat, Bryce tells us you love video games and books.” Fuck. I feel little beads of sweat instantly form on the back of my neck. My mouth gets dry. This is where they judge me, call me names, and make fun of me.

Leslie starts back up, “I can’t wait to get the kids to bed most nights so I can get some game time in. Those kids do nothing by hog the Xbox. My Xbox.”

Wait. I blink, trying to reign in my surprise. She’s a gamer? I feel like I just got thrown a curveball here. After a minute, I find my words.

“Thankfully, I don’t have that issue. Bryce isn’t really a big gamer, so I never have to worry about him hogging my shit.” The girls laugh, and instantly I feel a little less pressure in my chest. We’re trading off gamer tags and the games we could play together when Bryce comes over and gives me a kiss on the lips.

“Doing okay?” he whispers.

“Yes, I am.” And I truly am. These women are friendly. They have yet to judge me or

make me feel like less of a person.

“Good.” He leans in for another kiss. When I turn back to the girls, they’re all staring at us. Leslie is bouncing up and down in her seat, fist pumping into the air. Diane and Michelle both have a smile that stretches from ear to ear.

“I’ve never seen that side of him.” Diane admits after Bryce walks away. “He looks good with you.”

“He’s like a different person.” Michelle points out, nodding.

“What do you mean?” I ask, confused. There’s a part of me that isn’t sure I want to know this answer, but so far, they’ve been nice to me. I’m still cautious, but I know Bryce is still here for me.

Leslie purses her lips, then says, “Well, when he first got here, he was quiet. He joked very little with the guys, didn’t really talk, and just kind of hung around. That was for about a few weeks. Then, he seemed to loosen up a bit. But I should tell you, every girl in this place hit on that man. They tried so hard, threw out their best stuff, but no one could hook him.”

“Yea. Boobs all pushed up, practically worked naked, just to get him to into bed.” Diane adds, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

I can feel that twisting again in my chest. I loathe this place.

“But then a couple months ago, I guess in November, maybe October, he was like a new man. I mean, he smiled more, laughed more, and he really came alive. Now we know why. You.” Diane finishes, and all three stare at me, each one silently agreeing with her.

“That man is head over heels for you, Kat.” Leslie says, smiling. “Head over fucking heels in love with you.”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Maybe?”

“Did she just say maybe?” Michelle scoffs, looking at the other ladies. “There is no maybe here. We’ll be coming to your wedding in the next couple years. Count on it.”

“My nose is tingling. You ladies talking about me?” Bryce comes over and wraps his arm around me. He plants a kiss on my cheek and smiles at me with adoration in his eyes.

“Yes!” all the girls answer in unison.

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Bryce roars with laughter, then focuses back on me. “Don’t believe anything bad they tell you.” says, winking. Bryce softly kisses my lips and gives my nose a little peck. I blush as I turn back to the ladies. They all give me the “told you so” look.

Eventually, the women change the subject, which I’m more than thankful for. While I don’t mind hearing that Bryce has been happier since he met me, I still don’t enjoy being the center of attention. Here, I’m getting asked questions left and right by them. Maybe in time it’ll get easier.

Tonight definitely has been a bit of a surprise for me. I feel pretty relaxed around the guys and their significant others. No one calls me horrible names or makes fun of me. No one does mean things or bully me. Each one of them speaks to me as if I’ve been part of this little group for quite a while.

I glance over at Bryce while he’s talking and shooting pool with the guys. I look forward to doing this more often with everyone. By the end of the night, I honestly feel like I really socialized for the first time in my life. I don’t feel like the outcast or the strange girl.

For the first time, I feel like I belong.

Chapter 17

Katrina

“Hey, Kitty Kat.” Bryce says when I answer the phone. He’s been at the gym all day with Austin, so I’m surprised to see his name pop up on my phone.

“Hey. I thought you were working out. Shouldn’t you be spotting Austin right now?”

“Eh, he’ll be fine. So, I actually called for a reason.” I can hear the clacking of weights and all the grunts in the background. You’d never catch me in a gym; I’d just buy a treadmill for my place. But I hate running so that probably won’t happen either.

“Okay, what’s up?” I say curiously, now that he’s caught my attention.

“I want to take you out to dinner. Can you be up at my place around six thirty tonight?” Bryce asks, his voice sounds shaky, like he’s worried about something.

“Um, I guess. Yeah. You don’t need to take me out, Bryce. I can cook us something.” I bite my lip nervously. I don’t want to feel like I’m on display. And I know that Bryce’s intention is far from that, but it still makes me scared for tonight. I don’t like the attention.

“Nope, I want to take you out. So just be at my apartment then, okay?” This is probably one of those times I won’t win.

“Okay. Sure, Bryce. I’ll see you then.” I reply, closing my eyes and trying to calm my racing mind.

“I promise it’ll be okay. Bye, Baby.” With that, Bryce ends the call.

All right. This is not how I’d envisioned my night going, but here we are. Entering my room, I pull out an outfit for tonight. Crap, I didn’t really ask if it was somewhere fancy, which I hope it isn’t. I own nothing that could be considered fancy. Texting him really quick, I ask him if I need to wear something nice. Bryce lets me know I can just wear what I’m comfortable in. Sounds awesome. Nice top and jeans it is.

I pick out a scarlet red chiffon babydoll blouse and pair that with a pair of light wash

skinny jeans. Looking around my closet, I pull out my black knee-high boots to complete the outfit.

By four in the afternoon, I'm doing my usual going out prep. I hop in and out of the shower, dry my hair, and get dressed. Since I really don't do that much to get ready, I finish a little early, so I pour myself a glass of wine. I'm not sure where we're going, but I have a feeling I'll need a little liquid courage. New places don't really give me warm and fuzzy feelings. I prefer the tried and true ones, but I trust Bryce.

At a little after six thirty, I lock up my apartment and head up to Bryce's. I put my key in and open the door. I walk through the door and immediately stop. My eyes take in what stands before me, and my breath catches in my throat.

The lights are all turned off, but all the rooms are lit with candles. Every single room. Standing a few feet in front of me is Bryce. He's holding a dozen roses in his hands. Instead of moving further inside, my emotions get the best of me, halting me where I stand.

A feeling of weightlessness goes through me, and there's fluttering in my stomach. I can't stop the tears from falling down my cheeks.

"Oh, please tell me those are happy tears, baby." Bryce runs up to me, putting the flowers on the table next to the door.

"Y-yes. V-very happy," My hands go to his chest and I grab hold of his shirt.

"Gotta be honest, though. I wasn't going for tears, sweetheart." Bryce cups my face and wipes my cheeks with his thumbs.

"N-never got f-flowers b-before." He pulls me into his chest and kisses the top of my head.

“Well, you’re going to need to get used to it.” Bryce laughs. “I’m going to spoil you, sweetheart.”

Once I finally calm down, I take the roses and smell them. I’ve never, in all of my twenty-five years, received flowers from a guy. Seeing him hold them just triggers such an emotional reaction. My heart swells with love. This man has a way of pulling my most emotional states from me.

Bryce takes my hand and leads me over to his dining room table. Two chairs sit next to each other with place settings already set out. There are candles already lit, two glasses of red wine already poured, and a vase with another set of roses.

“Bryce ...”

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He pulls out my chair, saying, “Sit, please.” When I oblige, he pushes it in and disappears into the kitchen.

When he comes back out, he’s carrying two plates full of food. He sets mine down in front of me and places his in front of the other chair. Bryce sits down and takes my hand.

“This is a pan-seared cod in a white wine and tomato basil sauce.” he announces proudly.

“Bryce, you didn’t have to go through all this trouble.” I wave my hand around nervously. “But this smells fantastic.”

“Kat, none of this was a hardship. This was something I wanted to do for you. I’ve been out of this world happy these past few months, and it’s because of you. From the moment I saw you in OneShot Coffee, I knew. I just knew there was something greater at work. Then to find out you live below me? Fate. Fucking fate. I didn’t meet you on accident, Kat. Something bigger than us placed you in my path for a reason. Whatever stars aligned, whatever road we walked, every path we’ve ever traveled, it led both of us to one place: each other. That’s the greatest gift the universe can give me, Kat. You.”

For a moment, I can only stare at him. My heart is beating fast, and my pulse is racing in my ears. The butterflies are moving all around in my stomach now, in some sort of weird dance. The love I have for this man is undeniable.

“Bryce ...” I get up and stand in front of him, then move to straddle his lap. Tears

trail down my face, but every drop is made of all my worries, fears, and pain leaving me. This man fills me with such happiness; I don't want to know anything else. "Take me to bed."

His eyes bulge, and his mouth drops open. "Kat, I didn't say that to—"

"I know you didn't." I cut him off and say it again. "Bryce, take me to bed."

Without a second thought, he picks me up and carries me into the bedroom. His room is lit by only the candles and the moonlight coming from the window. His mouth leaves a trail of kisses down my neck while he sets me at the foot of his bed.

The electricity in his lips makes the hair on the back of my neck stand up. Bryce sets me down and begins removing his shirt and pants. Once those are thrown to the floor, he grabs my hands and pulls me close. His mouth hovers over mine, and I shiver with pleasure.

"You drive me crazy, Kitty Kat." Bryce whispers as his lips tenderly brush mine.

His hands slowly move down, soon reaching the bottom of my shirt. He grips the hem and slowly pulls my top up over my head before discarding it on the floor. His lips find mine, and the kiss triggers a fire deep within me. Bryce's tongue caresses mine, making me moan into his mouth.

"I love hearing you moan, baby." Bryce growls. His lips move from my mouth, down my neck, and back up to my earlobe. When he softly nibbles on my ear, it causes moisture to pool between my legs.

I feel his fingers reach the clasps of my bra and unhook it. He pulls back and slides the bra off, adding it to the pile on the floor. His hands move to massage my breasts as his lips start their path down my neck again. When they reach my nipple, I gasp.

His teeth scrap against it, causing a sensation that sends shock waves to my core. He moves to my other breast, sucking the nipple and tracing his tongue around it.

Bryce slowly kisses his way down my stomach to the top of my jeans. My breaths come faster. He kneels in front of me, his blue eyes staring back up at me as he unbuttons them and pushes them down. I step out of them, and then he throws them to the side. Bryce's hands grab my thighs and yank me closer. I wrap my hands in his hair, savoring how soft it feels against my fingers. His mouth soon finds my wetness over my panties. Bryce pulls back, eyeing me while he rubs my clit through the fabric, biting his lip.

He hooks his fingers in the waistband, then drags them down. Ever so slowly, he works his way back up my legs, sliding closer to my entrance. His fingers tease me, brushing softly over my sensitive clit.

"Please, Bryce." I moan. My body trembles from the need to have him touch me.

"What do you want, Kitty Kat?" Bryce purrs, his eyes flooding with desire.

"Touch me. Please," I beg. My eyes close as I try to mentally will him to the place I need him to touch next.

Bryce takes the tip of his finger, sliding it between the swollen lips of my pussy.

"You are soaking wet, baby." Bryce curses, running along my slit. His finger finds my clit, and he slowly plays with it. Small moans escape me, and I can feel something strong building inside me.

Without warning, he removes his finger, and I feel his tongue circling my sensitive nub. The sensations are too much. My legs start giving out. Quickly, Bryce wraps his arm around me to support me. He moves his free hand up my leg to my entrance and

pushes his finger inside me, never letting his lips leave my wetness. I can feel myself clench around him. Bryce responds by sucking harder and running his tongue over my aching bud.

“Oh, fuck, Bryce. I’m gonna come!” Moaning louder, my body convulses when he pushes me over the edge. I feel the heat pool at my core. And then it happens: I explode. I scream his name as my orgasm and waves of pleasure crashes through me.

“Beautiful, just fucking beautiful.” Bryce kisses his way back up, still holding me, and slams his lips into mine. As my tongue caresses his, I can taste myself on him. I pull him closer, deepening the kiss.

I grip the top of his boxers. He pulls back from my lips, placing his forehead on mine, as I reach into his boxers and pass my hand along his hard cock. Bryce lets out a hiss and involuntarily his hips thrust towards me. My hand wraps around him, and I stroke his hardness, letting my fingers graze the tip of his cock. Bryce’s head falls back, and I sprinkle his chest with kisses.

“Baby, this is going to sound bad, but if you keep doing that, I’m going to come.” I smile at that. My touch drives him completely crazy. I retract my hand and bring my arms up to wrap around his neck. I kiss him passionately, and our tongues intertwine.

Bryce picks me up and carries me to his bed. Softly he laid me down and crawls over me, straddling my body, kissing every inch of my skin. He breaks away and pulls back a bit.

“Are you sure you are ready, Kat?” He locks eyes with me.

“Yes, Bryce.” I put my hands in his hair and pull his face into mine. I kiss him and softly bite his lower lip. “I’m on birth control. As long as you’re cl—”

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“I’m clean. Already tested,” he says quickly. “I need you to look at me, Kitty Kat. This may hurt a bit, okay?”

I nod and stare into his blue eyes, trying not to let fear overwhelm me. “I’m ready.”

Bryce reaches down and lines himself up with my entrance. My breath catches as he enters me. He moves slowly, but I still feel like I’m being stretched apart and split in two. When he pushes further in, I feel a burning sensation. Bryce stops for a moment and leans down to capture my lips in his.

Without warning, he quickly thrusts into me, causing a searing pain to tear through. I whimper, and Bryce hisses. He stops moving and watches me, making sure I’m all right.

“Are you okay?” His voice is full of concern. “I’m so sorry. Please tell me you’re okay, baby.”

“Y-yes.” My hands begin to shake. “I’m okay.”

“I promise I’ll be gentle.” Bryce moves gently inside me. With each push and pull of his cock, my pussy becomes more accepting of him. Eventually, we begin to move together as one. I moan, wrapping my arms around him tighter. I need Bryce to fill every inch of me.

“Fuck, baby. You’re incredibly tight. So very warm and tight.” He closes his eyes, trying to keep himself from finding his release so soon. His breathing grows heavier and faster with each passing second.

The sensations that come with each thrust cause an intense warming inside me. His mouth crashes down on mine, his kiss rough with passion and endless heat. Between the kissing and the building inside of me, my body trembles.

“Bryce, I’m going to come again.” I breathe out.

“Sweetheart, I want you to explode around my cock. Let me feel you come on me.” Bryce pants, smiling through the sweat beading down his face.

Instinctively, I wrap my legs around his waist, finding the friction I need against my clit. He moves deeper and deeper inside of me.

I let out a groan as I can feel myself nearing a peak. My toes curl and my mouth opens, but no sound comes out. My walls clench around him, and my vision goes white when my orgasm comes at me hard. I scream out his name, riding the wave of pleasure. Bryce isn’t far behind as he thrusts harder. He groans out, coming inside me while leaning his head against my neck.

We’re both breathing fast and heavy. He strokes my face and peppers it with kisses.

“Are you okay, baby?” Bryce asks, regarding me seriously.

“More than okay.” At that moment, I want to tell him I’m absolutely in love with him. More now than ever. Bryce just gave me something so incredibly special, it made my heart soar. But I say nothing. I just can’t say it. “Thank you.”

He grabs my face with his hands and meets my gaze. Bryce’s eyes show an intensity I’ve never seen from him before. He opens his mouth like he wants to say something, but he doesn’t. Instead, his lips find mine and he kisses me again.

I can feel him soften inside me. He slowly pulls out. Instantly, I feel the loss, but he

stays hovering over me. After a few minutes, he shifts up onto his knees.

“Stay right there. I’ll be right back.” Bryce walks into the bathroom, and I hear the water start running.

He comes back with a washcloth and gently cleans me up. He throws the towel in the nearby hamper, then makes his way out to the rest of the apartment to blow out the candles. A minute later, he returns to the bed. I help him pull the covers down and we both climb in.

We lay on our sides, facing each other. He hooks his legs between mine and pulls me into his chest. We lose ourselves in each other. Our eyes try to convey everything we’re feeling, everything we aren’t saying. His hand brushes my hair away from my face.

My heart is beating hard. Not because we made love or that it was my first time, but because this man absolutely holds my heart in his hand. He’s my everything. My heart belongs to him.

Chapter 18

Katrina

February fourteenth. Valentine’s Day. A day I’ve never celebrated before. Sure, when I was little, my dad would bring my mom a dozen roses and a single rose for me, but outside of that? Nope.

This year is different, though. I have someone to celebrate it with, someone who captures every inch of my heart. Bryce is worth breaking my anti-Valentine’s Day streak for. Plus, I have something special planned for him.

We've already decided not to go out. He says he's going to come home and cook us an amazing Valentine's Day dinner instead. Thing is, I'm already planning on cooking it for him. A caprese stuffed chicken with roasted vegetables. He'll be home around six, so I have to get to the store and pick up what I need so I can bring everything to his apartment.

Once I'm sure I'm free from being discovered by Bryce, I head to the store I know I can shop in and not stress myself into a panic attack. As I'm walking down the aisles, I'm completely in a daze. My mind thinks back to the past couple of weeks; all the time we've spent together, all the moments we've shared, all the love we've made. I've never been happier. It feels like I'm walking on cloud nine every minute of the day.

Like today, for example. I'm wandering around the grocery store with an empty cart. I've been meandering the aisles in a dreamlike state. This morning, I woke up to roses next to my side of Bryce's bed. He also had my favorite steaming hot latte waiting for me on the kitchen counter. Like I said, dream state.

I drop the food off at his apartment and run down to mine and get his gifts. His first gift is a wooden organizer for all of his little electronic things. His phone, watch, and iPad. He's always leaving them everywhere around the apartment. We usually spend at least half an hour trying to find them all. Makes for a fun morning of finders keepers.

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The second gift is a trip to go see his parents. He hasn't seen them since the holidays, and I know he was worried about being near his ex, but he needs to go see them. His ex will always be his ex, but she doesn't get to keep all of Florida in the breakup.

I turn on some Evanescence while I cook, moving gracefully around his kitchen and singing along. The iPad sits on the counter as I try to prep everything. Tonight needs to be perfect.

Over the last few weeks, I've decided I need to be honest with Bryce. I need to tell him how I feel. Even if he doesn't feel the same right now, I need to get it off my chest because I can't live with keeping it locked up inside me. Bryce needs to know that I have completely fallen in love with him.

It took everything in me not to let that slip after we made love for the first time. I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I knew it wasn't the right time, but tonight? Tonight will be perfect. What's more perfect than telling someone you love them on a holiday celebrating love? Maybe that's a little cliché. Okay, yeah, a lot cliché. But it's what I want to do, so I'm going to be cheesy and cliché as fuck.

As I'm cutting up the vegetables, I hear a knock at the door. I stop what I'm cutting and wipe my hands off on a nearby kitchen towel. Walking to the door, I look through the peephole, finding a blonde woman standing there with a box.

I unlock the door and open it cautiously.

"Hi, can I help you?" I ask through the small opening I've allowed.

“Um, who the fuck are you? Why are you in Bryce’s apartment?” Her posture is stiff, and her body is visibly shaking. Her face is turning red by the second. She’s obviously beyond pissed.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand the question. Who are you?” I step back a bit, opening the door wider. This, of course, ends up being a mistake. She seizes the opportunity and pushes her way in.

“Not sure who the fuck you are, but I’m his girlfriend, Emma. Why isn’t Bryce here? He knew I was coming. I’m moving in this weekend.” Emma huffs, glaring at me.

“I’m sorry? You’re moving in with Bryce? Bryce Hawthorne?” My stomach rolls, and I can feel the nausea climbing up my throat. I taste bile and a whole load of other awful things. Namely fear and self-hatred.

“Yes. That’s what I said. Are you deaf? I spent the last few months trying to sell our home and packing up everything to move out here. With my boyfriend, Bryce fucking Hawthorne. So, I ask again, who the fuck are you?” She slams the box down, her nostrils flaring. I notice some men’s clothing and items in the box. The outside is labeled with his name and the word “apartment.”

“Uh ... I ... I ... Kat—” My words never come. In an instant, my panic is back. I can feel my throat getting smaller. Sweat drips down my neck. My breathing hitches, and my chest grows tighter.

“Spit it out, slut! Why the fuck are you here? Have you been fucking sleeping with him? What the fuck?” Emma throws her hands in the air out of frustration. “I knew I should have moved out here sooner. How could I not see this was going to happen? I came here to surprise him, on Valentine’s Day of all days, and he is fucking sleeping around with a whore like you. Fucking great!” She slams her palm on the table next to her. Emma’s breaths come out rapidly. She closes her eyes, trying to gather herself.

That brief reprieve allows me to do the only thing I can do right now. Grabbing my keys and purse, I run. Right out of the apartment, out to my car, and out of Bryce's life. I clutch my chest once I sit in the driver's seat and slam the door. I allow myself to cry for a minute, then realize I need to leave before Bryce gets home. There is no part of me that wants to even look at him. He deceived me like they all did in the past. None of it was real.

Pulling out of my parking space, I drive. I don't have a destination, but like everything in my life, I float place to place. Never truly belonging. Never important to anyone. How long was he going to keep her a secret for? He lived right above me; I would eventually find out.

Before I realize it, I'm turning into the airport to watch the planes take off. I need something to distract me, and I need a place I can think and not worry about Bryce finding me. I should call Vic and let her know, but I just don't need to deal with the ramifications of that right now. Just for a moment, I need to think in my space.

I look at the clock and see it's past seven. We'd be eating dinner right now. Right now, I'd be celebrating my first Valentine's Day. I guess it's not in my cards. I can never celebrate it. At least my streak goes unbroken.

How? How did I not know or see the signs? Were there signs? Maybe he never had an ex? Maybe he was just killing time with me until she got here? I guess she came early, and he didn't know. Maybe he saw me as gullible and easily manipulated; I was something to pass the time.

As I lie back in my seat, the tears come. I love him. I was ready to confess. To tell him how I fell for him. This entire time he taught me how to take my life back from my fears. He supported me, protected me. There was so much I told him about me, so much I trusted with, and all this time he was lying to me. I told him my fears, my past; I gave him a part of me. What the actual fuck?

My breathing grows shallow. I feel like I'm hyperventilating. Squeezing my eyes shut and clenching my fists, I realize I'm having a panic attack. I recite lyrics to one of my favorite songs. Focusing on the words, focusing on nothing but the lyrics, in the hopes of bringing myself back.

After a few minutes, my heart slows down, and I can think clearer. The tears come, the feeling of loss comes, the realization that I'm alone again comes.

I take my phone and shut it off. By now, he would've seen that I wasn't at his apartment, which leads me to believe he doesn't care for me. Not as I do him. She's his endgame, not me. I was a placeholder until his girlfriend was ready to move here. Emma just got here sooner than he expected.

Watching the planes take off, I envy those who can enjoy their life. I'm jealous of those who can love and are loved. Finally, I thought I was getting a chance at a normal life, a normal relationship. Lies. Everything had been a lie.

None of this makes sense. Not a single thing makes sense. But I can't stand to even face the one person who can clear this up. I can't even trust what he has to say. Not to mention that it's well past seven, and he still hasn't called or texted me. He doesn't care about me, and it's entirely possible he never did. Again, I'm the joke, the fool, the outcast.

I pull out of the lot and head somewhere that I can just sleep. There's no way I can go back to my place, and I'm not ready to deal with my parents or Vicki and all their questions. I find a Walmart parking lot and park my car. It's not ideal, but I just want to be alone, and this will allow me to work out this nightmare.

Thankfully, my windows have tinted glass, so no one can see inside. I throw up my sunshade to give me complete privacy. I next turn off my car, get in the back seat, and pull down the middle seat to get access to my trunk. Reaching in the opening, I

pull out the blanket I keep in there for emergencies and a few bottles of water.

I hop back into the front seat, lean it all the way back, and wrap myself up in the blanket. I watch the people coming and going from the store through my window. It's a mindless activity that takes my mind to a different place.

Then, I see a couple laughing and holding hands. Closing my eyes, I can remember his touch, his laugh, even his kisses. It felt so real, like I had all of him, including his heart. But so does the betrayal. That is very real. Knowing there is someone else.

I close my eyes and remember the last time that happened. The last time I let my guard down and someone fooled me into believing I was someone special.

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A guy I've not seen before bumps into me. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to."

I keep my head down, trying to ignore him. It is my senior year, and I have two more months left before I'm out of here. May can't come fast enough.

"Um, okay. Look, my name's Ryan. I just started here. I know it's kind of weird to get transferred at the end of a year, but my dad's in the military." He pauses and looks at me. "So anyway, I'm a junior. What about you? Do you have a name?"

"Um ... I ... I'm Kat." I still don't look at him. I keep my head down. "I'm a senior, and you probably shouldn't be talking to someone like me."

He raises a brow. "Someone like you? Are you diseased? Do you have the plague?" Ryan tilts his head to the side, throwing me a questioning glance. The corner of his mouth tilts up into a half smile.

"Very few people want to be around me. In fact, no one does. I don't have any friends. So please, just find someone else to talk to." I turn away and walk down the hall, hoping he doesn't follow.

Later that week, at lunch, I sit in the corner of the room like I always do. I'm staring at my food when another tray slams down at the table.

"Hey there, Kat. Mind if I sit here? Thanks!"

Before I can respond, Ryan sits down next to me and begins eating.

“What are you doing?” I hiss. “Do you have any idea what sitting with me will do to your reputation here?”

Ryan looks me right in the eye, “I don’t care.” He looks back down at his lunch and pops a fry into his mouth. “So, why are you all alone, Kat?”

I shrug. “Because I am.” My hands go to my lap and I squeeze them together, trying to get rid of my panic.

“I don’t understand. Did something happen?” he says as he bites into his burger.

“Yes. It’s ... it’s a long story. Not worth rehashing,” I look out the nearby window. “I’m not really worth knowing. You should just go.”

“See, now that’s where I think you’re wrong. I get to decide that, not a school full of bullies.”

I snap my head back to him, not believing what I just heard. No one has ever “wanted” to know me. Everyone makes fun of me and stays away from me because that’s what the kings and queens of this high school have said to do. No one has ever gone against it.

“So, I want to get to know you. I could use a friend, and so could you. I don’t see a problem with it.” Ryan shrugs his shoulders and goes back to shoveling food in his mouth.

It was after that lunch that Ryan and I became close. I finally had someone to confide in. I had told him all that happened to me, and he gave me a shoulder to cry on. It was nice finally having someone as a friend. It was nice to feel like I was a person, a human being that had feelings someone cared about.

The end of April rolled around, and I had just a few weeks left in this hellhole. I only had to get past all the prom crap that was everywhere. I wasn't going to prom; in fact I hadn't been to a dance since sophomore year's homecoming dance. Once prom was over, we had finals and then graduation. I only needed to get to graduation.

"Hey, Kat," Ryan strolls up on me at my locker. "You mind if I talk to you for a minute?" My eyes go wide with fear. He chuckles, "It's nothing bad, so don't freak out."

We walk outside and sit on one of the many benches that flank the sidewalk. Ryan turns to me with a serious look on his face.

"Look, I, um, I really like you. Like, like you more than a friend. You're a wonderful person and I hate that this school has tormented you before anyone even got to know you. Though, I'm glad you gave me a chance to be your friend because I got the chance of knowing a beautiful soul. You're a special person, Kat. I'm kind of glad I don't have to share you with anyone. So, I have two questions. First, would you go on a date with me this weekend? I'd like to take you on a proper date. Second, will you be my date to prom?" Ryan runs his hands through his hair, giving me a nervous smile.

Ryan's leg bounces up and down. I know he does that when he's nervous, which is often. He's apparently liked me for a while and has finally worked up the courage to ask me.

"I don't know how to answer that. No one has ever asked me out before, Ryan." My heart is racing in my chest.

"Then say yes. Let me take you out and show you a great time. Show you how I feel and treat you how you should be treated." Ryan pleaded.

“Okay,” I’m hesitant, but I trust Ryan. Or at least I did at that moment. When reality eventually comes crashing down, I’ll realize that I should have never trusted him or allowed him to get that close to me at all.

The day of homecoming is finally here. Ryan knows I still have fears about getting picked up by a guy. I need my own ride home in case something happens. He ended up being okay with that when I told him, and he seemed to understand my apprehension.

I have on a beautiful emerald dress. The dress has a sweetheart neckline, cinches at the waist, and flairs out from there. I feel like a princess in it. My mom helped me pick out and she cried when I tried it on. She was so worried I wouldn’t get to experience prom, since I had been adamant that I wouldn’t go.

That night, I meet Ryan outside the hotel where the dance is. He immediately spots me and smiles. He saunters towards me and holds out his hand to me, pulling me closer.

“You look beautiful,” He leans in and kisses my cheek. Stepping back, I reach into my purse and pull out his corsage.

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Ryan's face goes white. "Shit, I didn't get you a corsage. Fuck! I knew I forgot something. I am so sorry, Kat." He places his head in his hands, ashamed and flustered.

"It's okay," I tremble as I put on his white rose corsage, trying not to let my face show my disappointment. I'm sure he'll make it up to me at some point. Ryan is always thinking of me, and tonight we're both nervous. It's fine.

"I promise I'll make it right, Kat. God, I'm such an asshole. I'm so sorry." Ryan takes both my hands in his.

"No, it's okay. No need to make it right. We're here now and we can enjoy ourselves." I shake my head, giving him a nervous smile. "Ready to go in?" I need to change the subject. Ryan smiles at me and nods. He holds out his arm for me to take. We walk towards the hotel and soon enter the ballroom.

About an hour into prom, and I excuse myself to go to the ladies' room. Once I freshen up and check my dress to make sure everything is where it should be, I head back to the ballroom. When I return, I can't find Ryan. Immediately, a sinking feeling hits me. This feels like homecoming all over again. No, it can't be. That's the past.

Walking around, I finally spot him talking to Becky, one of the queens of this school who has made my life a living hell. I walk over to him to figure out what is going on when suddenly he leans down and kisses her. Not like a peck on the cheek type of kiss. It's not an innocent kiss. This is a passionate kiss.

Halting in my tracks, I feel my chest tighten. Becky spots me, and she and Ryan

come over holding hands. My eyes go wide with fear.

“Hey Kat. Have you met my boyfriend, Ryan? Oh, wait, you have. Well, we’ve been together for quite some time. Sorry about that. I know you thought he was your friend these past few weeks and that he liked you. Yeah, also sorry for that little joke too. We just didn’t want you leaving here without one last shenanigan for old time’s sake.” She looks up at Ryan.

“They didn’t think I could get you here. Apparently, you didn’t go to a lot of dances after homecoming a couple of years ago, which I heard all about! Sounded fun. Seems like I owe you a big thanks, though. We won a lot of money tonight.” Ryan points between Becky and himself. He takes off the corsage and throws it on the ground. Becky reaches in her purse and pulls out one that matches hers, a red rose, before pinning it on his suit.

“Look, no hard feelings. It was for a bet. But thanks for trusting in me to tell me all those things. I had incredible stories to tell everyone. They really enjoyed reliving all of their antics. They had a great time hearing how much they affected you.” Ryan laughs and then leans in to kiss Becky.

That is when my breath leaves me. My hands start to shake, and I become dizzy. A crowd forms around me, and I start to hyperventilate. I feel cold, but I can feel sweat dripping down my back. My chest hurts. I fall to my knees, then everything goes black.

That night was hell for me. I ended up at the hospital. My blood pressure was dangerously low, according to the paramedics when they got to me. My panic attack and low blood pressure had led to my fainting.

I never went back to school. My parents fought for me to finish school from home. I took my finals at different times than everyone else. I didn’t even walk. That had

been the final straw. With only two weeks to go before summer and the threat of a legal action, the school simply wanted to be done with me. So, they agreed to let me just do everything from home.

It was also the last time I trusted anyone besides Vicki. Trusting her was a monumental task. It took quite a while for me to let her in. But she was also persistent in wanting to break down my walls.

What Bryce did was a thousand times worse. He made me fall in love with him. He held my heart, and he fucking crushed it. Bryce took something from me I can never get back. I'll never, ever trust anyone again. This officially pushed me over the edge. I've reconstructed my walls to keep everyone out. I'll live by myself for the rest of my life if it means not getting hurt again.

He told me I was his everything. Nothing but lies. In reality, I'm nothing.

Chapter 19

Bryce

Of all days, Valentine's Day just has to be the day I'm running late. There was a terrible accident on the highway, and they called us to help. I didn't have time to call or text Kat to let her know, but I'm sure she'll understand. Kat is always understanding of my job and that we deal with emergencies.

So, when Austin and I return to the station, I immediately head towards my truck and send her a text letting her know that I'm running late and that I'll be there shortly. The text doesn't go through. Going through my calls, I click on her name and call her. Right to voicemail. That's not like her; something isn't right.

My gut is telling me something is wrong. Trust the gut. Always.

Running to my truck, I jump in and pull out of the lot like a bat out of hell. There is a fear in my stomach that is making me nauseous. I keep trying to call her cell, but it keeps going right to voicemail. I turn my head to her parking space near the apartment and it's empty.

What the fuck?

I stop at her apartment first. She's not there. Running up the stairs to my apartment, I hear music coming from my speakers and slow down. Maybe she ran out to get something and her phone died? I put the key in the lock and walk in. I stop dead in my tracks.

"Hey, babes! Look, I made dinner for us!" What the hell did I just step into? I turn around quickly and look to make sure I'm in my apartment. This is my home, but there is no Kat. Emma fucking Lane is standing in my kitchen. My fists clench at my side.

"What the fuck is going on here? What in the fuck are you doing in my home, Emma?" My voice booms over the music.

"Like I said, Bryce. I'm cooking dinner. Oh, also, I moved here officially now. So, you and me can start fresh. My company found me a spot to work here with a sister company of theirs. So, cheers to new beginnings and second chances." She walks over to hand me a glass of wine.

Ignoring the glass, I glare at her. The rage in me has me vibrating. How the fuck did she get in here? I'm doing all I can to control my anger right now. Normally I'm level-headed and calm, but seeing her in my home? It's flipping a switch inside me. Rage is all I feel right now.

She goes to put the glass on the table and comes over to try and put her arms around

me. I step to the side, avoiding all contact with her. My body feels like it's about to combust. Taking a deep breath, I control my revulsion for the woman standing in my home.

“First, you’re going to tell me where Kat is. Then, you’re going to get your shit and get the fuck out of my apartment or I will have you arrested for trespassing. Have you forgotten what I do for a living? You know you can’t be here.” My words come out in a growl.

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“Kat? Who ...” Emma pauses for a moment, then snaps her fingers. “Oh! The bitch that was here? Oh yeah, she ran off. Scared little one. She didn’t even care about the food she was cooking. She could have burned the place down.” Emma waves her hand in the air dismissively. “Anyway, I don’t have a clue. She up and left. I mean, really, Bryce? Her? She’s so not your type. She got the hint and left. I mean, she didn’t even put up a fight! You’re apparently not that important to her. At least I’m fighting for you, babes. I love you. Look, I brought you a box of your stuff. I mean, your parents seemed excited when I told them. They told me where I could find you! They want us to get back together.”

“Get the fuck out!” I scream at the top of my lungs, no longer able to hide my anger. My entire body is ready to rupture in rage. “Get your shit and get the fuck out! I don’t love you, I don’t want you, and you are nothing to me, Emma! So, get the fuck out of my apartment!” I point to the door. “Get out or I’ll have you arrested. Your fucking choice.”

The look in her eyes says it all; she realizes she miscalculated. She thought I would be happy she came running to me. It’s the complete opposite. I’m seeing red and even more raging mad that she intimidated Kat into running. Knowing what I know about Kat, she’s likely thinking the absolute worse right now. Nothing else is more important than finding Kat.

Once Emma leaves, I lock the door and head to Kat’s apartment. I walk in. All her clothes are still there. Her laptop and phone charger too. I look up the times for OneShot Coffee and find they’re already closed. So, she can’t be there. Picking up my phone, I call Austin.

He answers on the first ring, “Hey, Bryce.”

“I need Vicki’s number. It’s an emergency.” I say forcefully.

“What’s going on?” From the sound of his voice, I can tell I have his attention.

“It’s Kat. She’s gone, and I can’t get a hold of her. My ex showed up. Freaked Kat out. Told her we were getting back together. I need to see if she’s with Vicki.” Words fly out of my mouth as fast as they can to explain the situation.

“Fuck. Okay, sending it now. Keep me up to date.”

Hanging up on Austin, I call Vicki. Every fiber of my being is praying Kat is with Vicki right now. If she isn’t—if she’s out there alone, it is going to fucking kill me. My heart can’t take knowing that.

“Hey, Vicki. It’s Bryce.” I blurt out once she picks up. There is a fire in my body that I don’t know if I can keep under control.

“Hey, shouldn’t you be doing the dance with no pants with your woman right now?” That’s not what I want to hear. Not at all.

“She’s not with you?” I panic.

Immediately, Vicki gasps and grows worried. “What do you mean? Why would she be with me?”

“Fuck! I can’t explain. But if you hear from her, call me immediately.” I don’t have time to go into detail with her. I don’t want to call her parents and worry them, so I hop in my truck to do a drive-by. If her car is there, I’ll at least know she’s okay.

I keep trying her phone as I haul ass to her parent's house. When I get there, I drive down the street slowly. My heart sinks. No car. Both of her parents' cars are there, but Kat's car isn't on the street like it usually is.

Defeated, I drive back to the apartment. Her car still isn't there. With my heart breaking, I head inside her place and sit down on the couch. I need to try one more time to get her to answer me. As I text her, I'm mentally willing her to answer me.

Me: Kat, please call me. We need to talk.

Me: Please answer. Please.

I pick up and call again, but it's still going to voicemail. I squeeze my phone, then realize that I need to stop. If she calls and I break my phone, she'll once again think the worst.

What I really need to do is file a missing persons report. The cop in me knows there's no foul play and all that'll happen is some missing persons BOLO will get put out there. In reality, she'll show up in the next day or two. My heart feels like it's breaking into a million pieces. It physically hurts me. Clenching my chest with my hand, I hang my head. I have no idea what to do. This is a first.

My phone rings and I immediately look at it. It's Austin.

"Hey, did you find her?" Austin asks; he knows how my ex can be. When I first came out here and partnered up with him, he saw first-hand the effect of what Emma did to me. He knows she's a piece of work. I know he can only imagine what Emma did to Kat.

"No. No, I don't know where else to look. I drove past her parents' house and her car wasn't there. She's not with Vicki either." I run a hand through my hair.

“Yeah, Vicki called me freaking out. I didn’t tell her anything. I told her you were out looking for Kat and left it at that. Do you want to put out a BOLO?”

“She left of her own accord. No foul play. It wouldn’t do much. Chances of her showing up tomorrow or the next day are more likely. Fuck! I don’t even know. Hardwick, my mind is a mess right now.” I press a palm against my eye, trying to relieve some tension. It’s not working. My head hurts like crazy.

“Okay, let’s wait it out then. I’ll have Vicki keep texting her and calling. Kat will come home. Your ex ran her out. Kat just needs a little time to get her thoughts together. I’m sure she’s fine, wherever she is.” Austin lets out a sigh, like he’s trying to believe the bullshit he just spewed.

“Yeah,” There’s nothing else I can say. I’m officially out of my mind to the point that I have no words.

“Look, how about we go drive around?” Austin suggests.

“No. I’m going to wait here. Wherever she is right now, she wants to be alone. Best thing to do is to let her calm down. She’ll come back. All her stuff is here,” Looking at all her things, my heart twists in pain. Now, I’m just saying words to convince myself this is all going to be okay. But I’m far from okay. This is all far from okay.

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Today should have been a special day, and I was going to tell her. Finally, tell her how much I love her. And I do. She's been a bright light in my life. From the moment I met her, my heart has never felt this full. Except for now. Now, it's missing a piece of itself. It's missing Kat.

Tomorrow, I'll drive by her parent's house again. If she's not there, I'll stop at Vicki's place. Kat has to give me the chance to explain, I need to make her understand that it's not what it seems.

Tonight, I'll stay here. I'll wait on this couch and wait for her to come home. This way, she can't run. I walk into her bedroom and grab a pillow and blanket. Honestly, I won't be able to sleep, but I need to try so I can find her tomorrow if she doesn't come home.

I lie back on the couch and pull out my phone. I send her another text pleading with her to just call me or come back. The text never goes through. I call her cell again, but it goes right to voicemail. This time, I leave a message.

"Kat, call me. I need to talk to you. Please, I'm worried about you. Please," I hang up and scroll through my music, trying to find a good distraction.

This all could've been avoided if I'd gotten off work earlier. Fuck. Fucking Emma. She poisons everything she touches. The thoughts she probably put into Kat's head ... God, that has to be eating at Kat. I pull up our song by Brett Young and place my phone on the coffee table. I flip it on, so it'll repeat. It's all I want to hear right now.

The best part of myself is mad at me: Kat. The best part of myself is out there

somewhere. She's my everything, and right now, I have nothing without her.

My eyes grow watery, and a tear slides down my cheek. I wipe it away and close my eyes. I picture her piercing emerald eyes. Imagine her next to me, asleep and making her cute little noises.

Another tear slides down. I can't lose the woman I love, and I can't live without Kat.

Chapter 20

Katrina

My neck has a cramp in it, and I'm very uncomfortable. Looking at the dash, I notice it's only six in the morning. This was probably a rash decision to just sleep in a Walmart parking lot. I sit up and adjust my seat, rubbing my neck. Ugh. Sleeping in my car was a stupid idea. I should have just gone to Vicki's. I turn my phone on, and I immediately have countless messages flying in and a ton of voicemails. Most from Vicki and one from Bryce. I'm not even interested in whatever excuse he has.

My mind stops me for a moment. What if it's not as it seems? What if she thought they were together? I shake my head. I know what I saw. She was carrying a box of his things. This Emma. She was in complete surprise that I was there. There was no faking how upset she was that I was in Bryce's apartment. Ugh, and she's beautiful. A blonde bombshell. I have nothing on her. Bryce and Emma? Those two belong together. They would have cute kids, and they would have the perfect life together.

I see his text messages. Nothing explaining what happened or why he was with Emma at the same time he was with me. I delete them and block his number. Just as I did that, I thought of another problem. I can't go back to my apartment. He lives too close, being right fucking above me. I'll have to rely on Vicki to tell me when Austin is at work, then I can grab my things and stay at her place until I can find a new

apartment.

I shouldn't have to be the one to move and suffer, but I would rather find a new place to call home than worry when and if he's going to move out. The last thing I need is to risk running into him or her. Or worse, both of them together. I shudder at the thought.

Picking up my phone, the first person I call is Vicki. She'll probably be mad at me, but she'll understand once I explain.

"Where the fuck are you?" Vicki screams into the phone once she picks up.

"A Walmart parking lot," I confess. I bite my thumbnail nervously. My chest is tightening. The realization that I slept in my car last night is getting to me.

"What the fuck are you doing there? What is going on, Kat?" she says frantically.

"I'm on my way over. I'll explain once I get there. Sound good?"

"Well, you'll have no choice. I won't let you leave till you do." Oh, Vicki is beyond pissed right now.

"Okay, I'm on my way now." I end the call and drive over to Vicki's place.

Once I'm inside, she grabs me by the arm and pulls me towards the couch. Her entire body is shaking when she says, "Spill, now. Do you have any idea how freaked out I've been? Why? Why did you just disappear, Kat? You've had me up all night trying to get a hold of you! What the fuck is going on?" Vicki rapid fires the questions at me. I hold up my hand to silence her.

"Bryce is cheating on me. Well, I think I'm the other woman. He apparently forgot to

mention he was with some other chick who was moving in with him. They had an entire life together. I'm the side piece, the one who gets forgotten about." My breathing picks up, and I can't help but gasp. My heart is beating so fast, I'm scared it'll jump right out of my chest. I close my eyes, trying to calm myself so I don't pass out from hyperventilating.

"Wait, what? That doesn't make sense. Why would he be cheating on you?" Her face scrunches as she mentally tries to come up with an explanation.

"I'm telling you, he is. Her name is Emma. She had his stuff and lost her mind when she saw me in his apartment. She said she was his girlfriend." I break down, not able to hold back the tears any longer. "I had a panic attack, and I knew it was going to get worse if I stayed. She called me a slut for sleeping with her man. Emma kept calling me names, telling me I was basically a home wrecker."

"So, you took off." Vicki nods in understanding. She knows my past, and she knows what happened with the guys I've been around, so now she understands why I ran. She rubs my back and tries to comfort me now that all this makes sense to her.

"I got my breathing under control, but my chest still hurt. I went to watch the planes take off and land at the airport, hoping that would help me. Then, I just became tired, and I didn't want to go home. I knew Bryce could find me there, at home. So, I slept at Walmart. Which sounds silly, I know, but I just didn't want to be around anyone." I wipe my tears, sniffing.

"Are you sure he's cheating on you? Kat, he's been searching for you. He's been calling and texting me all night and into this morning." Vicki shows me her phone as proof.

"Maybe because he feels bad about how I found out. You know I can't trust him, Vic. If she wasn't his girlfriend, who was she? I mean, this has all happened before. There

is no way I can go through it again. I can't be the punchline." Rocking back and forth on her couch, I try to keep the sick feeling in my stomach down. "Maybe Austin has some insight?"

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Vicki shakes her head. “Already went there. Austin says it’s Bryce’s issue, and he doesn’t want to get involved.”

“See, that right there. That tells me there is something more going on. If he wasn’t seeing anyone, why wouldn’t Austin just tell you I overreacted and that this Emma girl was no one but a stalker or something? I mean, she had his stuff, so I doubt she’s a stalker.” I twitch at the thought that he has a life I don’t even know about. My heart aches, and I close my eyes briefly, willing my breathing to return to normal.

Vicki sighs. “Yeah, that’s a good point. If it were nothing, Austin would have at least told me.” She gets up and heads towards the kitchen. “Okay, let’s get you something to drink. Tea?” I nod and lie back against the couch, pulling a throw blanket over myself.

I furrow my brows. “Wait, why would he have told you? Is there something going on between you two?” Immediately, I sit up, realizing what she said.

“What? No! Don’t be crazy. Just fuck buddies. I’m just saying, he knows we’re besties. I’m sure he wouldn’t want you to worry if it was nothing.” she rambles off, digging in her cupboard for tea bags.

“Yeah, I guess you could be right.” Turning to my side, I fold my arms around myself and hold the hem of the blanket tight against my chest. Vicki comes back out several minutes later with two mugs of steaming hot goodness.

“I was going to tell him I loved him, Vic,” I admit, my voice cracking, just like my heart. “I was going to give him my heart. Well, he technically already had it; he just

didn't know." Tears are steadily flowing from my eyes now. Then, I realize something. "Shit, I left the card and the tickets to Florida behind. That's probably why he's calling. To give them back to me so I can get my money back. God, I'm so stupid. Why did I do that?" I sit up and sip my chamomile tea. The sweet apple-like scent helps calm me, while the warmth helps soothe me.

Vicki sighs. "Bryce called me last night. He asked if you were with me. When I told him no and I asked him what was going on, he told me he couldn't explain. But to his defense, he sounded sincerely worried, Kat. I think you should talk to him." She sat closer and rubbed my back, giving me a pitiful look.

"I can't because I know how this ends. There's no happy ending for me. I become a joke to them. For years to come they will see me as the girl who thought she could have a normal life and a man to love. I'm never the endgame." Placing my hands in my lap, I wring them. My body shakes. I can feel panic creeping up.

"Okay, I need you to relax. You're getting worked up. Look at me," She slowly turns me to face her. "Count with me. Breathe and focus on when you inhale and exhale."

We count and breathe, and eventually, I calm down.

"Talk to him, Kat. I can go with you. But I think you really need to clear the air. This isn't high school. He's not the past that still haunts you. Look, if I thought for a second he was cheating, I would absolutely kick his ass for you. But I don't think he was, sweetie. Just go talk to him." she urges. Maybe Vic is right.

Bryce wasn't my past, but I'm not sure if he's my future either. Nevertheless, I need to have some closure. I finally nod; she has a point. I just need to hear him out.

"Give me a couple of days and I'll go. I just need to gather my thoughts, but I'll go talk to him." I explain, accepting that this is probably better than letting it go. Getting

answers would serve me better instead of me coming up with my own.

Vicki pours me more tea and we sit back and turn on a movie. I need to know what the hell is going on with Bryce, but I'll do it on my own terms.

* * *

It's been three days since Valentine's Day. It's been three days since I felt like myself. Three days since I've seen Bryce. It hurts to breathe. During all three days, I've felt like a shell of myself. Floating through existence, barely getting by. My broken heart's barely keeping me alive.

I've been staying at Vicki's place. She gives me the support I need right now. Vicki called out of work, and we didn't go out. We both just hid in her apartment. Vicki and I watched movies—sci-fi ones, because rom-coms were simply not happening right now. Neither of us want to watch the lovey dovey shit with all that's happened.

“Okay, Austin called and said that they just got off work. So, you can head over there when you want.” Vicki calls out from the kitchen while she grabs a bag of chips to munch on.

We let Austin know that I want to talk to Bryce, but that he can't say anything about it. If Bryce knows or prepares himself for me, nothing would be truthful. I need to talk to him without him knowing I'm coming. There needs to be a genuine reaction from Bryce.

By eight at night, I finally work up the nerve to go over there and talk to him. And by working up the nerve, I mean I finally stopped throwing up and dry heaving from my nerves. Though I'm surprised that I even threw anything up, I haven't much eaten since this I ran from his apartment.

I step up to Bryce's door and try to calm my nerves. After I take a deep breath, I realize I hear noises from inside. Moaning. My stomach drops. I don't know why, but I place my hand on the doorknob. I should just turn and run. But I don't. I need to see for myself what is happening.

While I'm shaking, I somehow manage to quietly unlock the door and push it open. I turn to the living room and see Bryce with his eyes closed and his hands in the hair of a blonde as she gives him head. My eyes go wide with panic, my breath hitches and I let out a gasp.

"What the fuck?" I place my hand on my chest; the pain is too much. I think I'm going to be sick. Sickness hits me, my stomach rolls, and my heart breaks a million times more than it was. There was a chance it'd be healed by working things out with him. Now it's dust. My heart's been crushed to dust. There's no hope for it.

Bryce's eyes shoot open, but I don't stay to finish watching them. I run down to my apartment. As I come up to the door, I can hear the blood pumping my ears. I feel lightheaded and dizzy, and my hands are trembling. I'm hyperventilating as I finally unlock the door and get into my apartment. My entire body is heavy. I feel like there are weights pulling me down to the ground. I try to take deep breaths, but I can't get my lungs to work.

I need to get to the couch. I just need to lie down. Fumbling and barely hanging on, I make it into the living room. I get down on my knees, unable to stand anymore. My vision is tunneling. I grab onto the couch, but my hands slip, and I feel myself crash to the floor.

After I hit the floor, everything goes dark.

Chapter 21

Bryce

It's been three days since I've talked to Kat. Three days since she ran out on Valentine's Day. I'm fucking miserable. I only shower and shave because I have to maintain myself for work. If it wasn't for work, I wouldn't leave the house. I'm completely and utterly destroyed.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

I've been staying at her apartment every night, hoping she'll come home. She doesn't. I can't stay there tonight; I need to sleep. Being surrounded by her, without her, it's slowly killing me. I don't know how much more of this I can take.

I make my way up to my apartment. I'm fucking exhausted. All my calls go unanswered, all my texts ignored. There's not much more I can do other than wait for her to come back. Walking into my room, I see a card sitting on the dresser next to my watch box. Where the hell did this come from?

My hands shake as I open it, my breathing quickens, and my heart is pounding right out of my chest. As I pull out the card, I see that it's a Valentine's Day card. Somehow, I missed this with all the crazy that has happened over the last few days. I open it and read the message inside. My heart is clenching, hurting, and twisting at the fact that this card is from Kat. Tears escape my eyes, and I'm too tired to hold them back.

My Dearest Bryce, (sounds fancy, doesn't it!)

I want to share with you that not only are you my first, but you are also my first Valentine. Today will mark a holiday I've never had reason to celebrate, but now I do. You.

I love that you make me feel completely normal. I love that you don't judge me. I love that you can read me and know my tells. I love that you protect me. I love that you nerd out with me. I love that you support me. I love that you care for me. I love falling asleep next to you. I love waking up to you. I love making love to you.

To put it simply, I love you. Happy Valentine's Day.

Your Everything,

Kitty Kat

Inside the card is a piece of paper, I unfold it and stare at it in disbelief. My hands drop everything. Running my hands over my face, I scream.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” Kat got us two tickets to go see my parents this summer. For her to get on a plane, to be around people in a tube thirty thousand feet in the air ... Fuck!

Kat loves me. Kat fucking loves me. She loves me enough to be uncomfortable and risk an anxiety or panic attack just to go with me to see my parents. She loves me enough and trusts me enough to know I will help keep her calm and protect her. Except I couldn't protect her from the vile Emma. The life-sucking parasite called Emma.

How am I going to get her back? To get her to listen to me? I pick up my phone and text her.

Me: Kat, please. I need to talk to you. Please, you need to let me explain.

I wait. It doesn't go through. She blocked me. There's a void in my chest where my heart used to be. I walk over to the bed and drop to the floor next to my nightstand. Every bone in my body hurts over this. There's a visceral pain in me that feels this loss, that knows I lost the love of my life.

I pull my knees up and rest my head on them. How can I let her go? There's no way I can simply forget about the woman I love. Turning my head to the side, I pull open the drawer from my nightstand. I pull out her gift that I was going to give to her three

days ago. A beautiful heart-shaped locket. The front has a single diamond on it. On the back, I wrote a message to let her know all she needs to know. “You’re my everything.”

She is my everything. Kat has been since the day I met her. I didn’t know it then, but she carries my heart and soul in her hands. Everything I do, it’s all for her. She absolutely is my everything, and I need my everything back. I rub my chest above my heart, trying to smooth the pain away. Nothing is working.

Sitting there in tears, I stare at the necklace until I have to leave for work. I love you, Kat. No matter what happens, I’ll make sure you at least hear from me. Wiping my tears, I put the locket back in the box and put it away, hoping that one day soon I can place it gracefully on her neck.

* * *

Austin and I are out patrolling a neighborhood when he turns to me. He hasn’t said much about this whole thing; he knows it’s tearing me up inside.

“Man, you look like shit, Hawthorne.” He gives me a slight chuckle as he turns down another street.

“Thanks, asshole.” I give him a side-eyed glance and continue looking forward at the road. Today hasn’t been bad so far, but I’m still pretty upset.

“Have you heard from her at all?”

“No. I think she blocked my number. Texts aren’t going through. Fuck. I don’t know what to do.” I scrub my face with my hands; I’m beyond frustrated.

“Well, I can tell you she’s been staying with Vicki. I mean, I’m not supposed to say

anything. Vicki will probably castrate me for it, but she's with Vicki." Austin confesses.

"But when I called her that first night, Vicki didn't even know Kat disappeared. Where was she?" I turn more to look at him. My hands are curled into fists in my lap.

Austin sighs. "You're gonna not like it. I don't even know if I should tell you."

"Tell me." I growl.

Austin hesitates, but finally speaks up, "She slept in a Walmart parking lot, from what Vicki tells me. She went to McCarran and watched the planes land and take off for a while to calm down, then went to Walmart to sleep." He shakes his head, frowning.

My heart stops. I feel sick. My stomach is rolling. She slept alone in a parking lot. She didn't even feel comfortable enough to go to her place. I made her that way through my mistake. Emma being that mistake. If I had made it home sooner, I could have stopped all of this.

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Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

“Man, are you alright? You look pale as fuck right now.” Austin pulls over to a nearby gas station. I jump out, needing some fresh air.

I turn back to the vehicle and interlock my hands behind my head. “I fucked up. What the fuck am I going to do?” I pace back and forth again. My stomach betrays me, and I dry heave.

“No one fucked up. It’s clearly a terrible misunderstanding. Kat thinks you were doing something behind her back, so try to see it from her point of view. Let her come around; she’ll eventually be ready to talk.” Austin stands next to me, worry etched in his face.

“But it’s killing me! Waiting is killing me! I can make this right if she would just let me! Fuck! I love her. I love her so much. Every part of me wants to go to her. I’m like a magnet being drawn to her. But now? Now, not being allowed to? It’s tearing me apart from the inside out!” My words just spill out. Every muscle is vibrating with pain.

I need her. Every part of me needs Kat. I’m nothing without her.

* * *

Today’s been a shit day after all. Every day I’m without her, it just gets shittier. Once I get home, I take a shower and change. I probably need to eat, but I just don’t have the stomach for it right now.

One word to describe me at this moment? Exhausted. Not sleeping much is taking its

toll. I really need to get a few hours of sleep tonight. I rub the palm of my hand into my eyes. God, I'm so fucking beat.

I take out my phone and see if I have any missed calls. Nothing. Not a text, not a call. Part of me wants to call up Vicki and check in to see how Kat is doing. I just need to hear that she is okay. But I can't. I know I can't. She needs to have her time to get her thoughts together, and I have to respect that. In time, I can hope she comes around.

Like Austin said, I just have to wait. So, I sit and wait. I fucking hate sitting and waiting. There has never been a time in my life where sitting and waiting has helped me. Fuck, I hate sitting and waiting.

Turning on my television, I leave on anything that can act as noise. I just need the noise. Noise helps me get her out of my head. These days, she takes up every thought I have. Kat's always on my mind. It's why I can't sleep; she's in my dreams. Ugh. I really need to get some sleep. I'm going to have to take time off if I can't get my shit together. I can't risk Austin's life if I'm too tired and shouldn't be working. Tomorrow, I'll go ahead and put in a request for a few days.

My eyes grow heavy. I feel the exhaustion coming at me full force. Maybe I'll stay asleep, and maybe I won't dream of a life with Kat. Maybe she'll forgive me in my dreams. My dreams are where she loves me. It's where we have a life together, and that's more than I can wish for. In my dreams, she's my wife, and we have kids. We live a happy life. In my dreams, she's my everything. So, for now, since I can't have her here with me, I'll just have to dream that one day we will find each other again.

Before long, the noise from the TV finally gets to me, and sleep overtakes me.

"Kat, please, you need to hear me out. It's not what you think. Emma, she's my ex. Please," I beg.

“Why didn’t you just tell me? Why keep all of it locked up and away? How was I supposed to know? Why did you keep her a guarded secret?” Her body’s shaking. I try to reach out to her, but she steps back.

“It’s not like that. I just ... I wanted to forget her. If I didn’t say her name, she didn’t exist. She is my past, and I want to leave her there.” This is partly the truth. “It doesn’t matter. None of it matters. Emma’s nothing but my past.”

“But I love you, Bryce.” She pulls away again. Why does she keep pulling away? I feel stuck, rooted to the ground.

“I know, Kat. I love you and nothing will ever change that. Please. Let me make it up to you.” She takes a step forward and I run over to her. I can finally reach out to her. Touch her. Kiss her. My heart beats wildly. I look down at her lips. The anticipation makes my entire body shake.

Her lips feel so real. I can hear her moans. Feel her hands touching me. “I need you. Baby, I love you.” I whisper to her.

Kat says nothing; she gets on her knees in front of me. She takes off my belt and unbuttons my jeans. My breathing quickens in anticipation.

“Kat, you don’t have to do this.” I lock my gaze with hers as she looks up at me with those brilliant emerald eyes.

“Shhhh,” She continues working to get my pants undone.

Kat takes her tongue and licks the underside of my shaft. Instantly, I groan in response. “Kat ...” I throw my head back in pure ecstasy.

Kat’s mouth hovers over the head of my cock, and slowly, she wraps her mouth

around my length. Her tongue swirls around my head.

“Fuck, that feels so good.” I wrap my hands in her hair, moving her mouth slowly down my cock. “Your mouth is amazing. So fucking warm. Oh, fuck. That’s it, baby, look up at me.”

Her hand strokes me in tandem with her mouth. She pulls back and flicks her tongue on the head of my cock. I let out a hiss. Her mouth wraps around me again. This time, she goes deeper. Taking me all the way to the back of her throat. Kat is making it hard for me to control myself.

All of this feels so real. Like she’s really here. My hands are in her hair, and her mouth is on my cock. This has to be the best dream ever, and I don’t ever want to wake up. I’m so happy to have her with me again.

“I love you, baby. I love you so much.” My breath hitches as I hit the back of her throat.

Then I hear it; what sirs me from my dream. A gasp and “what the fuck?”

I force my eyes open, pulling myself from the dream. Why do I still feel Kat between my legs?

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Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

It isn't Kat I'm staring at between my legs. It's Emma. Emma is sucking me off. What the actual fuck? Air escapes my lungs as I panic. While I try to assess what's happening, I look up and see who's behind Emma. Standing there watching is Kat, pale as a fucking ghost. She's crying.

Fuck. This has to be the nightmare. Fuck. My eyes are coming out of my head, trying to process the surrounding scene.

Then, Kat abandons where she stands. Without me even being able to fix this, she disappears. Again.

"What the fuck, Emma? Get the fuck off me!" I sit up and jump off the couch. Emma simply sits there with a smile on her face like she's won. Reaching down, I put myself back into my pants, getting angrier by the minute.

"What? I was giving you some special kisses, baby. You were enjoying it." Emma bats her eyes, looking through her long lashes at me.

"Are you out of your fucking mind? How the fuck did you even get in here?" I'm across the living room, and my voice is booming. There's a good possibility my neighbors can hear me.

"Well, you had an extra key hanging on the key ring, so I just took it." She gets up and saunters towards me. "We were getting back together. Since I need to move in, I needed a key, Bryce."

"Stay the fuck back. Are you out of your fucking mind? You are off your fucking

rocker, Emma. Seriously, you need to seek help. Get the fuck out. Give me the key and get the fuck out. No, you know what? Keep the fucking key; I'll change the locks. Get. The. Fuck. Out." I emphasize every word. I need her to understand her and I are nothing.

"Whatever. Call me when prude girl won't take you back. She'll never be enough for you. Just remember I said that. What we had was good, Bryce." She shrugs and throws the key at me. "Just remember how great of a job I just did sucking your cock. You can have that every night, baby."

"Get out!" I roar. With that, she jumps back a bit. I've never raised my voice like that to her. Never have I ever raised my voice to a woman, but today ... Today is an exception. She violated me and took advantage of me. I can see the fear in her eyes as she gets her shit and leaves.

Once I know she's gone from the complex, I run down to Kat's place. When I get there, the door is slightly open, so I walk in.

"Kat? Kat, please let me explain." There is no response, so I continue, "I was sleeping. She stole a copy of my key. Please, I didn't know she did that. What she was doing to me, I had no clue, Kat. I promise. I was dead asleep." Listening in the entryway, all I hear is silence.

Something doesn't feel right. That feeling comes back to me. There's something very wrong here.

"Kat? Kat, I'm coming in. I just want to make sure you are okay. If you can hear me, just say something so I know you're okay." I announce. When I hear nothing, I continue into the apartment and keep talking. "Okay, Kat. I'm walking into your room. Just answer me if you're in there. I'll turn and go back to the entryway." Still nothing. There's a sinking feeling in my stomach.

I slowly walk into the bedroom, but she's not there. Turning, I walk out and look into the kitchen and see that is empty too. I head into the living room, and that's when I spot the feet on the floor by the couch.

"Kat!" I run over to her. I check for a pulse; it's weak, but it's there. "Baby, I am going to call for help." I take out my phone and dial those three numbers. "Just stay with me, Kitty Kat. Just stay with me." Softly, I run my hand over the top of her head. I feel like my heart is beating so fast I might need help too.

I lean forward and place my head next to hers as the phone rings. "I am so sorry, baby. So fucking sorry."

"9-1-1, what's your emergency?"

Chapter 22

Katrina

It's been two weeks since they took me to the hospital. Two weeks since I saw Bryce and Emma together. Two weeks. Only two weeks. Yet it seems like it was just yesterday that I walked in on Emma blowing Bryce. Worst of all, he had his hands in her hair, enjoying every moment.

My head constantly replays what I saw, like on a loop. During the day, I can fight it, but at night, it haunts me in my dreams. Sleep doesn't come easy, and I fight it every chance I get because I don't need to see them.

When I left Bryce's apartment that day, I ended up passing out in mine. Turns out my blood pressure was low and there was dehydration. I'm so hurt and upset, food and water aren't at the top of my list of things to worry about. Then of course, the panic attack on top of it all. Everything combined shut my body down. I'm thankful I had

enough forethought to get as close as I could to the ground. It could have been worse if I had fallen from standing.

I remember nothing until I was in the ambulance. The paramedics said that Bryce would call my parents to let them know what happened. As soon as they said his name, everything faded away. My mind had gone back to replay the events that landed me in an ambulance, and my body went into shock again. I ended up passing out only to wake up in a hospital bed a short time later.

The nurses only allowed my parents and Vicki to come see me, per my request. That was it. I didn't want Bryce anywhere near me. He would have taken advantage of my situation, being stuck in a bed and not having anywhere to go. So, I banned him. Bryce can go to hell.

The doctors came in, got my blood pressure back up, and gave me fluids. They also told me I needed to see someone about the panic attacks. They offered to put me on some medicine for the anxiety, but I declined. If I stay in my world, I'm fine. I just need to stick to what I know. My parents weren't happy with that decision; they didn't know how bad it had gotten. Honestly, my anxiety had actually gotten better when I was around Bryce. It just so happens that now, he also brings out the worst of it.

Eventually they let me go home under the care of Vicki and my parents. My mom and dad wanted me to come back to stay with them, but I insisted I go home. I just wanted my bed; I didn't want to live in other people's homes anymore. Vicki offered to stay with me for a couple days to make sure I was okay. I took her up on that offer just so my parents would be happy that I wasn't going back to my place alone. Compromise.

Since then, though, I've been alone. Completely alone. I don't call anyone, and I don't text anyone. Vicki comes by just to make sure I'm alive because I won't even

respond to her texts. She sends my mom and dad updates, at least. The updates don't change. Still sitting on the couch, not eating much, and not sleeping.

I won't sleep in my bed. Bryce slept in my bed. We shared that bed together so many times. I just can't get past the thought, and his aura is still on his side. When I get the motivation for it, I'll order a new bed.

I hear a key go into the lock on the front door. For the first week, I got anxious because I thought it was Bryce. But he's let me be. He's left me alone, which I'm grateful for. Now, I just wish he'd leave me be when I close my eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

“Hey, Kat. It’s me!” Vicki calls out, even though I can see her.

“Hi,” I mumble, my lips turning down in a frown. It’s not that I don’t love my best friend, it’s the circumstances that she visits me under.

“Okay, so, what have we eaten today?” Vicki gets right to the point. She makes her way over to the fridge. Vicki meal prepped my meals for me since I wasn’t eating or cooking for myself, so she looks to see if I’ve touched any of the containers. “Well, I see we’ve only eaten a couple this week. You’re not eating enough, Kat.” Vicki yells from the kitchen.

“I don’t care. I’m not hungry.” I bite back, scowling.

“Kat, you can’t starve yourself.” She sits on the couch next to me. “Take care of yourself or you’ll end up back in the hospital. You’ve already lost so much weight, and you were already thin.”

I give her a sidelong glance. “I don’t care. Just leave me alone. I just want to be alone.” My eyes sting with tears.

“Are you at least working?” Vicki gives me a fearful look. Fear that I’m falling apart faster than anyone can put me back together. That I’m spiraling out of control. And she’s right.

I sigh. “No.”

“When was the last time you showered?” Vicki wrinkles her nose. “I can smell you in

Henderson.”

Ignoring her comment, I go back to staring blankly at the wall. The days and nights have become one long nightmare. I don't bother answering her; she won't like my answer anyhow. She gets up and goes to the bathroom, then I hear the shower turn on. Great. She's going to force me.

“Let's go, stinky. And you got two choices. You can either go freely, or I'll drag you and throw you in. Normally, I wouldn't stand a chance, but your skinny ass is weak. So, guess who would win this one?” She crosses her arms and moves to stand in front of me.

I let out a long sigh and let my head fall. Nodding, I stand up and slip into the bathroom. I get in and let the scalding water fall over me. For a few minutes, the shower feels great. The water washes over me, erasing the pain. But then, I close my eyes. It's then that my world crashes down. The pain caves into me. I see him. I see those eyes. Those beautiful blue eyes. I can hear his laugh, feel his touch, see his smile. That's why I don't sleep. The dark delivers him to me.

I feel my eyes flood with tears. I do what I can to hold them back, to be stronger than the memories, but I lose that battle. The tears fall. They mix with the water from the shower. My heart can't take the pain. No matter how many times I tell myself to forget and move on, I just can't get my heart on board.

There can never be an 'us' anymore. He has Emma. Bryce doesn't need me. My heart doesn't care. My heart is broken, but my heart still loves him. Time. Is time the answer? Will time heal me? I guess that's all I have now. Only time will tell.

I lazily wash my hair. Just enough to get some crap out and for it to look clean. As I wash myself, I remember his touches. How his lips would gently graze my skin, the warmth in his breath. How Bryce would lie next to me in bed and absentmindedly

run his fingers along my skin. God, I miss his touch. I miss him.

Stepping under the water, I rinse. Placing my hands on the wall, I drop my head. My shoulders shake and my lips quiver. The water's getting cold, so I get out of the shower and don't even bother wrapping a towel around me. Walking wet into the bedroom, I throw on a t-shirt, underwear, and a pair of pajama pants. Of course, this is all soaked now, since I didn't dry off. I just don't care. I have zero fucks to give.

As I finish getting dressed, I hear Vicki talking to someone on her phone in the kitchen.

"She isn't doing well. She's despondent, and there are black circles under her eyes. Kat's not even eating." She pauses, probably listening to whoever is on the other end of the call. "She won't work either." Vicki listens again. "Yeah, I know. She's drinking, so we don't have to worry about dehydration, but she refuses to eat. Kat's going to starve herself at this point. I just don't know what else to do. I want to slap her till she wakes up and snaps out of it."

I saunter out into the living room, shooting Vicki a look. I scrunch my face and clench my jaw. Yeah, I know you're talking about me, bitch.

"I gotta go, she is out of the shower. Yup. Talk to you later." Vicki ends the call.

"Who was that? Your boyfriend, Austin?" I snap at her. I didn't like that she was talking about me behind my back.

She narrows her eyes. "Yes, and don't talk to me like that. He's worried about you too."

"Oh, wonderful! He can go tell his cop buddy about how destroyed I am. Everyone can have a good laugh at my expense. Everyone always does! Thanks for sleeping

with the enemy, Vic. You can go now.” I’m furious. The last thing I need is Austin letting Bryce know how miserable I am.

“Kat, you know that’s not at all what’s happening. Austin’s a concerned friend. That’s all.”

“That’s not all. He’s with Bryce. I’m sure he gives him updates so they can both have a jolly good time laughing at my pain and heartache. My inability to see what was right in front of me, the joke.” My head’s pounding. It feels like a battering ram is hitting my skull. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to will the pain away. “Just go away, Vicki. I just want to be alone.” I wave her off and throw myself on my couch.

“You know what the best way to deal with all this is, Kat? Get up and live your life. Don’t let this man control how you feel anymore. Don’t let this man make you feel like less of a person. No one should be able to make you feel any sort of way unless you let them. You need to get control of the situation and keep moving forward. This isn’t you.” She points to me sitting on the couch. “Get it together. And yes, this is tough love. So, get off your ass and get it together.”

With that, she picks up her stuff and leaves. Fine by me. Less interaction with people, the better. I don’t need people riding my ass. I was the one who got hurt. Bryce hurt me; he broke me. The only one who gets to say when they’re ready to move on is me. I’ll do it on my time, no one else’s. But can I even move on? Even if I can’t, at least it’s my decision.

As I lay on the couch, her words turn in my head. She has a point; I need to be stronger. How, though? He took my heart and stomped it to dust. He absolutely broke my heart. I don’t know if I have it in me to be stronger. I just want to be alone. Though, without Bryce, I feel more alone than ever.

Bryce

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:51 am

Three weeks. Three long fucking weeks since I've seen Kat. I have to keep myself from just bursting through her door and begging her to listen to me. The pain in my chest grows with each day I'm away from her. I don't even stay at my apartment anymore; I crash with Austin. Seeing her will only tear me apart more, and I don't want to risk further upsetting her.

Vicki and Austin keep me up to date on how she's doing. From what I hear, it's not good. She's isolated herself from everyone, including her parents. The only person she trusts enough to see is Vicki. At least she allows Vicki to help, so she hasn't completely shut down.

Vicki informed Austin that Kat isn't eating much or sleeping. She barely gets up to shower. So, Vicki has been going over there every other day just to make sure she's getting a shower in or making her eat something. Vicki said if she gets her to eat, it's very little. Just enough to get by. She said Kat has lost a lot of weight and her skin is even more pale than it normally is.

"Hey, Hawthorne, you with me?" Austin looks over to me from his desk. We're back at the station, filing some reports for the day.

"Yeah, sorry. What's up?" The station is buzzing with people coming and going. Noise that drowns out my thoughts. Phones are ringing, chairs are scraping against the floor, and cases being talked about. Noise.

"You need to do something." He looks at me. I know what he is talking about, but I ask anyway.

“About?”

“Kat. She’s falling fast, man. You need to go over there and talk to her. Do something.” He goes back to facing his monitor. “Stop her free fall, man.”

I rub my thumb across my bottom lip. He’s right. Something needs to happen. Both of us are falling apart without each other. Misunderstandings are impeding the truth.

“You ready to go?” Austin stands up and grabs his keys off his desk.

I let out a sigh and nod. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

While I drive us back to Austin’s place, memories of Kat next to me in bed, hearing her laugh, and making love to her pop into my head. I miss her so much. There’s not a day that goes by that I’m completely myself. I’m half existing. That’s when it hits me. I need to do something drastic to get her to listen to me and to get her back.

As we continue to drive, I form a plan in my head. I’m going to need help, though. So, when we pull up to Austin’s house, I jump out of my truck and run up to him before he can even fully get out the passenger side.

“Hey, you think you can get Vicki and we can all meet up to discuss something?” I ask, out of breath.

He raises a curious eyebrow. “Yeah, like when?”

I glare at him and my eye brows lift upwards. “Like now. I need to do this now.” My voice rushes out, coming out as if I’m yelling at him.

“Okay, I’ll call her.” Austin taps the hood of his car, nodding back towards his seat. “Get in. We can head to the wing place.”

I head over and hop in. He sends off a text to Vicki, and she responds almost immediately.

“Okay, she’s in. Let’s go.” He starts up his truck again, and we head over.

We sit down at a table once we get there and order some drinks. Vicki comes strolling in just as the drinks arrive.

“Bryce,” Vicki eyebrows pinch together as she nods her acknowledgment. I know she isn’t happy with me. This will finally give me a chance to explain that I’m not the bad guy

“Vicki, listen. Coming here was for a couple of reasons. First, I want to explain what happened. I made Austin swear not to tell you so I could get the chance to tell you, just like I would like the chance to tell Kat. Second, I need to get her back.”

“Why? So you can keep destroying her? So you can keep making her your side piece? She’s a fragile person, Bryce.” Vicki’s words slice at me like knives.

I speak over the lump in my throat, “If anyone knows how fragile she is, it’s me. I never meant to destroy her. There was no way for me to know that Emma was going to show. Never would I ever want to cause Kat any pain! I love Kat! I fucking love her!” My voice rises with each sentence.

Vicki tries to hide her surprise at my confession. Instead of acknowledging what I just said, she moves on to whatever thought is in her head.

“But you did, Bryce. You hurt her to where I can’t even look at her anymore. She’s fading away to nothing! You say you love her, but you used her as a place holder!”

“Emma’s my ex! Emma’s ... my ex.” My voice falters. My head drops to my hands.

“She was able to get my parents to tell her where I lived by telling them she had some stuff of mine she had to ship back to me. I never invited her out here. She was hell-bent on trying to get me back, and she had some weird idea we were still together. She freaked Kat out, and then Kat ran. I kicked Emma out when I got home, making it clear that it would never happen with us.” I take a breath. My mouth is dry, and the water the waitress dropped off isn’t helping. I feel like I swallowed cotton balls.

“Go on.” Vicki urges. She squints at me, folding her hands under her chin, propping her elbows on the table.

“The night Kat went to the hospital, I ... I was so tired that I passed out on the couch. I hadn’t slept much, and any sleep I was getting wasn’t enough. That night,” I run my hand through my hair, sighing. “I’d passed out; I was so exhausted. There was a dream that Kat and I were doing things together. It felt so real, like she was there, talking to me. Like she was touching me. Of course, I was right on both accounts. Kat catching Emma and me, that was what woke me up out of my dream. It was only then that I looked down to find Emma getting me off.” That sick feeling creeps back into my stomach.

“So, this Emma just came in and was sucking your dick and you had no idea?” Vicki demands, obviously disgusted.

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I shake my head. “Vicki, I was so fucking tired and so deep asleep that I had no clue. Like I said, it felt real, but I was so tired that my brain couldn’t figure out that it was actually happening and that I needed to get up. I thought it was Kat in my dream.” My voice fades into a whisper at that last part. The part I wanted to be true.

“How did she get in?” Vicki grills me.

“She found an extra key I’d made when I made one for Kat. Emma took it. I didn’t even know it disappeared.” I hang my head. Since then, I’ve had my locks changed again. Even though Emma left the key, I don’t trust that she didn’t make copies of it.

“Are you pressing charges against this bitch?” Vicki’s eyes are wide, and her eyebrows shoot up in disbelief.

“Yes, I am.” I left it at that.

Vicki continues, “Okay, so, after Kat caught you, what happened?”

“I got her away from me and got her out of my place. Once I knew she left, I went down to Kat’s place. When I got there, I saw she’d left her door cracked. I announced myself and searched for her. Then, I found her on the floor, and I called 9-1-1.” My heart races remembering how scared I was looking at her lying there. Knowing my past caused it. I close my eyes at the memory. I felt so helpless; I saw her and knew it was my fault.

“Okay.” That’s all Vicki says.

I stare at her. Waiting for her to finish, but nothing else comes out. Austin shrugs when he catches my dubious look.

“That’s it? Just ‘okay’?”

“Yeah, Bryce. Okay, look, Kat’s like family to me. So, okay. I’ll help in any way I can. Both of you are fucking miserable. You look like shit, and she looks like shit. You both are torturing yourselves. And for what? Some mistakes and misunderstanding that some dumb bitch caused. So, yeah, okay. Let’s figure out how to fix this.”

I nod, and a piece of my heart starts to beat again with the possibility of being able to fix this and get Kat back in my arms. “I have an idea, but I’ll need your help.” I tell her.

“I’ll help, Romeo, but you better not screw this up. I need her to get better, not worse. Promise me you’ll make all this right. Promise me you won’t hurt her.”

“I promise I’ll get our Kat back. When I do, I’ll never let her go again. She’ll never know hurt again.” With that, I fill them in on the idea I had.

When I get back to Austin’s, I head into his spare room and lie down on the bed. I turn on the song I played for her, then pull up her picture.

I miss that face, that laugh, those eyes. What’s left of my heart squeezes as I stare at her beauty. Whatever I do, I can’t fail her anymore. I have to make sure that this goes off without a hitch. To prove to her that she’s the only person I want to be with and the only one who holds my heart. This needs to work. Fuck, this needs to work.

I need to get my Kitty Kat back.

Chapter 24

Katrina

Today's a better day. Every day I'm getting better. Weekly I go see a therapist to help with my panic and anxiety. It's something I probably should have done years ago, but with the help of Vicki, I found a therapist I can trust enough to talk to. So, like I said, each day is getting better.

I'm working again, but I don't dare head to OneShot Coffee. Instead, Vicki brings me a latte from there every morning. She still sits and eats with me at least one meal of the day to make sure that I'm eating, but honestly, I don't mind the company now.

Vicki is making her famous pancakes in my kitchen as I pick up a book I've been reading and start on the next chapter. I've also thought about finishing my book. Maybe with more therapy I'll be able to put myself out there. Maybe.

"Hey, you know, I was thinking," Vicki begins while walking into the living room. "I think we need to do a girls' weekend. Head up to the mountains. Become one with nature and all that shit. What do you think?"

"Um, yeah. I don't see why not? We'll get a cabin, right?" A cabin allows for privacy. They have magnificent views of the mountains, too. This would be perfect to just relax and forget everything.

"Absolutely. Okay, I'll see if we can get one this weekend. I'd like to get out of Vegas as soon as possible. Sound good?" Vicki goes back to flipping pancakes.

"As long as we get a cabin, yes. Sounds good." Getting away might be what I need to help set me straight again. Help me get back to myself a little more than I have already. My therapist told me I need to make small strides in stepping out, so we

could consider this a small step. I mean, I'm leaving the house. That's something, right?

Vicki brings me a stack of her scrumptious pancakes and sits down next to me on the couch with hers. I dig in, moaning with every bite.

"Seriously, you know how to make pancakes." I say with a mouthful.

"It's easy, Kat. But feel free to keep the compliments coming." Vicki laughs.

"Oh, the last thing I need to do is stoke your ego. You need nothing else going to that head of yours. If it gets too big, Austin won't know what the fuck to do with you." As soon as I mention Austin, my mind instantly thinks of Bryce.

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She must have noticed the change in my demeanor, because she says, “Stop. Just stop. Don’t be negative while eating my pancakes.” Vic gives me a pointed look. “You’re doing better now. Don’t bring yourself down, okay?”

“I just miss him. Everything that thought I had with him, I miss. I loved him. What’s worse is that I gave him a part of me I can’t get back.” My vision becomes blurry.

Vicki scoots closer to me and wraps her arm around me. She puts her head on my shoulder and rubs my arm. “I know. It’ll get better. I promise, it’ll get better.” We sit there in silence for a little while longer, eating our food.

“Okay, I’m going to take off. There’s so much to do today, and I need to book the cabin for this weekend. If we can’t get it, we can try again next weekend. Sound good?” Vicki takes both our plates and put them in the sink.

“Yeah, that sounds good. Let me know.” Picking up my book, I go back to reading it. About three pages in, my mind goes back to Bryce. Nothing makes sense.

I was so sure that he felt something for me. We had a connection, and he went out of his way to make me feel safe. There were so many nights he made me feel comfortable, so many nights that he put me first. If I was only temporary, why make that much effort?

I feel that pain again. That loss. So, I do what I do best lately. I cry it out.

* * *

Vicki was able to get the cabin for just for today with a check out late tomorrow. At least I'll still be able to enjoy some peace and quiet with a beautiful view. It wasn't the entire weekend I was looking for, but it would still be a pleasant escape.

I'm getting ready and packing a couple things to wear along with my laptop and necessities when Vicki calls me.

"Hey Vic, what's up?" I rest the phone between my head and shoulder, my hands still at work getting things together.

"Hey, so I could get an earlier check-in. I'm going there now to get us checked in. Head up there as soon as you can." she says excitedly.

"Really? Awesome. Okay. Well, I'm just finishing up with the packing now, so maybe I'll just Lyft up there so we can drive back together. Does that work?"

"Abso-fucking-lutely. Now get your ass up here! We got some relaxing to do, woman." She disconnects the call before I can respond.

I gather a few things up and finish packing. I go into my dresser to grab a bra and I find the picture that Bryce and I took with Santa over Christmas. It was the dumbest thing to do and everyone was looking at us like we were crazy, which we were. Well, he was, for wanting to take the damn picture. I let out a laugh thinking about that day. Then, there's a sharp pain in my chest.

I would've never done something like that by myself. He was what made it okay.

That also makes everything else not okay. He was my shield, my knight in shining armor, my defender. I don't have any of that anymore; I don't have him anymore. My Bryce armor's gone. While I know I need to learn how to overcome things myself, I loved his support. Bryce could always push me to try things and at the same time

know when to pull me back.

So, where did I go wrong? How did I not see that I wasn't it? Was it all my issues? Maybe it was too much for him.

Except, I was his everything. He was happy. Like he said, we didn't meet by chance. If all our paths led to each other, why am I walking alone?

I sit on the floor and hang my head. That feeling, that itch to stay inside, is creeping up again. I don't want to see anyone. I'm just better off alone; I can only count on me. My old friends weren't truthful; Ryan betrayed me. Hell, the entire school did everything they could to keep me on edge. I couldn't trust a single soul in that building. Then, of course, Bryce. Bryce was the worst of it because I gave him more of me than I've ever given to anyone.

And he crushed me.

I let the tears fall as I wipe them away from my face.

I haven't even seen him this past month. In the past, I would sometimes hear him walking around after work, but for the last month, nothing. He disappeared after taking me to the hospital.

I was just too messed up for him to love.

I finally pull myself up off the ground and slowly finish packing. While I'm getting the last of my things into my suitcase, my phone beeps.

Vicki: Did you leave yet?

Me: No. Had a bit of a Bryce breakdown. Found a picture of us. My mind took it

from there.

Vicki: Okay, look. You really need this. So, let's go. Get your ass in an Uber or some shit and get the fuck up here. We can cry it out more if you need to over wine and tequila.

Me: Nothing good ever happens with tequila, Vic.

Vicki: Exactly. Trouble, here we come!

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I let out a small little laugh and shake my head. Vicki really knows how to pull me from my funk sometimes.

My Lyft shows up soon, and I make my way to the mountain. I let Vicki know I'm on my way, and she sends me the cabin number. Cabin 16.

Me: Ok, I'm pulling up now. Want to unlock the door so I can get in?

Vicki: It's already unlocked. Just come in. I'm too drunk to get up.

Me: Um, you've only been drinking for a couple hours. How drunk can you be? Also... your texting is spot on for a drunk.

Vicki: Talent, bitch. It's called talent.

Me: Did you get us the "Love Birds" cabin? Are you trying to tell me something, Vic?

Vicki: Yes, I love you. Of course. Now, get your ass in here and help me drink this tequila.

Stepping up to the door, I turn the handle and walk in. I startle when I notice the rose petals everywhere. Turning to the right, I see that the fireplace is crackling with flames. Candles are lit all around the room, and Brett Young's *In Case You Didn't Know* is coming out of the speakers.

I ugly cry. Without even looking up, I know who is standing before me. The hairs on

the back of my neck stand up, and a chill runs down my spine.

With his hands in his pocket, Bryce steps closer. My breath hitches, and I look up.

“Hello, Kitty Kat.”

Chapter 25

Katrina

Bryce. Oh my God. I blink a few times to make sure I’m not dreaming. I’m not.

Bryce is here. What is going on? My mouth falls open, and my bag drops from my hand. My skin’s tingling, and I stand there stunned, unable to move.

“Kat, I need you to give me a few minutes to explain. Please. Vicki and Austin helped me set this up. So, please let me just explain.” Bryce has a look of desperation on his face. He holds a hand out in front of him, trying to keep me in place. He doesn’t move forward; he keeps the distance between us so I’m comfortable enough to listen.

Slowly, I nod my head. My mouth is dry, and there’s no way I can form words even if I try. Might as well let him speak.

“Emma’s my ex from Florida. She should’ve never been here. I didn’t want her here. My parents mistakenly gave her my address when she lied to them and said she had some things of mine to mail.” He pauses to gauge my reaction.

All I can do is stand there. Emma’s his ex. So, I nod again to let him know he can continue.

“That day she showed up, hell, I had no idea she was going to be there. I’m not moving in with her, and there were no plans for us to get back together. Emma’s my past, Kat. I don’t want her.”

Bryce licks his lips and clears his throat. He closes his eyes for a moment, then looks at me. His eyes have become glassy with tears he’s obviously trying hard to hold back. Bryce is visibly shaking.

“The day you ... you walked in on us,” Bryce closes his eyes and scrunches his face, like he can barely stand the words. “She stole a copy of the extra key I’d made. It was my emergency key. For whatever reason, if you’d lost yours or I’d lost mine, we had another one. She saw it and took it after you left when she ambushed you on Valentine’s Day.”

Bryce runs his hands through his hair. What he says next makes him pale.

“I was asleep, Kat. I was having a dream about you and me. It had been so long since I had actually slept, I was so exhausted. When I got home, I passed out on the couch. What she did to me ... In my dream, it was you. I didn’t know it was real until I heard your voice. You snapped me out of my sleep. You woke me up when you started talking. When I came to ... Kat ... I am so sorry.”

Bryce clears his throat, trying to regain his composure. I see a tear slip from the corner of his eye. He hastily wipes it away.

“When I said you were my everything, I meant it. You are. Every day I’m without you ... Fuck, Kat, I miss you. I need you in my life. When you’re not with me, I can’t think, I can’t breathe. I just exist, floating through the days. People talk to me and I pretend to listen, pretend to laugh, pretend to live. I never meant to hurt you. I would never hurt you. If I’d just been more upfront about my ex, it might have stopped all this hurt between us. Maybe none of this would have happened. Fuck, I hate myself

for hurting you.” Bryce shrugs his shoulders, almost looking defeated.

My legs stay rooted in place. I can feel my body shake. There are goosebumps on my skin from the electricity surrounding us.

“If you give me the chance, I promise to spend the rest of my life making sure you never feel that way again. I don’t want another day to go by where you’re sad or upset. There will never be another day you don’t know that you’re number one in my heart. Every day, I’ll put a smile on your face and make sure you know how much you mean to me. Kat, I love you. I love you so much.”

Seeing him tear up does something to me. Listening to his confession and hearing him pour his heart out makes something stir inside me. Without a doubt, he means what he’s saying. Bryce is telling me the truth of what happened. I pull my hands up to my face and start crying, my body shaking from the force of my sobs. The tears are coming so fast I’m having a hard time breathing.

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“Kat, I’m going to come closer, okay?” Bryce hesitantly steps towards me, unsure of how I’m going to react.

I still can’t move; I’m fixed in place by everything that has happened and everything I’ve heard. Bryce slowly saunters towards me, taking small steps to make sure I don’t step away from him.

When Bryce finally stands in front of me, he immediately drops to both knees and wraps his arms around my waist. His entire body shakes with regret and something else. Something I have a hard time naming through my tears.

“I’m so sorry, Kat. Please. Please forgive me. I never meant to cause you this much hurt or pain. It’s always been you. Since the day I met you, it’s always been you. Please, I don’t want to be away from you anymore. I just want to love you. To show you how much I love you. To show you that you mean everything to me.”

Bryce silently cries while he holds me. My shirt’s wet from his tears.

“The past few weeks ... Kat ... All I’ve done is think about you and pray you’d give me the chance to tell you the truth about everything and how I feel. When I saw you on that floor, though? Fuck. I knew I had to tell you. I’m sorry that I got Vicki and Austin involved, but I needed you to at least know that I love you. If you give me the chance, I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you.” Bryce squeezes me harder.

“No.” I finally squeak out.

“What?” Terror hits his eyes when he looks up.

“No, you can’t spend the rest of your life making it up to me.” My throat’s scratchy and sore from the crying. I try to get myself together.

I feel him shake his head, accepting what I just said. “If that’s the way you feel, then fine.” Bryce sniffs, and I feel his arms loosen around me.

I grab his arms to stop him and his head snaps back towards me. I can see hope plastered all over his features.

“No, you can’t make it up to me, because I already forgive you. I love you, Bryce. All these weeks apart should’ve helped me to get over you, but all it did was prove how I feel about you. I could never move on because I love you.” Tears gush down my face as Bryce stands up and tries to wipe them away.

He places his head against mine, and our eyes lock on each other, even through the blurry tears.

“I love you, Kat.”

“I love you, Bryce.”

In a heartbeat, his lips come crashing down on mine. The emptiness I felt these past few weeks is suddenly replaced by a longing, a need. I feel at home with him. My body responds to his touch. Sparks fly between us while the air thickens, making it harder to breathe.

Bryce pulls back just enough to lock his gaze with mine. His ocean blue eyes darken with desire. His hands move up to my face and tip my head back. Bryce kisses my cheek and brushes his lips along my jawline. I exhale, and tremors rock through my body as his hands work their way into my hair. Bryce leaves a trail of kisses along my neck.

He moves one of his hands from my hair down to my waist. His fingers slip under my t-shirt. The very touch of his fingers is electric. Even the smallest contact from Bryce makes my skin burn. The heat radiating throughout my body makes me feel like I'm ready to combust.

His tongue trails along my jawline. Bryce stops and makes me look at him. My heart is fluttering, there are butterflies in my stomach, and my knees are weak. All from a single look. It's from that moment, from that look, that I know he loves me. We can see into each other's souls. At this very second, his eyes are telling me everything he's said and everything he has yet to say.

Bryce picks me up and walks across the room to the bed. He sits me down and works to remove my shoes, then my pants. Bryce stands between my legs and lifts my shirt up above my head before tossing it behind us. I sit there almost naked, left in only my bra and underwear.

My entire body shivers, but I'm not cold. My body is vibrating from the anticipation; the need for this man. Bryce reaches around and unclasps my bra. It slides down my arms, and I let it fall to the floor.

His hand comes around to rest on the back of my neck, and he pulls my face closer to his. Bryce hovers his lips over mine. He takes my hand and places it on his heart.

"Do you feel that?" Bryce whispers.

"Yes," My voice is breathy and hitches at his touch.

"My heart is yours." Before I can respond, his mouth claims mine. There is a warmth in my chest. A fullness I've craved for so long.

Bryce softly pushes me back against the mattress as his hands find my panties. He

stands up and pulls them down slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. When he gets up, he grabs the collar of his shirt and yanks it over his head. Then, he quickly works to unbutton and slide his pants down. His hand strokes his cock through his boxers.

“Spread your legs, baby.” Bryce’s voice is husky and full of desire. He’s been waiting for this just as long as I have.

I slowly bring my legs up and spread them open. Bryce groans at the sight. He’s immediately working to get his boxers off.

Before I can react, he pulls me closer to the edge of the bed and drops to his knees.

I hear a slight growl from him as his tongue greets my slick folds. Bryce finds my swollen nub and gently circles it, sucking on it. I moan when he buries his face in my pussy. His mouth is hot and wet against me. Bryce’s fingers dig into my thighs as he continues licking and tasting me. He continues to build the tension inside of me, and soon, I feel the tightening in my stomach.

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I scream his name, grab hold of his hair, and instantly fall apart. My legs wrap around his head, and I throw my head back. I shudder under his hands while he works me through my orgasm.

“Bryce. Oh, fuck!” My voice is throaty, and my body vibrates with pleasure.

“You’re beautiful when you come.” Bryce crawls on top of me, brushing my cheek with his delicate fingers. He leans in and kisses me, lining himself up with my entrance.

“I can’t wait. I need to be inside you, Kat.” Bryce’s eyes look for my acceptance. Taking his face into my hands, I bring him down for a kiss. He growls when our tongues dance around each other.

I lose focus as his cock enters me. My mind tries to process all the sensations of having him slide into me. Everything I’ve missed, everything I needed, is right here in this moment. Bryce and I connect as one. I hear Bryce hiss when he’s finally fully sheathed inside me. He stops moving and locks eyes with me.

“I love you.” Bryce moves gently inside of me. His body on top of mine is igniting my skin. My body burns for him from the inside out.

My legs wrap tighter around him to get him to drive deeper into me. I crave the friction that his cock creates between us. He thrusts harder into me, and I moan in response from the pleasure. There’s an aching growing inside of me; a warmth in my stomach.

We find a rhythm and move together. Bryce wraps his arms under my head and back to bring us closer together. My pleasure intensifies, and I know I'm close to exploding. My breathing picks up, and my heart threatens to explode from my chest.

"Come for me, Kat." Bryce whispers into my ear. He pulls his head back. "Keep your eyes on me. Don't close them."

Bryce thrusts harder inside me. His cock is pushing so deep, I gasp. Suddenly, I come explosively. My body pulsates around his cock, and my entire body twitches with ecstasy. Bryce thrusts again, letting out a growl when he pushes fully inside me, exploding.

As we catch our breaths and try to steady our hearts, our eyes lock, and my hand caresses his face. Bryce leans down and kisses me while we both try to ride out the high of our orgasms.

Wrapping my arms firmly around his neck, I pull him in and place my head on his shoulder. I can feel him softening inside me, but neither of us wants to move. And I am completely ok with that.

After a while of being in each other's embrace, Bryce moves and pulls out of me. Walking into the nearby bathroom, he grabs a towel to clean me up. He tosses the towel on the ground when he finishes, then slides next to me under the covers and pulls me close. My head rests on his chest, and my fingers lazily move up and down his stomach, tracing the ridges in his abs.

"I missed this. Feeling your skin on mine." Bryce whispers.

I lift my head to look up at him, and I lose myself in his gaze as I smile.

"You are absolutely gorgeous." He leans in and kisses my forehead.

Before I can control it, tears break through. My body shudders, and my lips tremble.

“Hey, hey. What’s wrong?” Bryce slides down so that we can see each other eye to eye.

“I ... I just ... there’s just so much emotion. Everything,” I wave my hand between us. I can’t seem to find the words to finish my sentences.

“Shhh. I know. These last few weeks have been a whirlwind of emotion for the both of us. But that’s over, Kat. We’re finally where we should be. With each other,” His lips graze mine, brushing against them. “You’re my everything, Kat.”

Bryce tugs me closer to him again. My head is on his arm and my face in the crook of his shoulder. My tears finally slow down, and my eyes grow heavy.

Bryce rubs my back. “Sleep, baby. I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

With our legs interwind and our bodies pressed against one another, for the first time in a long time, I’m comfortable.

As I start to drift to sleep, a thought comes to mind. He fits me. Somehow, we fit together. Without each other, we’re just pieces. My heart was missing a piece of itself. Bryce is the missing piece to my heart; my missing piece.

Chapter 26

Bryce

Sunlight peaks in through the windows and wakes me from the best sleep I’ve in weeks. My arms are still wrapped around Kat, and I pull her closer while we spoon. I take a minute to appreciate how stunning she is. How soft her skin feels on mine.

She loves me. Kat loves me, and I finally have her in my arms again. My heart beats hard at the thought. This is the woman I'll spend the rest of my life with. I want to marry her and have babies with her. There is no doubt she's my everything. After all the pain and separation, we still found a way back to each other's arms. I'll never let her hurt again; I'll do everything in my power to make sure she never feels pain again.

I slowly remove myself from her arms, cover her with the blanket, and kiss her on her temple. Knowing what I know, she hasn't slept much in the past few weeks. Kat needs to rest.

I walk to the back door and open it to the beautiful deck. Staring at the mountains and the sunrise, I admire the beauty before me. Florida is a different beautiful. It has the sparkling sea and endless sand. Nevada, however, has towering mountains and steamy deserts. Two very different places.

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Walking back in, I head over to the coffee pot and set up to make some coffee for the two of us. That's when I hear shuffling behind me.

Smiling, I say without turning around, "Good morning, gorgeous."

"Mm. Good morning," Kat wraps her arms around me, and I turn in them to face her. She put on my t-shirt and it hits her right at her knees. Kat looks sexy in my shirts. In fact, she may need to wear them from now on.

"How did you sleep?" I cup her face and bring her eyes up to mine.

"Like a rock. With the lack of sleep I'd been getting, exhaustion got the best of me. Plus, I had you next to me." She chuckles. "I honestly can't remember the last time I slept that good."

Leaning down, I kiss her, and our mouths fuse together. I explore her mouth with my tongue. Her lips were soft. Kat moans into my mouth, and I instantly become hard.

Pulling back slightly, I lift off my shirt, pull off my shorts, and pull her back into me. I pick her up and wrap her legs around my waist before carrying her into the bathroom. I reach into the shower and turn on the water, my lips never leaving hers.

"Bryce," she whispers tenderly into my lips. My hands roam her body, igniting a fire between us.

Once the water is warm enough, I carry her into the shower with me, letting the water cascade over us. Gently, I sit her down. I cup her cheeks as I crush her mouth to

mine.

Her hands trail from my neck, down my chest, and over my abs. Kat's soft hands find my hard cock that stands between us. I hiss as she strokes me softly. Her soft skin feels amazing against mine. She squeezes with just enough pressure that I can lose myself at any moment. My heart rate picks up, and my breathing hitches.

"Kat, you feel too good. If you keep doing that, I'm going to come." My eyes squeeze shut as I try to control myself.

"So, you want me to stop?" Kat asks innocently.

"I have a better idea. Turn around. Place your hands on the wall and arch your back." I command, biting my lip. She obliges, and I slide my hand up her spine until I reach her neck, then grip it softly. I take my cock and tease her entrance, sliding it over her folds, grazing her clit.

Kat's head falls forward. "Please, Bryce." She moans.

"Please what, Kitty Kat?" My voice comes out rough.

"I need you. Inside me. Please,"

With a single thrust, I push deep inside her. She gasps, trembling around my length. My fingers slide into her hair, taking a fistful, while my other hand clutches her hip. Slowly, I move in and out, allowing her to adjust, but only for a moment.

Then, the need in me took over. I thrust faster and harder into her. My body crushes into hers, our wet bodies thumping against each other.

I raise up my hand on her hip to slap her hard on her ass, grunting in pleasure. Kat

gasps, and I feel her tighten around me. My Kitty Kat likes that. That only makes fuck her harder, throwing her ass back to meet my waiting cock.

“Fuck, Kat. You’re so tight. You feel so good. Come for me, baby.” Reaching around her and between her legs, I slowly rub circles against her clit. Kat’s legs shake below me.

“That’s it, baby, come.” I continue thrusting inside her. I can feel her milking my cock as she comes undone. There’s the familiar tingle at the base of my spine, and I know I can no longer hold back. With a final thrust, I roar as I empty myself inside her.

“Fuck,” Still inside her, I pull her up so her back is against my chest. Kissing her shoulder, I make my way up to her hair. I nibble on it, causing her to shudder. “I love you, Kat.” I whisper in her ear. Gently, I pull out of her and she turns to me. She says nothing, but everything she has to say, I can see in her eyes.

Kat leans in and captures my lips in soft a kiss. We spend several more minutes under the water, kissing, before we finally clean ourselves off.

After we get dry and dress, I tell Kat to go sit on the deck in the back while I make us some coffee. It’s not like her lattes from the coffee house, but it’s caffeine, and I know how much she loves caffeine.

When the coffee maker finishes, I take the two cups and walk out to the deck. She’s lying in the lounge with her eyes closed. Standing there, I admire the view before me. Kat’s a vision. Her long black hair drapes elegantly over her breasts, and her lips are slightly parted and swollen from our shower escapade. Kat is slightly curled on her side, her head on her arm. She’s exhausted.

I know I didn’t make easy on her these last few weeks. It was all my fault that she

went through what she did. I should have been more open and honest instead of trying to ignore my past by never bringing it up. Even though she's forgiven me, I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to her.

I set the coffee next to her, and she opens her eyes and smiles at me.

"Hi," Kat breathes, eyes sparkling.

"Hi, baby. Did I wake you?" She makes room for me on the lounge by her legs. I sit down and rub her thighs while I drink my coffee.

Kat smirks. "No, I was just resting my eyes. You kind of wore me out."

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“Scoot up,” I get her to move forward, and I slide in behind her. I drape my legs alongside her, and she leans back against my chest. Kat looks up at me, smiling. I kiss the top of her head, letting out a happy sigh.

“I’m sorry, Kat. Really, I am. For everything I put you through, and for you to be sitting here with me ... I don’t deserve you, but I’ll do everything I can to prove to you I’m worthy of your love.” I set my coffee down on the table next to us, then wrap my arms around her.

Kat sets her coffee next to mine before turning in my arms and straddling my legs. She takes my face in her hands and locks her eyes with mine.

“There isn’t a doubt in my mind that you are, Bryce. I can see it in your eyes, taste it in your kisses, and feel it in your touch. I forgive you. Please, don’t dwell on it. It’s held us back enough these past few weeks. I don’t want any of that to continue to hold us back. I want us to move forward, together.” She leaves a soft kiss on my lips.

I grab her hands and hold on to them. There are things I need to tell her, that I need to get off my chest. Everything I’ve held in, I need to get out into the open.

“Are you okay, Bryce?” She gives me an apprehensive look.

“After ... after that day when you saw what you saw ... I, um, I pressed charges against her. What she did to me was without my permission ...” I felt so violated. On top of worrying about Kat, I had to process what happened to me. “So, I followed the ambulance to the hospital and then I reported the incident when I got there. I asked for someone to take a statement and collect the required samples.”

“Oh, Bryce.” She runs her hands through my hair and forces me to look at her. Kat’s lip trembles. “I’m so sorry she did that to you.”

What she did was wrong. I had no choice but to make sure she didn’t just get to walk away. I break eye contact with her and look down, playing with the hem of my shirt.

“You did what you had to, Bryce. What she did was so wrong—so very wrong.” Kat assures me.

“I know. When I woke up and realized it wasn’t you, that it wasn’t a dream ...” I run my hand over my face. “Sick, Kat. I was physically sick. Emma stood there like nothing was wrong. I mean, I know I’m a man and all—”

Kat interrupts me, her expression growing dark, “Stop! Don’t even say it. It doesn’t matter what sex you are; you didn’t consent. You didn’t want it. That right there is what makes it wrong. It’s not based on what sex you are. You, of all people, should understand that, Bryce. I know you’re on the wrong side of this one, but if another person came up to you to report an assault, would you question it based on their sex?”

“Fucking never,” Shaking my head, I instantly understand what she’s saying.

“Then don’t hold yourself to a different set of standards. Emma did something that violated you, and you reported it. Justice will be served. Together, you and I will work to heal and grow.” Kat says as she places a hand over my heart.

“Thank you,” I lean forward and kiss her. “Just ... thank you.” This woman’s amazing. Just when I think my heart can’t possibly love her more, it does.

We hang out at the cabin for a little while longer. Silence greets us as we take in our beautiful surroundings. Up here in the mountains there’s actually trees, beautiful thick trees. The mountain sides are covered with them up at this elevation. The blue

sky sits as a backdrop behind the rugged terrain, making for picture perfect scenery. We eventually pick up our mess of clothes and get in my truck to head back into the valley. Back home, together.

While we're driving, I reach over and snatch her hand. I weave my fingers with hers. Everything is right. Everything feels right.

"Hey, do me a favor. Drop your stuff off in your apartment and then come up to mine. I'll make dinner, and we can relax to a movie. And before you even worry, I bought a new couch." Not only did I replace the locks, but I also bought all new furniture. I couldn't even look at the old couch without thinking about what happened.

Kat gives me a huge smile. "Okay. That sounds great, actually." She brings my hand up to her mouth and kisses me.

She goes to her apartment while I walk up the stairs to mine. It's so strange to think that after seeing her that day at OneShot, she ended up being my neighbor. The neighbor I fell in love with and who I'm going to spend the rest of my life with.

When I get inside, I head towards my room to the drawer where her Valentine's Day gift is. Pulling it out, I smile. I'm so ready to give this to her; it's long overdue. From the moment I saw it, I knew it was for her. As I'm looking at the box, remembering how I felt when I picked it out, I hear the front door open.

"Bryce?" Kat calls out.

I walk out of the room, holding the box behind my back. Smiling like a fool in love, and I am.

"Are you ok? You have a weird smile on your face. Like you know something I

don't." She laughs nervously.

"I've been waiting to give this to you for a long time. I've been waiting to see the look on your face when you open it. So, yeah, I'm smiling like a crazy person." I chuckle. Slowly, I bring my hand out from behind my back and place the box in hers.

"Bryce..." Her lower lip trembles and her hands shake as she holds the box.

"This is for you. It says how I feel. I don't want you to doubt what you mean to me." I'm anxious. My anxiety is running high, and I'm almost nervous she won't like it.

Kat opens the box, and her eyes go wide. Her mouth forms an enormous smile.

"Bryce, this is beautiful." She takes it out of the box, then notices that there's something written on the back. "You're my everything." She repeats the words out loud.

She looks up at me, and I can already see the tears falling down her cheeks.

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“Bryce, oh my God. I love this.” Kat sniffles. “This is just ... I ... I don’t even have words.” She wipes her eyes, sniffing.

“Turn around and let me put it on you.” Kat hands me the locket, which is now shaking in her hands. She grabs her hair to lift it off her neck. I put it on and kiss her neck when I finish, feeling her shiver from my touch.

Kat turns around and gazes into my eyes. Those beautiful emerald eyes lock onto me. I can stare into them forever, get lost in them, get lost in her.

For the rest of the evening, we make up for time that we lost. We never stop talking to, touching, hugging, or kissing each other. Eventually, we both lie on the bed together and watch a movie. I look down to see Kat is fast asleep. Smiling, I lean down and kiss her head.

“I love you sleeping next to me.” Even though I know she can’t hear me, it doesn’t stop me from making my declarations to her. “I never want to lose you, Kat. Never again. My heart isn’t the same without you.”

I pause and push the hair that fell in front of her face away.

“One day soon, I am going to ask you an important question. I pray that you’ll tell me yes. That you’ll want to spend the rest of your life with me, have babies with me, grow old with me. I can only hope you’ll want to live the rest of your life with me. I love you, Kat. So very much.” I rest my head on hers, and she nestles even closer, still sleeping peacefully.

I turn off the television and cover us with the blanket. Closing my eyes, I'm finally able to relax with her in my arms, in my bed. Kat's finally home.

Chapter 27

Katrina

The last couple of weeks have been the best in my life. If it only gets better from here, well, I must be in for a real treat. Bryce has been beyond attentive and loving. Nothing seems more right than being with him.

Every night, we're in one of our apartments, cuddling, talking, and making love to each other until we fall asleep. Neither of us wants to let go in the morning, but adulting duties call. By the time Bryce gets home from a shift, we do it all over again. Rinse and repeat. It becomes routine, and both he and I are okay with this.

Bryce steps out of the bathroom after taking a shower. "You want to go to dinner with Vicki and Austin tonight? Austin brought it up yesterday that they really haven't seen us in a while. Thought maybe we could do dinner," Bryce pulls his shirt on and tucks it into his pants. Remember I said I wasn't crazy about a man in uniform? Yeah, I don't know what I was thinking. Bryce looks delicious in his uniform.

"Um, where?" I ask hesitantly. Even though I've been better about things, I've been happy in our bubble. My therapist told me I need to work on trying new things, new places, and attempting to push myself. The more I become stuck in place, the harder it will be to dig myself out.

"The little Italian place down the street. I figure it's close, and it's Italian." His eyebrows go up and he shrugs. He then gives me a little pouty face and any chance of me telling him I didn't want to go, went out the window.

“Okay. Let’s do it. I really have seen little of Vicki lately, and even though you’re with Austin all the time at work, it might be nice to get out a couple with another ... wait. Are they a couple?” I scrunch my nose.

“I have no fucking clue. Those two are so busy fighting whatever attraction they have to each other, I don’t think they see it.” Bryce chuckles. He leans in and kisses me. “Okay, I have to get to work. Love you.”

“Love you too. Be safe, please.” I place my hand over my heart.

“Always am,” He winks and flashes me his panty-dropping smile before walking out the front door.

It never gets easier. I’ve always been one to worry about his safety, even when we were only neighbors. Bryce balances me, and he protects me. He’s someone I trust. When he had his accident, it scared me to death that I would lose him. Even during the few weeks we weren’t together, my mind always worried about him. I was always being pulled to him. Even when I didn’t want to be.

I yawn, realizing I’m still exhausted. Crawling back into his bed, I lie my head on his pillow. It still smells like him. His scent calms me, and eventually, I fall back asleep.

* * *

“How come you take longer than me to get ready, Bryce?” I call out from his kitchen. I even threw on some makeup, and I’m still ready to go before he is.

“Because you’re already so beautiful, you don’t need to do anything. I, on the other hand, have to work hard to get this handsome.” Bryce gives me a mischievous smile and winks.

“Okay, points for the compliment, but really? A little cheesy there, babe.” I giggle.

“I got more, if you want. I can literally be cheesy like no one else.” He waggles his eyebrows.

“Nope! Let’s get a move on, Officer Hawthorne. We’re going to be late, and who knows what argument will start if we aren’t there to put an end to it.” I grab my bag and throw my phone in it after texting Vic that we’re leaving now.

“Huh. I think I like the sounds of that.” Bryce comes up behind me.

“Sound of what?” Turning my head towards him, I narrow my eyes.

“Calling me Officer Hawthorne. Yeah, I really like the sound of that. You are definitely going to be calling me that tonight.” He roars with laughter when I roll my eyes. “Let’s go, woman. You’re taking too long to get ready!”

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Bryce slaps my ass before heading towards the door. My mouth drops open, and I shake my head.

“Oh, you are so gonna get it later.” I chuckle. “Or maybe not get any at all.” Winking, I walk outside and swing my hips a little extra for him. I can hear him growl behind me.

When we got to the restaurant, Vicki’s already there sporting a cute little black dress, and Austin looks nice in a button-down shirt and jeans. The men almost dressed identically, but Bryce was in a gray button down and Austin in a maroon one.

“Did you guys share styling tips?” Vicki teases when we come up to the table.

“Ha,” It’s all that Austin says before pulling me. When he releases me, he glares at Vicki and then slightly smiles before sitting down. I walk around to hug Vicki and tell her I miss her.

We sit down at the table, with me sitting on the inside next to the wall and Bryce to my right. Vicki is across from me and next to Austin. I look up from the menu and see the side eye that she keeps giving him. I smile to myself. It’s so obvious they like each other. They just won’t admit it. Maybe they like the push and pull; who knows?

Once the server places our drinks in front of us and takes our order, we hold up the tequila shots—well, except for Bryce—and toast to us all being back together. Vicki also throws in, “love and shit like that,” which makes Bryce and I laugh.

“So glad you two could finally come up for air. We almost didn’t recognize you when

you walked in.” Vicki quips and the corner of her mouth curls upwards.

I shoot her a look, but then my face breaks out into a wide smile at the thought. Bryce puts his arm over the back of my chair and runs his hand up and down my arm. His touch sends shivers down my spine. I love it.

These days, being out doesn’t bother me as much as long as Bryce is next to me. My anxiety hasn’t been making much of an appearance, and I can only attribute that to Bryce and how protected and safe he makes me feel. He’s my little Bryce bubble.

When I have to venture out by myself, that’s when I have to use what the therapist and I have been working on. Allowing myself to find the small wins and learn how to be comfortable around others. One trick I’ve learned to use is my senses. Touching something can help ground me. So, when I feel anxiety, I grab on to the locket Bryce gave me.

“So, what are you two doing after this?” I ask Vicki and Austin. For the first time all night, neither of them speak. Vicki’s eyes go wide, and I see redness creep up Austin’s neck.

“You’re funny, Kat. Don’t push it. I took care of you all those weeks. So, mind your own business.” Vicki glares at me, her pressing into a thin line. I just laugh. Yeah, I’m onto those two.

After dinner, Bryce and I head back home. We noticed Vicki drove with Austin when we were in the parking lot, so we had a pretty good idea where they would end up. When we get back, we make our way up to his apartment.

“I am exhausted.” Bryce walks through the door and puts his keys on the table next to it.

“Yeah, I didn’t expect to stay out that late. But I had a good time. I missed seeing them.” My arms find him, and I wrap them around his waist.

Bryce leans down and rubs his nose along mine. “Ready to go to bed?”

I pull away and bat my eyelashes at him. “Yes, Officer Hawthorne.” My voice is low and breathy.

I hear Bryce growl, and I run for the bedroom, laughing.

* * *

The sound of the shower wakes me from my sleep. Rolling over, I grab my phone and see that it’s six in the morning. I groan, throwing myself back on my pillow. I turn and pull his pillow into me. If I can’t have him next to me, this will do for now.

When the shower turns off, Bryce comes out in just a towel. It’s a wonderful sight to watch the droplets of water fall down the ridges of his chest. I want to lick the beads of water off him. I want to run my tongue down every crevice—

Before I can finish my sexy thoughts, Bryce sits on the bed and turns to me with a serious look on his face.

“What’s wrong?” I sit up, now worried about whatever he is about to say. My heart rate picks up, and I clench my fist to try and control my reaction.

“Nothing. Just breathe. Nothing is wrong. I just want to see how you feel about something. And I’m a little nervous.” His hand finds mine. I give him a nod, and he says, “What would you say to us moving in together? Not here, but maybe get a house. We can rent for now and then look for a more permanent home, but this way we’re not going back and forth all the time.”

I pout a little. “But then we won’t be neighbors.”

“No, Kitty Kat. It’ll be even better than that. We’ll be a boyfriend and girlfriend who share the same bed every night.” He tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear.

“Okay, I like the sound of that. Maybe we can look for a house near Vicki or Austin?”

“Yes, we definitely can. Alright, you lie back down, I’m going to go start the coffee and make you something to eat. You have your appointment with the therapist today, right?” He calls out as he heads to the kitchen.

“Yup. At ten. I’ll probably leave here about a quarter to.” I slump back and close my eyes, trying to get a few more minutes of sleep.

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Coffee is calling me, and the urge is too strong. I can smell the caffeine a mile away. I begrudgingly get out of bed and take my sleepy ass into the kitchen where I find a mug with coffee already made to my liking.

“Mm. Thank you,” I smile as I take a sip. Making my way over to the table, I pull out my chair and sit just as Bryce puts a plate of eggs and bacon in front of me. “Mm. Food.”

Bryce laughs and sits down next to me. We eat and talk about what we want to look for when we start house hunting.

“I want a backyard so I can work outside when it’s nice.” It would be so nice to sit in a lounge and work on one of my edits or even read a book. Maybe even write my book one day.

“If we had a pool, that would be even better.” Bryce adds.

“Yeah, that would be nice. Oh, and an enormous kitchen so you can cook for me.” I giggle. Bryce throws his napkin at me and laughs.

He leans over and kisses me. “I’ll always cook for you.”

After breakfast, I clean up, and Bryce leaves for work. Once I finish, I take a shower and get dressed. I consider that maybe after my therapist appointment I can pick some groceries up and cook him a nice dinner tonight. We can celebrate deciding to move in together. Or just eat really excellent food. Either way, I’ll make something for him.

I grab my bag and my phone and head out the door. My doctor's close by, so I don't need to rush. As I drive, a huge grin spreads over my face. I'm truly so lucky to have found Bryce. We had a few rocky moments, but we made it through stronger than ever before.

I pull up to the intersection with some Breaking Benjamin blasting through the speakers. I tap and sing along to the song while I wait for the light to turn green.

When it does, I cross into the intersection. But I never see it coming. Out of the corner of my eye, something small and red appears. Coming at me fast. I can't react.

"Bryce—" Then, it goes black.

The pain. The sound. Make the sound stop. My back hurts. My head. I can't remember anything. My eyes are heavy, and it hurts too much to open them right now. They feel weighted. That sound won't stop. Then I realize it's a car horn. I hear a car horn. I smell smoke. This is a dream I can't wake from. A sudden jolt of pain in my arm makes me realize it's not a dream. I need Bryce.

Slowly, I open my left eye to figure out where I am. My car. There's glass everywhere. The dash is in my lap. Airbags. The airbags went off. My entire body hurts, and my head is pounding.

"Bryce," My voice barely registers. I call out. Fuck, I need Bryce. I don't know what's going on. I can't make sense of anything. My body hurts so bad, but suddenly, I find my voice. So, I yell for help.

"Miss! Stay still. We called 9-1-1. Just stay still, okay?" someone says to me. I'm not sure from where. I hear the sirens next.

"Bryce," I say weakly. My body's shutting down. My arm hurts. It hurts to move it.

The pain is too much.

“Just relax, miss. They’re coming. You’ve been in an accident. You need to stay still.” Accident. The glass, the pain, the sound.

“I ... need ... Bryce ...”

Everything goes dark.

Chapter 28

Bryce

Today has already been a day, and it’s only ten in the morning. Even with all the calls, I’ve been on cloud nine. Kat and I are going to finally find a place of our own.

“So, what part of the valley are you looking at?” Austin asks after I tell him the good news. “You guys must be so excited. I mean, you pretty much live together already. At least now you’ll save money on rent and shit.”

“Actually, we were going to look out by you. Then, you can just come pick my ass up in the morning.” I laugh and slap him on the shoulder.

He rolls his eyes, grinning. “Not happening. You can drive your own ass to work. I do enough of the driving around here.” He gestures to the squad car.

We drive around until a call comes in over the radio about an accident. We’re near the intersection, so we radio dispatch that we’re responding.

When we pull up to the intersection from the call, my breath hitches. The car ... I know that car. It can’t be ... It’s Kat’s car.

“Rescue’s on their way. Let’s get the scene cleared of pedestrians so they can get ... What’s wrong?” Austin glances over at me. “Hawthorne, you’re as white as a ghost.”

“That’s ... That’s Kat’s car.” I choke out. Reaching down, I yank off my seatbelt. People are gathering everywhere around the scene.

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“Fuck!” Austin jumps out of the vehicle with me. We both run over to the car, but Austin holds me back for a moment. “I’m gonna need you to stay in control, Hawthorne. Focus on the scene and let Rescue get her out and over to the hospital. Got it?” I mindlessly nod. All I can do is try to keep myself from screaming her name.

Collecting myself, I walk up to the tangled, metal mess.

“Kat! Kat! Baby, can you hear me? She’s unconscious, Hardwick.” I look over at her and survey her injuries before calling out to Austin, “She’s got cuts everywhere. Kat’s really pale. Shit, they won’t be able to get to her from the driver’s side door.”

“EMS is one minute out. The front passenger side’s fucked up too. Damn it.”

“They’re going to need to use the hydraulics to get her out. The dash’s pushed in. They may need to take the whole top of the car off. Let them know!” I yell back.

“Officer?” a man calls from behind me.

“I need you to move back, sir.” Pointing to the sidewalk, I lead him there.

“Wait! She was saying something before she passed out.”

I stop dead in my tracks. “So, you talked to her? Did you see what happened?”

“Yes. My car’s stopped over there.” He starts pointing, but I interrupt him.

“Okay, don’t go anywhere. We’ll want to get your statement. Got it? Just go sit down over there out of traffic.”

He nods and then adds, “She was calling for her husband or boyfriend. Bryce or Brian or something. She kept calling his name out.”

I thank him, but chills are running down my spine. Then, I turn back to Austin, who’s trying to clear the scene of onlookers. I run back up to the car and look in.

My throat is dry and my hands are shaking. I cut the side window air bag out of the way. She looks even more pale than before.

“I’m right here, baby. No way am I leaving your side. EMS is almost here, so just hang on, okay? I love you, Kat. Just hang on for me, please.” My voice catches, and I step back, still shocked. I turn to Austin. “Where the fuck is EMS?” After I scream that out, I see them pulling up. “Get them to block off the road here and the one over there. We need to secure this area so they can work.”

Austin nods and directs them on where to go. I radio in that we need more units to re-direct traffic and get these cars out of here.

“That’s Hawthorne’s girl. Get her the fuck out and get her to the Metro Medical as fast as you can!” Austin points to me as he lets them know. “The driver in the other vehicle is sitting there. You’ll need to look at him too. He’ll need transport and bloodwork done as well. I smell alcohol on his breath. He’s a little torn up.”

Waving them off, Austin walks over to me.

“Come on, man. Let’s move so they can work,” Austin places a hand on my chest and helps push me back. He leads me a little ways away so they can start cutting apart the car to get her free.

“Fuck, Hardwick. I can’t lose her. Fuck.” I can barely even speak. Tears are burning my eyes, though I try to hold them back. “She’s so pale, so still.”

He gives me a concerned look, placing a hand on my shoulder. “Hawthorn, you need to sit. You’re going to pass out. You look as white as a ghost right now.”

I shake my head at him. “Absolutely not. I need to go with her. Her parents—I need to call her parents. Vicki, too.”

“Don’t worry about Vicki; I’ll call her. Right now, you need to worry about yourself. You are no good to her if you’re a mess. Call her parents once we get her out, then you can let them know she is going to Metro. Don’t worry about work; I’ll let Sargent know. We’re all here for you both. You know that.”

“The guy over there, in the Cubs jersey. He knows what happened.” I run my hand through my hair. “Fuck. She needs to be ok. I can’t lose her, man. I just got her back.” Running my hands over my face, I feel the wetness on my cheeks. I don’t even realize that I’m crying until I feel it.

“Hawthorne, focus on what needs to happen right now. Let everyone do their job to save her. Look, they almost have her out. Get on the phone and call her parents.”

Pulling out my phone, I take a deep shuddering breath and call Liz.

“Hi, Bryce! How are you doing?” Fuck, I’m about to break her heart.

“Liz, I need you to sit down and listen to me for a moment.” Last thing I need is for her to fall or faint.

“I’m sitting already. Bryce, what is going on? You have me a little scared. Is Katrina ok?” Liz’s voice is shaky.

“I’m sorry, Liz.” I pause and take a deep breath. My stomach in knots, knowing the news I have to break to her about her daughter. “Kat’s been in an accident. They are taking her to Metro Medical.” My hands are trembling.

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“I-is she ok?” There’s panic in her voice.

“I ... I don’t know. They’re getting ready to transport her. I’m going to go with her, so just get there as soon as you can, okay?” I try to keep my voice calm while talking to her, but I am seconds away from breaking. I can hear the pain and tears in her voice.

“Oh my God. O-ok. I’m getting everything now. Just tell me one thing, is it bad, Bryce?” she asks.

“Liz, I don’t know. We’ll know more when they get her to the hospital.” I can’t tell her how bad it looks. I don’t want her driving any more upset than she already is.

By the time I hang up with Liz, EMS has her out of the car and they are loading her into the ambulance.

“I’m going with, Hardwick.” I tell Austin, who only nods in understanding. I jump in the ambulance with her.

Sitting alongside Kat, I clutch her hand into mine. “Kat, I’m here. I’m not leaving your side. I love you, Kat. Stay strong, baby. Please.” I try to control my breathing, but I’m so scared. Another round of tears run down my cheeks. Every muscle inside me is vibrating as I try to hold it together.

EMS gets to work taking vitals and doing what they need to with her. I answer whatever questions I can for them. We eventually get to the hospital, and they get her inside, rushing her back. Standing out in the waiting area, I wait for her parents and

Vicki to get there.

Austin shows up about ten minutes later and finds me with my head in my hands.

He sits next to me. “Hey, Hawthorne. Have you heard anything?”

“No, they took her back. I’m waiting on her parents to get here.” Finally, I lift my head and place my hand on my chest. More tears come. Swiping them away, I try to compose myself.

Austin fills me in on what they think happened at the scene. The other driver needed medical attention and was taken by an ambulance to the hospital, but he remembered nothing of what happened. Based on witness statements, she had the green light and the man in the red sports car blew through the red and hit her. The impact sent her into the other cars waiting at the red, and his car jumped the sidewalk before finally coming to a stop.

Austin and I sit there for a few more minutes before I spot Mark and Liz running in.

“Bryce, honey, what the hell happened?” Liz runs over to me and hugs me. “Is she okay?”

“I don’t know. They just brought her back from surgery. Listen, I need to you sit down.” Mark and Liz take a seat and I kneel in front of them.

“She was in a bad accident. Austin and I responded to the scene. I had no idea until I got there that it was Kat.” Looking down and wiping away tears, I pause. “A car t-boned her. They had to extract her from the vehicle. Unfortunately, I don’t know what the extent of her injuries are. I just know they rushed her back there saying something about needing immediate surgery and that the doctor would come talk to us when he finished or knew something.”

Liz starts crying, and Mark pulls her close to comfort her the best he can with all this information. I rest my hand on her leg, and she places her hand on mine.

“Thank you for being there for her.” Liz says through soft sobs. We all weep quietly, waiting.

“I love your daughter, Liz. I’ll be there for her, always.” Wiping away more tears, I get up and hug them both.

When I turn around, I spot familiar faces coming towards me. Cook, Nash, and Gibson are all walking towards me.

“Cook,” He steps up to greet me.

“Nash,” I shake his hand and pull him in for a hug.

“Man, I am so sorry about Kat. She’s a strong woman, though. She’ll pull through.” Nash claps me on the back.

“Gibson,” I nod to the man. He comes up and places both hands on my shoulders.

“We’re all here for you and Kat. Lean on us, okay?” Gibson pulls away after I agree.

“Have they said anything?” Nash asks.

“Nope. She’s only been back there for maybe thirty or forty minutes. Doc said he’ll come out when he knows something.” I sit down in between Liz and Austin.

Everyone takes a seat, all waiting to hear how Kat is doing. I take Liz’s hand and hold it while we wait. With all that I can, I’m trying to be strong for her parents. Liz’s entire body is shaking, and she’s in a bit of shock herself, understandably.

An hour and a half later, a doctor comes out, and I immediately stand.

“Family for Katrina Morrison?” he calls out.

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Liz stands up next to me, swaying. Both Mark and I help to support her.

“We’re right here. I’m her mother, this is her father, and this is her boyfriend.” She points to me. “Anything you say to her father and I, you can say to him.” I grip her hand and squeeze as a silent thank you.

“Let’s walk into one of the private rooms so we can talk.” He leads us to this plain office where all the walls were bare. The furniture matched the furniture in the waiting area. All three of us sit quietly, waiting.

“First, my name is Dr. Benson. Katrina came in with some pretty serious injuries from the accident. She has a ruptured spleen and internal bleeding. She also has a broken arm and leg. There’s a bit of brain swelling, so we’re monitoring that. Right now, I have her listed in critical condition and in a medically-induced coma.

“Her body needs to rest while the swelling in her head goes down. I want to keep her here in the Trauma ICU until we wake her from the coma. We were able to stop the internal bleeding and repair the spleen. We put her arm and leg in casts. They were pretty bad breaks, but they should heal fine with time. Like I said, she’s in a coma, but that’s so that she can rest and heal. Do you have questions?”

“Is she going to be ok?” Liz asks, her voice wavers. Her hand is on her chest over her heart as she tries to keep her focus and not breakdown.

“Honestly, I can’t give you an answer for that. We are monitoring her. We need to let her heal, let her body rest.” Dr. Benson answers, his voice very sympathetic towards our situation.

I speak up next, “When can she come out of the coma?”

“Once the brain swelling has gone down. The induced coma will allow the brain to rest, protecting it.” Dr. Benson reaches out and touches Liz’s hand. “The minute I know something, you all will know. I just don’t know the outcome until it happens.”

I get it. They can’t say she is going to be okay because things can happen. It becomes a liability. All we can do is wait. Wait and see if she wakes up and pray there are no other issues that pop up along the way.

“We also gave Katrina some blood. She was quite pale when she came in here, so try not to worry when you see her. She’s still a little pale. If you folks have any questions, please let me know. I’ll be back to check on her all this week.” With that, Dr. Benson stands up and leaves.

We take a few moments to cry in the room before we leave. When we return to the waiting area, Vicki is there crying into Austin’s shirt. I’m guessing he told her what happened. Austin has Vicki in his arms, trying to console her.

Walking over to Vicki, I pull her into a hug. She starts crying even harder, and I rub her back, letting her get it out. I look over at Austin, and he’s torn up too but trying to stay strong for Vicki. When she’s done, she walks back over to Austin, who sits her down and drapes his arm around her.

A couple hours later, a nurse comes up to Kat’s parents and me and tells us we can go back, two at a time. They look at me, knowing I want to see her. But they need to go first, and I know that. I, of course, nod to her parents, letting them know I’m okay with waiting.

After about an hour, both of them come out in tears. Liz steps up to me and hugs me.

“Just prepare yourself, sweetheart.” She kisses me on my cheek. “We’re going to go grab something to eat and then we’ll be back. That’ll give you some time with her. Go be with her Bryce. She needs you.”

“Just so you know, I’m not leaving her. I have already requested leave for a while. There is no way I’m leaving until she wakes up.”

Liz nods, giving me a weak smile. “She loves you, and I can see why. You’re a wonderful man who stands by her no matter what. As her mom, I’m beyond relieved she has you. Now, go in there and see her. Make sure she knows how much you love her; that’ll help her get better.” She gives me a powerful hug, and her and Mark leave.

As I watch them disappear down the hospital wing, my nerves get the best of me. I make my way back into the Trauma ICU. Approaching the door, I can feel my chest squeeze tight. I know what I’m about to see will be extremely hard. The sight of her in this room may never leave my mind. After all, I saw her in the car. But nothing could have prepared me for what was in front of me when I reach her room.

Lifeless. Kat’s body is just lying there. Her cuts are cleaned up and bandaged, and she has tubes going in and out of her. There’s a cast on her arm and leg. The image is horrific. My stomach sinks at the sight. Her eyes are closed, and her breathing is steady from the use of the ventilator. Her skin’s pale and ghostlike from all the blood loss. If it weren’t for the machines beeping and letting me know there’s still a heartbeat, I’d question if she was even still alive.

My steps are quiet as I walk in the room. My breath catches in my throat. The pain is repeatedly stabbing at my heart, and I want to scream. But I need to be strong for her. Stepping up to the side of her bed, I find her icy hand and wrap mine around it.

“Hey, Kitty Kat.” I choke out. “Listen, I need you to be strong, okay? The doctor says

you just need to rest and heal. You won't be alone; I'll be sitting here, right by your side until you're all better."

I wipe the tears off my cheeks. Bringing her hand up to my lips, I softly kiss her.

"I love you, baby. You have no idea how scared I was when I responded to the accident. When ... when I pulled up and I saw your car, my heart stopped. To see you lying there ... That's not something I ever wanted to see. It broke me. I don't know if that image will ever leave my mind." My head rests against hers, and I break down. I reach up and rub the spot where my heart's hurting.

I felt so useless the moment we pulled up and I realized it was her car. There was no way for me to stop her from hurting or erase the accident. It happened outside of my control. I'm supposed to protect her, be her shield, but I always knew I couldn't protect her from something like this.

"I'm so sorry, baby." I cry. I cry so hard. When I finally stop crying, I kiss her hand again. "When you get out of here, we're going to go find our forever home. Let's not rent, let's buy. Put down roots. Settle into our lives together. We'll spend our days loving on each other and our nights making love to one another."

I brush some of her hair back from her face. Her beautiful face. I lean in, kiss her forehead, and place mine against hers. My tears fall on her face, and I brush them off.

"I love you." I whisper in her ear before I pull up a chair next to her bed and hold her hand while I watch her. All I want to do is wake up from this nightmare. But until she wakes up, my world will be forever dark.

Chapter 29

Bryce

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“How is she?” Vicki comes into the room, her eyes red from crying.

It’s been a day since the accident. One day since I last saw her smile. Every hour, it becomes harder for me to see her like this. Every minute, every second, goes by at a snail’s pace. But I haven’t left her side, and I won’t be anytime soon.

“Still under. Doctor says she looks good, but her body needs the time to heal. Make sure the incision where they had to go in doesn’t get infected, make sure her hemoglobin goes up, or something like that. With all the blood loss ... it’s just a lot.” I run my hand through my hair and let out a sigh.

Vicki shakes her head and walks towards Kat. She leans in and speaks to her, “Listen, you need to be okay. I ... I can’t go at this world without you. You’re my twin; my sister from another mister. I can’t be without my bestie.” She runs her hand over Kat’s cheek. Her eyes are filled with sadness, the corners of her mouth turned down. There’s black circles under her eyes, and I know she didn’t sleep last night. “You’ve had a shit hand dealt to you, but you’re a fighter. Always a fighter. So fucking fight this so we can go drink tequila again.”

Vicki’s right. Kat has had a shit hand; life has thrown her nothing but obstacles. Here’s Kat again, being thrown another curve ball. But Vicki’s right about another thing too; Kat is a fighter. Even with all that she went through in life, she still smiles. She still laughs. Kat still gives me her love.

Even when I’m sure every cell in her body told her to run from me, she gave me a chance. She was a stranger to me until that day in the coffee shop. Fate brought us together for a reason. We were meant to love each other. We mended each other’s

broken parts and filled in the holes. That's why I can't lose her. I just can't. If something happens to her, it'll destroy me. There's no coming back from losing Kat. I'll be forever broken.

Vicki stays for a couple hours, filling Kat in on all the latest bar gossip on, which they must talk about regularly. Vicki starts up the stories where she apparently left off from the last time. Every now and then, she reaches out and touches Kat's cheek and closes her eyes. I can tell Vicki is trying to will her to suddenly be better.

After she leaves, Kat's mom comes in. Her eyes are bloodshot. I know she was up worrying about Kat, and she had every right to do that. I'd offered to have them spend the time with Kat overnight, but they wanted me to. The hospital has been beyond accommodating for us.

"Hey, Bryce. Sweetie, are you doing okay? Have you been here all night?" Liz walks over to Kat and squeezes her hand, glancing at me.

"I haven't left, no. Don't worry; I'm fine. How are you doing?" I try to shift the focus onto her and Kat. I don't need her to worry about me too.

"Oh, sweetheart, you need to sleep. You need a break from this place." She holds my hand, squeezing it. She frowns, her eyebrows lower as she looks at me with sadness.

"I'll be fine. The nursing staff have been angels and helped me get comfortable here while we wait. I got a couple hours of shut-eye last night. Trust me. I ... I can't leave her." My lips form a thin line, and I bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from tearing up.

"I know, but you need to take care of yourself so you can take care of my baby girl." She places a hand on my cheek. "You're good to Katrina, but you're no good to her if you're not at your best. So, go get yourself something to eat, some coffee, whatever.

Just go take a breather.”

Nodding, I hug Liz. “Thank you,” I leave the room and see Kat’s dad in the waiting area.

“Mark,” I say as I shake his hand and give him a hug. “I’m going to go get some coffee.” He nods his head and pats me on the back before going into the room with his wife and daughter.

I head over to the cafeteria and get myself some dark sludge. Honestly, I’m not really hungry, so I don’t grab anything to eat. Instead, I sit down, sip my gross hospital coffee, and text Austin.

Me: Hey.

Austin: Hey, how’s our girl doing?

Me: No change. Doc says she’s still healing, but no infections from the surgery or anything like that. So far, so good.

Austin: Good. Next question. How are you doing?

Me: Honestly, I just want her awake. I don’t want her to be here. I’m losing my mind. Every hour seems longer than the last.

Austin: You need to go home and rest. Take a shower, a nap, eat. Just refresh.

Me: No. I need to be here. If they wake her up, I need to be here for her.

Austin: You need to be on your “A” game for her. Because when they wake her up, she’s going to need you on you at your best.

Me: Whatever.

I don't need to hear it anymore. Sipping my coffee, I get up and begin walking back to the waiting area. I sit down, and my mind wanders. Thinking about Kat and everything we've both been through, finally catching a break. Only for it to come to a screeching halt. But then, I think of the future. There's no fucking way I can have a future without her. I want her by my side forever.

Opening up my phone, I scroll through my pictures. I find one of us lying in bed just last week. We were watching a movie, and she fell asleep on my chest. Her lips are parted, and her hand is on me. Her leg is wrapped around mine as if she's trying to keep me locked in place. When I felt the movement in her chest and heard little mewls, I knew she was sleeping. I couldn't help but take a picture of us like that.

Except now, she's sleeping again, just not in my arms. And she has a lot of medical equipment going in and out of her. God, I just want to look into those green eyes and see her smile.

A little while later, Liz and Mark come out and sit next to me in the waiting area.

"You doing okay, son?" Mark puts a hand on my back, trying to comfort me.

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“No, I’m not. But when she wakes up, I will be.” That’s the only thing keeping me going, Kat waking up.

“She’s going to have a long road to being a hundred percent again. You know that, right?” He’s not lying. She’s going to have an arduous journey to get back to where she was. Not to mention any setbacks with her anxiety and panic attacks.

“I know. And I’ll be there for her, with her, every step of the way. She won’t do this alone. I can promise you that.” Looking him in the eye, I want to make sure he understands I mean every word I’m saying.

He smiles sadly. “I know. You’re a good man, Bryce. I wouldn’t want anyone else standing side by side with my daughter. Thank you for taking care of her and loving her.” Mark’s eyes glisten, and he straightens, clearing his throat.

“Thank you,” I stand and hug him. How can I not? This man just told me how thankful they are that I’m in Kat’s life.

When Liz and Mark leave, I make my way back into Kat’s room. Every time I walk in there, it still makes me sick to see her in that condition.

I do my usual. Bending over, I kiss her forehead and her cheek. Brushing her hair out of the way, I whisper, “I love you, Kitty Kat. I’m here waiting for you.” I pull up the chair and move it next to her. Taking her hand in mine, I lean back against the hardness of the chair and close my eyes.

I dream about our future. Kat and I getting married, her carrying our babies, and us

growing old together. Our love is never ending.

Chapter 30

Bryce

Daytwo of Kat in a coma. Forty-eight hours since I've had a conversation with Kat. It's been two days since she could tell me she loved me. Two days since I could fall asleep with her in my arms. Two hellish days since she ended up here on a ventilator, fighting against the injuries from the crash.

I've been at her side like I promised to be this entire time. The only time I leave is when her parents are here. That's their time with their daughter, and I don't want to interfere with that. I simply run home and shower. No nap, no sleep, no food. Just shower, change, drive back, and wait in the waiting room. Or I'll go if the doctor needs to examine her. The hospital has made a special case for me to stay with her, and I don't want to do anything to jeopardize that.

"Morning, baby." I lean over and kiss her forehead. As I sit back, I take out my phone and check to see if I have any messages. There are a ton. All wanting to know how she's doing. Looking through a few, I answer them, then put the phone away for now. Holding her hand, I close my eyes until I hear a knock on the door.

"Hey, man. How's our girl?" Austin comes in, dressed in his uniform, and looks over at her with his lips turned down. I hate that I'm not out there with him, but he and I know Kat comes first. At least, for me she does.

"Same. She had a minor infection and a bit of a fever, but they pumped her with some stuff, and it seemed to get it all under control." I squeeze her hand, expecting her to squeeze it back, but I know she can't.

“Hey, mind if I talk to you outside for a bit? The visitor area, if you don’t mind.” He tilts his head towards the room’s direction.

“Sure,” I turn to Kat and kiss her hand. “I’ll be back, baby.” I say softly.

Austin and I walk out to the visitor area, and I see Kat’s parents and Vicki there. I know what I just stepped into: a fucking intervention.

“Now, before you huff and puff and blow the house down, just listen to us, okay?” Austin puts his hand on my shoulder, and I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“Bryce, we love and adore you, but you are no good to our little girl if you’re not taking care of yourself. So, we want you to go home. We want you to eat, shower, and sleep. You don’t have to do it now, but in a few hours, we want you out that door and going home. You need sleep. Bryce, you look like crap.” Liz orders me, and she does not look like someone I even want to think about crossing right now.

She has a serious expression on her face that any mother worried about her kids would have. Even though I’m not her son, she treats me like one, therefore, Liz is giving me the “mom means it” look.

“We’ve all taken the next couple days off work. Austin and myself,” Vicki tells me, coming up to give me a hug. “But all four of us will be here. We’ll all take shifts with her. Well, Austin’s going home with you to make sure you sleep. The rest of us are staying here and rotating our time with her so you can feel more at ease with going home and sleeping.”

“What if something happens and I’m not there?” I protest, my chest instantly filling with anxiety. “I can’t leave her like that. I need to be here for her. She got a fever last night. What if it happens again? What if it’s worse? No, I can’t go.” I shake my head and my mouth forms a thin line. My hands tighten into fists, and my nails press into

my palms.

“You can and you will. She’s fine. If—and only if—something happens, we’ll call you immediately.” Liz reassures me, stepping in front of me.

“She wouldn’t leave me if I was in there. She would fight tooth and nail to stay by my side.” My voice trembles. I know that statement to be very true. That woman in there wouldn’t leave my side come hell or high water. “She wouldn’t leave me.”

“Would you want her tired? Hungry? Not feeling her best? No, you wouldn’t. You would want her to go home and rest. Just so we are clear, I’d tell her the same thing I’m telling you. Go. Home. And. Sleep.” Liz punctuates every word. By the look on her face, she will drag me back to my house herself if I don’t cooperate.

Looking back at the door we came from, I nod. Liz is right. I would want her taking care of herself. I look up at Austin, and he tilts his head towards the exit.

“Come on. How about we go get something to eat, then we can head back to your place and you can get some rest?” Austin suggests. His lips draw in tightly, his sympathetic eyes bore into me. I cave.

Walking back into Kat’s room, I stand next to her and let her know I’ll be back.

“I love you, Kitty Kat. I promise I won’t disappear for long. You have our family looking out for you, and I promise I’ll be back soon, sweetheart.” Leaning over her, I brush my lips to her forehead and let a few tears fall. Austin and I walk back out to the waiting room and every step I take away from her makes my stomach twist in pain.

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Hugging everyone goodbye, I remind them to call me if something changes. I turn to the door, we walk to the car, and Austin drives us to get some food. My heart feels like it's being torn in half right now, leaving this place. Leaving her side.

She holds the key to making me feel whole again.

* * *

Once we get back to the apartment, I make sure my phone is on as loud as it can be and plug it into the charger. I walk back out to the living room and sit on the couch.

“What’s going on that head of yours, Hawthorne?” Austin looks up from his phone.

“Man, so much. So fucking much. Fuck.” Running my hands through my hair, I sigh. “She needs to pull out of this. It makes me so nervous that they still have her under and on the ventilator. I just want to talk to her and hold her and tell her everything will be ok. I can’t lose her; we just started making plans. We just fixed all the wrong.”

“I know, but she’ll be okay. They have her under so she can heal. Her body went through a lot. Besides the surgery, they need to make sure the swelling in her head goes down. The doc said it wasn’t a lot, but enough to call for making sure she can heal by letting her rest. They’ll wake her up soon.” Austin places his elbows on his knees. “Go take a shower and try to unwind a bit, okay?”

“Yeah, fine.” A hot shower sounds like something I need right now.

I head into the bathroom and start the shower. Memories of us in the cabin as well as ones of Kat and I here in this apartment come back to me. She is everywhere. I see her in every part of my life; the memories live in every part of my head. I am surrounded by her. That was one of the reasons I stayed with Austin during the Emma fiasco. No matter where I look, there's Kat.

After removing my clothes, I step into the shower, and I can smell her shampoo instantly. Popping the top open, I sniff the lavender shampoo. My chest squeezes, and my stomach twists. So many things can happen with her being under and on a ventilator.

"Fuck. I miss you so much, Kat." It's at that moment I let everything catch up to me. Tears burst from my eyes, and I let myself cry. My body drops to the floor of the shower and I bring my knees up to my chest. Everything comes out. I held in my emotions for as long I could. I'm bound to break at some point, and right now seems like the perfect time.

I'm not sure how long I'm in the shower for, but I get out well after the water is no longer hot. Grabbing the towel from the nearby hook, I dry off. I throw on a pair of pants and check my phone. There's nothing from anyone I care to hear from at this point in time. "Anyone" being Kat. I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Everything will be fine.

I lie on the bed and pull her pillow into me. I wrap myself around it, as if it were Kat and she was curled up into me. My body feels cold without her.

My vision grows blurry again, and I can feel the tears well in my eyes. My body shakes as raw despair floods out of me and down my cheeks. I wish I could take her place. Just let me take her pain away.

Eventually, exhaustion gets to me, and I fall asleep wishing I was holding Kat.

* * *

I'll never admit it out loud, but I needed that sleep. My body was so tired, I ended up sleeping straight through the night and into the next morning. Of course, Austin stayed with me the entire night. He's a good man; someone I would call a best friend. I genuinely can't thank him enough for what he's done for me. Now that I'm fully rested and no one has called, I can head back to see Kat.

Once we get back to the hospital, her parents fill me in. She was stable all night, and the doctor will be stopping by this morning. Liz and I decide we'll both wait for the doctor. So, we sit with her, and Liz tells me stories about Kat. I pull up a chair and take Kat's hand in mine while I listen.

"Kat had this Alvin and the Chipmucks Christmas CD. She loved that CD. Shoot, what was the name of that song?" She bites her nail, trying to think of the name. "Oh! Christmas Don't be Late! This one here played it over and over on the stereo system. By mid-June, we found the CD and hid it. She cried for days over it. We eventually got it back and had to pray that it would stop working at some point."

"Kat loves Christmas, so I can see that happening." I chuckle, breaking out into a small smile at the thought.

"She's always been big on Christmas. It means so much to her. Not because of the gifts or anything, but because to her it's about family. We cook, decorate, bake cookies, anything together as a family. Family to her is the most important thing." Liz collects herself, wiping tears from her cheeks and sniffing.

"When she was little, she wanted eight kids. Four boys and four girls. She had names picked out and how she was going to decorate each room. And if she couldn't have kids, she was going to adopt; giving kids a home and a place to feel loved. Kat has always had a big heart, it's just a shame that the world can be so cruel." Her face

grows dark, and she averts her eyes, instead looking back at Kat.

“I know she does. It’s one of the many reasons I love her. She tries so hard to overcome what she deals with, what’s thrown at her, and she does it with such fortitude. I can’t help but admire and respect her.” I say, sighing. Kat’s my phoenix.

“You know, Kat’s been a different person since she met you.” Liz admits, getting up and standing next to her daughter on the other side of the hospital bed. She brushes Kat’s face and runs her hands over the top of Kat’s hair.

I rub my tired eyes, glancing at Kat along with her, drinking her in. Fuck, I miss her. “Well, to be honest, I feel like I’ve been a different person since I met her. A better person since I met her.”

“You both have such an immense love for each other. The two of you are so lucky to have found each other. Not everyone gets to know a love like yours.” She smiles at me and then down at her daughter.

Liz comes over and pulls me into a hug. “I know you’ll always protect my baby girl, and I know you’ll keep her safe. So, thank you.”

“Always,” My eyes get a little misty when we hug. Just as we pull apart, the doctor comes in.

“Good morning,” Dr. Benson greets us as he walked in. “So, I have some good news. Katrina’s healing very well. Her blood and hemoglobin levels are looking good. Her stitches are healing nicely—even better than expected. She’s a healthy young woman, so that helps.”

“When will you wake her up?” I turn to Kat and squeeze her hand.

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“Today we’ll wean her off the drugs. She’s been breathing well on her own, which is why we removed the ventilator. I’ll warn you now; she may not wake up right away or be very aware of her surroundings. So, don’t just expect her to snap out of it. I know most people think that happens, but it doesn’t. They’re still very groggy when they come off the meds.” Dr. Benson tilts his head. He looks at Liz with compassion.

The doctor and Liz talk a little more. My mind’s more focused on hearing her voice and seeing those emerald eyes. The doctor turns to leave, and I walk up to him and shake his hand.

“Thanks, Dr. Benson.” I can feel the excitement and the hope pulling inside my chest.

“You take care of that one. She’ll need a lot of healing time.” He shakes my hand back, placing his other hand on top of mine. I nod and head back to Kat.

Liz eventually leaves to go tell Mark what the doctor said, leaving Kat and I alone in the room together. I let her know everything the doctor said and how excited I am to have her wake up.

While her mom is still out of the room, I pull out a little red box. Inside sits a beautiful platinum hand-engraved, channel-set engagement ring with a round, two-carat diamond.

“I picked this out about a week before the accident. I was going to ask you once we moved into our new place. Well, once I got your parent’s permission, then I was going to ask you.” I chuckle to myself, my heart filling with hope at the thought of a new life together. “I’m going to marry you, Kat. You’ll be my wife, and I’ll be your

husband. We'll make beautiful babies, and we'll love each other unconditionally."

I wipe the wetness from my eyes. It's a lot to say out loud, but I mean every word.

"I'll do everything in my power to make sure you know how much I love you, every minute of every day. You're it for me, Kat. You're what my heart's been missing."

I pick up my phone and turn on our song, setting it to repeat. Laying my head on the bed, I grab her hand in both of mine, kissing it and resting it against my cheek.

"You're going to be coming back to me soon. I'll be with you every step of the way. I love you, baby."

Chapter 31

Katrina

Beeping. I hear beeping. My eyes feel heavy, and I'm exhausted. My body feels stiff. The smells are nauseating. It smells like bleach and antiseptic. There is a staleness in the air. I need to open my mouth to say something, but I can't move it. Maybe I just need to go back to sleep. This could all be a dream.

"Baby, can you hear me? Can you open your eyes for me?" It's Bryce. I feel his hands on my head, and I can smell him now, the autumn rain. It's a much better smell, comforting and warming. But I still hear that damn beeping. I need to hold on to Bryce; he can bring me out of this. He can save me from whatever nightmare I'm locked in. Bryce! My head screams his name, and I try to make my lips form the words, but I just groan, too tired to do much else.

With every ounce of energy I have, I open my eyes a bit. Everything's out of focus, but I can make out Bryce right in front of me. And I know it's him because I can

smell him.

“Hey, Kitty Kat.” He lifts my hand up and kisses it. “Welcome back.” My eyes focus a little more, and I see I’m in a hospital. My mind freezes as it tries to search out the reason I’m here. I can feel my eyes grow wide with fear.

“Bryce,” the words come out hoarse, and I barely get out his name. I don’t even recognize my own voice.

“I’m right here, baby. Listen to me, okay? You’re in the hospital. You were in a bad car accident, but you’re going to be okay. So, just take some deep breaths and relax. I’m right here with you.” Bryce leans in and kisses me. My lips are dry, but he doesn’t seem to care.

“Accident?” I croak. I don’t remember an accident. The last thing I remember is eating breakfast with Bryce before leaving for my therapist ...

My eyebrows shoot up, and my eyes go wide. “T-the car ... hit m-me ...” My heart rate spikes when I realize the truth of my own words.

“Relax for me, Kat. Yes, there was a car, and it hit you. You’re going to be okay, but I need you to calm down. I’ll explain everything once you’re ready, okay?” Bryce caresses my face, running circles over my forehead with his fingertips. It’s soothing, and the movement helps me relax.

I’m growing a little more tired by the second. My body still feels heavy, and my eyes are getting droopy too. I close them and turn my head into Bryce’s hand.

“Shh. Just sleep, Kat. I’ll be here when you wake up.” That’s all I hear before I fall back into darkness.

* * *

My eyes open, and I look around. I'm confused. Bryce. I was talking to Bryce. I go to move my hand and realize someone is holding it. I look down at my hand and see him. He's still here with me.

Bryce lifts his head and looks up. "Hey, sleepyhead. How are you feeling?"

I grip his hand tighter in mine. "What's going on? I need to sit up." It's then I realize that I have a cast on my arm and leg. "Bryce?" Looking down at my casts, my pulse races a little faster. The machines around me pick up my accelerating heart rate.

"Baby, breathe. Look at me." Bryce puts his finger and thumb on my chin and turns my head. "I'll tell you what's going on, but I need you to calm down. Can you do that for me? Just look into my eyes and focus on me."

"Yeah," For a moment, I squeeze my eyes shut, then open them to focus on Bryce and steady my breathing.

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“Okay. You have a broken arm and leg. The doctors were worried about a possible brain or spine injury. You had slight swelling in your brain, but it went down. You had massive internal bleeding and a ruptured spleen. They were able to repair the spleen and not remove it. There were a lot of cuts and scrapes from the broken glass and air bags, but those will heal. You’re doing much better. You had a slight infection after the surgery, but you recovered by the next day.”

My head lowers as I try to understand everything he says. My brain’s trying to connect the dots, but everything’s so fuzzy.

“What happened? I don’t remember.” I’m still trying to take everything in, but I want my memory of what happened back. My fists clench angrily. I squeeze my eyes shut in frustration.

“What’s the last thing you remember?” Bryce laces his fingers through mine.

“Well, I remember having breakfast with you and then getting dressed.” I pause and look up at Bryce, frowning. “I left to go to my therapist appointment.” My mind replays the events. I was driving, singing, and then ... “Red car. There was a red car coming at me!” My eyes go wide in shock, and he cups my face.

“Drunk driver. He t-boned you. You’ve been in the hospital for a couple of days. The doctors put you in an induced coma so your brain could heal and you could rest. You’re doing much better, which is why they woke you up. You still need to rest, but everything will be okay, baby.” Bryce runs his knuckles over my cheek, soothing me as I take all this in.

He stays with me while nurses and doctors come in. They poke and prod me more and run more tests to make sure I'm all right. It becomes a flurry of people coming and going. But throughout it all, Bryce sticks to my side like glue. The only time he leaves is when my parents come in to see me.

Once I'm moved out of ICU and into a regular hospital room, I have even more people that come to see me. Some of Bryce's officer buddies and their wives. Vicki and Austin . My parents. Everyone wants to know how I'm doing, what I remember, and if I still hurt. It's a little overwhelming. Eventually, everyone leaves.

Bryce leaves the room for a bit to go grab some food. He brings it back, of course. From what my parents have told me, Bryce has been by my side through everything. The exception being when my parents and Austin staged an intervention and made him go home and sleep. I'm glad they did that, it hurts to know he was sitting here not taking care of himself.

"How are you feeling?" Bryce turns his head to look at me while he leans back in his chair, eating.

The smell of the cheeseburger is a welcome change from the stale bleach smell of the room. Bryce bites down into the cheeseburger, and I lick my lips like it's some Pavlovian response. I clear my throat and turn my head to look forward towards the TV.

"Um, not sure. I hurt. Like I'm sore. And I hate these casts. I hate feeling stuck here and that these nurses keep coming in here. I hate that you have been sitting here by my side and I didn't even know it. Even more so that you had to worry about me, and I hate that I made you worry at all. I just hate everything right now. Really, I just want to go home. I just want to lie in bed with you next to me. And if I didn't have these fucking casts, I would make you get in bed with me right now." I take a deep breath and wipe the tears that escape from my eye with my good hand..

Bryce gets up from his chair and moves it out the way, setting his food down on a nearby table. He pushes the safety bar of the bed down and lays next to me. His hands hold my face, and he brings his lips to mine.

Bryce pulls back just an inch and looks at me. “Kat, I’m happy you’re in this bed. Happy that all you broke was your arm and leg. I’m so happy there were no injuries beyond what you had. Fucking ecstatic that you’re still breathing, too. Sweetheart, Austin and I responded to the accident. Obviously, we both had no idea it was you until I pulled up and saw your car. When I saw ... saw you, pale, white as a ghost and not moving, fuck. Scariest moment in my life, Kat. It was killing me to see you like that. A witness said that you were calling for me after the accident. And I hate I couldn’t get there sooner. It tore my heart up. I wasn’t there to tell you to your face that I love you and that everything was going to be okay.” Bryce wiped the silent tears from his eyes. “I wasn’t there to comfort you, Kat. To hold your hand and be there for you.”

I reach out and touch his cheek with my hand, encouraging him to continue.

He cleared his throat, adding, “I get you hate being here, but this is better than what could’ve been. Your car was in bad shape, Kat. They had to extract you and cut your car up just to get you out. It was the most helpless I’ve ever felt in my life. I’m supposed to protect you, and there was nothing I could’ve done to change those events. Nothing I could’ve done to shield you. I almost lost you, Kat. I can’t live without you. My life doesn’t go on unless you’re in it. My heart doesn’t beat without you.”

Bryce bends down and puts his head in the crook of my neck. His body’s shaking, and I feel the moisture from his tears on my skin. As he lays there, I move my good arm to wrap around him and cry with him. Our bodies and hearts give into the pain we’ve both gone through.

While most parts are still fuzzy, I remember calling out for Bryce after the accident. I needed him, and I was out of my mind not being able to see him. That he wouldn't know what happened to me. It seems the universe wasn't letting that happen and sent him to me when he answered that call. I wasn't awake to know, but I now know in that moment, he was there for me.

We say little for the rest of the night. We simply hold each other. Even when the nurses come in to do what they need to do, he never moves. Bryce simply lays next to me, gazing into my eyes as I stare right back into his.

Eventually, sleep takes over the both of us.

Chapter 32

Katrina

4 Months Later

"Is the kitchen all packed up?" Bryce calls from the bedroom.

"Yes! For the millionth time. You do you. Don't worry about me."

As soon as the words leave my lips, I know I'm going to get a look. Yup, there it is. Bryce stands in the doorway, brows furrowed and lips in a thin line.

"Okay, Bryce. You can worry about me, but not about the packing and me. You know what I mean!" I throw the roll of tape at him. Of course, he catches it and laughs while he walks away.

"Why did we think it was a good idea to move now? August has to be like the hottest month out here." Bryce shouts.

“It’s a dry heat. Suck it up, princess.” My back is turned, so I don’t hear him sneak up behind me.

“Suck it up, huh?” His hands find my ticklish areas, and he goes to town.

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“Bryce! S-stop! Please! Ah!” I laugh uncontrollably. “Uncle! Uncle!” When he finally lets go, I’m out of breath. But that doesn’t stop him from pushing me up against the wall and devouring my mouth with his.

“Mm. You’re lucky everyone will be here soon, otherwise you and I would be taking a detour to the bedroom.” Bryce looks hungrily at me, biting his lip.

“Yeah, yeah, caveman. You can throw me over your shoulder when we get to the new house. Pack!” I point back towards the bedroom.

Bryce winks and obeys, saying, “I’m holding you to that, Kitty Kat.”

The last few months have been full of difficulties for me. Bryce has never wavered in his stance on being there for me through it all, though. He’s stood next to me through everything.

It’s a good thing I live on the first floor because when I came home from the hospital, I was in a wheelchair for a while since my leg was still in a cast. I would’ve preferred crutches, but a broken arm didn’t allow me that luxury. When I got home, Bryce simply moved in with me. He had only signed a six-month lease, so he was already pretty much living month to month.

We sold whatever furniture we didn’t want to keep. The rest went to storage for whenever we bought a house. Today, we’re finally getting ready to move into that house.

Bryce was my hero throughout this entire ordeal. Austin had told me how hard it was

for Bryce to hold it together when he got there. When I came home from the hospital, he helped me through everything. Even getting in a vehicle again. There was a period where it terrified me to get into a car. I still get anxiety, but it's getting better. And as long as I'm with him, I'm usually okay.

We bought a house on the northwest side of the valley. It's in a newer neighborhood, so there are a lot of young families there. One day, when we start a family of our own, there will be plenty of kids for them to play with. That's in the future, but it's nice to think about.

We were originally going to rent and then buy a home, but after everything, Bryce didn't want to wait any longer. He wanted to finally put down roots and start our life together. I honestly wanted the same.

Today, all of our friends and family are coming to help move us and get us settled. Even his parents flew in. We can seriously use the help, to be honest. I still favor my good leg and arm. Bryce tells me it's natural to do. I'm just afraid I'll break them again.

Nighttime is rough for me. I have nightmares of the accident.

Usually, the same scene plays out. There's a jolt, and I wake up in the car, I talk to a man, and I ask for Bryce. Sometimes, in my dreams, no one comes to help me. Therapy's helping with the anxiety and panic that comes with being in an accident like that. The nightmares are getting less frequent, and Bryce has me wake him up if he doesn't hear me so he can hold me until I'm comfortable enough to fall asleep again.

Things have improved, and I'm getting better. Physically and mentally. I have Bryce to thank for a lot of that. I love him more than he may realize.

“We’re here!” Ruth calls into the apartment after walking through the front door. “Oh! Katrina, come here, sweetie. How are you doing?” She rushes over to me and hugs me. Because of the accident, we couldn’t go out there last month. We had to postpone the trip I got for Bryce for Valentine’s Day. It was a tough decision, but there was a lot going on with getting me back on my feet. With my recovery requiring physical therapy, it was just better to postpone for now. I think I was more upset over it. It didn’t seem to bother Bryce that we had to push the dates back.

Ignoring her question, I try for a subject change. “Hi, Ruth. How are you? How was the flight in?”

She pulls back and studies me. “You didn’t answer me. How are you doing?”

“She’s fine, mom. Let the poor girl go. Also, what? Am I not that important anymore?” Bryce throws his hands in the air. Ruth narrows her eyes at her son, and he chuckles, adding, “Fine, dote on her. I’ll just be over here packing and wishing my mom loved me as much as she loves my girlfriend.”

“That boy of mine,” She laughs and shakes her head, grinning.

I finally say with a chuckle, “To answer your question, I’m fine. Much stronger and doing better every day.” Her hands are soon on my face, and she kisses me on the cheek.

“I’m so glad to hear you’re better. Okay, what do you need us to do?” Ruth rolls up her sleeves and begins taping a nearby box.

“Still not going to say hi to me, mom?” Bryce yells from the bedroom.

“Oh, fine!” Ruth huffs. She giggles, making her way over to him and hugging him tight. Bryce. He’s such a momma’s boy.

Greg and Ruth begin packing up what we left in the bathroom. We're almost ready to go. My parents, my sister, and her husband are coming with the truck and van. Hopefully, we can do all of this in one trip.

"Hey, Kitty Kat." Bryce again sneaks up on me. I turn around and throw my hands around his neck. "Have I told you how much I love you?"

"Hm. Let me think," I tease, wrinkling my nose and pretending to be deep in thought.

"Well, if you have to think about it, I haven't said it nearly enough. So, let me fix that. Sweetheart, I love you so very much. Today will go down as one of the best." He smiles against my lips, kissing me.

"You have more than one?" I cock an eyebrow.

"Of course. The day I met you. Christmas Day, when I first kissed you. Oh, when I finally told you I love you, which also was the day we found each other again. The day you woke up in the hospital. Oh, and I can't forget every day I wake up next to you. Just to name a few," Bryce shrugs and gives me his signature panty-dropping smile. Butterflies swirl around in my stomach. This man still gives me fricking butterflies.

Once the moving truck's packed up, Bryce's dad, Greg, drives it to our new place. Bryce and I jump into his truck, and I'm so ready to get settled into the new place. My insides are doing flip-flops with the excitement of our new house. Our home.

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“Ready?” Bryce looks at me, reaches over, and grabs my hand. He lightly kisses the inside of my wrist, grinning at me.

“Been ready forever,” I lean over and kiss him slowly on the lips. His tongue in my mouth moves slow and steady. I pull back with hooded eyes, saying, “Does everyone need to help us move?”

Bryce throws his head back and laughs. “Yes, it’ll move a lot faster—no pun intended. The sooner we get moved in, the sooner we can break the house in.” He winks.

I smile inwardly and look out the window. Tonight is going to be a long and busy night.

* * *

Once all the furniture and boxes find homes in their designated rooms, I order pizza for everyone. Bryce had stocked the fridge with drinks for everyone the day before. We just had no food in the house yet.

I look around and see everyone scattered around the family room. My parents, my sister and her husband, Bryce’s parents, Vicki, and Austin. Our little bubble; our family and friends. The people we love helping us celebrate an important moment in our lives.

Our new home is a beautiful two-story house that has a beautiful backyard. Actually it’s a huge backyard, which is very hard to find in Las Vegas. I know Bryce is already

planning on building an outdoor kitchen in the backyard for the future parties he plans on having. We chose this house because of the open floor plan and huge gourmet kitchen. We plan on having holidays here in the future, and having the open floor plan will allow for everyone to feel apart of the festivities.

I walk outside and look at all the lights that Bryce strung up so we would have a relaxing area after a day of moving. I'm lost in my own thoughts when Vicki comes up next to me. She drapes her arm around me and pulls me into a hug.

"How are you doing, girl?" She smiles at me, giving me a hopeful look. "You happy to be in the house now?"

"I'm ecstatic. It just all feels perfect—like I'm finally home." I lay my head on her shoulder. "Everything's perfect. It couldn't possibly get any better."

Vicki pulls me in for a tight hug. "Actually, I think it's about to get better. More than you could ever imagine." She pulls back and turns me around to face Bryce, who's standing on the other side of the patio with our friends and family behind him. Vicki leaves my side and stands behind Bryce with the rest of them.

"What's, uh, going on?" There is a fluttering in my stomach, and I bite my lip. I look at Bryce, who's grinning from ear to ear.

"Kitty Kat," he says while he steps up to me. He takes my hand and meets my gaze with his.

"Bryce, what is it?" I can feel my body heat rising, and my cheeks flush pink.

"Look, I need to ask you a question; a very important one. But I want you to listen first," Bryce pauses and places his hands on my face. "They say love is just a word until someone comes around and gives it a meaning. Kat, you gave that word

meaning and so much more.” Bryce gets down on one knee in front of me. I gasp, and tears immediately start dripping down my cheeks. Happy tears. Insanely happy tears.

He pulls out a red box with a beautiful ring inside it. My eyes dart back and forth from him and the ring. Oh my God. Is this really happening?

“We started out as strangers, then we found out we were neighbors. We became friends, and then we became lovers. But that just isn’t enough for me. I want to be your husband if you’ll be my wife. Katrina, will you marry me?”

My lips begin to tremble and I stand there completely stunned. My breathing stops, and my heart races wildly in my chest. I place my hands over it, trying to will it to slow down. “Yes, Bryce. A million times yes!” Bryce jumps up and draws me into his arms, then his lips come down on mine. The kiss is deep and fervent. He nips and sucks along my mouth, his tongue opening my lips and finding mine. When he finally pulls away, I realize our family still stands behind us, cheering. There are happy tears in everyone’s eyes.

Bryce takes the ring out and slips it on my finger.

“Oh, Bryce. This is so ... I don’t even have words.” I shake my head as he reaches up and wipes the wetness from my eyes.

“Everything you need or want to say, I can see in your eyes. So, don’t worry, baby.” He kisses the top of my head while everyone comes up to congratulate us. We spend the next few hours with our family and friends, living in the moment and talking about the future.

When everyone leaves, we shower and come back downstairs. Sitting on the couch, we survey the work we still had to do. There are still plenty of boxes to unpack.

“Tomorrow?” Bryce looks at me, then back to the pile of endless stuff.

“Yeah, tomorrow. I’m too tired to deal with all this.” I wave my hand around, frowning.

“Well,” Bryce tips his head, saying, “I hope not too tired. I kind of wanted to celebrate with you on a much deeper level.” His voice is low and raspy as he bites his lip.

Before I can react, Bryce picks me up and throws me over his shoulder, caveman style. I laugh the entire way up to our new bedroom. When he puts me down, I notice there are candles on the dresser and a bouquet of roses next to my side of the bed.

“Bryce ...” All this emotion is too much for me today. I walk over to the flowers and smell them, smiling. “Thank you.”

He spins me around, and his lips come down on mine. His tongue invades my mouth, and his hands move up my neck, wrapping my hair around them. He pulls my head back as he nibbles on my jawline and down my collarbone. His kisses grow desperate while they trace over every inch of my neck and face before moving back to my mouth.

I run my hands down his chest and pull up on the hem of his shirt. Bryce pulls his shirt off when I drop to my knees. Slowly, I pull down his basketball shorts and find that he isn’t wearing anything underneath. His lip curls up into a mischievous grin, and I can see the heat in his eyes. He wants this just as bad as I do.

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I can see every inch of Bryce perfectly. I take my hand and firmly grip the base of his shaft. My tongue licks up the underside all the way to the tip. I hear Bryce's breath catch, and his hands move to grip the back of my head. He moans with just the slightest tease of my tongue.

Slowly, I lower my mouth over him. I tighten my lips around his cock and move down, taking him as deep as I can. Bryce lets out a deep groan. He grips my hair tightly between his fingers and holds me still while he slowly pumps in and out of my mouth. He shudders, cursing under his breath. Using my hand, I move it along the part of him I can't take in. Suddenly, he roars and pulls me off. My mouth pops as it leaves his manhood. He's so close to coming.

"Fuck. Kitty Kat. I ... Fuck. Clothes. Off." Bryce claws at my t-shirt, yanking it over my head. He then picks me up and throws me onto the bed. I sit up on my elbows while Bryce's hands reach the top of my shorts and tear them off of me.

"Spread your legs, baby." His voice is raspy with lust. His hand runs up and down his cock. Not able to wait a second longer, he crawls on the bed, like he's stalking his prey. He's slow and seductive while he stares at me with hooded eyes. Bryce stops and flings my legs over his shoulders. Bryce's head drops to my entrance as his eyes lock with mine. I shiver, and he takes my pussy into his warm mouth like he's starving for my juices.

I let out a gasp, my mouth falling open in pleasure. My back arches, and my hands reach out to grab his hair to bring him closer. His tongue flicks across my folds, and soon, I feel his fingers slide inside me. He curls his fingers up, finding my g-spot as he pumps them in and out of me. Bryce's tongue works soft circles around my clit,

bringing me closer to ecstasy.

Then, it hits me like a tidal wave. A wall of pleasure that comes crashing down on me. A wall of pleasure that comes crashing down on me.

I push his face in closer, trying to ride out every ounce of pleasure he's giving me. I next yank his head out from between my pussy lips and pull him up, back towards my face. .

"Bryce, please." I'm panting hard, and my voice is breathy. I need to feel him inside me.

He crawls up and kisses me, letting me taste myself on his lips. My hands go back to his hair to pull him in closer. He reaches between us and lines himself up to my core. When he slowly slides in, he lets out a growl. I gasp at the fullness I feel, closing my eyes momentarily to let myself adjust.

Bryce pulls back and looks at me, slowly pulling out and pushing back in.

"Fuck, Kat. You feel so good. I love being inside you." With that, he thrusts against me harder this time. My mouth is stuck open from the sheer force of satisfaction coursing through me and filling every vein in my body with raw electricity. Bryce leans forward and groans in my ear. "I love this pussy. So tight, baby. So tight."

He reaches up and grabs a hold of my head with one hand and my leg with the other. His pace quickens, his eyes he locking with mine. "Come for me, Kat." With his permission, my body listens; he's finding all the right places, moving faster in pace with my grinding against his cock. My orgasm rips from me as I scream his name. I feel him quiver while I come all around his length. Bryce roars, releasing inside me.

Bryce's breathing is heavy when he collapses on top of me, our chests touching, our

skin slick from sweat. He lifts himself up just an inch to look into my eyes, brushing the hair away from my face and peppering me with soft kisses.

“I love you, Kat. This is only the beginning. I’m looking forward to making love to my future wife in our new home for many years to come.” He kisses me before I can answer.

Soon, I felt him harden again while still inside me. Taking a deep breath, he starts rocking back and forth again, slowly building us up for our next passionate releases. I laugh, then moan, gripping him tightly against me.

Bryce is right; this is only the beginning. We make love until the sun peeks through the curtains early the next morning. I’m in his arms, like I was always meant to be.

Epilogue

Katrina

One year Later

October is beautiful in Las Vegas. The weather finally cools off, the sky looks bluer, and for those who have trees in their yards, the leaves actually change color and fall off. It’s also the perfect time for Bryce and I to get married.

When we originally started planning the wedding, we had no idea what month to get married in. So, we played a little game. We wrote the months on sticky notes and put them on one side of the wall and then the dates in the month on the other.

Bryce was up first. I blindfolded him and spun him around, and he had to put a little sticker on the month we were going to get married. Yeah, okay. A little weird? Sure! Totally worth it, though. Watching Bryce try not to fall over and actually get the

sticker on a sticky note was honestly hilarious. I'd never laughed so hard in my life.

When he found the wall, and I finished peeing my pants from laughing, the sticker landed on October. So we had the month picked out.

My turn was to decide what the date would be in October. I was praying I didn't land on the thirty-first. We didn't want a Halloween wedding. Bryce slipped the blindfold on my face and spun me around. Since I had better balance, I found the wall easy and placed my sticker.

The eighteenth. October eighteenth.

It wasn't until I sent out the invites for the wedding that we found out something amazing about that date which only further sealed our belief that it was fate that brought us together. Fate that had put us together as neighbors and turned us into lovers. My mom called me the day she received the Save the Date card. Turns out, my grandparents married on the same day. It was then that I knew we were always going to find each other. A simple game of Pin the Sticker on the Date, and we picked the same month and day as my grandparents.

Today's that day. October eighteenth. The day I get to marry the man I love. Also, the day that I get to tell him a little secret I've been carrying around for the last few weeks. My hand goes to my stomach. Today, Bryce will find out he's going to be a dad.

God help us all, but I am in a dress. Vicki, of course, is really excited about me in a dress. It took a lot to get me into the bridal stores, but I did it. I'm dolled up in a beautiful white satin gown with a mermaid cut. My hair's pulled back into a gorgeous relaxed twist at the nape of my neck. The hair coils around itself and has a floral comb made of rhinestones and pearls that nestles into the twisted bun. I'm officially ready to walk down the aisle. My parents and my future in-laws have been coming in

and out of the room all day. I haven't had one minute of privacy or time to relax, so I finally kicked everyone out until I was ready.

Well, I'm ready.

I stand outside the entrance to the chapel with my father, waiting to go inside. Vicki and Austin make their way down the aisle, and the ushers close the doors so I can get in place. My nerves have me shaking and my stomach in knots.

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“You look beautiful, Katrina. I love you. I’m so happy you found Bryce. He’s a good man.” My dad brings me in for a hug, careful not to smudge my makeup.

“The hair dad, the hair. If you mess it up, there will be consequences.” I giggle.

“Oops. Sorry,” He smiles and kisses my forehead. “You ready?”

I take a deep breath and nod. “Yes, I am.”

The doors open, and a weird thing happens. Everyone disappears. There’s no one but the man at the other end of the aisle. All I see is Bryce standing there, waiting for me. He’s in a black tuxedo, and he looks beyond sexy in it. His eyes are glassy and red. Bryce and I lock eyes while I walk down the aisle. The man I’m about to marry, the man I love, the man who is about to become a dad, is staring back at me with nothing but love in his eyes. When I get to the alter, I notice a small tear fall from his eye.

“Is that a happy tear?” I ask, smiling at him.

“I didn’t think it was possible, but yes. It’s a happy tear for my beautiful bride.” Bryce wipes his eye and sniffles.

My dad gives me away and Bryce takes my hand. As I stand before him, the officiant begins the ceremony. We each say our vows, promising that we’ll love each other forever. After that, we’re pronounced husband and wife.

Bryce leans forward and kisses me, gently sweeping his tongue against mine. The moment his lips touch mine, the world around us fades away. It’s just us, husband

and wife. Bryce and Kat. My hands move to touch his face. I can't believe this is real, I feel like I'm dreaming. When Bryce does finally pull back, the world comes back into view. Cheers erupt all around us from our family and friends. We turn toward them hand in hand and make our way back down the aisle. Now, it's time to celebrate.

The ballroom where our reception is being held is beautifully decorated. Huge crystal chandeliers hang from the high ceilings, flowers adorn the each table that our guests sit at, and the tables are covered in a beautiful champagne tablecloth. Black chair covers with a champagne ribbon tied around cover the chairs. The table for the wedding party sits in the front of the room with a white table cloth and chairs on one side. Austin is Bryce's Best Man and Vicki was my Maid of Honor, so they will be joining us at our table.

During the reception, Bryce and I have little time to do anything. We go from person to person, thanking them for being here. Everyone there congratulates us, telling us what beautiful a couple we are. All our guests are having a great time eating, drinking, and dancing.

It's a beautiful wedding, and it's ours.

"Can I get everyone to clear the dance floor, please? It's time for the bride and groom to have their first dance." the DJ announces over the loudspeakers. Everyone clears the floor, and Bryce drags me to the center. I instantly feel hot, and I can tell my cheeks are flushed. My nerves start to get the better of me.

"I don't know if I can do this, Bryce." I look at him, shaking my head and biting my lip. My throat is closing up, and I can feel beads of sweat starting to drip down the back of my neck. "Everyone's staring." My eyes dart all around us.

"Because it's a wedding, baby. Just focus on me. Remember that night when we danced for the first time in your apartment?" Bryce asks, and I nod. He smiles,

adding, “Just think of us back there, dancing to our song. Except this time, we’re really dressed up and there’s an open bar.” That last line manages to make me laugh and relax a bit.

“Okay,” I finally cave. Bryce takes my hand, spinning me around the floor, and we dance to our song. In Case You Didn’t Know. People around us have their cameras out, taking pictures of us. But as we move around the floor, it’s just Bryce and me. The rest of the world doesn’t exist.

“Bryce, I need to tell you something.” I say, biting my lip.

Bryce narrows his eyes, asking, “What is it?” I can tell he doesn’t like my approach. Okay, time to rip off the band-aid.

“I found something out today. Something big,” I pause for dramatic effect. Also, to rile him up a bit. Yeah, I said rip off the band-aid, but it’s also fun to ruffle his feathers.

Removing my hand from his, I place it on my belly and meet his eyes with mine. I don’t say a word, letting him connect the dots. He looks down at my hand, confused. Bryce tilts his head to the side a bit, trying to figure out what I’m trying to say. Suddenly, his eyebrows nearly shoot up to his hairline. His eyes are as wide as saucers and his mouth drops open.

“Y-you’re ... there’s ... we ... pregnant?” Bryce can’t form a sentence, but I nod at him anyway, grinning from ear to ear.

“Congratulations, Officer Hawthorne. You’re going to be a daddy.” A steady stream of tears now flows down my cheeks, and I can see the water well in Bryce’s eyes too. He drops to his knees in the middle of the song and places his head and hand on my stomach.

“We’re having a baby.” He looks up at me, and I confirm his words with another eager nod. “We are having a baby!” I see his shoulder shake as he cries—happy tears, of course. A few minutes later, I notice the music has ended, and the DJ hasn’t put on a song yet. Everyone has gathered around us, waiting for confirmation on what they think is going on.

Bryce jumps up and yells, “We’re pregnant!” Our family and friends immediately go bat shit crazy. He picks me up and spins me around, then sets me on my feet. “We’re pregnant.” he repeats, but softly and only to me this time.

“Yes, we are.” I throw my arms around his neck and bring his forehead to mine.

“Kat, I love you so much.” Bryce takes his hand and places it on my stomach again. “You’ve given me so much already, and now you’re carrying our baby.” He tears up again. I kiss him softly, smiling against his lips.

“I love you too, Bryce.”

“I will never forget the day I walked into that coffee house. The second I laid eyes on you, I knew I had to find out more about you. I had to get to know you. As fate would have it, you turned out to be my neighbor. I remember how excited I got just knowing I could see you again. I never imagined in a million years that moment would lead us here.” Bryce takes his thumb and wipes my eyes and cheeks, chuckling. “They say true love doesn’t have an ending, and ours doesn’t. Simply put, because I’ll love you forever.”

“If I did anything right in my life, it was giving you my heart, Bryce.”

We’ve both been through a lot and had our fair share of difficulties testing us, but we’ve always found our way back to each other. I married the man of my dreams, the man who protects me and keeps me safe. I married the man who loves me unconditionally. I married the man who took my breath away the moment he stepped

foot in a coffee shop.

I married the man who turned out to be my neighbor all along.

The End.