



Waiting  
Lower Story

# Ghosts of the Canyon

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# MICHELLE MANKIN

VIET CONG

# Ghosts of the Canyon

**MICHELLE MANKIN**

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Cover: Lori Jackson Design and Danielle Leigh  
Cover photo by @rafagatalafx  
Editing: Pam Berehulke  
Rebecca at Fairest Reviews Editing Services  
Proofreading: Lawrence Editing  
Formatting by Elaine York at [Allusion Publishing](#)

# Table of Contents

[About the Book](#)

[Trigger Warning](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)  
[Chapter 37](#)  
[Chapter 38](#)  
[Chapter 39](#)  
[Chapter 40](#)  
[Chapter 41](#)  
[Chapter 42](#)  
[Chapter 43](#)  
[Chapter 44](#)  
[Chapter 45](#)  
[Chapter 46](#)  
[Chapter 47](#)  
[Chapter 48](#)  
[Chapter 49](#)  
[Chapter 50](#)  
[Chapter 51](#)  
[Chapter 52](#)  
[Chapter 53](#)  
[Chapter 54](#)  
[Chapter 55](#)  
[Chapter 56](#)  
[Chapter 57](#)  
[Chapter 58](#)  
[Chapter 59](#)  
[Chapter 60](#)  
[Chapter 61](#)  
[Chapter 62](#)  
[Chapter 63](#)  
[Chapter 64](#)  
[Chapter 65](#)

[Chapter 66](#)  
[Chapter 67](#)  
[Chapter 68](#)  
[Chapter 69](#)  
[Chapter 70](#)  
[Chapter 71](#)  
[Chapter 72](#)  
[Chapter 73](#)  
[Chapter 74](#)  
[Chapter 75](#)  
[Epilogue](#)  
[About the Author](#)

# About the Book



Welcome to the year 1969, a tumultuous year when the world and rock 'n' roll were changing. Woodstock, war protests, free love, it's all there, plus a rollercoaster romance that will have you frantically flipping pages to discover who this heroine chooses.

What Katelyn Love longs for most of all is a child. Someone to shower with the affection she never received from her parents. Haunted by a heartrending tragedy, she has to give up on those desires and her musical dreams.

Liam Hart is a big rock star. But the adoration of thousands of fans isn't enough. He wants Katelyn's love, for her to long for him like she once did, but he lost her and doesn't know how to get her back.

Ryan Chance is a handsome and talented up-and-coming musician, the talk of LA Canyon. Just home from Vietnam, he arrives in Los Angeles, hoping to escape the pain of his past. His singular goal is to become a rock star. Success in the music business won't erase his sins, but it's his sole focus...until he meets Katelyn.

Two compelling men want to make Katelyn their own. One believes love means possession. The other doesn't understand love at all, but he knows her. Which one of them will tear down the wall around Katelyn's heart, setting her free to live and love again?

*Ghosts of the Canyon* is a historical romance tapping into timeless themes that will surprise you and maybe even make you cry. Don't read it if you are in the mood for a romantic comedy. But if you're searching for a sizzling romance with lots of sensual tension that will slam your emotions and send your spirit soaring, step back in time with Katelyn, Liam, and Ryan.



Some subject matter may trigger sensitive readers. There is a listing available on the [author's website](#).

# Prologue



1973

Katelyn

“I can’t believe he’s dead,” I say, my voice echoing within the waiting area connected to airport customs.

Deep, mournful peals toll inside me. One man is gone forever, and the other is completely lost to me. I feel empty and wrong without the two men who had at one time filled my life with meaning.

“It’s hard to believe. Difficult for all of us.” Barney Finegold studies me closely, much like I’m doing to him. “You look good, all things considered.”

“Thank you,” I say carefully, smoothing my long hair with hands that tremble.

In my haste to get to the airport, I didn’t stop to waste time on my appearance. I dressed quickly and got in my car. The entire drive from LA Canyon to the airport was a panicked blur.

“It’s been a while,” I say. “You look good too.”

“You’re being kind.” The band manager’s features soften. “I know I look like shit.”

“A little older.” I tilt my head, noting more gray in the older man’s curly hair than the last time I saw him.

“You haven’t changed at all,” he says after trailing his bloodshot hazel gaze over me.

Barney is both right and wrong. Four years haven’t done much to alter me outwardly, but inside, everything is different. I’m more of a ghost in my own life than ever.

I shrug as if I’m unaffected in the aftermath of circumstances that separated me from the only two men I have ever loved. “I thought he was doing better.” Blinking quickly, I glance at the automatic doors again.

“I thought so too, or he seemed to be the last time I saw him.” Barney

puts his dark-framed glasses on top of his head and scrubs his tired eyes. The tour T-shirt he's wearing is as wrinkled as my purple minidress.

"When was that?" I ask gently.

"Just before he was scheduled to go onstage." Barney brings his glasses back down onto his large nose again.

"At the venue in Bogotá?" The knot in my gut tightens as I twist my hands together.

"Yes." He nods sadly.

"That's what's being reported."

Unable to sleep last night, I turned on the television and saw the news. When I found out what time their plane was landing, I came here.

More tears flood my eyes. I still can't believe it.

"What went wrong?"

"I don't know exactly." Barney's thin shoulders slump. "I wish I did." His expression is riddled with regret. "He was fine when I stuck my head in his dressing room. Complained about the schedule wearing him down. He hates touring now. Says it takes him too far away from you."

Barney gives me another pointed glance that I pretend not to see. He doesn't know exactly what went wrong between us. No one really does except those directly involved, and now that number has been reduced to only two.

"I don't think I factor . . . factored all that much in his decisions anymore." My throat closes as I make the correction.

Barney grimaces. "Touring is a grind, but he said he was handling it. I wanted to believe in a healthy way, but given his history with substance abuse, I shouldn't have trusted him."

Trusting him was my mistake as well, one of many, the final straw that eventually ended even our friendship.

I place my hand on Barney's shoulder. "It's not your fault," I say softly, offering him absolution that I can't seem to fully extend to myself.

"Isn't it?" His guilt-filled gaze meets my understanding one.

"No. It absolutely isn't." I shake my head emphatically. "Don't take on that burden. He is . . . He was . . ." I correct myself again, though doing so makes my throat tighten and my chest hurt. "He made his own decisions. You can't control an addict."

I give Barney the same advice the therapists have given me over the years, but honestly? The moment I heard the news, that old, familiar anger

assailed me.

He was in one of the most popular bands . . . he should have been on top of the world. He possessed everything he most wanted. All the women he craved were his to freely sample. He was living out his dream, so why try to escape it?

“Thanks for saying that.” Barney’s gaze sheens with wetness like my own. It’s going to take more than my words for him to forgive himself. “I wish I had done more.”

“You were the reason he agreed to rehab the last time.” I squeeze his shoulder and return my arm to my side.

“He was clean when we started the tour, as far as I knew.” Barney peers at me over the rim of his glasses.

He doesn’t ask how I know about the last rehab. It’s embarrassing how obsessively I comb through the entertainment news for tidbits. I remain far too interested in two men than I should be, although it’s only one now.

Barney lifts one shoulder. “But you can never really know, I guess. Once an addict, always an addict.”

I nod tightly, having gained experience I wish I hadn’t. Except now that he’s gone, those experiences are the sum total of all I will ever have.

Cold, I wrap my arms around myself. My memories don’t bring me comfort. I knew how he was. I loved him. There is a part of me that always will, but my love wasn’t adequate, certainly not enough to change him. The wetness in my eyes overflows as I realize I will never have another hug from him or another conversation. I’m not prepared. This shouldn’t be the way his story ends. The terrible hollow ache inside my heart expanding, I miss him. I mourn everything that is lost, even his anger toward me.

“How is . . .” I stop myself from saying *his* name. Whenever possible, I try not to. “How is the rest of the band holding up?” My inquiry is directed at Barney, but my focus remains on the glass doors.

“They’re jet-lagged. Sad as fuck. In shock, as you can imagine.” He uses his middle finger to push his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose. “No one spoke a single word the whole fucking flight.”

“Bogotá to LA,” I say low. “That’s a long time.”

“Fourteen hours, normally.” He shrugs. “Longer since we were stuck on the tarmac waiting out thunderstorms.” His bushy brows pull together over his nose as he studies me. “Does he know you’re here?”

“I don’t think so.”

My heart hammers at his reference to a man who inhabits too many of my thoughts. We haven't spoken to each other since that last time when he pushed, and I pushed back harder, finally accepting that I was to him what I was to everyone, a byline to the world's biggest band.

The automatic doors hiss as they open, and my eyes burn in anticipation. Every molecule in my body shimmers with longing as he appears.

Larger than life and more rock 'n' roll formidable than ever wearing only a suede jacket with shearling on the lapels and dark brown leather pants, he is so tall, his head nearly skims the top of the doorway.

My traitorous body leans toward him. The years haven't done anything to diminish my yearning. This man is and always will be the axis on which my desires rotate, no matter what lies I spin for myself.

Raking his thick hair out of his eyes, he sees me.

Both of us riveted, our gazes lock, and I feel that connection down to my bones.

Greedily, I take him in, everything I have missed. He demands attention. That handsome face, his rock-solid presence, those powerful arms that once held me, that strength I used to rely on. The air seems to be his to command. He pulls all the oxygen from the room, even the breath from inside me.

"Katy," he says low, and I crumple, sand on his shore as the memories crash over me. He takes a step toward me.

"No," I rasp, shaking my head. He is a threat to my emotional well-being. Even after all this time, my greatest desire is to be who he needs.

*I'm just here to say goodbye*, I remind myself. But deep down, I acknowledge there's a deeper reason, one that will inevitably get me hurt. I back away.

He stops. His brows crash together, a silent crescendo to our tragic song. Only a few feet separate us, but I feel every single inch as he frowns. I tell myself that I'm immune to his displeasure, immune to him, but it's a lie. And now, lies and memories are all I have.

I lift my chin. He doesn't need to know I wake up nearly every night longing for him.

Feeling a whoosh of humidity behind me, I tear my gaze away from the gravitational force of his, and then I go completely still when I see her.

*Vanessa.*

The beautiful cover model has him in a way I never did, or she does according to the media. Impeccably dressed, she looks like she stepped off

the cover of a magazine. Obviously, she took the time with her appearance that I didn't. Calling his name, she runs to him.

More tears assault me as he looks at me but opens his arms for her. He is everything I want. There is more than a part of me that remains his. But he doesn't want me like I want him, not now and not back then either.

Regrets spark flames. As a funeral pyre burns inside me, the past rises from the ashes.

# Chapter 1



1969

Katelyn

“When are you coming home?” I ask Liam.

My grip tight on the phone, I glance around the eclectic and somewhat cluttered interior of our bungalow nestled among the California laurels and pines. I’m looking for something to ground myself, but our house without her—despite my best efforts—is just a house and not a home.

“Not for another month.” He sighs. “RDA extended our tour.”

“Oh.”

I needed good news from him today, not bad. It has been three years since we lost our baby, but it’s become harder, not easier, to hold on to the pieces of me that remain. I need a distraction, need to get out of the house, to do something, anything. If not, I’m afraid my tiny, hard-fought-for pocket of air—the small amount where I can still breathe—will collapse.

Releasing a sigh of my own, I say, “I was expecting you home this Saturday.”

“For your birthday.” He remembers, not a given. A distance has opened between us since my miscarriage. “I want to be there, but fuck, I can’t, babe. They booked us a show.”

“Where?” I drop my disappointed gaze to the floor.

“New York.”

“I hate New York,” I mutter.

We fled there in the aftermath of our loss, hoping that a change of scenery would do us both good. It didn’t. The cold was as brutal as Calgary, the city too crowded. Buildings blocked the light and warmth of the sun. We drifted further apart, not closer.

“You didn’t really give it a chance.” Chastisement laces Liam’s tone. He means I didn’t reach for the life preserver he threw me.

We share grief over losing our baby, but he doesn't miss her like I do. She was only a concept to him, but to me she was everything.

"Come see me. We can do the touristy stuff we never did when we were residents." His voice softens. "You can bring your camera. Take photos. Finish out the tour with me."

"I can't."

The truth is I don't like going to his shows anymore. In the beginning, when Liam formed his band, I helped him. It gave me something to do that occupied my time and peripherally involved music.

I talked to club owners. I booked his gigs. I even designed the fliers. I was considered a member of the band, though I was mostly behind the scenes.

But now, he has managers and assistants, an entire team to do for him what I once did all by myself. Plus, his fans are mostly women. They don't like me. In my lower moments like today, I suspect that my fears regarding them are more real than fictional.

No. I yank back hard on that thought before it can reach the inevitable conclusion. Liam loves me. We struggle to connect nowadays because of my sadness and his apathy, but he would never betray me.

"Why not?" he asks, and he doesn't usually press. He lets me wallow. It's easier that way for both of us.

I search for a convenient excuse. "Maureen is throwing a party for my birthday."

"You hate parties."

I hate parties now. Everything changed after losing our baby, especially me.

My throat closes. Tears building, I close my eyes. Sometimes I find it difficult to remember why anything matters.

"Katelyn," he says urgently. "Are you still there?"

"Yes." I follow his voice out of the darkness. Opening my eyes, I blink rapidly and swallow to loosen my throat. "I'm here."

I force myself to breathe. In my small and solitary space, there's oxygen, but only the bare minimum to sustain life. Maureen knows. She sees. I'm a shadow of the woman I once was.

"Barely there," he says accurately.

"I'm okay by myself. It's quiet."

Without Liam watching me, it's easier to pretend there's no problem with



me or with us. I curl my fingers tighter around the hard plastic phone receiver.

“It’s not healthy. You should get out more,” he says. “Not just listen to music, but maybe consider playing your guitar again.”

“I’m going to Love Street.” There’s a sharpness to my tone, a warning for him not to take his criticism further. I will never play my guitar again or write lyrics or songs. Music involves accessing my feelings, and that’s not something I’ll ever be able to do again.

“Because your best friend talked you into it, no doubt.” He heeds my warning, abandoning me in the darkness, taking the easy way out.

I don’t blame him. I’ve pushed him away too many times.

“You’re my best friend,” I say, shaking my head. “Not Maureen.”

“Used to be.” Liam’s voice is angry and disappointed. He has reason to be.

“Still are.” Feeling guilty, I try to make the truth out of a lie.

“Who’s performing?” He recognizes the lie but changes the subject.

I have my ways of avoiding the situation between us; he has his methods too.

“Someone new,” I say. I don’t remember his name. I wasn’t really paying attention to Maureen when she told me.

“A group?” he asks. “Or a solo performer?”

I squint, trying to recall. “A new guy everyone is talking about.”

“Did you hear back from Dr. Maale?”

“Not yet, Liam.” I blow out a frustrated breath. “I just went in to have all those tests last week. Why all the questions?”

“I just wanted to hear your voice. I miss you.” He lowers his voice. “Do you miss me?”

“Yes.”

I miss the man Liam used to be, just like he misses the old version of me. I do too. But sadly, I fear we’re too far apart to find our way back to those people, or to be the couple we were before.

“I worry about you,” he says softly, and my fingers tighten around the phone.

His concern used to wrap me up like a blanket. Now it’s just another thing that suffocates me.

“I’m okay,” I say quickly. “No need to worry.”

But that’s a lie, a sad one that we both ignore, even though we don’t

believe it.

## Chapter 2



Liam

“Fuck!” I slam down the phone receiver.

Drawn to the darkness outside my hotel suite that now mirrors my current mood, I stomp toward the window. I’m frustrated and irritated after disappointing Katelyn yet again.

“Come back to bed.” The bitch with huge tits that I chose from the groupie lineup beckons.

I already had sex with her. And now, as I expected, I’m far from satisfied. I have absolutely zero interest in doing her again. The woman I really want on my cock is in our house in LA Canyon.

“No, babe.” I rake a frustrated hand through my blond hair. “Grab your stuff and get out, yeah? I have work to do.”

Actually, I have more worrying to do about Katelyn. She’s lost too much weight lately. She barely eats, hardly sleeps. She’s fading away right in front of my eyes, and I don’t know what to do about it. I worry she’ll disappear completely if this tour goes on another month.

“I’m done playing,” I tell the girl.

Picking up on my vibe, thank the God my old man repeatedly invoked during my childhood to belittle me, she climbs out of bed and gathers her clothing strewn across the floor.

I see her reflection in the glass. I don’t feel guilty about cheating on Katelyn. In my mind, she cheated on us three years ago when she got pregnant. She was too young to be a mom, and we were too poor. I warned her that being parents would change us. It did in the end, in the worst fucking way possible.

Depressed now like Katelyn, remembering losing our baby three years ago on this day, I flop my ass into an easy chair next to the window. I scowl at my guitar, ignoring it like Katelyn does her own, as well as me and my

needs lately.

I sift through the few leftover pills inside the glass bowl on the coffee table. The pink ones usually help me forget. After popping a couple of capsules in my mouth, I wash them down with what's left in my beer bottle.

I stare down at the city street below. Waiting for the pills to work their pharmaceutical magic, I watch cars crawl along. I wonder, like I often do, what Katelyn is doing. I miss her, miss the way she used to be and the way we once were.

Laying my head back against the cushion, I close my eyes. I exhale a relieved breath when I hear the door to my hotel suite click closed.

The groupies don't work any better than the pills. If I had a time machine, I would go back to before Katelyn got pregnant. I liked us then.

With my eyes closed, I can see Katelyn and how she looked at me the first time I saw her, and it makes my cock stir inside my boxers.

I remember her long blond hair swirling around her pretty face and those expressive gray-blue eyes of hers twinkling excitedly. We were both in line outside, waiting to get into the same popular Calgary club. We talked, bonding right away over our shared love of music, and shortly afterward, we moved in together.

In the beginning, our goals were in sync. We made our careers a priority and both obtained residencies at the club where we met. Performing was something we were both addicted to, though for different reasons.

For Katelyn, it validated her choices, since moving to Calgary and pursuing a music career was something her conservative-minded parents never supported. Older than her by nine years, I was past the point of caring about what my parents—mainly my father—or anyone else thought. Being center stage under the spotlight then and now satisfies something inside me like nothing else does, except for Katelyn.

My lips curving, I open my eyes.

I still have Katelyn's adoration, and my woman is gorgeous. Her mouth is positively sinful. Her skin is creamy soft. Her voice is straight-up seduction, and her curves are inspirational, even now, as thin as she is. Other men can be inspired by Katelyn. They can look at her, but they can't touch her. She belongs to me.

I might not still have Katelyn the way I used to, but I still have her. It might not be like it once was between us, but she still purrs when stroked, only for me. I like knowing I have that power over her.

As I imagine her naked, my cock gets so hard, it throbs. I want to sink it inside her and meld her body to mine, but I can't have sex with her until the extra tour dates the label added are completed.

On my own, all alone, the suite doesn't feel right. Truthfully, I don't feel right without Katelyn.

## Chapter 3



Ryan

“Who is that?” I ask, my gaze locked on the beautiful blonde standing on the sidewalk. A ray of golden California sunlight beams down on her, and yet somehow, she outshines it.

“Why do you want to know?” Maureen Gabriel raises an inquiring brow after following the direction of my gaze.

Knowing everyone in LA Canyon, the owner of Love Street is understandably curious about my interest. In all the time I’ve been performing at her place, I’ve never asked her about any woman. But there’s something about this one that intrigues me.

Just on the other side of the plate-glass window, the beauty uses her camera to snap photos of those waiting in line to come inside Love Street to see me perform.

My heart goes absolutely fucking haywire inside my chest as I watch her. With only the glass separating us, she is close but not as close as I suddenly want her to be.

“No reason,” I force myself to say lightly.

*Lie.* Lots of reasons.

I let my gaze and my imagination roam as the gentle breeze I enjoyed on my short drive to the store sifts through the long, golden strands surrounding her pretty face.

*Is her hair as soft as it looks, or her body as sexy as it seems to be beneath her clothing?* Her orange corduroys and canary-yellow blouse are what first caught my attention. But it’s the woman wearing those colors who has me riveted.

“She’s not one of your groupies.”

“I can tell.” But I imagine having her anyway.

My little fantasy comes to an abrupt, screeching, needle-across-vinyl end

as a guy she seems to recognize approaches her.

*Who is he?*

I bristle in irritation when the guy leans in and says something to her. She pays far too much attention to him, and anger surges. My hands form fists at my sides.

*What relationship does she have with him?*

“Don’t set your sights on her.” A warning like radio static crackles in Maureen’s normally smooth voice.

“Not setting my sights on anyone.”

Another lie. This woman is all I can or want to see right now.

But I crank the dial down on my interest. Women are for only one thing. I’m up front with them about it, and I make certain every encounter is mutually beneficial. But looking at this one, it takes me a few moments to remember the reasons why.

Tearing my gaze away, I place her in the same category as the others. “She’s a pretty piece.”

Maureen’s lips purse in displeasure. “She’s no one’s piece.”

“How so?” Undeniably intrigued, I take another look.

As the blonde enters the store, the bell above the door jingles, and my mind goes to the movie where a ringing bell heralds an angel’s wings being granted. This one reminds me of a celestial being with her golden coloring, perfect features, and incandescent glow.

I growl under my breath when I notice that I’m not the only one staring at her. *No one’s piece, my ass.* There’s no way this woman isn’t already claimed.

With her silvery-moon-and-ocean-blue eyes, her full lips, and that sunshiny aura, she isn’t only sky-and-sea stunning, she seems familiar somehow. But I quickly dismiss the notion that I’ve seen her somewhere before. If I had, I wouldn’t have forgotten.

“I call her the ghost of the canyon.” Maureen’s commentary breaks into my reverie. “Pisses her off. But at least I get a rise out of her.”

“Why call her that?” I shift my large frame toward Maureen while my gaze continues to follow the blonde.

“She knows why.”

“What the hell?” I frown in confusion.

“You want to know her secrets?” Maureen’s hazel eyes begin to twinkle for reasons only she knows. “You can ask her. But not right now.” She taps

my forearm. “Time to play for your supper, boy.”

“Right, Auntie.”

I’m not younger than Maureen by much, but I rush to obey. She’s my boss and is at the top of the music business that I want to break into.

Hearing her band on the radio and knowing where she lived, I left behind steady carpentry work on the East Coast. Being here is a chance to do something different with my life. It’s a fresh start, a necessary one.

Making my way toward the makeshift stage in the corner of her shop, I stop at the wall beside it where I left my guitar earlier. I place my case on the wide window ledge and click open the worn latches that got even more banged up during my cross-country trek.

While getting ready, I continue to track the blonde. There’s no sun inside the shop, obviously, but that nimbus continues to glow.

What is the source of that light? Does it ever go out? Is there a way to make it glow brighter? And more importantly, why do I want to know?

“You’re in for a treat,” Maureen says to the crowd from center stage with her bejeweled fingers wrapped around the mic.

Recognizing my introduction, I refocus on the task at hand.

I need this gig. Sure, I have a little residual income trickling in from dear old Uncle Sam, but in California, it takes a lot more than a little money to make ends meet. I can’t afford any missteps. I need every single one of my performances to go well. Label reps often frequent Love Street.

“Back by popular demand,” Maureen says, pausing to wink at me, “I give you Ryan Chance.”

I raise my hand to acknowledge her introduction and the polite applause of the crowd.

Throwing my guitar strap over my shoulder that bears the names of my fallen brothers in arms, I stride onto the stage that’s actually only plywood over a bunch of milk crates. It’s a humble beginning for now, but soon it will be more. It has to be. I’m determined to be a success, though I know it won’t make up for my failures.

“Hello, Love Street,” I say with my mouth near the microphone, pitching my voice lower.

That gets the blonde’s attention. She snaps her head my way as if I’d called her name. Her turbulent gaze crashes with my curious one, and my skin—hell, my entire body—goes completely electric.

*Fucking hell.* I wonder how high that voltage would go if I touched her.



Her eyes flare slightly.

I desperately want to know what she's thinking, but she drops her gaze before I can get a read. I tell myself that's fortunate and offer gratitude to a god I no longer believe in after a tour in Vietnam. Women with angelic auras aren't for a bound-for-hell type of guy like me, no matter how compellingly packaged.

When I strum the first chord, my body relaxes. Music washes away my sins. It's my slice of heaven here on Earth. Music rescued me from the brink of madness.

Cranking a machine head on my guitar, I adjust the tuning and let my gaze wander over the audience. I make it a habit to connect with them as I prepare to bare my soul. But tonight, I'm distracted and allow my gaze to follow Maureen's ghost some more.

At the back of the room, she skirts the periphery of the crowd, moving with mesmerizing grace. Her body has gentle curves, but it's also lean and tight. I imagine removing her clothing and doing things to loosen her up.

But my irritation spikes again as another guy beckons and she joins him. I'm too far away to catch her name or hear what he says to her. Whatever it is, thankfully, she doesn't stay with him long.

Bringing her camera's viewfinder up to her eye, she retreats and snaps more photos. She avoids a summons from another guy, and it hits me.

Her camera is a buffer. With it up and in use, she's on one side of the lens, and everyone else is relegated to the other.

Her expression relaxes as she takes pictures. Taking photos, she's in her comfort zone, like I am when I'm playing my guitar. I prefer to be alone on the side of the line I've drawn too.

"You going to stand there gawking at her or you gonna play?" Maureen growls under her breath as she bumps my shoulder with hers. She's near my weight but a foot shorter, and I'm a big guy. She doesn't budge me. However, the plywood sags beneath us.

"I'm going to sing."

I snap myself the fuck out of it, deciding the blonde isn't a ghost. She's a witch who has put a spell on me.

So, she's pretty. There's plenty of pretty pussy to go around.

Chicks who dig the scene flock to LA Canyon and the artists and musicians who make it our home. Some of the younger ones do it to defy their parents. I'm careful to steer clear of those. Not that I'm much over legal

age, but I have some standards. Girls must be legal to ride my magic penis.

“Thanks, Auntie.” I give her a respectful chin lift.

Maureen is talented. She made it big. She could, but she hasn’t forgotten where she came from. She’s in the limelight but shares that light to help up-and-coming artists.

“You’re welcome, sweetie.” Maureen gives me a chin lift back. The warmth in her expression is palpable, even for a hell-bound guy like me.

What you see with her is what you’ll find underneath. She’s an auntie to everyone in the community. She’s no ghost. She’s the living, breathing heart of the canyon.

• • •

## Katelyn

I heard the murmurings about Maureen’s new performer before she called and insisted I come check him out.

They say his music is different. That he’s good on the piano and with his harmonica, but even better on his guitar. Talk is that his lyrics tell a story.

That piqued my curiosity. I love music, but lyrics are that next level. Revealing soul deep truths, they are the steppingstones to enter the cathedral where I used to worship. Nowadays, the door to enter that sanctuary is closed to me.

As Ryan strums his guitar, his brown eyes soften, their surface sparkling like morning dew glistening on sun-kissed earth. Listening to him, I find my sadness receding. The grip around my heart loosens. I don’t struggle so much to breathe.

Who is he? Where did he learn to play with so much emotion in each strummed chord? And what is it about him that seems strangely familiar?

“Hey.” Maureen taps my arm, startling me out of my thoughts.

I frown. I love my friend, but I resent the intrusion. Unexpectedly, Ryan Chance has provided just the distraction I needed tonight. But why? What is it about him?

Tilting my head, I study Ryan some more. He is handsome with those brown and heavily lashed eyes, only not typically, certainly not like Liam. His features are strong. He’s tall. He has a formidable presence.

The man and his music are an invasion. Normally, I’d retreat from

anyone so forceful or anything that makes me feel, but I'm drawn to him somehow and find myself leaving my usual place in the back of the room.

"What do you think?" Maureen asks, moving beside me.

"Yeah." I nod. I know that doesn't answer her question, but I can't put into words how Ryan and his music have affected me. I only know they have.

Watching him, she says, "He has some serious skills."

I agree. My legs are trembling. My skin is hot. My scalp and other parts of me are crackling like a live wire. Suddenly, I feel more alive than dead. And I've been like this since he locked eyes with me.

Ryan plays his guitar like it's a woman he knows intimately. I wonder if he's that good at other instruments. But then he begins singing. His voice is crack-open-your-chest, pour-warm-liquid-elixir-into-it powerful. It demands to be heard, yet it also coaxes.

*I went to the edge of the world  
Looking for more  
While others found what they  
Were searching for  
I found nothing except sorrow*

*I returned to where I began  
I wasn't the same  
My time at the edge  
Had changed me  
Not feeling no more, baby  
Gotta keep on going, baby*

*Here I am at this place  
Asking for a reason  
Looking for the rhyme  
I need someone to explain  
Want to know the reasons why*

*My time on this earth  
Does it matter  
Caring means losing  
Trying leads to failing  
Hurting bad. It's dark here, baby*

*Lost, gotta let you go, baby  
This is my goodbye*

Shocked, I go completely still, as does everyone else around me. He has us all transfixed.

My soul vibrates like a tuning fork, and a long-abandoned desire arises within me. Through his music, Ryan expresses his feelings like I once did. Powerful feelings powerfully presented, his hurt resonates with me. Did he find those answers? A remedy for his pain? Curious, I need to know more. I wonder for the first time in years what it would be like to sing again, to play my guitar, only not alone with him.

Maureen shifts, her mouth near my ear as she says softly, “Ryan asked about you.”

“What about me?” I ask, continuing to stare. With Ryan’s gaze on mine, I can’t look away. I don’t want to look away when it seems like he’s singing directly to me.

His second song is about a boy offering a girl a smile that lasts a long while. That smile is a clever euphemism that will slip past censors and antiquated sensibilities should it ever get airplay. And it deserves radio airplay. With Maureen behind Ryan, it won’t be long before that happens.

Ryan is young, talented, and sexy. He awakens artistic and sexual longings that I no longer acknowledge or indulge in. Not fully. I’m near the same age as he is, but I feel much older. I’m certainly no ingenue like I was when I first met Liam and got swept off my feet.

Though that isn’t what is happening here. Ryan isn’t onstage singing his song for me. He is just one of those performers who has an innate ability to reach each person in his audience to make them believe that what he’s doing is only for them.

But that’s a musician’s parlor trick. Like so many other things in life, it’s not real. I know all too well how putting your faith in how things appear to be rather than how they truly are will disappoint you.

## Chapter 4



### Ryan

“Good performance tonight,” Maureen says, appearing only moments after I send away the last fan who had been waiting in line to get my autograph.

“Better than good.” I smirk.

“Don’t get all cocky just because women like you.” She shakes her head, her brown hair skimming her shoulders.

“Plenty of men in the audience tonight too,” I say to Maureen as I crook my finger at the groupie.

Her eyes brightening, the girl pushes away from the wall and comes closer. “Hey, Ryan.” She licks her red lips.

“Hi.” I secure tonight’s quick hookup choice but glance around the store again.

This blonde is not *the* blonde I really want, but the ghost has vanished. I noticed her slipping out the door during my third encore. I knew the exact moment she left because she held my attention the entire show, a potential distraction that felt like way more than a distraction.

Did she know I sang each song just for her tonight? It was a total trip how she seemed to hang on every word. I wasn’t simply trying to connect to the audience with my music. I was attempting to connect with her.

“You have some talent,” Maureen says.

“More than some.” I drape my arm around the woman who is warm and willing, but a disappointing companion.

I remind myself I don’t need to feel a connection to her or anyone else. I just need a distraction from my own dark thoughts for a little while.

“Arrogant boy.” Maureen rolls her eyes as she tucks the wad of cash that is my cut of ticket sales into the front pocket of my leather jacket. “Don’t spend that all in one place.”

“I won’t.” I blow through women before they can dig into my background

or figure out how fucked-up I am post 'Nam, but my cash I hold on to.

“You have plans Saturday night?” Maureen asks.

“No plans,” I say, wrinkling my nose at the blackness outside, framed by the store windows.

The night that awaits me after my brief diversion with the groupie will undoubtedly be as dark as the memories that will appear as soon as I close my eyes.

“Why? Do you need me to take Jackson’s place?” I keep my tone neutral, though my body vibrates with enthusiasm.

Monday is an okay gig. I’m grateful for the opportunity to play any night at Love Street, but Jackson has Saturday night. That’s top billing.

“No.” Maureen’s hazel eyes narrow. “You’re not ready for that.”

“I disagree.” My gaze clashes like cymbals with hers.

She slowly smiles. “Hold on to that confidence, boy. It’ll serve you well when nine out of ten record execs tell you your music stinks.”

“You gonna introduce me to some soon?” I toss back at her while filing away her advice. It jives with what I’ve been told by others.

“I just might. Eventually. But there will be no performances at Love Street on Saturday. I’m throwing a party for the ghost.” She studies me closely. “You should come.”

“I don’t think so.” I’m tempted to go, but I’m going to settle for one-thing-only chicks. My current one shifts restlessly under my arm.

“Why not?” Maureen continues to scrutinize me. “Saw you staring at her your entire set.”

I shrug as if that wasn’t a big deal, but it was. And, apparently, Maureen noticed.

“More women than just Kate will be there.” Maureen taps her chin with a perfectly manicured nail.

“Kate?” The interest I thought I had managed to dial down cranks up to full volume now that I have her name.

“Who is Kate?” The groupie flutters her fake lashes at me.

“Katelyn Love,” Maureen says, her scrutinizing gaze still on me. “I call her Kate.”

“Nice name. Pretty girl. But she’s not my type.” The lie tastes like a sour apple Now and Later candy on my tongue.

Maureen shakes her head. “Don’t believe you.”

That makes two of us. I don’t believe me either.

“Ryan,” the blond chick whines. “Let’s go.”

She latches onto my waist, pressing her ample tits into my side. It’s a practiced maneuver. On any other day, it would probably get the response she wants. Right now, it does shit for me.

“Not tonight, babe.” I remove my arm, letting her go.

My dick is taking a siesta. I’ve completely lost interest in having sex with this woman. I only chose her because of her resemblance to Katelyn. I roll her name around in my mind.

And just like that, my cock is suddenly awake and raring to go again.

“But you said—”

“Changed my mind.” I cut off the groupie, stepping out of her reach before she can latch on again.

She pouts.

“You’re pretty,” I say because she is, and I’m not a complete jerk. “But I just remembered I have shit to do.”

Like jack off in my room while fantasizing about Katelyn Love.

“Okay. Maybe another time.” The groupie gives me an expectant look.

“Maybe.” I give it to her straight. “But probably not.”

I feel bad watching the hope die in her eyes, but it’s better that she knows right now not to form expectations. I will never be the type of guy to gain access to a girl under false pretenses. I’m not like the asshole who got my mom pregnant.

“Goodbye,” she says.

“Bye.” I watch her leave, then turn my attention to Maureen, making an on-the-fly decision that I want to make but probably shouldn’t. “I’ll come to your party.”

“Great.” Maureen nods, seeming unsurprised.

“You wanna give me your address?” I ask her.

“It’s going to be at Kate’s place, not mine. You can just park here and follow everyone else walking up the hill. It’s going to be the only place to be on Saturday night.”

“Got it.” I nod. “Thanks for the invite.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll lock up after you.” She points her chin at the door. “Be safe. Don’t do shit I wouldn’t do.”

“Night, Auntie.”

I don’t make any promises but head out the front door. I hear her click the lock behind me.

It's late. The sidewalk in front of Love Street is empty. The gentle breeze I enjoyed earlier is gone, but a pleasing fragrance fills the air from whatever flower is currently blooming in the canyon.

I fish my keys out of the front pocket of my jeans as I walk to the parking lot. My 1948 Buick Roadmaster is the only remaining vehicle.

After placing my guitar in the back seat, I fold my large frame into the front one. I crank the key and music from the radio blasts me back. I chose the Roadmaster in case I ended up in an ensemble act and needed the extra space. My goal out here is to make a go of it solo, but I know the odds are stacked against me because of my half brother.

Tapping the steering wheel to the latest Aunties and the Uncles' hit, a song about Maureen's love of the fall, I back the Buick out. I'm aiming for the road, about to stomp on the gas, but slam on my brakes as someone stumbles in front of my car.

"What the hell?" Putting the car in park, I yank open my door and jump out to stalk across the pavement toward the ghost who's no ghost at all. "I almost hit you!"

Katelyn startles at my vehemence. My gut knots as I glance at my front bumper. There are barely two inches between her and it.

She blinks up at me. In the beams from my headlights, her moon-and-sea eyes are shiny, wet, and unfocused.

"You okay?" I ask, softening my tone. Though fuck if I know what to do if she says she isn't.

She shakes her head, and predictably, I'm at a complete loss. But my unease doesn't decrease. It increases as she backs away from me. I might not have a clue what to do to help her, but I know I'm going to try.

"Katelyn, hold up," I say firmly.

Stopping, she tilts her head. "How do you know my name?" Her voice is perfect and bell-like.

"Maureen told me," I say gruffly, though I think it should be obvious.

"Right." Some of the gathered tears slip free from her eyes.

"Why are you crying?"

"I'd better go."

She doesn't even seem to notice the drops that continue to fall, but I track each one. When a tear lands between her slightly parted lips, I lick my own. That connection that began when I was up on stage performing for her seems even stronger now with it being just the two of us.



She glances at Love Street. The building is dark. All the lights are out.

“Were you looking for Maureen?” I raise a brow.

“Yeah.” She nods.

“I think she’s already gone,” I tell her gently. She’s a ghost, but I don’t want to spook her. “But I can take you in my car around to the back of the store where she usually parks. If we can’t find her, I’ll give you a lift home.”

“I don’t want to go home.” She shakes her head, and that beautiful hair shimmers like the sun shining at night.

“I don’t either,” I say honestly. I just want to stare at her. More than stare.

“Why not?” She cocks her head, and the sun becomes liquid gold that flows over one slender shoulder.

“I share an apartment with three other guys. It’s crowded. After a show, I like to go somewhere and unwind alone.”

“I understand.” She glances away. “I’ll leave you to it.”

“But you didn’t want to go home,” I say to remind her, wanting to keep her here with me.

“What I want doesn’t really matter.” Seeming defeated, she drops her chin. Her long hair curtains her pretty face.

“It matters to me,” I say without thinking and realize it’s true. And fuck me. *Fuck me.* My heart starts beating fast. “You in some kind of trouble?”

If she’s in trouble, I already know I’m going to get involved.

She glances up at me. “No, just running from the past.”

I’m ensnared by her, by the hurt glistening in her grayish-blue eyes.

“Trying to run,” she says sadly. “Apparently, not fast enough.”

“I can understand that.”

Man, can I ever. I run that same race every night with the same disappointing results.

“Do you want . . .” I pause, swallowing hard. “Want to talk about it, I mean?”

“No.” Her chin comes up to a stubborn angle. “No way.”

“Me the fuck either.” I exhale in relief. “Wanna go somewhere?” An idea occurs to me, and I go with it. “Somewhere cool? Somewhere I was going before I almost ran you over?”

“I’m not sleeping with you.” She presses her lush lips into a thin line.

*Not yet.*

“I don’t remember asking you to have sex with me,” I say cockily.

She lifts her hands and plants them on her hips. “I have a man.”

“Okay.” I pretend that doesn’t matter, pretend I’m not looking at her tits. “Just asking you to hang with me, not asking for anything more.”

*Not yet.*

“I don’t know.”

When she nibbles her bottom lip, I bite back a groan, imagining those lush lips wrapped around my shaft.

“Maureen thinks I’m all right.” I give Kate a reference to push her past her indecision. “Plus, I almost ran over you. You owe me the pleasure of your company.”

“I’m more comfortable alone.” She wraps her arms around herself.

“So am I.” But I don’t want to be alone tonight, and I don’t want her to be either. “How about we give it a shot?”

“Give what a shot?” Her head cocks again.

“Being alone,” I tell her. “Not talking. Only tonight, we’re doing the alone thing together.”

## Chapter 5



Katelyn

“What are you doing?” I twist my hands in my lap as Ryan parks his Buick by the side of the road, but he doesn’t answer me. He’s driven us to the middle of nowhere in a vehicle that used to be a hearse. When I asked him why he chose the Roadmaster, he explained that it’s big, and he got it for a steal.

I shouldn’t be worried. Though there are tree limbs that hang over the vehicle like claws, I remind myself that Maureen likes Ryan. She doesn’t put any artist on her stage that she doesn’t. He seems open, and real or imagined, I feel a connection to him after listening to him sing. Each of his songs has a similar theme to that first one. He struggles with an inner pain so like mine that it was almost too difficult to hear the words.

I admire that he puts his emotions out there. He shares his truth in his music like I once did. But even so, it was impulsive of me to go with him. That sort of behavior is the old me. The old, old-before-Liam version, who packed up her meager belongings and left her rural home behind at the age of eighteen.

The now-me, however, is having second thoughts. I should have gone to get a drink with him in a crowded place, not gotten in the car alone with him.

“Get out,” he says, then glances at me when I jump in my seat. “Why are you freaking out?”

“Take me back to Love Street.”

He narrows his eyes at my demand. “You agreed to come.”

Oh, those thickly lashed chocolate-brown eyes. They contain hidden depths I want to explore. It becomes clearer why I got in the car with him.

“Why change your mind now?” Ryan says with a frown.

“Where are we?” I ask.

“We’re in Griffin Park.”

My eyes widen. Good place to bury a body, and conveniently, he has a hearse.

He rolls his eyes. "I'm not a psycho."

It's dark, but there's a full moon. I can see his features clearly, and he can undoubtedly see mine.

"That's something a psycho might say," I counter.

On the other hand, he was concerned about me earlier. A psycho wouldn't care about me or my feelings. Most guys would have run in the opposite direction from a woman with tears in her eyes.

Then there's his music. A man who writes lyrics like he does isn't crazy and is far from shallow.

The risk in my coming here isn't him. It's me. I'm far too curious about him.

I let out a sigh. "I know you're not crazy. But I still shouldn't have come."

"Why not?"

I sit up straighter. "I already told you my reasons."

His frown deepens. "Your man has you on a tight leash?"

I shake my head. "He doesn't have me on any leash."

"Maybe he should." Ryan's gaze drifts over my face. "You're very pretty. A guy can get ideas with you wandering around at night on your own. But on the other hand, you don't strike me as the type of woman to be controlled."

I like that he thinks I'm pretty and surprised he sees any strength to acknowledge. Too much of the time, I feel like I've fallen so far into sadness that I'm invisible. I needed to hear affirmation more than he knows.

"You're right." I nod once. "I make my own decisions."

"Good." He gestures. "So, we're already here. Decide to get out. I want to show you something."

"What?"

"I'll come around and let you out, and you can see for yourself."

"Okay."

My heart beats excitedly as he opens his door, and my gaze follows him as he rounds the hood. Ryan is a big guy. There's muscle packed on him, but he's agile too. Before my thoughts can wander more, he's already at my side, opening my door.

"Take my hand." He extends his arm, his palm up. "It's dark," he says when I don't move.

His hand is large and intimidating like the rest of him. But as I think about it, I realize I'm not intimidated.

"Thank you."

The choice is my own. I place my fingers in his. Warmth flows from him to me as his fingers close around mine.

"For what?" he asks.

"For offering me a choice and for acknowledging my strength, I guess." I give Ryan a furtive glance and bite my lip. "For not running in the other direction when I was obviously upset earlier."

"You made the decision to come with me, even though you were upset. The credit goes to you. Don't make me out to be some kind of hero."

He draws me out of the vehicle and reaches around me to close the door. His spicy and woody cologne heightens his masculine scent. It all swirls around me.

I'm a little lightheaded as he moves his hand to the small of my back. I feel more than warmth from his touch. I experience a tingling awareness.

Ryan is an attractive man. But it's strange to notice or feel anything like this when I haven't in such a long time.

"I'm just a guy who didn't want to be alone and wasn't really wanting to go home either." His jaw suddenly inexplicably tight, he adds, "Not yet, at least."

"Right. I understand." I'm a diversion for him, a temporary one. I give myself a good mental shake. The attraction I'm experiencing isn't only wrong, it's one-sided.

"C'mon."

He guides me with a firm touch that makes me melt. The mental shake didn't do any good, not with how close his fingertips are to touching my ass.

Distracted, I stumble on the uneven, unfamiliar ground beneath my feet.

"You all right?" He brings me to his side.

The strong arm he throws around me is meant to steady me, but it doesn't. He doesn't. Instead, he has turned my world upside down.

"Sure I am," I say breathlessly and pull away. "I just needed a moment for my eyes to adjust."

"The ground is smoother over here." He strides ahead. Stopping in front of a low hedge, he beckons. "Come see the view."

"Okay." I follow him, discovering that he's right. The ground is smoother.

“What do you think?” he asks when I move beside him.

Since he’s not looking at me, I trace with my gaze a granite jaw so roughly hewn that it crumbles my good sense. I swallow hard. I think maybe I am in trouble, despite my denial earlier.

“Beautiful, huh?” He turns to find me staring at him.

I nod. *Yeah, he is beautiful.*

“But you’re not looking at the view.” His head tilts.

Quickly looking where he was, I see why he brought me up here. My lips part. “Whoa.”

Los Angeles is spread out beneath us and twinkles like a Christmas tree on its side, its many branches draped in festive lights.

“How did you find this place?” I whisper. The height provides the perfect vantage point to see the entire city.

“I stumbled across it by accident when I came up here for . . .” He trails off, his jaw hardening.

“Came for what?” I ask.

“Reasons I don’t want to talk about,” he says roughly.

“It’s quiet.” I don’t pressure him for those reasons. I have my secrets too. “It’s a good thinking spot.”

Staring ahead, he says, “I do some thinking here.”

“About what?”

“Song ideas. And what I’ll do should anyone beyond the Love Street audience decide they want to hear them.”

“They’ll want to hear them,” I say with certainty. I know I want to.

“Maybe.” He shrugs his muscular shoulder.

Returning his gaze to the view, he squints as if the brightness below us hurts his eyes. His brow furrows beneath a thick swath of his brown hair.

Ryan carries some sort of heavy burden. That’s obvious since pain is such a common theme in his songs. I don’t know what happened in his past or what the cause of his pain is, but I recognize a fellow sufferer.

“You chronicle. You watch. You stand at a precipice apart from everyone else,” I say, musing. “You see the light. It pierces the darkness, but it can’t overcome it. You’re afraid maybe nothing will.”

Being with him, unexpected light trickles into my darkness. I’m aware of myself more than my surroundings and I have a sudden urge to write my words down.

“That’s deep and lyrical.” He gives me a long, assessing look. “Are you

quoting from a song?”

“No.” I shake my head.

I don’t write lyrics anymore. I don’t compose music. I don’t play piano, or my guitar, and I don’t sing. Those activities used to comfort me and her while she was inside me.

Before, I had so many plans for us. I would have shared my love of music with her, would have been the mother to her that I never had. I was too willful to be acceptable to my parents. But I would have accepted her just the way she was. I would have encouraged her. I would have lavished her with the love I never received from my parents.

Love was the key to transforming the apartment Liam and I once shared into a home. With her, we would have been a family. Now, Liam and I are just two individuals under the same roof, going through the motions.

I sigh. I can’t tell Ryan or anyone else that, but I share what I can.

“Being here and looking down there makes me wonder about the people inside all those buildings.” I search for more words, dipping my cup into the fountain inside my soul that I thought was dry. “They come to the West Coast like we all do, looking for a brand-new start. Our minds are full of ideas, our hearts bursting with dreams. Some rise to achieve them. Some fall. And some get left behind.”

“Did you get left behind?” he asks low, and I glance at him sharply.

“Yes.” I did, though there’s more to it than that. “It was my choice to stay. I like it here.”

“I like it too,” he says softly. “Especially now that I’ve met you.”

I don’t know what to say to that. But I like how it makes me feel warm and bright inside, like I did tonight when it seemed like he was singing only to me.

“What is your dream?” he asks, and for some reason, I don’t shut him out like I do everyone else when a conversation gets too deep.

“I don’t have one.” Not anymore. My dreaming died when she did. I feel the weight of his speculation even though I don’t look at him. “I enjoy taking photos of others pursuing their dreams.”

On the periphery, I’m a witness to, but not an actual participant in the lives being lived.

Maureen was right, and the realization rocks me. I *am* a ghost.

“Is that why you were taking photos at my show?” Ryan leans closer, but I pull back.

He's handsome, talented, and intriguing. He's gotten me thinking about something other than my own sadness. He's dangerous to my status quo.

Scowling, I say, "I thought we decided we weren't going to talk." I'm irritable, mostly with myself. I'm feeling things now, and as I expected, not all that I feel is good.

"Too late for that, Katy."

"We should go." I've already said way more to him than I planned, feel with him way more than is safe.

"All right." Ryan turns and gestures. "After you."

"We'll go together."

I retrace my steps, and though his legs are much longer, he slows his strides to keep pace with me. We're both quiet, thinking our own thoughts and not talking about them. It's a companionable silence, and for the first time in a long time, I don't feel so isolated or alone.

"Here we are." Ryan opens the passenger door. He didn't touch my back as we walked. He didn't reach for my hand. He trusted that I could manage the return trip to the car on my own after he showed me the way.

"Thanks," I murmur softly. "For not talking and everything else."

Nodding, he closes the door.

From my place in the passenger seat, I watch him round the hood.

There's no way he can know that today is one of the most difficult days of the year for me, but somehow, I think he suspects. He brought me here. He shared his alone spot with me. I think he wanted to try to understand me. Sometimes, I think more is said by actions and companionable silence than by a bunch of words.

"So, same time tomorrow night?" In the driver's seat, he turns and gives me an expectant look.

"Yes," I say without hesitation. More of handsome, intriguing, and affirming Ryan? "Absolutely."



## Chapter 6



Katelyn

“Let me buy you something,” Maureen says. “And don’t say another mirror. You have enough of those all over your place as it is.”

“I like mirrors.” I like taking photos and painting using them.

I shift away from the small framed mirror on a display shelf in my favorite secondhand store and peruse the items on the next one. A delicate crystal lamp with a pink silk shade catches my eye, and I trace the base.

“Let me buy that for you.”

“No.” I shake my head, even though I know it would look perfect on the piano.

“Kate.” She sighs. “It’s almost your birthday.” Placing her hands on my shoulders, she turns me to face her. Searching my gaze, she purses her lips. “Stop being difficult.”

“You’re throwing me a party,” I tell her. “You don’t need to do anything else.”

“I do things for you because I want to.” Making a face, she removes her hands from my shoulders and plucks the lamp off the shelf. Spinning around, she says, “I’m your best friend, and I feel bad that I wasn’t there for you when you came back by the store last night.”

“I’m not accepting a guilt offering, Reen.”

I chase after her as she practically runs to the cash register. She’s shorter than me by an inch, two times heavier, but her determination gives her superhero-like speed.

“What the hell happened with Ryan, anyway?” Refusing to be deterred, she places the lamp on the counter. Swiveling around while the young shopgirl rings her up, Maureen gives me a pointed stare. “You’re being awfully evasive about it.”

I’m not the only one being evasive. On the drive over, I tried to get

Maureen to share about her evening. She refused and changed the subject.

“This one is fifty cents,” the cashier says while removing the price tag.

“That’s too much to spend,” I say. “I don’t really need it.”

“It’s fine.” Maureen opens her wallet. “What good is having a bunch of money if you can’t spend it on the people you love?”

She waves my hand aside when I try to snatch the bill away from her. Taking the change from the girl, Maureen hands me the lamp.

“Thank you.” My fingers close around the base. The crystal beads on the pink shade shiver in my grip.

“You’re welcome.” She tucks her wallet away, and we exit the shop.

Outside, Maureen withdraws a big pair of pink sunglasses from her purse and puts them on. I do the same with a pair of my own. It’s midafternoon, and after all the crying yesterday, my eyes are overly sensitive to the light. Her eyes appear bloodshot too. Worried about the reasons for that, I move in front of her.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

“You’re not using again, are you?” I squint at her, trying to see her eyes beyond the shaded lenses.

After a long, drawn-out moment that makes my already nervous stomach muscles clench, she nods. “But it was only one time.”

That is never the truth.

“Peter is going to be pissed.” I’m pissed. I nearly lost her the last time she went on a drug binge.

“He doesn’t know.” Her chin drops. “He didn’t even come home last night.”

“Oh, Reen. I’m so sorry.”

I throw my arms around her and pull her close. Her husband is a serial cheater, but she won’t consider a divorce. It’s not only the social stigma of ending her three-year marriage that has stopped her; it’s the potential damage to her career.

Maureen’s husband is a co-singer in her band, along with her sister, Mandy, and her husband, Brian. But I believe the bigger reason Maureen doesn’t leave him, though she denies it, is that she’s still in love with Peter.

“It’s what it is.” She lifts her chin and blinks away the shine from her eyes.

“What it is stinks.” I squeeze her once more and ease back to look at her. Hurt and understanding, the same emotions swim in both our gazes.

“It blows. But we have each other.” Her expression lightens as she says teasingly, “And a lamp.”

Even though I can tell her lightness is forced, I go with it.

“We’re doing all right.” I give her a firm nod.

“Of course we are,” she says.

But we both know that’s not entirely true. She has her drugs. I have my pretending. We’re both in denial about our men. Our mutual love of music isn’t the only thing we have in common.

“You should confront Liam.” She grabs my hand and squeezes it.

“Because that went so well with Peter?” Frowning, I tug my fingers free.

“Liam isn’t Peter.” She shakes her head.

“Isn’t he?” Bitterness sours my tone.

“No.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Liam loves you.”

I don’t deny it. “Our situation is more complicated than that.”

“So, uncomplicate it.” She tilts her head as she studies me. “Unless you’re not invested anymore. Did you and Ryan—”

“No, of course not.” I cut her off, shaking my head vehemently. Knowing how it feels to be betrayed, I would never cheat on Liam.

“I saw how you were looking at Ryan, honey,” she says gently, and my stomach roils with guilt. “And that boy is definitely interested in you.”

“He’s a man,” I say quickly. “The same age as me.”

“Noticed all that, did you?” She arches a brow. “Where did you two go last night?”

“Griffin Park.”

She peers at me over the rim of her sunglasses. “That’s a big make-out spot, honey.”

“We didn’t go there for that. We just talked a little,” I say. “And he showed me the view.”

“Of him sans clothing?” she says with a playful leer.

“No.” I twist my hands together. My actions might not betray me, but my thoughts about Ryan do. “He’s easy to talk to.”

“Easy to look at, you mean.”

Frowning, I say, “Stop twisting my words around.”

“Are you seeing him again?” she asks, and I nod.

“But it doesn’t mean anything. I hang out with a lot of people.”

“You do,” she says. “Socially, in groups. But in all the time I’ve known you, I’ve never seen you spend time alone with anyone but me or Liam.”

I press my lips together. She's right.

"Be careful is all I'm saying." Her expression turns contemplative. "Get it straight in your mind what you want and what signals you're broadcasting. Because even if you don't plan to have sex with Ryan, I guarantee he's thinking about it."

## Chapter 7



Ryan

“Hey, Mom,” I say, taking the phone from my roommate.

He gives me the evil eye and walks off, scratching his ass and muttering about how fucking early it is.

“Is everything okay?” I ask her.

“I called too early again, didn’t I? The time zone messes me up.”

Apparently, she heard him. Hearing her voice doesn’t make me long for home, but I do miss my mother.

“It’s okay,” I tell her, blotting my face with the end of the towel draped around my neck. “Don’t sweat it. I was awake.”

“Still having nightmares?” she asks, her voice filled with concern.

“Sometimes,” I say, admitting to less than the full truth to keep from outright lying.

If I told her that I continue to have nightmares every night, reliving the chopper crash that resulted in me losing two of my best buddies, she would worry even more. She has enough to worry about. I send money home every week, but finances remain tight for both of us.

“What’s up with you?” I ask, changing the subject. We talk once a week, staying in touch, but usually only on weekends. Long-distance calls are too expensive.

“Your brother called me again.”

“I don’t have a brother,” I say, unconsciously clenching my teeth.

“Half brother,” she says carefully, knowing how I feel about it.

“What did Liam want this time?” Tension slices through me as sharp as the metal that tore apart my thigh.

“Nothing specific,” she says. “He just wanted to check on you.”

“I’m not so sure about that.” The reason why he suddenly seems to give a damn about me is a mystery. “Did you tell him what I told you to say?”

“Yes.” She sighs. “But he won’t take your money.”

“Fuck.”

I want my debt to him repaid. Liam showing up at the army hospital and footing the bill for me to see a private specialist was a nice thing to do. I probably would have had trouble walking without a limp after my injury if he hadn’t. But I’m not willing to forgive and forget. His helping when I was at my lowest doesn’t make up for the fact that he never acknowledged me or my mother before.

“Ryan Michael Chance.”

Mom chastises me using my full name, like she does every time I disappoint her. Chance is her last name. It’s the only one I’ve ever used. I will never take my biological father’s surname or anything else from him. He rejected my mom and me, so I reject him too.

“I cuss,” I grumble. “I’m not five anymore, Mom.”

She lets out a huff, sounding put out. “I’m well aware.”

“Sometimes I wonder if you realize I’ve grown up.”

“You’re all I have,” she says softly.

“I know.”

That guilt card she plays works. I’m a sucker for it. When Mom got pregnant, her family disowned her. At only eighteen, two years younger than I am now, she raised me all on her own. She has my love, respect, eternal gratitude, and anything else she needs.

I rake a hand through my hair, still wet from my shower. After tossing and turning the whole night, I finally got up and took care of the throbbing hard-on Katelyn caused. But I can’t think about that. Not while on the phone with my mom.

“Anything new to share with me?” she asks.

“No record deal yet,” I tell her, but I’ll be sending home a significant portion of my earnings.

“Liam could probably—”

“No. Not taking anything more from him. I’m my own man. If I make it, I make it on my own.” I gentle my tone. “Like you did.”

“Love you, Ryan,” she whispers. “Proud of you.”

“Proud of you too, Mom. Love you.”

My throat tight, I return the phone receiver to the cradle. Adjusting the towel around my waist, I retrace my steps to my bedroom.

Since I’m up, I might as well start my day.

•••

## Katelyn

I step inside Love Street, following Maureen. In the hallway ahead of me, her hands are full, but she deftly flips on the light switch using her elbow.

We're both carrying paper bags filled with snacks and sodas to stock her shelves. Her informal business plan for her popular corner store slash music venue never included food sales or even turning a profit. She believes that she was fortunate to become a success and is committed to providing a place where new artists can potentially be discovered.

Distracted by her warning earlier, I don't register the music at first, but as I do, I stumble.

Stepping into the main part of the store behind her, I see him and my heart flutters.

Ryan is by the stage with his acoustic guitar in his lap. The song he's playing isn't from his set the day before. Those songs were fantastic, but this one is even better.

"Hey, boy," Maureen says. "Could you put down your guitar for a sec and give us a hand?"

"Absolutely." Ryan stands and places his acoustic guitar in a stand near his chair.

As he comes closer to me, my body tingles and my heart beats faster. I blush as his eyes meet mine.

"Thanks." Maureen shoves her sack into his arms.

"Let me have that," he says low to me and reaches for mine.

When his hand skims mine in the transfer, awareness like electricity crackles from that point of contact, spreading to other areas that I can pretend don't exist but can't ignore.

"You look nice," he says.

"So do you." Smiling, I return his compliment with one of my own.

"Thank you." His chiseled lips curl.

My cheeks flame as I watch him follow Maureen.

I probably shouldn't have said anything, but it's the truth. With his black leather jacket draped over the back of his chair, his white cotton T-shirt clings to his sculpted chest. His worn jeans fit him equally well.

My mouth goes dry as he bends, and the denim stretches over his ass as

he places the sacks on the checkout counter. Even the man's butt is noteworthy.

He turns around as Maureen starts unpacking. I crank my gaze up quickly but not fast enough. Catching me staring at his ass, he smiles, deepening the matching crescents on both sides of his mouth.

Being the source and recipient of his amusement, my stomach flips. I feel like I've been on a rollercoaster ride since I met him. And I like it. I feel more than just alive around him. I feel almost like my old self again.

"You sleep okay last night?" he asks, closing the distance between us.

"No."

*Don't think about him in bed*, I tell myself, but it's too late. I already have imagined it.

"Me neither." His gaze dips to my mouth.

"Why not?" I ask. My lips tingle from his regard, and his gaze rises.

"Why what?"

"Why couldn't you sleep?" I notice that his eyes are a darker brown than before. Are his reasons for being awake most of the night the same as mine?

"Because." He scans me slowly, and it feels like he has caressed every inch of me with the tip of his wet tongue. "I was thinking about you."

"Hey!"

When Maureen suddenly appears, I jump. I had completely forgotten her. My cheeks become flames. I feel guilty and know she was right to warn me.

Ryan isn't the only one thinking about sex.



## Chapter 8



Ryan

Over the course of the evening, I monitor Katelyn more closely and catch details I missed the night before. Like there's more than just interest as she watches me perform. There's a wistfulness that makes me wonder just how big a role music played in those dreams she refuses to talk about.

I've also noticed a distinct pattern in her interaction with others. She quickly shuts down anyone who attempts to engage her for longer than the time it takes to say hello. She purposefully isolates herself, except with Maureen.

But why? And where is this mysterious man she mentioned?

I get that she has her own mind. Man, do I ever, but I don't get the space he allows her. If I had a woman like Katelyn, I would never let her out of my sight.

Curiosity about her consumes me.

For the first time in a long time, my focus isn't on trying to forget what happened in Vietnam or on getting a recording contract.

Like now, I should be paying attention to the fans who have lined up to meet me again tonight after my performance, but instead, I glance over at her once more. Katelyn remains at the register, but a growl escapes me when a man on the other side of the counter grabs her and pulls her toward him.

"Excuse me." I thrust the paper with my signature scrawled on it at the waiting fan and wave a hasty apology to the others.

My blood pressure rising, I race across the crowded store. Seeing my expression, everyone wisely jumps out of my path. Reaching her, I tap the guy hard on his shoulder.

"Hey, asshole," I say.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" He releases her and turns to face me.

Katelyn backpedals so fast, she slams into the shelf of stocked sodas

behind her.

“You.” I’m furious but in control. “You’re what’s wrong.”

In my peripheral vision, I see Katelyn’s hand rise to her throat, and I burn even hotter. Her eyes are wide, and her face is drained of its usual glowing color. No doubt her pulse is racing too.

This fucking asshole frightened her. Though I’m all for peace post-Vietnam, I know there’s a time to refrain and a time to react. This guy earned a reaction.

“Did he hurt you?” I ask her.

“No.” She shakes her head. “Just wouldn’t take no for an answer. He scared me, is all.” Her eyes clearing, she pastes on a fake-as-shit smile.

“Fucking prick.” I return my attention to the asshole while also noticing all the other people who have gathered around.

They’re raptly watching the scene, but not Maureen. Pushing through them, she reaches her friend in a few determined strides.

“Hey, I have you.” She wraps Katelyn in her arms.

Satisfied Katelyn has who she needs, I leave the two friends in each other’s capable hands and my eyes narrow on the prick.

“You don’t touch a woman, any woman, unless she gives you permission. Understand?”

“Yeah.” The guy waves his hands in front of himself, sensing what’s coming. “I don’t want any trouble.”

“Well, you got it with that dick move.” I shove him backward with both hands and give him a disgusted look. He’s an asshole and a coward.

“Get out of my store,” Maureen tells him, her eyes brownish-green flames. She’s boiling but in control like me.

“You heard her,” I say, and he tucks tail and makes for the door like the coward he is.

“Show’s over.” Maureen passes her gaze over the crowd in the wake of the dick’s departure. “Store is closing early tonight.”

*Good call.*

“Can you get everyone out?” she asks, eyeing me with her arm around Katelyn.

“Absolutely.” I nod tightly and proceed, though I’d much rather switch places with Maureen.

But what the hell do I know about comforting a woman? Plus, I’m not certain Katelyn would welcome my comfort.

Frustrated, I rake a hand through my hair. Caring about her, I'm in unfamiliar territory. But does that stop me?

*Hell no.*

I glance at Katelyn again. Her eyes meet mine, and I feel it, that undeniable pull. She's beautiful, sexy, and beyond intriguing. When I'm around her, it's like I've stepped out of the darkness and into the light. I'm not thinking about hiding who I am or running from my past either. Whatever this is between us, my course is clear. Everything else is a distraction.

• • •

## Katelyn

My eyes lock on Ryan as I watch him flip the store sign around to let everyone know Love Street is closed. When he turns, our gazes meet.

Now, like the first time, I feel something. I don't want to put a label on it, but it's rapidly becoming impossible to ignore. I don't have it completely straight in my head what I'm broadcasting or even what I want. I just know it involves him.

"Honey." Maureen captures my chin, gently turning my head to get my attention. "I don't think you should work the register anymore."

"Why not?" Surprised, I frown. I like helping her.

"You're too pretty, for one." She glances at Ryan. "And not just because of what happened with that asshole."

"I can take care of myself."

Shrugging, I take a step back. Her hand dropping to her side, Maureen looks hurt.

"I'm not changing my life because of one stupid asshole."

"Know you can. And I don't expect you to."

A worry crease appearing between her brows, she glances at Ryan again. As if they have some unspoken exchange, he moves to join us.

"Wanna get the hell out of here?" he asks me.

"Yeah." I nod at him. "If you're okay to close without me?" I glance at Maureen.

"Sure, Kate." The crease between her brow deepens. "You should go home."

"Let me get my purse." I bend to retrieve it from the under-counter shelf

beneath the register.

“Think about what I said earlier,” Maureen says when I straighten.

“I will.” Her warning is practically all I’ve been thinking about. “See you tomorrow.”

I want her to know I’ve paid attention, but I’m not going to let her coddle me. I coddle myself enough. I like that Ryan doesn’t do that.

“I’ll be here.” She continues watching me with obvious and admittedly warranted concern.

“Good night,” I tell her and hitch the strap farther up my shoulder.

“Good night, Kate.” She passes her gaze to him. “Ryan.”

“Night, Auntie.”

Ryan doesn’t seem to pick up on the undercurrent between us. He gestures to me, and when I move close, he places his hand on my lower back.

I feel that firm touch everywhere. Tingling and turned on, I’m practically panting as he steers me toward the back door.

“Wanna talk about it?” he asks when we’re outside.

“No.” Taking a deep breath of the crisp, floral-laden air, I shake my head. “I appreciate what you did for me in there and your concern, but—”

“You want to remind me that the same rules apply as last night, you mean.” He raises a brow. “No serious talking. Just shared time together. Right?”

“Right,” I say with a relieved nod.

Only, I’m not sure I want to continue observing the same rules.

## Chapter 9



### Ryan

“Why were you upset last night?” I ask Katelyn as soon as I park beside the road in Griffin Park.

“That’s none of your business.”

She stiffens in the passenger seat, but I press on. I want her, but I want answers too. I know I need them to gain access to her.

“If I tell you something heavy”—I pull in a breath for courage—“something I’ve never shared with anyone, will you consider telling me?”

She turns her head, studying me for a long, unnerving moment. Then she swallows and nods.

“Okay.” I expel the breath I was holding. “I was in Vietnam. I don’t know if I believed in the reason we were sent over there, but I didn’t have other options. I was raised by my mother. Enlisting was my only way out of a small town where everybody knew my name and the circumstances surrounding my birth.”

“What circumstances were those?”

When Katelyn tilts her head, I lose my train of thought for a moment, watching the strands of her hair shimmer like spun gold in the moonlight.

“When my mother was around our age, she had sex with a married man,” I say bluntly. “And got pregnant with me.”

“Oh.” Her chin drops.

I just shared something big and I can’t see her eyes. They are the windows into her keep, the most guarded part of her. I don’t accept her shuttering them.

“What are you thinking?” I shift toward her, and the seat’s old springs creak beneath me. “Look at me, Katy.” I reach across the seat and gently but firmly lift her chin.

“I’m not judging,” she whispers, removing my hand. “I just . . . I can’t

. . .” Her chin quivers and her eyes flash with a wet sheen.

“Can’t what?” I capture her hand, enveloping hers in both of mine.

“I can’t do this conversation. We can’t share. Get closer. Touch each other.” She glances down at our joined hands, then up at me. “It’s not right. I’m in a relationship.”

“I think we can. I think it’s necessary.” I share more. Instinctively, I know that to gain Katelyn’s understanding, I have to find common ground. “The man whose DNA I share never told my mom he was married. He fed her bullshit lines about a future he never planned to share with her.”

Katelyn slips her hand from mine. “I’ll bet he was handsome and charming. Young, they had chemistry. She believed what was between them was more than it really was.”

Fuck, she’s trying to draw parallels between what I feel happening with us and what happened to my mom.

“I’m not like that asshole.” I hurl the words. “Repressed piece of shit.”

Liam told me stuff about our old man and the verbal abuse he suffered that makes me more relieved than I already am that he never acknowledged me.

“I’m not meaning to imply you are.” She sighs and looks away. “It’s your mother’s side of the situation, her pregnancy that I identify with.”

“You’re a mom?” I ask.

Where’s her child? She hasn’t mentioned one. My thoughts come to an abrupt halt as she rips open her door.

“Katy,” I call as she tears off into the night.

I shove open my door, round the hood, and search the darkness for her. That hot-pink dress of hers is attention-getting, but it’s impossible to see in the dark. Her incandescent skin is another matter.

Spotting her, I pursue her. I feel like I’ve been in chase mode since I first laid eyes on the girl.

“Shit.” She trips and falls, and I’m right there to pick her up.

“Take my hand.” I reach out to her like I did the first time we came up here. Only, it isn’t a request this time.

She places her hand in mine. “I’m not going to talk about it.”

“Yes, you are.”

Lifting her off the ground, I tug hard, throwing her off balance. Her momentum brings her into me, and her hands land on my chest. My heart thumps rapidly beneath her palms.

I capture both of her hands. “Tell me. Explain.”

“I was a mom for a short time, but I’m not now.” Her eyes close.

Her lids flutter and tears escape to slide down her cheeks. Now, like before, her sadness pierces my heart.

“I lost my baby.”

My breath catches. I don’t dare breathe.

“She’s been gone for three years now.” Her fingers spasm in my grip. “There’s a hole inside me, a silence where the music used to be. I miss her every single day.”

“I’m so sorry, Katy.” I squeeze her hands. “That sounds difficult.”

“It’s a nightmare.” Her eyes open, and when I see the devastation in them, I almost wish I didn’t know the cause. “Only, I never wake up.” More tears escape.

“I understand.”

“You can’t understand.” She tries to pry her fingers from my grip. “No one really can.”

“I understand what it’s like to lose someone,” I say insistently. “I lost two of my best friends in Vietnam. When I close my eyes, I see their faces and hear their voices. When I try to sleep, the crash that took them replays in my mind. They called for me. They begged for my help. Only, I was thrown too far away from the chopper to get to them.”

God, it was horrible. The blood. The smoke. How difficult it was to breathe. The air felt wrong, heavy. The pain and fear I experienced then weigh me down even now. They were my brothers. My found family. Only I was too weak to hold onto them.

“I’m sorry.”

I nod, trying to get my accelerated heart rate to slow down. “The gas tank exploded. I was wounded by shrapnel, but every day I wonder if I could have saved them, if only I had tried harder. I failed them,” I say bitterly.

“You didn’t.” She goes completely still. “You feel responsible. I understand what that’s like.”

In the wake of her words and our confessions, the crushing weight on my chest eases. Something shifts in the space between us. Something sweet takes its place. Something new and fragile accompanied by a beautiful melody that originates in my heart.

“I believe you do.” I draw her close, a certainty about her settling deep in my bones.

“The way you feel about your friends, sad, lonely, and isolated.” She lifts her chin to meet my eyes. “I feel that way too.”

Staring down at her, I hurt because of the pain she allows me to see, but I also feel understood in a way I never have before.

“When I’m with you,” I say, framing my thoughts for her, “I don’t feel alone.”

She nods. “Neither do I.”



## Chapter 10



Katelyn

We're quiet as Ryan drives to my house. It's an unfamiliar silence as we process what we've shared, but it feels more right than anything in my life has ever felt.

"Here we are," Ryan says as he parks just like he did the night before.

However, nothing is like it was before, and I think we both know it.

"Do you want to come inside?" I ask.

"Yes, I do," he says low. "Very much."

"Okay." I swallow hard.

As he reaches for the handle on his door, my mind drifts, safe, secure, seen, and understood by Ryan, I imagine impossible things.

A knock sounds on the window on his side, reality startling me from my Ryan-centered fantasy.

"Fucking hell." Ryan rolls down his window. "What's up? Is there a problem?"

"No problem." A man I recognize points up the street. "Saw your show tonight, man. You're really good." He leans an elbow on the sill. "Hi, Katelyn." His eyes narrow. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, Daryl," I say. He's a studio musician, an acquaintance, nothing more than that.

"How's Liam?" He glances back and forth between Ryan and me. His eyes narrow further as he draws an incriminating conclusion that makes me feel guilty and small.

"Good," I say tightly. "He's good."

"Tell him if he ever needs someone to fill in for Reggie with Fargo-North, or if Reg is ever indisposed or leaves the group, I'm his man. All right?"

"Sure." I get what he doesn't say. If I don't help him, he'll tell Liam

about me being in a car alone with Ryan. "I'll pass that information on."

"Cool. See you." He pushes away from the window.

Through the front windshield, I frown as I watch him join a trio headed in the direction of the closest party. In the canyon, parties and doors are open to everyone. If you get bored at one place, you can easily find another.

"What is it?" I ask, noticing Ryan is looking at me funny.

"Liam Hart is your man?" he asks softly, but the question blares because of the way he is looking at me like I somehow betrayed him.

"Yes." The rightness between us suddenly feels awkward. I crank up my chin. "I assumed you already knew."

"No." He shakes his head. "I didn't." His thick brown hair that I imagined running my fingers through bristles with his tension.

Staring at him, I force myself to connect the dots.

Ryan is an up-and-coming artist. He wouldn't dare risk the ire of the great Liam Hart of Fargo-North. Not for me.

As that realization sinks in, my eyes fill with tears. What we shared, and what I thought it meant, doesn't really mean anything at all. It can't mean anything when it's gone just like that.

"Right." I face the fact that I'm nothing to Ryan but a potential conquest, just a guitar string he's expertly plucked.

*Nothing happened*, I remind myself. Almost something is really nothing. But it feels like I've lost something vital.

"I'm really tired." I reach for the door handle on my side. "I'd better go in. Good night."

"Don't leave." He grabs my hand, and I glance down at his long fingers around my wrist. "I just need a moment to process." His grip tightens.

"Okay." I look up.

"So soft." His expression thoughtful, Ryan strokes the pad of his thumb across the sensitive skin of my inner wrist.

I shiver with pleasure, even as disappointment continues to burn like hot coal inside my chest.

I know why his reaction scores so deeply. My confidence in my appeal is at an all-time low since I discovered the panties in Liam's bunk on the tour bus, the ones he excused away as being a misunderstanding. I might prefer to pretend that my suspicions about Liam's infidelities aren't real, but if they aren't real, then why do they hurt so bad?

"We shouldn't be doing this." I tug, and Ryan releases my wrist.

“What are we doing, exactly?” He peers at me through his thick lashes.

“Nothing. We aren’t doing anything.” Not yet, at least.

“I think you know there’s much more than nothing between us.”

“Regardless, it ends. Right here. Tonight.”

No matter what Liam does, no matter what excuses he makes, I can’t act like he does. I may be struggling to connect to the world, but I’m still me. I won’t betray Liam the way he betrayed me.

Ryan’s eyes flare. “I don’t accept that.”

“It’s not your choice,” I fire back.

“I believe it is. At least partly.” He rakes a hand through his hair. “What do you want, Katy? And don’t lie. You wouldn’t have shared the things you did, and I wouldn’t have either if there wasn’t something worth exploring between us.”

He’s right. Again, his openness tempts me. “But that’s just it, there can’t be anything. It wouldn’t be right.”

“Because of Liam.” He presses me to explain, and that tempts me too. If only Liam would make that much effort to understand and reach me.

“Because I might be messed up,” I say, spitting out the words. “But I won’t be like him.”

“Is Liam cheating on you?” Ryan’s eyes widen in surprise.

“Yes.” Saying the words, I drop my chin, my cheeks hot.

Liam is the one fooling around on me, but sadly, I’m the one who feels ashamed.

• • •

## Ryan

“Liam is a fool.” My half brother is an idiot to look at, let alone touch, another woman when he has Katelyn.

I reach for her. Bridging the distance that feels like the width of a man between us, I gently lift her chin.

“He might be.” She bites down on her lush bottom lip, attempting to pin the quiver. “But it’s me who feels like one.”

“You have vows between you?” I search her gaze. Without her hiding her feelings from me, it’s obvious Liam has hurt her deeply.

“We had love. I thought it was enough.”

Katelyn closes her eyes, and when she reopens them, the pain in them is more acute. Given her loss of a child and Liam's betrayal, it's no wonder she doesn't let many people close.

"And now?" I ask.

Personally, I don't know about love other than my mother's. I know about dedication to my brothers in arms. I know about fulfilling my commitment to the Army. And I know it's wrong for Liam to keep Katelyn tied to him if he's fucking other women.

"I'm not sure. Everything changed after we lost her."

Katelyn sways in her seat, and I grab her shoulders.

"I'm sorry." She attempts a smile. "I've kept all this inside for so long. I should feel better getting it out in the open, but I feel exposed. Usually, when people know Liam cheated on me, they think I'm weak and deficient in the bedroom. They pity me."

"I feel exposed sharing all the things I have with you too, but I wanted to share, and I don't pity you." I admire her strength and resiliency. "You have been through a lot and survived it. You're strong not weak. It's Liam who is deficient, not you."

"You're strong too," she declares. "If it were possible for you to save your friends, you would have."

"I'm not sure about that." I give it some consideration and decide I know one thing for sure. "But I want to be strong for you."

"Ryan." She shakes her head.

*Fuck that.*

"Katy." I tighten my grip. She needs to let me help her.

"You can't touch me like this or call me that," she says, and yet her lids flutter with pleasure with each pass of my thumb.

"You're Katy to me."

Not yet *my* Katy, but soon. That's something else I know. I have a goal—her—and my mind is set on achieving it. But I don't push her. Not yet. I have a concession I need from her first.

"Invite me inside again," I say. "I want to stay with you tonight."

"But Daryl—"

"Fuck Daryl," I snap, cutting off that protest and stopping her before she can come up with another. "Fuck everyone and what they want or what they think about us. All that matters is you and me, yeah?"

# Chapter 11



Katelyn

“What are you doing?” Ryan asks me the next morning, his deep voice spilling into my ear through the phone.

“Why do you ask?” Still in my pajamas, I find my heart is racing after I sprinted across the house to answer the phone.

“It took you a while to pick up,” he says.

“It’s early. I just woke up.”

But that’s just an excuse. When I heard the phone ring, I assumed it was Liam calling. I feel guilty because of what I was doing in my bed and who I was using for inspiration.

“What are you wearing?” Ryan croons like he does onstage, and my body gets even more alert.

“Why are you calling?” I try to turn the focus to him, needing to think about something else rather than what his voice does to me or the fact that my nipples are tight and tingling underneath my silky top.

“To check on you,” he says. “We talked about a lot of heavy shit last night. I wish you would have invited me in.”

“It wouldn’t have been right,” I say softly.

“I didn’t feel right leaving you alone.” He sounds a little angry like he did last night when I didn’t invite him inside. “As soon as it got light outside, I had to call and make sure you’re doing okay.”

“I’m okay.” Warmth washes over me in response to his concern.

“Truly?” he asks, not settling for false reassurances like Liam does.

“Better than I usually am.” I realize as I clarify for him that it’s the actual truth. “It helps talking to you,” I whisper.

Ryan doesn’t attempt to minimize my pain. He doesn’t redirect me. He has pain of his own from being in Vietnam and losing his friends.

My pain from losing her will always be there like his. The hollowness

inside me that my baby was supposed to fill will remain empty. My house will never be a home. I will never be right.

However, sharing with someone who understands, I feel like I'm better equipped to deal with everything somehow.

"How about you?" I ask, my brows drawing together in concern. "Did you get any sleep last night?"

"Hell no." He lets out an audible breath. "I've just been biding my time until a semi-acceptable hour to call you."

"I'm sorry."

I gave him my number last night, and he gave me his because he said he didn't like the idea of me being in my house alone and wanted me to know I could reach out to him anytime.

"I like spending time with you, Katy." His voice drops lower. "I don't think about how badly I miss my friends or how terribly I failed them when I'm with you."

"I don't think about how sad I am either," I say softly. "And you didn't fail them. But you didn't tell me the names of your friends yesterday."

"Gus and Joe. Their names are embroidered on my guitar strap."

"Nice names." Wanting to know more, I ask, "What were they like?"

"Strong. Honorable. Funny as hell."

"Funny how?"

"They did Abbott and Costello routines. All the time. They pretended our MREs were fine dining. They played practical jokes on me and a lot of the other guys."

"So, they got your mind off your circumstances."

"Yeah, for sure."

"I'm sorry they're gone." My eyes burn. "I wish I could have met them."

"Me too." His voice is rough. "They would have liked you. Thanks for asking about them."

"Of course." A tear spills over, and I swipe it away with my free hand.

How can this between Ryan and me be wrong when it feels like the dawn breaking over the darkness inside me?

"What are your plans for today?" he asks, lightening my thoughts.

I glance at my camera. It's perched on the edge of the island where I left it the morning before. At Love Street last night, I didn't even miss it all that much. Plus, this morning I don't have an overwhelming urge to pick it up and retreat into the room beyond the kitchen.

“What did you have in mind?” Surprising me, anticipation builds inside me for the day ahead, rather than dread.

“Shopping.”

“What?” I screech in surprise. “Guys hate shopping.”

“This one doesn’t. At least, not if it’s for you.”

“You’re not buying me anything.” I shake my head, even though he can’t see me.

“Your birthday is on Saturday, right?”

“How do you know that?”

“Maureen invited me to your party.” Ryan’s tone turns teasing. “I think it might be the only way I’m going to get to see the inside of your house.”

I’m not so sure that’s true.

“We’re going shopping together,” he says in an authoritative way that makes my skin prickle with awareness. “I’m buying you a present.”

“No, you are not.” I like the idea of him being bossy in certain scenarios, but this isn’t one of them. And he can’t buy me anything. There’s no way I could explain that to Liam.

“Katy.” He sounds exasperated.

“Ryan,” I say and almost smile. I feel bubbly inside. I like sparring with him.

“I like the way my name sounds from your sexy lips,” he says in a flirty rumble.

And that’s all it takes for my slick and swollen clit to begin throbbing again like it was when he called.

*Think about something else.*

Twirling the phone cord around my finger, I ask, “What’s your daily routine like?”

“Besides trying not to think about the past?”

“Yeah.”

I like that we have common ground, but I also don’t like it. I don’t want him to be sad.

“I usually play my guitar and jot down song ideas. Sometimes I go to the piano store on Mulholland and practice on their baby grand. Drives the salespeople there crazy since they know I can’t really afford to purchase one.”

“Come over to my house. We have a piano here.” I swallow hard as soon as I make the offer.

“Are you sure?” he asks gently.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

I don’t withdraw the offer. Maybe it’s because he doesn’t push, or maybe it’s because I want to hear him play more than I fear what his invading my personal space might lead to.

“Just give me a little time before you head over. I need to . . . I need to get dressed.”

I can’t tell him I need to finish what I started earlier. But I do need to finish it. That sensual edge has to be muted before he arrives.



## Chapter 12



### Ryan

The carved Bali front door opens, and Katelyn appears. The light from outside surrounds her as if she'd summoned it. She's barefoot and wearing another minidress. This one is lime green and showcases her amazing body like the others.

"You like bright colors," I say instead of something pertinent like "You're a threat to my self-control."

"I guess I do."

She tilts her head to a considering angle, and I fight the urge to plunge my hands into those long, luxurious, liquid-looking strands. I imagine her naked. It's far from the first time. Taking another shower after jacking off while thinking about her is why I'm arriving at her house on Lookout Hill later than planned.

"Why?" I ask. I want to know everything about her, every motivation and desire.

"I don't know." Her brows draw together, forming a tiny crease beneath her bangs. "I guess I never thought about it."

"I have." I believe it's because she might hide behind her camera, but deep down, she doesn't want to be ignored. She wants someone to see her, to reach out to her and bring her back to life. Or at least that's the message I receive, and I'm down for it.

*I see you, Katy.* In fact, since I first saw her at Love Street, she's all I see.

"Can I come in?" I ask, shifting my weight from one foot to the other.

"Yes, of course." She steps back and sweeps her arm to the side. "Piano is in the living room. You can't miss it."

"Thanks." I walk into her house.

A bungalow perched on the top of the hill; it reminds me of a tree house. It's at one with its environment from the stone path that leads to it, to the

wide planks of wood beneath my boots, to the bank of windows that line the entire back wall. The glass frames the green forest behind the house, filling the interior with light.

“Do you like it?” She moves closer and her scent washes over me, honeysuckle and that slight metallic scent I can’t yet identify.

I take in more before replying. The house is large yet intimate.

A large stone fireplace is on one end of the space, and a short run of stairs behind it leads to a loft, where books are stacked on shelves and a guitar is pinned to the wall. On the opposite side is an open kitchen with bright blue cabinets, a rustic farm table, and a reading nook with a striped cushion and a few pillows. The window above the nook has shelves that contain colorful glass vases.

“It’s charmingly tranquil, cheerfully bright, and encouragingly warm.” I glance at her. “Like you.”

“I’m not.” She glances away. “Not anymore.”

“I think you are.” I snag her hand and pull her gently toward me. “Didn’t you decorate it?”

“Yes.” Looking at me, she nods. “I guess some of the old me leaked out.”

“The old you?” My brow furrows as I think about it. “Oh, you mean before your baby.”

She nods, her eyes turning glassy at the mention of the child she lost.

“What about this?” I gesture to the only other item in her house that’s as large as the fireplace.

“Liam bought the piano.” Her gaze drops to her feet. It seems like she’s avoiding looking at the piano.

That seems significant, and I pursue it, though the last thing I want to continue is a topic that includes my half brother.

Discovering that Liam is her man threw me for a loop last night, for sure. Did Liam show me a photo of her when he visited me in the hospital? He might have. He shared a bunch of things when I was injured and pumped full of pain meds. But my connection to Liam isn’t something I’m ready to confess yet. She’s too conflicted about us. She just invited me into her house, and there’s more, much more that I want from her. I’m not willing to risk losing the ground I’ve gained.

“Did he buy it for himself or for you?” I move in front of her. Wedging my finger under her chin, I lift her head. I see the answer sparkling in her eyes before she gives it.

“He hoped I would play it.” She frowns. “He doesn’t understand.”

“That music comes from your soul,” I say, understanding totally. “But you’re too sad to access your soul anymore. You’ve walled that part of yourself off.”

“Right.” Her beautiful gray-blue eyes widen in response to my insight. “How do you know that?”

Because I’m observant and the object of my observation is her. But I don’t tell her that.

Instead, I say, “It’s how I felt when I woke up in the hospital after losing Gus and Joe.”

My sadness seemed to separate me from everything and everyone else. Even the act of breathing exhausted me.

“I wasn’t interested in anything that previously brought me joy. My mind, my thoughts, my soul was soaked in sorrow that deadened my senses more than the pain meds did.”

“Yes.” She nods reflectively. “Just like that. But you got yourself out of that dark place. How?”

“I went to therapy in the hospital, and I listened to music. Which is also therapy but a deeper kind. In a lot of ways, it’s more powerful.”

“Yes, I agree.” Her moon-and-sea eyes narrow. “But I don’t want a stranger digging around in my head.”

“I didn’t either, pretty girl. But you don’t have to talk to a stranger. You can talk to me.”

“I wouldn’t know where to begin.” She tilts her head. “Or if I even really want to try.”

“You want to,” I tell her. “All of you is still there, just needing favorable conditions so you can come out.”

“I don’t know.” She bites down on her lip.

“You do know.” I tuck her hair behind her ears, and she shivers as the tips of my fingers skim the shell. “I see you, Katy. I see all of you. You’re in the bright colors you wear, and you’re here closer to the surface inside your house. The way you decorate reflects you. You’re in the periphery of the crowd at Love Street, hiding behind your camera, pretending the music doesn’t affect you. Yet your fingers move, your feet tap, and your body sways.”

“I can’t do this.” She tries to lower her chin to hide from me, but I don’t let her.

“You can,” I say softly. “You want to. You know there’s a break in the wall you’ve built around yourself. You just need to slip through it.”

*Or let me in, I think, so I can show you the way out and encourage you to live and enjoy life again.*

## Chapter 13



### Katelyn

“I wish . . .” No, I can’t tell him. It’s too much.

“You wish what?” Ryan presses and pushes me. Unlike Liam, he seems to really want to know everything, the good and the bad.

“I wish I had met you before,” I say, not holding anything back.

“Before Liam.” Ryan’s increased intensity is palpable.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“We can’t undo the past.” He frames my face. With his gaze searching mine, he strokes my cheeks with his calloused thumbs. “But we can choose what we do now and what we remember. Your baby girl needs to be remembered, and so do my friends. Let’s decide to make them a part of each day the best that we can.”

Letting that sink in, I nod slowly. Ryan gives me food for thought and the time to digest it. Warmth floods my heart and other parts of me as he continues to stroke my skin.

“We can choose to do something different,” he says, studying my eyes, “break out of an unhealthy pattern. It’s not always going to be easy. But it will be easier if we help each other. We can be each other’s safe place when we’re sad. Agree?”

“Yes.” I nod. “Though I don’t think you realize what you’re offering. I get sad a lot.”

“I do too, especially late at night.” He gives me a firmer version of his current expression. “I want you to know that I will always be there for you, no matter how sad you get.”

“Ryan,” I say, my tone warning. “You can’t make a promise like that.”

“I can, and I already have.”

When his lips twist up, I want to curl up at his feet like a kitten and bask in his certainty. Have him stroke every inch of me. Be his in every sense of

the word.

But that's not to be. There's a man who's not here right now, and yet he stands between us.

"You can't make me any promises." I try to shake my head, but Ryan keeps my face completely still, holding all of me in the palms of his capable hands.

"Why not?" He inches closer, his thighs brushing mine.

"Because I'm not free."

The air crackles with my declaration. With him so close, his exhilarating scent swirls around me. He is majestic like a towering pine. Inviting like a log cabin with a warm glowing fire. Blindingly gorgeous like a fresh blanket of dazzling white snow.

"And if you were free?" he asks. "What then?" His eyes sparkle like stardust strewn across a velvety night sky.

"But I'm not."

My soul stirs behind my wall. Ryan awakens my desires, and not all are merely physical.

I long to share everything with him—my deepest secrets and my darkest desires. I'm tempted to write down the words and the emotions he inspires.

But I can't. I won't.

Instead, I take a step back, and his hands fall to his sides. I'm suddenly plunged into cold as if he really was all that stood between me and the harsh elements of a snowstorm.

"Don't be afraid of me, Katy," he says firmly.

"I'm not afraid." Yet, I take another step backward.

"Then why are you running from me?" he asks, following me.

"It's not you." As my ass hits the corner of the piano, I stop and lift my chin. "It's me."

"Take a chance," he says low in a seductive timbre. "Trust me."

"I do trust you." I wouldn't have shared all that I have if I didn't. "It's only . . ."

"It's not me," he says. "It's you, you mean?"

"Yes." I nod to confirm. "We have to stop before this goes too far." My heart racing, I lick my dry lips. "You have to stop it." I don't have the willpower necessary to throw on the brakes anymore.

"You don't actually want me to stop." His eyes flare, scorching me with his heat.

“We’re just friends.” I throw that out as he lowers his head, his mouth coming closer to mine. “Friends can make promises. Friends can share confidences.”

And we can still spend time together while Liam is away.

“I don’t do friendship with women.”

“Make an exception, please,” I beg him. “For me.”

His gaze narrows. “Is that what you really want?”

I shake my head, then manage a nod. “Yes.”

“Okay.” His eyes flash with anger and a hunger that is at odds with what he agreed to. “But be warned, there is no line—friendship or otherwise—between us that I won’t cross if given the opportunity to take what is already between us further.”

“I hear you.” I feel him too as he grips my arms. He’s intense, and I long to experience all that intensity directed at me, but I can’t.

“I’m not sure you truly do.” Ryan squeezes me, the firmness of his grip sending shock waves of need spiraling throughout my body. “But even as just a friend, I will put you and your well-being first, no matter what.”

“I’m responsible for me.”

I reel in the wake of his statement, knowing he means it. Ryan will push, even if who he must push against is me. He is strong, determined, and oh-so tempting. I’m weary of struggling alone and long to lean on someone other than myself for a change.

“I lost friends I failed to protect,” he says grimly. “I won’t allow that to happen again.”

“Their deaths weren’t your fault.”

“You say that so readily.” His dark brows crash together. “And yet you hold yourself accountable for hers, don’t you?”

“Yes.” My palms slide down to my abdomen, though she is a part of me that is longer there. “I am responsible.”

Sobbing, I confess it all in a rush.

“I insisted on working the night I lost her. The doctors wanted me to lower my stress level and take it easy. Liam tried to convince me to stay home. But we needed the money, and I enjoyed performing, so I went to the club anyway.”

“Oh, Katy. My Katy.” Ryan sweeps the back of his hand across my cheek. “You’re not to blame, but I understand how you feel.”

His gaze turns unfocused.

“The day Joe and Gus died, we were joking around. It was blue skies and beautiful outside. We weren’t expecting anything to go wrong. We went on so many routine missions where nothing ever happened that I developed a false sense of security I shouldn’t have trusted. I should have been paying better attention. If I had been, maybe I would have been able to warn the pilot before it was too late.”

Understanding, I nod. “We never see the end of a dream coming until it slams right into us like a brick wall.”

“Like that exactly.” His eyes refocus. “But we can’t control the uncontrollable.”

“Why not?” I complain bitterly. “Who made that terrible rule?”

“I don’t know.” He frames my face again, and I lean into his palms. “It’s what the psychiatrists say. The chaplain said other things too. But I don’t know if I believe any of that religious stuff anymore.”

“What do you believe in?” I ask.

Whatever it is, I want to believe in it too. It will give us more common ground, and I need something to stand on and someone to hold on to. I want that someone to be him, but it can’t be.

“I believe in the understanding between us right now. I believe it’s better to get things out instead of leaving them inside. I believe I’m less sad than I was the day before.” His gaze drifts over me. “I believe all that because of you.”

His beliefs are mine now too. I don’t want to run anymore. I’m tired of running and struggling to breathe. I just want to stay right here with him holding me.

Ryan draws me closer. “We’re good for each other.”

He’s right, and I don’t stop him as he lowers his head. Holding my breath, I let it out in a disappointed rush when he only presses his lips to the crown of my head.

He’s being a friend, an honorable one, keeping his side of the bargain, but I don’t really want him to keep it anymore.



## Chapter 14



### Ryan

“I can’t believe you made me a pie.” I suck on the fork’s tines to get every drop of the sweet strawberry and tangy rhubarb filling while Katelyn watches me. Dropping my fork on the orange placemat, I bring the plate to my mouth and lick the delicious, perfectly flaky crumbs.

“Glad you, um, enjoyed it.” Cheeks flushed, she glances away when she realizes I’ve caught her staring.

“Best pie I ever put in my mouth.” I return the plate to the placemat and touch her arm. I need her eyes back on me. It’s become one of the necessities of life. “Where’d you learn to bake?”

“My mother.” A vortex of emotion swirls in her eyes.

“You never mentioned your mother or your father before.” I tap her arm to keep her with me.

“We didn’t get along.” She glances down at my hand on her arm, then up at me.

“The fault must have been on their side of the relationship.”

“What relationship?” She grimaces. “They’re practical people. They didn’t know what to do with an artistic daughter, other than to criticize her and pile on more and more rules.”

“Sounds rough.” And a lot like the struggles Liam shared about growing up. I wonder if he told her how his father called him a girl for wanting to pursue a music career.

Katelyn shrugs as if wasn’t rough, but it’s bullshit. Her expression is pinched from the pain they caused her. “They sent me away after I contracted polio. They feared being exposed to the disease and contracting it themselves more than they cared for me. They never visited me once at the polio colony.”

“That’s terrible. Bad enough that you contracted polio. Scary as a child.

Terrifying, I'm sure." I shake my head in disbelief. "Inexcusable that they betrayed and abandoned you when you needed them most."

"It was awful." She nods grimly. "I was only ten, and yet it fell on me to conquer my fears and face the chance that I might not recover. My only saving grace during that time was music."

"Music pulled me out of a deep depression after the crash."

"It was your cure." Katelyn's beautiful eyes swim with compelling empathy. "It was mine too and my companion. When I turned on the radio by my bed and the music played, I wasn't alone anymore. My willfulness that my mother always devalued became my greatest strength. My spine was twisted. The doctor's diagnosis wasn't good, but I channeled my fear into a determination to walk again. When I returned home, I only bided my time until I was old enough to leave. I never looked back afterward, never contacted them again."

"I'm sorry." I cover her hand where it rests on the table beside her empty plate. "Sorry your mother and father abandoned you when you were sick and frightened. No parent should ever do that."

"I agree." Her gaze brightens. "But—"

Shaking my head, I say, "You didn't abandon your baby."

"I feel like I did." She presses her lips flat.

"That feeling is valid." I stroke her skin. "But you didn't leave her. You were right there. Loving her then and loving her now."

"Yes." Katelyn swallows. "I used to talk and sing to her. I sang to her at the hospital. I was almost to term when I started having labor contractions, but she was born too soon. I wish . . ." Her breath hitches. "I never got a chance to hold her."

"I'm sorry." I continue drawing circles on her skin that seem to soothe her. I want to encourage her to keep sharing. "I wish there was something I could say or do to make you feel less sad."

"Talking to you helps." Her delicate brow crinkles. "Having you here does."

She doesn't withdraw from my caress, and I take that as progress. Friends can touch, but being friends isn't all I want us to be.

"I know something else that would help." I incline my head.

"Not playing the piano." She goes taut like an overtightened guitar string. "I never play anymore."

"Okay." I pat her arm. "Don't get defensive. I warned you I will say and

try to get you to do things that I think are good for you.” Removing my hand from her arm, I take the yellow napkin with embroidered daisies off my lap and drop it on my plate. “But will you come sit with me on the bench while I play?”

“Absolutely.” Her eyes twinkle excitedly like the ocean, and the moon is aglow with stars.

“Kay.” I shift closer and press my mouth to her temple.

*Damn*, she smells good. Her soft hair brushes my nose. It’s the source of her honeysuckle scent. Now that I’ve gotten away with kissing her once, I just want to do it again and again.

Making myself back away, I stand, but she doesn’t immediately rise. She peers up at me, looking dazed.

*Wait until I kiss you for real.*

It will happen. It’s only a matter of when.

I move to the piano. The feet on the bench scrape the floor as I scoot it back. Sitting, I raise my hands in position. Closing my eyes, I begin to play but stop immediately as dishes clatter from the kitchen.

“Sorry,” Katelyn says and gives me an apologetic look. “Those notes are pretty. What song is that?”

“Not a song yet.” I shake my head. “Just a melody.” What I don’t tell her is that it’s the one I first heard up at Griffin Park when we connected.

“A very cool one.”

*It’s our melody. It’s us.*

“Come sit with me.”

Katelyn’s praise means more to me than a fan’s or anyone else’s. I shift to one side on the bench and gesture. She looks unsure.

“I could use some help. I only have those first few notes.”

“Okay.” She wipes her hands on a yellow dish towel and exits the kitchen. In that short green dress with her body, those legs, and her grace, she commands all my attention as she comes closer.

As she sits, her floral fragrance washes over me. My already hard cock throbs inside my boxers.

“Are you going to play?” She bumps my shoulder with hers. It’s almost comical, a pixie trying to nudge a building.

“Sure.”

I scoot closer to her, a thrill shooting through me when my jean-clad thigh touches her bare skin. Reluctantly ripping my gaze away from her legs,

I return my hands to the keys and play the melody again.

“Stop.” She taps my left hand.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“It needs a counter melody,” she says. “Higher on the scale, I think.”

“How high? Show me.”

“Like this.”

Katelyn doesn’t hesitate, and a smile ghosts my lips as she places her fingers on the keys. She duplicates my melody perfectly, only a little slower. She adds notes that sound like they were always meant to be there.

“Brilliant,” I say. “Do it again.”

“All right.”

As she plays, I hum. I don’t have words yet, just an idea where the sound of my voice should go.

“That’s good,” she says.

“Because you’re good.” I give her a firm nod of approval. “Where’d you learn to play the piano?”

“From Liam.” She clunks a key. Her eyes widen as she glances at her fingers, then at me.

“Don’t look at me like I tricked you.” I shake my head at her.

“You did trick me.” She purses her lips, and for about the fiftieth time since I arrived at her house, I want to kiss her again.

“The music is inside you,” I say. “So is the desire to help a friend in need.”

And not just me. Katelyn helps Maureen with anything that needs doing—shopping, stocking shelves, or working the register.

“You have a good heart, Katy.”

“You do too.” She gazes at me as if I invented music, not just coerced her into playing it again.

“Not really.”

Because if I did have a good heart, I wouldn’t want to steal hers away from my half brother. But Liam doesn’t deserve to keep her heart or any other part of her. By screwing around on her, he betrayed her love like her parents did.

I will never betray the trust Katelyn has given me. But that doesn’t mean I won’t skirt the line between right and wrong. She understands and accepts me. She is my safe place. My muse. The music of my heart. I will do whatever it takes to make her mine.

## Chapter 15



### Katelyn

“No, sorry,” I tell the customer on the other side of the counter from me. “Ryan isn’t playing Saturday night.”

My birthday is Saturday. Plus, he’s not a headliner at Love Street. Not yet, but it’s only a matter of time. Word has gotten out. It reached a ghost in her bungalow at the top of the hill, a ghost who doesn’t feel like a ghost anymore since she met him.

I pop the lid and give the girl with the polka-dotted headband her bottle of ice-cold soda. Glancing again at Ryan, I see that he still has ten people waiting in line to meet him. I sigh.

“You’ve got it bad,” Maureen says, appearing without me noticing her approach.

“I don’t . . . I mean, who . . .” I trail off as she steps behind the counter with me.

“You two hit it off.” She ignores my incoherent excuses. “I had a feeling you would.” She bumps her hip to mine. “He stares at you all the time too.”

I glance Ryan’s way again. When his brown eyes meet mine, I melt.

“You going to talk to me about it?” She moves in front of me, blocking my view of Ryan, and places her hands on my shoulders. After a moment of searching my gaze, she says, “You’re falling for him.”

“No. I can’t.”

“Because of Liam.”

“Yes, of course.” I nod.

“Kate.” She frowns. “Liam is cheating on you.”

“Because of me.” I tell her practically the only thing I haven’t already confided to Ryan. “Because I’m not the woman he fell in love with. I abandoned him in our relationship long before he ever abandoned me.”

“That’s fucking bullshit, and deep down, you know it.” She squeezes my

shoulders, her hazel eyes narrowing. “You need to talk to Liam, really talk to him when he comes home.”

“Yes.” Only, I don’t want to talk to him. The person I really want to talk to is Ryan.

“Talk to who about what?” Ryan asks.

My desire seems to have conjured him from the other side of the room. He glances back and forth between Maureen and me when we both remain silent.

“I’m hungry,” I say brightly. “I know it’s late, but would you mind taking me to get something?” Looking at Ryan, I feel my cheeks warm from my guilty thoughts. My greatest hunger isn’t for food. “I’d love a burger.”

“I’m hungry too.” He looks at me like he looks at my fresh pies.

I’ve been baking for him, and he’s been coming over to my place every day since that first time. We’re playing house together, and I’m setting myself up to get hurt.

“Great.” I gesture. “Just let me close out the register.”

“I’ll do it,” Maureen says.

“But that’s a big job—”

“I can handle it.” She gently turns me toward Ryan and gives me a gentle push. “You two go on. I suggest Bill’s, but you’d better hurry before it closes.”

“Okay.”

Without even thinking about it, I take the hand Ryan offers me. He touches me all the time now, little friendly touches that set me on fire. He’s all I think and fantasize about.

Maureen is right. Liam and I need to talk when he returns.

“See you Monday.”

Ryan throws his strong arm around my shoulder, pulling me close like a guy would his girl. I bask in that feeling. I’m tempted to erase the line I drew in the sand, but I know if I do, I risk losing him as a friend.

“Tomorrow, you mean,” Maureen calls out, and Ryan turns us in a circle to face her. “I’ll be over in the afternoon to get your house ready for your party.”

She arches a brow like she thinks I might need another reminder for a plan that we agreed upon a long time ago.

“Right.” I nod. Maybe I do need the reminder. Everything has changed since I met Ryan. “Thanks, Maureen.”

“Love you, Kate.”

“Love you too.”

My throat gets tight. She’s a good friend, and I’m fortunate to have her and the man holding me. He’s vaulted right up into a tie with her.

“You first, Katy, my lady.”

We’ve reached the rear door. Ryan pushes it open. The fresh night air, with just a hint of salt from the Pacific, hits me.

“What about your guitar?” I ask, just now realizing he doesn’t have it.

“Already put it in the car earlier.”

“Oh, I didn’t notice.” I hug myself. Even in the crook of his arm, it’s colder outside than inside Love Street.

“Hold on.” Ryan stops and shrugs out of his leather jacket.

“I couldn’t.” I try to wave him off, but he ignores me, draping the jacket that’s warm from his body around my shoulders.

“But you’ll be cold,” I say.

“I’m never cold when I’m with you.”

I swoon at the look he gives me.

Striding to his car, he pops open the passenger door. I slide in, bringing the collar of his jacket to my nose as I watch him round the hood. The leather smells like pine, spice, and him.

“You okay?” He reaches for my hand after he gets in.

“Yes, why?” I ask.

“Seemed like there was a serious undercurrent in your conversation with Maureen.”

“There was,” I say. I can’t seem to get away with keeping any secrets from him.

“Wanna talk about it?” Ryan’s gaze turns searching. In the lamplight from the parking lot, he’s so sweet and seductively handsome that it’s all I can do to keep from climbing into his lap and kissing him.

“No.” I lick my tingling lips. “I mean, there’s nothing to talk about.”

His gaze drops to my mouth. My lips shimmer in longing . . . all of me does. Every day, it’s getting harder to resist what’s been building between us.

“Don’t lie to me.” His eyes capture and hold mine.

“I’m sorry.” I find myself apologizing. I don’t really want to keep anything from him.

“Did you really want a burger?” He frowns. “Or were you just deflecting me?”

“I am hungry.” I withdraw my hand from his. “But yes, I was deflecting too.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want to talk about Liam.” My gaze turns pleading. “Not yet. Do you?”

“No.” Ryan shakes his head, and my fingertips buzz with the longing to run my fingers through his hair. “But on the other hand—”

“It’s my birthday in a few hours.”

I can’t help but cut him off. Given the seriousness of his tone and his expression, I know he wants to talk about that line and what feels inevitable between us. But that involves talking about Liam, and Liam is the last thing I want to focus on right now.

“Yes, I know.” The crease between Ryan’s gorgeous brown eyes deepens. “We need to go shopping.”

I have no desire to go shopping. When he comes over, I just want it to be the two of us hanging out together at my house.

“I don’t want you to buy me anything.” I have put him off about buying me a present every time he brings it up. What I want most, well, I’m staring at him right now with my heart in my eyes. “But would you spend all day Saturday with me?”

“Of course I would.” His voice lowers, sending a shiver of pleasure through me. “No place I would rather be.”

“And . . . I . . . don’t want to talk about Liam. Not now, and not tomorrow either.” I push the birthday privileges as far as I can. “Okay?”

“Is there anything else you want?”

His gaze sweeps over me. The hunger in his eyes is obvious. My nipples tighten to points.

*You, please.*

*Your mouth on mine.*

*Your hands on me.*

*Our naked bodies joined.*

“Just your time.” Flames licking my skin, I manage to stay on my side of the friendship line.

But I’m not sure I can do it much longer.



## Chapter 16



### Ryan

I start the engine, cranking the key harder than necessary. I want Katelyn badly, want her to green-light the desire we share. I can feel it pulsing and throbbing between us.

I throw my arm across the back of her seat to back out. She's snuggled into my jacket, holding the lapels together over her tits.

Satisfaction surges through me. It's almost like a lover's embrace. But almost isn't nearly enough.

I groan as she turns her moonlight gaze to me. I've jacked off numerous times, imagining her looking at me just like that. Never has a woman affected me like she does. It's her. Just her. And it takes all the self-control I possess not to throw the shifter into park, lay her out in the back of my car, and take her.

One kiss. I know it would only take one to convince her.

"What's wrong?" she asks, nearly the same question I asked her a moment before.

Eventually, I will tell her exactly what I'm thinking. We suffer from the same ailment, and it has only one remedy. But there is a major impediment.

Can a man hate his own brother?

Liam is the legitimate son, afforded all the privileges I was never even offered. I've resented that nearly all my life, but I'm not sure it's hate.

But I covet what is his. I envy him for every moment he has shared with Katelyn.

"You're beautiful." I capture and tuck a strand of her golden hair behind her ear. I make chances, excuses to touch her.

"Thank you." She shivers as I skim my fingers around the shell. "You should . . . we should get going."

Her pretty pink tongue darts out to moisten her lips, and my cock

lengthens inside my boxers. It takes me a long moment to remember an objective for the night that doesn't involve fucking her.

*Bill's. Burgers. Right.*

I aim the Roadmaster in the direction we need to go. For now, it's food. Later, all bets are off. I've reached the limits of my self-control.

•••

## Katelyn

I sneak glimpses at Ryan as he drives.

Distracted, he doesn't notice how I trace his thick hair and his heavy brow with my gaze. His strong jaw is set in a determined line. He is often serious. Tonight, he's focused on getting me fed. Every muscle in his body is taut, from his powerful thighs to his grip on the wheel. My skin prickles as I imagine him using that power and that strong grip on me.

I let out a shaky sigh.

Morning after morning, I wake throbbing, thinking about him. I imagine the heavy weight of his body on top of me, his firm lips kissing my skin, his confident touch. I know that sex with Ryan wouldn't be something to endure like it has become for me with Liam.

"Shit!" Ryan exclaims, and I lurch forward as he brakes hard to avoid the teen in the street in front of us. "Hey, kid," he calls, beckoning after rolling down his window.

The boy skirts the bumper and rests the sign he was carrying on his shoulder as he makes his way around to the driver's side of the vehicle.

"Sorry, mister." His long, shaggy hair frames his sheepish expression. "I wasn't paying attention."

"What's going on?" Ryan asks, his gaze narrowing as more young people appear. Carrying signs, they scurry across the street in a group.

"There's a rally tonight at Bill's."

"What for?" Ryan's brows pinch together.

"Protesting Vietnam, man."

"Right." Ryan nods in understanding.

"You and your girl should come." The boy peers over at me before returning his gaze to Ryan. "No more men should die. It's wrong."

"Thanks for the invite," I say.

The boy nods at me and taps the doorframe. Walking away, he's quickly swallowed by the crowd.

"Looks like Bill's is out." Frowning, Ryan looks for a space to turn around. "We'll have to find somewhere else to get you a burger."

"No." I shake my head. "I mean, forget the burgers. We should go. Park there." I point to the empty place between two cars parked along the curb.

"Not gonna make a bit of difference to the politicians what a bunch of kids do," he grumbles.

"It might not." I think about Ryan's friends and him. Men like them are being drafted into service and forced to fight in a battle on the other side of the world. As soldiers, it's their duty to do what they're told, even if they don't understand the conflict or believe in the reason they are over there. This is a serious issue that needs a voice. I don't want any more men like Ryan or his friends to lose their lives. "But that doesn't mean we shouldn't do what we can." The conflict that seemed so far away now seems very close.

"You're right." His handsome features sharpen as he nods once. After parallel-parking his car, he strides around to my side to let me out.

"Thank you." I place my hand in his. Again, I have that feeling of significance. Only this time, it seems to be me leading the way.

"Hey, take this." A girl with a long ponytail hands me a sign that reads make love, not war.

"If only it could be that simple," Ryan says, his expression grim as we blend in with the crowd.

"Simple can make what is complicated clear." My fingers wrap tighter around the sign.

"You might be right." He walks faster, his grip tightening around my fingers.

"Wrong can be made right." I hurry to keep up with him and everyone around us while gathering my thoughts. "It's just a matter of each person deciding what they stand for. If enough people come together to do that, the decision-makers can't ignore us."

## Chapter 17



Ryan

Sitting at the top of a grassy hill above Bill's with Katelyn beside me, I do my best to absorb it all.

Young people are everywhere—on the sidewalks and the intersection below. Those in the streets have their arms linked.

Traffic is clogged in every direction. Uniformed cops, wearing serious expressions, stand on the sidelines, watching us. They may not agree with our views, but we're sending a message.

The question is: Are we loud enough that the people in power will be forced to listen?

A girl with a handkerchief over her red hair stands and starts chanting. Several others join in. Like Katelyn, they seem to believe they can make a difference. Their voices rise in volume, but with them saying different things, the message is discordant.

Until Katelyn rises.

I stare at her, and so does everyone else as she starts singing.

*Holy fucking shit.* Apparently, she has found her voice and it is an amazing bell-like soprano that raises chill bumps on my skin. With a voice like hers, it isn't just sad. It's a tragedy that she isn't performing anymore. I wonder if she has decided to sing right now because of me.

It seems like I'm the reason. I recognize the melody. It's our melody. The one we've been working on together. She's replaced my humming with words that perfectly and poignantly describe the scene before us. Disharmony becomes harmony, and a gentle protest message becomes a megaphone with her sincerity behind it.

Standing, I gather her hands in mine, joining her when she repeats the chorus. It might be difficult to change anything, but she's right. We have to try.

Others join us, and when we stop singing, there is complete silence. But only for a few moments.

An authoritative voice shouts a command. Lights arc through the air as flares are thrown. Apparently, those flares are a signal.

Cops step off the sidewalks and raise shields, though there is no violence. As they march forward, the crowd backs away, but the cops don't stop. They keep advancing. Canisters are lobbed. They roll, the metal clattering over the concrete. Plumes of smoke rise.

*Tear gas. Shit.*

“Run!” I grab Katelyn's hand and drag her with me back over the hill.

“What are they doing?”

She tries to look back over her shoulder, but I pull her forward, toward safety like she has done for me since the moment she entered my life.

Katelyn was lost, but she wasn't really a ghost. That was me. Ever since I returned from Vietnam, I've had one foot in an emotional grave, dead inside and unfeeling except for the memories of my friends. My only release for those feelings was my music.

Making that deep realization, I stop.

“What's wrong?” she asks as I position myself in front of her. Staring up at me, she ignores the people scattering around us in every direction like ants from an agitated mound.

“Nothing's wrong.” I dive my hands into her silky hair. “Except that I need to do this.”

Cradling her head in my hands, I tilt her chin up, tracing the precious line of her jaw as I slowly bring her mouth to mine.

“Ryan . . .” She breathes my name against my lips like maybe I'm the answer to every one of her questions too, and that's all the permission I need.

I lower my head. She slides her arms around my neck, comes up on her toes, and meets me halfway. My jacket falls from her shoulders. A flash like a star going supernova lights up the night. Her lids close.

Looking down at Katelyn, I'm mesmerized. She is so beautiful, and it's a miracle. Her trust is a miracle to a guy like me—a miracle I don't hesitate to exploit. My mouth is only a whisper away from hers when it penetrates that someone is calling her name.

She gasps.

I spin around, putting myself between her and whoever the fuck this is.

“*LA Canyon News*,” a man says as he tries to peer past me. “Miss Hart.”

He frowns at her beneath the brim of his ballcap. Apparently, I don't rank, since unlike her, I'm not in a relationship with someone famous.

"Can I get a quote to go with the photo my photographer just took?"

"My last name is Love, not Hart," she rasps. "And no, you can't."

"You heard her," I snap. "No comment."

Stepping forward, I reach for the camera, intending to rip it from the photographer's grip, but Katelyn stops me.

"No," she says, moving in front of me. "You'll go to jail."

She's probably right.

"Do not publish that photo," I growl at the guy around her. He and his buddy get a clue and back away.

"It's okay." Katelyn puts her hand on my chest. "It's not a big deal."

"It isn't okay." My heart beats rapidly beneath her palm as I glance down at her.

"Truly, it is," she murmurs.

She wraps her arms around my waist, and I wrap mine around her. Tight. My anger fades as she lays her head on my chest.

She feels so good in my arms, so right.

But though my anger is gone, trepidation rises. I have her, but not the way I want.

Not yet.

And if that photo gets out, I might not have any of her for long.

• • •

## Katelyn

We don't talk about the reporter as Ryan drives to my house. After parking his car at the curb, he comes around to my side. I place my hand in his. We go up the path to my door like we have before. Only, everything feels different.

Ryan almost kissed me tonight, and I almost let him. I sang tonight too. I found my voice, and I don't feel guilty about playing the piano or singing again because of him.

At my door, he brings my hand to his mouth and skims his warm lips across my knuckles. I tingle with pleasure, so primed, it feels like he kissed me somewhere more intimate.

“Come inside,” I say breathily.

His eyes flare. “Katy.” He straightens. His intensity is an arrow that finds its mark in the center of my heart. “If I come inside tonight, I don’t go in as just a friend.”

“I want you here. I need you.” Pulling in a shaky breath, I bite down on my lip.

I’m certain about my decision. It’s over with Liam, or I wouldn’t feel the way I do about Ryan. What I’m not certain about is how to go forward from here.

“But we have to have a serious discussion about Liam before we take things between us any further.”

Ryan frowns. “I thought we weren’t talking about him.”

“Not today then.” I nod. “But I owe him an explanation.”

“I understand.” Ryan’s eyes narrow. “So, it’s good night.”

“It is unless you agree to stay without the possibility of more. Please stay.” I rush out the words. “Sleep here. I don’t want to be alone.”

What I mean is I don’t want to be separated from him. Fuck it, if that means I’m not as independent as I should be as a woman in 1969. So be it.

“It’s my birthday,” I add because Ryan looks like he’s still undecided. “Please stay.”

## Chapter 18



Ryan

I try and fail not to stare when Katelyn emerges from the en suite bathroom in a purple chemise. I can't fight these feelings for her. I'm not planning to fight them anymore.

"I'm glad you're sleeping in here and not on the couch." Rubbing lotion into her hands, she avoids looking at me and rounds the bed. Liam's bed.

Katelyn remains his. I agreed not to talk about him, but he's here all the same. There is a ghost in the room.

"Fuck, you're pretty," I tell her.

She gives me a wobbly smile. "I want you here." Sitting on the edge of the bed, she peers at me over on the other side. "But I'm nervous."

"Don't be nervous." That look over her shoulder is pure seduction, just like she is.

With my cock throbbing inside my boxers, I move to the side of the mattress she's perched on and press my lips into the creamy hollow between her neck and shoulder.

"I'm not going to do anything you don't want me to."

"That's the problem." She shifts to face me. "With you, I don't want just anything. I want everything."

"Not a problem if I want to give you everything." I sift through her hair, marveling at the color, the soft texture, and that I'm finally here beside her in a bed.

"Ryan," she says softly.

"Katy." I lift my gaze, and her eyes meet mine, hazy with passion.

That eye contact alone affects me as strongly as if she'd palmed me.

"I wish you'd put a shirt on."

"This is how I sleep." I grin slowly. She's as into me as I am her. Thankfully. "I could take the boxers off too," I tease.



“Don’t you dare.”

But her gaze dips, and when it rises, her cheeks are flushed. Predictably, my cock is harder.

“Maybe I should put a shirt on,” I mutter.

“Don’t.” She stops me with a light touch on my arm. Her fingertips dance over my skin. “I want to touch you. I need to.” She glances up through her golden lashes. “May I?”

“Hell yes,” I say, then groan when she immediately runs her fingers across my shoulders.

“You’re so strong.” Her gaze follows the path of her hands. “And powerful.”

She traces my biceps, skims my forearms and abs, but stops at my waist. I know it’s not my cock that’s given her pause, even though as swollen as it is, it’s certainly intimidating.

“Did it hurt very badly?” She lightly brushes her fingertips over the raised and jagged edges of my scar.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” Stopping her, I capture her hand and bring it to my mouth instead.

“All right.” She nods, and a crystal-like tear falls from her eye. “But it must have been scary.”

“Terrifying. But I was one of the lucky ones.” Even though I practically bled out before the medics eventually sewed me up.

“Yes.” She nods and another tear falls.

The first one is for me. But I know without her saying that the second one is for Joe and Gus.

“Don’t cry,” I say. “Not for me.”

“Sorry, it’s just that when I think about what could have happened . . .” She uses the back of her free hand to swipe the moisture away. “With an injury so severe, I might never have met you.”

*Could. Might. Never.*

A tune fills my mind to go with those words. It isn’t only my body she revives.

“The scar reminds me of the accident.” I take her hand and press my lips to the back of it.

“That you survived.” She gives me a firm look. “And bearing that scar means Joe and Gus will always remain a part of your life.”

“Right.” I end the heavy talk, pointing to the lamp on her nightstand.

“You ready to turn out the light?”

“Yes.” She twists at the waist.

I stare at her tits and take in the show of her hem rising higher on her thighs, giving me a glimpse of that shadow between her shapely legs. Precum pearls my slit.

“Night, Ryan.”

“Night, Katy,” I say softly as she turns the switch.

The room is plunged into darkness. She doesn’t see the hunger blazing like torches in my eyes as she lies flat on her back and brings the sheet and covers up to her chin.

“You’re too far away.” I grab her by the waist.

She gasps when I arrange her on her side, then moans when I curl up behind her and slide my hand into position over her pussy.

“My cock is going there,” I tell her. I don’t want there to be any doubt about where this is going. I will claim her.

“I want you too.” She covers my hand with hers, and I feel the damp heat of her beneath my skin.

“Soon,” I promise. I will move heaven and earth, do whatever I must to have her.

Katelyn doesn’t speak, but she curls her fingers around my hand and brings it to the hollow between her delectable tits. I press my face into her neck, breathing in her honeysuckle scent as most of my worries drift away.

I have her. I’m keeping her.

Soon, her breaths even out. I stay awake longer. It takes a long time for my cock to settle down. But despite my discomfort, I’ve never been more at peace in my entire life.

Even in my half brother’s bed, I feel like I’m finally where I belong.

• • •

Until I wake and discover that Katelyn is gone.

Throwing back the covers, I sit up. With my hands on the mattress, I blink against the brightness, surprised to see that the sun is already high in the sky. I slept through the night without a nightmare.

Shaking my head in disbelief, I go in the bathroom, take care of business, wash my hands, and brush my teeth with a new toothbrush Katelyn set out for me. When I return to the bedroom, I search for my white T-shirt but decide *fuck it* when I can’t find it. I have a person who’s more important to locate.

It's Katelyn's birthday. I can't wait to give her my present. Conveniently, what I need to give to her is just outside in my car.

Stepping into the living room, I find the light is even brighter through that long bank of sun-facing windows, but there's no Katelyn. So, I follow my nose to the kitchen, smelling freshly brewed coffee. Thankfully, there's also a plate of pancakes. If I hadn't already decided to keep her, those two items would tip the scale.

I pour way too much syrup on the stack and have a big bite poised to go into my mouth when the phone rings and then rings some more. But the noise doesn't summon Katelyn.

Worried now, I frown, wondering if she went off with Maureen for birthday preparations. The ringing stops, and then it starts up all over again. This time I answer it.

"Hello?"

"Is this Katelyn Love's residence?" a professional-sounding male voice asks.

"Yes, it is," I say gruffly. I don't recognize the voice, but it could be the reporter. "But she's not here." *Where is she, dammit?* "Can I take a message?"

"Yes, this is Dr. Maale. I've been trying to reach her about her test results. I spoke with Liam, but would you mind telling her to call my office? I'd like to talk to her."

"I'll tell her. Absolutely."

"Great. Thank you."

Dr. Maale ends the call. I'm hanging up on my end when I hear a clatter and see a door on the other side of the kitchen that I hadn't noticed before.

Abandoning the tempting stack of pancakes for someone who is infinitely more enticing, I turn the knob and throw open the door. As expected, I find Katelyn inside.

She's wearing my missing T-shirt, but she isn't alone. She's surrounded by at least a dozen painted versions of herself. Some portraits are on easels. Some are smaller and on tables. Some hang on the wall.

With her thumb through the hole of a painting palette containing daubs of paint, the living, breathing Katelyn is absorbed in her current work in progress and doesn't even notice me. It's doubtful she even heard the phone ring.

A mirror beside her reflects her image as she's absorbed in the canvas in

front of her. This version of her is different than the others in the room. It takes me another stunned moment to process everything and realize what that difference is.

The other paintings are muted versions of her. The backgrounds are more vibrant than she is except for her current project.

“What’s changed?” I ask out loud, and she startles, dropping her brush.

“You shouldn’t be in here.” She shakes her head and steps in front of her painting.

“Too late. I’m already here.” I close the distance between us. “You’re incredibly talented.”

I grasp her by the shoulders, not caring that her wet palette gets crushed between us. Some of the paint ends up on my white T-shirt, and some smears on my skin.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me you paint?”

She shrugs. “It’s just a hobby. Therapy, really.”

“This isn’t just a hobby,” I say after glancing around again. “It’s an obsession.”

## Chapter 19



### Katelyn

“You’re right,” I say softly, feeling notably vulnerable with Ryan in my studio, surrounded by fourteen different versions of myself on canvas. “Without music in my life anymore”—I glance away from his far-too-perceptive eyes—“this is my catharsis.”

“I understand.” He captures my chin and gently turns my head, so he is all I see. “But you have music. Instead of encouraging others, you need to pursue it for yourself again.”

“No.” I shake my head. “Music is too tangled up with pain and loss for me. I can’t unwind it.”

“And this isn’t pain?” He sweeps his gaze around the room and winces. “How long have you been painting yourself like this?”

“Since we moved here,” I say softly. “In this room, I have the space and the lighting to paint.”

“And the motivation,” he says, guessing correctly.

“Losing our baby isn’t all I’ve lost.”

I peel Ryan’s hand away from my face and release it reluctantly. Watching his arm fall to his side, I feel untethered. His touch steadies me.

“I lost Liam, lost who I was. And now with you, I feel . . .” I’m at a loss. Some things like Ryan and me are too big and too difficult to convey with just words.

“Now with me, what?” he asks, then exclaims, “Fuck!” He takes my painting palette from me.

“Oh no.” I notice we have paint all over each other, and that he has paint on his palms.

“We need to get this out of the way.” He glances at my palette in his hand, then places it on a nearby stool that is there for just that purpose. Giving me a long, searching look, he asks, “Where were we?”

“I don’t remember,” I mutter, losing my nerve and not liking that. I was bolder before Liam started cheating on me.

“I think you do,” Ryan says as he studies me closely, “but you’re afraid to share. Maybe you just need me to lead the way.” He nods as if I’ve agreed with him. “You’re all I think about. Everything changed since I met you. You star in every fantasy.”

He gathers my hands, and I feel the wetness on his skin as he brings my hands to his bare chest. The paint is cool, but his skin is warm. I flatten my palms, feeling the steady thumps of his heart.

“Let me show you,” he says low.

“We shouldn’t,” I whisper, suddenly breathless in response to the glittering intensity in his eyes.

“Oh yes, we should.”

He tips up my chin. My heart races as he lowers his head. His warm breath bathes my lips in mint.

As his firm lips touch my softer ones, I begin to tingle everywhere in anticipation. I sigh from the bliss of the connection, feeling like I could fly. My chest swells. My heart is pounding so hard, it reverberates throughout my body like a gong struck by a velvet-tipped mallet.

“Ryan,” I say softly against his sculpted lips. The blood rushing through my veins has caught fire. “More.” I twine my arms around his neck.

“I need you too.” He crushes his mouth to mine.

“Yes.”

I thread my fingers in his hair and tug on the thick strands at his nape. Opening my mouth to the prodding of his tongue, I moan when he sweeps it inside and touches the tip of his to mine. I feel it, that first tentative touch, and the deeper penetrating strokes that follow between my legs.

“Katy.” He rips his mouth from mine. “My Katy.”

Peppering my jawline with potent kisses, he palms my breasts, and they swell to fit the frame he provides. I grab his biceps, my legs giving way beneath me when he brushes my tight and aching nipples with his thumbs.

“She’s in here!” a male voice calls out, and then closer, suddenly shouts, “Holy fuck!”

I open my eyes. The wall of Ryan’s chest and the paths my hands took when he kissed me are painted all over his skin. It takes me a moment to bring everything together in my mind, to realize I know that voice.

*Grayson Niles. Liam’s bassist.*

I release Ryan and back up a step, but it's too late. The damage is done.

When my gaze meets Gray's, the accusation in his steely eyes convicts me. Everything seems to happen in slow motion, then speeds up.

My thinking of Liam seems to conjure him like some ill-advised wish. He appears in the doorway, striding into the room at full steam, and then that steam fizzles out.

"What the fuck?" Liam glares back and forth between Ryan and me.

Pressure building behind my eyes, I know what he sees.

In Ryan's white T-shirt, I wear his colorful handprints and thumb swipes over my breasts. We painted a road map on each other. My heart beats rapidly knowing it's obvious what we were doing inside this room.

During the short span of a few of my guilty heartbeats, Liam takes it all in, and I know his conclusion is accurate. I want to sink into the floor as his blue eyes harden to glacial ice. What I don't expect are his next words.

"Hello, half brother." Liam glares at Ryan. "I see you've met my woman."

## Chapter 20



### Liam

“What the fuck, Katelyn!” I shout, focusing on her eyes. Not on her tits that bear Ryan’s handprints. Not on her lips, swollen by another man’s kisses.

My half brother and my woman. What the ever-loving hell?

Katelyn numbly shakes her head. She doesn’t startle from my yelling. Instead, she seems addled and her entire body is shaking.

“Katy, listen to me.” Ryan takes a step toward her.

“Back off,” I growl, and Katelyn focuses, but not on me.

“Don’t touch me.” She backs away from Ryan and wraps her arms around herself. “You knew.” Her beautiful voice cracks. “Didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Ryan nods. “I did. But—”

“You lied to me.” Betrayal and hurt are fissures that fracture her. I watch her fall apart before my eyes.

*How far has this gone?* Despite all the evidence, I’m not sure. When the *LA Canyon* reporter called me, I told him that he got it wrong, that Katelyn wouldn’t cheat. And yet, here we are.

My blood is boiling. My heart struggles for each beat.

But my mind focuses on one thing: Ryan didn’t tell Katelyn who he was.

Why, I don’t know, but I do know I can use that. Their relationship, whatever the hell it is, however far it has gone, will end now. It was founded on a lie.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” As tears flood Katelyn’s beautiful gray-blue eyes, she glares at Ryan.

I hate it when she cries; it slices into me like a knife. Under any other circumstance, I would go to her and comfort her. But not here. Not now.

“There wasn’t a good time,” Ryan says, pleading for her understanding as he spreads his hands wide.

“There’s always time for the truth.” She lobbs her accusation like a



grenade.

“Not in this case.” The way Ryan sways, it’s like he’s been punched. “I just wanted to—”

Her chest heaving, she sobs. “I know exactly what you wanted.”

Her eyes are wide and her skin is pale. Her lips tremble. She looks nearly as lost as she did at the hospital three years ago, when she went back for surgery with our baby but came out of it alone. I hated many things about her being pregnant. But the worst was having to be the one to tell her that our baby was dead.

“I’m so st-stupid,” she stammers. “Such a fool.”

“You’re not, Katy.” Ryan softens his tone. “Not at all. Just the opposite.”

“Don’t call me that.” She shakes her head, all that glorious hair shimmering like pure gold in the sunlight streaming through the windows in her studio.

“It’s who you are to me.”

Her eyes flash as her lips firm. “Not anymore.” Her voice snaps like a whip.

Ryan jerks back. Every battle-honed contour of his body goes rigid. Even the scar on his thigh seems to pulse a darker purple in response to his tension.

“It’s over,” she says firmly. “Get out.”

*Thank fuck.* Cool relief washes over me, reducing the boil to a simmer. Ryan has well and truly fucked himself.

“It’s not over.” Ryan steps toward her, but she shrinks back, and just like that, he suddenly looks as shaken as she does.

“It is.” Her hands form fists at her sides. “It should never have happened.” She squares her shoulders, and that detached, emotional mask she’s worn nearly every day since we lost the baby is back. “I’m going to pretend it never happened.”

Ryan’s jaw tightens. Apparently, it’s far from over for him.

“I see Liam found you.”

Maureen makes a dramatic entrance, her taffeta party skirt swirling around her. Taking in the situation in a glance, she winces but recovers quickly. Married to that prick Peter, she’s undoubtedly had lots of practice.

“The caterers are here. Guests will be arriving soon. You should get ready to greet them.” She looks at Katelyn, then glares at me like I’m the one with incriminating handprints all over myself.

“You help Maureen,” I say as I make eye contact with Gray.

The reporter is going to print my response about the photo of Katelyn and Ryan today. With my celebrity status, it will make the front page. There are also other reporters coming to Katelyn's party because I invited them. This party isn't only for Katelyn; it's for me. Gray and I are shopping for a new label.

"And take Ryan with you," I tell Gray.

Bringing my hands together, I point the tips of my fingers at Ryan as if they're the double barrels of a shotgun. I'm nearly mad enough to shoot him, to complete the job that shrapnel didn't. But I'm madder at Katelyn.

"Not going anywhere." Ryan cranks up his chin. "Not until I talk to her."

He's nearly as stubborn as Katelyn. I glance at her like he does, but she's not paying attention to us.

"You okay, honey?" Maureen has her eyes trained on her friend. She doesn't balk at the painful portraits like I did the first time I saw them. She must have seen them before.

"No, I'm not okay," Katelyn says and starts sobbing.

This concerns me. She's always okay. I'm accustomed to her detachment, counting on it. I need her to keep up appearances with everyone at the party today.

"Let me help." Ryan moves toward Katelyn, but she doesn't even acknowledge him.

It's like he doesn't even exist. I can relate and almost empathize with him.

"You're going." I move between Ryan and the woman who might not wear my ring, but is mine all the same.

"You don't look good, birthday girl." Maureen clucks her concern behind me. "Step aside, Liam, so I can get her to your bedroom." She tucks Katelyn under her arm.

"She stays." I try to reach for Katelyn.

"Get out of my way, Liam Hart." Maureen waves me away, giving me another glare. "You don't tell me what to do. She's in shock, and she needs a moment. She wasn't expecting you today."

"Obviously," I say snidely. "But she stays. We're going to have a talk."

*Fucking hell.*

What Katelyn has done has shaken me to the core. I want to rail at her for doing this to me and beat the shit out of Ryan. My own brother.

After all I did for him.

# Chapter 21



## Katelyn

I avoid my reflection as I stand in front of the mirror in my bathroom.

In the shower, I scrubbed my body and face with the rag and turpentine that Maureen retrieved from my studio. The paint is gone now, but my skin is red and raw. Inside, everything is worse. My chest is a wreck, and my heart feels like a piece of metal that got worked over by a lawnmower blade.

“You done in there?” Liam asks from our bedroom. Again.

“Yes.”

I can avoid my own eyes but not his, and not the consequences for what I’ve done.

Squaring my shoulders, I return to the other room. Liam has Ryan’s shirt with his brother’s condemning handprints on it in his grip. Maureen is next to him. She has Ryan’s jeans, belt, and boots under one arm.

“Give all this shit to him,” Liam says, whipping the shirt her way.

“Right.” She frowns.

“And make sure he gets the fuck out of my house.”

*Our house.*

“Why don’t you tell him yourself,” she says. My friend has the nerve I lack.

“Don’t fight me right now, Maureen.” He glares at her. “Do. It. Now.”

Completely ignoring him, she looks at me. “Kate?”

It’s not the first time. If Maureen isn’t ignoring Liam, she’s arguing with him. They’ve never gotten along.

She wrinkles her nose as she steps around him on her way to me. “Tell me what you want, honey, and I’ll see that it happens.”

That’s just it. I can’t have what I want. I can’t have it because it was all one big lie.

But why did Ryan lie to me? It couldn’t be just for sex. I know Ryan is no

saint. I've seen the women at his shows. Like Liam, he could have anyone he wants.

So, what was it?

Was he just using me to get back at Liam, the legitimate son? Or was it to gain access to him? That would certainly be one way to get into the music business.

Ryan wrecked my life.

No. I quickly correct myself. *I* wrecked my life. I chose wrong, and I have to live with the consequences. One being that I'm awake. With my nerves no longer deadened, I feel, and everything I feel hurts.

"It's okay, Maureen," I whisper, touching her arm. I'm back to lying and pretending again. "I appreciate your concern, but I'll be all right."

"You're not," she hisses at me. "You look terrible. I'm concerned."

Trying harder, I tell her, "I'm as okay as I can be, given what's happened," then glance at Liam.

I'm only in a towel, but he doesn't look at me like he normally would. Maybe he never will again, and that's my fault too.

"Give us a few minutes." I return my gaze to my best friend. "Please."

"Okay, Kate." She shakes the pile of Ryan's things at me. "I'll drop these off. Then I'm coming right back for you."

"Thank you." I nod.

"You got it." She stops beside Liam. "I'm going to be just outside."

"I hear you, *Auntie*." He sneers the nickname. "Shaking in my boots."

She doesn't react. "I'll leave the door cracked open."

She exits the room, and it's all I can do to hold my ground as Liam stomps toward me. The sneer he aimed at my friend is now all for me.

"Did you fuck him?"

His words slice through me, bleeding out what remains of our love. But I have no defense.

The way he looks at me is almost worse than his accusation. There's anger and even disdain. Maybe this is the way he's been looking at me since we lost the baby. Maybe there is more than one reason I withdrew from him and the world.

"Did you fuck the woman who answered your phone in Kansas City?" I ask, able to wield accusations too. "And the one whose panties were in your bunk on the tour bus? And the one who called me here at the house to share with me what a good lay you were?"

Liam flinches, and then his eyes narrow to slits. "So, you did fuck him."

My heart hurting, I rub my chest. I knew he was unfaithful, but I didn't really want to have it confirmed. The knowledge is salt rubbed into too many wounds.

"No, I didn't." I clarify for him, even though I don't think he'll believe me. "We just slept together."

"Here?" His voice rises with his incredulousness. "In our room? In our bed? And you expect me to believe you did nothing?"

"Believe what you want to believe." I plant my hands on my hips. "I don't owe you an explanation."

"You owe me everything." His eyes flare. "What would you have done if not for me?"

He waves a dismissive hand at me. I feel more exposed and vulnerable in just a towel than I already am.

"You were alone in Calgary," he shouts. "You had nothing. You were nobody. If I hadn't come along, you would have been forced to go back home to your dear old mommy and daddy."

I lift my chin. "I would have found a way to make my own way."

"How?"

"Singing," I reply stubbornly. I have more talent than he was ever willing to admit. "Playing the piano and my guitar."

"News flash, babe," he says snidely. "You're really not all that good."

That hurts. Liam's opinion still means something to me, even though the love between us is gone.

Pressure builds behind my eyes as I pull in a breath. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I want it to sink in." His lips flatten. "I want you to get how this feels."

"How what feels?" I ask.

"The fucking truth."

"This isn't the absolute truth." I shake my head. "It's your personal truth."

"You hurt me first."

Liam is like a child. There's no use correcting him. He won't take responsibility for his actions. But I will for mine.

"I made a mistake."

"Damn right you did." He nods tightly.

“I’m sorry.” Tears pierce my eyes. Sorrow rises, flooding all the emptiness inside me. I’m sad for what we’ve lost, for what never will be. “No matter what you believe, I was going to tell you about Ryan.”

“Oh, really?” Liam’s dark blond brows lift. “When exactly?”

“I’m telling you now.” My towel slipping, I grab the loosened edges, and Liam’s gaze dips. I might not feel passion anymore, but he does, and I’m not sure if I’m relieved or repulsed. “I’m confessing, even though you just want to hurt me.”

Denying it, he shakes his head. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Well, you are.” My tears spilling, I gesture between us. “But it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“You think you’re leaving me?” His lips curl. “Because of him?”

“No.” My chin comes up higher. “I’m leaving you because it’s best for me.”

“You’re not going anywhere.” He grabs me by the upper arms and hauls me into him.

“Ow, Liam,” I cry as his fingers pinch my skin.

“You’re pregnant with my kid, babe.” He shakes me, and my head lolls. “Dr. Maale called me a few days ago because he couldn’t get ahold of you. You’re staying right the fuck where you are.”

## Chapter 22



Ryan

I stare at Katelyn. Across the pool from me, she reminds me of the Cali sun in a bright yellow dress. I'm wearing my jeans and the T-shirt she was wearing earlier.

I slept with her. I kissed her. She was almost mine. All that brightness, all of her, was almost all for me.

My eyes burn with jealousy as Liam pulls her closer to him. She hasn't left his side since they emerged from their bedroom. One lie of omission, and I lost her. It appears she's made her choice.

It's almost like I was never in the running. Like we never happened. But we did, and I believe her choice is the wrong one.

I toss back another shot of tequila that makes my eyes water. Catering staff wearing tuxedos are serving them on silver trays to the fifty or sixty guests in Katelyn's backyard who are here for her birthday party and looking to get smashed like me.

"She's not going to acknowledge you, no matter how hard you stare at her." Maureen offers that tidbit as she appears beside me. Her long skirt swishes from her abrupt stop.

"Not gonna stop me from trying," I say stubbornly.

"You lying to her isn't something she's going to forgive and forget."

"Thanks for retrieving my clothes," I say but continue to stare at Katelyn.

Even if she won't acknowledge me, I have to look at her. She is all I want. In her pristine dress now instead of my shirt, the evidence that I touched her is gone. She looks wholly unaffected by our encounter in her studio. You wouldn't know by looking at her that our kiss even happened. But it did. Even after tequila, I can still taste her on my tongue.

"Liam wants you to leave," Maureen tells me again.

I glare at her. "Liam can go fuck himself."

“Right. I don’t think that’s the way he has it planned.” Her expression as she looks at Liam says she’s not a big fan of his either. “You do realize you’ve made a huge enemy of someone who has a lot of connections in the music industry.”

“I’m aware.” Not that I care. Katelyn is all that matters.

“Why did you do it?” She shifts her full attention to me, even though there are at least three overdressed guys who are likely upper-industry types trying to get her attention. “Why not tell her up front that you are related to Liam?”

“Because once I figured it out, I was afraid she would react just like she has.” I gesture with my empty shot glass to where Katelyn is now.

Liam’s goal seems to be to circulate her around the party like a trophy. It’s her birthday, but it seems to be more about him.

“Did you invite all these people?” I ask Maureen.

“Fuck no.” She shakes her head. “I just invited you and a few people from Love Street.”

“So, the rest are Liam’s doing?” I ask, taking a wild guess.

“Yeah.” She nods.

“Did you know Liam was coming home today?”

“No.” Her eyes narrow on the current subject of our conversation. “I don’t like Liam. He treats Katelyn like shit. And where opportunities have arisen, I’ve made certain others in our industry know how I feel about him. Not that it’s done much good. Labels are mostly run by men who think it’s cool that he plays the field and has a woman like Katelyn on reserve.”

“It’s totally not cool.” I shake my head. Liam’s attitude toward Katelyn reminds me of the way his dad treated my mom.

Maureen studies me even more intently. “She deserves better.”

“I think so too.” I give her statement a confirming nod.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” she asks me.

“Try to change her mind.” I rake a hand through my hair. “Explain.”

“Don’t try,” Maureen says grimly. “Make certain you succeed.”

“Did she say something to you?” I tilt my head. Do I still have a shot? “From where I’m standing, it looks like my chances for success are slim to none.”

“I haven’t talked to her yet.” She frowns. “Bastard practically has her hobbled and shackled to him since they came out of their bedroom.”

That isn’t encouraging. But I remind myself that Maureen is on my side,



not his. And she's Katelyn's best friend. That is two huge things in my favor that Liam doesn't have.

"I'm gonna go to my car and get my guitar." I turn down a waiter with more tequila.

Getting drunk isn't going to get me anywhere. It's not going to get Katelyn back. But I know something that might.

"Still planning to do a song for her?" Maureen arches a brow.

I nod. "Yeah. Definitely."

"That's a good plan," she says. "I approve."

Maureen knows Katelyn nearly as well as I do. Words alone might not reach her, but ones set to music might.

•••

## Katelyn

My heart rises to my throat, and I can't even swallow as I watch Ryan leave.

*This is it.* Once he goes, there's a very real possibility I might never see him again. Tears burn my eyes and blur my vision at that thought.

Noting that my attention has wandered and who it has wandered to, Liam pinches my arm in the same spot where he grabbed me too hard earlier.

"Ow." I suck in a sharp breath. I'm going to have a big bruise. Both Liam and Ryan left marks on me today.

"Babe." Frowning at me, Liam gestures. "Did you hear what Bar just said?"

I shake my head. Bar is Barney Finegold, the manager of the Aunties and the Uncles. He has agreed to represent Liam.

I know why he's interested in shopping Liam and Gray to other labels. Liam is talented. He's a proven commodity with not one but two top-selling hits. Sure, money will be lost buying him out of his current contract, but there's lots more money to be made by signing him when he's at the top of his career.

"I missed what you said. Sorry."

I make eye contact with Barney. I like him. He's not your typical salesman just looking to exploit his artists. He cares about the people he represents. I remember he was the one who convinced Maureen to check herself into rehab when everyone else just ignored her problem.

“It’s perfectly all right. Not the coolest thing for us to be talking business on your birthday.” Barney peers at me over the rim of his dark glasses. “I told Liam, chances are there will be a bidding war between the major labels to sign him.”

“Even without a drummer?” I ask, since of course Reggie isn’t coming along with this new deal.

Liam never liked his drummer, not because he isn’t talented, but because he calls Liam out on his bullshit. Plus, Reggie is nearly as good-looking as Liam. It gives him too much competition with the groupies.

“Keeping the entire three-piece would be better.” Barney strokes his newly whiskered chin. He’s attempting to grow a goatee but poorly. “Your harmony will suffer without Reggie.”

“You might be right.” Liam gives Barney’s advice some consideration, which is surprising.

Artistically, Liam is a dictator. His heavy-handedness is tolerated because he’s talented and has a good sense about music.

Remembering his criticism of me earlier, I rub my chest again. That barb still stings. It isn’t only physically that he’s hurt me.

“I know I am.” Barney bobs his curly head. “Group acts are where it’s at.”

Liam wrinkles his nose. “Because every label is looking for the next Beatles.”

“Songwriting. Music. Harmony,” Barney says. “Those guys have it all, and yes, that’s what they’re looking for.”

“Katelyn’s going to help us this time around with the songwriting.”

I gawk at Liam. This is news to me. Though, admittedly, I didn’t process much after he told me I was pregnant. I was in shock. My whole life in upheaval. But even so, I know I would have remembered him asking me to write songs for him . . . with my mediocre talent.

“I’m not working while I’m pregnant.” I lost a baby continuing to work and not making it the priority I should have. “I will not lose this one.”

I place a protective hand over my abdomen that has yet to swell. Losing my appetite and having a little trouble sleeping are the only indicators of my condition so far.

“You’re pregnant?” Barney asks, his eyes widening as he looks at me.

“Yes.” I nod. I only need to make my appointment and confirm with Dr. Maale, but I know Liam wouldn’t lie about something this important.

“Congrats.”

When Barney touches my arm gently, tears arise. Since Liam returned and all hell broke loose, I feel completely at a loss and desperately in need of affection. My best friend is too far away on the other side of the pool, and Ryan is no longer an option. That is over. He lied to me. None of what we shared was real.

But it felt real. I can still feel the imprint of his lips on mine.

“What’s that guy doing?” Barry asks, and I turn.

“Happy birthday, Katy,” Ryan says, looking right at me. Holding his guitar, he has returned and is standing on the diving board. He has no mic, but his voice carries straight to my ears and then my heart as he starts singing.

This time, there’s no doubt. It’s not an illusion. He really is singing only for me.

*Where are you, my Katy?  
And how long have you been  
Roving roaming in the vision  
The one that drew me in?*

*You say that you ain’t dreamin’  
You tell me you can’t see  
But are you barely breathing  
Surviving just like me?*

*When we were on our own  
Two vagabonds aimless all alone  
We couldn’t know  
What the future holds  
For you and me*

*Well, what do you want now, Katy?  
And where does your journey lead?  
Knocking round  
The lost and found  
You somehow found your way to me*

*No need now to be on our own*

*Two wanderers finally finding home  
The answers there  
For us to share  
Just you and me*

## Chapter 23



### Liam

The catchy guitar-chord progression alone is a siren's call. Everyone is staring at Ryan rather than at me. Worse, he has Katelyn's attention, her complete and utter devotion, singing carefully crafted words about a woman—her, apparently—entering his life and changing it for the better, changing him.

*What a bunch of bullshit.*

At the start of the second chorus, Gray flicks his current joint into the pool. Giving me a chin lift, he strides over to Ryan. Gray is a total suck-up. Plus, he likes to be the center of attention.

Unfortunately, he seems to mistakenly believe that what Ryan is doing is a publicity stunt authorized by me. The record execs I've invited appear to be making the same error.

Doing the rounds, I told them Ryan is my half brother. I saw no point in trying to keep something that big hidden. Unfortunately, now everyone thinks this is my important announcement. That Ryan is part of our new group. That he is my replacement for Reggie.

*No fucking way.*

Just when I've had enough, Ryan ends his bullshit song, and I realize Katelyn has abandoned me.

That pisses me way the hell off. With all the execs arriving, we didn't get to have the lay-of-the-land talk we needed to after I told her she was pregnant. Quite frankly, I have a bunch more to say, but without the proper time to do so, I condensed my instructions to two things: stay by me and stay away from Ryan. The *or else* was implied.

However, Dr. Maale warned me that Katelyn is a high-risk pregnancy. I don't want her to get agitated. I survived the hell of losing a child and the aftermath. I'm not doing that shit again.

Fucking hell, I'm far from sure I want this baby any more than the other, but it's come at a convenient time, and I'm not above using the situation to ensure that Katelyn remains mine.

But I'm not going to be outdone by Ryan at a party with my woman at my house. Today is supposed to be about me and *my* music.

Making my way toward Ryan, I growl a few *excuse mes* and shove through the crowd around him. He's done singing, but I want to make sure he understands he is done—very done.

"Give me your guitar," I demand.

"All right." He unstraps it and turns it over, not paying much attention to me. That's because Katelyn is staring at him like he's the father of her unborn child.

That ratchets my anger even higher. I'll take care of him and her later. Right now, I have to salvage this shit, for the sake of my career and because of Katelyn. She is all doe-eyed for Ryan right now, but I'll remind her. He's a second-place talent. She adores me, not him.

"Gray," I snarl at him. "It's time. We're doing our new tune now."

"You got it, boss."

I strum the chords. We're going in a new direction. Rock 'n' roll is moving away from pretty little be-bop phrases and harmonies, and we're going with it.

Music gets Katelyn's attention. It should because my song is fucking brilliant. It's going to make my new group bigger than the Beatles.

*There's something between us  
You know what I mean, girl  
Don't let it divide us  
When it should unite us*

*There's something between us  
You know what I mean, girl  
It could be so fine now  
To call you all mine now*

*But I caught you in a lie  
And it makes me question why  
Would you just throw away  
That good thing between us*

*There's something between us  
You know what I mean, girl  
Dragging our love down  
So long as he's around*

*There's someone between us  
But I'm taking your heart back  
Belonging to me all along  
When did things go so wrong?*

There's applause when Gray and I finish that Ryan didn't get. I shove his barely adequate guitar back at him. He grips it by the neck, and I lean in. I have something to say.

Man-slapping him on his back like we're good, I drop the bomb. "Katelyn is pregnant with my baby, motherfucker."

"What?" He jerks back like he's been shot.

"You heard me." That little bit of empathy I felt for him earlier is long gone. "Stay the hell away from Katelyn. Take your guitar and your amateurish music, and get the fuck out of my sight."

• • •

## Katelyn

"Ryan!" I call and nearly fall running down the steep stone pathway from the house, trying to catch him as he leaves.

He turns, and the look he gives me stops me cold in my tracks. "Go back inside."

"We need to talk." I choose rudimentary communication. I had a speech rehearsed as I tore through the house looking for him after his song, but I can't remember it.

"No, Katelyn. We don't." Cold, his brown eyes are those of a stranger.

So, I'm Katelyn, not Katy anymore.

I hug myself. We're done, but I make myself move closer.

"You might not think we do, but I have something to say." My world just got turned upside down, and he's the only one who could possibly understand.

"You're pregnant."

“Yes.” I swallow hard. Liam told him. I suspected he had.

“There’s nothing left to say.”

“Just that I need you.” I step down onto the stone just above Ryan.

“Don’t come any closer.” He puts up his hand, his free one that isn’t holding the handle of his guitar case.

“Because you’re afraid someone might see us.” I crank my chin up. Going on the defensive helps me keep the tears at bay. “That Liam will see. You’re afraid of the damage he could do to your career.”

“You were never planning to leave him.” Ryan’s gaze dips, and when it rises, his expression is as blank as sheet music without any notes. “Did you know you were pregnant? While Liam was away, and we were together?”

“No.” I shake my head, doing my best to look and sound as emotionless as he does. That’s a difficult feat to achieve when there’s distrust now between us.

“You expect me to believe that?”

“We weren’t even trying to have another child,” I say. “I only went to my doctor because I’ve been nauseated in the mornings and overly tired lately. They ran some tests. I didn’t know one of them was for pregnancy.”

“I guess that adds up.” He presses his chiseled lips together. “Dr. Maale called earlier. I talked to him briefly before I went into your studio and . . .”

“We kissed.”

And it was incredible. I’ll never forget it. Never forget him.

“Why didn’t you tell me Liam is your brother?” I ask softly.

If I’m on my own accepting the blame for what happened between Ryan and me, I should at least know why he lied to me.

“And I want the real reason, not what you said in my studio.”

“That was the reason.” He frowns. “I didn’t want it to change things between us like it has.”

“Did you know all along?” I ask. “From the very beginning?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Not until that night outside your house when Daryl asked about Liam.”

“Okay.” So, up to that point, what we shared was something, at the very least the start of a meaningful friendship. But it’s obvious now that I don’t even have Ryan as a friend anymore.

*But I have a baby.* I place my hand over my abdomen.

I lift my chin higher. “Your song was beautiful.”

I long for Ryan to hold me. I need him to tell me everything is going to be



all right. But it's up to me to face my fears, the biggest one being that I could lose this baby like I lost her. That terrifies me.

"It's not my song." The ice in his eyes thaws a little. "It's yours."

"Thank you," I say softly.

"You're welcome."

"You make all the difference in my life too," I say without thinking, then catch my lip between my teeth. "I mean, you did for a little while." I drop my gaze. I'm no longer comfortable sharing with him like I once was. "Before you came along, I was in a really sad place. You helped me get out of it."

"You helped me too."

"I'm glad I could. You're a good man who made a bad decision keeping who you were from me." I nod at him, then drop my gaze to my feet. "I was a better person with you. I liked the way you saw me."

"You are the woman I see," he says gently.

"I was for a brief while."

I glance up at Ryan. His warmth and sincerity reach me. His pine and unique masculine scent swirls around me. On the step beneath me, he feels like my entire world. Everything else seems secondary. But seeming isn't real.

Wrapping my arms around myself, I try to hold on to that better version of me. I'm afraid it's not just him I'm saying goodbye to today.

"You once told me you're no hero, but you're wrong. You were mine."

"Katy . . ." He groans.

"Not Katy anymore." I shake my head. "You're right. It's only Katelyn now."

"You're staying with him." His brows slam together. "Even though he was unfaithful."

"It's our baby."

That says it all. This baby is my purpose. Even if Liam doesn't like being second fiddle to a child, I have to find a way to rebuild a home from the wreckage of what remains. I can't fail. I won't. The baby is the priority.

"Goodbye then, Katelyn."

Ryan turns, but I can't let him go, let us go. Not quite yet.

"Ryan, please."

Hearing my sob, he turns around. I don't see tears in his eyes, probably because there is an ocean in mine.

Bridging the distance between us, I step down. I plant my palm on Ryan's

solid chest and go up on my toes, needing him for balance. Relying on the firm foundation he is for me this one final time, I aim my mouth for his jaw. He hasn't shaved. His skin is a rough coating of whiskers. I expect the roughness, but he turns his head at the last moment, and I get the corner of his mouth instead.

Warmth, decadence, near bliss, it all flows from him to me. My lips tingle, and I yearn for more. But I withdraw; it's my only choice.

"Goodbye." I silence the clamor in my mind. The warmth under my palm, the steady thump of his heart, the rightness of him, I memorize it all. Summoning the remains of my strength, I let it all go. I let him go.

We are at an end before we even got started. There are no more words. There's nothing more to be done. There is nothing left to be said.

## Chapter 24



### Liam

I hear the front door click. I've been counting the moments since I saw Katelyn run after Ryan. Stepping away from my guests in the living room, I ask her, "Where were you?"

"I was saying goodbye to Ryan." She doesn't lie or make excuses. There are tears in her eyes.

This thing with my half brother pisses me off. It's much more complicated than I expected.

"You wanna talk about it?" I force the words out. She looks devastated, and I love her. I try to inject sincerity into the offer, but talking about Ryan is the last thing I want to do.

"No." She shakes her head. "I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

"It's still early. We have guests." I gesture. "Go to bed if you need to, but don't go to sleep. When I finish with this, we need to talk."

"All right," she says dejectedly.

My unfaithful but biddable woman. Her shoulders slump as if she's the one carrying the weight of the world and our future on them.

I return to the living room. "Where were we?" I rake an agitated hand through my hair.

"I believe Pacific Records was about to make a proposal." Barney pushes his glasses back up to the bridge of his nose.

"Right." The exec loosens his tie and leans forward in his chair. "PR already pitched a sizable offer. For you"—he points at Gray—"and you." His gaze lands on me. "However, Ryan Chance intrigues us. That was a clever stunt having Gray sing with him."

It was no stunt. I clench my jaw.

"We want to hear the three of you together in one of our studios as soon as possible. If you harmonize as well as we imagine, we're prepared to buy

you out of your current contract and offer you complete freedom on your first album with us. We'll also consider giving you a percentage of the royalties earned—a small one—on every record we sell that has your name on it. Sound good?" He raises his silver brows.

He knows it sounds good. It's fantastic. No one has offered us royalties. He's blown the other deals completely out of the water.

However . . .

"Ryan is not part of our deal," I tell him.

"Well, that is disappointing." The exec shakes his head. "Because after what we heard, he's definitely part of ours."

*Fucking hell.* I don't want Ryan in my group. He tried to steal Katelyn from me. I want to destroy any chance he has of making it into the music business, not help him.

But Pacific Records is the biggest label out there, and their offer is huge. So, I keep cool and think it through.

It's over between Katelyn and Ryan. She's pregnant with my baby. Ryan lied to her, and Katelyn's not likely to forgive that betrayal.

If I make him part of this deal, I can keep an eye on him, and she's always going to wonder if Ryan was using her all along. I probably won't need to do anything else to keep them apart.

Turning back to the exec, I force a smile. "You have yourself a deal."

•••

## Katelyn

Liam enters the bedroom as I exit the bathroom. His meeting didn't last long.

I only just changed into my nightgown, a new one. I threw the purple one I wore when Ryan and I slept together in the hamper. I also changed the sheets because I can't be in bed with Liam if it smells like Ryan. I took the trash out too. It had the rag in it that I used to take off the paint.

But though I've removed everything that reminds me of Ryan, I know it's not going to be so easy to forget him.

"Are your guests gone?" I ask Liam, blinking away tears that just won't go away.

I tell myself that I'm emotional because of the pregnancy hormones, but I know that's not it. I can dispose of all the physical evidence of Ryan, but my

emotions regarding him go far deeper than I want to admit.

“Yes.” Liam comes close, raking his gaze over me.

His blue eyes darken with appreciation, but beneath the silk, my flesh rebels. It’s wrong for me to be repelled by his desire. We were in love at one time, and I carry our baby inside me. But I don’t want him touching me. Not tonight.

“Maureen?” I ask, needing her. “Is she still here?”

“No. She told me she’ll call you.”

I nod and try not to flinch when Liam reaches for me.

“I missed you, babe.” He frames one side of my face with his hand.

“I missed you too.”

I did miss him. Until I didn’t.

But is what happened between Ryan and me all my fault? Shouldn’t Liam shoulder some of the blame? He cheated on me. He broke us as a couple long before I did.

“That’s my Katelyn.”

He aims his mouth at mine, but I turn my head. His kiss lands on my cheek.

“Not yours.”

I take a step back. He needs to earn back my trust, doesn’t he?

“You are.” Grabbing my arm, he swings me back into him.

My hands land on his hard chest. Liam is nine years older than Ryan, but he is every bit as physically fit. He’s handsome too, only more mature. At one time, I melted if he just looked at me a certain way, but that time has passed.

“You cheated on me,” I say, unable to keep the hurt out of my voice. “I don’t trust you anymore.”

His gaze narrows. “You cheated too, darling.”

I sigh, unable to deny it. “Right. But what I did, didn’t go as far.”

I’m the only one who knows how I feel about Ryan, and that those feelings went further than what happened between us physically. Feeling that way about Ryan and acknowledging it, I’m not sure I can ever love Liam the same way I once did.

“Let me make you feel good.” He releases my arm and runs the back of his hand down my arm and across my breasts.

My nipples tighten, betraying me. I feel like I’ve betrayed Ryan and myself.

“No.” I grab his hand to stop him. “Don’t. I don’t want you to touch me.”

“Why not?” His eyes rise. They’re dark sapphire now, not icy blue.

“Because I’m not ready.” I release his hand and step back. “It’s too soon. You have to give me the time I need.”

“Time for what?” he asks.

“To rebuild what we broke.” I wrap my arms around myself, which are a poor substitute for Ryan’s.

Liam tilts his head. “All right,” he says after a considering beat. “But I’m a man, babe. I have needs. You gotta give me something. Otherwise . . .” He lets that hang.

My stomach lurches into my throat. That’s a threat. It’s not love—it’s manipulation.

*But it’s not about me.* I place my hand over my abdomen and swallow hard.

“I understand.” I ignore my stomach and force my tense muscles to relax.

“That’s my girl.” He reaches back between his shoulders and draws his shirt over his head. Watching me, he removes his shoes and pants. “Your turn.”

I take off my nightgown.

“Beautiful, babe,” he says low after a long, leisurely scan of me in just my panties. “Fucking love your body. Come here.”

“Okay.” Shuffling forward, I swallow another wave of revulsion.

Liam tugs down my panties, kissing my abdomen, but his lips on my skin don’t feel right. His kiss doesn’t even feel like seduction or affection. It’s a reminder. The baby is a fragile bond that binds us.

When he straightens, he tosses my panties aside. “You won’t need these anymore tonight.”

“Right.” My vision sheens with emotion as I follow him to the bed. I know what he wants, but I don’t want to do it.

He shoves down his boxers and sits on the edge of the bed. I drop to my knees on the hard floor as he pumps his rigid cock. He places his hand on my head.

Tears slide down my cheeks as I take his cock in my mouth and suck him. My spit mixes with my tears, but he doesn’t notice. He groans and comes in my mouth fast. I swallow every drop and rise quickly.

Turning, I stumble on the way to the bathroom and make it to the toilet just in time. It’s not pretty. I heave up semen and bile.

I haven't eaten anything all day. I'm grateful for that, at least. That for tonight Liam is satisfied with a blow job.

But what about tomorrow?

## Chapter 25



Ryan

I don't sleep. Not a fucking wink. I don't want to close my eyes.

I see Katelyn in my mind. I smell her honeysuckle scent. I feel her warmth and her creamy skin. Repeatedly, I relive that perfect kiss.

But I wonder . . . Is Liam kissing her? Touching her? Fucking her?

Even knowing she's pregnant with his child—that she chose him over me—I still want her so badly, I ache.

“Fuck!” I jackknife up and slam my palms against the mattress.

I can't stand it anymore, can't stand being in this room where the walls seem to be closing in around me. I need a distraction. Waiting for the sun to rise, I pace my room like a caged animal. As soon as the light cracks the horizon, I get dressed. Then I grab my guitar and head out.

After firing up the Buick, I drive to Love Street. It's not far, but everything outside my car is a complete blur.

In the parking lot, I pull into a spot and remember nearly running Katelyn over. I recall how sad she looked that night, how lost. That's how I feel now. Having her, I felt like I had everything. But now it's all gone.

I grip the steering wheel and stare at the empty street, so empty without her. I consider going to her house, wanting to be with her more than anything. The world makes sense when I'm with her, but being with her isn't an option.

She made her choice. I'm mad at her for making it. But I understand because I understand her.

*A baby.* It's not the child she lost, but she has a second chance to be a mom.

We made no promises to each other. There wasn't time. In the end, I have to accept her decision and respect it. Even if she had chosen me, it's not my child she carries, and what the hell do I have to offer her?

*You're my hero.*



Even with my eyes wide open that resonates deeply. It isn't just that she's her best self with me. I'm at my best with her too.

How the fuck am I supposed to walk away from that? How can she?

I feel more alone than before I met her. I want to tear my hair out, tear my heart out of my chest because it hurts so bad.

But I throw open my door instead. I seek solace where I have sought it since Vietnam.

Alone with just me and my music.

• • •

Hours later, I don't find any solace. I believe that without her, even that is lost. But I write tons of melodies and lyrics. Page after handwritten page, I bleed out the emotions inside me onto paper.

I'm shaking out cramps in my hand when Maureen comes in. I stand, peering into the darkness behind her, seeking but not finding who I most want to see.

Maureen shakes her head. "She's not with me."

Disappointment sweeps through me like a flood. I feel like I'm drowning as she walks closer.

She notices all the crumpled balls of paper and arches a brow. "You've been busy."

"I needed to do something." I tuck my pencil behind my ear and rub the back of my neck.

"Yours is a healthier way to deal with stress than many would choose."

"Oh yeah?" I raise a brow. "What else can I do?"

"Try to forget what troubles you, I guess," she says with a shrug.

"Not possible."

"I agree." Maureen looks sad, and I get the distinct impression we're not just talking about Katelyn and me anymore. "Damage done to our heart is impossible to completely forget."

"How is Katelyn?" I don't have a right to ask, but I have to know.

"Not good, honestly." Her brow furrows. "Worse off than you."

I frown. I don't like that, and I hate that there isn't anything I can do about it. Frustrated, I rake a hand through my hair. "This is killing me."

"Try being pregnant and determined to stick by a man who . . ." She trails off.

"A man who what?" I ask, my guts knotting, but Maureen just shakes her

head.

“Not for me to share.”

“But Katelyn told you something?”

“Yes,” Maureen says with a sigh. “She’s wrong, in my opinion. But it’s her choice, and Liam is the father of her unborn child. I asked her to stay with me, at least for a while, but she refused.”

“Why would you want her to do that?” I ask gently. On the surface, I’m controlled. But inside, I’m a volcano, and the pressure to blow is building.

“It doesn’t matter why. She won’t take me up on it.” Maureen’s gaze narrows. “She’s determined to make a home for her baby. She has her mind set to make it work with Liam. We got into a fight over it.” Her eyes turn unfocused. “I’ll smooth things over with her later. I want to make it clear she has a safe place to go if she needs one.”

Steam spews. “Why would she need a safe place?”

“Because—”

“Hello, anyone home?”

Liam appears, stepping out of the same back hallway Maureen did. He’s not alone. He has Gray with him.

“Hey, man.” Gray tips the brim of his Borsalino fedora with the flattened crown to us. “Auntie.”

Maureen glares at Liam. “We’re closed.”

“Didn’t come to talk to you.” Liam weathers her glare, then looks at me. “Came to talk to you.”

“Don’t have anything to say.” I glare at him too. “Except I’d better not find out you’re mistreating Katelyn.”

“Hurt the mother of my child?” His brows rise. “I wouldn’t dream of hurting Katelyn. Whatever gave you that idea? Or who?” He shifts his attention to Maureen. His blue eyes, the same shade as the asshole who spawned us, narrow. “If you’re filling Katelyn’s head with anything that hinders our relationship, I will forbid her from seeing you.”

“This isn’t medieval times.” Maureen spits out the words, her face turning red. “She’s not chattel. You don’t own her.”

“Katelyn is mine, and what we do in private is none of your business or anyone else’s.” He looks at me. “Are we clear?”

“We are so not clear.” I get up in his face. “Not if what you do in private harms her.”

“Back down, little brother.” He grins. “First off, I would wipe the floor

with you. It wouldn't even be a contest."

"You're dreaming, old man." I narrow my eyes. What does he think I was doing over in 'Nam?

"Secondly, if you happened to do any damage, my woman wouldn't like that. My woman, not yours." He scores that point and taps his chest. "But I didn't hurt her, and you need to clear your head and pay attention. I have a proposition for you."

Completely confused, I jerk back my head. "What the hell?"

"Pacific Records has offered us a record deal," he says.

"You and Gray, you mean."

"No, the three of us," he says to clarify. "They liked your song."

"No deal. No way." I shake my head. "Not doing shit with you."

"You want in this business?" He lifts his chin. "Then you go in with me or you don't get in it at all."

A threat, one he might be able to follow through on.

"Then I guess I don't." I shrug like it's not a big deal, but my music is all the future I'm ever going to have.

"Ryan," Maureen hisses. "Come talk privately with me for a minute." Without waiting for my agreement, she stomps to the far corner of the store.

"Pacific Records is a big deal," she says low when I join her.

"Sure. But there are other labels."

"Other smaller, less significant ones," she says pointedly. "I think you need to consider Liam's proposal and its upside."

"What upside?" I tilt my head.

"Being in a group with Liam with Pacific Records backing you, you're going to have a lot of cash. Money is power." She lifts a finger when I start to protest. "Plus, you'll be in a position to be close to Katelyn when I can't be around."

Light dawns, an epiphany as bright as a solar flare.

"Okay." I nod to her and return to Liam, extending my hand. "I'm in."

"You got yourself a deal." He clasps my hand, and we shake on it.

## Chapter 26



### Katelyn

Hearing a loud crash outside the house, I jump. Dropping my paintbrush, I pick it up and place it in its proper place, then set down my palette.

It's late. Liam hasn't come home yet. It's probably him, but what if it isn't?

My heart hammering, I creep into the kitchen. I'm seriously considering withdrawing a knife from the butcher block holder when the front door bursts open.

"Katelyn!" Liam shouts. "Where are you?"

I exit the kitchen, nearly barreling into the three men in the entryway. Three inebriated men who are all glassy-eyed and swaying like treetops in a breeze.

My gaze stalls on only one.

Ryan's deep brown eyes seem to drink me in as greedily as I do him. It feels like a lifetime has passed since we said goodbye. Every hour, I've thought about him, but not being able to talk to him or see him has felt like forever.

"What's going on?" I ask.

I haven't seen Liam since he left the house, telling me he had band business to take care of. So, why is Ryan with him? Not just with him, he's propping him up on one side. Gray is doing the same on his other side.

They reek of alcohol. Gray also smells skunky, which is his baseline since he's always smoking marijuana.

"You're looking at Hart, Chance, and Niles," Liam says before his head lolls back.

I shake my head. "I still don't understand."

"We signed a contract with Pacific Records," Ryan says.

"We?" I don't think I heard him right. "As in, you three together in a

band?”

“Yeah,” Ryan slurs.

“Already laid down two tracks tonight.” Gray puffs out his chest, looking proud.

My mouth opens, but no words come out. With Liam and Ryan feeling like they do about each other, this doesn’t make any sense.

“PR told us they’re going to push for radio airplay right away.” Gray nearly goes down as Liam suddenly leans hard his way.

“We need to get Liam in bed,” Ryan says. “He polished off an entire bottle of vodka.”

He and Gray with Liam between them head down the hall that leads to my bedroom.

“Fuck.” Ryan bangs his shoulder against the wall on the way.

I follow the weaving trio. When Gray knocks a picture askew, his hat comes off, but I catch it. I enter the bedroom as they dump Liam into the bed, then I hand Gray his hat before going to the foot of the bed. Liam is passed out and snoring.

Shaking my head, I take off his shoes. Ryan disappears inside our bathroom and returns a moment later with our trash receptacle. Placing it on the floor beside Liam, Ryan turns him on his side.

“Don’t want him to choke on his own vomit,” he says, his eyes meeting mine.

“Right.” I nod. “Thank you for bringing him home.”

“He shouldn’t be left alone.” Ryan glances at Gray. “Can you stay with him a minute? I wanna talk to Katy—Katelyn.”

“Sure. But not too long.” Gray traces his handlebar mustache. “I’m wiped, man.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Ryan grasps me by the upper arm. His grip is firm but careful.

“What’s happening?” I ask him when we’re in the hall.

“You’ve been painting.”

With his eyes much more focused than they were a moment before, he sweeps his thumb over my cheekbone. My skin tingles and my nipples tighten to diamond-hard points beneath my painting smock.

“I couldn’t sleep,” I say.

“Why not?”

“You weren’t with me,” I blurt, then wince as the truth slips out. My

brain is as susceptible to him as the rest of me. “I mean, Liam wasn’t with me.

“Don’t lie.” Ryan’s brows form a V of displeasure.

“I can’t tell you my truths anymore,” I whisper and glance away.

“Why not?” He captures my chin and brings my gaze back to his.

“Because of Liam,” I say, reminding him. “Because I’m pregnant with our baby. Because we can’t be what we were anymore.”

“I’m in a group with Liam.” Ryan rakes a hand through his hair. “We signed a contract with Pacific. I’m going to be around a lot.” His voice drops an octave. “We can’t be what we were, but we can be friends.”

“I’d like us to be friends.” I lick my dry lips. Having him this close awakens my every desire.

Ryan’s gaze drops to my mouth as he brushes the pad of his thumb across my wet lips. I shiver as pleasure rushes through me.

“Then friends”—his eyes darken—“is what we’ll be.”

## Chapter 27



### Ryan

Being friends with Katelyn is heaven but also hell because I want to be so much more than friends.

Right now, my gaze is glued to her as she pulls a pie out of the oven. She is my obsession. I have never wanted any woman more.

“Ryan!” Liam barks, catching me staring at Katelyn again. “Come fix this riff.” On the piano bench, he shakes a piece of paper with my handwriting on it.

“What’s wrong with it?” I take the paper from him.

“It’s too slow.” He swivels around on the piano bench. As he plunks out the notes, there is a crash in the kitchen.

“Shit!” Katelyn exclaims.

When I get to her, she is running cold water from the tap on her fingers. The pie is on the floor. Stepping over it, I come up behind her and take her hand in mine to examine it. Her fingers are red but not blistered.

“Are you okay?” I ask.

“Just burned my fingers.” She’s breathless.

So am I with the front of my body aligned with the back of hers. My cock swells where it’s pressed against her.

“I can see that.” I remove her hand from the stream of water and turn off the tap. “It’s not blistered. Thankfully.” I brush my fingertips gently across hers.

“Ryan . . .” She shudders as she breathes out my name.

“It’s okay,” I say. Her hand may be, but my cock is throbbing. “Just needs some ice.”

And I need some ice down my pants. I take a step back as Liam enters the kitchen.

“So, is the pie the only serious casualty?” Liam takes her hand and

inspects it like I did.

While he's engrossed, Katelyn looks at me, and I stare right back at her. Time hasn't lessened the hold she has on me.

We've remained just friends as agreed since we formed Hart, Chance, and Niles. That was two weeks ago. Sometimes, we go into the studio as a group, but mostly we practice here.

Often, I find excuses to touch Katelyn. Her responsiveness to me is addictive. She is. I know I need to stop indulging my addiction, but I can't stop. I don't want to.

"I'll make another one." Katelyn withdraws her hand from Liam's. "I have an extra crust in the freezer. It won't take long."

Her hip bumps mine on her way to the refrigerator. I pretend I don't want to lift her onto the counter, spread her legs, move aside whatever panties she's wearing under that multicolored minidress, and sink my aching cock inside her pussy.

"Ryan!" Liam shouts.

*Fuck.* I got caught staring at her too long.

"Piano. Now."

He turns, and I follow him into the other room, but not before I take and gently squeeze Katelyn's hand.

"Sorry you got hurt," I say low.

Her eyes shiny, she nods.

When I reach the piano, I drop onto the bench beside Liam. "This isn't my song," I tell him. "It's Katelyn's, really."

"It's your handwriting." His eyes narrow.

"It's your song, Ryan," Katelyn says from the kitchen. Her voice is muffled. She's on her knees cleaning up the mess.

I want to help her, but I also don't want to push my luck with Liam. His relationship with her is much different than mine. He's possessive with her and treats her like she's an object he owns.

Katelyn doesn't like it, and she pushes back. However, when she does, he seems to inevitably take his frustration with her out on me. I know she's noticed because she's stopped pushing back, at least whenever I'm around. I try not to think about what happens between them when I'm not here.

"The lyrics are yours," I tell her. "You made them up on the fly at the protest. You're getting credit on the album."

"But you wrote the melody," she says. "The words aren't as important."



“They are,” I say firmly.

“Blah. Blah. Blah.” Liam mimics our arguing with his fingers. “I don’t care who gets the fucking credit, so long as the song goes on the album. It’s a good tune. But let’s pick up the speed of the riff and finesse the lingo. Yeah?”

“What did you have in mind?” I ask.

“Make a stronger statement,” Liam says. “Like my Fargo-North song. Make it us versus them.”

“Us who?” I ask, needing more to go on.

“Those your age,” Liam says. “Those who don’t believe in this war. Demand that those in charge change things.”

“He’s right.” Katelyn wanders into the living room, wiping her hands on a dish towel.

I’m relieved that she doesn’t seem to be favoring her injured hand.

“Okay, but how?” I tilt my head.

“Mention the cops,” she says. “And the tear gas. Call the protesters ‘youth.’”

“Or children,” I say, getting an idea.

“Right.” She nods. Unsurprisingly, she’s on the same page. This isn’t the first song she’s contributed her ideas to. “That would work.”

I pick up the paper. Crossing out a line, I add her suggestions.

Liam plays the tune. Gray comes inside without that ridiculous hat he usually wears. One of his cheeks has crisscross marks from the hammock. He must have fallen asleep again outside after smoking a joint.

I sing the revised song. Liam and Gray harmonize with me on the chorus.

“Wow,” Katelyn says, rubbing her bare arms when we finish. “Your harmony is perfect.”

Liam and I have sibling phonics. Gray is adept at melding his voice with ours. The record label is excited about our sound, and so are we.

“Right time. Right sound.” Gray strokes his mustache. “Right message. This one is gonna be our big hit.”

## Chapter 28



### Liam

“We leave tomorrow early in the morning.”

Since we’re already in bed, I have plans; I want to have sex with Katelyn.

Gray’s prediction about the protest song she contributed to has come true. We’re getting paid handsomely to be a last-minute addition at the Monterey Festival.

But I’m not thinking about that. Right now, my cock is throbbing as I stare at Katelyn, coming out of the bathroom in that slinky chemise that makes love to her sexy body like I will soon.

“I know,” she says and climbs into the bed. Flipping onto her side, she draws the sheet up to her chin and reaches for the switch on the lamp.

“Don’t turn it off.” I stop her. “I want to see you.” I place my hand on her upper thigh and slide it higher.

“Liam,” she says as she covers my hand. “I’m—”

“Don’t tell me you’re too tired or that it’s too soon. It’s been three weeks since I came home. I’m tired of blow jobs. You’re my wife. I want to come inside you.”

“Not your wife,” she whispers, and I freeze with my hand on her panties. She’s never once complained about our nontraditional arrangement.

“Is that what you told yourself to make it okay what you did with Ryan while I was away?” I ask snidely.

“No,” she whispers, and I know I hurt her. I don’t even have to see her eyes to know. “I just want our baby to have a father.”

“I am the father,” I snap. “Don’t need a bullshit piece of paper for that.”

“You know what I mean.” She flips over to face me. “We need something that will hold up in court. Our child should have your last name.”

“Not a big fan of my old man. If you knew him like I do, you wouldn’t be in a dither to have his name attached to our child.”

I sift my fingers through her golden hair. Her lids don't flutter with pleasure like they once did. That pisses me off, and so does this conversation.

"What is this really about?" I ask harshly. "You afraid that when Hart, Chance, and Niles goes mega, that you as the mother of my child won't get your share?"

"No." Her gaze turns cold. "I hope you're hugely successful. Fame has always been more important to you than me." She bites down her lip. "Never mind."

"You think you're not important to me?" My eyes narrow. "You're the sole reason I do what I do."

She nods, but her eyes don't reveal the same level of unwavering faith she used to have in me.

That's the Ryan effect. My half brother is a hell of a guitarist and a kick-ass songwriter. I'm glad he's in my band. But I don't trust him with her. I'm relieved that when I'm away from her, he will be too.

"Talking time's over." I snag the hem of her nightgown and whip it over her head. Ripping the sheet back, I climb over her. "Eyes on me," I say when she starts to close them. "I don't want you thinking about anyone but me."

I will fuck any and every thought of Ryan out of her pretty head.

I cup her breasts. Lowering my head, I flick her nipples and they bud under my breath. She likes that and arches her back. I strum the tips again, then lick and suck on them while watching her face. Her lips parting, she pants, and her lids lower over her smoky blue eyes.

"Damn, you're pretty to look at turned on."

"Thank you." She threads her fingers into my hair and lifts her hips as I move lower.

I keep my gaze on hers, bringing her to a climax within moments with my tongue. Before she comes down, I position and slide my aching cock into her delicious wet heat. She feels so good, so tight. No place better. I never fuck groupies on the road without making sure they're on birth control, and I always use a rubber.

Gliding in and out of her, I remember our early days and how I often made Katelyn climax multiple times. I pinch her nipples now like then, and she cries out. It's a sting of pleasure-pain that she enjoys.

I feel her tighten around me. It's been too long. I want to last longer. I want her to come again, but it feels too good. It only takes a couple of strokes inside her before I explode.

Roaring her name, I fill her. There's no woman in the world like Katelyn. When I eventually come down, I bury my face in her neck and breathe in her sweet scent.

"I love you," I say, noting that her skin is wet. She's crying. I can taste the salt of her tears on her skin.

"I love you too."

She wraps her arms and her legs around me as if she doesn't want to let me go, just like she used to. But it's not the same. She didn't come again, and I don't have her the way I used to, if my making love to her makes her cry.

## Chapter 29



### Ryan

Onstage, Hart, Chance, and Niles are magic like we are in our rehearsals, but the magic is magnified.

There's something about being under the spotlights and having your voice amplified by speakers. We fed off the energy of the crowd. They were as into what we were doing as we were. Gray and even Liam felt the same way. I see it in the brightness of their gazes as we tromp together offstage.

They go on ahead to the VIP tent, but I get waylaid backstage by some women. I listen to them gush about the band, then politely but firmly decline their advances. Jazzed on adrenaline, I only want a certain woman to celebrate with, and she's not here.

I don't make eye contact with anyone as I walk to the tent for artists. Flipping up the flap on the entrance, I sail inside but come to an abrupt halt when I see Liam.

He's sucking down vodka while one naked chick sucks him off, and another plays with her clit.

I look away. "Fuck, Liam."

My chest is tight. I don't care what shit he does, but my heart hurts for Katelyn. She doesn't deserve this.

"Go away, Ryan," he slurs.

He didn't get wasted off what he's chugging now. The brightness of his gaze onstage wasn't adrenaline. He's doing drugs.

Liam sneers at me, his eyes bleary. "This isn't a team sport."

"You sure as fuck could fool me," I fire back.

Navigating around his threesome, I head over to where Barney and Gray are hanging out.

"Hey," I say, and Gray glances past me. "Not getting any pussy?"

"No." I shake my head. The only one I want, I can't have.

“How about some hash?” He offers me a drag on the joint he’s smoking.

“No.” I wave it and his smoke away.

“You don’t do drugs?” he asks. We’ve had this conversation before, but he doesn’t remember.

“I saw too many of my buddies getting killed while on the stuff,” I say. “I vowed if I ever made it out of that jungle alive, I was going to live my life for real without any smoke-and-mirrors shit. You feel me?”

“Sure.” Gray scrunches his face as if living real is completely unappealing. “What vice do you have?”

*I have one*, I think, but she’s only a vice because another man has claimed her.

Gray squints his steely eyes. “Not comfortable with a bandmate who has no vices.”

“I have them.”

“Name one,” he says.

“You.” I roll my eyes.

“Good one.” He guffaws.

“I have someone who’d like to meet you,” Barney says while straightening his glasses.

“Not doing groupies,” I warn him.

Barney shakes his head. “Not a groupie.”

When he steers me over to a nearby seating area where John Kendrix is lounging, I nearly swallow my tongue.

“Good set.” John, the best guitar player to ever pick up the instrument, jerks up his chin.

“I’m a big fan,” I say, not even ashamed that I’m gushing. “Seriously. Love your songs.”

In fact, they’re everything about the new movement in rock ’n’ roll that I love.

“Thanks.” He stands with his guitar in hand. He’s so tall, he dwarfs me.

“Gotta go shred.” He points back the way I came. “But if you do Woodstock, we’ll talk some more there, yeah?”

I nod and watch him stride away.

*Man, that guy is cool. His music. That guitar.* I’m not sure exactly what I am or what I’m doing, but I know he is the real rock star.

“Morris Henderson.” Barney reappears with a man in tow. “I’d like you to meet Ryan Chance.”

“Hey, man.” I hold out my hand. “Nice to meet you.”

“Morris is one of the presenting sponsors at Woodstock,” Barney says. “They want HCN to appear.”

“Cool.” Everyone tonight has been talking about the big East Coast event. I hook a thumb over my shoulder but don’t look, keeping my eyes on Barney. “What did Liam say when you told him about Woodstock?”

“Liam’s not in any shape tonight to make a decision.” Barney shakes his head. “And anyway, I’m not asking him. I’m asking you.”

“We’ll do it,” I say quickly. More and more, Barney has been coming to me for group decisions. “If Kendrix is going to be there, it’s destined to be a big deal.”

“He’ll be there.” Morris nods. “We’ll have HCN headline the evening portion of the show. Do ‘Stop.’ It’ll be radical.”

## Chapter 30



Katelyn

“What did the doctor say?” Maureen asks me.

“That everything looks good.”

I serve her a slice of my freshly baked pie. It’s apple, which seems to be Ryan’s favorite. I made it thinking about him, though the guys haven’t returned. They went on from Monterey to two other festivals.

“Stop” is the big hit Gray predicted. The first two HCN songs, “Katy, My Lady” and “She’s Crying,” Liam’s only contributions, both only just peeked into the charts. “Stop” is in the top ten on the billboard, which is huge.

The band is scheduled to appear on the Don Havitt show before they come home. I invited Maureen over to watch them with me.

“How are things with Liam?” she asks in a casual tone, but there’s nothing casual about the way she’s watching me.

“I don’t really want to talk about Liam.”

I take a seat beside her at the bar. I can’t tell her about the sex we had before he left. For me, it was making love, but it wasn’t just Liam in our bed. I realized as Liam touched me and coaxed me to climax that it wasn’t him I was thinking about. It was Ryan.

“Did he force you?” She frowns.

“He didn’t force me the other time.”

“He manipulated you into giving him a blow job.” Her frown deepens. “In my book, that’s forcing.”

“We differ in how we view that.” I didn’t have to do it. Covering her hand with mine, I explain. “It was my choice.”

“Liam is an asshole.”

“I know how you feel about him.” I squeeze her hand. “And I know why. You’re protective of me. I love you for that.”

Ryan is protective of me too. I know deep down how I feel about him, but



I'm committed to making my relationship work with Liam.

To Maureen, I say, "I want our baby to grow up in a healthy, happy, and nurturing home."

"I love you too, honey." She clasps my hand between both of hers. "But what about Ryan?"

"What about him?" I paste on a neutral expression.

I'm back to wearing my mask again, suppressing my emotions. In that, things with Liam are very much the same as they were before Ryan.

"You were falling for him." She studies me closely. "Do you really expect me to believe that you can shut off your feelings for him just like that?"

"They aren't over," I say honestly. "But they have to be."

She raises a brow. "Feelings aren't a switch you can flip off whenever you decide."

"I have been focusing my effort on making it seem like the switch is off."

That's the best I can do, but I know I need to end my friendship with Ryan when he returns. I can't do what I need to do for my relationship with Liam if Ryan is around.

I don't know exactly how I'll end it without revealing how I feel, but I know that once Ryan gets the message, he will move on. And when he does, it will be just Liam and me in our bed.

• • •

"Are you still going on tour next week?" I ask Maureen after we've eaten our slices of pie and have settled on the couch in front of the television with big glasses of cold milk.

"Yes." Maureen nods. "Twelve cities in two months. Two months isn't so bad."

"No, it's not," I say, but I see the darkness that creeps into her eyes. She doesn't like touring, and I don't like her being so far away.

"Call me every day." I reach out my hand between us.

"I will."

She laces our fingers together. Hers are encircled by rings. Mine look small and boring compared to hers.

My brow creases as I study our hands. I remember when things were at their worst, she shot up her drugs between her fingers and hid the evidence with rings.

“You’re not using again, are you?”

“No, of course not.” She looks away.

“Please tell me if you feel like shooting up again.” I tug on her hand, and she looks back at me. “I’ll help you. We’ll go to the counselor together. I’m always here for you, no matter what. You know that, right?”

“I’m not using, but I appreciate the offer.” She gives my hand a squeeze. “Look.” She unthreads our fingers and points at the television. “They’re on.”

I look just in time to see the camera pan from the host to the band. They stand side by side, all holding guitars.

Liam is on the left wearing a geometric serape I’ve never seen before. Gray is in the middle, sporting a suede jacket with fringe. Ryan has on a white button-down tuxedo shirt. It’s untucked. He’s wearing faded, flared jeans with patches on the knees and his worn leather belt.

Fans are perched on scaffolding, some higher up than others.

Gray starts them off. As he strums the intro to an acoustic cover of an old R&B tune, his silver eyes are twinkling. He’s having fun. Even Liam looks happy.

Ryan leans into the mic. His chiseled lips only a breath away, he sings as he plays his guitar. He looks confident and gorgeous.

I whisper the three words in my mind. My chest aches with the power of my feelings as I look at him.

Maureen leans forward like me. “They’re good.”

I don’t respond. I can’t. I’m too busy drinking it all in.

HCN is tight as a unit. They’re having a good time. Their harmony raises the fine hairs on my arms.

They finish the cover to loud applause, but they don’t pause. They go right into “Stop” with Liam introducing the number and Ryan mentioning me as the lyricist. He looks right into the camera when he says my name, and my cheeks burn.

I wish I were there, but I’m also glad I’m not. Knowing how I feel, it would be too difficult not to throw myself at him.

That world isn’t mine. It’s Ryan’s. He belongs there.

It’s obvious he’s the one who is more than the others. He fills the screen with his presence. And when he begins to wail on his electric guitar, a bright and shiny new one, he is transcendent.

The camera loves every single angle of his face like I do. The lens captures everything close up—his lowered lids, his parted lips, even the

sparkle in his rich brown eyes.

When he finishes the song with an arm flourish, the fans come down off the risers. As an adoring throng of women surrounds him, I look away. My chest hurts again but for a different reason.

While the band rehearsed, I believed he was still mine. I believed it because I wanted to believe it. There are no other women around when he's here.

But he's not mine.

It might not be difficult at all to convince him that we can't be friends. He likely doesn't need to move on like I do.

In fact, he probably already has.

# Chapter 31



Ryan

When we get back from the Havitt show, I stay away from Katelyn as long as I can.

I'm afraid I can't keep hidden how I feel about her anymore, but on the other hand, I'm not sure why I should keep quiet. Liam is cheating on her again, plowing through pussy like she doesn't even exist. He doesn't deserve her.

Today is the day that the band is posing for the cover of our self-titled debut album. I talked Katelyn into being the photographer long before we left for the festivals and our television appearance.

Our song is currently number one on the charts. The label wants this cover finalized and our album completed. I don't really care about all of that. I just want to see Katelyn.

Standing in Griffin Park in front of the viewpoint of downtown where we had our first serious conversation, I have more adrenaline coursing through my bloodstream waiting for her to appear than I did getting prepped to go on live television for the first time.

Finally, I spot Liam's shiny new silver convertible. There's no groupie in his passenger seat today. It's Katelyn with big sunglasses covering her beautiful eyes and a rainbow-colored scarf over her golden hair.

Liam parks beside the tent with the makeup and wardrobe people in it. Barney comes out and starts laying into Liam for being late. He already gave Gray an earful for being stoned.

As Liam tries to defuse our manager, Katelyn gets out. She has her camera around her neck. Removing her scarf, she loops it around her camera strap, puts her sunglasses up on her head, and scans the setting.

I move toward her like she's called me, and on some level, she has. My long strides devour the distance between us.

Her face lights up when she sees me. Her moon-and-sea eyes sparkle, and she starts to run. Reaching her, I swing her into my arms.

“Katy.” I groan. Lowering my head, I aim my mouth for hers.

“Ryan.” She turns her head to the side while clutching my shoulders. Her nails dig into my flesh, not to pin me to her but to remind me as she gives me a warning look. “Liam.”

My lips skim the round of her cheek, and she lets out a shuddery sigh.

“I missed you.” Not caring about Liam, I brush her cheek again. “So fucking much.”

“I . . .” She trails off as the sound of shouting reaches us. “Put me down.” Her voice sounds wrong, strained.

“Okay.” I release her.

As I let her down slowly, her soft curves and warm skin slide temptingly over the sensual edges of me. Her eyes growing large, she stumbles back a few steps. She felt me.

“Are you okay?” I catch her now like I did way back then. “How are you feeling?” I sweep my gaze over her, noting the slight swell from the baby.

“I’m fine,” she says.

“You look stunning,” I tell her, and she does.

Her cheeks are flushed. Her eyes are bright, and wearing a hot pink minidress with bell sleeves, she looks prettier than any *Vogue* runway model.

“Thank you.” Her hand slides over her abdomen.

I wonder if that’s a reminder for her or for me.

I can’t forget her pregnancy, and I don’t want to. Having a baby is Katelyn’s deepest desire. Though she has never voiced it, I believe she wants to be a mom to get right what her parents got wrong.

But everything has changed in my mind. I’m not without means anymore, and Liam isn’t acting like a husband, certainly not like a doting father-to-be. He thinks and acts like the world revolves around him.

I get that he needs that adoration because of the way he grew up. His mindset would be okay if he were a single guy in a rock band, but he’s not single. He’s behaving like the asshole who donated nothing but his sperm to make us.

“I need to talk to you,” Katelyn says at the same time as I do, then gestures to me. “You first.”

“Okay, but privately.” I point to where my Roadmaster is parked under a tree.

She nods. I take her elbow and escort her while glancing around to make certain no one is watching us.

When I get her out of view, I cage her between my arms. Trapped against the vehicle, she lifts her chin.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” I dip a finger under the strap and follow it to where the camera rests between her tits.

“Don’t,” she says breathily.

“Don’t what?” I ask. My lids get heavy, and my cock gets harder as I stare at her mouth.

“Friends don’t touch like that.” Staring at my lips, she wets hers.

“I don’t want to be just friends anymore.” I lower my head, and her eyes lift to search mine. They’re smoky with desire. “I don’t think you do either.”

“I don’t.” She shakes her head. “I mean, I do.”

“You seem confused.” I lift her off the ground. “Let me make things clear.” I crush my mouth to hers.

“Ryan.”

When she moans, I take advantage of her parted lips. Slipping my wet tongue between them, I stroke deep. That sweet taste of hers ignites passion that I’ve contained for too long, but not anymore.

While she clutches my shirt in her fists and makes sexy, desperate noises, I make a feast of her mouth. I claim it. I claim her. Somehow, we will make this work. I’m so into it, so into her, that I don’t realize at first that she’s hammering my chest.

“Put her down.” Liam growls.

“Fuck.” I rip my mouth from hers and set her feet back on solid ground. Resting my forehead against hers, I try to get my breathing and my body under control.

“Step away from him, Katelyn,” Liam orders.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, her gaze darting to mine.

“I’m not.” My hands curve into fists against the cool metal as she ducks out from under my arms.

“It’s my fault.” She rushes over to Liam, her camera swaying between her tits.

He brushes her aside.

I turn to face him, only to receive a brutal blow that cracks my jaw and spins my head and my body around. As I slam into the passenger door and slide down, I see stars.

When they clear, I realize Liam's not done. He lifts me off the ground and cocks his arm again, but my head is clear now. I get up and shove him backward.

"It's my turn," I warn.

But Katelyn slips in front of him.

"Katy, don't." I pull back my arm just in time. "Fuck, I could have hurt you."

"You already have," she says.

Stunned, I stagger back. "I don't want to hurt you." Nothing Liam could do to me could devastate me more.

She reaches for Liam and brings his hand to her lips. "I came over here to tell Ryan that we can't be friends anymore. I choose you. I love you. You know that."

She goes up on her toes and kisses him with the mouth that I just thoroughly ravaged. I can still taste her on my tongue. I glare at Liam over her, and he glares back at me.

"He's your brother," she says, lowering herself to the ground.

Liam glares at me. "We will never be brothers."

"He's right." I nod tightly.

Katelyn will always stand between us.

## Chapter 32



### Katelyn

Alone in the dark closet that serves as my developing room, I wait for the image in the solution to appear. I've developed others for the album cover, but they weren't quite right.

It's been weeks since the shoot. The label is getting irritated with me, but I think this one is going to be the right one.

For a few moments after Liam punched Ryan, I wasn't sure the shoot would even occur, or if the group would stay together, but it did and they are. Liam's anger seemed appeased by the punch and my declaration. Ryan didn't seem angry, though. He seemed disappointed in me, which hurts, but not nearly as much as our friendship being over.

I'm a minor factor when it comes to the group. Hart, Chance, and Niles is the biggest musical act in the country. With a number-one hit and an album on the way, their momentum seems unstoppable.

Ryan's image forms first on the paper. Instinctively, I reach out to trace his face before pulling my hand back.

His expression is fierce. His eyes are blazing. The fire in him will certainly be for some other woman. In fact, Liam has told me repeatedly about all the beautiful women Ryan has been taking out since the shoot.

I would rub the ache inside my chest, but it won't help, and anyway, the photo is ready.

Grabbing the tongs, I take it out of the solution and hang it up to dry.

It's practically perfect. Only the people who were at the shoot know why Ryan is in profile, refusing to look at me while the other two men are looking straight at the camera.

There was talk about going back to redo the photos, but the spot in Griffin Park is no longer available. A developer purchased the land and broke ground to build apartments.



Taking off my apron, I exit the darkroom. My eyes adjusting slowly, I return to my current canvas. It's a half-sketched image of Liam and me. But though I've worked on it for several days, it's not right. I'm not sure it will ever be. Not when Liam's face keeps morphing into Ryan's.

"Thought I would find you in here," Liam says, and I fumble, nearly dropping my brush.

"I wasn't expecting you." I lay my brush next to the canvas and cover my throat with my hand. My pulse is beating rapidly.

"The show ended early." His eyes narrow. "Ryan was eager to take off with Shannon Sun. You know who she is, right?"

"Yes." I nod. She's one of the 009 girls. Every actress who portrays the love interest for the spy in that film franchise becomes the next big star. Her stunning face is on the cover of every magazine at the supermarket.

Liam's words are an arrow that hits the center of my chest as he intended. His anger toward Ryan was appeased by his punch, but he hasn't forgiven me, not by a long shot.

"You get the photo developed?" He comes closer. The sharp bite of alcohol and the subtler scent of a woman's perfume washes over me.

"Yes, it's all done."

I no longer cry, and I don't confront him. He has explained about the meet and greets and the socializing he's required to do. But the pieces of our relationship seem more fragmented than ever. I've begun to doubt myself and my ability to make the pieces of what's left of us into a home.

"Good. The label will stop hassling Barney, and he will stop bugging me."

Liam sways. He seems more unsteady than usual, and I wonder like I have before if it's only alcohol in his system.

"Speaking of Barney." Liam holds up a finger. "He wanted me to let you know that Lawrence Katzman has invited you to be on his New York show."

"What?" My eyes grow large. That's one of the biggest talk shows in the country. "Don't you mean he wants HCN?"

"He did," Liam says, "but we're doing Woodstock then. So, you're doing Katzman's show for us."

"Why would he want me?" I tilt my head.

"Because." He sounds bitter. "Every time we're asked about 'Stop,' Ryan says that you wrote the lyrics."

"But I was looking forward to going to Woodstock." I haven't seen any

of HCN's shows. Anytime I ask, Liam makes excuses for why I can't go. Seems he has another one.

"Can't be helped." He doesn't look unhappy for me or the least bit sympathetic. "But you'll do it for me and the baby."

Liam reaches for me and pulls me into him. My hands go to his chest, and my stomach contents come up to my throat. He reeks of alcohol.

I know what he wants. It's just that I don't share the same desire. It's far from making love when he's like this.

But I'll do what I need to do. I'll close my eyes. He doesn't ask me to keep them open anymore. I don't think he wants to see what's in them.

I walk down the hall ahead of him, resigned to doing what I must for the baby. I already know despite my desires that I'll do the Katzman show too.

Sex with Liam or the show, in both instances, I might as well be alone.

## Chapter 33



Ryan

This is so fucked.

I stomp out of the tent. I'm sick of Gray's marijuana stupor and beyond fed up with Liam's shit with the groupies. If my eyes were daggers, Liam would be dead several times over. He has Katelyn, yet he fucks these random girls, and none of them compare to her.

It only took me a week of getting to know Katelyn to figure that out. I dated a little after she made her declaration at the shoot, but I learned that I prefer to be alone.

It's dark outside. In the field, there are people as far as my eyes can see. It smells like damp soil, weed, and body odor. The ground under my feet, as I pace in the secured area for artists, is muddy from the rain.

Rather than think about our performance on day four of Woodstock in front of a crowd estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands, my mind wanders to Katelyn, as it is prone to do. I don't fight it anymore. It's just her I want. I suspect it will always be her.

She was mad about not being here. During the entire flight from LA, she didn't say a word to Liam.

Granted, she didn't speak to me either. But that's how it has been since the last time I kissed her. I made up my mind to have her then, but she rejected me. Again. The second time stung as badly as the first.

How dare she reject what she knows—what we both know—is between us. When I kiss her, her soul touches mine. If I were inside her, she wouldn't be able to deny it. I would make her admit that she is mine.

*So, get inside her.*

This isn't the first time I've reached that conclusion. Liam has blown his chance. If she knew about his shit, she would leave him. I would step in and take care of her and the baby. I would claim both, Liam and the band be

damned.

*Fuck.* If only I could just tell her about Liam's infidelity. But I know her. I know if I did that, she would hate me for it.

Frustrated, I rake a hand through my hair. It's shoulder length nowadays and unruly like my thoughts.

Liam stumbles out of the tent, a girl under each arm. He lays sloppy, open-mouthed kisses on both. It's not just the groupies. Now he's doing everything Gray only experiments with, plus acid and amphetamines.

"What are you looking at?" Liam is already slurring.

I'll have to sing louder to cover for him onstage tonight. But I'm not covering anymore for him about the women. That shit stops here.

An idea forms. We're all—including Katelyn—at the same hotel in New York. Once our part at Woodstock is over, a helicopter will pick us up and fly us into the city.

What if I don't tell her about Liam? What if she discovers what he's doing on her own?

A plan like that could backfire, but I'll take the chance. The way I see it, it's the only chance I have.

I can't live like this anymore. And neither should she.

## Chapter 34



### Katelyn

The woman I saw in the dressing room mirror before they escorted me to the stage, I barely recognize anymore. She's less than a ghost. She's a mirage. Every time I get close to study her, she simply disappears.

The makeup artist put more makeup on me than I ever wear, but it's subtle. Whatever she did to my eyes, I really like. My hair is loose around my shoulders. The purple minidress with the pink daisy print is designer. I don't recognize the name since my wardrobe at home comes from the same secondhand shop where I buy my mirrors and vases. My shoes are platform sandals.

"It's time." A young man wearing a lanyard points his clipboard at the stage.

Taking a step in that direction, I wobble.

"Shit." I stop, undo the straps, and leave the sandals behind so I don't fall flat on my face making my debut on television.

"Katelyn Love, ladies and gentlemen." Lawrence stands from behind his desk and gestures to the empty guest couch beside it.

The studio audience claps politely as instructed as I walk out onto the set on my bare feet.

"So, your husband is Liam Hart of Hart, Chance, and Niles, one of the biggest acts in the nation," Lawrence says, reading off the card in his hand.

"He's not my husband." I look directly into the camera as the man operating it rolls the wheeled apparatus so close, it's all I can see.

"But you're having Liam's baby, aren't you?" Lawrence looks genuinely confused, but I know it's an act. They had me fill out a questionnaire. He and his staff already know that information.

"Yes." I place my hand over my abdomen. "Liam and I have vows of love that mean something between us. We don't believe in the traditional

church or vows.”

But as I recite the rehearsed words, I discover that I no longer truly believe them. I want something more formal between Liam and me. With the baby coming, and me alone so much of the time, I don’t think it’s wrong that I crave that additional layer of security.

Lawrence’s gaze narrows. “You’re a nontraditional gal.”

“Yes.” I nod.

I guess I am. Only on the inside, I think I’m more traditional than non. It was the way I was raised. It’s the way I plan to raise this baby, though Liam and I have barely talked about it or anything else lately. I’m not a mirage to him. I’m practically invisible.

“It makes sense then.” The host’s eyes sharpen to points. “There are rumors circulating that the brothers in the group share you, and that the baby might be Ryan’s.”

“It’s not Ryan’s.” My eyes get as large as the spotlights that focus on me.

“But you and Ryan wrote ‘Stop’ together. And we have a photo of you together. This one.”

He slides the glossy across his desk. I glance at it, recognizing the photo from when we joined the protest and Ryan almost kissed me.

“We were just friends attending a protest.”

“You look rather cozy.”

I pull in a breath through my nose. His insinuating tone irks me.

“That doesn’t mean anything.” I shake my head, maintaining my poise. “Only that we feel the same way about the Vietnam War.”

“We have it on good authority that Ryan is around your LA Canyon house a lot.”

He used to be.

“When the band was working on their album.” This feels like a setup. “But I hardly see Ryan anymore.”

“Because you don’t want to see him.” Lawrence leans forward, his elbow on the desk. “Or because Liam forbids it.”

That cuts too close to the truth, but I deny it. Lifting my chin, I say, “Liam doesn’t tell me what to do.”

“Maybe he should,” Lawrence says snidely. “If you were my woman, I would make sure you did as you were told.”

This is a setup. He wants to put me down to build himself up with his traditionalist viewership.

What he doesn't realize is that I'm a lot like him. But when two people talk at each other instead of listening, it's impossible to communicate.

When the show goes to commercial break, I want to leave, but I stay. A parallel could be drawn to my relationship with Liam, but I gut it out for Liam, for our baby, and for Ryan.

I raise my chin and keep it up, answering all the host's questions the best I can, telling his viewers about the things I do believe in. That love makes a difference in people's lives.

I'm certain of this mainly because of Ryan, and once a long time ago because of Liam.

I share how I feel about music and how important I believe art is. How it helps me, and others, process their emotions. I tell him there shouldn't be rules about how love should look, or what is or isn't art.

As I start to share my views about the Vietnam protests and why Ryan and I wrote "Stop," we run out of time.

Lawrence stands and thanks me for being on the show. The same young man who escorted me to the set hands me my sandals and guides me back to the dressing room. I'm told I can keep the dress and the new shoes. They hand me a bag that holds what I wore into the studio.

I'm incredibly tired and weary as I step outside the building. Maybe it's jet lag; I don't know.

I wonder if the guys are back from Woodstock. The jealousy I felt about them getting to go while I did the show is mostly gone now. I would have liked to hear the music, but being ignored by Ryan and Liam would have hurt.

Thinking depressing thoughts, I walk back to the hotel by myself. Luckily, it's warm outside, and it's only a few blocks.

When I reach the Crystal Hotel, there are a ton of girls standing around outside. One of them stops me from going inside.

"You can't just go in." She squeezes my arm. "You have to be invited in by one of the guys. Otherwise, hotel security will kick you out."

"What guys?" I ask, thinking I know.

"Hart, Chance, and Niles." She tilts her head, looking at me like I'm dense.

"Hey, she's Hart's old lady." Another girl comes over. "Saw you on Lawrence's show on the TVs in the department store window."

"Sorry," the girl who stopped me says. "Of course you can go in."

“Liked what you said on the show,” the second girl tells me. “You’re groovy.” She gives me the peace sign with her fingers.

“You’re groovy too.” I give her peace back and feel a little lighter as I head inside.

As I pass the front desk, the clerk behind it calls out to me.

“Miss Love. I have your new room key.”

“Why do I need a new key?” I ask, walking toward him.

“Mr. Hart’s instructions, ma’am,” he says. “I believe he mentioned there was an issue with your original room.”

“I’m sure it’s a misunderstanding,” a familiar voice says, and I turn around.

Ryan’s brown hair looks almost black, wet and slicked back from a shower. He smells good, like a pine forest, and is wearing jeans that fit him well. His white T-shirt reminds me of the ones he wore during the days when he was my friend and cared about me.

“How was Woodstock?” I ask, staring at his chest.

The fabric of his shirt is stretched so tightly across it that I can see every defined ridge and even his nipples. They’re dark and erect. My own got tight and tingly the moment I heard his voice.

“It was hot and wet.” He shrugs, and oh, the images that come to mind from his reply. They have nothing to do with an outdoor music festival.

“I saw you on the talk show,” he says and winces.

“Yeah.” I shake my head, trying to clear it from the Ryan-induced haze.

*Focus, Katelyn.*

“It was pretty awful,” I say, cutting to the chase. I don’t know why he’s talking to me after ignoring me for so long. But I don’t trust myself around him. “So, do you know what the deal is with my room?”

“I’m not sure, but we can ask Liam.” Darkness flickers in his gaze. “I think he’s still in your old room. I’ll walk with you if you like. It’s on the way to mine.”

“Sure.” I nod. “That would be nice.”

“Not sure I feel like being nice today.”

He glances down at his feet. He’s barefoot, and all of me gets tingly.

Why are his masculine feet beneath the raggedy hem of his flared jeans such a turn-on? It must be my pregnancy hormones. Or maybe it’s the fact that Liam hasn’t brought me to climax in months. But deep down I know, it’s just Ryan. Despite my best intentions, I fell for him a long time ago, and I



remain in love with him.

“This way.” Ryan gestures and we walk side by side so close our hips touch.

People do a double take when they see us—when they see him. Ryan is recognizable now. Even if he weren’t a celebrity, he’s a level of handsome that turns heads.

He places his hand on the small of my back at the elevators, and my mind flashes to the past, to that first time I went with him to Griffin Park.

Glancing at me, he says, “Do you remember—”

“Yes, I was just thinking about that.” I blush as I glance up at him.

“Seems like a lifetime ago.” He pushes the call button without removing his other hand from the small of my back.

“But the ground’s not uneven here,” I say softly.

“Isn’t it?”

He stares at me so intently, I feel like he can see and sift through my every thought.

“No.” I shake my head. “Not really.”

“Funny,” he says low, like it’s not funny at all. “Feels that way to me.”

My stomach flips as he guides me into the elevator and the doors close, leaving us alone. He presses the button and suddenly, I don’t know what to say.

I’m conscious of everything. The rustle of my dress around my upper thighs. The warmth of his body. His breaths. My rapid heartbeats. Is he breathing faster?

The elevator dings as we reach our floor.

“After you.” He holds the door. His hand remains on my back.

Did his fingers just slide lower? I’m so lost in the sensations, in the warmth that has pooled between my thighs, that my surroundings don’t immediately register. When they do, I come to a complete stop.

“Why is there a line of women in the hall outside our room?” I move away from Ryan.

“Katelyn,” he calls, but I ignore him and step inside.

A topless girl who looks far too young hisses at me. “Go back outside and wait your turn, lady.”

“It’s my room,” I snap at her, but movement and sound draw my eye to the bed. All the heat Ryan stirred up turns to ice.

Liam is in our bed, but he isn’t alone. One girl is feeding him her pussy,

and the other is taking a pounding from his cock. Both are chanting his name at the top of their lungs. They seem to be enjoying his technique a hell of a lot more than I do.

“I don’t want to be here.” I reach back, somehow knowing Ryan is there.

For the second time in our relationship, Liam has turned my world upside down. But not with information this time—by his actions.

## Chapter 35



Ryan

“Why?” Katelyn buries her pretty face in my chest as her tears fall. “How could he do this to me?”

“I don’t know.” I press my lips into the crown of her head. She smells like honeysuckle and feels like a dream, except for the reason that I’m holding her inside my hotel room.

*What’s done is done.* Liam made his choices—wrong ones, terrible ones. And I made mine. But he is the villain, not me.

“What can I do to make it better?” I set her down and tip her chin up. Even with her eyes swimming in sadness, she is glorious, and I want her.

“Make me forget this ever happened,” she whispers.

“I don’t want you to forget.”

If she forgets what an asshole Liam is, she might go back to him. She’s taken him back before, because of the baby, I know, but tonight, I’ll make certain she never returns to him again.

“Why not?” Beneath her golden bangs, her delicate brow creases.

“Because I don’t want you to go back to him.” As I give her that straight truth, I tuck a long strand of her blond hair behind her ear.

“I won’t. I can’t.” She blinks, clearing the wetness from her eyes. “It’s over.”

“Good.” I smooth my thumbs across her cheeks, removing the spilled tears.

“I’ll call Maureen. I’ll stay with her and figure it out. Somehow. Some way.” Katelyn throws back her shoulders. “Fuck Liam.”

Before my very eyes, I watch Katelyn rise from the ashes. She’s beyond strong, beyond wonderful, totally glorious.

“You can call Maureen in the morning.” My eyes search hers. “Tonight, I want you to stay here with me.”

“Yes, okay.” She licks her deliciously lush lips. “If you’re sure. I don’t want to cause trouble between you and Liam.”

“There’s trouble already.”

Cataclysmic trouble when he realizes what I’ve done and that I’ve claimed Katelyn. But I set aside for now what the morning will certainly bring. I have her finally. In this moment, she is all mine.

“Katy,” I say, and her eyes soften. “I want to kiss you.”

Ultimately, though, I want my cock in her pussy. She should have been mine all those months ago on her birthday.

“I want you naked in my bed,” I say, spelling out tonight’s agenda. “I want to worship every inch of you. I don’t want this night to be about forgetting. I want to finish what we started. I want you to remember us.”

“I want that too.” She twines her arms around my neck, crushing her beautiful tits to my chest.

That’s all the green light I need.

“Good.” I lower my head.

Seeing the yes in her eyes, I know she’s with me. This is about us now. I memorize the moment with my mouth only a breath away from hers.

“Ryan,” she says, begging as if she could be as desperate for me as I am for her. “Please.”

As her lids close, she urgently tugs on my hair. I give her what she wants, what we both need. I remove the fraction of space between us.

Capturing her lips, I nip and suck on her tender flesh, then brush my mouth across hers. My lips tingle. My blood roars. With bumps of pleasure erupting all over my skin, I meld my mouth to hers.

We are a perfect fit. I take my time savoring the connection. We are fire together. The way she arches her needy body to bring it closer to mine fans those flames. We are going to burn the world down tonight and rebuild it.

“My sweet Katy.” I frame her beautiful face with hands that tremble just a bit.

Changing my angle, I go for her mouth again. I thrust my tongue repeatedly between her pretty lips, broadcasting what’s coming.

“Ryan.” Pulling in a breath, she breathes me in.

Even with her eyes closed, she sees me. She moans when I deepen the kiss. Deep isn’t enough. I explore all the previously off-limit spaces, reclaiming what should only ever be mine.

I fill my fingers with the treasure of her soft golden hair. Kissing her

longer and deeper, I gorge on the sounds of her pleasure. She's an addiction, my addiction. I can't get enough of her.

"Mmm." She's greedy too and lets me know with every urgent tug on my hair what I do to her.

I rock my hips against hers to show her what she does to me too.

"Can't breathe." She rips her mouth from mine and turns her head to the side.

While she gulps in needed air, I rain sultry, open-mouthed kisses along her delicate jaw. She clutches fistfuls of my hair as I dive down the stately column of her neck.

"Spinning," she murmurs. "The world is spinning." She sways as if her legs are too weak to keep her upright.

"Hold on to me." I sweep her off her feet. "I have you."

I lick her creamy skin from below her ear to the fragile hollow exposed by the collar of her dress. Striding to the king-size bed, I'm in agony and ecstasy with her in my arms.

"I have you too." She grabs my face and takes my mouth. Flicking her wet tongue between my lips, she makes me spin as well.

"Fuck, you make me crazy." I gulp for air. My heart hammers so hard, I can feel it in my cock. "You have a wicked little tongue," I tell her, my eyes blazing.

Katelyn's lids open slowly. She smiles at me, and it's blinding. I know in that moment that I could travel the world and see all its wonders, but I will never ever see anything more beautiful than her.

"My pretty lady." I unwind her arms from my neck and lay her out on my bed.

*Mine.* My gaze burns with satisfaction as I stare down at her.

She sits up and reaches for my belt. I make myself stand still like a statue, letting her unbuckle it. Taking advantage of her preoccupation, I stare at her. Her bottom lip is pinned by her teeth. She's absorbed in her task. But in reality, it's me who is completely spellbound.

"I'm totally primed." I take her hands before she can undo my jeans. "If you get your hands on my cock, I'm going to come way too soon. Yeah?"

She glances up at me through her lashes.

"You're first." I drop to my knees on the carpet and begin to undo my goddess's sandals.

Katelyn shivers as I caress the sole of each foot and kiss each ankle.

Raptly, she watches me as I lick my way up one shapely calf and then the other.

“You make me wet,” she says breathily.

“Let’s see about that.”

I glide my hands along her creamy, soft thighs. Diving under the hem of her dress, I find her panties. The cotton is soaked. In one swift motion, I remove them.

“Ryan!” She gasps as I spread her knees apart. “I’m already close. I—”

“Shhh,” I whisper, covering her mouth with the tips of my glistening fingers.

Her eyes sparkle as she licks them.

“Naughty girl.”

“Not yet.”

“Soon,” I promise.

I remove her minidress as I rise, and her hair settles around her slender shoulders. In only a violet bra, she is a vision so exquisite that I can’t breathe.

“Please don’t stop,” she says and reaches for me again.

“Not stopping.” Not ever.

Getting myself together, I tear off my boots and toss aside my socks. Reaching back between my shoulder blades, I remove my shirt. My jeans and boxers are next. I throw everything on the floor.

Her appreciative gaze washes over me. “You’re gorgeous.”

“You are,” I say with a grin.

My cock is so hard it bounces. As I move closer, she lifts her gaze.

“Kiss me, Ryan. I need you.”

Happily, I comply. I need her too.

Lifting her up into the air where all goddesses belong, I fasten my lips to hers, kissing her thoroughly, like I plan to fuck her. She wraps her sexy legs around me, and I reach around and unclasp her bra. With her clinging to me like a flowering vine, I climb onto the bed, drag her bra straps down her arms, and toss the last impediment aside.

With a dark and possessive gaze, I lay her out and drink her in. Katelyn isn’t a goddess. She is my salvation. Carefully, I arrange her silken tresses around her beloved face. The gold against the white sheets reminds me of one of her canvases.

“You’re so incredibly beautiful, Katy.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t want to be beautiful.”

“What do you want?” I touch her, running my desperate fingers across her breasts.

Her nipples tighten. Her breath catches, and so does mine.

“I want to be yours.” She licks her lips. “Just yours.”

“You’re all I want.” I drag the back of my hand down the center of her body.

“Ryan.” She arches into my touch. “Yes.”

From her breasts to her pussy, I worship her.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me?” I spread her knees apart, move between them, and glance at her.

“No,” she says softly.

“Then look, baby,” I say, and her gaze dips as I palm my cock. “If you’re in the same room, I get hard like this.” I jack my cock a couple of times.

“It’s you inside my head,” she whispers. “If . . .” She swallows. “If I’m touching myself, it’s you I imagine. You I want.”

*Fuck.* “Show me.”

She cups her breasts like the treasures they are and pinches her perfect pink nipples. Her lips part and her breaths shorten. Pre-cum slickens my shaft. Watching her work herself up works me up, and I can’t even breathe when her other hand slides down to her neatly trimmed golden pussy.

“No more.”

Peeling her hand away, I lick the salty essence she’s gathered from her lower lips. I bring both her hands together, kissing each one. There’s a fever inside me.

I gaze up at her, my eyes blazing. “I need to be inside you.” There is more than merely desire raging within me.

“I need you too.” Her eyes are hooded and hazy with passion, but they remain locked on mine.

“Watch me make you mine.” I slide inside her, groaning at the ecstasy.

“That’s so good.” Her hips come up. She’s impatient to receive more of what I’m eager to give her.

“Heaven.” I reach the end of her. “Not going to be able to go slow.”

“I don’t want slow.”

She grabs my ass then lifts her hips, chasing my cock as I move.

“What do you want?” I ask.

Driving into her, I know I will give it to her without question. Anything to have access to her and prolong this bliss.

“Just you,” she says.

Our eyes lock. She lifts as I plunge. Together, we move. No phrasing or chords could ever be as earthshattering as this.

“Ryan,” she cries.

As I pick up my speed, her nails dig crescents into my skin.

She draws in a sharp breath. “I can’t hold off. I’m going to come.”

“Katy.” I hammer into her. Feeling her tighten around me, I tunnel my hands under her ass and drive my cock in deep.

“Ryan . . .” She pants, loving that. “Oh, Ryan, yes.”

When she rhythmically unwinds, I let go too. I pound my passion into her, giving her all of me, pulse after pulse. As her soul kisses mine, behind my eyelids, I see a brand-new, star-capped world where wishes come true.

I bring her mouth to mine and claim her. It’s finished. There is no going back to the way it was before. We’re going forward together from now on.

Katelyn is mine.



## Chapter 36



### Katelyn

“You’re making me feel self-conscious.”

I step out of the shower and grab the big, fluffy towel Ryan gives me. While we were in the moment, I didn’t care about the swell of my abdomen, my darker nipples, or that my breasts are significantly larger. I just wanted to be with him, to experience with him once what we might have been if our circumstances were different.

“You’re beautiful.”

That low voice of his does the predictable things to me that it always does. It echoes like a concert hall in the luxurious hotel bathroom that’s practically as big as a rock concert venue.

His eyes gleam as he returns to his previous sexy lean against the doorjamb. Crossing one ankle casually over the other, he says, “I like looking at you. I’ve waited a long time for the opportunity to see you like this.”

Wait—was that all this was for him, an opportunity?

Inside, my chest burns, and that burn reaches my eyes. To me, what we did was so much more. Everything with him feels like more and has since the moment I met him.

Setting those things aside to analyze later, I pat myself dry. I feel his gaze following me as I grab the bottle of complimentary lotion by the sink.

I try but fail to hold back my thoughts. Where will I go when I leave Ryan’s room? What’s going to happen to my baby and me? What is my plan?

Frowning, I pour lotion into my hand.

“Let me do that.” Ryan pushes away from the doorframe and swaggers toward me like he’s claiming the mic at center stage.

Mesmerized, I watch him—that wide and chiseled chest, those powerful legs, his narrow hips, and the significant cock that his boxers barely contain. I like to look at him too, but I know I have to leave soon.

Scraping the dollop of lotion off my palm and onto his, he gathers my hands. I moan as he gently kneads the jasmine-scented cream into my skin.

“Turn around,” he says and moves behind me.

Brushing my hair forward, he gets more lotion from the bottle. I watch him in the mirror as he rubs it into his hands and kneads it into my shoulders.

“That feels so good,” I murmur, leaning my head back onto his solid chest.

“You’re exquisite.” He glances at me in the mirror, and I memorize that look. It’s a good one.

I hold my breath as he lowers his head and presses his mouth to that sensitive spot beneath my ear. His lips are firm, and the tip of his tongue is wet. Heat rushes through me as he drags his tongue over my skin. My nipples tighten, and my clit swells.

“Why are you tense?” He lifts his head and gives me a questioning glance before kneading harder.

*Him. He’s the reason.*

I want him, but I can’t have him, not the way I truly want. In the aftermath, I know I shouldn’t have come to his room. I should have confronted Liam and had it out with him once and for all. But I was shocked, embarrassed, and hurt.

Why does Ryan always seem to be there when I’m at my lowest? I wish he could witness me being strong. Maybe, I swallow hard at the thought, that moment needs to be now.

“Ryan.” I turn around.

Knowing what I must do makes my chest and stomach hurt. Plus, without his hands on me, I feel strangely cold and untethered like a balloon rising in the air into a lightning-filled sky.

“Thank you for being here for me tonight.” I power on, though he frowns. “For comforting and holding me. For having sex with me.”

It felt like lovemaking, every gentle caress and affirming word, my climax like none I’ve ever had. But I frame the experience in terms that don’t entangle him.

“That wasn’t sex.” He frowns. “Not like any I ever had.”

I blink several times, not knowing how to respond. “But you’ve had lots of women.” The groupies are all over him, more than Liam.

“Had. You’re right.” He nods tightly. “But none since the day I met you.”

My lips part, and I’m at a loss for a few moments. “I find that difficult to

believe.”

“It’s the truth,” he says firmly. “Why would I lie?”

“But what about Sharon Sun?” I ask. “And all those women you dated?”

“When you cut me off, I tried to move on.” His dark brows crash together. “But no woman felt right. Because none were you.”

“Ryan, I—”

“Whatever’s in your head right now,” he says, interrupting me. “Get it out.”

He takes a strand of my hair. Rubbing it between his fingers, he studies it for a long moment.

“I already showed you what’s in my head.”

“Apparently, you didn’t get what’s in mine.” He lifts his gaze. His eyes are smoldering flames. “So, we’re getting right back in that bed and doing what we just did again. And however many more times we need to until I’m certain you understand.”

“Understand what?” I whisper, feeling the crackle of heat from his gaze.

“That you’re mine. That you belong with me. That you’re never going back to Liam.”

My brows rise. There’s a lot there to like. However, I take a step back. “I’m not a thing to be owned.” That is what I was reduced to in my relationship with Liam.

“I know you’re not. You’re an incredible woman.”

Ryan curls his fingers around my arms and pulls me into him. Hard. My hands land on his chest.

“But you’re *my* incredible woman now. Only mine. No one else’s.” He lifts me and throws me over his shoulder.

“Put me down.” I pound his muscular shoulders that feel as solid as rock.

“No.” He strides into the other room. My towel unwinds along the way, ending up on the floor with my clothes. “Not until you admit what this is between us.”

He throws me onto the bed, and I come up.

“What do you think it is?” I toss my hair out of my eyes.

He sweeps his darkened gaze over me. “I’m going to show you again since the first time apparently didn’t take.”

“Ryan, wait.” I hold up my hand.

“No.”

Climbing into the bed, he pushes my hand backward. The intention to

stop him becomes a caress. His skin is so warm, the flexing muscle beneath so powerful. He is too tempting. My other hand comes up to explore.

“That’s my Katy,” he croons as his head comes toward mine. “Give me your mouth.”

I lift my gaze from the fantasy of his chest. He captures my lips, his tongue sweeping between them. I surrender, opening my mouth wide, chasing his tongue. I need more, not less of him.

Wrapping my arms around his strong neck, I pull him down, craving the weight of his body on top of me. My breasts grow heavy and my nipples tingle against his heated skin. My clit throbs as he kisses me.

“I’m a person. A person can’t be owned.” That needs to be said.

He doesn’t treat me the way Liam has, but nevertheless in this, and in so many ways, Ryan completely owns me. My heart and desire his, I don’t fight him. I don’t think I can. I need him desperately.

“Katy, my lady,” he murmurs. “I know. Let me show you what you are to me.”

Smoothing my hair back from my face, he rains hot, body-melting kisses along the underside of my jaw. I race my greedy fingers down the sculpted contours of his back while he runs his tongue down my neck. I come off the mattress as his warm, wet mouth fastens around my nipple.

“Ryan.” I grab fistfuls of his hair. “Yes.”

I pant as he swirls his tongue around the diamond-hard tip. When he draws the aching nub deep into his wet mouth, I feel each pull in my pussy.

Releasing it with a pop, he gives me a dark look and uses the same technique on the other side. Licking and nipping, he grazes the sensitive peak with the edge of his teeth. Each draw, like the ones on the other side, resonates in my pussy.

Pulling him away from my breast, I aim my mouth at his and kiss him with abandon. He tastes decadent, like my every secret fantasy fulfilled.

His hands busy, he shapes my breasts as he kisses me. He pinches my nipples and rolls them between his thumb and finger. He seems to have learned and does everything I like. When I lift my hips, he brings that needy part of me into that corresponding part of him that I’m desperate for.

I am his in every way that matters, and I want him. Desire strums in my clit. My skin shimmers like the sun on the surface of the Pacific Ocean. My pussy aches to be filled with his cock.

I rip my mouth from his and beg, “Please, get those boxers off.”

I try to wiggle out from under him to accomplish that imperative objective. Sparks fly from the friction of his hard body against my peaked breasts and pulsing pussy.

He rises and rips his boxers away. “They’re gone,” he says and kisses me again deeply.

I’m going to come just from his tongue repeatedly and perfectly striking mine. He somehow senses it. Breaking the seal between our mouths, he pushes up on his arms. His biceps flexing, he sweeps his possessive gaze over my naked body.

“Mine,” he says.

“Yes.” I don’t deny it. He’s proven his point.

“Right.”

His lips curving into a cocky grin, he aligns his cock. The glide of his fingertips where my need is the most acute makes my entire body tingle with longing.

“More.” I lift my hips, seeking his cock.

Ryan gives it to me, all of it, the swollen crown and the entire hard-as-steel length. He gives it to me again and again. He doesn’t tease; he hammers into me. There’s no rhythm or finesse. He’s out-of-control close, and I lose control too.

Squeezing my eyes shut and already pulsing, I grab his tight ass and grind into his next thrust. I’m desperate for more of him and that blinding climax that’s just out of reach.

“Katy . . .” He groans. Planting his cock deep, he hits that perfect spot.

“Ryan,” I cry out. I feel his eruption and see stars. “Oh, Ryan.”

Every straining cell in my body is flooded with heat. He takes me to impossible heights. Climaxing, I’m liquid light that he spins into an impossible dream.

## Chapter 37



### Ryan

I have Katelyn in my bed two more times, plus once in the shower.

Currently, I'm pounding her into the wall, her tits bouncing as I drive my cock into her. I go as deep as I can, but it's not enough. I had her, I have her, but I want more.

Staring into her eyes, I feel there's a place inside her that I see and need to reach. Desperation clawing at me, I decide to switch positions.

"I want you to ride me," I say as I take her to the bed.

Keeping us joined, I lie on my back. She keeps her gaze on me as I spread her sexy legs wide so she's straddling me. Those eyes of hers are my undoing. She had me. I was hers from the first time she looked at me.

I thrust my cock deeper. She needs to know that I'm hers, but she also needs to admit that she's mine.

Staring down at me, she plants her palms on my chest and circles her hips. Her lids are heavily hooded with passion. Her mouth is swollen from my voracious kisses. Her tits bear the evidence of my fascination. But it's not enough.

"You drive me insane with lust." I lift my hips.

She moans and rides faster on my hard cock. My balls draw up, full of cum. Desire rages. An insatiable hunger for her burns in my blood.

"I'm close again. I'm going to fill you up," I tell her. "I want to see my cum dripping out of you."

"Ryan . . ." She breathes out my name, looking at me like I'm a god.

I see the pleasure on her gorgeous face before her cunt starts to spasm around my cock. Flipping her over, I rise up on one arm and drive my cock deep into her again and again while she cries my name.

"Katy." I stiffen and ejaculate.

Her greedy cunt rhythmically milks from me every fiery drop. After I'm

spent, I collapse on top of her and wrap my arms around her.

Her tits, her pussy, she feels so good. My cock stirs inside her. I've got to have her again.

"I can't satisfy this craving," I say, feeling the need to explain the obvious.

She cracks open her eyes as I smooth her passion-dampened hair from her beautiful face. "I love you," she whispers.

"I don't know love," I say without thinking. It's what I want. Her love. Nothing in the world I want more than to be number one in her heart.

At my words, she goes completely rigid in shock.

"Let me up." She shoves at my chest, and I think maybe I said that last bit too harshly. I don't budge, of course. I like where I am just fine. My cock is already lengthening inside her.

"But I know you," I say earnestly, trying to explain better.

"Whatever that means," she mutters. Looking away, she tries to get off me again, but I only grip her hips tighter. "Let me go, Ryan."

"No." I squeeze for emphasis, then grasp her chin. Making her look at me, I feel my chest pinch when I see that her eyes are wet. "You don't understand. Listen to me."

"I do understand." She swallows. "Believe me, I do."

The sharp edges of her hurt cut me. She shoves a third time, and I let her go. She slides off my hard cock. Without her, I immediately feel wrong.

I've fucked up.

Her back to me, she scoots to the edge of the bed and grabs the wrinkled sheet. Draping it around her sexy body, she rises. I get a glimpse of her squared shoulders and the length of her elegant spine as she marches toward the bathroom as regally as a queen.

I get up and go after her, but the door to the suite rattles. Someone is outside and trying the handle.

"Open up!" Liam shouts and pounds on the wood with his fist.

Katelyn gasps. Her eyes wide, she looks at me.

I don't like at all what I see. She's completely closed off to me.

"You're not going anywhere." Ignoring Liam's pounding, I move in front of her and place my hands on her slender shoulders.

"It's over." Her jaw is set, and her eyes are flashing with the wrong kind of fire. She means it's over with me.

"Oh no, it's not. My cock is still slick with your juices," I say crudely, but

she needs to get the point. “You want me. I want you. We’re just getting started. This is far from over.”

A crack from splintering wood has us both turning our heads toward the door.

“Fucking hell!” Liam shouts. Entering the suite with the door hanging askew on its hinges, he takes in the situation in a single glance. “I knew it.”

He comes barreling toward me, but I’m ready this time. He doesn’t get a sucker punch. What I give him snaps his head back, and he goes down hard. But he shakes it off, regains his feet, and comes right back at me. Unfortunately, he knocks over Katelyn, who has rushed over.

“What the fuck?” I shout. She isn’t going back to him. That shit is over. Not us.

“Stop.” She stands, and moving between both of us, she holds up her hands, sobbing. “Please, stop.”

“You slept with him,” Liam says, his eyes narrowed.

“I had sex with him,” she says coolly. “Just like you had sex with all those women in our room.” Her voice breaks.

“It’s not like that—”

“It’s exactly like that,” she snaps. “It’s over between us.”

“No. No way.” He looks more than a little crazed knowing he’s lost her.

Unfortunately, I know how that feels.

“Yes,” she says, but her hand drops to her stomach, and I notice that she’s gone unnaturally pale.

“Katy.” I take a step toward her. “What’s wrong?”

“No. It hurts.” She shakes her head at me. “Don’t touch me.”

“You don’t look good,” I say as I reach for her.

“Stay away.” She backs away and stumbles when her foot catches on the edge of the sheet.

That’s when I notice the blood, too much blood. It’s soaking the sheet.

“You’re bleeding, Katy.”

She glances down and sways in shock.

“No, no, no.” She starts shaking and raises her gaze. “Help me,” she pleads, collapsing without warning.

I catch her, sweeping her limp body into my arms as I shout at Liam, “Call a doctor!”

“On it.” He rushes to the room phone.

“Stay with me, baby,” I say.



My blood running cold, I say it over and over again like a prayer, in the ambulance and later at the hospital. But it's a prayer that's not answered for any of us.

## Chapter 38



Liam

“A lot *is* your fault.” I narrow my gaze, knowing it was Ryan who set me up to be caught with my pants down. “But not the miscarriage. It was her uterus that imploded, not her vagina.”

Unfortunately, I overheard and can’t get it out of my head him telling the ER doctor how many times he fucked Katelyn.

“She’s awake,” Ryan says roughly, his gaze trained through the glass that gives us a view into Katelyn’s post-op room.

I don’t think anything I said to him penetrated. He’s been pretty much in a fog since they pried Katelyn out of his arms to take her back for emergency surgery.

Another baby gone. I rub the ache inside my chest with my fist and shift to look at her too. It doesn’t matter how I feel about the loss.

In a hospital bed on the other side of a big glass window, Katelyn’s silver-blue eyes are swimming. She looks scared and like a teenager, not a grown woman, in a gown that is far too large for her. The nurse is talking fast, trying to calm her down, no doubt.

This is like the previous time, only worse, because I know I have nothing to give Katelyn that she wants anymore, not even my comfort. But in a way, I’m relieved not to have that task anymore. I understand why I couldn’t be the man she wanted. I couldn’t be because Ryan is.

I turn to Ryan. “You have to tell her.”

The asshole is an asshole, but he’s my half brother, and he looks more shaken right now at the prospect of going in there than I am.

“No.” He shakes his head and looks at his hands.

They still have her blood on them. She hemorrhaged when the placenta detached. At first, she bled so much, they weren’t even sure she would make it.

I did a lot of soul-searching then. I've accepted that I'm not the man for her. Mostly. I'm definitely not the man to go into that room and deliver the news she doesn't want to hear.

"She's not going to want to talk to me," Ryan says when I continue to stare at him.

"Well, she sure as shit won't talk to me." *Fuck.*

The nurse comes out before I can convince Ryan to perform that grim task. "She's asking for both of you."

"Okay." I nod at the nurse and man up. Straightening my shoulders, I go in first, and Ryan follows.

"The baby's gone," Katelyn says dully, pre-empting anything I can say. Her lips trembling, she twists the white hospital sheet in her hands and looks at me. "Isn't she?"

"He's gone." My eyes sting a bit. It was a boy this time. So very tiny. I can't unsee that. "I'm sorry, babe." I take a step toward the bed.

"Don't touch me." She recoils, and that slices me right through the center of my heart like a blade.

"I'm mourning too," I say quickly, lashing out, and she jerks like I slapped her. "I'm sorry."

*Fuck,* I never handle shit like this right. My shit of a father never provided a positive role model.

"We're toxic for each other, Liam." Her accusatory gaze sets fire to what's left of my heart. "And any life we make together, figuratively and literally."

"Babe, you're not toxic." *Fuck that shit.* "It's me. I'm the one."

I'm only good at two things—music and fucking. Though apparently, my half brother has that same talent set too.

Unable to imagine a life that doesn't include her, I say, "Let's take some time to process. We'll figure this out together. We can try to have a baby again."

Honestly, I don't want to, no fucking way. But for her, I will.

"No, we can't." She swallows, her eyes flashing with bitterness that she attempts and fails to blink away. "I got the message from the universe or whoever. I'm not supposed to be a mom." Tears spill. "It's not meant to be."

"Fine, babe." I rake an agitated hand through my hair that's gotten almost as long as Ryan's lately. "Whatever you want, but when we get home, we can revisit—"

“Not going back to that house.” Cutting me off, she twists the sheet tighter. “Not going anywhere with you.”

“But where will you go?” I ask. Certainly not to her parents. She has no contact with them at all that I know about. Plus, she hates the cold, and Canada just reminds her of the first baby we lost.

She presses her lips into a flat line. “Not your concern.”

“I love you,” I say firmly and truthfully. “You will always be my concern.”

“Love doesn’t make a bit of difference,” she snaps. “If it did, you would have kept your dick in your pants.” She drops her gaze. “And I’d still have my baby.”

She blames me for the miscarriage. That steals the breath from my lungs.

“You can stay with me,” Ryan says softly, and the direction of her gaze shifts. Before he spoke, she didn’t even acknowledge him. “Just until you’re recovered and physically able to go wherever you choose.”

He tacks on that last bit, seeing what I see. She’s gone as blank as one of her unpainted canvases.

“No.” She shakes her head. “No fucking way.”

“You’re going to need time to recover.” His brows plunge together, his displeasure at her reply palpable.

“I will never recover.”

Given the look on her face right now, I believe her.

“Katy,” he says, pleading. “Please take some time to consider.”

“Not your Katy.” Her tone is chilling. “Not your woman. Your plaything. Or your doormat.” She hurls that last insult at me.

“Don’t bring me into it.” I shake my head. “I already had my turn. And I apologized.”

“Do you want me to apologize?” Ryan asks her.

“No.” More tears flood her eyes. “I just want you to leave me alone.”

Ryan jerks like he did when I sucker-punched him. “I’ll go today, but I’ll be coming back tomorrow.”

“I don’t want you to come back.” She shakes her head. “I don’t want to see you ever again.”

“Well, we don’t always get what we want in this life.” His jaw tightens. “As you and I both know and wear the scars to prove it.”

I think he scores a point, but it comes at a cost.

“Yes, you’re right.” She clutches her blanket so tightly that her knuckles

blanch. “But today, it’s me in the hospital, not you.”

“You blame me,” he says grimly.

“I blame me.” She pokes her chest, and her heart rate goes crazy on the monitor. “I went with you. I had sex with you. I didn’t stop to think. If I had, I would have realized you set me up. You manipulated me, and here I am in a hospital, suffering the consequences.”

“Katy,” he says, trying again.

*Persistent fucker.*

Tears spill from her eyes. “Please don’t call me that ever again.”

“We’re friends.” Ryan’s arms are stiff, his hands forming fists at his sides.

“Friends don’t lie to each other.”

“I didn’t lie.” His brow furrows. “If you’re referring to Liam’s infidelity —”

“I’m not talking about him,” she says quickly. “This is about you and what you’ve done to me.”

Glad to be out of the hot seat, I almost grin that she’s laying into someone else.

“You wanted me for yourself,” she says. “I was a prize to be won at whatever cost. You didn’t care if I got hurt in the process.”

“That’s not true.” Ryan’s hands open and close at his sides. “I care about you. You’re not being fair.”

“You didn’t stop to think how it would make me feel seeing Liam fucking other women.”

His gaze narrows at that.

“Suspecting is one thing. Seeing someone you love betraying you is much worse.” She pulls the sheet up as if to shield herself from that hurt.

The hurt I caused her. Suddenly, I don’t feel at all like grinning anymore.

“You didn’t care,” she says, giving it to him without any mercy. “You didn’t care about anyone but yourself. The situation served your purpose. You took advantage of me, and now look at all the damage.”

She gestures to herself and waves her hand in the air, pausing to pull in a breath and draw her sword. With startling precision, she wields it.

“You’re right. You’re no hero at all. Not to the friends you lost, and certainly not to me.”

## Chapter 39



### Katelyn

“Oh, honey.” Meeting me outside the terminal at the Los Angeles airport, Maureen shakes her head as she rounds the hood of her silver Thunderbird. “You look terrible.” She grabs my suitcase before I can. “Don’t you dare lift that. Let me help you.”

“Thank you.” I don’t protest her help like I have everyone else’s.

Nevertheless, watching her load my suitcase in the trunk, I remain as lost as I was in New York. Numb, I don’t feel the warmth of the Cali sun on my skin. I don’t experience joy at seeing my friend. I’m alone in a fog of suffocating emotions. Passengers leaving the terminal give me a wide berth as if they can sense my despair and fear it’s contagious.

“Get in.” Maureen grips my shoulders and gently steers me toward the passenger side of her vehicle.

“I can do it,” I say when she starts to open the door for me.

“Can you?” She aims her shaded gaze at me and gives me a long, searching look. “Maybe you can.” With her brow creasing above the pink frame of her sunglasses, she gestures to me. “You sounded better on the phone than you appear to be now.”

I wasn’t better. It was just that she couldn’t see me in New York.

Somehow, I manage to get in the Thunderbird on my own while she rounds the hood. My body feels like sludge. I’m tired, more tired than I’ve ever been in my entire life. I feel like I’ve been treading water in the open ocean with no sight of land for days.

Maureen starts up the car, and I listlessly stare out the window on my side. There are crowds of people on the sidewalk, mostly families and children. It’s as if my eyes are drawn to what is most painful.

I drop my gaze. Deciding my lap is a safer focus, I trace the ridges on my new indigo corduroys. Someone—I assume Liam—bought new clothes for

me and left them on a chair in my room at the hospital.

“I’m sorry you lost the baby.” Maureen pats my leg. “Sorry you’re so sad.”

Her rings are hard against my flesh. She’s wearing at least twelve.

I want to respond to her. I should clasp her hand and hold on tight. I desperately need her and the comfort she’s so sweetly offering. I need someone, anyone, to help me remember why the pain I’m suffering right now is worth enduring.

The days in the hospital were lonely. The nights were torturous.

The pain meds gave me hallucinations. More than once, I thought I saw Ryan sitting in the chair where the clothes were this morning, right beside my bed. But he left after I laid into him. He said he would come back, but he never did.

Why would he? We aren’t lovers. We’re not even friends anymore. We aren’t anything. What he wanted, he got from me, and it came at a terrible price.

But Liam visited every day. Apparently, I mean more to him than I supposed. He told me the band is playing another festival this weekend and touring their album after.

When Liam came, we only talked about his work. We avoided the topic of us and other heavy subjects. I’m leaving him. He knows it, and I know it. But I can’t think about that right now. I can only handle one moment. Sometimes, only one breath.

I climb out of my thoughts and look at Maureen. “Thank you for checking on me every day,” I say, attempting to connect with my friend. She’s the only one left. “But you never said how you knew I was in the hospital.”

I didn’t tell her. I know Liam didn’t call her.

“Ryan called me.” As her hands tighten on the steering wheel, she glances at me.

“Oh.” I return my gaze to my lap and sink down into my seat. The passion Ryan awakened, the way he made me feel, that’s all gone. In its place are layers of pain and guilt. Who I was with him, I no longer am. I need those layers to insulate me from the rest of the world that I just can’t deal with anymore.

“I would have found out eventually,” she says softly. “It’s all over the news.”

“What part of it?” I ask.

“You and Ryan,” she says carefully. “The end of your relationship with Liam, your miscarriage, all of it, honey.”

“Right.” I nod dully. Of course it is.

My baby is gone. I’ve been betrayed by the two men that I love . . . loved. My entire life has imploded. I’m barely holding on to the pieces that remain, and now that’s fodder for strangers.

Pressure builds behind my eyes. I don’t want to cry; it doesn’t help. But the tears come anyway.

I shift and rest my forehead against the window. Tears fall, a torrential downpour. The view on the other side of the glass blurs. I lick the wetness that pools between my lips.

Silence descends as Maureen drives. Detached from it all, I drift alone in a sea of sadness, only floating back to the surface when she turns onto a road I recognize.

“Where are you going?” I ask as we pass Love Street and she continues up the hill. “This isn’t the way to your house.”

She agreed to let me stay with her. She is my refuge, and that is the only plan I have. I managed the flight from one coast to the other, envisioning collapsing onto the bed in her guest bedroom afterward.

“I’m only going to be home for a few more days.” She brakes at the stop sign and gives me a worried glance. “I have to go back on tour. Don’t you remember me telling you?”

“I guess,” I say, frowning. “Vaguely. But—”

“I don’t want you at my house all alone. We discussed it and agreed that it’s best for you to be in a familiar environment. We’re going to take turns checking up on you.”

“I don’t need checking up on.” I frown. “What familiar environment? And who is we?”

“Liam, Ryan, and me.”

“No,” I say firmly. “Absolutely not. I want to be alone.”

Her talking about me to Liam and Ryan feels like a betrayal. Another one. And why would Ryan want to be involved?

Maureen glances at me, her frown matching mine. “Being alone when you’re depressed isn’t a good thing.”

“Maybe not.” I point at myself. “But that’s what I want, and what I want should count for something.”



“Here we are.” She slows the vehicle and parks in front of my house. *Liam’s house*, I think, correcting myself, and more tears threaten. “Why are we stopping here?”

“Because it’s your house now, honey.”

“I don’t have a house anymore.”

My name isn’t on any of the legal paperwork, even if this house is the closest any place has ever come to feeling like a home to me.

“You have a house now.”

My brow knits in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“Liam signed over the house to you.”

“The bank owns the house.”

“Not anymore. The mortgage is paid.”

“Who paid it?” My gaze narrows. “You?”

“Not me. Liam, basically.” She glances away. “Though I would have paid it off if I could have.” She glances back at me. “But with Peter and me splitting up, my finances are tied up.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t know.” I reach for her, and she glances down at my hand over hers.

“No one knows yet. But it’s okay.” She says the words, but I recognize them for what they are.

“It’s not okay.” I shake my head. “You’re hurting.” She loved Peter, and she’s grieving a loss too. “What’s going to happen to the group?”

“We’ll go on,” she says bitterly. “Too many commitments and too much money involved not to.”

“That sounds stressful.”

“It will be stressful. It already is.” She sighs.

For the first time since we’ve been friends, Maureen looks unsure. I counted on her to be my rock. My world is disintegrating around me, and hers too. I’m scared for both of us.

“I want to tell you something.” She worries her lip. “I lost a child too.”

“Oh no.” I take her fingers in mine and squeeze them. “I’m sorry. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t like to talk about it. We’re a lot alike in that. There are probably more women like us than we can imagine.” Her gaze turns unfocused. “It happened early on in my marriage. Being pregnant was the reason we got married in the first place, and losing the baby marked the end of it.”

“Maybe I got pregnant too soon into my relationship with Liam.” I did a

lot of thinking in the hospital and confess something to her that I never have to anyone. “But it doesn’t matter anymore.”

“It matters. You matter. Your loss matters.” She covers my hand with hers. “I’m further along in processing my loss than you. More functional in some ways and less in others. But I don’t think we’ll ever stop wondering what might have been if we had them.”

“I understand.” There’s more than one ghost in this canyon.

“I know you do.” Maureen nods and releases my hand to swipe at the wetness under her eyes. “That understanding goes both ways. And because I understand what you’re going through, I won’t allow you to disappear, and neither will they.”

She gestures. I look out the window and stiffen at the sight of Liam and Ryan walking toward her car.

“Why are you doing this to me?” I turn to look at her, not wanting to deal with them or my emotions. “I don’t want to be here. Can’t I stay at your place? Please? Just for a little while? Just until I figure things out?”

“No, you can’t. I’m sorry.” She recaptures my hand. “Sometimes being a good friend isn’t giving you what you ask for but making sure you get what you need.”

“What about you?”

I grasp at a straw, even though it’s one that might hurt her. Grabbing one of her fingers, I slide off a ring.

“Oh no,” I whisper, confirming my suspicion.

“I’m taking care of that.” She pulls back her hand. “Don’t start on me. You have enough to worry about.”

“How are you taking care of it?” I ask, my stomach knotting. “By doing more drugs?”

“I’m going into rehab as soon as we finish this tour.”

“Promise me,” I say firmly.

“I’ll promise,” she says, holding up her hand, pinky finger extended, “if you promise not to disappear on me or them.”

She glances at the two men whose looming presence on the other side of my door is palpable.

“Deal.” Sealing my fate, I curl my finger around hers.

## Chapter 40



Ryan

“Katelyn does better when Maureen is around,” Liam says, punctuating his statement with a few clunky notes on the piano from the song we’ve been working on.

I’m not sure if he hits those wrong notes to get a rise out of Katelyn or me.

Regardless, his shit doesn’t work on her. She’s totally gone. There’s no sign of the woman who loves music and contributed something to nearly every song on our album. His off-key notes grate on my already frayed nerves, but when I get an opportunity to be around Katelyn, I don’t want to think about new material.

“She pretends better, you mean.” I tear my gaze away from Katelyn.

On her favorite perch, the cushioned nook, she is curled up in a ball, her expression blank. Looking at her is all I have nowadays. Sometimes she treats me to a glare, and on rare occasions, an angry word. But only when she pokes her pretty head out of her shell.

I hoped being in her own home, surrounded by her things with her studio nearby, would help her. But it’s been nearly three weeks since she was discharged, and she isn’t improving. If anything, she’s worse. That spot in the window, rather than the streets of the canyon, has become her preferred haunt. Her only haunt, really.

“Right. Exactly.” Liam shakes his head sadly.

Wan and too thin, he doesn’t look much better than Katelyn. But where she is withdrawn, Liam is hedonistic. His method of coping is more women and drugs.

I’m concerned about him and the future of the band. He can’t keep using at his current level.

However, I’m thankful that I convinced him to pull it together today to

come over to see Katelyn. We have an uneasy truce that revolves around her. One thing we can agree on is our concern about her.

“What are we going to do?” Liam gestures as Katelyn drops her forehead onto the glass. What she sees as she stares out the window at the backyard for hours is a mystery.

Shaking my head, I murmur, “I don’t know.”

I hate that I’m at a loss. Maureen pushes Katelyn when she’s in town. Liam and I are afraid to. For some reason, Katelyn hasn’t banned us from visiting.

Yet.

She could. It’s her house.

I placed the deed with her name on it on her dresser in the bedroom. It’s now tucked into the top drawer. I know because I’m a stalker.

I want more than just these visits, but I’ll take whatever parts of her I can get away with having. I don’t care if she doesn’t like me being around.

*Okay, I do care.*

It’s driving me crazy the distance between us and seeing her like this. It kills me being so close to her, knowing I’ll never get closer again.

Having her didn’t diminish my obsession. I want her. I want back what we had—our talks, our connection, the sex. Fucking hell, sex with her was better than I could have imagined.

I’m alone every night now because after her, no other woman will do.

A masochist, I rewind every second of our one night together. I remember how she smells and tastes. How she unraveled for me.

If there was a price to pay to fix what I got wrong, I would pay it. A task to perform, I would do it. Words to say, I would say them. But there’s nothing.

*Except . . .*

Recalling something she told me, I push away from the wall I’ve practically been glued to since I arrived. I stride to where she’s sitting.

“This has gone on long enough,” I tell her, because *fuck this*.

Katelyn looks up, her eyes wide. She’s surprised since I don’t usually talk to her.

We both stare at each other. It’s been too long since she looked at me, instead of through me.

My heart swells and my cock predictably hardens.

I let my gaze drift over her beautiful features. That impertinent nose.

Those kissable lips. Those expressive eyes. I almost think I see a flicker of light within the storm in her gaze, but the moment passes. Apathy returns. She draws away right in front of me, and it pisses me off.

“No way.” I scoop her up.

She gasps. The crocheted blanket she’s been huddled under falls to the floor.

“What the hell are you doing?” she asks.

“What I should have done weeks ago.” I take her to her studio.

“Put me down.”

In my arms like a bride, she feels too light for her frame. I make plans to force-feed her some food after this.

But first things first. Saving her soul consumes me.

She pounds on my chest as I step over the threshold and into her studio. I’m encouraged, not discouraged by her reaction. It’s a response, and I’ll take it. I’ve had enough of the listlessness.

Katelyn makes for the door as soon as I set her down. “I don’t want to be in here.”

But my legs are longer. I beat her to it, slam it shut, and move in front of it.

“Step away from the door, Ryan.” She folds her arms over her delectable tits and glares at me.

*Fucking adorable.* My Katy is still in there, her spirit intact and as feisty as ever. The relief I feel witnessing that is immense.

“Ah.” I arch a sardonic brow. “So, you do remember my name and how to string words together to communicate.”

Her pretty eyes narrow. “I remember a lot of things I wish I could forget.”

I absorb that blow and return fire. “So do I.” I palm my erection. “I wake up every fucking night hard and throbbing, remembering the way it feels to be inside you.”

“Don’t,” she rasps and drags her gaze up. “That’s over.”

I take another hit.

In my heart, I know I’ve lost her, but my head has sustained less damage, and it’s more stubborn.

“So you say. But we were friends before we were lovers, and friends don’t stand idly by, watching someone they care about fade away.”

“You don’t care about me.” She shakes her head. Disturbingly, the gold doesn’t shimmer like it used to.

“I do.”

Fucking hell. If she only knew the things I have done.

Staying with her in the hospital at night when Liam was out fucking and getting trashed.

I purchased the house from him to give to her so she would have somewhere familiar to stay.

I paid her hospital bill, because the way Liam has been using, he only has dregs in his bank account. He has blown nearly every bit of his portion of the band’s proceeds on women and drugs.

But I can’t share those things with her. With her mad at me, she’ll assume my motivation for doing anything positive for her is guilt.

I do feel guilty. I screwed up. I shouldn’t have used manipulation to get Katelyn into my bed. But guilt isn’t my primary motivation.

She is.

# Chapter 41



## Katelyn

I'm hurting, aching inside, but I managed to keep that pain distant until now.

Looking at Ryan, I feel sensations inundating me all at once.

I see him so handsome, strong, and tall. I smell his masculine scent, the pine and spice. Memories flood my mind as I remember the taste and feel of him.

Longing rises inside me. I want him. I want to believe that he really cares about me, but I just can't. That is over. It's all over.

"Step away from the door," I say, lifting my chin. Believing him cost me everything.

"No." He shakes his head.

My fingers tingle with a foolhardy urge to dive them into his thick and satiny soft brown hair, but I won't. I can't give in to that desire, or any other that involves him.

"I'm not painting," I tell him. That outlet is dead to me, like music and everything else. "If that's what you want me to do."

His jaw tightens. "You're not leaving this room until you do."

Oh, that defined jawline and that coating of afternoon stubble. I remember the friction it created against my naked skin. How much heat it sparked. How thrilling it was to trace his jaw with my tongue.

*Stop it. I reprimand myself. Don't be weak.*

I know it's over between us in my mind, but my heart stubbornly clings to what we had. Our friendship. The closeness. The way we bonded over music and just about everything else. That one unbelievable night.

Then I remember the way it ended and give myself an internal shake.

It wasn't real. None of it. And it came at an unimaginable cost.

"Well, I guess we'll just wait and see."

I start to drop to the floor, having a vague plan to sit cross-legged on it. I

can be more stubborn than Ryan. He'll get the message. He has other more important things to do, only he catches me on the way down.

"Yes, we will see right the fuck now." He squeezes my upper arms for emphasis.

Turning me—us—because apparently, we're a unit in his mind, he shuffle-walks me to the closest blank canvas. I stand in front of him and it like a statue, but my concentration isn't on the canvas. It's on the man behind me.

I feel the grip of his hands on my shoulders, the warmth of his body, and the hard length of his cock against my ass.

"Please don't touch me." Rattled and so tempted to turn around and throw myself into his arms, I step forward, nearly knocking over the canvas and the easel in my rush to put much needed space between us.

"You don't want me to touch you?" Reaching around me to steady the rocking easel, he sounds mad.

Why is he mad? I'm the one who got picked up and forced into this room.

"No, I do not want you to touch me," I say clearly, though I can't turn around to look at him. He'll see the lie in my eyes.

"Then paint," he says firmly.

A pleasurable shiver rolls through me as I remember other commands from that night. *Spread. Do that again. Come.*

"The sooner you start," he says, thankfully unaware of the direction of my thoughts, "the sooner you can leave this room."

"Will you leave if I paint?" I need him to leave because of how badly I want him to stay.

"No," he says in that low rumble that does things to me I don't want to admit. "The deal is you paint. You eat something after. Then I'll go."

"Everything okay in there?" Liam calls out as he pounds on the closed door to my studio.

"Yes," Ryan says.

"No," I say at the same time.

"Katelyn needs to stop being stubborn," he says to Liam.

Ryan is too close again. His warm breath ghosts the top of my head.

"Good luck with that," Liam mutters, his voice somehow slipping through the cracks surrounding the door.

"She thinks she has the upper hand." Ryan moves in front of me. "She's wrong."



I don't think that. Far from it, and the shiver of pleasure I feel as he holds my gaze and brushes a long strand of my hair from my front to my back proves it.

"She needs to be brave." His gaze softens, turns imploring. "She can do it. I believe in her."

"I'm not brave." I drop my chin and cross my arms, so he doesn't see that my nipples are puckered and poking my thin halter top.

"Painting is cathartic for you. You need it like I do music. Like you still need music, if only you'd allow it to heal you."

Those are deep truths that stir something within the nothingness inside me.

Fighting against it takes all my concentration. I don't protest when he gently lifts my chin. He searches my gaze like he used to.

Ryan is too close, too vital—present, not past tense. Despite everything, it's far from over between us.

Unable to look away from him, I blink as my eyes fill and my nose stings. Tears that are always close to the surface glisten in my vision.

"Get what hurts out, baby," he says softly, coaxing at the perfect pitch like he does on a million records. "Or all that bad stuff will destroy you."

I know he speaks from experience. He has losses. Depression in the aftermath. Sleepless nights. I empathize with him now like I did then.

But I can't comfort him. Numbness is my only choice. I need to rewrap all those insulating layers around me. I can't allow myself to process, or even to think about the babies I lost.

"I'm too broken," I say truthfully. "There's nothing left to repair."

"You're wrong," he says.

I want to believe him, but I don't have the strength or his faith.

"Well, good luck in there," Liam says. "I'm taking off. Gray needs help in the studio."

Ryan's attention shifts to the door, and then he looks at me. "He means he wants someone to do drugs with him." His museum-worthy jaw tightens again.

"Liam is doing drugs?" I ask.

"A shit ton." Ryan nods grimly as he returns his focus to me. "Yeah."

"Why?" My brow furrows.

I mean, I know he's done some recreationally. Marijuana with Gray. Some stimulants occasionally, but nothing serious. Not like Maureen.

“Probably for the same reasons you’ve withdrawn.” Ryan frames my face and studies me intently. “You surface with concern for Liam.” His gaze hardens. “Even after he screwed around on you.”

I can soften my heart for Liam. He isn’t a danger like Ryan is to what remains of me.

“We lost a child.” Another child.

I curl my fingers into fists, and my nails bite into my palms. But that’s paltry discomfort compared to the colossal devastation of losing them.

“Yet your cheeks are flushed because of me, not him.” Ryan sweeps his thumbs across my skin. “Your lips are parted. Your eyes are dazed.”

I’m captivated by him. Though I remain susceptible to his touch, I can’t let on how much I crave him. Liam has his drug addiction to hide, and I have one of my own, apparently.

“It’s just hormones.” I shrug free and step back, but not before he notices how my body betrays me.

His eyes narrow. “How can you shut it all down after how good it was between us?”

“Easily. By looking at you,” I say harshly, “and remembering all I lost.”

“So be it.” As his handsome features turn to steel, Ryan whips around me.

I’m cold in his absence, rather than flushed. Every cell in my body strains with the effort it takes to resist the urge to call him back.

When the door slams into the wall, I jump.

I’m alone now. It’s what I told him I wanted, but it’s not what I need.

I should return to my nook. Separated from my emotions, it’s safer beneath my layers, but though I didn’t want to admit it while he was here, Ryan got through. He always seems to penetrate whatever barrier I erect.

Exposed and raw, but with no one to see but me, I walk to the closest mirror and take a good, long look at myself. The healthy glow from my pregnancy, the shininess of my hair, the sparkle of anticipation in my eyes, it’s all gone. I’m not a mom anymore, and I never will be.

Acknowledging that rips me in half. Tears flash in my gaze.

I sway on my feet, but I weather it on my own. I’m not Liam’s or Ryan’s. I’m not any man’s woman anymore. I’m not as brave as Ryan thinks I am, but maybe I’m not as weak as I suppose either. I’m just me with losses and pain, but I’m still here, and I’m still standing.

I pick up my paintbrush. After dipping my brush in the paint, I stroke an outline of that woman.

She's a survivor. It's her I focus on. Her I paint.

## Chapter 42



Liam

What the hell?

I push myself up from the couch at the studio that I crashed on when I left Katelyn's. Wiping the saliva from my cheek, I peer over the back cushions.

*Ryan.*

I can see him through the glass. In the sound booth, he is bent over the body of his 1953 Gibson Les Paul Standard Goldtop that he repainted black. And he's tearing the ever-loving shit out of it.

I shake my head. Guess things didn't go the way he wanted them to with Katelyn. Since I'm an asshole, knowing that makes me grin.

Standing, I list before I right myself and grab a handful of uppers from the glass dish on the coffee table. Popping them in my mouth, I chase them with warm beer.

I saunter over to the booth and knock on the doorframe, but Ryan doesn't hear me. Kind of digging the angry riff he's laying down, I push away from my spot and snag my guitar, a Gretsch White Falcon.

He looks up when I lay down an antagonistic counter melody. His eyes are darker than usual, the brown almost black.

Yeah, things with Katelyn definitely didn't go well.

"Got any lyrics yet?" I set my guitar in the stand and take out a crumpled pack of cigarettes from the front pocket of my shirt.

"Not in here." Ryan snatches the stick I've just tapped out.

"Fuck you, man." My hands shake. "Maybe I took too many pills."

"You need to lay off the shit," he says sternly.

I don't argue with him. He's right.

"I like the new riff," I say, changing the subject.

"Thanks." He lifts his chin. "It's the bridge for 'Moving On.'"

I raise my brows. "Did Katelyn tell you to fuck off?"

He nods once.

“You get one shot with her, then you’re out.” I scratch my head. “Or at least, that’s how it was with the boyfriend who came before me.”

Ryan scowls. “You got more than one chance.”

“She likes me more,” I say. “I’m better looking. More experienced.”

The crease between his brows deepens.

“Just shitting you.” I clasp his shoulder. “Seems to me, she purposely torpedoed every meaningful connection she’s ever had. Her heart is a fortress. She lets you in the outer courtyard, but she’s not really gonna let anyone into the castle. Her own parents let her down, abandoned her when she got sick. That fucks you up, you know?”

Ryan gives me a long, assessing glance after my ramble. Probably putting one plus one together and figuring out that I have abandonment issues of my own that fucked me up. Our old man rejected both of us in different but similarly destructive ways.

“She tell you about getting polio?” I ask, redirecting again. The uppers make me jumpy, but they make me mentally sharp too.

“Yeah.” His expression turns thoughtful.

“Music was her saving grace when she was in a really shitty emotional space.”

“Mine too,” he mumbles, and I know he means after coming back from Vietnam. I visited him at the hospital. That shit was seriously bad.

“Maybe music is mine too,” I say.

Or it was at one time.

Now, it’s just drugs and pussy. Music serves those two purposes.

I shrug like it isn’t a big deal that I just gave my half brother some deep insight into the woman we both love. Don’t know why I did it. I want her too, but maybe I realize I’m never getting access to her again. That’s a realization that I don’t think Ryan has come to yet.

“Hey.” Gray stumbles into the room. He’s shirtless, only in his boxers, and his hair is sticking up all over the place. “You guys already jamming?”

“Yeah.” Ryan nods, and the drug haze clears from Gray’s gaze. “Grab an acoustic.”

Ryan unstraps his Gibson, exchanging it for his favorite beat-up Epiphone.

Gray gets his own guitar and arches an inquisitive brow. “What do you have in mind?”

“Us three doing the intro acoustically to give it punch.”

Ryan makes eye contact with Gray, then me. At some point, he became the de facto leader of the group, even though he’s the youngest. I can grudgingly admit, but only to myself, that he’s the most talented. Bonus, he’s always sober.

“I want three-part harmony on the opening lines.”

“You got it.” I nod. Our harmony kicks ass.

“Let’s do it.” Gray’s eyes brighten.

He loves to play. We all do. We have our issues, but that’s a definite bond between us.

I see her and I’m sure  
That she’s the one  
She looks at me  
And doesn’t see it  
She lets me know  
She’s moving on

Her heart’s a fortress  
Got no key  
She’s moving on

Beyond my grasp  
She slipped away  
A silent soul  
Quiet and cold  
At a distance  
She won’t talk to me

I’d share myself  
But she won’t take me  
I can’t reach her  
Couldn’t teach her  
A lover lost  
In her gray world

Her heart’s a kite  
Wind blown away

She's moving on  
She's moving on  
She's moving on  
And now she's gone

## Chapter 43



### Katelyn

“Hey,” I say when Maureen answers the phone. “Happy birthday.”

I sag with relief. It took me several calls to her hotel in Minneapolis to finally get through to her room.

“Thank you, honey,” she slurs. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too. Are you having a party?” I hear music and laughter in the background. I wonder if she’s only drunk or if it’s more. I want to ask, but I don’t feel right interrogating her on her birthday.

“Yeah, something like that,” she says. “But it’s been going on for a while. It’s mostly strangers who want to gawk at a rock star. Let me go close the door to the other room.”

A clatter sounds on her side of the line. Apparently, she set the receiver down on a hard surface.

In my kitchen, I settle in on my side where my ass is on the floor. With my back to the island, I can see into my studio. Freshly painted canvases are propped up everywhere because Ryan couldn’t take the easier route and just let me be. He is so different from Liam.

My brush strokes are rough, and the colors are stark. Violently, my anger has erupted from me.

*Why did I lose them? Not just one but two precious babies?*

All the canvases bore the brunt of my emotions. The results are difficult to look at. My eyes in each portrait reveal the despair of a woman who knows she’ll never be a mom.

Pressure builds inside me yet again. My chest gets so tight that I can barely breathe. I look away from the devastation, staring at my feet instead, and I manage a few shallow sips of air.

“So, what’s new with you?” Maureen asks breezily.

It’s her birthday. I can’t spoil it by sharing my dark truths or what the



doctors told me.

“Is Ryan still standing in a corner, staring at you like he wants to make a meal of you?”

“Um, not hardly.” My skin prickles as I imagine him doing that and wishing it were true. “We argued today. He’s gone.”

*Gone for good, I’m afraid.*

“Arguing, huh?” She taps the phone with a nail. “Sounds like an improvement over the way things were when I was there last. Where there’s smoke, there’s heat. Between you two, there’s fire.”

“There’s nothing between us anymore,” I mumble bitterly. Except guilt on his part because of the blame I placed on him.

I know the miscarriage isn’t his fault. It’s mine. Some force, fate, or whatever power rules the universe, decided that I don’t deserve to be a mom. Maybe before this, I believed in a benevolent higher power. It was the way I was brought up, but I don’t believe in anything anymore.

My grip tightens around the phone. Darkness oozes from the nothingness pit and coils around my paint-spattered ankle. I feel the tug, the urge to crawl back into that pit and bury myself beneath all those numbing layers.

But Ryan’s handsome face swims before my teary eyes. I remember what he feels like, how he looks at me, how strong his grip was on my arms. I feel. I always feel far too much when he touches me.

“I don’t believe that, honey.”

*She’s right.* There is something.

Ryan wants me. I saw the hunger in his eyes. I felt him.

I want him too. But for me, there’s more than only sexual desire.

That’s one of many reasons why I can’t fall into his arms again. I can’t put myself in a position to be tempted because I know I’ll inevitably succumb and be crushed when his desire wanes, and he moves on just like Liam did while I was standing right beside him. I don’t have the emotional reserves to survive any more losses.

“I’m still sad,” I say softly. “I still miss my baby.”

I lay one hand over my abdomen that’s no longer round. Tears fall, and I let them. I’m processing. I’m feeling now.

“Sad is normal.” Her voice thickens. “Missing too.”

“Was your baby a boy or a girl?” I ask. I should have asked her before, but I was too much in my own headspace to be a good friend.

“A girl,” she whispers.

“I’m sorry.” My heart hurts for her.

“I’m sorry about yours too, Kate.”

“Thank you,” I say and mean it. “Helps to talk to you. I know you understand.”

Remembering and talking about them brings everything to the surface. Sadness needs to be brought to the surface. Otherwise, I’ll drown in it.

*Get the bad stuff out.*

Ryan is right. But afterward, where is all my longing and the love I have for them supposed to go?

“You can be sad. You’re supposed to be sad, but you have to continue living, Kate,” she says emphatically.

“Why?” The question automatically pops out, revealing how very deeply disturbed I’ve been.

“Because one of us has to survive.”

“You survived.” My brows draw together. “And knowing that helps me. It helps me a lot.”

“Barely,” she mutters.

“Barely counts.” I am surviving one breath at a time. “More than surviving,” I add. “You’re strong, talented, and successful.”

“I’d give away my career and everything that comes with it just to hold my baby one time.”

“I know.” With a miscarriage, there is no goodbye. “All I have left is this hollow ache inside.”

I blink away through the salty sting and rub the soreness inside my chest that I suspect will never go away.

“But you’re more than just an ordinary star,” I say, wanting her to see herself clearly like I do. She sounds tired and defeated. “You’re Auntie. The heart of the canyon. Everyone loves you.”

“Not the one whose love I really want.”

*Peter.*

“I understand.” Twice, I’ve struck out swinging for love.

“I know you do.” She exhales heavily. “Peter’s girlfriend is pregnant. I saw her backstage tonight. She’s three months along.”

“Oh.” My mouth rounds. “That must have been difficult.”

“It was the worst.”

“I’m sorry.” I don’t allow myself to imagine Ryan with a woman carrying his child.

“So am I.”

“I love you, Maureen. I need you. You have to go on living too.” I give her the words she gave me with just as much emphasis.

“I love you too, Kate.”

Some of the tension in me eases. “Wish I could hug you.”

“I wish that too,” she says with a sigh.

“When you get back to LA,” I say, “we’ll go shopping and hang out together like we used to.”

I neglected her when Ryan was in the picture. I need to remedy that.

“Right.” She yawns. “Well, I gotta go.”

“It’s later there,” I say, chastising myself for forgetting the time difference.

“Never too late for you.”

That means so much. Warmth pushes back the numbness inside me.

“I’m here if you need me.”

“I know you are.”

“Bye, Maureen.” I’m reluctant to hang up.

“Wait,” she says, and I exhale in relief. I’m not ready to say goodbye.

“What?” I ask.

“Promise me something,” she says insistently.

“Anything,”

“Don’t retreat again. Don’t withdraw if something bad happens.”

“What’s going to happen?” The fine hairs on my arms and the back of my neck prickle.

“Nothing.” Her tone sounds off. “I just want you to reach out for help when you need it. Reach out to Ryan first. I know you’re mad at him for manipulating you into sleeping with him. But you need to consider the reason he did what he did.”

“We didn’t sleep,” I say to remind her. She and I discussed this before. “He did it because he wanted to have sex with me.”

“Yeah?” I imagine her brows rising to a skeptical height. “If that’s all it was, then why’s he still coming round?”

“I don’t know,” I say softly.

“So, promise me,” she says again, pressing.

“I promise.” I nod. “I love you.” I feel like I need to say it again.

“I love you too,” she says softly. “Goodbye, Kate.”

## Chapter 44



Ryan

“What’s happened?” I ask after opening the front door to my new house at the top of the canyon.

“You haven’t seen the news?” Liam strides inside. The look on his face as he passes me has me bracing.

“No, man. I just got up.” I shut the door and join him in the center of my living room. “Is Katelyn okay?”

I haven’t gone to her house to see her. She made it obvious that day in her studio that she doesn’t want to see me. But I want to see her.

The band is scheduled to go on the road again. I won’t be able to see her, even if I want to after we leave. And that makes me antsy.

“She’s not answering her phone.” Liam walks through the open sliding-glass doors, and I follow. He stops at the rail, his gaze narrowing. “That’s my house down there.”

“Katelyn’s house,” I say, correcting him.

He gives me a look. “You can see into my old living room from here.”

“I’m aware,” I say. “That’s why I bought this house.”

“Kind of creepy.”

*Kind of obsessed.* But I need him to focus.

“What news?” I ask. “And how is Katelyn involved?”

“Maureen is dead. She OD’d last night. They found her this morning.”

“No.” I stagger back, ice water flooding my veins. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, man.”

He nods somberly, and my eyes start to burn.

I hear him. It hits hard, but I don’t have the luxury of processing right now.

“Does Katelyn know?”

“I don’t know if she knows because she won’t answer her phone.” He

leans over the rail. "I don't see her inside. Maybe she's not home."

"She's home." That wall of her windows is my focal point when I'm home. I saw her go to bed, but I don't share that. "I saw her this morning." She was wearing that sexy-as-fuck purple chemise.

"Someone probably called her." Liam's brow furrows. "Peter would."

"We need to get down there." I turn and head for the entryway table where I keep my car keys in a glass dish. "Let's go." Picking them up, I toss a glance over my shoulder.

"She's just right there." Liam walks toward me, shaking his head. "Can't be more than fifty yards away."

"Yeah, but I can't fly," I point out sarcastically. "Can you?"

"Nope," he says, following me out the door. It takes us barely five minutes to get to her house. It would have taken longer if I had observed the stop signs.

We walk up the path to the house together, and I bang on her front door, but she doesn't answer. My anxiety hits the roof.

"Chill, man," Liam says. "I'll use my key."

He digs in his jeans pocket. I don't ask him why he still has a key when it's Katelyn's house now, not his. Maybe he's not on the same shit list as me.

"Katelyn!" I shout, stomping inside as soon as Liam opens the door.

I scan the living room for her, and he's right on my heels. Not seeing her, I head for her studio.

Her phone rings as we enter the kitchen. She must hear it. She must have heard us. The house isn't all that big.

We find her in her studio, standing motionless in front of a portrait of Maureen. One she must have just painted. The colors are glistening.

"You captured her perfectly." Looking at the portrait and knowing Maureen is gone, my chest gets tight.

"I can't." Katelyn sobs and just shakes her head.

"We're here," I say.

Liam and I both reach for Katelyn at the same time. He ends up grasping one arm, and I get the other. We crash together on either side of her. Somehow, I end up with my arms around her, and Liam gets his around us.

"Ryan?" Katelyn tips her head back and blinks up at me. Her golden lashes are dark and spiked from crying.

"Yes, I'm here." I tighten my embrace.

Her eyes slowly focus. "Is she really gone?"

Her lush lower lip trembles, and I know I'm going to hell because I desperately want to kiss her.

"Yes, Katy," I say softly. "She is. I'm so sorry."

"Oh, Ryan." Her hands fist in my shirt as she collapses into me.

My cock predictably hardens. My heart goes insane inside my chest at finally having her back in my arms.

I'm not her fucking hero—but, man, I want to be.

## Chapter 45



### Katelyn

I race to the door, knowing without looking through the peephole that it's Ryan outside. He's picking me up for Maureen's memorial service.

My heart seizes as I even think the words, but I clench my hands into fists and raise my chin. I can't cry. I'm giving a speech about what Maureen means to me and so many others. I have to keep it together.

Pulling in a deep breath, I prepare to open the door. My heart hammers in anticipation.

Ryan was there for me the day she died, but he's been on tour. I haven't seen him since that group hug that seems to have marked a truce between us, and me and Liam too.

They have both called me every day. I'm trying to stay connected. I'm not disappearing. I promised Maureen, but I know this is only a temporary truce. I can't keep reaching out to Ryan forever.

I throw open the door, telling myself that I'm prepared to see him after weeks apart. But I'm not ready. My eyes sheen with longing. My heart clamors to be let out of its cage. Every cell in my body leaps for joy, wanting to be merged with his.

"Katy," he says in that low rumble that scrambles my senses. Leaning his forearm on the doorframe above my head, he sweeps his heavily hooded gaze over me. "You look good."

His voice, his proximity, and a single glance is all it takes to overwhelm my intentions.

*It's your best friend's funeral.*

I give myself an internal shake, but I sway toward him. Of course, he draws me into his strong arms. I grab the twin lapels of his black suit that looks incredible on him. His capable hands settle warm and temptingly low on my back. The cotton of my black sheath dress is no barrier to the reaction

his touch evokes.

As his pine scent washes over me, my skin practically keens with pleasure. My nipples tingle. Heat pools between my legs.

“You look good too,” I say huskily and force myself to step back. Pasting on a smile, I glance past him. “Where’s Liam?”

“He wanted to be here.”

Ryan clears his throat, and my eyes return to his. I see the lie before he can speak it.

“He’s wasted again, isn’t he?” I ask.

Yes, Liam has called every day, but during many of those conversations, he’s been barely coherent.

“He’s not in good shape.” Ryan rakes a hand through his thick shoulder-length hair.

I take it all in. His broad shoulders in a suit that fits him so well that it must be custom. Plus, the decadent gleam of his dark brown hair. The richest chocolate doesn’t compare to the color of his eyes.

“I’m sorry he can’t be here for you,” he says, apologizing for Liam.

“You’re not responsible for him.” I swallow hard.

Obviously, Liam isn’t a casual drug user anymore. I understand in my head that he’s an addict, and drugs aren’t his only addiction.

*It’s not personal that he has let me down.* I mentally recite the words the therapist gave me.

I started seeing her at Ryan’s insistence. She doesn’t cost as much as I assumed a psychiatrist would, but even a little is a strain on my meager savings. I won’t be able to continue going to her much longer.

“You can’t control an addict’s actions.” Ryan nods somberly. “But I try.”

“Ultimately, it has to be his decision.” I press my lips into a displeased line. “Is he in town?”

“Yes.” Ryan nods. “But just for the weekend like me. He’s staying at the Crystal Hotel on Wilshire.”

Ryan’s eyes glisten with sudden increased intensity that makes my body sing. But I can’t sing. Not on my own, and certainly not in any sort of scenario involving him, vocal or otherwise.

“I’ll go see him,” I say.

“I’ll go with you.”

“Thanks.” I nod.

“No big deal.” Ryan shrugs. “Maybe together, we can talk some sense



into him.”

As his muscles flex, I lose my train of thought.

“Maybe.” I take another step back, needing some space. “Do you want to come in for a minute while I grab my purse?”

“Sure,” he says in a low octave that zips me back to our night together.

“Kay.”

I retreat, and he follows. A dance, a chase, a prelude to the inevitable, the way it has always felt with him. Distracted, I can’t remember where I put my purse.

Seeming to read my mind, he points. “It’s in the nook.”

“Right. You have good eyes,” I say as I retrieve it.

“Something like that,” he murmurs.

I turn back around with my purse and catch him looking at me with a hungry expression. But he rubs a hand over his face, and it’s gone.

“That your speech?” He snatches the piece of paper with my handwriting in midflight before it can float to the floor.

“Yes.” My eyes burning, I take it from him and tuck it farther down inside my purse. “It’s not good enough. I’m not prepared.”

Ryan closes the distance between us. “You can do this.” Bringing me into him, he tips up my chin and searches my eyes. “Think of her. Remember her. She might be gone.”

He touches my chest, and my heart rate accelerates beneath his fingers.

“But she’s in here, and she’ll never be gone from there, right?”

## Chapter 46



Ryan

The funeral is madness. The street is barricaded outside. Cops, fans, and press, more people are here than there were at the protest that Katelyn and I happened upon a lifetime ago.

Everyone who isn't outside is inside. Celebrities and friends are crammed into a gothic cathedral filled with white roses.

Maureen impacted so many, but most of all Katelyn, who bravely stands behind a lectern in front of all of us. Somehow, she captures in lyrical sentences the essence of a woman who was taken from all of us way too soon. As she speaks, her hands shake so hard, they rattle her paper.

I want to go to her, hold her, comfort her, tell her it's okay. But I know part of being the hero to her that I'm determined to be means letting her do things on her own. Even if she struggles, she will discover her strength. She is strong. She's always been strong. She just needs to believe in herself the way I do.

"Maureen w-was," Katelyn stutters, "*is* my best friend."

Touching her chest like I did earlier, only with her own fingers, she finds my gaze and holds it. I dip my chin respectfully, my eyes brimming with the faith I have in her.

"She showed us all how to live and love," Katelyn says. "My hope, her hope, would have been for us to follow her example. Help others the way Maureen helped you. Share your love of music. Encourage talent wherever you find it. Let your friends know you care. Make yourself available. Time might be all you have to give, but time is the most precious gift."

When she finishes, there's not a dry eye in the place, certainly not mine.

Using the handrail, Katelyn steps down from the podium. I pass Peter on the way to intercept her. It's his turn to speak about Maureen now, and then it will be her family's.

“Thank you,” Katelyn murmurs as I slide my arm around her and lead her back to her seat—our seat.

I don’t do it for thanks. I do it just for the privilege of being near her, but I don’t say that aloud. We’re under a white flag, a truce since Liam and I embraced her inside her studio. I want Katelyn back in my life and in my bed, just me and her, no one else, but I’m too uncertain of where I stand with her to push for what I want.

In our seats on the pew, Katelyn leans her head on my shoulder. I press my lips into her hair, breathing in her honeysuckle scent, mixed with that faint chemical scent that I know now is a combination of developing fluid and paint.

She reaches for my hand, and my heart wants to fly out of my chest when she intertwines our fingers.

After the pallbearers remove the casket, we rise. The choir leads us in singing “Amazing Grace.” Katelyn sings beside me, and her beautiful, lilting voice gives me chills. She’s as gifted as Maureen vocally. Her songwriting is unparalleled.

I’m itching to take the speech she just made and craft it into a song, a tribute for Maureen. But I’m more uncertain about the outcome if I put pressure on Katelyn artistically than I am about her agreeing for us to be lovers again.

We file out side by side. Photos are taken. Tons of them. Katelyn is Maureen’s best friend, and I front a band that’s become the biggest one out there, despite Liam’s unpredictability onstage due to his substance abuse.

We’re a good band. A solid one. And we could be a brilliant one if Gray laid off the weed and Liam could stay sober.

My dream, if I’m still allowed those after all that has happened, would be for Katelyn to be a part of it. All our best songs have pieces of her in them.

•••

## Katelyn

“Open the damn door!”

In the hallway, Ryan pounds on the door to Liam’s hotel room again. He left his suit jacket in the car, and his white shirtsleeves are rolled back, leaving his sinewy forearms on display.

Looking at him, I lick my dry lips.

“Fuck, he’s not answering,” he says under his breath.

“Do you have a key?” I ask.

He shakes his head. His jaw is so tight, the muscle ticks.

“No. But I can get one.” He touches my arm. “Stay here. I’ll go to the front desk and be right back.”

“Okay.” I nod, my skin tingling where he touched me.

I watch him go. That ass in dress pants, those wide shoulders in a custom shirt, he is a sight worth watching. Unfortunately, I’m far from the only one who enjoys looking at him.

Legions of his fans are camped outside the hotel. Mostly women, they screamed seeing his iconic hearse-like Buick. Ryan has tons of money and could have a sports car like Liam. Hell, he could probably have three. Since he’s not blowing his earnings on drugs, he must be saving them for something else.

The door suddenly pops open. Liam appears with a half-naked woman. With her shirt and bra clutched to her breasts, she gives me a furtive glance through her mascara-smudged eyes before scurrying down the hall in the same direction Ryan went.

“Katelyn, so good to see you,” Liam slurs and scratches his ass. He’s only wearing boxers, and those drop an inch. He’s a lot thinner than the last time I saw him. “Come in.”

He gestures widely and nearly topples.

“Thanks.” I step inside and gasp. I’ve seen a lot with Liam over the years, but the state of this room is appalling. “How long have you been in town?”

“A couple of days. Same as Ryan.” He narrows his red-rimmed eyes. “Why?”

“Because your room stinks like you’ve been here a week.”

There are pills everywhere. Tourniquets. Used rubbers. Empty booze bottles. More women’s lingerie is lying around than there is at a department store.

“Rock-star lifestyle, babe.” He staggers to the dresser. Aiming his hand for a whiskey bottle that has a few drops in it, he misses, and it shatters on the floor.

“Liam. Fuck.” I try to catch him before he falls, but we both end up going down.

He lands on top of me. Pushing up onto his palms, he stares down at me. I

try to catch my breath.

“Hey, babe,” he drawls, his eyes focusing.

“Get off me,” I say, feeling his cock lengthen between my thighs.

“Like it here.” His putrid breath makes me want to vomit. “Been too long.”

He strokes my cheek, his gaze dipping to my mouth.

“No, Liam. No way.” I turn my head to the side just in time, but he manages to plant a wet one on my cheek.

“Why not?” Undeterred, he grasps my chin, forcing me to look at him. “Why Ryan and not me? We could be good again like we were before.”

“Ryan’s not a drug addict, for one.” I don’t tell him Ryan’s not a choice, or that Ryan wasn’t the problem. It was us.

Liam scowls. “He’s not perfect.”

“I don’t think he is.”

Frowning, he slurs, “You look at him like you used to look at me.”

“Let me up, Liam.” I shove at his bare chest, but he doesn’t budge.

“Fucking stalker,” he spits out. “Completely obsessed with you.”

Concentrating on his words, I don’t even think about the droplets splattered on my skin.

“What do you mean?” I whisper and stop trying to wiggle out from underneath him.

“He bought our house from me for you,” he says, and my lips part in astonishment. “Then bought a house on the hill above you so he can watch you all the time.”

I shake my head. “No, you gave me the house.” Liam is wasted, likely confused.

“No, Katelyn. He just wanted you to think I did it.” Liam shakes his head and pushes off me. “He’s the one. He pays for your therapist too, in case you’re wondering.”

“Why?” I tilt my head.

“Thinks that pussy of yours is golden, I guess. Wants guaranteed continued access. How the hell should I know.” Shifting backward, he studies me. “Why don’t you just ask him?”

I get to my feet. Smoothing my wrinkled dress, I glare at Liam. I don’t show him how off-kilter I feel because of what he shared. I want to stay inside the warm and perfect little biosphere I created where it seemed like Liam still cared about me, and Ryan is a true friend.

Ryan reappears. "Got the key."

Coming closer, he looks at me, and I look at him. He must see something in my expression. He can't know what Liam has shared.

"What's happened?" he asks, apparently sensing something. When I don't answer, he turns to Liam. "What did you do?"

"Told her the truth."

"What truth?" Ryan turns his spotlight-like gaze on me.

"Her house. Your new house. Not really truth, per se." Liam makes a face. "A whole pack of lies."

"Katy." Ryan comes toward me. "You need to listen."

"I don't. Stay back."

Pressure builds behind my eyes as I hold up my hand. Reality rushes in. Once again, I'm made to feel like a fool because of Ryan.

"You don't understand." He frowns.

"I understand." I lift my chin. "That I am and always will be to you what I became after I had sex with you."

"And what's that, exactly?" Ryan asks.

"A pawn," I say bitterly. "A conquest."

"You really believe that?" His eyes narrow to splinters. "After all we've been through?"

My arms straight at my sides, I nod. "Things aren't the way I thought they were, yet again."

"You don't know me at all." His expression is a thundercloud. "Do you even listen when I talk to you?"

My brow furrows. "You don't know me either."

"I know you." Lightning flashes in his gaze. "I know you very well. How you like to be touched. How you sound when you come. How good your pussy feels around my cock."

I stagger. His words are a wrecking ball, shattering my illusions.

It's all about sex for him. Still. His caring and concern; it isn't real. I crafted the reality I wished for out of my own hopes and desires.

"Wait a minute," Liam says.

Standing, he takes my hand and pulls me into him. I'm tempted to lean on him. Between the two of us, right now, he's steadier than me.

"You can't talk to her like that." He frowns at Ryan.

"You want Liam to be your hero, Katy?" Ryan asks, his tone caustic.

"I'm my own hero."

I tug my hand free from Liam's. Straightening my shoulders, I give them each my gaze. It's watery, and I'm not certain I'll succeed, but my words are firm and the verdict is final.

"I'm done being used in a childish competition between the two of you."

## Chapter 47



Ryan

“Open the damn door, Katelyn!”

I pound on the carved wood with my fist, knowing that playing my guitar is going to be a mother later, but I don't care. She's letting me in, or I'm breaking the door down. I'm just about to put my shoulder to it when she opens it.

“Go away, Ryan.” Witness flooding her blue-gray eyes, she blinks furiously.

“Not a chance.” I tell her the fucking truth that she seems so fond of throwing at me whenever she's trying her damndest to cut me loose. “Let me in.”

“I don't want you in.” She swipes her hand across her golden bangs.

“I'm aware of that, princess.”

I scan her, glad she ditched the mourning sheath. She should always be in vibrant colors. Barefoot, she's wearing purple bell-bottom corduroys that hug her amazing curves and a cute tank top in hot pink that has ties on each of her delicate shoulders. I want to take off everything she's wearing and lick every single inch of her.

Pointing, I say, “You have paint on your cheek.”

“Is that what you nearly beat my door down to tell me?” She lifts her impertinent nose.

“No, but if you let me in”—I give her a leisurely scan and lower my voice—“then I'd be glad to show you.”

“Goodbye, Ryan.”

She starts to shut the door, but I prevent her with my boot. Apparently, propositioning her wasn't the way to go.

“I'm coming in.”

I grab the door. As I advance, she backs into the foyer.



“Ryan, stop.” She puts her hand up.

I’m inside her castle, but I’m not far enough inside. Complete and exclusive access is what I’m after.

“Feel what you do to me.” I bring her hand to my chest, where my heart beats wildly beneath her palm. “I’m in and staying.” Not taking my eyes off her, I kick the door shut.

“I don’t want you here.”

She licks her lush lips. My gaze is drawn to the glistening wet surface.

“You lie.”

Grasping her firmly by the upper arms, I bring her up onto her toes and her mouth directly to mine. I want to crush my lips to hers, reassert my claim. She is mine. But I need to play this exactly right, and I dredge up the willpower to merely brush my lips against the ones I could write entire songs about.

“Ryan.” She sighs.

That’s all the permission I need.

I back her into the wall and plunge my hands into her hair, kissing her long, hard, and deep, until my cock is pounding against the fly of my pants. Until she’s meeting each voracious stroke of my tongue with hunger of her own. Until she turns her head to the side to catch a breath.

“See,” I say triumphantly. Nipping her earlobe, I lick her from the hollow of her shoulder up to just beneath her ear. “You want me as much as I want you.” I spill the truth into her ear because it needs to be said, and she needs to acknowledge it. “Now, just like in New York.”

“Move.”

Her response is immediate. Frowning, she pushes at me. She doesn’t budge me, but I step back. With her head ducked, she skirts around me.

“Point made.” Her tone is cool, the opposite of the fire that blazed when my tongue was in her mouth. “Which really makes my point from earlier.”

“You are *not* a conquest or a pawn.” I place my hand on her shoulder, searching for the right words to tell her what she is to me.

“Don’t touch me anymore, Ryan.” She brushes my hands aside.

I’m frustrated as hell. My cock is aching from that kiss. I can’t find the right words, and she’s starting to piss me off again.

I move, needing to be in front of her, to see her face, but she won’t lift her chin and tries to get away from me again.

I block her retreat. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Yes, I heard you.” She brings her pretty face up and glares at me. I like the fire in her eyes but not the hurt. “But you don’t seem to be listening.” She opens and closes her hands at her sides. “I don’t want you here.”

“That’s not true.” I’m so mad, I grind my molars. “We’re good together. Good for each other. At the funeral, we were tight. We’re friends who should be lovers, not enemies. I don’t understand what’s changed.”

“You bought this house.” Her eyes flare, practically setting fire to the fringe above them. “You told Liam to lie about it. You live”—she gestures widely—“somewhere up on that ridge and watch me without my permission. You learn, and what you learn, you use to manipulate me.”

“That’s not it,” I say, but not confidently. She might be right.

“You don’t own me,” she says. “And I’m not having sex with you again.” She whips a long strand of her hair back over her shoulder.

“You will. We will. It’s inevitable.”

“It’s not.” She blinks at my audacity, but I’m done pulling punches.

“There is pure fire between us. And it’s always going to be that way,” I say, laying it out how I see it. “It just takes one kiss for you to unravel for me.”

She shakes her head. “There won’t be any kissing again.”

“Why the fuck not?” I rake a frustrated hand through my hair. “We’re adults. We’re unattached.” And thankfully, Liam is out of the picture.

“Because I said so.” She squares her shoulders. “Because I’m not like the women who used to wait for you after your shows at Love Street, or like the ones who likely wait for you backstage now.”

“I know you’re not like them,” I say softly.

Katelyn has me, us, on a razor’s edge. One misstep, and I know I’m going to lose her for good, just like Liam has.

“There is no comparison.” I don’t deny that there are women. There are tons. Liam is making it his personal mission to go through all of them.

“Right.” Hurt flashes in her eyes. “And yet you want me to become one of them.”

“I want you,” I say urgently, trying harder to explain. “Only you. You aren’t like them. There is no one like you.”

“For the moment.”

I shake my head. “There’s been no one on my mind, my thoughts, or my bed since I met you.”

She blinks slowly at me, appearing stunned. “You’re lying.”

“It’s the fucking truth.”

But I’m flailing. After New York and the secrets that I’ve kept trying my best to help her, she won’t take my word for it. I need proof, but I don’t have any.

“I’m not Liam,” I say, trying a different approach. “I’m your friend. Everything I’ve done was for your benefit.”

Her expression hardens. “Friends don’t lie. They don’t manipulate. They don’t push.”

“They do if their friend is doing things that are harmful,” I say. “You’re alone in this house. It’s not good for you. You’re sad. You need me, and I want to help you. Let me help you, dammit.”

She’s too proud. That was the reason I didn’t tell her I bought the house in the first place.

“You don’t get to decide what I do.” The cape of gold around her slender shoulders shivers with her irritation. “Or what’s good for me.”

“What do you want me to say?”

I’m at a loss. I want her, but I can’t have her if she denies me access and contradicts what’s between us.

“Nothing.” Her expression softens, revealing a vulnerability that hurts me to see. “There is nothing you can say.”

“I don’t believe you.” I recall another time when she looked vulnerable. It was after what she said, and I didn’t say when I was inside her. “You want me to say I love you?”

“No,” she denies it, then adds with a shrug, “Maybe at one time, but not anymore.”

“You’re forcing me out of your life because without those words as collateral, you’re afraid I’ll abandon you.”

I remember what Liam told me when we were in the studio working on “Moving On.”

Putting it all together, I say, “Because you think I’ll let you down like your parents did. Like Liam has.”

“You will, eventually.” She wraps her arms around herself. A self-contained fortress for one. “When has anyone in my life been any different?” Her breath hitches on that deep self-truth, and her eyes brighten. “Even Maureen left me.”

*Fucking hell.* My lady has had a hard time of it.

“I don’t know love. I told you that then. But I know you, Katy.” To me,

that's the most important factor. "I know we're good together."

"Until we're not," she says. "Like in New York when I found out you manipulated me. Like in Liam's room, when I discovered more misdirection and lies."

"You trusted me at one time," I say, reminding her firmly, but an edge of panic creeps into my voice. "You can trust me again."

"I can't. You lied to me. You manipulated and hurt me too many times. I'm all out of chances. I'm not putting myself out there with you again. Not for sex, no matter how good it might temporarily be. I have nothing left to give."

*Fuck.*

"Katy, please." I take a step toward her, but it doesn't eliminate the chasm that has opened between us.

"Goodbye, Ryan."

She withdraws further. Her arms tighten around her torso. She's holding herself together, but it's me who needs to be held. I'm the one suddenly about to fly apart.

"I'll call you later." Desperation rises within me at the prospect of losing her. No more touches. No more conversations or closeness. No more of my Katy. "I'll make it up to you somehow."

"Don't call," she says coolly. "I'll just hang up. Just go. And don't come back."

"You want me completely gone?" My brows crash together. I can't fathom it. Can't contemplate life without her.

"Yes."

Her sharp reply slices through me like a blade. I see my life with her on one side and my life without her on the other. It's not a pretty picture.

"Done," I say sadly.

I'm not mad anymore. I'm miserable, and it seems to me that she is too. But she's stronger than me.

Katelyn turns her back on me, and after several agonizing moments, I turn mine on her and the man I used to be, the one who only existed because of her.

## Chapter 48



### Katelyn

I don't remember the specifics of the days that followed Ryan's departure, but I remember the pain.

Pain like I've never felt before bled out in paint in my studio, a compulsion to capture Ryan's likeness in every way I could. When I ran out of canvases, I sketched him on pad after pad in charcoal.

Then, when the pain was only an ache, a constant one beneath my breastbone, my new companion, I tucked everything away. My developing room became a storage closet for all those images of him and me. Separated, those versions of us didn't exist anymore.

Ryan's Katy is gone. So is Maureen's Kate and Liam's babe. I'm just me now.

I'm not sure exactly who that is, but I know I won't withdraw again. I made Maureen a promise.

But I can't do it alone. I need therapy, and I've continued it. However, without Ryan helping, I don't know for how much longer.

"I can't pay the bill in advance today."

In my therapist's office, I twist the strap of my handbag in my grip. My cheeks warm as the receptionist peers across her desk at me.

"All appointments must be paid for in advance."

"I know, but—"

"However . . ." She sniffs. "Yours have already been paid."

"Before, someone paid for them," I say, and embarrassment makes my skin warmer. "But not anymore."

Now, I'm truly on my own.

"The entire year has been paid in advance."

"By whom?" I ask, my eyes growing wide.

"Let me look at my notes." She flips through a stack of papers. "Barney

Finegold. On behalf of his clients. Do you know who that is?”

“Yes.” I nod.

The band’s manager. Ryan found a workaround. It’s not directly from him but from the group.

I could protest, but I contributed to many of their songs and didn’t ask for anything. I won’t ask.

I can accept this. I have to, frankly. My finances are in bad shape, such that I don’t have the luxury of indulging my broken heart anymore.

After my appointment, I’m heading out to look for a job. Maybe more than one.

Writing lyrics is a rush—or with Ryan around, it was.

That ache in my chest starts to throb as I just think about him, but writing songs isn’t an option for me. That part of my life is over, like all the rest.

• • •

After my appointment, I head to the main shopping strip that’s a walkable distance from the house. There, I fill out dozens of job applications.

Discouraged by the lack of interest, I trudge back up the hill and make it to the walkway to my house as the sun starts to set. My house is only mine for now. There’s a very real chance I will have to sell it. I want to cry and give up, but I won’t. I can’t afford to.

“Miss Love?” A man in a dark charcoal suit, nearly as nice as the one Ryan wore to Maureen’s funeral, pushes away from the wall by my front door.

“Yes. I’m Katelyn Love.” I put my hand to my chest where my heart is beating rapidly. He looks like a lawyer, and I anticipate bad news. It’s about all I’ve suffered lately.

“I’m Sam Massey.” He pulls out a card, but I wave it away. “I’m an attorney at Massey and Associates. We represent Maureen Gabriel. I believe she was a close friend of yours. Please accept my condolences for your loss.”

“Thank you,” I rasp, telling myself again not to cry.

“She bequeathed Love Street to you.” He offers me an envelope. “The building is paid for, but she also gave you 5,000 dollars for utilities, and the name of the store to use as you see fit.”

My eyes get larger as I take all that in. “When did she do that? Make these arrangements, I mean.”

I want to believe her overdose was accidental, not purposeful. Otherwise,

I didn't notice the signs and failed her as a friend.

"Several years ago." He straightens his dark tie. "Shortly after she bought the building, I believe."

I exhale the breath I've been holding.

He shakes the large envelope. I hear a key rattling in it, and something stirs inside me. It's weak and fragile like the beating of an angel's wings. It's been a long time since I felt it, but I know what it is.

It's hope.

I'm afraid to reach for it, but I do. It's all I have left.

"Thank you." I take the envelope and hug it to my chest. A crack of sunlight brings light and warmth into my heart.

"You're welcome, Miss Love."

He moves away, and I stand on my doorstep for a long while.

My mind is all over the place. Of course I will continue what Maureen started. I have the means to do all those things I talked about at her funeral. I'll encourage up-and-coming artists. And maybe I'll also help women like us who have had miscarriages.

At the idea of being able to do something good like she would, that constant ache in my chest eases a little.

"I'm still lonely," I say out loud, lifting my gaze to the sky.

I follow a barn swallow that I pretend is her. My guardian angel loops through the sky.

"I miss you, Maureen. So much."

I miss Ryan too and even Liam. I love them both. That love doesn't disappear because they don't return it. I just need to channel that love into something productive.

"Thank you for thinking of me."

Maureen said she would always be there if I needed her, and she is. She's the only one.

But she's enough. She has to be.

## Chapter 49



Katelyn

“Morning, you,” I tell my reflection. “You’re okay. You got this.” Since the lawyer appeared at my house all those months ago, I’ve been giving myself pep talks out loud. Ignoring the skepticism in my gaze, I turn away from the bathroom mirror. I don’t have time to second-guess or panic. Today is the dress rehearsal for the grand reopening of Love Street. Succeed or fail, it’s all on my shoulders. I must be strong and carry on. I have a thousand things on my to-do list.

I walk to my bed, sit, and put on my platform sandals. Unbidden, a memory slams into me. New York. Ryan at my feet. The confidence of his caress as he unbuckled these very same sandals. The dark desire in his eyes. The way my body came alive in response to him. The way it still does just remembering.

*No. Stop.* My hand comes to my throat where my pulse beats rapidly. Pressing my quivering thighs together, I stop the memory from replaying further. I can’t allow myself to get swept away by my longing for him.

*It is over,* I remind myself. I snapshot that moment in time, make it a photo, and paste it into a thick scrapbook labeled Ryan. This isn’t the first time I’ve gone through this exercise. There are so many memories, so much longing, but I resist the urge to succumb. I have made some progress with my therapist. I’m not where I should be putting the past behind me, but I manage to close the scrapbook.

I stand and smooth nonexistent wrinkles from my orange-and-white daisy-dotted minidress. Refocusing on the present takes effort, but I’m proud of myself that I’m able to do it and that my hands only tremble slightly.

I glance at myself in the dressing mirror. My dress looks nice even though it’s not new. I purchased it at my favorite vintage store. Since I received the deed to Love Street, I’ve been busy with preparations for



reopening it. I'm on a strict budget. At this point, that five thousand dollars Maureen left me is dwindling not growing. I don't shop for much beyond the necessities to reopen the shop, and anyway, going to the vintage store without Maureen makes me sad. I wish she were here. I could use a hug. Pain squeezing my heart in a tight grip, I close my eyes.

*God, I miss you, Reen.*

Tears burning behind my eyelids, I see her lovely face in my mind. She's gone, but I remind myself that she loved me. I envision her encouraging smile. She didn't abandon me. Not completely. Bequeathing me Love Street, she gave me a purpose and a part of herself.

I reopen my eyes. Pulling in a breath for courage, I blink through the wetness and manage to leave my bedroom behind.

In the foyer, I grab my bag. I take out my keys and exit the house. Somedays, I'm not as brave, and I stay inside longer. But today the sadness won't win. It doesn't even delay me . . . not much anyway. I have my purpose. I have a part of Maureen with me always. I made her a promise. I'm determined to keep it.

• • •

"Where do you want this?" Jeremy Taylor asks me. Standing in the middle of Love Street, he is holding my latest canvas.

"Over here." I direct him to the small niche by the window where I have decided to display a few of my paintings alongside those of other local Canyon artists. I point to the dark corner.

"No one will see it there." He frowns and takes my painting to an easel that has better lighting and is by the aisle. "Here is better."

"No," I protest. Love Street isn't about me. It's about the music. It's about Maureen.

"Yes, here," he insists. Setting the canvas down, he moves in front of me. He is way too close. I take a step backward.

Jeremy is a gifted musician, a young and very handsome one with long brown hair and clear blue sky eyes. He was playing his guitar for a crowd on the sidewalk outside the store when I started repainting the interior. I opened the door to let out the fumes, and he walked in. We started talking. I shared my vision for the reopening of Love Street. He brought his friends around the next day to help with the remodel. They show up periodically, but he's walked in the door every single day since that first one.

“It’s you.” He removes the distance from him that I gained. “It showcases your talent and the beauty of the canyon with all those laurel trees. It stays.” His gaze sparkling determinedly, he cups my face in his hand and his voice drops an octave lower. “I’m staying.”

“I appreciate all you’ve done.” I peel his fingers away from my skin. I know what he wants. He’s been pressing for it more and more lately. I know I should try to move on. But he doesn’t understand me like Ryan and his touch doesn’t make my heart race or my thighs quiver. “We’re just friends.”

“Untrue.” He reaches for my hands and brings them to his chest. “Stop pulling away from me. I’m here. You’re here. There’s something between us.”

Denying it, I shake my head.

“Sleep with me.” He squeezes my hands in his grip. “I can make you feel good.” He’s offering the free love that he and his friends practice.

“Have sex with you that doesn’t mean anything.” I tilt my head as if I’m considering it. But sex like that isn’t for me. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes.” He nods vigorously. “I’m not Liam or Ryan. It doesn’t have to be complicated.”

He knows the basic facts of my past. We’re friends but not kindred spirits. We don’t have the baring and meeting of souls type of friendship that Ryan and I shared . . . that I thought we shared.

“I’ll give it some consideration.” Putting Jeremy off yet again, I tug my hands free.

“Good.” His gaze brightens. This is more encouragement than I’ve ever given him.

In my head, I know I should take him up on his offer. He’s a friend. He’s handsome. There is caring and some attraction. I recognize it since I’m beyond being a ghost. I came alive again because of Ryan, but I also had my heart crushed by him. I’ll never put myself completely out there again with Jeremy or any man, but on the other hand, I won’t withdraw from life. No matter how difficult it is, I promised Maureen.

“I need to get started on my list.” I change the subject. “I have a thousand things to do.”

“I’ll help.”

“Thank you.” Some of my tension eases. I’m alone and sad, but I have a friend and don’t take that gift for granted. “Do you have everything you need for your performance tomorrow?”

“Yes.” He nods. He’s my headliner.

“Your set is the longest.” I glance at the new stage. It has a curtain that I salvaged from a dumpster. It only took one professional dry cleaning to make the fabric beautiful again. If only I could be salvaged as easily.

“I’m ready, Katelyn.”

I swallow hard. I’m surviving as is. A full salvage of me isn’t possible. “How about the others?” I put Jeremy in charge of the opening performers.

“Everyone is good to go.” He places his hands on my shoulders. I try, but I’m unable to suppress my instinct to flinch. Sadly, his touch isn’t the one I crave. I don’t allow that thought to go further, but I know deep down that he is not the man I need.

“I’ll check on the backroom.” I gesture. “Can you stay out here and check the stage lighting?”

“Absolutely,” he replies.

“I’ll leave you to it.” I head to the storage room that serves multiple purposes. Right now, it’s my refuge. Stepping inside, I close the door and lean heavily against it. I rub my sweaty palms on my dress. But that doesn’t remove the wrongness of Jeremy’s touch.

I let out a shaky breath. Time for another pep talk.

“Hey, you.” I curl my fingers into fists. “You can do this. It’s a matter of focus.” I glance around the room. Those multiple purposes are visible inside this place. There are canvases for painting. I don’t write songs. I don’t use my camera anymore. I don’t sing, but I continue to paint. Only once Love Street reopens, there won’t be time for me to paint at home anymore. There are a couple of mirrors on the walls, in case I ever work up the courage to look at myself closely enough to do self-portraits again. That isn’t part of my current plan. But the stacked chairs are. There are only six. But it’s a start. Six brave women, one of them me, wrote our names on my signup sheet. We’re going to meet once a month and talk about our miscarriages. It helped me to share with Maureen. I hope it will help others to do the same. Post Ryan, I believe it’s better to get things out rather than keep them inside.

But one thing I fear will never come out.

Ryan’s Katy. She lives inside me alongside this place card Katelyn. In survival mode, this version of me has a purpose but not much else. I wake alone. I work mostly alone. I go to bed alone. My heart is broken but functional. I don’t dream. I don’t write songs. There is no music inside me. My loneliness is acutely painful at times. I accept that Ryan didn’t return my

love, but accepting doesn't mean I am over him. My love remains his. I'm strong enough to manage without him, but I can never truly move on. Not like I know he has.

## Chapter 50



Liam

In Pittsburgh, I spin on the stage under the spotlight. I'm grooving and having a pretty good time.

Ryan leans in. His fingers are a blur on his Gibson. We harmonize on my mic so good on "Moving On" that I get chills. The lights go off, and that's it. That song is our finale. The stage is plunged into darkness, and the crowd goes nuts. It feels like we're a fucking supernova.

I jog offstage, hand off my Gretsch to a tech, and slap Ryan on the back when he joins me. "Excellent performance."

Gray spins his sticks, gives us a chin lift, and moves toward a chick with her top off. "You," he says. "Come get on my dick."

Topless hurries over since that invitation apparently sounds really enticing.

I refocus on Ryan. He's got a chick with him now too. A brunette. "Felt good out there, didn't it?"

"Felt all right." He's been sullen and apathetic ever since Katelyn kicked him out of her life. It's getting old. That was nearly eleven months ago.

"We got a break coming up," I say to remind him.

Ryan lifts his mouth from the brunette's skin. He was sucking on her neck like a vampire.

"Wanna come to the reopening of Love Street with me?" I ask, now that I somewhat have his attention.

Pain slashing across his face, he releases the brunette so abruptly that the girl stumbles and nearly falls. "Katelyn invite you?" His brows nosedive above his shadowed eyes.

"She did." I nod once.

"She didn't invite me." He casts his troubled gaze around the crowded backstage area where roadies are trying to dodge naked and mostly wasted

women to get our equipment out of the building.

“She might talk to you if you come.” I throw that out there, knowing she also might not. But if it were me and I was completely shut out like him, I’d take that chance.

“Got shit to do.” He points to a couple of chicks. I guess the brunette isn’t enough of a distraction. “Later.”

Ryan eyeballs me before taking off with the groupie trio. He passes by booze and pills. He doesn’t do those, but he does women. More than me.

It doesn’t help. Well, not for long. He remains surly. He’ll eventually end up acknowledging, like I have, that there’s all the rest . . . and then there’s Katelyn.

I know it’s not that she’s the most beautiful woman in the world or even the best in bed. It’s the way she focuses on you when you’re with her. She makes you the center of her world. That kind of adoration is a bigger rush than spinning in the spotlight.

I grab a groupie—just one. The multiples are too much work. The girl latches on to me too readily. Her face isn’t right. Her hair isn’t golden. She doesn’t glow with some kind of inner cosmic light that Katelyn does.

But she worships my cock in the dressing room. I come, and for a moment, I’m okay, but it’s disappointing. It’s the image that the groupies really worship, not me.

I regret every woman I stick my dick into but one.

• • •

“Hey, there.” I steady Katelyn as we weave together up the pathway to a house that at one time was ours.

“I’m okay.” She pushes away from me at the door to pull her key out of her bag.

“Are you?” I squint at her to make the two versions of her merge. “You had two glasses of wine after we closed the store.”

“Yeah. I don’t usually drink much. And I didn’t eat anything today.” She gets the key in the lock on the third attempt. “Do you want to come in?” she asks after throwing open the door. “I could heat up a TV dinner.”

*Hell fucking yeah, I want in.*

“Sure,” I tell her, playing it cool. “I could come in for a bit.”

She kicks off her sandals on her way to the kitchen, and I try not to get caught staring at her in a sunny yellow halter top that exposes her enticing

waist. With that matching miniskirt, every guy at the opening was as obsessed with her as I am.

“Your lineup is good. That kid with the long hair and glasses is raw, but he’s a talent.”

“Jeremy Taylor,” she says amid a lot of clattering in the kitchen.

“What?” I flop on the couch that I notice has a lot more pillows than I remember.

“The talent. His name is Jeremy.” She walks toward me, her hips swaying like a metronome.

“Sit.” I pat the cushion beside me. “Tell me about him. Where you found him and what you’ve been up to. We haven’t talked in a while.”

“Nearly a year.” She looks troubled and shifts her weight from one foot to another.

“The talent.” I lift my brows, reminding her.

“Jeremy.” She refocuses, and I know without her saying that she was thinking that it’s been about a year since she’s talked to Ryan, too. “He started coming around when I started the renovations.”

“He’s far from a kid.”

“I guess.”

She sits next to me, tucking one leg beneath her. I pull her closer. Her back is to me, and I start massaging her shoulders. I revel in the creamy softness of her skin.

“That feels good.” She lets out a moan, and my cock swells.

“You worked hard today.” I remember us like this in our old apartment. She was always keyed up and found it difficult to relax after her late-night gigs.

“Everyone seems younger than me these days. It’s not the absolute age; it’s what you’ve been through.” She shrugs as if what she’s been through and survived can be easily dismissed.

It can’t. Not for her. Not for me, and not for Ryan either. We’re each still trying to navigate troubled waters in the aftermath.

“The real stage. The VIP seating area. The bar. The licensing.” The store now sells T-shirts with Love Street and a heart on a green street sign and LA Canyon beneath it in bold colors. She’s also selling her artwork and featuring others. “Did you do all that yourself?”

“No.” She shakes her head and long strands of her shiny hair spill over my hands.

My cock gets harder. I want her badly. I will always want her. Katelyn is the prototype, the gold standard. Other women—every single one—fall short. I came to that realization too late and blew my last chance with her. Thinking things like this, I recognize that the pills I popped earlier have worn off.

“Jeremy pitched in,” she says. “He brought his friends to help. Other artists like him who couldn’t get any stage time at other places. Everyone who helped got to perform tonight. But Jeremy . . .”

“Stands out,” I say, filling in.

“Yes, his lyrics are poetry all on their own, but then his music elevates everything.”

“He’s like Ryan.”

“No.” In denial, she starts to sit up, but I hold her in place.

“That guy you call a kid is in love with you.” I squeeze her shoulders for emphasis.

“He isn’t,” she says, frowning. “And even if he was, I’m too old for him.”

“He is totally in love with you.” Any man if given a shot with her would take it. “At least two of his songs are about you. Love songs. Don’t tell me you didn’t notice. I won’t believe you.”

“How are things with you?” she asks, changing the subject.

“The same.”

Drugs. Booze. Women. It’s become boring and depressing as fuck, but I don’t know how, or even if, I can stop it.

“And the band?”

“The band is doing great,” I say. “Gray’s the same. Ryan is not. He’s—”

“I saw you on Midnight Feature.”

She cuts me off, and I feel her tension now that I’ve brought up Ryan.

“So, you don’t want to get an update about Ryan?” I ask. “Don’t want to know how he’s doing or that he’s struggling to write songs?”

“No, I don’t.” Her voice sounds rough. “What he does or who he does is none of my business.”

*Yeah, she’s just as bad off as Ryan is.*

“He’s like I was after losing you.” I give it to her straight, though I’m not really sure why. It’s obvious she knows about all the women.

“You didn’t lose me, Liam.” She swivels to look at me, and the pain in her eyes makes me suck in a sharp breath. “You tossed me aside.”

“Ouch.” I power ahead, even though she’s plunged a knife into my chest. “That wasn’t how it went down with you and Ryan.”



“I don’t want to talk about Ryan.”

“Avoiding it doesn’t make it go away.”

I see the same pain, the same shadows in her eyes that I see nearly every day in his. If I were really being honest, I’d acknowledge that’s what I see when I look at myself in the mirror.

“Avoid what?” She tilts her head to a considering angle.

“That you’re still in love with him,” I say.

“I’m not.” She turns away and her shoulders slump. “I can’t be.”

“If you would only talk to him . . .”

“There’s nothing to say. He’s moved on. Ha-ha,” she barks bitterly. “Yeah, not only do I get to see the pictures, but I have to hear him sing about how well he’s doing apart from me every time I turn on the radio.”

“He’s not doing well.” I correct that misconception. “He’s trying to fill a void, but only expanding it.”

“Ryan is on top of the world. He’s one of the biggest stars in the music business. All three of you are. I’m happy for you. You work hard, and you deserve your success.” Her voice gets gravelly. “There was something between Ryan and me for a brief time, but there were also all the groupies like there are now. There is no void, just a continuation of more of the same, like you said, for both of you.”

“He wasn’t into the groupie scene until you cut him out of your life, Katelyn.” I shake my head. “Other women weren’t his mistake with you.”

“So, he was telling the truth.” Her shoulders stiffen. “But it doesn’t matter,” she mutters and her fingers curl into fists. “One truth doesn’t outweigh his manipulation or lies.”

*Maybe not*, I think sadly. Because she might not want to, but she remains in love with Ryan.

He loves her; I’m sure of it. I love her too.

Ryan and I screwed up how we went about loving her, and we’re suffering the consequences. Separated and alone, we all lose. We sing about love changing the world and making a difference, but it hasn’t.

At least, not for us.

# Chapter 51



Ryan

Katelyn doesn't see me, but on my deck, I see her down below, standing in front of the windows at the back of her house. Her face is tipped to the moonlight. She's more haunting than it is. But she's not alone.

*Fuck.* I feel like I want to peel off my own skin. My grip tightens around the cool iron railing.

She hasn't been alone any night this week, but it's not Liam with her like he was after the reopening of Love Street three months ago. Admittedly, I'm proud of her for what she has accomplished over the past year. She's soared while I've crashed and burned. Everyone in the canyon is talking about her and how she is carrying on where Maureen left off, encouraging new artists while also putting her own unique spin on the store.

However, pride isn't even what I'm feeling right now. I'm seething. I tolerated Liam being at Katelyn's side because I know though he loves her, he has zero chance of regaining her. He screwed up like me. He's allowed near, but only so close.

But this guy, Jeremy Taylor, he's my worst nightmare. She's let him into her castle, and as I watch, he appears behind her. He has access to the princess, and I don't.

Brushing her long hair aside, he kisses her neck. She turns away from the window, away from me, and I feel like I lose her all over again when she spins to face him and allows him to press his lips to hers.

Pain rips my insides to shreds. Nausea rises. Anger flashes. I'm like dry kindling doused in gasoline and lit by a match.

*She knows there's a chance I'm up above her watching, doesn't she?*

Katelyn might as well have carved my heart out of my chest with a dull blade.

A thousand images of her fill my mind, but memories don't fill the empty

space. They don't comfort. Instead, they burn like acid.

I can't handle this tonight. Probably not any night. But today I'm rawer than usual. It's the anniversary of the day I lost Gus and Joe.

My failures haunting me in more ways than one, my grip on the railing snaps the wood. Furious, I scoop up a broken piece. Wielding it like a bat, I break every window at the back of my house.

I lost Katelyn. I lost my friends. I'm angry, so fucking angry, but mostly at myself.

I don't stay to survey the destruction. There's worse devastation inside me.

Glass crunching under my boots, I go inside and stride through the house that's no home and is as sparsely decorated as it was when I moved in. Why decorate? It suits me that the house is as desolate as I am without her.

I snatch my leather jacket from the hook by the door, grab my keys and wallet from the dish, and stalk out of the house.

But I don't get in the Buick. It stays parked in the drive. That vehicle is too wrapped up with memories of her. It's not going to give me the speed that I need.

• • •

"Let me call Katelyn." Liam yanks the receiver from my bruised hand.

"Don't, man." I shake my head at him, and the private room they admitted me to after the ER spins.

Liam glares at me, then dials her number. "She should know about the accident before the press gets ahold of the story."

Too weak to argue, I collapse into the bed. I turn my head as a flash of movement at the door catches my eye. Liam doesn't need to call her. Katelyn is already here.

"Hey, guys," she says over-cheerfully after she knocks on the doorframe. "Can I come in?"

"I was just calling you." Liam sets down the phone and goes to her.

I can't get up because I have a broken leg, busted ribs, and a concussion from crashing my new Stingray. Plus, bruising on my hands. But that was from earlier on my deck.

"Where's Jeremy?" I ask snidely, acid seeping into my tone.

"I left him in the waiting room," she says evenly.

Her gaze connects with mine, instead of skimming over me, and that

connection is a switch thrown. Light as bright as the midday sun illuminates every dark corner inside me.

“Are you okay?” She takes in the setup around me and shifts to look at Liam, as if he has the answers she needs now, and not me.

“I’m here, not over there,” I say bitterly, and I get her gaze back.

Her eyes are like a silvery blue moon in the night sky that represents our failed relationship. I’m a failure—busted up to hell, both inside and out—while she is as beautiful as ever in a violet minidress with a paisley pattern. Her white boots make her shapely legs look a fucking mile long.

“You look good.” Drinking her in, I find better words than my previous ones.

“Thank you.” Her tone lightens. “But you sure don’t.”

“Touché.” My lips curve in response to her quip. The minute movement is not without pain. In the crash, my chin hit the steering wheel.

“I’ll just go find a pay phone,” Liam says, but we don’t turn away from looking at each other to acknowledge him. “I need to talk to Barney about rescheduling our upcoming tour dates.”

“Okay.” I nod.

After he leaves, Katelyn takes a step closer. “How did this happen?”

“I took a curve on the Five too fast,” I say. My fingers—hell, my entire body—vibrate with my desire to touch her. “Totaled my new Corvette. Blasted a significant chunk out of a concrete barrier.”

“How fast were you going?” she asks.

Entirely too fast, I think, but I say, “A hundred twenty miles per hour.”

“You’re lucky to be alive.” Her expression turns troubled, almost as if the thought of my demise deeply disturbs her. “Why were you going so fast?”

“Trying to run from my past, I guess.” I shrug, trying to downplay the truthful answer that’s the same one she gave me when we first met. “Today, I mean yesterday, was the anniversary of the chopper crash. Fuck, I hurt.”

Wracked with pain, I close my eyes briefly. The pills they gave me in the ER barely take the edge off.

“I’ll bet you do. More than physically.” Her expression softens. “I didn’t know it was a significant day for you. I’m sorry.” Her gaze drops to the tray beside my bed. “Would you like some water?”

“Yes, please,” I say, my voice husky.

But what I really want is her. I need this side of her more than anything. Her softness and her understanding, I would do anything to get them back.

“You’re the only friend I’ve ever been able to talk to like them,” I say truthfully. “And I fucked it up.”

She freezes with a glass of water in her hand.

“More than you wanted to know, I can tell.” I get surly, and her eyes widen beneath her bangs. “I’ve shocked you. You came to see me as a courtesy, not for us to make amends.”

She nods slowly, and that cavernous space inside me that she once filled yawns painfully wider.

“Who called you?” I ask, thinking aloud.

“Gray,” she says softly.

“What did he say?” I ask.

Gray doesn’t know nearly as much as Liam, but he knows too much. It’s impossible to keep secrets when you’re in a band.

“That you busted all the windows in your place,” she says carefully. “And that you nearly killed yourself.”

*Pretty accurate assessment.*

“So, you feel sorry for me.”

Plus, she knows I haven’t stopped watching her. I remain obsessed. The other women are all wrong. They don’t know me. They don’t understand. They aren’t light; instead, they increase the darkness.

“No, I don’t. It’s just that—”

Cutting her off, I wave a hand. “I appreciate you coming, but I don’t want your pity. Thanks, but no thanks.” Apparently, I haven’t fallen so low that I’ll accept even scraps. “I don’t need or want you here. Go on back to your boyfriend.”

“Okay.” With shaking hands, she sets down the glass and nearly spills the water when I grab her wrist. “Ouch. You’re hurting me.”

“Sorry.” I loosen my grip, and my eyes narrow to accusatory splinters. “But you hurt me first.”

“Because I’m *moving on* like you already have numerous times.” Her eyes are charged bolts of lightning.

“Are you jealous?” I ask, wanting her to be. That means she still feels something for me.

“Of groupies, no,” she says.

But I see the truth in her eyes. Recognize it. She’s seething with the same jealous toxicity as me.

“Stop watching me,” she rasps and twists her wrist free.

“No.” Watching her is all I have. I refuse to surrender my last remaining connection to her.

“Then I guess there’s nothing left to say.”

So, she came here to sever that last little bit of her that I have. That makes me furious.

“Tell me this,” I say quickly, and she stops halfway to the door. “Is it as good, the sex with him?”

“You have no right to ask me that.” She turns her head slightly but doesn’t give me her eyes.

Having no right doesn’t stop me. Not when she’s nearly gone.

“Why does Jeremy get in there and not me?” I keep hammering at her, hoping she’ll crack, and that somehow, I will be the one who gets to reassemble the pieces.

“I can trust him,” she says softly.

“Like you once trusted me?” I keep pressing, needing to know where I went wrong, so maybe I can get it right.

Still not looking at me, she nods. “Yes.”

“What happens when poor Jeremy messes up, huh?” My pressing turns to planting seeds of doubt. “When he falls short like Liam and I have?”

“You hate me so much.” Katelyn turns to look at me, and her eyes are swimming in hurt. “That you want that to happen?”

“I don’t hate you.” I shake my head. “But I sometimes think that you hate yourself, that deep down you think you’re not worthy of any of us. That you go into each relationship, Liam first, then me, or whoever, knowing our failings and accepting or ignoring them rather than acknowledging and working through them.”

“Why would I do that?”

Sensing a flicker of uncertainty in her, I exploit it.

“So you’re the one in control,” I say plainly, not being gentle. “So you’re not vulnerable. So you conveniently always have an out.”

“What about you?” she fires back. “Incapable of love, unable to give or receive it.” Her attack is as unrelenting as mine. “All you know is manipulation, and I won’t allow you to bind me to you with your truths that are as hurtful as lies.”

“You’re doing it right now.” I try to sit up and grimace as searing-hot pain shoots through me. “You’re pushing me away again because I know you too well, and you’re afraid.”

“Goodbye, Ryan.” Her expression slams shut like a door. Her shoulders squared, she turns.

All of me hurts watching her go.

Surprisingly, Katelyn stops in the doorway. “Please don’t drive recklessly anymore.”

“Why would you care?” I ask harshly.

There’s no reason to tread carefully. This is the ending to us underscored. Afterward, I know there will be nothing left to salvage. And it will be me, not her, who’s going to be destroyed. I’m going to have to reassemble my own pieces.

“I do care,” she says without hesitation. “I’ve always cared. That’s where you didn’t pay attention. That’s the truth you never got and couldn’t return, not the way I needed you to, and now it’s too late for both of us.”

## Chapter 52



1973

Liam

“Did you really fuck that reporter from the *Times*?” Ryan asks from the couch across from me inside my dressing room in Bogotá.

He looks as tired as I feel. This tour has gone on for too long, and South America is too far away from LA and the woman we both lost.

“Yeah.” I nod and knock back the remaining dregs left in my tequila bottle. Placing the empty bottle on the coffee table with the others, I swipe the back of my hand across my mouth. “But it wasn’t any fun.”

“She’s complaining to Barney.” Ryan’s bleary eyes brim with understanding.

HCN has been on tour for months. A lot of things that were mildly amusing to us at the beginning aren’t anymore.

“About the sex?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “About the inappropriateness of having sex with someone who is writing a feature on the band.”

“That was supposed to be the fun part.” I shrug. “She was loud, seemed to enjoy it. How about you? Saw you choose two pretty things from the groupie lineup.”

“Sent them away. When I got them in the light, they didn’t look as tempting.”

They didn’t look like Katelyn. I can read between those cryptic lines.

Ryan gestures. “Rather come hang with you.”

“Rather keep an eye on me, you mean.” Both my brows rise to an accusatory height.

Barney, Ryan, and Gray take turns making sure I’m sober. They’re delusional if they think I don’t know what they’re doing.

Ryan doesn’t deny it like Gray or Barney might. “You shouldn’t be



drinking again.” He glances pointedly at the line of empty liquor bottles.

“It’s just booze,” I lie.

“Is it?” He studies me closely.

I hold his gaze, though it’s difficult. He can’t tell just by eyeballing me that I’ve been popping a few pills again.

Ryan shrugs. “Not trying to bust your balls. Just don’t want to see you detoxing in another rehab facility.”

I make a face. “I don’t wanna go through that hell again either. But there are worse things.”

“Katelyn still not talking to you?” he asks, his scrutiny of me increasing. He’s very interested in my answer, and it’s telling that he equates silence from her as being a worse hell than detox.

“Nothing. No contact at all. I’m completely shut out.” I exhale heavily. “I blew all my chances.”

*God, I miss her.* I’d endure her nagging me about the drugs like she did that last time she caught me having a minor relapse. I would do practically anything to get her talking to me again.

In my desperation, I’ve started to write her letters. Long letters. At least with those, I have some hope of assembling the right words to reach her. I share sappy shit. Beg her to meet me and hear me out. But I’m too chickenshit to mail them.

“No contact for me either,” he says sadly.

Katelyn iced him out after his car accident two years ago. I don’t know what they said to each other after I left them alone, but whatever it was, it wasn’t good. They both changed and not for the better. Ryan took to writing angry, cynical songs, and Katelyn retreated to her studio. Her paintings are mostly dark self-portraits that are as disturbing to me as his lyrics.

“Sorry, man.” I pat his leather-clad knee.

Ryan is already in the getup he’ll wear onstage. He’s a rock star, and he plays that role well. But offstage, he struggles just like me and Katelyn. She hasn’t dated anyone since things went south with Jeremy. I know this because Ryan watches her and gives me updates, and because I check up on her too through friends of friends.

“Why’d you do it, man?” His gaze sharpens.

“Do what?” I ask, worried that he knows about my hidden bag of pills.

“Come visit me in the army hospital when I was injured,” he explains.

“Fuck if I know.” I rake a hand through my hair. He’s never outright

asked me about that. I think on it a moment and decide to give him the truth. It's an important one. "I didn't like the idea of my brother being hurt without having anyone around to help him."

"My mom—"

"I knew about your financial situation," I admit. "It wasn't great for me living in a house with our piece of shit father, but I had all the amenities, and I had options outside of enlisting, unlike you. I knew your mother couldn't afford to take off from work to see you. I also knew there was no way you could have paid for the specialist you needed." I made it a point to find out everything I could about Ryan as soon as I found out he existed. At first, I was interested just because our old man didn't like it. Then when I became estranged from my parents, Ryan became the only family I had.

"Thanks." He looks sheepish. "I wish you would have let me repay you."

"You're welcome. It was a long time ago. No repayment necessary." I wanted to help him, but I'm as uncomfortable with his gratitude as he is with my gift.

"So why you always trying to get me to see Katelyn?" His keen interest in my answer to this question is palpable.

Because I failed her. Because I love her. Because he loves her too, though he never uses those words, can't use them if he never sees her.

"Not always," I hedge. "Just when you wrecked your Stingray and when she reopened Love Street." If I can't have her, I don't want just anyone for her. I want him. But I'm not going to answer this question. He needs to figure out the answer for himself. Once he does, maybe he can figure out how to be who she needs.

"Why do you care if I end up in rehab again?" I ask pointedly, turning the interrogation spotlight on him.

He doesn't answer, but he gives me a you-know-why look.

We're both too damn stubborn to admit that we care about each other. I don't think we can pinpoint the exact moment it happened. Maybe it began at the military hospital when I was all he had. We hit a roadblock falling for the same woman, needing that same woman. But when Katelyn had the second miscarriage, Ryan was there for her and me. It was a significant turning point for us when Maureen died, and we came together to comfort her, and each other, forming a circle of three.

I know how I feel about him. I've tried not to acknowledge it, but when he fucked up and Katelyn shut him out, that was my motivation for giving

him that deep insight about her. He could have used that information to regain her.

Ryan knows, deep down, he knows how I feel, and it's the same for him. That's why after he wrecked his car, he didn't call Gray, he called me. With Katelyn out of our lives, I'm the closest friend he has and he is mine. We might not say it, but we both know we are more than bandmates. We're brothers.

"I'd better get to sound check." Ryan rises, looking less than enthusiastic and more than a little concerned about me. "You coming?"

"No." I haven't been to one single sound check this entire tour. "Need some 'me' time."

"Okay." He gives me a heavy look. "I know touring is a grind. We have a long break once we're done. Things will be better for all of us after we get some rest."

"Sure," I say, but I know I don't sound convincing.

My gaze follows Ryan as he leaves. Shit rolls through my head, mostly stuff I can't change. For him. For her. Or for me.

As soon as the door closes, I get up and lock it. Things won't be better in LA. I won't be better, and neither will he. When we're not onstage playing our roles, things are even worse.

Flopping onto the couch, I reach between the cushions and pull out my bag of pills.

One color is to make me forget that my life is shit. Another is supposed to make me euphoric. One helps me sleep.

I frown at them, noting they are all mixed up. Not selective anymore, I take an assorted handful and crack open a new bottle of tequila.

I sit there for a while, waiting for them to work, but they don't.

I still feel sad. I still miss Katelyn. I still regret ruining the life we had. It's not being a rock star that made me feel ten feet tall and fulfilled. It was being loved by her.

Getting up, I stagger to the dressing table and find the letter I started earlier. I scribble out more sappy shit, some hopeful stuff, and for whatever reason, I also lay out a few commands. Something I've not done before.

But lately, I feel like time is running out for all of us. Nothing numbs the pain and regrets inside me anymore.

Looking at Ryan, I see me. He's only a few steps behind me, but he'll eventually fall into the same pit.

And Katelyn, well, she shouldn't be alone so much. She needs someone to lavish her extravagant love on. She has a home, but no one to live in it with her.

I'm a selfish motherfucker, but I don't like her being sad. I tell her that I love her and admit to her that I always will. I scrawl my signature, stuff the missive inside an envelope, and address it to her.

On the way to the door, I stop at the couch and grab the bag. Deciding *what the hell*, I tip the entire contents into my mouth and chase it down with tequila.

Unlocking the door, I flag down a roadie.

"Mail this," I slur, waving the sealed envelope in the air.

"Yes, Mr. Hart." He touches two fingers to the brim of his HCN ball cap and takes the envelope. "You okay, sir? You don't look so good."

"This is the way I normally look," I spit out. "Without Katelyn in my life."

He must be new, or at least I think he is. My thoughts are finally turning foggy.

I retreat to my room. Snagging the tequila bottle, I lie on the couch. I cradle the liquor in the crook of my arm and let my thoughts drift.

I'm tired, so fucking tired.

The room spins, and when it eventually stops, I see Katelyn way back how she looked the very first time I ever saw her.

Smiling softly, I close my eyes.

## Chapter 53



Ryan

“Vanessa, you shouldn’t be here.”

I don’t know why she came to the airport. Having just put Liam in a coffin in Bogotá and flown halfway around the world to get back to Los Angeles, I’ve used up my reserves, both emotional and physical.

Seeing Katelyn again in person after all this time, so close, but still too fucking far away, brought everything I struggle to repress right back to the forefront of my mind. I have so many memories. Since she shut the door on us, memories are all I have. I sort through them daily, but the here-and-now reality of her eclipses them all. I need her now more than ever before. I can’t deal with Vanessa and her shit right now. I just want Katelyn. I’ve always just wanted Katelyn. I’m not settling for memories anymore.

Vanessa doesn’t take the hint and clings to me like poison ivy. “I need to talk to you.”

“We’re done.” I move her an arm’s length away from me. “I told you we were through before the tour. Why are you here?”

“Because of Liam.” She places her hand on my chest. Her skin is cold.

I don’t want her to touch me. I tried to make it work with her. She was my last attempt. Every woman feels wrong when I crave another.

“Because of the opportunity for publicity, you mean.” I know her motivation.

Catching our manager’s eye, I signal.

“Vanessa. Hey.” Barney puts his arm around her and steers her away.

I pull in a breath, but the air is wrong too. Vanessa’s Chanel No. 5 is not Katelyn’s honeysuckle scent.

“Was that Katelyn I just saw?” Gray moves beside me.

Roadies and other crew who have cleared customs like we have go around us. Our sorrow repels them like a force field.

“Yeah.” I nod.

My heart goes haywire like it always used to whenever she was near. The years haven’t changed anything. Not when I remember the softness of her creamy skin, the taste of her sweetness on my tongue, and how perfect she felt around my cock when she came.

“Where did she go?” Gray scans for her.

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find her.” I set myself on the path she took. I have no right to pursue her. She ended us years ago. I respected the space she put between us, but I never accepted it.

On the flight, I did a lot of soul-searching. I realized how shitty my life is and how much my shit has come to resemble Liam’s, minus the drugs. And now Liam is gone.

Pain grips my heart in a vise.

I squeeze my eyes shut, but I see him and replay our last conversation. He was as miserable without her as I am. I know what I need, who I need. I reject all previous boundaries. I want and will have the real living and breathing Katelyn. I’m done having her haunt my life.

“Good luck,” Gray calls.

Already on the move, I lift a hand in the air to acknowledge him, but I don’t slow down. I’m not taking my remaining bandmate or anyone else in my life for granted ever again.

*Fuck Liam.* Fuck him for leaving. Fucking fuck, it hurts so much that he’s gone.

Outside, I’m practically slammed backward by the crowd. Flashes from professional cameras blind me. In less than a moment, I’m surrounded by reporters. The doors behind me close, shutting off my retreat as questions are thrown at me from every direction.

*“What happened to Liam?”*

*“Was it suicide? Or just an overdose?”*

*“You were brothers, why didn’t you stop him from using drugs?”*

I’ve already asked myself all those same questions. Their recriminations added to my own slice me into smaller pieces.

I bring my sunglasses down from the top of my head, stick my nose in the air, and ignore them. They are sharks. They smell blood in the water. *Liam’s.* They can’t hurt him anymore. But they can hurt me, and more importantly, they can hurt Katelyn. I won’t allow it.

Suddenly, the doors behind me whoosh open. Barney appears,

accompanied by security. They leave him and usher me back inside.

“Where’s Vanessa?” I ask when Barney reenters the terminal.

Not that I care, but because I don’t want her saying anything unkind to Katelyn. And she would, given the chance. She’s that kind of woman, and she knows things after housesitting for me. Her threat to go public with that information is one of many reasons why I should have cut her loose way before I finally did.

“Had her escorted off the premises.” Barney points to a door marked for authorized personnel only. “You should have used that exit.” His brow furrows. “Why didn’t you?”

“Looking for Katelyn,” I say, knowing that pretty much explains everything.

“She’s out there.”

I follow the direction of his gaze down to the tarmac and a coffin beside our plane. A lone figure is beside it, a familiar one. Pain detonates inside me, seeing her like that with him. It’s all wrong.

“She wanted to say her goodbyes.” Barney touches his shoulder to mine. “She told me the funeral will be a circus, and she wasn’t certain you’d allow her there. But I knew you wouldn’t mind her going out to see him. You okay, man?”

I nod, but I can barely hear him over the ringing in my ears. I move closer to the window so I can see her better.

“You should answer a couple of the questions for the media before you go out there.” He gives me a worried glance that I see reflected in the glass.

I press my lips into a distasteful line. “Not doing that.”

“Maybe a statement then.”

“I lost my brother today. Yesterday.” I rake a hand through my hair.

Fuck if I even know what day it is. I just know every muscle in my body aches. My heart is the worst.

“And you’re hurting,” Barney says, nodding.

I nod.

“Then that’s what we’ll say. That you’re going to take some time alone to process. Sound like a plan?”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll work out the rest later. Go to her,” he says gruffly. “She needs you.”

“Not so sure about that last part,” I mumble. “But I know I need her.”

## Chapter 54



### Katelyn

“How dare you die.”

Furious, I swipe at my tears. I don't want to cry. I want Liam to be alive. I want him to talk to me, make excuses even. He should not be inside a box.

“I don't know how to exist in a world without you in it.”

“I don't either,” a familiar, low voice says. “I'm mad at him and sad as fuck.”

“Ryan.” I turn around slowly.

“Katy.”

He scans me, and I shimmer everywhere his gaze touches. I don't even contemplate correcting him for using that name. I just want to throw myself at him, have him hold me and never let me go.

“I would tell you how beautiful you look,” he says into the silence, since I've suddenly lost the ability to speak. “But it doesn't seem right.”

I glance away. “Nothing seems right anymore.”

I have to look away. Ryan is not mine in any capacity, and there's too much longing in my eyes.

“Not even a little with him in that.” I return my attention to the ebony wood that's emblazoned with a silver guitar. Hesitantly, I place my palm on it.

“I agree.” Ryan's voice goes lower. “I need you, Katy.” He groans, the vibrations of that need resonating deep inside me. “I'm hurting so much, and I know you are too. Please let me fucking hold you.”

“Yes.”

As a sob escapes me, I reach for him, the man who is alive and grieving like me, and he's right there.

When Ryan crushes me to him, I wrap my arms around his waist and hold on. His skin is smooth. He's only wearing that suede jacket and no shirt, but



he generates enough heat to warm an entire building. But there's also something deeper, something that's always been there between us from the very beginning.

He feels like coming home.

"I've missed you so much," he murmurs into my hair, his breath stirring the fine hairs at my temple.

"I've missed you too," I say softly.

My body is trembling. I might try, but I can't lie. I don't want to lie. Not now, and maybe not ever again. This is all that matters. I have Ryan, and he has me. I can't think beyond this moment.

Weary, I rest my cheek against his solid chest. He is as strong as I remember, and his heart beats wildly beneath my ear.

"I'm so, so sorry this has happened," I whisper. "I just wanted you to know that."

I pull in a breath for courage, but it's laden with jet fuel and too much of his familiar musk and cologne.

Instead of finding courage, I get weak in the knees as the memories rush at me.

The first time I took Ryan's hand. Our first kiss in my studio. That night in New York that I can never forget.

Somehow, I have to find a way after this to make those memories into static images again. But I'm afraid I won't be able to manage it.

"Don't go."

Ryan must feel the goodbye I must say coming. It's going to hurt as much as it felt good to have him again.

"You have your world." I release him and step back.

He has a girlfriend. I can't allow myself to forget that.

"And I have mine." I look at my feet. Liam doesn't even connect our two worlds anymore.

"What about music?" he asks.

"What about it?" I lift my gaze.

"That's our world, a common one."

"It was at the beginning." Music and so much more.

"It still is," he says and grabs my hand.

"Let me go." I tug, but his grip tightens.

"No." He shakes his head. "Don't leave me. Please stay. I'm holding on by a thread. If you ever cared about me, stay."

A tear falls, and my willpower wavers.

I more than care. That's something he doesn't get, even now.

But I turned Liam away when he needed me. My therapist told me I had to do it to protect myself. She said I was enabling his drug use by always allowing him back into my life.

If I say yes to Ryan, am I enabling him to manipulate me again?

But on the other hand, Liam is gone. The old rules no longer apply. I don't get to undo the choice I made with him, that in retrospect I believe was the wrong one. Right now, I can choose to help someone I love. No matter what Ryan does, doesn't do, or doesn't say, the way I feel about him will never change.

"Okay, I'll stay," I say, and Ryan's dull gaze brightens.

Some choices I am powerless to change, but not this one. I can make this goodbye into a hello.

• • •

## Ryan

"I like your car," Katelyn tells me as we approach my silver Stingray.

We've been stuck in the airport, tying up loose ends related to Liam and the end of the tour. Much to my surprise, she stayed with me the entire time. The way that makes me feel is the difference—she is—between sanity and madness.

"It's sleek and suits you." She studies it while I study her. "But I kind of miss the Roadmaster."

"It's still around. Parked in the driveway at my house. You can come see it anytime."

*Come see me* is what I really mean, though.

I avoid looking at the blue Chevelle that I know is hers parked behind my Corvette. A tour employee offered to bring both cars around to this section of the airport that's reserved for VIPs. That car of hers will take her away from me. I don't want that.

"That's good." Her expression turns reflective, and I wonder if she's thinking about all the times we were together in the Buick. "I'm glad you still have it."

"Lots of memories associated with it." I throw that truth out there to see if

we're on the same page.

"Yes," she says softly. "There are."

"Guess I need to let you get home."

Yet, I inch closer. My face near her ear, my breath stirs the fine hairs twined around it. She shivers and crosses her arms as I pull in a greedy lungful of her honeysuckle fragrance, which I'm pleased to discover hasn't changed.

"Yes, it's late." Lowering her arms, she starts to back away.

"I'll follow you home." I rush to bridge the gap between us and brush my fingers across the small of her back. She hasn't protested a single touch since the tarmac, so I've done as many as possible.

"That's not necessary." Her eyes darken in response to this touch, just like they have to the others.

"I disagree."

Besides the fact that I don't want to let her go, I think about the canyon murders. A cultish leader and his small group of drugged-out followers murdered an entire household of people before they were caught. We were on the tour when the story hit the news. It made me worry about Katelyn even more, and I watch her even more closely whenever I'm at home. The openness of the community in general changed afterward too. There are no more unlocked doors and unlimited access to nightly parties.

"I want to be certain you're safe."

"I appreciate that."

Her eyes meet mine, those stunning grayish-blue pools that I could stare at for hours. I feel the connection between us as strongly as ever. Time and distance haven't changed it. I've been around the world, met women in every country, but never have I encountered one who even came close to making me feel the way Katelyn does.

"But I can take care of myself." Her shoulders squaring, she opens her purse and fishes for her keys.

"Know you can. But I'm going to follow you all the same."

Katelyn was always capable and confident on her own, but that independence is more pronounced now. I'm proud of her. I continue to keep close tabs on everything that pertains to her. Love Street and the relationships that have developed around it seem to be the entirety of her life, like the band is for me.

"Okay," she says, not meeting my eyes.

I feel like I've won another major victory tonight as I watch her step off the curb and unlock her car door. I raise my own keys in the air to acknowledge her vehicle starting up, then jog to the driver's side of the Stingray. I fold in and get the engine humming.

I don't realize until I'm in the car that I'm cold. Being shirtless in Bogotá was one thing, but LA in the spring after the sun has gone down is another. But I didn't notice the coolness when Katelyn was nearby. I barely noticed anything but her.

On the freeway, in the canyon, and all the way to her house, I follow her while racking my brain for the right words to convince her to stay with me, at least for the night. When we arrive at her house, I decide to just ask.

Getting out of my car, I stride to the driver's side of hers. I open the door and get as close to her as I can as she steps onto the pavement.

"Stay with me a little longer," I ask as I shut her door. Walking her backward into it, I run the back of my hand down her creamy cheek, practically purring like my cats do when I let them lap the leftover milk from my cereal. "Come to my house with me."

"I can't." She glances away.

"You can." I capture her chin, gently turning her head so she has to look at me. "You can't really want to be alone tonight any more than I do."

I see that stark truth in her eyes. We're both hurting.

"But it's entirely your decision, of course," I force myself to say. I'm done manipulating her.

"Hardly," she says. "Not when you're touching me."

She removes my hand from her face.

*Do I still have some sway over her?* She has all the sway over me. Touching her, I'm the one who is seduced. It's always been that way.

"We can talk about Liam," I say softly.

I stamp my palms into the cool metal on either side of her. This close, with the streetlamp illuminating us, I notice her pretty features softening.

"We are the two people in the world who knew him best," I say, but I don't mention Gray. He was . . . is a critical component in the band, but he has never been an integral part of the three of us.

"I shouldn't." She catches her lush bottom lip with her teeth.

"Give me a night," I say. "Let's pretend the mistakes I made didn't happen. We'll talk like we used to, share our memories, and brainstorm ways to immortalize Liam's legacy. We can go back to the way things are if we

have to in the morning.”

## Chapter 55



Katelyn

“I can’t forget the past,” I whisper into the heavy silence that falls between Ryan and me.

Being caged between his strong arms and staring at his chiseled chest, desire swells inside me. I want him now just as much as I ever did. But I also remember the pain.

“I’m not asking you to forget everything,” he says low.

*Just the bad things that got me hurt.*

“Okay,” I finally say. I don’t want to return to my house. With Liam gone forever, I know tonight it will feel like a tomb.

“Good.” His relief at my agreement is obvious. Taking my hand, he leads me to the passenger side of his Stingray.

Once I’m seated inside, he closes my door. I watch him through the windshield as he rounds the sleek hood. His strides are sure, and his posture is confident. He is the incredibly sexy man who has always drawn my eye. But there’s something different now, a change I don’t understand.

“Ready?” He folds himself in and sifts through the keys on his ring to get the right one to start his car.

Distracted, I imagine him using those deft fingers on me rather than on his keys, and it takes me a moment to reply.

Finally, I say, “Yes, I guess I am.”

“Good.” He throws his arm across the back of my seat.

I’m lightheaded as his pine scent washes over me. He backs up and executes a tight turn to go back down the hill. He stops at the first stop sign and turns left.

Within a few short moments, we enter his cul-de-sac that only has three houses on it. I know which one is his because of the familiar Roadmaster parked in the driveway but also because during a weak moment, I drove by. I

was curious to see the front of his house.

“Do you ever have trouble with fans or reporters stalking you here?” I ask as he capably aims his Corvette onto the available space on his driveway.

“No.” He shakes his head. “My name isn’t on any of the paperwork. It would be difficult for them to find me.”

“Makes sense.”

I’m mesmerized by the way the beams of illumination from his house lights bounce off the gleaming strands of his hair. It’s longer than I ever remember it being, and there is more light brown color in it than dark strands these days, and I don’t know why. Not knowing when I used to know him better than anyone makes me sad.

He gives me a searching glance and seems to sense my shift of mood. “Let’s go inside.”

“Sure.”

I lick my dry lips as he gets out. Inside the Stingray, he was almost close enough for me to turn my head and press my mouth to his.

Not that I would. Not that he would be receptive. Just that the thought crossed my mind.

He comes around to my side. Strong, confident, and distracting, I watch him while I can. I’m jealous of his neighbors. They get to see him every day when he’s not on tour.

“Here.” Opening my door, he offers me his hand. “The car’s low to the ground. Let me help you out.”

“Thank you.”

Without hesitation, I place my hand in his, and his fingers close firmly around mine. As he helps me out, my body brushes against his. The years evaporate in the heat that flares between us.

“Front door’s this way.”

He clears his throat, steps back, and gestures with his free hand. I go along with him readily. I’m as susceptible to him as ever.

Beneath the overhang, he releases my hand to insert his key. “After you.”

He pushes open the door, and when I step inside, I immediately note two things. The sparse interior—the contents include only a couch and a baby grand piano, and two quick streaks of movement that dart away from each piece of furnishing.

“You have cats?” My expression revealing my surprise, I shift to look at him.

“Yes, two, though they aren’t very social.”

He drops his keys in a dish by the door, shrugs out of his suede jacket, and hangs it on a hook that protrudes from the wall.

When he turns around, his sculpted lips slowly curve and my stomach flips knowing he has caught me staring. His muscular back and that tight ass of his encased in leather is a view nearly as jaw-dropping as his front side.

“I didn’t know you liked cats.”

This is something else I’ve missed, or maybe it’s a new development. There are years of details and experiences that I don’t know anything about. Things I don’t have any right to know.

Liam’s gone. Ryan’s practically a stranger.

All the losses and the sorrow associated with them seem to slam into me at the same time. My legs shaking, I nearly collapse. But now, like so many other times in the past, Ryan is there to steady me.

“You all right?” He holds me upright, my arms in his capable grip.

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” What I do know is how good it feels for him to hold me.

“It’s been a rough day.”

“Terrible. The worst.” I nod, awash in the warm concern in his eyes. “For both of us.”

Belatedly realizing my palms have somehow found their way to his naked chest, I snatch them away.

“I’m sorry. Got a little dizzy. Didn’t mean to paw you.”

“No need to apologize. Paw me anytime.” His gaze is bright with intensity. “I’m always here if you need me, Katy.”

“Me too. For you.”

The words are out now, and I can’t retract them. They’re true. I mean them. It’s effortless to care about him. It’s pretending that I don’t care that is difficult.

“What are their names?” I ask, fumbling for a change of focus.

*He has a girlfriend*, I remind myself again. He doesn’t need to know how hung up on him I still am. Nobody needs to know that. It’s scrapbook material, ancient history.

“Whose names?” He’s still studying me too closely.

*Come on, Katelyn, he can’t read your mind.*

“Your cats,” I say, feeling foolish. “The black one and the calico.”

“Griffin and York.”



“Those are unusual names.” I tilt my head. “How did you come up with them?”

“Griffin for the park where we had our first meaningful discussion. York as in the city where—”

“I get it.” My body flashes with heat.

That night was years ago, but I still remember everything. Ryan is one of the only three men I’ve taken to my bed. He’s the best lover I ever had or will have. I accept that.

But tonight is about remembering Liam. It’s not about Ryan and me or our history.

Our past has been put to rest.

## Chapter 56



Ryan

“I said too much.” I wrinkle my nose. “Even naming my cats, I think about you.”

“So, this is your place.”

Katelyn doesn’t acknowledge my confession. Turning in a circle, she takes in the open floor plan. The living, kitchen, and dining room are one big continuous area that runs the length of the house. With a wall of windows, the backside of my house overlooks the entire length of hers, on this level and the pool level below.

“It’s big,” she says.

“I’ve neglected the interior.”

Not a lot to recommend my home. Not a lot to recommend me either, but the things I neglected and got wrong, I’m going to change in my life . . . and hers.

I move in front of Katelyn. If I’ve shared too much, so be it. She doesn’t have to acknowledge every confession, but she has to acknowledge me. That’s not optional anymore.

Reaching out, I frame her face.

“What are you doing?” Her gaze dips to my mouth, and her lids lower. She’s anticipating a kiss.

“Telling you something important.” I want to kiss her. That’s for damn sure, but I need her to get this. “The best part of this house is its proximity to you.”

“Ryan.” She grabs my forearms and holds on to me like she might be experiencing another dizzy spell.

“Katy,” I say back. We’ve done this back-and-forth dance before. I’ve missed it. Missed her.

Her lips twitch, and I know she’s remembering too. But does she miss me

as much as I miss her?

“I’m uncomfortable knowing that.” She swallows and peels my hands away. “Can you not touch me?” She takes a step back, looking anywhere but at me. “And maybe put on a shirt?”

“You used to like when I touched you.” My lips thin in displeasure. I want her back in my arms.

“A lot has changed since then.”

I frown, not liking the reminder of our time apart.

“I’m still me, and you’re still you. We were best friends at one time. I don’t have many of those left.”

Separated from Katelyn but with that loss binding us, Liam and I became friends. More than friends, though we never talked about it. We tried to find enjoyment where we could, but it wasn’t joy. It wasn’t who we wanted. Without Katelyn, every moment of every hour wasn’t living. It was wasted time.

Liam not being here, his death, it still feels surreal. I keep expecting him to appear. But I realize one thing.

I’m done enduring. I’m going to live every moment to the fullest, and Katelyn is too. I’m not wasting any more precious time.

“Could you consider us being friends again?” I ask.

“Yes.” She nods. “That’s why I’m here.”

“That means a lot to me.”

I’m committed to the truth when at all possible between us going forward. I want her to confess that she misses me too. I believe she does. Who can she talk to now like she used to talk to me?

Watching her, I never see anyone enter her house. Not since Jeremy. There could be someone at Love Street, but I don’t think there is. There had better not be. I frown at the thought.

“So, the shirt.” She gestures.

“Right.” I rake a hand through my hair. “I’d like to get out of these leather pants too.”

“I imagine you’d like to shower. Put on a different pair of pants.”

“Don’t want me running around in just my boxers, huh?” I tease.

She shakes her head.

“I’ll change into something more comfortable,” I say. “If you promise to make yourself at home.”

“Sure.”

She bites down on that lush bottom lip of hers that I want to suck on, and my cock hardens behind the laces.

“I could make you something to eat,” she says. “If you’re hungry.”

“I’m hungry, for sure.”

For her. I want to devour her. But that’s information, though true, that I don’t share. Yet.

“We left for the airport before going onstage,” I say. “I usually wait to eat until after a performance.”

“That was fourteen hours ago.” Her expression reveals concern, and her words reveal knowledge that I realize Barney must have given her.

“Yeah.” I shrug, and her gaze dips to my chest. “Actually, it’s been longer than that since I’ve eaten.”

“Huh?” Her unfocused eyes rise to meet mine. Her pupils are dilated, the rim of color surrounding them smoky.

*Yeah, she’s still into me.*

“I get the idea you might be hungry too,” I say, pressing for the answers I want.

Katelyn shrugs. “I could eat.”

“Help yourself to whatever you can find.”

*Me, I think. Help yourself to me.*

I gesture. “The same team that brought our cars around stocks my refrigerator before I return to the house from a long tour. They also dropped by to check on Griffin and York too after . . .”

I stop myself, not wanting to bring up Vanessa. I certainly noticed how Katelyn reacted to her at the airport.

“After what?” She tilts her head to an inquiring angle, and her hair spills over her shoulder.

All that golden softness. My cock lengthens as I remember how good her hair felt against my skin.

“Nothing important,” I say.

Vanessa isn’t a significant person in my life. She was a failed attempt to get over Katelyn, just like all the others. Liam tried her before me and came to the same conclusion.

“I’ll see what I can find to eat.” Katelyn turns, and I remember.

“Don’t go downstairs,” I tell her.

“Why not?” She turns to face me, a puzzled crease appearing between her brows.

*Why not, indeed?*

The contents of my basement will reveal a level of obsession with Katelyn that Vanessa discovered when she was supposed to be taking care of Griffin and York. She would have used that knowledge against me if not for a nondisclosure agreement I insisted she sign, and that Barney reminded her about tonight.

I refocus on the present to find Katelyn watching me closely. She's waiting for an explanation that I'm not ready to provide. I will reveal everything, even my intentions.

I realize now that I can't omit critical information from her like I did in the past, not even to protect her feelings. But I can delay revealing certain information until the timing is right. In a relationship, like in a song, there is a prelude, an opening line, and a chorus. All are required to make music.

Katelyn is here. Prelude. She agreed to be friends. Opening line. I want more. Of course I want more. Repeated chorus. I want us to be the sweetest music to the best song.

I just need to get her to admit she wants that too.

## Chapter 57



Katelyn

Ryan comes up behind me as I'm placing the food I prepared on his bar. His pine scent is stronger than earlier. He must have showered with whatever soap he uses, and what he used washes over me too.

"You made pancakes and eggs." His strong arms come around me, and I swoon internally when he presses his warm lips to my cheek. "Thanks."

"I was in the mood for breakfast." The huskiness of my voice reveals the effect he has on me. So many things do, but I count on him not paying the same level of attention to me that he used to.

"Have a seat." He pulls out a barstool for me.

"Thanks," I murmur.

"You're welcome." His voice drops to a panty-melting octave.

Mine have been noticeably damp since the airport. Just a glimpse is all it took.

*Remember Vanessa. Remember all the women.* For years, I've seen them with him on TV and in photos.

My swoon stabilizing, I climb onto the wood-topped seat. Ryan takes the one beside me. We both dig in, thinking our own thoughts, the minutes ticking by as we eat our fill.

"As good as I remember." He sets down his fork on his empty plate.

I'm not thinking about food. Instead, I'm wondering if sex with him can possibly be as extraordinary as I remember. My cheeks burn.

"You're blushing." He swivels on his seat to face me more fully. "What's going on inside your head?"

Apparently, he remains too observant when it comes to me. I need to be more careful.

"I'm not accustomed to being around you anymore." There, I found a vague reply that's also truthful. "I thought we agreed you would put a shirt

on.”

I avoid looking at him in just jeans . . . because *damn*, he’s as chiseled everywhere as he was before and beyond sexy.

“Couldn’t find my favorite one,” he grumbles.

“Why not?” I ask.

“My clothes are in my suitcase. The Pacific Records team will launder everything and bring it to the house, but not for a day or so.”

“Okay.” I swallow hard.

I have to dial up my resistance. When Ryan was near and I couldn’t have him, I managed to resist him. Until New York, and after that, well, the aftermath is why we’re here like we are now. Friends with a complicated history. Friends who know how the other looks naked. Friends who had sex.

Recalling how it felt to have him moving inside me, I find the heat in my face spreads everywhere.

Fearing I’m going to set fire to the wood seat beneath me, I bow my head and bring up the man who stood between us then, and I expect will always be between us. “Liam. I came here so we could talk about him.”

“I know you did.”

Ryan’s voice changes. I feel the chill radiating from him. A glance confirms he’s looking at me.

“But you also came for me. Once you care, you care. For him and me. I know you. Don’t deny it.”

I nod. I can’t deny it. That lie is stuck in my throat.

“My sweet Katy.”

Ryan swivels, framing one side of my face in his large and talented hand while I’m held captive by the intensity in his eyes. His thumb, rough from years of plucking his guitar, sweeps across my cheek.

“I wonder if Jeremy was around long enough to get in there.”

I shutter my gaze. Peeling Ryan’s fingers away from my skin, I release his hands and climb off the barstool. “I didn’t come to talk about me.”

I gather our plates and avoid his eyes. I head to the sink, but he catches me before I make it there.

“Did he get in?” Ryan asks.

His fingers around my upper arms, I’m trapped and stand very still.

“You’re putting me on the spot,” I say stubbornly, calling it like I see it.

“I know I am. It’s necessary.”

“It’s not your business to know anything about me anymore.”

“I disagree.”

“No.” I sigh. “He did not.”

What does it matter if he knows?

“Jeremy didn’t get in my head or anywhere else. It’s already way too crowded for anyone else. Like Liam, he preferred the rush of the limelight and drugs more than anything I had to offer.”

“He’s an idiot.”

I almost smile. That assessment, and the vehemence with which he makes it, goes a long way to eliminate the hurt that my brief and disappointing relationship with Jeremy left behind.

“I figured that out. Eventually.” I wiggle free and place our dishes in the sink.

“Leave them.”

Ryan eliminates the space between us that I’ve gained. His hard front pressed into the curves of my backside feels so good that I can’t find it in me to protest.

He places his hands on my shoulders. “My house finally feels like a home with you in it.”

“Mine did too. Once.” I close my eyes. “But that was a long, long time ago.”

“It feels like yesterday, but it also feels like a century being separated from you.”

Letting out an agonized groan, he gently turns me around and lifts my chin. His brown eyes glimmer with familiar intensity, but there’s also that additional difference that I’m unable to identify.

“Don’t disappear on me again. I don’t think I could survive it another time. I’m laying some deep truth on you. But I need to know, do you hear me?”



## Chapter 58



### Ryan

“Yes,” Katelyn says. “I hear you, but—”

“But nothing. I didn’t ask for more than acknowledgment.”

Not yet, but I will. She still cares. She came here because I needed her. She admitted it. We’re already past the prelude.

“I messed up in the past,” I say, feeling the need to confess. “I’m not repeating mistakes. I’m going to show you that I’ve learned from them. What I’m not going to do is let up when you try to hide your emotions from me.”

“Ryan.” She shakes her head. “Too much time has passed. Too much has changed. Let’s just keep this about Liam.”

“Liam is here.” I point to her heart, then my own. “Like Maureen. Like Joe and Gus.”

“Like my babies.” Her eyes flash with unshed tears.

“Right.” I nod once. “We’ve had losses. But we are moving through this latest one the right way. We lean on each other. Agreed?”

“Yes.” She attempts to nod, but I still have her chin.

I lower my head and seal our bargain with a kiss.

The connection of our mouths rocks me to the core like she does, but I don’t take things further. Desire pounds inside my cock. My heart matches that driving rhythm. My body screams in protest. But I want the sweetest music. To get it, I must execute every detail exactly right.

“Now that we’re in agreement”—I step backward and gesture—“let’s sit and figure out together what Liam would want if he were here.”

“I wish he were here.” Her sapphire-and-silver eyes glimmer.

“I wish it too.” I cup her pretty face. “Wish I had given him a harder time about the drinking. I didn’t know he was popping pills again.” I let her see that truth and my regret. “I swear.”

“He is . . . was”—she covers my hand with hers—“an addict. That

addiction is an addict's master. Neither you, nor I, nor anyone else, could have stopped him, except him."

She brings my hand away from her face but doesn't immediately release it. An improvement, a minor one, but I'll take it.

"Wise words," I say softly, feeling that reassuring squeeze of hers somewhere deep. The tension and guilt riding me since I first found out about Liam ease somewhat. "Thank you. I needed to hear that."

"You're welcome." She gives me a tremulous smile and releases my hand.

I lead her to the couch, brushing my fingertips across her lower back on the way. If she thinks I'm going to stop touching her, she'll soon discover she's mistaken.

She sits on the middle cushion, and I sit right beside her with the armrest on my left. My weight causes her to lean into me. Taking advantage, I throw my arm around her, gathering her close. She lets out a shaky sigh but stays put.

Another victory. For both of us. There is mutual need between us that she will eventually acknowledge. But something else needs acknowledging right now.

"It's not your fault either," I say. "What Liam did."

She nods slowly. "I know it in my head. I enabled him before. I've gone to enough therapy sessions to understand that. But my heart doesn't care what the therapist says, you know?" She lifts her gaze to meet mine.

"I know, Katy." I touch the tip of her nose. "And I feel the same way you do."

"It's not going to get easier," she says somberly. "Missing him."

"No, it's not. It's tough now. It'll be tough later."

I don't bullshit her. We both know grieving for those we have lost is a constant companion. When they're gone, they're gone. It's those who are left behind who suffer the separation. But Katelyn isn't gone. I've regained a ghost who previously haunted me.

"So, what are you going to do?" She shifts. Threading her arms around my waist, she lays her cheek on my bare chest and stretches her shapely legs out on the couch. The hem of her short dress barely covers her ass.

"We take one step at a time." My reply is measured, but my heart wants to gallop into a future where we can be together like this on my couch every night, making plans.

“And the first step?” she asks, then yawns as I sift my fingers through her silky hair.

“A ceremony for Liam to celebrate his life,” I say.

“Not in a church.” She adds that important qualifier. “He was against any established form of religion.”

“Leftover resentment because of his parents.”

I run the back of my hand over her soft cheek, remembering conversations with Liam about his upbringing and our piece-of-shit father. That man had no qualms about impregnating my mother and abandoning her and his child. But somehow his son wanting to pursue a career in music was an unpardonable sin.

“Long hair and rock ’n’ roll are the devil’s business.” She shakes her head. Her damp lips brush against my skin. A branding, like everything with her, that scores me deeply with heat. “He told me his mother said that.”

“Parroting his father, I’m sure.” It’s a conclusion that’s easy to reach, given what Liam shared with me. “And his parents lost a son they could have had, since they couldn’t find a way to understand him.”

“Yeah.” Katelyn lets out a sad sigh.

“Like your parents lost you.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she whispers, too easily dismissing it.

“It’s not.”

We’ve touched on this subject before a few times, but I want her to know my assessment remains the same.

“I’m proud of you. You’re dedicated to your friends. Strong. Talented. Caring. Beautiful. All traits you will surely pass on if you ever try to have children again.” I feel the sudden tension that whips through her and hold her still with my hands on her ass. “You won’t make the same mistakes that your parents or Liam’s made. You’ll be a wonderful mother.”

Katelyn tries to push away. “I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Okay. I’ve said my piece.”

I capture her gaze and see pain there. I expected to see it. Her parents did a number on her. But it seems like much more.

“You still mourn your babies,” I say, making a guess. Those losses are real and hurt her deeply. “I respect that, but maybe someday—”

“Please, Ryan,” she pleads, her eyes bright. “I can’t do this. I won’t.” Her

hands curl into fists on my chest.

“Then we won’t.”

I stroke her back in long, soothing movements. Soon, I see the effect my caresses have on her. Her tension eases. Her lids lower, and eventually, she relaxes, lying back down.

“Thank you.” She kisses my chest.

*Fuck.* Now I’m the one with every nerve ending strung tight. She’s perfectly curvy, enticingly warm, and feels incredible in my arms.

“You’re welcome,” I manage to say after a moment. But my cock remains hard, and with her draped over me, I know there’s no way she can’t feel it.

“So, a non-church ceremony for Liam. We’ll share all the good things we remember. You’ll speak.” Making plans, she gives me a pass about the hot steel that’s pulsing beneath her. “Gray will come. Maybe Barney.”

“You too,” I say.

“If you want me to.”

“Liam would want you there.” And I want her there.

She gives that some consideration. “Yes. And we must have music.”

“Definitely music.”

Katelyn and I talk for at least an hour. We come up with a set list of songs Liam liked. Her responses to my questions become slower and slower, until eventually, she falls asleep on top of me.

I stay awake. Having Katelyn, I’m reluctant to close my eyes. I aim them at the ceiling far above that is most certainly where he has gone.

“Never going to forget you, man.”

My cats appear. They hop up on the couch and settle in, one on either side of us.

Peace settles over me. In this moment, that peace eclipses the sadness.

Liam is gone but not absent from our hearts. He will always be remembered by the two who knew and cared about him the most.

## Chapter 59



### Katelyn

I'm cocooned in warmth. Dreaming I'm in a cabin in the pines by a roaring fire, I don't want to wake up, but something is tickling my ear.

When I crack open my eyes, I see Ryan. I've only actually slept in a bed with him once, but it was the best I've ever slept, and I would recognize that muscle-carved chest anywhere.

Lifting my head, I look at him. His sculpted lips are parted. His warm and humid breaths were tickling my ear. By the moonlight streaming in the windows from the back of his house, I can see that his brow is smooth of tension in his sleep, and his strong jaw is rough with stubble. I realize other important things as I look at him, but I'm not ready to admit them yet.

I wiggle free from his arms. As I do, his cats lift their furry heads. Their ears twitch and they give me imperious feline looks that say *how dare you take our daddy's affection away from us*.

"I'm sorry." I mouth the apology and get up.

Finding a bathroom off the hall from the living area, I take care of business. After washing and drying my hands, I look at myself in the mirror over the sink, but I don't find the answers I seek in my eyes.

I know where the answers are. They are where they always have been. I've been avoiding acknowledging that truth for years.

After turning off the light, I return to the living area. Ryan remains asleep. Of course he's sleeping. He is grieving and jet-lagged.

Walking softly toward the sliding glass doors, I peer out. Even in the darkness, I can easily find my house down below. The light is on inside my kitchen. It feels surreal to be inside Ryan's house, when over the years, I've stood at my own windows and looked up at his.

"Why are you over there?" Ryan asks in a gravelly, sleepy voice.

"Just thinking," I say without turning around to look at him.

“About what?”

“You and me.”

In the glass, I watch him rise from the couch. My mouth goes dry as I notice how low his jeans ride on his narrow hips.

“A serious thought for the middle of the night,” he murmurs as he approaches me.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were Liam’s brother?” I ask, and he stops. “Why did you set me up to discover him cheating on me in New York? Why did you buy my house and have Liam give it to me? Why choose this one that overlooks mine?”

“Because I want you.” He moves again, quickly eliminating the distance between us. “Because I can’t give you up. Because since the moment I met you, I’ve wanted only one thing.”

“Which is?” I whisper.

“To make you mine,” he says simply.

My heart flutters. Maureen was right. His reasons are as important as my questions.

As a shaft of moonlight beams on us, I see Maureen’s smile in my mind and feel like she is near. Liam too. Maybe that should bother me, but it doesn’t, and as I make a decision, I feel like they would approve.

“Make me yours, Ryan.” I reach for him.

“Yes.” He gently turns me around. “Hell yes.”

His expression is as resolute as mine. It seems he has been doing some thinking of his own and made a decision too.

It might only be one night, but I’ll take that one night because I want this. I need it. I want to be his.

We are given a brief amount of time to live our lives on this earth, but we’re really only guaranteed the current moment. I loved Ryan in the past, and I love him now. In my heart, I know I always will.

“Katy.” He frames my face.

“Ryan.” I cover his large hands with my smaller ones, wanting his touch and needing to deepen it.

He lowers his head, and I sigh as his mouth touches mine. It’s bliss that’s even better than I remember.

He slips his wet tongue between my lips. I moan into his mouth, feeling it in my clit when the tip of his tongue meets mine.

He groans, and it spirals through me. My heart races as he slides his

hands down the sides of my body. My breasts swell. My nipples tighten, and I begin to throb between my quivering legs.

Cupping my ass, he drives his tongue deep. Heat floods my core as he shapes and lifts each globe, rocking his hard length against the part of me that's aching like the rest of me.

"Katy." He rips his mouth from mine and rains fiery kisses along the sensitive underside of my jaw. "My Katy."

As he brings his mouth back to mine, his heavily-hooded eyes house flames. He squeezes my ass cheeks and spears his tongue between my lips. He is the heat of a blazing fire and the relentless pounding of monsoonal rain.

Desperate sounds escape me as I suck on his tongue. The same voracious hunger driving him drives me. I skate my hands over the smooth skin stretched across the thick muscles that bulge his shoulders. Breaking the seal between our lips, I gulp in air and kiss him everywhere I can reach. His hair. His ear. His strong jaw.

"This has to come off." He tugs on the hem of my dress and peers at me with brown eyes that glimmer as enticingly as the moonlight.

"Yes."

Ryan turns me around. Facing the glass, I turn my head to the side. He is behind me. I hold my breath as he sweeps my hair to the side. He finds the toggle on my dress and slowly unzips it. His hands graze my skin as he removes it from my shoulders.

I shakily draw in much needed air as his fingertips trace down my tingling spine. He slips my sleeves off my arms and the dress glides down my body, exposing my breasts, my waist, my hips, the length of my legs. The air is cool in contrast to my feverish skin.

"Step to the side." He crouches at my feet and taps my calf.

Stepping to the left, I do as he commands, leaving my dress in a puddle on the floor.

"Fucking beautiful." He rises.

God, he is beautiful. Lethally handsome. Insanely sexy. Power hums in every coiled muscle of his chiseled physique.

"Look at yourself in the glass," he says. "Not me."

"I want to look at you," I admit.

His lips curve. "Then watch me."

Ryan moves closer. Behind me, he brushes my hair forward and lowers his head. Peering up at me, he presses his mouth into the sensitive hollow

between my neck and shoulder.

I reach back for him. Grabbing fistfuls of his thick hair, I tip my head to the side to give him better access. He licks my neck, wetting my skin, but the rest of me is blazing hot.

“I want your cock,” I say as I roll my ass over it. Even through the denim, I can feel how hot and hard he is.

“You’ll get it.”

He pumps it between my ass cheeks. Heat rushes to my core, and my nipples throb against the satin of my bra. My pulse races as he frames my heavy breasts.

“You’re so sexy.” He flicks my diamond-hard nipples with his wicked thumbs. Watching me watch him in the glass, he nips my earlobe, then sucks it into his greedy mouth.

“Oh, Ryan.” I moan as more wetness rushes between my trembling legs.

“I’ve imagined doing things like this to you,” he says low, his heated gaze on mine. “So many times.”

He kisses my neck while gliding his hands across my shoulders. I tingle everywhere his fingers graze my bare skin.

“Touching you is always better than I can imagine.” He unclasps my bra.

I’m mesmerized by the stark hunger in his expression as he removes the garment and tosses it aside.

“Touch me more,” I beg. I’m an addict for his touch, for him.

“Oh, I certainly plan to.” He scoops me into his arms.

I gasp. Twining my arms around his neck, I hold on to him as he strides across his living room. My legs and my feet with my boots still on swing as he carries me into his bedroom. I notice that it’s as sparsely decorated as the rest of the house. There’s only a huge bed draped in white sheets.

He sets me down. The scent of fresh laundry detergent rises to my nose as I come up on my elbows. Captivated, I watch him remove his jeans and boxers.

His cock juts out proudly between his legs. The crown is swollen, the length and size equally impressive. Before me is a primal god, and in only my white panties and boots on his bed, I feel like a virginal sacrifice. I’m no virgin, but this feels new. It is new with just our pure passion, this unquenchable desire, and no more secrets between us.

“I want to taste you,” I say as I scoot to the edge of his bed.

He sucks in a breath as I wrap my fingers around his cock and pump it,



root to crown. Sliding off the bed and onto my knees, I'm at his feet in a worshipful pose.

As Ryan grabs a handful of my hair, I peer up at him and lick the velvety underside of his cock. The combined scent of pine and his musk fills my lungs. His eyes darken as I take him in my mouth. I fist him at the root and suck the rest of him, slow at first, but he tastes too good, and I'm too greedy.

He lets out a groan. I bob faster, making his cock slicker. He gets harder and tastes saltier. He's close, almost choking me he's grown so large.

I plan to swallow every drop of his cum. Anticipation makes my nostrils flare. Even his scent is stronger, muskier.

"Enough," he says roughly.

My heart races as he drags me to my feet by my hair. Winding a long length of it around his fist, he brings my mouth to his and kisses me with a possessive thoroughness that leaves me soaking wet and breathless.

"Ryan." I rip my mouth from his. Panting and trembling with need, I cling to his solid forearms and stare up at him in awe. My legs can barely hold me. "Please, please, put your cock inside me."

Giving me a dark look, he lifts me like I weigh nothing and tosses me onto his bed. He whips my panties off, and with his eyes on mine, he spreads my legs apart. My clit throbs as he moves between them.

"Mine." He palms my pussy, and I remember a time that seems like ages ago when he made the same claim.

"Yours."

I cover his hand with my own and lift my hips, bringing my pulsing pussy deeper into his palm. He rocks the fleshy part over me, and I moan.

"So wet, so needy, so perfect for me." He aligns himself at my entrance. "No one but you, Katy. Just you."

He pushes his cock inside me, filling me completely.

"No one," I whisper.

He feels so good. I press my aching nipples into his hard chest and race my hands across his strong shoulders. As he moves, gliding out shallow and sliding in deliciously deep, his honed muscles flex. I lift my hips, chasing his cock. He seems to touch my soul with each thrust, but even touching my soul isn't deep enough.

Faster, deeper, our passion drives us. I move in rhythm with him. Our bodies are in sync. His skin becomes slick, and mine feels like it's on fire.

"Katy." Planting his cock deep, he stiffens and hits that perfect spot.

“Ryan,” I cry. “Oh, Ryan.”

Unraveling, I feel my pussy rhythmically contract around his cock and squeeze my eyes shut. Overcome with pleasure and my love for him, I see stars behind my eyelids, a future I forfeited restored. Even after those lost years, we’re beautiful together. Only with him am I right.

“My Katy,” he murmurs and caresses me.

“Ryan.”

Shimmering, I wrap my limbs around him. The intensity of my climax slowly unwinds, fading like waves receding from a sparkling shore.

His expression tender, Ryan brushes my hair back from my perspiration-soaked face. He kisses my damp temple. His gaze is dark with possessiveness. He just had me, but he can have me again.

I’m just as hungry for him. One time, two, a lifetime will never be enough. Ryan Chance is and will always be the only one for me.

## Chapter 60



Ryan

I bring a warm, wet washcloth back to the bed from my bathroom.

Climbing over Katelyn, I gently wipe away my seed. I hope maybe I gave her a baby. I don't know if I'm ready yet to be a father, but I know being a mother is one of her deepest desires. And I want to give her every desire I can.

"You don't have to do that." She puts her hand over mine.

I look up at her. She's blushing.

"This is mine." Reverently, I sweep my hand across her perfect pussy. I'm never letting her go. Not ever again.

Her blush deepens. "I don't dispute that."

"I'm glad." I nod once.

"I love you." She glances away. "It's how I feel. I'm not hiding it anymore. But I'm not sure how you want to do this."

Speaking those words, she fulfilled *my* deepest desire.

"We do this however we want to."

I grasp her chin and turn her head so she has to look at me. Can she see that the inside of my chest is burning again with the light that went out when I lost her?

"All right," she says softly.

"We didn't talk about it at the time." I give her a wry grin. "Because I was too desperate to be inside you, but let's stop for just a moment while I take care of this."

Getting up, I toss the washcloth in the bathroom sink. I return to find her propped up against the headboard with my sheet covering her delectable tits and the boots she wore while I fucked her on the floor.

*Good.* I plan to fuck her several more times in other positions where the boots might get in my way.

I climb back into the bed beside her. Gathering her to me, I smooth a long lock of her hair.

“I want you to know that you can always talk to me. That I will always strive to be honest with you. Everything I do, even my mistakes, the ones we touched on in the past and the ones I might make in the future, are always motivated by my concern for you.”

“I understand.” She bobs her pretty head.

“Good.” I study her closely.

Katelyn is almost too agreeable, but I tell myself not to worry. We have all the time in the world now that we are together. We’ll get things right.

“I will do everything in my power to protect you, and I don’t want you to worry that we didn’t use a condom.”

“I wasn’t worried,” she says softly.

“You should be.” My brows draw together. “There were women after you shut me out.”

She drops her gaze. “I realize that.”

“None that meant anything. I already told you.” I lift her chin. “I stuck my dick into them. It was a release, but it just made me feel bad afterward. It got to the point that I couldn’t do it anymore. I broke off my arrangement with Vanessa. When I went out on tour, I made a show in front of the guys, pretending nothing had changed, but I didn’t fuck around anymore.”

“Oh.” Her lush lips round with surprise.

“Yeah.” I nod firmly. “I didn’t want anyone but you. That was over three months ago. But I always used a condom. There’s stuff around that I didn’t want to get. Plus, I wanted a barrier between me and anyone else. I got tested before we went on tour. I’m clean. My cock has never been unwrapped inside any woman but you, and it never will.”

“Thank you.” Her eyes get glassy. “Thanks for being honest and for looking out for me.”

Her lips tremble. I lean in and kiss them.

“Ryan.” She sighs, and just like that, my cock gets rock-hard again.

“Katy.” I bring her arms over her head and kiss her again, only deeper. “Love your lips.” I nibble on them. “Drove me nearly crazy looking at them and not being able to do this.”

I swipe my tongue across the seam, slipping it inside her mouth when she moans. When I flutter it against hers to tease, she grabs my head. Apparently done with teasing, she pulls on my hair and crushes her mouth to mine. She

sucks on my tongue. I press her deeper into the mattress, thrusting my cock between her shapely legs.

She turns her head to the side. "Please."

"Yes, I'll please you," I say cockily. Pleasing her pleases the fuck out of me.

I dive onto the bed, lying on my back beside her. Grabbing her, I place her on top of me. Her thighs splayed on either side of my head, I make love to her cunt that I just cleaned.

She poses prettily for me and plays with her tits while I make a feast of her. When she throws her head back and starts making those sexy sounds like she can barely breathe, I know she's ready.

Lifting her off my face, I move her onto my cock. I align and slide right in. She's wet and tight.

"Fucking perfect," I tell her, my eyes blazing with satisfaction.

"You're perfect. That was perfect. You have a talented tongue."

She leans down, her hair sliding softly around me as she kisses me. Her wet tongue swipes across my lips. Sitting back, she uses my chest for leverage and starts riding me.

It's my turn to play with her tits, and I love the way her breath catches when I tug on the tips and roll them between my fingers.

"Ryan, yes."

She loves that too and grinds on me. I jackknife up, licking and sucking on her tits.

I feel her pussy tightening around my cock. "Anything I do to make you feel good," I say darkly while pumping up into her. "You just have to one-up me, squeezing me like that."

She smiles like the temptress she is and slides up and down on my hard cock, squeezing it some more.

"No more messing around." I groan and flip us over. "I'm going to come inside you so fucking hard," I say and start hammering into her.

"Yes," she says and moves with me.

I drive deep and she squeezes. Our desperate flesh slaps together. My balls draw up, and she knows.

"You feel so good." She grabs my hips and lifts hers. Her eyes closing, she strains for it, and I fucking give it to her.

"Katy." I stiffen, ejaculating inside her, and she falls apart.

"Ryan! Oh, Ryan, yes!" she cries.

My name cried out by thousands of fans doesn't come close to how she makes me feel. Nothing does. Katelyn is my every fantasy, my every need fulfilled.

# Chapter 61



## Katelyn

My boots tucked under my arm, I sweep Ryan's hair aside and press my lips to his cheek.

On his side in his bed, he mumbles sleepily and reaches for me, but he doesn't open his eyes.

Carefully, I tuck his arms back in and pull the sheet up to his chest. It's a shame to cover it up. Maybe someday he'll let me paint him nude. That would be a painting just for me, for me to keep and always remember, a memento for when he inevitably moves on.

*I love him.* I will say it and show him as often as I have the opportunity, no more holding back, but I won't tie him down or make demands. That wouldn't be love.

*I need to go.* I have help at Love Street. An eighteen-year-old who wants a shot onstage has been coming in early. I called him, and he's swinging by to pick me up. I have the keys to the building. The shop can't open itself.

Yet, I linger, sweeping my gaze over Ryan one more time.

We had sex three more times before going to sleep, once in his shower and twice in his bed. Once with me gripping the headboard, and him holding my hips and drilling into me from behind. Remembering that angle and how deep his thrusts went makes me tingle with pleasure again.

Then that last time. After he dried me off from another shower, he kissed and caressed every inch of me in front of the bathroom mirror before bringing me to his bed.

"Sleep well," I whisper before padding from his bedroom.

In the living room, his cats lift their heads from where they are resting on the back of the sofa.

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

They blink at me in reply, their ears twitching.

“I think that’s yes.”

I go to the kitchen, fill their water bowls, and find cat food. Leaving them taken care of, I pull on my socks, zip up my boots, and slip out the front door.

Outside, I gasp, nearly knocking over Vanessa.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, her hand sliding over her abdomen.  
*She’s pregnant.*

All the blood drains from my face, and my body grows shockingly cold. I should have realized. For one thing, she’s no longer model thin. Her skin is glowing radiantly, and she has a noticeable baby bump, if you know what to look for.

The world tilts again. Bitterly, I think that it’s not the first time a surprise pregnancy has ripped Ryan away from me. I’m no better prepared this time and grab the wall for support.

“He’s inside,” I manage to rasp. “The door is open.”

They’ll make a family. Ryan can have a family. A child is something I can never give him. I rub my chest where that old ache lingers. No matter how much feeling there is between us, that fact makes me a temporary diversion.

“Miss Love!” Cameron Steele calls, waving from where he’s standing beside the open driver’s door to his Chevrolet Monte Carlo.

“Congratulations,” I say to Vanessa. Then I force my wobbling legs to move to Cameron’s car.

“Was that Vanessa, the cover model?” Cameron asks after I get in.

“Yes.” I nod.

“Prettier in person,” he says, pulling away.

“Yes,” I say dully.

The rest of the short drive to Love Street is unmemorable.

Cameron enters the building alongside me. He goes to the register. There are receipts from the day before to tally. After that, I go to the storage room. It’s also the meeting spot for my miscarriage group once a month. It occasionally serves as a studio for visiting painters.

Today, it serves that purpose for only one.

•••

Ryan



“What the hell, Vanessa.” Jackknifing up in bed, I scan the room. “Where’s Katelyn?”

Vanessa shrugs. “She left with some guy.”

That isn’t a shrugging matter. “What guy?” I throw back the sheet and her gaze dips. She’s seen my cock before. “This erection is not for you,” I tell her, not wanting her to get the wrong idea.

“I’m aware.” She huffs, throwing her ponytail behind her shoulder. “I didn’t come to climb into bed with you.” She screws up her face.

“Why did you come?” I open a drawer and quickly put on a pair of boxers.

“I’m pregnant.”

I freeze, and every cell in my body becomes ice. I look at her and see the signs. “How far along?”

“Not giving up the baby,” she says firmly.

“That’s not what I asked.” My brows crash together. The question of paternity is foremost in my mind. After all, Liam was with her before me. “Did you tell Katelyn?”

“Yes.” Vanessa nods, and her gaze turns unfocused. “She didn’t ask whose it was.” Refocusing on me, she says, “Neither have you.”

“Whose is it?” I ask and hold my breath.

“Liam’s.”

I exhale. “Thank fuck.” My relief is immense.

“I tried to tell you at the airport. I was waiting until the tour was over to tell Liam in person but . . .”

I do the math. “You’re several months along.”

“Three and a half months.” Her eyes fill, and for once I don’t think it’s manipulation. “No one wants to photograph me. I can’t get shoots anymore. I’m overdue on my rent. I’m sorry I tried to blackmail you. Obviously, you and Katelyn are together now, and it doesn’t really matter.”

We’re not together the way I want, or Katelyn would still be in my bed, and I would have my cock deep inside her.

“You need money,” I say, drawing the obvious conclusion.

“Yes.” She nods. “And somewhere to stay until the baby is born. I’m going to give it up for adoption. Then I can go back to work.”

My mind spins on the details, but it keeps returning to Katelyn. “You can stay here for now in the guest room.”

“Thank you.” Her shoulders slump.

“Don’t thank me yet.” The furrow between my brows deepens. “I have to discuss it with Katelyn first.”

The claim I asserted last night obviously didn’t stick, or she would still be here in my bed. But it will stick. Katelyn and I are a done deal.

All that remains is for me to seal it.

## Chapter 62



Katelyn

Alone in the storage room at Love Street, I set my paintbrush down and jump when a heavy hand lands on my shoulder.

“Katy,” Ryan says in that low voice that always gets to me, and today gives me a sensory flashback from last night. “You didn’t even hear me come in.” His warm breath stirs wispy strands of hair by my ear.

“Did you knock?” Turning to face him, I cross my arms over my chest to cover up the fact that my nipples are now tight and tingling.

“Several times.” He gestures to the canvas I just finished. “You were absorbed in your work. That’s me.”

“Yes.” Warmth blasts my cheeks.

It’s him and how he looked in bed this morning. I couldn’t get the image out of my head, so I painted it. The only difference is on the canvas, there’s a corner of a sheet that’s strategically placed.

“It’s really good.” One of his dark brows rises.

“Thank you.”

“You painted Liam too.” He glances at the canvas beside his.

“Yeah.” I nod. There was more than one man in my head this morning.

“But . . .” Trailing off, Ryan tilts his head. “You haven’t done anything but self-portraits or inanimate objects for years.”

“How do you know that?” My brows draw together in confusion.

“That’s the piano at your house,” he says, still staring at the painting of Liam.

“It was our house at one time,” I say. “But that was always *his* piano. I tried to get him to take it with him when we ended, but he never did.” Tears sting my eyes. “And now he can’t.”

“I miss him too.” His brown eyes soft, Ryan pulls me into his arms and kisses the top of my head.

“It doesn’t seem right.”

“I know it doesn’t. It’s going to take time. A lot of time for both of us.”  
After giving me a squeeze, he releases me.

I take a step back and try to breathe normally. Refocusing on him, I register what he’s wearing.

“That’s the T-shirt I wore—”

“The first time we kissed.” He completes my thoughts like he often used to. The handprint—his handprints—are faded but recognizable. “It’s my favorite shirt. My tour things arrived after you split on me.” The softness in his gaze disappears. “You shouldn’t have left without waking me.”

“I saw Vanessa.” That needs to be said. I take another step back, mourning the loss of his warmth, his pine scent, and the brevity of our reunion. “I know she’s pregnant.”

“It’s not mine.” His expression hardens. “I told you I stopped seeing her before the tour. She was with Liam before me. It’s his.”

“Vanessa is carrying Liam’s baby?” I ask, working it out but still needing confirmation.

“Yes.” He nods. “She’s in a desperate situation. That’s why she tried to blackmail me. She can’t get work being pregnant.”

“Blackmail you how?”

“Don’t be mad.” He holds up his hands like they’re a traffic signal for my emotions.

“Why would I be mad?” I narrow my eyes.

“All those paintings you’ve done over the past two years? I bought them. They’re at my house. In my basement.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Vanessa thought, like I can tell you do, that it’s blackmail-worthy that I’m a little obsessed with you.”

“A little?” My brows rise. I must have done a hundred paintings. They were all sold to an anonymous buyer. Now I know that person was him.

“A lot,” he says sheepishly. “It’s you, Katy. Always you. I told you that last night. But I can tell that I need to reassert my claim.”

He turns, goes to the door, and closes it, then locks it.

“Ryan, no.” I shake my head as he advances.

He has a dark glint in his eyes that makes my pussy do a happy dance.

“We can’t. We need to talk about Vanessa and the baby.”

“We can. We will. We are.” His lips slowly curve, and my stomach does an anticipatory shimmy. It’s in total agreement with my pussy. “We’ll talk

more later.”

He grasps the hem of my dress—the same purple one I wore last night because I haven’t gone home to change—and whips it over my head.

“Ryan.” In my bra and panties, I cover myself. “This is where I work.”

“It’s also where you can play.”

He lifts me by my elbows, brings my mouth to his, and kisses me. It’s a delicious kiss. He tastes like toothpaste and seduction.

“Mmm.” I moan into his mouth, my knees getting weak as his tongue repeatedly strikes mine.

He breaks the kiss. “You make me crazy.”

Leaving my lips tingling and me wet, he kisses along the sensitive underside of my jawline while I cling to his sinewy forearms.

“You’re the sun,” I rasp as heat rushes through me. “You make me melt.”

“You’re too hot to melt.”

He unclasps my bra and removes it. As he brushes his thumbs back and forth over my peaked nipples, they begin to ache, and so does my pussy.

“Are you wet for me?”

“Yes.”

Of course I am. Being back here with him, I feel naughty and sexy. I grasp his shirt and take it off, tossing it aside like he did my dress.

“Come here.”

He crooks his fingers, and I jump into his waiting arms. Spinning around, he takes me to the closest wall.

“Hard and fast, baby.” He gets his thumbs inside the waistband of my panties.

More wetness rushes to my pussy as he peers up at me from where he’s crouched.

“Okay.” I’m totally on board with that plan, or any plan involving his cock inside me.

“My Katy is a naughty girl.” He stands and brings my panties to his face. Inhaling deeply, he groans. “You smell so good. Like clover and honey.”

“Ryan,” I beg. “Please. Anybody could come.”

“And you want to get fucked before that happens.” He tucks my panties into the front pocket of his jeans.

“Yes, definitely.” I nod and the ends of my hair brush my nipples, making them harder and my pussy wetter.

“I aim to please you.”

He unthreads his belt and undoes his jeans. Bringing his boxers down with the denim, he frees his cock. It's as glorious in the daytime in the storage room as it was in the nighttime at his house.

"Love how you look at me like I'm the best you have ever seen." He lifts me and pins me to the wall. "Because that's the way it is for me looking at you."

Gripping my upper arms, he captures my mouth and kisses me hard. I twine my arms around his strong neck and kiss him back harder. My skin, where my back is pressed into the plaster behind me, is cold, but the rest of me is moldable fire.

He tongues me deep and brings one of my legs up around his waist. Spread open for him, I moan as he grinds his erection against me.

"Need my cock inside your pretty pussy," he murmurs.

His firm lips graze the surface of my kiss-swollen ones, setting off sparks. Finding my soaked entrance with his fingers, he aligns the crown of his cock and slides the entire length inside me.

"Feels so good." I wrap both of my legs around his trim waist.

Not giving me a moment to savor that goodness, he starts to move. The friction of his cock against my primed clit sets off more sparks.

"I need you." I use his muscular shoulders for leverage, needing him deeper.

"Need you too, baby."

As he flexes his biceps, he drives into me while I gaze at him. I grind down, and he thrusts into me. Again and again, we crash together.

"Faster," I murmur, urging him on. I feel it coming, and I know it's going to be huge. Every climax with him is.

"Yes." An ass cheek in his capable hands, he squeezes me each time he drives into me.

"Don't stop." I close my eyes. I'm throbbing, at the edge. "So, so good."

"Katy."

He groans and starts hammering into me with his cock. He's so hard, so erratic, so out of control for me, it sets my blood on fire.

"Fuck," he says. "You drive me crazy."

He loses control. And so do I.

"I love you," I say as I let go.

Closing my eyes, in freefall, I pulse rhythmically around him.

"My Katy."

He plants his cock deep and fills me with wave after wave of his white-hot heat.

## Chapter 63



Ryan

“You’ll get more power out of that chord if you do it like this.”

I adjust the tuning on Cameron’s Gibson and pluck the same set of strings he had a moment before with less than the best results.

“Right. I think I can do that.” He reaches for his Gibson, and I reluctantly turn it over. It’s a sweet acoustic.

His brow creased in concentration, Cameron duplicates what I showed him, continuing with his song.

I glance over at Katelyn. She’s at the register with a line of customers waiting to get checked out. The blush on her cheeks is gone that I thought might be permanent after we emerged from the storeroom to find several of her store helpers, including Cameron, giving us knowing glances.

She was flustered at first but quickly settled into her routine, and I fell into my rightful place beside her.

Katelyn has transformed Love Street into a bustling business. There’s a positive vibe like there always was, only now there is a corner dedicated to Maureen. She won’t be forgotten, but the rest of the shop is all Katelyn.

Vintage mirrors are on the walls in the VIP seating area, like there are in her studio and inside the storage room here. Watching our reflection in one, I waited until the last minute to close my eyes.

Seeing Katelyn’s naked backside as I drove my cock into her with her accepting my claim was hot. That image of us, along with every other time I’ve had the privilege to be inside her, is burned like a brand in my brain.

Parts of her are embedded everywhere inside Love Street too. Knowing her like I do, I recognize them. Carved island barstools line the bar, revealing her affection for the tropics like the front door to her house. Vibrant-colored velvet, predominately in her favorite color purple, frames the stage.

Everyone who steps inside the shop, and it’s been hopping since I arrived,



is greeted by her, and most she welcomes by name. She belongs here as much as she does at her house, and by extension, I feel completely at home here too. Anywhere is home for me if she is there.

“Can I have your autograph?” a teenage girl asks me from the floor beneath where I’m seated on the stage.

“Absolutely.” I pat Cameron on the back and murmur encouragement for him to continue before I cross the stage and walk down the steps.

“Thank you, Ryan.” The girl beams at me, flashing a wide smile that reveals her braces.

“What’s your name?” I ask, taking the pen she offers me.

“Penelope.”

“Nice to meet you, Penelope.” I scrawl my name on a page in her Love Street is where the music is at spiral notebook. “What’s your favorite HCN song?”

“All of them,” she says.

I laugh. “Good answer.”

Feeling a prickle on my skin, I glance across the store. My eyes seek and find Katelyn’s. Hers are glowing with approval, admiration, and love.

My heart that she owns swells. She is the only one I want, the only one whose admiration and affection I desire.

She is mine. I know that. I only lack time to convince her that she is everything to me. Making her feel insignificant in their relationship was one of the areas Liam failed her, and that failure left its mark.

“Here you go, Penelope.” Finished signing, I return her notebook and discover that I have a line for signatures that is twice as long as Katelyn’s at the register.

“Sorry,” Katelyn mouths.

I shrug. It’s okay. It’s part of being a celebrity. It’s still a rush that anyone wants my signature.

I enjoy connecting with the fans, but I don’t need to prove myself artistically like I once did. Another difference between Liam and me. I crave Katelyn’s approval, not that of strangers. Making her proud satisfies me.

After signing autographs, I help restock the shelves. More glittery, rainbow-bound notebooks get stacked behind the propped-up display one, more matching pens go in vintage vases, more of Katelyn’s paintings from the back room are placed on easels with price tags on them that are far too low.

“You don’t have to do this.” Katelyn skims her fingertips along my back, and my cock hardens.

Her honeysuckle fragrance washing over me, I turn, place my hands on her hips, and kiss her—just a quick peck. If I do any more, I’ll end up backing her into a wall again.

I have no qualms about fucking her anywhere, but this isn’t backstage at a rock concert, and she isn’t a groupie. This is her place of business. I want to support her in everything she does, integrating my life with hers, not commandeering it.

“I enjoy it,” I tell her. “I’m having a great time. Proud of you. Maureen would be too.”

“I hope so.” Katelyn’s blueish-gray eyes beneath her gold bangs shimmer with emotion.

“Know so,” I say with a nod.

“We need to talk.”

“About what?”

Worry tightens my muscles. I know that she’s not yet where I am about us. She thinks this is temporary. Because of her childhood and Liam, she expects to be abandoned, betrayed, left behind. I’ll prove to her she’s wrong.

“Vanessa,” she says. “Liam. Us.”

“I agree.”

I frame her beautiful face, sweeping my thumbs over her lovely, creamy skin. My already hard cock starts to throb, but I focus. I want her, not just now but always.

“I have a reservation for us tonight at Gio’s. Can you break away for dinner, maybe even the rest of the night?”

“That’s a fancy place.” Giving my request consideration, she catches her plump bottom lip with her teeth. “A very public fancy place.”

“You deserve fancy.” I want to lay the world at her feet. Everything I’ve earned or achieved, I want to share with her. “And I want to show you off.”

“I’m Liam’s woman.”

“Former,” I say, correcting her.

“Yes.” A fine line appears between her brows. “But he’s your half brother. Your bandmate. He just died.” Her voice roughens, and so do my insides. It still doesn’t feel real. “People will talk.”

“Let them talk,” I say firmly and fiercely. “I know Liam is gone. I have cracks inside me from his passing that will never completely heal. You and I

both know and feel his loss deeper than anyone out there because we cared about him the most.”

“Yes, but—”

“If he were here,” I say, trying to explain, “he would want us together.”

This is tricky. I have no proof, but I know in my gut that though Liam loved Katelyn to the end, he accepted that he lost her a long time ago.

She shakes her head.

“He left us alone in the hospital,” I say. “Before you sent me away. He wanted us to make amends. If he couldn’t have you, I was his choice.” I move my hands to her shoulders and squeeze. “Don’t deny it. You know in your heart it’s true.”

“Maybe,” she says slowly. “But the publicity—”

“I don’t care what the world thinks about us,” I say. “I only care about one person’s opinion, and that person is you.”

## Chapter 64



Katelyn

I knew the dress I wanted to wear for Gio's before I left Ryan in my living room to wait for me to change. Unzipping my boots, I then place them on the shoe rack in my closet, and my dress and socks in the hamper. In the back of the closet, I find the vintage dress I love but never dared to wear because of the plummeting front and back. I exit the closet and lay the garment on the bed.

Knowing the time of our reservation and how long it will take to drive to the popular Hollywood restaurant, I take the fastest shower ever. Plus, I hurry because Ryan is waiting. I love him. He's into me.

My nipples and pussy tingle as I recall how he fucked me in the storage room. I want more of that, more of everything I can get with him.

But he is a rock star. Like Liam, Ryan will leave me behind to go on the road. I won't be cheated on again. I'll end this—whatever this is for him—before that scenario presents itself.

Honestly, I don't want to end it. If I could, I would string day after day and night after night together into a future with him. I would fight for that future, do almost anything to keep him. But I haven't told him yet about my fatal flaw.

Tonight, I need to do that. But until I do, I plan to make the most of all our remaining moments together. Those memories, like the others, will have to sustain me when he's gone.

After my shower, I draw on the dress. The polyester gives it a smooth no-wrinkle look, and I count on the thick fabric, what there is of it, to keep me warm. It's spring, so it's cooler outside when the sun goes down. But I have Ryan to keep me warm. Imagining the many ways he might achieve that elicits a pleasurable shiver.

"I'm ready." I step out of the hall on my platform sandals, and he rises

from the couch.

“Wow. You look stunning and sexy as hell.”

Sweeping his appreciative gaze over me, Ryan takes in the hot pink and canary yellow minidress with a halter neckline that exposes my shoulders and a great deal of cleavage.

“Is the back like the front?” He growls the question.

“Yes,” I say breathlessly. All my Ryan-susceptible zones quiver as his eyes darken and he stalks toward me.

“Fuck me,” he mutters. Reaching me, he grabs me by the hips and brings my body, tingling and all, into his.

“Yes, please,” I say brazenly.

“Later. Definitely fucking you in that dress with those heels on.” His grip tightens on my hips as if he’s wrestling with himself. “I’m taking you out and showing you off. Other men can look, but they can’t have you. You’re mine, yeah?”

“Yes.” For however long this lasts. And after, well, afterward, I will deal with that when it comes. For now, I’m making the most of every moment, and this is a good one.

“I’m yours too, Katy.” He releases my hips and brushes the back of his hand across my cheek. His eyes search mine. “You get that, right?”

I nod, unable to speak because there’s nothing I want more than that. But I know I only have him for now. For always is too unlikely to even hope for.

“Let’s go.” His lips thinning as if he can read my thoughts and doesn’t like them, he gestures sharply.

“Yes.”

I grab my purse on the way out. He puts his hand on the small of my back, directly on my skin.

“Maybe we should stay in,” I say as his fingertips slide lower.

“Don’t tempt me.” He shakes his head, and I smile.

“I don’t mean to.”

It shouldn’t be possible to feel happiness with Liam gone, but it’s undeniable that my lips curve. I’m with the man I love, and he thinks I’m sexy. He’s proud of me and wants to show me off. Those things would make any woman happy.

“You don’t have to do anything but be you to be irresistible.” He takes my hand after I lock the door.

“Thank you.” I squeeze his fingers as he leads me to his car. He parked it

on the curb behind my Chevelle earlier.

“Thank you for taking the night off and spending it with me, Katy, my lady.”

Ryan opens the passenger door. I touch his chest, skimming my fingertips over his pecs. I let him see in my eyes how much the way he treats me means to me.

He shuts the door carefully and rounds the hood. Of course I watch the show.

After he’s in the driver’s seat and pulling away from the curb, I ask, “Are you going by your house to change?”

“Hell no.” He shakes his head and the dashboard lights gleam in the glossy light and dark brown strands. “I’m a rock star, baby. I wear whatever I want, wherever.”

There’s a lightness to his tone and a sparkle in his rich brown eyes that I haven’t seen in a long time. Maybe the things he’s said are true. Maybe he’s missed me as much as I’ve missed him. Maybe, just maybe, being with me makes him as undeniably happy as he makes me.

He grins at me. “And this is my favorite shirt.”

“So, why did I need to change?” I arch a brow.

“You didn’t need to.” His wrist casually drapes over the steering wheel as he brakes at a stop sign and glances at me. “But I wanted you to have a chance to change so you could put on something that is your favorite too.”

“That’s thoughtful,” I say.

“I will always try to consider your feelings.” His expression turns serious.

Ryan has made lots of meaningful declarations last night and today. He’s the one who’s irresistible. I take his hand.

He glances down, then up at me. “Love your touch. Crave it. Crave you.”

“Same,” I tell him.

“Good.” He gives the sports car some gas.

“Why me?” I mutter, asking aloud the question that’s inside my mind.

“It has been you since I first time saw you,” he says without hesitation. “It’s your heart I wanted from the moment you gave me a glimpse of it up in Griffin Park. It will always be you.”

He gives me a concise nod while I reel from his beautiful words. Then he gives me more.

“I look forward to spending the rest of my life showing you all the many reasons why.”

## Chapter 65



Ryan

At Gio's, I toss the Stingray keys to the valet and round the hood. I'm anxious to let Katelyn out of the car and get my hands on her, eager to explain things that I hope will eliminate that worry line between her brows.

"Hello there." I gather her hands and pull her out of the Corvette.

When I tug harder than necessary, momentum crashes her body into mine. Her palms land on my chest, and my semi becomes a raging hard-on. Unable to resist, I press my mouth to hers. All that lushness is perfection.

Kissing her more thoroughly is on my agenda. However, right now I ease back.

"There's paparazzi here," I tell her. "We'll stop and let them take our photo before we go in the restaurant. They will shout questions, but we won't answer. Soon, we'll need to craft a statement that we can both agree on, and that the label can release to the press. That might satisfy them, and it might not. This stuff isn't my favorite part of being a performer, but it's the way it is. I want you to be a part of every aspect of my life. That okay with you?"

"Yes." She licks her delicious lips and nods.

"All right, Katy, my lady. Let's go." I squeeze her fingers and tuck her into my side.

We make it to the sidewalk before the blinding flashes from camera bulbs start. My arm around her, I hold her close but gently. I skim her cheek the way I like to. She cups my jaw, taking cues from me. We pose until the flashes slow, and then I steer her to the maître d' stand under the dark green canopy.

"Good evening, Mr. Chance. Miss Love."

"Good evening, Ray." I nod.

"Your table is ready."

Ray grabs two menus and moves to the glass-inlaid door that's etched

with the restaurant's name. Opening it, he makes eye contact with both of us.

"If you'll follow me?"

Once we're inside, Ray leads, and we fall into step behind him. The classy but homey Italian restaurant is crowded. Diners murmur. Dishes clank. Glasses clink. Heads turn to follow us as Ray takes us to the secluded table I reserved that overlooks a courtyard with topiaries and twinkling lights.

"You handled that like a pro," I say, praising Kaitlyn as I pull out her chair.

"Thank you."

She sits, and I watch her place a checkered cloth napkin in her lap as I take a seat on the other side of the table.

"Your menus." Ray hands one to Katelyn first, then me.

"Ray Junior will be your server tonight." He dips his head. "Enjoy your meal."

"We will," I say, but I'm not looking at him.

I look at Katelyn, and she blushes.

"Fuck, you look pretty." I reach for her hand, and she gives it to me. Makes me feel good every time she willingly gives a part of herself to me.

"Thank you." Her blush deepens. The flickering candle in the ruby votive casts seductive shadows over her. "What's good here?" she asks without looking up from her menu.

"You," I say. "You're the good here."

"To eat."

Her eyes meet mine and her lush lips curve. As I stare at them and imagine all the things I want to do, my cock extends to full length and starts to throb. Dinner with Katelyn is going to be heaven and hell.

"Yeah, same answer."

"Ryan." She shakes her head. The gold in her hair shimmers, and the candlelight dances in her grayish-blue eyes.

"Katy," I say, my mouth twitching in amusement.

I like to tease her. Being here with her makes even the burden of regret I have for the years we've missed feel bearable.

"What's your favorite entrée?" she asks, trying again.

"Again, you." I smirk.

"Are we going to eat . . . food," she says quickly to clarify and arches a cute brow, "or do you want me to jump on your cock and ride you in the middle of this restaurant?"



“Tempting.”

The image she’s planted in my mind makes the situation in my jeans nearly critical.

But I’m committed to long term. I will have her ride me later, and a million other things, but I need to secure her first. To do that, I need to remove any doubts she has about us.

Ray Jr. arrives before I can get started, and we place our orders. Spaghetti with meatballs for her. Cheese ravioli for me.

While we wait, we talk about her work. She has lots of plans for Love Street. More performances. More artists to showcase. More merchants.

When the food arrives, I move next to her so we can share, and just because I love being close to her.

Ray Jr. returns at just the right time. Removing our empty dinner plates, he gestures to another nearby waiter, who sets down two complimentary cannoli for our dessert.

After Katelyn takes a bite, she moans. Covering her mouth, she says, “Wow, this is good.”

“I know, right?”

I nod, but I’m not thinking about the rich bits of chocolate, the creamy filling of the cannoli, or the crunchy pastry shell. It’s just her. She’s the wow.

“I was lost until you came along.”

“What?” She puts down her fork and blinks in confusion.

“You heard me. I think you’ve heard a lot of things.” I narrow my gaze. “But I don’t think you’ve absorbed them.”

“We’re doing this now,” she whispers, and I see her sudden tension.

“Katy.” I take her hand. “This is serious between me and you. It has always been serious. I told you a long time ago that you’re not like the others. I’m telling you again plainly the same thing right now.”

“Okay.” She slides her hand out from under mine. “But Vanessa.”

“What about Vanessa?”

“She’s at your house.”

“Yes, of course. She needs somewhere to stay. She’s pregnant with Liam’s child.”

Katelyn flinches at that. I’m not quite sure why.

“There is nothing between me and Vanessa,” I say, though I think it’s unnecessary.

“I know that,” she says tremulously. “And I also know why she’s there.”

For Liam, and because you won't abandon her like your father abandoned you and your mother."

"You're right." My lips thin. "But if you understand—"

"You could become a family."

I frown. "I don't want to be a family with Vanessa. I want that with you."

"Oh." Her eyes getting bright, Katelyn swallows and glances down at her lap. "That would be wonderful, but I can't."

"You can. You will. We will." I give her phrasing like earlier, and my soul trembles with the compulsion to write those words down. "Vanessa will stay at my house until the baby is safely adopted, and she can work again." I couldn't live with it on my conscience if I did less than that for her. "But the final say is up to you. Do you agree?"

"Yes, of course, but that will be a while," Katelyn says.

"I know, but I thought during that time I'd come and stay with you."

She looks up. Tears more precious than diamonds cling to her golden lashes.

"I'd love that, but afterward . . ."

"We'll figure that out then," I say firmly.

I'm not going anywhere, but timing and logistics are things that need more consideration.

"Okay," she says, and I want to whoop with joy, but I play it cool.

"So, Vanessa and us we have covered," I say to summarize. "That leaves only Liam."

She lets out a shaky sigh. "That's a big one."

"He is." I scoot closer and put my arm around her. "He's in both our hearts. He's not going anywhere. He will always be a part of our lives, only integrated from now on, not standing between us."

"I agree."

Her eyes meet mine, all wide and open, no walls anymore. I have unlimited access. Nothing is more precious to me. Not even the most perfect song.

Which reminds me. "The label has their ideas about what to do about his legacy."

"Such as?" she asks.

"Continuing as a group is a no-go. I've done that, and I don't want to do it anymore. I touched base with Gray, and he agrees. The harmony and everything else, it just wouldn't be the same without Liam."

*Or without you, I think.*

“So, what will you do?” Her head tilts.

“I just want to stay here in the canyon with you.” I continue to lay out our future like I see it. “Get involved at Love Street. Encourage others like Maureen did and you do.”

“That would be amazing.” Katelyn’s eyes practically glow. “You’ve given this a lot of consideration.”

“I have.”

And it isn’t all I’ve considered. Now that I have her, I’m keeping her. In every way I can, I will bind her to me.

“I’d like us to write a song together for Liam. We can add it to the set list and sing it at the memorial service for him.”

“*You* will write and sing it, you mean.” She shakes her head, and her bangs swing across her forehead. “Not me.”

“You and me,” I say to correct her. “We are one mind, one voice, and one heart when we write songs together.”

“I do like contributing.” She nods, her expression reflective.

“It was always you and me, Katy. Nearly every successful song on those early HCN albums was me and you writing melodies and lyrics.”

“Ryan,” she says softly. “Thank you, but you give me too much credit.”

“Katy, I know you gave up your music when you lost your first baby.”

I tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. I don’t just want to fulfill her deepest desires; I want to return everything I can that she has lost.

“I can’t take away that heartbreak, but I can attempt to repair the damage. We can do that. We can do anything together.”

## Chapter 66



### Katelyn

After dinner, we go to Ryan's house to get his clothes and his cats to take to my place.

"Can I sit with you?" I ask Vanessa, gesturing to the empty space beside her on the couch.

"Sure."

She sets down her magazine. It's one with her on the cover. In the photo, her makeup is high-fashion glamorous, and her long reddish-brown hair is blowing around her face. She's wearing a colorful chiffon gown I could never afford or look like she does in it, but I love it. It's gorgeous.

"You look beautiful in that photo." I lift my gaze from the magazine to find her emerald gaze on me.

"The makeup artist gets the credit." She circles a finger around her face. "As you can see, reality bears little resemblance to the dream.

"You're beautiful without any makeup," I say, and it's true. "You're you, just not as glamorous."

"Thank you." Vanessa's brow crinkles. "You're not like I expected."

"What did you expect?" I tilt my head.

"Someone aloof."

"Why?"

"You broke two men's hearts who were still hung up on you when they had sex with me." She shrugs, and the top she's wearing slides off her shoulder. "I assumed you would be cold."

"They broke my heart too," I say honestly. "Both of them."

"Did they?" Her brows draw together.

"They did." I nod. Though her inquiries are abrupt, I appreciate her forthrightness.

"I'm sorry." Her expression softens. "I understand how that feels."

*Does she?*

I study Vanessa like she's studying me. She's confident, but in her gaze is a flicker of vulnerability.

I remember my own pregnancies. How wonderful it was to have a life growing inside me, but also how overwhelming the prospect of becoming a mom was.

Impulsively, I reach for Vanessa's hand.

"Is your pregnancy going okay?" I squeeze her fingers. "Are you seeing a doctor? Do you have friends nearby to help support you?"

I want to ask her if she was in love with Liam, but given the fact that she was with Ryan after Liam and threw herself at him at the airport, I think maybe I already know what her answer would be.

"I *had* friends." She drops her gaze and fiddles with the bent corner of her magazine. "Turns out, they weren't all that great. When they found out I was pregnant, they all dumped me."

"That's terrible. Well, you have a friend now," I say firmly.

Her gaze lifts. There's wariness in her eyes but also hope.

"What do you need?" I ask. It doesn't matter if she loved Liam or is in love with Ryan, she's a woman in need. "How can I help you?"

"A doctor recommendation," she says quickly. "One here in the canyon. I don't have a car. I can't go all the way downtown to the doctor I had there for my appointments."

"I'll give you the name of my gynecologist who is also an obstetrician. And I have a car. I can take you to all your appointments," I say. "If you'd like that."

"Yes." Her eyes brighten. "I'd like that a lot."

"Done." I nod once. "You need to get your rest. Drink lots of fluids. Eat well."

Her lips curve. "I'm beginning to see why they both love you."

"Loved, in Liam's case." My eyes burn. I hadn't spoken to Liam in over a year. "I'm not sure how he felt about me at the end."

"He loved you. He never stopped loving you," Ryan says. Moving toward us, he is wearing a serious expression and has the strap of a duffel bag over one broad shoulder and the strap of a cat carrier on the other one.

"If you need anything," he says to Vanessa, "you call. We're just down the hill."

"I will. Thank you." Vanessa looks at me. "Very nice to meet you,

Katelyn.”

“Katy,” I say with a smile. “I’d like you to call me Katy.”

That’s who I want to be. *His Katy*. That’s who I have always wanted to be.

We’ve had our missteps, mine and his, but I want a life with Ryan. I believe he can repair the damage to my heart. I believe he is the only one who can.

I want to be everything he needs. I love him. But he’s never used those words.

Can he love me like I love him? Can he love me knowing I can never give him a family?

I don’t know the answers to those questions. Not for certain. And he doesn’t have all the information to be able to answer them.

Not yet.

• • •

Ryan

“We’d better go.”

I grab Katelyn’s hand and drag her from the house. Hearing her conversation with Vanessa, I want to kiss her.

That nurturing heart of Katelyn’s blazes so bright. She is the sun. I want to bask in her warmth and loveliness like Liam once had the privilege to, like all the new artists and customers at Love Street do.

Vanessa has just been added to the privileged few. Katelyn, Katy, has a new fan and a friend, as unlikely as that would seem. Unlikely becomes likely with the addition of Katy.

Outside, I get Katelyn in the car and place the carrier in her lap. “You were brilliant in there,” I say and her gaze meets mine. “So sweet what you did.”

“That poor girl is alone and scared.” Katelyn suddenly looks alone and unsure, and I don’t know why. “I only did what anyone would do.”

“Not anyone,” I say. Most women wouldn’t be empathetic with a lover that her man, former and current, had sex with. But then Katelyn isn’t like most women.

“Strap in.”

I point, and she reels it in. I close her door, drop my bag in the trunk, and get in the driver's seat. Starting up the engine, I throw my arm across the back of Katelyn's seat and get us out of there.

On the short drive to Katelyn's house, I determine to get her sure about us. She's not alone. We're a team.

At dinner, I was frank about our relationship. She was with me. She accepted my plan. It's a good one for her and for me.

I don't know what has changed. But I know I'm going to find out.

## Chapter 67



### Katelyn

“What’s this?” I point to the big box by my front door.

“I don’t know.” Ryan shakes his head.

I crouch down and look at the label. “It’s from Pacific Records. It’s addressed to me.” Surprised, my eyes grow large.

“It’s Liam’s things from the tour and his apartment.”

Ryan puts his hand on my shoulder when I stand. I’m grateful. The world is spinning.

Gently, he says, “They said there wasn’t much and asked me where to send it. I told them here. I thought we could go through it together. I hope that wasn’t the wrong thing to do.”

“You thought right. I just . . .” Unable to finish, I focus on unlocking the door, but my hands are shaking too much. I try but can’t get my key in the lock.

“Let me.”

Ryan takes the key, gets the door open, and ushers me inside. I stand in the foyer like a statue as he brings in the box and shuts the door.

“Be back in a sec.” He sets down his cats and strides to the living room with the box.

Upset to be left behind by their daddy, Griffin and York meow.

“Okay if I let them out?” I ask, getting myself unstuck.

“Yes,” he says. “Please.”

“Here you go, kitties.”

I unzip the carrier. They give me displeased looks, then dash away.

Ryan returns sans box and duffel and leads me to my couch. I see the box on the coffee table and my gaze remains on it as I sit, and Ryan drops down beside me.

“You’re upset.” He gathers my hands. “Your skin is ice-cold.” He rubs



my hands between his.

“His whole life is in one box. I just wasn’t prepared for that.” My skin warming, I lick my dry lips.

“I don’t think it’s possible for anyone to be prepared to lose someone they care about,” he says softly, gently squeezing my hands. “Do you want to do this now or later?”

“Now.” No way do I want to put it off. Ryan being here helps so much. “But I’m scared.”

“Why?” He tilts his head.

Because this is Ryan, I tell him the truth. I tell him all my truths. I want him to love me, but how can he if he doesn’t know everything?

“Going through his things makes his death seem real and final.” I start with that.

“It is real and upsetting, but we have each other.” He nods. “Want me to open it?”

“Yes.” I watch him use the edge of my house key to cut through the tape at the top of the box. “But there’s something I need to tell you. Something I haven’t told anyone.”

My stomach roils as he sets down my keys and his gaze returns to mine.

“I can’t have children anymore.”

“Why not?” he asks gently, and tears fill my eyes.

“Losing the last baby the way I did, it damaged something inside.”

“I’m sorry, Katy.” His gaze turns as watery as mine. “So very sorry. I know how badly you wanted children.”

He pulls me into him. His arms become the haven I need. He is.

“Why didn’t you tell me when I brought up having babies the other night?”

“I wasn’t ready.” I just wanted him.

“What changed?”

“You,” I say, tipping my gaze up to his. “Being with you. You make me long for things I’ve been too afraid to wish for anymore.”

“Like what?”

“To hope for a better tomorrow. To make plans for the future. To dream.”

I bite down on my lip and try to explain better.

“Do you remember when you took me to Griffin Park that first time, and what I said when we looked down at the city?”

“Yes.” He nods reflectively. “You told me dreaming was for everyone

else.”

“You listen to me. You pay attention. You push and you encourage. You make me believe my dreams can come true too.”

“I want you to have everything you desire.”

“I’m beginning to believe you do.” I twist my hands where they rest on his chest. But I know Ryan can’t give me a baby. No one can. “Or at least, I believe you do right now.”

“There isn’t a time limit on my wanting to do everything in my power to make you happy.”

“But I can’t give you children,” I whisper. Sorrow welling inside me, I drop my gaze.

“Oh, Katy.” He wedges a finger under my chin and lifts my head. “That makes me sad because it makes you sad. But I don’t need children or anything else in the world to be happy. I just need you.”

“Ryan,” I whisper.

That dark and unlovable part of me that I hid from everyone else, I don’t need to hide from him. He thinks I’m enough. I was never enough for anybody. Not for my parents and certainly not for Liam.

“My Katy.” Ryan frames my face. “I’m yours. You’re mine. Can we agree to hope and dream together from now on?”

“Yes.” I nod slowly as if awakening from a bad dream and walking right into a good one. “If that’s what you really want.”

“Absolutely. Let’s leave opening this box for later. Now is about you and me.” His gaze dips to my mouth. “I’m going to kiss you. Lots.” His gaze rises. “Then I want to take you into the bedroom and show you how you are the fulfillment of my dreams.”

I kiss him. Wrapping my legs around his waist, I smash my mouth to his.

“Katy,” he murmurs against my lips.

I swallow his breath. I want to swallow him whole. Take all of him into me and never let him go.

Diving my hands into his hair, I thread my fingers into the thick strands. I part my lips, rubbing my tongue against his. Sparks ignite me.

He groans, pulls my hair and my head back, and deepens the kiss. Heat floods my core. Lifting me, he takes me to the bedroom.

At the foot of my bed, he lets me go. I slowly slide down his hard body until my shoes touch the floor.

Before I can get my bearings, he undoes the clasp at my nape that holds

up the bodice of my dress. The two sides of the halter fall to my waist. He stares at me. My breasts swell and my nipples tingle.

“Fucking beautiful,” he says, his eyes slowly rising to find mine.

I feel beautiful with him looking at me like that.

“Touch me,” I beg, aching for him.

“Yes.” His handsome features are tight. “It’s just that I want everything.” His gaze drifts over me, and I sway toward him. “Your lips. Your breath. Your body. You.”

I reach for his hands, bring them to my breasts, and crush my mouth to his. Our lips fuse. Our breaths mingle. Our tongues dance. And his hands work their magic . . . shaping, twisting, tugging.

“Katy, you make me crazy.” He breaks the kiss and steps back, his chest heaving.

“You make me feel just as out of control.”

My nipples burn from his desperate fingers. My pussy is wet. My clit is throbbing.

“Good.” His sculpted lips slowly form a wicked grin.

Getting his hands under my skirt, Ryan grips my panties at the middle and rips them in half. Cooler air rushes over my pussy, and my legs start to quiver. Whipping off his T-shirt, he tosses it into the corner with my ripped panties.

“Come here.” Crooking his fingers, he watches me.

As I move toward him, he loosens his belt and unbuttons his jeans. Grabbing one of my hands, he plunges it into his boxers.

I don’t need further instruction. I grab his cock. It’s hard and hot like metal left all day in the blazing sun.

He groans as I pump his sleek length.

“Ryan.” Wetness drips down my inner thighs. His desperation makes me more desperate. “I need you inside me.”

“I need that too, baby.” He pulls my hand out of his boxers and tosses me backward onto the bed.

Blowing tendrils of hair away from my mouth, I come up on my elbows, only to fall to my back as he spreads me open. He caresses me as he moves between my legs. My skin tingles everywhere he touches me, and my heart races. I can’t catch my breath.

Capturing one of my hands, he brings it to his cock. I grip him, bringing him to my entrance. He pushes inside me, inch by glorious inch.

“Ryan.”

I grab fistfuls of his hair and bring his mouth to mine. He kisses me as he fucks me. Only the way he moves, it’s not like fucking. He makes thorough love to my mouth and my cunt. Slowly, agonizingly slow, he increases his speed, and as he does, he kisses me deeper.

Every cell in my body is focused on him and the deliciousness of each decadent plunge.

I suck on his tongue. My hips lift into every thrust. Releasing his hair, I race my hands across his wide shoulders and down his muscular back. I grab his ass. Digging my nails into his flexing muscles, I rip my lips from his.

“Ryan,” I say in warning. “I’m close.”

“I feel you.” He groans, and the deep vibrations make my nipples tingle and my pussy clench tighter around him. “You feel so good.”

He nips my earlobe, and I come undone.

“Oh, Ryan.”

“Katy.”

When he stiffens inside me, I spasm rhythmically around his hard cock. Hot pulse after pulse, he fills me.

We ride out our mutual climaxes together. They go on and on, until I wring from him every last drop of his release. Until he gives me more pleasure than I’ve ever known. Until our slowing hearts beat as one.

## Chapter 68



Katelyn

With Ryan's arm around my waist, I go right to sleep, and I dream.

I dream about the past. I see Liam like he looked the first time I met him. He was so very handsome and healthy, not gaunt like he became after the drugs.

He smiles at me. My heart skips a beat like it used to. I try to speak to him, but the words won't come. Frustrated, I try to reach him. I need to talk to him, but my steps don't bring me closer.

"Liam!" I yell, but no sound emerges.

He sees me. He seems to hear me, but he only shakes his head.

That's when I notice he's holding my old guitar. He sets the 1956 Martin D-28 Spruce Sitka top down on the ground, and he starts to back away.

"No!" I scream. "Don't go!"

When he doesn't respond, I cry, big, body-shaking sobs as he starts to fade away. I'm not ready to say goodbye. There are so many things I need to share with him.

Suddenly wide awake, I sit up in bed. My heart is racing and my cheeks are wet. Beside me, Ryan stirs, but he doesn't wake.

After only a few times sleeping in a bed with him, I've learned he's a deep sleeper. Or he is when he's with me, which makes me smile despite my disturbing dream.

I'm good for Ryan. My flaw isn't fatal, not to him. Maybe I'm not as unlovable as I always supposed.

Filled with too many thoughts to sleep anymore, I get up. Leaving the bedroom, I go to the living room and open the flaps on the box. Tears fill my eyes when I see one of Liam's favorite shirts, the red one, right on top.

"I love you. I miss you. I wish . . . I wish I had a chance to tell you that one more time."

There never seems to be enough time to say all the things that need to be said to those we love the most. My ears strain for his voice, and my heart aches at the knowledge that I never will hear it again.

Taking off my chemise, I put on his shirt. I button the buttons from the top to the bottom, one by one. Bringing the collar up to my nose, I inhale deeply. It smells like him, like love that once was but now is lost.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be who you needed,” I whisper.

More tears fall. But the ache inside remains.

*You gave up your music when you lost your first baby.*

*Take away the heartbreak.*

*Repair the damage.*

I don’t hear Liam. I hear Ryan, and it sinks in what he was trying to tell me. A melody for his words teases my mind.

My skin prickling, I lift my head. An old but familiar longing wells inside me.

Remembering my dream and what Liam was holding, I practically run up the set of stairs to the loft and take my guitar down from the wall. I gave it away all those many years ago, but Liam bought it back. He always believed I would play it one day. He couldn’t understand how I could turn my back on my music, but I didn’t turn my back on it. Not really. I just buried that desire deep down inside.

Reverently stroking the satiny Brazilian rosewood sides, I place the instrument in my lap and strum a few chords. I wince and adjust the machine heads above the fretboard with the pearl inlays. Trying again, I smile, my lips curving in satisfaction.

“There you are.” I tap the top, happy to find that though she has been neglected, the intricacies and even the voice of this beautiful, old acoustic of mine remain unchanged.

But what about me? What does my voice sound like now?

I see Liam in my mind’s eye. I feel him nearby. Wishful thinking or an illusion, I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. He is here if I want him to be. Art is about the heart and soul more than the mind.

I bow my head and play the melody I heard before I climbed up the stairs to the loft.

I haven’t picked up this guitar in years, but I discover that playing again is as effortless as breathing. The desire to make music flows from me like water from an underground spring, and I tap into it.

After locating a steno pad, I write down lyrics to go with the music pouring out of me, along with a title.

“Low” by Katelyn Love

Hey low  
Here’s some notes for you  
Hope they get you high  
Soaring in the sky  
Is that where you want to be?

Hey low  
Here’s some lines for you  
They might make you dance  
In some trippy trance  
Is that what you want to do?

Hey low  
I just don’t know  
Which way I’ll go

Hey low  
Here’s a song for you  
Don’t let it weigh you down  
With its melancholy sound  
Is that where you have to go?

Hey low  
Just a question please  
Should I steal away  
Hide my heart today  
Is that where the answers lie?

Hey low  
I just don’t know  
Which way I’ll go

Hey low  
I’m just wondering now

Should I stumble on  
To the end of this song?  
Have to think on it some more.



## Chapter 69



Ryan

I wake to the sound of music. Not just any music, though. *Katelyn's music*.

She's singing. Her voice is emotional, slightly raspy, sweet like her honeysuckle fragrance, and as pure as her beautiful heart.

Throwing back the sheet, I hop up and quickly walk into the other room. Only, I don't find her on the couch, though I see that she has opened Liam's box. Following my ears, I'm led to my heart.

In the loft, Katelyn has the Martin in her lap that used to hang on the wall. Pieces of loose steno paper bearing her loopy handwriting are scattered all around her.

"Good morning," she says casually as if it's a normal, everyday circumstance to hear her playing and singing. "There's pancakes on the bar," she tells me, then resumes her song, blowing my mind.

Mesmerized by her talent that I have only witnessed in spurts before, I just stand there and marvel.

On the tiny couch, she sits, her head bowed, her golden hair a half curtain for her pretty face. She strums her guitar like a prodigy, singing about her struggles with depression and loss. It's a stripped-down tune, emotionally honest, and so completely identifiable that it could be my story or anyone's.

"That's fucking brilliant," I tell her when she finishes. Her open-tuning guitar technique lends a bluesy element to her song that perfectly suits it.

"Thank you."

She blushes, either because I'm nude or because she's emotionally naked, baring her feelings like she has. I'm not certain which, but I believe it's the latter.

As I gather the scattered pages, I read words and chords for other songs. In my mind, I hear her music. I feel it. It's the voice of her heart.

"These are incredible, Katy."

“It’s just a few songs.” She shrugs, and Liam’s shirt gapes at her neck, revealing the slope of her tits and lots of her creamy skin.

I experience a twinge of jealousy that she is wearing his shirt, but I let it go. Even not here, Liam is here. He made his mistakes, but I can’t be jealous if he helped her find her way back to herself.

“Not just a few songs.” I set the stack down on a tiny end table. “An entire album.”

“Once I started, I couldn’t stop,” she says sheepishly.

“I can see that. Oh, Katy.” I sigh. “I’m so happy that you’re making music again.”

Yet, I take the guitar from her and set it on a nearby stand.

“What are you doing?” she asks, her eyes widening as she notes my erection.

“Celebrating this monumental occurrence.”

I lift and adjust her so she’s lying on her back on the couch. There’s not room for me to stretch out, but there’s room for her.

I start unbuttoning Liam’s shirt. I can accept his assistance in bringing her muse back to life. We agreed to integrate him into our lives, but the shirt has to go. He had his chance with her. Now, she is mine.

“Okay.” She gives me her arms so I can tug off the sleeves.

“Lift,” I say, and her ass comes off the cushion so I can toss Liam’s shirt aside.

As I anticipated, she is completely nude beneath the shirt. I drink her in with my gaze, but it’s not enough. I caress her tits, her shapely legs, that incredibly tempting pussy.

But I need more. I kiss every creamy inch of her skin and lap at her gloss. I’m not satisfied until I slide my cock inside her.

She moves with me, and we rise and fall into each other. Higher we go, deeper. Reaching the crescendo together, we shatter. Who we were apart is gone. Together, we are reborn.

“Katy, my Katy.” I press my lips to the passion-dampened skin at her temple.

“Ryan.”

With her arms and legs, she wraps me up good and tight. I just had her, but hunger claws at me. I have to possess her again.

“Oh, Ryan.” She feels it too.

“My cock doesn’t want to leave your pretty pussy.”

“Can you go again?” She studies me through her lashes. “I wouldn’t think it’s possible so soon after.”

“I most certainly can fuck you again.”

I set out to show her that all things are possible between her and me, or maybe it’s that she shows me. It takes longer to build to a crescendo a second time, but every moment of the climb to the top is glorious. She is glorious.

Afterward, I smooth her hair back from her face. “I’m thrilled that you’re in touch with your music again.”

Staring deeply into her eyes as my seed leaks out of her, I accept that we didn’t make a baby but revel in the knowledge that we’re together and are no longer two broken halves.

I have Katelyn. She is my cure. She completes me.

And Katelyn has discovered what she needs inside her—her music—and who she needs, which is me.

## Chapter 70



### Katelyn

The first day the music came alive in me again, Ryan and I fine-tuned my songs.

Making love to him and making music with him, I never felt closer to anyone. But in that entire day—another one that I took off from Love Street—it felt like even when Ryan wasn't inside me, our hearts were still one.

Waking up in the bed beside him again this morning, I shift so I can kiss his sandpapery cheek. I ease back and stare at him.

*I love you.* I mouth the words, not wanting to wake him. He needs his rest after all he did.

My cheeks warm, and so do other parts of me. The couch in the loft twice, the shower, my studio; Ryan has some serious stamina. His creativity extends beyond music. But he needs food, so I get up to make it for him.

On my way to the kitchen, the box on the coffee table catches my eye. I do a U-turn and go back to it.

Pulling in a deep breath for courage, I start pulling out Liam's things. Guitar picks. Other shirts that are carefully folded.

And a letter addressed to me.

With it in my grip, I fall onto the couch. My heart racing, I tear open the envelope. The page inside is dated the day he died.

The paper flutters in my shaking hand. Liam couldn't speak to me in my dream, but he speaks now.

*Dear Katelyn,*

*I love you. I want you to know that I always have. But I didn't love you the right way, the way you deserve. And my wrong way kept you and Ryan apart. I'm sorry. I have many regrets, but that is my biggest one.*

*It's too late for me. I realize that now. But it's not too late for you and him. Forgive him for failing you. No one is perfect, but he's perfectly crazy about you. I believe his heart is in the right place. After all, he left it behind with you like I did. He'll never be happy until he has you again. I believe he's the key to your happiness too.*

*Play your guitar again. Make love. Make music. Have the home and the family you've always wanted. And maybe when you have all that your heart desires, you'll find forgiveness and a place within it for me.*

*Love always, Liam*

*P.S. I miss our babies. I named them. Rose for your second favorite flower. Honeysuckle just didn't work. And Grant because he was your wish for another child granted. He just didn't stay as long as we both wished. I inked them on my skin, right over my heart. They are inside it forever, like you are.*

• • •

“What is that?” Ryan asks.

I blink at him through my tears. I don't know how long I've been sitting on the couch, clutching Liam's note, but I know it's been a while. The light is brighter through the glass behind me.

As Ryan comes closer, I find my voice and answer him. “It's a letter from Liam to me,” I whisper. “But I think you should read it.”

“Oh, Katy.” He drops onto the cushion beside me and pulls me onto his lap. “I'm sorry. I didn't know that was in there.”

“It's okay.” I swipe at my tears. “Parts of it are about you. I think he would want you to read it.”

“Then I will.”

Ryan takes the letter from me. I watch him, his brow furrowed as his gaze moves quickly across the page.

“I see.” He very carefully places the paper on the coffee table.

Turning to me, his gaze bright, he crushes me in his arms. I feel the sob that shakes him.

“I know.” I wrap my arms tighter around his waist. Ryan is my comforter, but I'm his too. “It hurts. But I see too.”

I just wish I could have seen and understood Liam better while he was here.

# Chapter 71



Ryan

“Liam should have told us this himself,” I tell Katelyn.

I’m pissed that he didn’t. Not being honest about our feelings with each other, Katelyn and I remained unconnected.

“You and I apart were two lonely people. But here and now, understanding him and one another, we are three. If Liam were here, we could have all been there for each other.”

“I agree.” She sniffs.

Knowing where Liam’s heart was at, I get an idea. One that has been simmering since Katelyn told me that she can no longer have children.

“I’m not as cynical as Liam was about the world.” I tip up her chin, using my thumbs to swipe away the lingering wetness from her cheeks. “I believe things happen for a reason. And I believe love makes a difference.”

I believe that now because Katelyn has made all the difference for me, but I also believe that because of Liam. Why did he never tell me how he felt about losing the babies? Why not at least tell her?

*Fucking drugs.*

But I’m mad most of all at Liam’s piece-of-shit father who messed up both him and me. That damage kept us from sharing how we felt about each other, and it kept us both from loving Katelyn properly. Liam lost her, and I almost did too.

“I need to make some phone calls today,” I say.

There is a lot to do to implement my idea, and I want it done before Liam’s memorial service. It has turned into a big and public one because of our label.

“Band business?” she asks, her lip trembling.

“Some.” I kiss her. But most of what I need done involves her. “Can I drop you off at Love Street? Join you there later?”

“Yes, of course.” The trembling stopping, she gives me a watery smile.

“Good.” I touch her nose.

Katelyn looks at me without any blinders impeding my access to see her soul, and I’m stunned. She is everything I want and need.

I want to say the words, I know I need to, but I have never said them to any woman except my mother. I never thought I would meet a woman I could trust with my heart. But then I never envisioned a woman like Katelyn.

“Do you want to shower first?” she asks me.

I want to fuck her in the shower, but I have those phone calls to start. “You go.”

“Kay.”

She gets up, and I follow her with my gaze. Those hips swishing against her silk chemise are pure seduction. That ass and those legs must be paid homage to. Doing so makes my cock as hard as steel and my blood hot enough to melt that metal. It takes me more than a few minutes after she’s gone to get myself under control.

Heading to the kitchen, I pick up the phone and dial Barney first. “You able to get my mother out here?” I ask in lieu of a hello.

“Good morning to you too, Chance.” He laughs softly.

“It is a good morning.”

Even with the letter. Maybe because of the letter.

Liam did not intentionally OD. It is a relief to know he didn’t take his own life, and it changes everything, knowing he wanted me for Katelyn. My brother. So many times he was looking out for me. At the studio, he gave me deep insight into her that he didn’t have to. He wanted to call her after my car accident knowing I needed her. He left us alone in my hospital room. He tried to get me to attend the reopening of Love Street to see her. Having his letter, I know without a shadow of a doubt that if he were here, he would give us his blessing. If not for the drugs, he would be part of our lives right now.

“You’re with Katelyn?” Barney asks.

“Yes.” I rake a hand through my hair. “Very with her. But listen, she doesn’t know about the memorial service. That a date has been set or how big and public it’s going to be. I plan to tell her this afternoon.”

That shit is coming up fast, and it’s going to be rough on her. Make things more final than going through the box of Liam’s things did. But maybe, just maybe, I can ease the magnitude of the blow by giving her something good before the service and afterward.

“You still planning on you and her singing something?”

“Katelyn is definitely singing,” I say.

She doesn’t know it, but she is. “Low” is her story, but it’s Liam’s story too.

“Come again?”

“Katelyn is singing solo.” I space out the words loudly as if he’s hard of hearing. “She wrote a song. It’s absolutely fucking perfect. Her singing it will knock everyone on their ass. I’m not going to mess up that perfection with my voice.”

“Wow.” He sounds surprised and impressed. “Okay.”

“Katelyn is incredible in every way.”

“I have news that just came in from Pacific’s attorneys involving her.”

“What news?” I ask while also thinking about the consultation I need to schedule with a lawyer.

“Liam left all his royalties from the group to Katelyn.”

“Whoa.” I should have expected this, but I didn’t.

“Whoa what?” Katelyn asks as she pads toward me in a colorful kimono. Her skin is damp, and her golden hair is glistening.

“I’ll talk to you later about that other important matter,” I tell Barney. My voice is rough as I imagine getting my hands underneath that robe.

“I already have it.”

“That was fast.” My eyes widen in surprise.

“I know people.”

Apparently so. “I’ll swing by your office to pick it up,” I tell him.

“I’ll be expecting you.” He says goodbye and hangs up.

I set the phone down and tell Katelyn what Barney told me about Liam’s royalties.

“I don’t want them.” Looking pensive, she shifts her weight from one barefoot to the other.

“But Liam wanted you to have them.” I make the most important counter argument. “And you were a part of the band. I should have made sure you got a cut a long time ago.”

“I barely did anything.” She shakes her head, and all that gold shimmers. “I didn’t do it expecting to be paid.”

“Love Street does that well?” I raise my brows.

“It does okay.” She glances away.

“You can do a lot of good for the artists you believe in with that kind of



money,” I say, making another good point.

She glances back at me. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

I hadn’t either, but I am now. I’m thinking a bunch of things.

“Lot of interest in Hart, Chance, and Niles right now. Sales for our current material and our back catalog is going to skyrocket. You . . . we could branch out on our own with your cut of those sales and mine. We could start a record label of our own.”

And when we do, the first artist I would focus on would be her.

“I like this idea.” Her blue-and-silver eyes twinkle. “And I would love to partner with you.”

“Good. Me too. I’ll get Barney on it.”

“Okay.” She nods.

“How much time do you have before you need to leave for work?” I ease closer, eliminating the space between us.

“I always have time for you.” Her hands on my forearms, she glances up at me through her lashes.

“Good. I want to partner up with my partner.”

I throw her over my shoulder and take her to the bedroom, discovering that she isn’t completely nude under the kimono. But her panties don’t remain on for long.

## Chapter 72



Katelyn

“Can I help you?” I ask, my back turned as I close the cash register.

“Yes, you can,” Ryan says. “I can think of lots of ways.”

“Can you?” I smile so wide as I turn to face him that the edges of my mouth practically tweak my ears.

“Yes.”

With his gorgeous brown gaze smoldering, he looks so yummy in a tight black Love Street T-shirt with a rainbow and the slogan where all your musical dreams come true.

“Missed you today,” he says low.

“I missed you too.”

It’s ridiculous how much. But I’ve been into him since I met him. Time and distance didn’t lessen the hold he has on me. It’s irreversible. I’m a total and complete Ryan Chance addict.

“You look beautiful, Miss Love.” He leans closer, and his pine scent washes over me, making my nipples start tingling. “But understaffed here at Love Street. How can I help you?”

*Fuck me. Right here. Right now.*

My cheeks warming, I swallow to moisten my dry throat. Another part of me is already throbbing and plenty wet.

“Maybe sign some autographs.”

I don’t think Ryan notices, but I see a group of eager fans easing toward him. Even the customers who let him cut in line in front of them at the register are eyeing him with speculation.

“Done.” He nods once. “Sorry my errands took longer than I expected.”

“Did they go well?” I ask while motioning to the next person in line.

“Very well. I accomplished all I set out to.”

He gives me a weighted look. I feel the heaviness, but I’m not entirely

sure I know what it means.

“I have lots to discuss with you when you get off work.”

I nod. “Give me an hour to wrap up everything.”

With renewed energy, I start ringing up the teen who is batting her eyes at Ryan, trying to get his attention.

“I’ll give you a lifetime,” Ryan says in a low rumble.

Those words make my heart soar. I believe he means them.

• • •

“You brought the Roadmaster.” In the parking lot, I skip to the vehicle and stretch my arms wide to hug it.

“I think you missed my car more than me.”

Ryan comes up behind me and touches my thigh, his fingertips skating along my skin just under the hem of my dress. “You shouldn’t bend over in that thing.”

He grabs the hem of my panties and pops the elastic.

“Or what?” I spin and throw my arms around his strong neck.

“You know what.”

He settles his large hands over my ass and squeezes each globe. Even through the cotton, I feel the warmth of his skin, and my pussy quivers in anticipation.

“You taking me home or you going to fuck me here?” I ask brazenly.

“I’m already home whenever I’m with you,” he says, and I swoon.

“Ryan.” My eyes burn with all I feel for him, and all he means to me.

“Katy.” His sculpted lips slowly curl. “Later on, fucking is on the agenda, but first, I have a surprise for you. A few surprises, actually.”

He leads me to the passenger door and unlocks and opens it.

“Okay.” I settle in.

He strokes my cheek. “Buckle up.”

I nod. Given that weighted look in his gaze, I get the idea that I might need to strap in for more than I’ve bargained for.

I click my belt as he shuts my door. Watching him round the hood, I marvel that he’s mine in all the ways that matter, but for three words.

Ryan gets in and steers the Buick out of the parking lot. He hums “Low” as he drives.

“Is part of your surprise something about our potential new business venture?” I ask.

“No, and I wasn’t going to talk business tonight.” He brakes at a signal and glances at me. “But since you brought it up, Barney loves the idea. He has his lawyer working on it, and he thinks we should call it Love and Chance Records.”

“That has a nice ring to it.” I nod after giving it some consideration. “But how about Hart, Love, and Chance Records?”

“Perfect.” He grins.

I smile softly as he turns onto a familiar road. “You’re going to Griffin Park.”

“Are you planning to guess all my surprises?” He grabs my hand and squeezes my fingers.

“No, sorry.” I shake my head.

“No need to apologize.” He releases my hand and parks beside a condo development that used to be our spot. “Let me help you out.”

“Okay,” I say and watch him open his door and come around to mine.

The wind tosses his thick shoulder-length hair around his handsome face, and my heart swells with love for him.

He opens my door and offers me his hand. “My lady.”

“Thank you.” I place my hand in his. This moment feels nearly as important as the first time he offered me his hand years ago.

“I believe our spot is just over here.”

He guides me past the complex with its picnic tables and barbecue grills. His hand is steady on my back, and I realize I don’t just trust him to guide me over uneven ground, I trust him with my heart. All of it, even the imperfect parts.

He stops at the edge of the hill. The view of downtown LA is as spectacular as ever. But he is the one who steals my breath, not the city, as he drops down onto one denim-clad knee.

“What are you doing?” My heart flies to my throat where my pulse is beating rapidly.

“What I’ve wanted to do nearly from the beginning,” he says. “You are the fulfillment of my dreams, Katy, my lady.”

He withdraws a ring, a big silver geometrically designed one that has three brilliant diamonds. The gems are stunning, but they don’t sparkle more brilliantly than his eyes.

“Will you marry me so I can dedicate my life to fulfilling all of your dreams?”

“Holy fuck.” I cover my mouth.

He grins. “Is that a yes?”

“Yes,” I say, absolutely giddy. “Please stand up. Of course yes. A thousand times yes.”

He stands and slides the ring on. Kissing me hard and possessively, he holds my hand and runs his thumb over the stones.

“Why three diamonds?” I ask.

“For the past, for now, for the future. I was, I am, and I always will be only yours.”

“Ryan.” Overwhelmed, I let out a shaky sigh.

“Katy.” He frames my face, his eyes searching mine. “Three is also for Liam, me, and you. Is that okay?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

My lips tremble. I remember in my bedroom the first night we slept together, thinking that Liam would always be a part of our lives.

“And one more thing.” He glances down, continuing to stroke the ring.

“Yes.” I can barely breathe. My skin is shimmering. “What is it?”

“Three is for me, you, and a baby.”

“What?” I don’t understand. “I told you—”

“Would you adopt Liam and Vanessa’s baby with me?”

I gasp. My legs quake as the ground shifts beneath me, but he catches me before I fall.

“Did you ask Vanessa?” I whisper.

“Yes. She thinks it’s a wonderful idea. She already signed the paperwork. It’s in the car. It only lacks your approval.”

“A baby. Liam’s baby.”

It isn’t only my legs that quake. It’s my heart. Ryan has cracked it wide open. Seeing one of my greatest desires inside, one I had given up on, he found a way to give it to me.

“So, you’re in?” he asks.

“Yes.” Tears blur my eyes. “You are everything to me, Ryan Chance.”

I kiss him again. I’m addicted to his mouth and everything else about him.

“You’re my every dream come true.” I kiss him a second time—my soul, my ability to dream, all of me alive because of him. “You are my reason to hope and my hero.”

## Chapter 73



Katelyn

“It’s not a formal church funeral, at least.” Ryan shifts in the driver’s seat of his Corvette to look at me in the passenger seat.

“With 932 people attending,” I say, then bite down on my lip, “I’m not really sure what it’s supposed to be.”

“A ceremony to honor Liam.” He removes his key from the ignition. “To remember what he means to us. To celebrate his life. For us, that’s what it is, at least.”

“Yes.” I sigh. “I just wish we could do that with Liam here.”

“Me too, baby.”

Ryan drops his keys and reaches for my hand. Stroking the back of it with his thumb, he gives me that low-lidded look that tells me he wants me again, even though he just had me at my place.

It’s been this way since he came back into my life.

He put a ring on my finger. We are living together in my house. We are going to be parents to Liam’s child. Ryan has been there every day of the last week at Love Street.

Being together hasn’t lessened his desire or mine. It keeps growing. Our friendship was the foundation. But I needed him close to help me demolish my walls and wrong thinking, and he only needed the opportunity to be my hero so he could actually become it.

“Let me get your mind on something else. On me. On us.” He brings our joined hands to my thigh, slipping them beneath my skirt.

“What are you doing?” I pull in a sharp breath.

“Making you feel good,” he croons as if pleasuring me is a love song.

“Anyone could see. Your neighbors. Vanessa.”

I glance around as my nipples tighten to points. It’s the middle of the day. We’re parked in his driveway.

“No one can see us unless they come up to the car.” He slides our hands higher up my leg.

“I’m not so sure.” Yet, he’s planted the idea and wetness gathers.

“You need to climax.” He brings our joined hands to my panties. “Don’t you?”

“Yes.”

Because I’m insatiable when it comes to him, I lift my hips. He gives me what I need, caressing my pussy. I feel the warmth of his skin through my panties.

“You’re wet, naughty girl.”

He dips his fingers inside me and rubs my swollen clit with his thumb. My hand on top of his, I moan as he circles.

“That feels so good.”

I’m throbbing and move my hips to the motion of his hand, our hands. I can’t see them under my skirt, but I can feel them.

This is wrong. So dirty. But so right.

My heart races. My breaths grow short. My empty pussy aches for his cock. But that’s not an option here. So, I need more friction.

“Faster.” Panting, I rock my hips into his hand. “More. Please.”

“Look at me,” he says, and I turn my head. “You’re so incredibly hot.” His sculpted lips curve. “You burn me up. Get your climax, Katy. Show me how wet you can get and how pretty you can be coming for me.”

“Yes.”

Shamelessly, I ride his hand. Watching me, he rocks faster.

“Ryan,” I cry.

My desperation reaches a fever point. With his eyes rapt on mine, he sees. I moan and shudder as my climax comes. His hand under my skirt stills.

He is my anchor as my orgasm crashes over me, and I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Oh, Ryan.” Wave after wave, the pleasure consumes me.

When I open my eyes, I give him a blissful smile. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He looks hungrier than before. Sliding our hands out from under my skirt, I remove mine from his. He brings his hand to his nose.

Inhaling deeply, he groans and shoots me a hot glance. “I’m going to fuck you so hard the first opportunity we get for privacy. Understand?”

“Yes.” I nod. “I look forward to it.”

“Good.” He shakes his head as if he can hardly believe he has me, all of me, whenever he wants it. “You’re so good, baby.”

“You are, Ryan.”

“For you, I am.” He pulls in a deep breath that expands that gorgeous chest of his. “We have a busy schedule today.” He raises a brow.

“However the day unfolds, we choose how to best remember Liam.”

“Right.” His eyes glisten with approval. “And we both agree that you getting fucked hard before this day ends is a priority.”

“Yes,” I say and have to smile.

I glance at Ryan’s house. Part of honoring Liam is taking care of the mother of his child, which is going to be our child. In five and a half months, I’ll be a mom, and Ryan will be a wonderful father.

My eyes tear up. It’s difficult to fathom. He is the crossroads where all my hopes and dreams intersect.

“I need to go inside and get changed into my suit.” He grabs his keys.

“I’ll come inside too.” I unbuckle my belt. “I’d like to check on Vanessa.”

“You’re going to try to convince her to come to Liam’s service.”

“Yes.” I nod. “She should be there.”

“Cool,” he says, giving me an approving glance, “how you two have bonded.”

“I like her.”

“She likes you a whole lot.”

I shrug. “She’s lonely. Pregnant. We understand each other.”

“Not another woman in the world like you, Katy.”

His approval doesn’t remove the heartache, but it makes it hurt a lot less.

“There’s plenty like me.” I shake my head.

“No,” he says firmly. “There aren’t.”

He gets out and comes around to my door. I place my hand in his, and that same thrill shoots through me that I experience every time.

Helping me out, he brings our joined hands to his mouth and skims his warm lips across my knuckles.

“I love you.” I have to say it.

His eyes say it, and my heart can’t contain all that I feel. I know why he distracted me the way he did. He knows I’m nervous about singing in front of all those people.

But he’s prepared me. I’ve practiced the song many times. And I no



longer feel guilty about music. It's a part of me. It's a part of our story. It's a part of us.

"I have something big planned for you later." Still bent over my hand, he peers up at me.

"What?" I ask.

"Something you already agreed to. I'm just giving you notice that I'm speeding up the timetable."

"Does this have something to do with why you made me close Love Street for the entire day?"

"Yes." He nods. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes."

That answer comes easily. He's shown me in so many ways that I'm his motivation. That I am a priority. That we are.

"I'm so glad you almost ran me over the day we first met."

What if he hadn't been pulling out of the parking lot at just that moment? What if he hadn't cared that I was hurting? What if he hadn't asked me to go with him to Griffin Park?

"My pleasure to serve you, my lady." He straightens and tucks me into his side. "Then, now, and forever."

## Chapter 74



Ryan

“She is beautiful, son.”

“Yes,” I say, following the direction of my mother’s gaze.

Katelyn is halfway across the auditorium. That’s too far away from me, but she is on a mission. One I support, even if I didn’t quite authorize it.

Circulating the historic theater that is packed with musicians, industry reps, and reporters, Katelyn is wearing my favorite T-shirt with my handprints. It’s her way of showing me, though I have no doubts, that though she is here to celebrate Liam’s life, she belongs to me.

The cotton is pulled tight across her tits, and the excess length is tied into a knot at her waist. The vintage chiffon skirt she’s paired with the shirt is multi-hued and brighter than a California sunset, just like she is.

“Is that Vanessa with her?” my mother asks.

I nod. Katelyn insisted that the cover model attend the memorial service. She saved a spot for her beside us in the front row.

Public interest in Katelyn is feverishly high since we drafted and had the label put out a statement about us getting engaged. She couldn’t care less about being the center of attention, but she’s taking advantage of it, making sure every photo of her also includes Vanessa. Pregnant or not, the model will likely have more job offers after making friends with Katelyn than she ever had before.

It’s obvious to me that Katelyn isn’t just adopting Liam’s baby. She has adopted the baby’s mother too.

I catch her eye and crook my fingers. “Come here,” I mouth.

Nodding, she points to the front row and holds up a finger of her own because of course she must get Vanessa comfortably situated before she comes to me.

“She’s sweet and thoughtful,” my mother says, watching.

“Her heart is as beautiful as she is.”

Mine beats with possessiveness and pride as I watch her. It hammers with anticipation as she gets closer.

Unable to stand being separated from her a moment longer, I stride toward her and meet her halfway. Plucking her off the red-and-gold carpet, I swing her around in a circle and kiss her thoroughly.

*Yes, it's Liam's memorial service.* But we have his blessing. If he were here, he would support us.

I know without a doubt that he would have insisted on standing beside me as my best man. In his absence, Gray will sub for him, and my mother will give Katelyn away, if Katelyn will allow it.

“Hey.” Katelyn eases back in my arms and gives me a blazing smile.

Flashes go off around us. I didn't even notice the photographers circling us until now.

“Hey,” I say, my lips near her ear. “I want you to meet my mom.”

“She looks like you.” Her fingertips dance on my forearms. “Maybe loosen your hold so I can do that.”

“Hello, Katelyn.”

My mom moves closer as I step an inch back. She extends her hand to my lady while I glare at the photographers. I find and signal Barney.

“Leslie, it's nice to meet you.” Katelyn rejects the offer of a handshake and hugs my mother instead. “And you can call me Katy like Ryan does.”

I grin. I have to. Katy makes me happy.

“You look beautiful.” My mom gestures. “What's the story with the shirt and the handprints that look like my son's?”

Katelyn blushes.

“It involves our first kiss,” I say, answering for Katelyn. “Show her the ring, baby.”

Katelyn shows my mom the engagement ring.

“It's gorgeous.” My mom squeezes Katelyn's fingers. “Are you ready to sing in front of this big crowd?”

“No.” Katelyn makes a face at me. “But I'll do it to honor Liam, and I would do anything for Ryan.”

“I believe my son would move heaven and earth to make you happy.” My mom nods approvingly. “Are you wearing that ensemble to the wedding?”

Katelyn's eyes pop. “What wedding?”

“Yours, of course.” Puzzled, my mom glances at me.

“Surprise,” I say to Katelyn, and my grin widens in response to her glare. “I did give you a hint earlier. It’s just a small ceremony with a couple of our friends at Love Street. And about a gazillion honeysuckle flowers to make it official.”

“To make what official?” she asks.

“You and me,” I say. “And the fact that I love you more than life itself.”

“Ryan.” She lets out a shuddery sigh. Her eyes brighten like the summer sky.

“He didn’t tell you he loved you before now, did he?” my mother asks, guessing correctly.

“No.” Katelyn shakes her head. “He didn’t, not in so many words.”

“I think I know why.” My mom gathers Katelyn’s hands. “When Ryan was ten, he sneaked off to find his father to say that he loved him. Ryan thought that his love would matter. That his father would acknowledge him as his son. But of course he didn’t.”

“Oh no.” Katelyn’s gaze melts into pools of sympathy.

“But even without Ryan saying he loved you”—my mom studies Katelyn intensely—“you knew he did.”

“Yes.” Katelyn nods. “Because he showed me.”

“Love takes many forms,” my mom says sagely. “But the one that speaks the loudest isn’t words at all.”

“It’s actions.” Katelyn glances at me. “You didn’t have to say it, but I’m glad you did.”

“My love for you is bigger than words,” I grumble, snatching Katelyn’s hands away from my mom’s. “But I can say them too. I love you, Katy.”

That love blazes like flames in my eyes and my heart.

“I love you, too.” She smiles.

“Marry me today,” I say. I need her to be mine in every way I can have her.

“I’m not sure if that’s a question or a demand.” Her smile widens. “But yes, I will marry you today.”

“You and me together.” I push it to the maximum because the maximum is what I’ve always wanted with her.

“Love and Chance.” My mom shakes her head. “It was some lucky star that brought you two together.”

“It wasn’t luck,” Katelyn says softly. “It was Ryan and that incredible heart of his.”

“It was Katy.” I squeeze her hands.

“It was us.” She squeezes my fingers harder. “And music.”

“You’re right.” I nod. “Together, we are the music, every hushed silence, each crashing crescendo, every single note of a perfect song.”

• • •

## Katelyn

“I can’t do this.” Beside the stage, I turn to Ryan.

“You can.” He places his hands on my shoulders. Gently, he shifts my focus from the audience in the auditorium to him.

“There are over nine hundred people out there.” My chin wobbles.

“Probably sixteen hundred with media.” His sexy lips twitch. “More will see your performance when they put video of it on the nightly news.”

I squint at him. “Why are you telling me things that will make me more nervous than I already am?”

“Because.” He squeezes my shoulders. “That’s the worst of it.” His brown eyes sparkle more enticingly than any chocolate. “Wanna know the best?”

“Yes, please.”

“I’ll be right down there.” He points with his head, and I glance at his empty seat beside Vanessa. “Liam will be up there.” He lifts one finger and points it at the ceiling.

“Maureen too.” I get where he’s going with this. “I’m not alone.”

“Right.”

Ryan doesn’t return his hand to match the other one that remains on my shoulder but skims the back of his right one across my cheek, down my neck, and then turns it over, leaving his palm over the swell of my left breast. He leaves a trail of heat on my skin everywhere he touched me.

I have other responses too. My heart races. My breaths shorten, trying to keep up. My nipples tighten, and lower, I ache.

Ryan notices. He notices everything about me, and I notice everything about him. We are in tune with each other.

“Later.” His eyes darken and his nostrils flare. “Right now”—he traces a heart over my heart—“remember Liam. Remember his love for you and yours for him.”

My throat is too tight to speak, so I nod.

Ryan's expression turns serious. "He'll always be a part of our lives. We talked about this."

"You're right." I take his hand away from my chest. Bringing it to my mouth, I kiss the tips of his fingers. Liam was the prelude to us, a necessary one that some wouldn't understand, but they don't matter. They haven't walked in our steps or listened to the right notes. "He's a part of our perfect song."

"He's the low. You're the high." Ryan's eyes narrow. "Lots of people need to hear your song. They need to hear your lyrics and know they're not alone. To know, as you have so eloquently phrased it, that the valleys are there to help us look up. To give us the desire to climb our mountains. And once we are up at the top, to remember what it took for us to get there."

"And to remember those who helped us on our journey." My babies. Liam. His friends.

"Yes." He nods somberly. "When you go out there on that stage, sing to them." His voice thickens. "For them. We are their story. You and me, we continue where they left off."

"I will." Tears sting my eyes. "I can do that."

"Know you can." Both of his hands on my shoulders, he squeezes. "Go out there, Katy. Be yourself. You are meant to be a performer. The valleys you and I went through were meaningful. They brought us together. They brought your gift back to life. This song was meant to be written and performed by you."

I lift my chin, and he releases me. Ryan has always believed in me and given me the courage to exercise my strength.

I aim my gaze at the spotlight and the wooden stool in the center. One step at a time, I make my way there. The path isn't uneven or completely familiar, but Ryan's faith in me is the difference. It makes the uneven smooth. It gives me confidence where I falter. It gives me the courage to climb.

Throwing my shoulders back, I stand in front of the mic. "This is for Liam. He was my first love. This is for you, babe. Your love will always be a part of me."

I kiss my hand and point it to the heavens. Then I climb onto the stool.

Settling my guitar in my lap, I strum the chords. The music forms walls. Majestic ones.

It's been a while, but I recognize this place. Ryan is right, I belong here on this stage.

Liam. Maureen. Gus and Joe. Everyone who has a heart that music has touched is with me.

The fine hairs on the back of my neck rise. My heart expands, brimming with their love. My soul comes completely alive.

I open my mouth, and the words of the song take flight. And I know, I know without a shadow of a doubt, that I'm not inside the cathedral worshipping alone.

## Chapter 75



Ryan

“She needs ten more minutes,” Cameron informs me, his voice low.

“Why?” I glance past him. Katelyn has been in the Love Street storage room with my mom and Vanessa since we arrived. I’ve been impatiently waiting by the stage.

I try to distract myself yet again by looking around me. Gray is on one side of me and Barney is on the other. Every chair I rented for the wedding ceremony is filled. Those who wanted to attend and couldn’t fit inside are waiting outside. There is a line on the sidewalk that is so long it practically stretches to Katelyn’s house on Lookout Hill. Our plan is to let the reception spill over into the parking lot. It is going to be a huge celebration, but it lacks one very important part.

My gaze going again to the mouth of the hallway that leads to the storage room, my brow creases. “What can she possibly need to do to get ready?” I was ready to claim Katelyn the moment I first saw her so radiant she outshined a sunbeam.

“I’m not supposed to say,” Cameron replies.

In my mind, the young musician is far too good-looking to be hanging around my Katy. If I told her that her headliner is in love with her, she probably wouldn’t believe me. She doesn’t seem to realize how irresistible she is.

“What the hell is going on, Cam?” I demand to know. I feel like I can be demanding with him and use his nickname after teaching him how to play those chords properly.

“I promised her I wouldn’t tell you.” He shrugs. “She wants to surprise you.”

“Is she in the building?” I want confirmation that she hasn’t changed her mind.



“Yes, of course she is.” He rolls his eyes at me, looking younger than he is.

In response to his answer, the tight knot in my gut loosens.

“Let me check your tie.” Gray moves in front of me.

“It’s fine,” I grouse at him.

“Probably so. But won’t hurt to have a look.” He tips his hat back and adjusts my tie. “Relax. She’ll be here shortly. Enjoy your wedding day.” Finished with his task, he pats my shoulder.

“Are you nervous?” Barney asks, changing places with Gray.

“Fuck yeah,” I admit. I want my ring on her finger, her in my arms, our lives together as a couple officially started.

“Never seen you this keyed up.” Barney glances at Gray. “Have you?” he asks my best man.

“Nope.” Gray shakes his head. “Never.”

“Never had a more important moment in my life than this one. She is—” The wedding march starts cutting me off.

“And there she is.” A slow smile spreading across his wrinkled face, Barney steps back. My gaze snaps over the heads of all our guests. They are mostly Love Street patrons, in other words, Katelyn fans. There are a few reps from Pacific Records that I invited and a reporter from Music News that I tipped off, trusting that if she attended, she would get the details correct. I don’t just want residents of the canyon to know Katelyn is mine. I want everyone in the world to know.

“Katy,” I breathe in awe. At the back of the room in a strapless wedding dress, she looks like a princess in a fairy tale. The bodice hugs her gorgeous breasts and encircles her tiny waist. The lace inlay over the satin is as intricate as our love. The flowing skirt swirls around her shapely calves like sea foam. I drag my gaze upward to her eyes. My heart hammers when her gaze connects with mine. She is my stars and sky. All I could ever dream to wish for is her. She is my happily ever after. I am content merely being the earth beneath her delicate feet.

With yearning eyes, I stare at her. Everyone in their chairs has swiveled around to gaze at her too. She is stunning, the queen of all our hearts in that gown. Her golden hair is wound around her pretty head like a crown. Rather than a scepter, she holds a bouquet of sweet honeysuckle and fragrant eucalyptus. I force myself to wait for her rather than run to her as Vanessa, as her matron of honor, walks down the aisle.

Forest, mint, and honey, I chose the items for Katelyn's bouquet. Honeysuckle is her and symbolizes the enduring flames of our love. Eucalyptus represents earth, which is me.

The model reaches us at the stage and moves to the right. Cameron, with more than a little interest in his gaze, drifts in her direction. Snagging his guitar from a nearby stand, he begins playing the song I once performed years ago while standing on Katelyn's diving board.

I sing the lyrics Katy inspired as my mother escorts her to me. When Katelyn is where she belongs, I see tears glistening in her eyes.

"I love you." I speak rather than sing the perfect words to end the song.

"I love you." Her eyes shimmer with emotion and her lips tremble. I tremble in response to her.

• • •

## Katelyn

I reach for Ryan's hand. I need him to ground me. He is my secure foundation and looks so incredibly handsome in his black suit. I'm happier than I have ever been. Love Street is transformed into a dream come true with acres of honeysuckle blooms and sashes of white chiffon. My dress is perfection. It is one Vanessa kept from a former photoshoot. It's my something borrowed. Blue is a satin ribbon tied around the stems of my bouquet.

Looking into Ryan's glistening brown eyes, I'm grounded but feel like I could fly. I know I wouldn't be flying alone. He is as happy as I am right now. We lack only Liam and Maureen to make this joyous moment complete. In their own ways, they both played a part in Ryan and me being here today. Somehow, though there is a ceiling over our heads, I know they are watching us. I feel in my heart the love they are beaming down to us.

The official begins the ceremony. Traditional vows. We decided on those on the drive over.

"To have and to hold. To love and to cherish," Ryan vows and squeezes my fingers. Warmth flows from him to me. Desire. Hope. Wishes. Dreams. Music. He is all that and more to me.

"My love for you will never end," he adds embellishing. "I will always and forever be yours, my Katy."

I smile and repeat the traditional words. “To have and hold. To love and to cherish.” Then I embellish too. “Our love is remembering and honoring those who are beyond our reach. It’s holding onto each other in our castle behind the wall together. It’s discovering that it’s okay to be sad with someone who understands you. It’s walking unfamiliar paths hand in hand. It’s healing, growing, and dreaming. It’s me encouraging you to live your best life and you encouraging me. It’s making the most of all our moments. Forever, I am your Katy.”

Ryan smiles and brings me closer. From the moment I met him, I have wanted to be closer to him.

He kisses me as instructed. I wind my arms around his strong neck. Ryan deepens the kiss, not as instructed but as he must. His hands settle warm and low on my back. I melt in his arms. I am gold. He is stardust. Our love is the sun and the moon and the expanse of the entire cosmos. It is him and it is me and our unique love song. It’s our forged hearts beating as one.

# Epilogue



1975

Katelyn

“You ready, Mrs. Chance?”

“Yes.” I nod at the stage tech, and he leads me through the backstage corridor.

People scurry past us. Some glance at me, and I see recognition. They know me, not because of Fargo-North or as a byline to Hart, Chance, and Niles, but as me. My album—*my* album, I still haven’t gotten used to that—is the bestselling album in the US and number two in the UK.

Like it was yesterday, I remember wearing Liam’s shirt and writing the music and lyrics for my solo album that day in the loft. I remember Ryan removing Liam’s shirt and making love to me. The past and the present collided that day.

The technician climbs the steps to the stage, and I follow. He gestures, and I walk the rest of the way by myself. I think about Ryan as I stand beside the doors that will soon open for me to walk out onto the stage.

I remember other things—Ryan and me sitting together at the piano inside our canyon house when he tricked me into playing again, and the club in Calgary and the upright piano where Liam gave me lessons.

A woman with a clipboard appears beside me. “Five minutes, Mrs. Chance.”

“Thank you.”

I smooth down my purple dress. It’s longer and fancier than I usually wear. But not more formal than the gorgeous gown I wore to my wedding at Love Street.

But what I wore wasn’t important. It was who stood beside me and vowed to always love me. And who supported us—Gray, Leslie, Vanessa, and Cameron. They remain a big part of our lives.

Life isn't something that should only be endured. It should be lived to the fullest, and it shouldn't, it can't, be lived to the fullest alone.

"Mrs. Chance." The tech from earlier reappears. "Mr. Chance asked me to give you this."

"Thank you."

I take the honeysuckle bloom and tuck the stem into my hair like I've done for every live performance. Ryan has supported me every step of the way, from the recording of my album to the television appearances, and he has been there for every stop on the tour.

He has more than honored our wedding vows. He has shown me day by day, hour by hour, that his love for me is larger than words.

His love brought me to life. My body, my heart, my music, it's all his. And all the love we share, we lavish on our son.

"Three minutes," the woman says to me.

I give her a nod and lay my hand on my guitar. The wood is smooth and familiar. The strap that holds it in place on my shoulder is Ryan's. It bears two additional embroidered names now, Maureen's and Liam's.

"One minute." The woman holds up her finger, and my heart starts to race.

I love performing. It's a rush. It was a broken part of me that is repaired.

The door in front of me opens. Pulling in a breath, I walk onto the stage.

I reach out my arm and point my hand to the heavens. Bringing it down, I kiss my fingertips and point it at where my loves are both sitting in red chairs just to the right of the stage.

Ryan grins proudly, showing me those sexy crescents that frame his mouth. Little Grant Rose Chance with his blond curls and his baby blues waves a chubby fist at his momma and bounces on his earthly father's lap.

I know wherever Liam is, he is smiling too. We can't see him where he is, but we see his reflection every day in his son, our son.

There was a before with Liam. Now, there is Ryan. I see my life from both sides now.

"Hello, everyone," I say into the mic. My heart is nearly bursting, it's so full. "Thank you for being here tonight. It's an honor and a privilege to perform my music for you here in Carnegie Hall."

From Calgary, to New York, to LA Canyon, and then back again to New York.

Wherever I am, wherever they are, I look at Ryan—my hero—and my

precious boy, I am where I belong. I am home, and within that perfect home  
my soul is alive with music.

# About the Author



Michelle Mankin is the New York Times, USA Today, and WSJ bestselling author of over 40 romance novels.

Romance that rocks the heart.

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When Michelle is not prowling the streets of her Texas town listening to her rock and Nola funk music much too loud, she is putting her daydreams down on paper or traveling the world with her family and friends, sometimes for real, and sometimes just for pretend. Michelle and her business partner run Wild and Windy Book Event in Chicago, Phoenix, and Vegas.

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