



High Stakes Love
BOOK ONE

Double or

NOTHING

L.M. REID

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High Stakes Love | Book One

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ALSO WRITTEN BY L.M. REID

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chapter 1

Kat

My body moves to the music. The sound of his voice washing over and electrifying every piece of me.

Sutton Cole is a rock star.

He is to me, at least. And one day, he'll be a real rock star. Just as soon as one of these recording companies gives him a chance.

For now, I cheer loudly from the side of the stage in the very seedy bar that we should most certainly not be in. Mac is at my side, watching and critiquing every move that Sutton makes.

“Jesus, Kat, I swear, you're louder than the damn music,” Mac says as he covers his ears.

Damn right, I am.

Sutton deserves to be cheered for. Loud and proud. He's had enough people in his life that disappointed him – a mother that left him all alone, and an abusive asshole for a father. He deserves the recognition that no one else has ever given him.

I roll my eyes at Mac Thomas, Sutton's manager. Or, more accurately, his best friend. One that is extremely loyal and willing to take on the very non-paying role to help Sutton land the career he deserves.

I couldn't be more grateful to Mac for all that he does for Sutton. If he thinks he's going to get me to be quiet though, he has another thing coming.

"Yeah, baby," I shout again.

I can see Mac shake his head out of the corner of my eye, but there is also a smile on his face. It's there because he knows that I'm Sutton's biggest fan. No one loves him more than I do. No one ever will.

Sutton Cole walked into my life three years ago. He won over this shy girl with nothing more than a smile. A sexy as hell smile, but a smile, nonetheless.

That's it. That's all it took. He smiled, I melted, and the rest is history.

Sutton glances back at me, and for a second, I wonder if he could hear me yelling, if maybe I really was that loud after all. He's smiling, so even if I am, who cares?

All that matters is that his mind is on me and not the dozens of women that are standing at the front of the stage, fawning over him.

Dark hair, soulful eyes, and a voice that could melt the panties right off you.

He's perfection. Every woman wants him, and yet he's all mine. I'm it for him. It's the craziest and most wonderful feeling in the world. I don't know how or why, but I sure as hell am not going to complain about it.

The final chord of the song pulls my attention back to the stage and the man commanding it.

He thanks the patrons who are all clapping and hollering, taking just a moment to revel in the fact that they love him. More importantly, that he's good. That he's not worthless like his father always tells him he is.

I've only met his dad twice. Neither time went well and since then, Sutton has done everything in his power to keep me away from him. He didn't want him to tarnish what we have. And I respect his wishes, even though I know without a doubt there is nothing that could ever tear us apart.

Sutton exits the stage. Excitement and fear radiating off of him. His eyes dart between Mac and me. "So?"

"You were amazing," I cry out as I jump into his arms and kiss him.

There's no holding me back now. Not that there ever really was and certainly not when Sutton is near.

"You are never missing a gig if this is the kind of treatment I get afterward," he replies.

"This was by far the best set I've ever seen you do, baby."

"Thanks, Kitty Kat." Sutton nuzzles my neck.

“And I promise, you can’t half the treatment I plan on giving you tonight.”

Sutton lets out a growl, his hand gripping the flesh on my ass. When once something like that would have made my cheeks blush or my eyes divert to the floor, now I revel in it. I accept affection and take it any way he gives it.

A moment later he raises his head and looks to Mac for a more critical, less biased response.

“You rocked it,” Mac tells him. “Fucking phenomenal.”

Sutton squeezes me a little tighter and I can feel the relief wash over him. Hearing it from me is one thing. But from Mac?

God love the guy, but he’s honest to a fault. And there have been more than a few times when he’s told Sutton flat out that his set sucked, or a song wasn’t good. Even though it pisses Sutton off, it also makes him work harder. He listens to Mac, respects him.

Every song he sings, every gig he performs, it’s all for practice. A form of preparation for when he hopefully hits it big. Personally, I don’t see how he can’t. He’s amazing. His voice is like butter and just glides right over you. It’s the kind of voice that you can feel all the way to your soul.

Sutton Cole is made to be a rock star.

“Come on,” he says, hands grabbing my waist. “Let’s get you home.”

“How about you get me in bed, instead?” I suck my bottom lip between my teeth as I raise my eyebrows at him.

Mac groans; Sutton shakes his head; and I bounce out of the bar and onto the street.

“One day, you’ll be performing on the Vegas strip. Or in another country,” I tell him.

“I hope so.” Sutton drapes his arm across my shoulders as we walk to Mac’s truck.

“I know so,” I tell him, truly believing the words I’m saying.

People might think I’m biased, and yeah, I guess I am. But Sutton; he’s talented. Legit talented. And there isn’t a doubt in my mind that he will make it.

When we pull into the driveway, Mac hops out of the truck and Sutton moves over to the driver seat.

“Clean the seats before you bring it back,” he tells Sutton, who only responds by giving Mac the middle finger.

Sutton throws the truck into drive and heads for his favorite spot – the abandoned baseball fields.

I’m not sure what it is about this place, but he loves it here. And I love that he’s turned his spot, the one he considers his refuge, into our spot. It means a lot to me. Proves how much I mean to him. Not that there has ever been a doubt in my mind.

The truck hasn't even come to a full stop yet and I'm already pulling my dress over my head. Our spot. The spot where we come to make love. Tonight, after hearing and watching him on that stage, I'm a little more enthusiastic than usual.

"Goddamn, Kitty Kat," he says. The words fall from his lips, his eyes glued to me, staring as if he's in awe.

"You were so good tonight," I tell him. "So fucking sexy on that stage."

"Oh, yeah?"

I nod as I work the button on his pants. "I wanted you so bad."

"Wanted? As in past tense?"

He pulls my hair back and wraps it around his fist. "As in always," I tell him.

When I finally free him from his jeans, I begin to stroke his cock with my hand. I smile as I watch pleasure roll over the worry that had been etched in his chiseled features.

His hand still grips my hair as I lower my head, my lips wrapping around his head. As I sink down further, taking all of him in, he moans out my name.

I'm in no hurry. I take my time, slowly torturing and teasing him. My mouth tasting, my tongue licking, my hand stroking. I take everything I have been wanting all night and I savor every moment of it.

His hand tugs on my hair, coaxing me off of him.

With my lips swollen and wet, I look up at him.

“Jesus, fuck. Ride me, Kitty Kat.”

I follow his order, no questions asked. I love when he tells me what he wants. I love even more when I give it to him.

His eyes are intently focused on me as I sink onto him. The feel of him stretching me makes my head fall back in ecstasy.

His hand slides up my back until it's behind my neck, pulling me to him. “You are so amazing, baby.”

His lips cover mine, his tongue licking along the seam, begging for entry. His teeth nip with urgency.

He wants more and I want to give it to him. I want to give him all of me. My lips part, our tongues dancing together as he holds me against him. With his free hand, he palms my breast, his calloused thumb flicking over my nipple.

I moan and press further down on him.

He breaks the kiss and I arch into his touch. Hot, wet lips trail down my neck, my collarbone, straight to my exposed breast.

“Perfect. You're perfect,” he tells me.

He takes my nipple in his mouth. Sucking, tugging, torturing me with the pleasure it brings. He continues his glorious assault on my breast as his hands settle onto my hips, his fingers digging into my flesh. He quickens the pace,

moving me onto him. Harder. Faster. Deeper. Until we're both panting and pleading for our releases.

Sutton thrusts his hips up into me, the surge of pleasure sending me tumbling over the edge, with him following quickly behind.

He's still buried in me as we come down from our high, my head resting on his shoulder.

“Promise we'll always be like this.”

“We'll always be like this, Kitty Kat. You're mine, and I'm never leaving you.”

Chapter 2

Sutton

My mind and body are still coming down from cloud nine. First the gig. Then Kat.

Holy hell, how did I get so lucky?

No way in hell should a guy like me have a girl like her. But I do. And I don't plan on ever letting her go. She's sweet and smart and sexy as fuck.

I never believed in love until I laid eyes on her. Then she smiled, and man, was I screwed. One smile... that's all it took. It was shy and beautiful. It screamed innocence when I was anything but.

Kathryn Keller makes me a better person. She believes in me when no one else does. And she does things to my body that blow my mind. No girl before her could ever hold a candle to her. It's that very thought why I haven't even bothered looking at another girl since.

I tread lightly as I slowly enter the trailer that I call home. My foot crosses the threshold and I shut the door as softly as I can.

“Where the fuck you been?” I hear my father’s angry voice.

The room is pitch black, so I can’t see him; only hear him, but I know that he’s close.

The funny part of him asking is that I know he doesn’t care. It’s only an excuse. A reason to take his drunken anger out on me rather than a wall, or whatever woman he fucked tonight.

“I had a show tonight,” I tell him.

His thick, evil laughter takes up the whole room. The sound hurts my ears as it reverberates through my body and settles a fear in me in knowing what comes next.

“They paid me too,” I tell him, hoping that the idea of his useless son contributing to the bills, or the booze, might settle him down.

If I’m honest, a piece of me hopes he’ll find some pride in that.

He wasn’t always like this. Before my mom walked out, he was actually a pretty decent Dad. I’m fairly certain that he blames me for her abandoning us. Not the fact that she found another man, one who made better money and could offer her a better life.

No. That wasn’t it. It was me. The baby who cried too much. The kid who needed too much.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.” More laughter.
“They paid you for that shit you sing?”

The lights flicker on and his enraged face is closer than I expected it to be. And there sure as hell isn't an ounce of pride on it. Hatred maybe, but sure as hell not pride.

Wanting nothing more than to end this moment, to be able to enjoy what up until now had been a great night, I pull out the wad of cash from my pocket.

"Here, take it," I tell him as I shove it toward him.

He yanks the money from my hand and counts it. "Five hundred bucks? They gave you five hundred bucks? They fucking stupid?"

"I'm good, Dad. I'm really good. People want me to play for them."

"Bunch of fucking morons. All of them."

I don't know why I try. I could have walked through that door with a record contract in my hand and he still wouldn't have believed me. He still would have told me that I am a failure. The man hates me. I need to quit trying to change that and just accept it because there isn't a damn thing that I can do to change his stubborn pig-headed mind.

If I'm lucky, if I keep my mouth shut and just walk away, maybe he won't take a swing. Maybe I can go to bed and have sweet dreams about how amazing tonight was rather than nightmares about what he turned my life into.

"Good night, Dad," I say as I try to move past him. He steps in front of me, that look of hatred evident and gleaming in his

eyes as if he gets some sick fucking thrill out of this. “Don’t do this.”

“Do what?” he asks. His hands press on my shoulders and knock me into the wall.

My perfect night shot to hell because of this prick. I always told myself not to hit back. Not to fight him because no matter what, he’s still my dad.

This is it. The final straw. The last moment.

Fuck that. Fuck him.

“Stop.” It’s an order, not that he’ll listen to it.

“Or what?”

The challenge of his words makes me snap.

“Or this,” I respond, my arm cocked back and ready to punch him. I don’t even hesitate, I just let my arms go, my first connecting with his face.

Every ounce of rage I have ever felt for this man takes over. My fist pounds into his face, his sides, his stomach. Anywhere I can reach him, I hit him. Years of taking the abuse and neglect because I thought I had to – gone.

I hate that I’m using violence. A part of me feels no better than he is. But loving it all the same. Finally. Finally, I can show him exactly what he’s done to me.

When I step back, deeming it enough, I look at the man on the ground. Weak, beaten, and nothing like I ever want to be.

I turn to leave. To get the hell out of here before I do anything else. My skin cringes at the feel of his hands on me. The shove against the door, my head hitting the trim, leaving me slightly dazed. I turn back to him and see the rage in his eyes.

Everything I give him, he gives me right back, until we're both exhausted.

"Get out of my house," he spits out at me.

"Gladly," I tell him, storming to the door and slamming it behind me.

He'll drink away the pain, pass out, and then while he's in a drunken coma, I'll come to collect my things.

Chapter 3

Kat

My heart sinks as I watch Sutton walk up the sidewalk. Bruises — his eye nearly purple and swollen. There's dried blood in the corner of his mouth.

“Sutton,” I cry out as I run from the house and into his arms.

He just dropped me off an hour ago. How in the hell could this have happened?

It's a stupid question. His father. It's always his father.

Sutton grimaces as I wrap my arms around him. “Oh, God, are you okay?” I run my hands along his face.

He pulls back. “I'm fine. I just...”

“Come inside,” I tell him.

He glances at the front door, then back to me. “I shouldn't have come here. Your mom....”

“Her mom wants you to get your butt into this house this instant.” I turn and see my frail mother standing in the doorway. Tears well in her eyes, but it's not from the pain or the sickness. It's from seeing Sutton and the condition he's in.

If she were able to, she would be standing right here with me. Hugging him, checking him, taking care of him. Like a parent does.

Not his parent though. His parent did this to him. And for what? Because he hates him? Great. Hate him. Just don't do this to him. Don't cause him to shatter and break. He doesn't deserve that. He doesn't deserve any of it.

"Now," my mother's voice demands.

I wrap my arm around Sutton's waist and help him to the house.

"You poor boy," my mother says as she touches his cheek.

"You should see the other guy." Sutton's voice is soft. He cracks a slight smile and I'm not sure if he's joking or not. He's never hit him back before. But this time, I'm not so sure. Something in his eyes looks different.

"About damn time," my mother replies. "I wish you would just let me call the authorities."

"I appreciate that, Mrs. Keller, but I'm almost out of there. As soon as I land a real job, I'm out."

"You know you're more than welcome to..."

Sutton shakes his head. "I appreciate it, but no."

My mother presses a kiss to his swollen cheek. "Why don't we all get some rest. We'll talk more in the morning and figure out what to do." Slowly, my mother makes her way back to her room, denying my offer of assistance. "Oh, and Sutton?"

“Yes, ma’am?”

“When I tell you to have my daughter home by midnight, I mean it.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The door shuts behind my mother and I grab onto Sutton again. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Positive, Kitty Kat. I just want to get some sleep.”

I take his hand in mine and tug on it, inviting him to my room.

“Hell no,” he replies.

“What? Why? It’s not like you haven’t spent the night before,” I remind him with the sexiest smile I can muster at this hour.

“Yeah, well, I wasn’t invited those times. Your mother’s doing me a favor, I can’t...”

I love that he thinks that way, though I can’t help to find the amusement in it as well. It was only a few nights ago that he snuck in through my window, and we were going at in my bed. Then the shower. Then against the very window he snuck in through.

I respect his decision, even if I want nothing more than to hold him all night and make him forget what an evil monster of a father he has.

“The couch it is,” I say.

I settle myself onto the sofa and pat the seat next to me. “Go to bed, Kat.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you.”

It’s his turn to concede. He lies down on the sofa, his head resting in my lap. I recline the seat and toy with his messy black hair. “What set him off this time?”

“My existence,” he says. “What I need to do is get a job. Something, anything to get me out of there until I can get a recording deal.”

His eyes are closed, a silent prayer behind his words. Praying to a higher power that I’m fairly certain he would never admit to believing in. He wants it so bad, though. So desperate to make something of himself, to get out of that damn trailer and move on with his life.

“You’ll get there.” It’s an assurance I give him on a regular basis. One that I wish he believed in as much as I do.

“Thanks, Kitty Kat. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Sutton.”

Chapter 4

Sutton

I'm sitting at the old, abandoned baseball field, my guitar next to me and my pen and paper in my hand. It's where I come when I need to think, or work on my music. Sometimes even to make love to Kat. Like we did last night in Mac's truck.

I smile at the memory, though the lifting of my cheek causes a surge in pain by my swollen eye.

There are a million places I could go to, but I like it here. I like the solitude of it. I like that it's the place where my last good childhood memory was made. Any memory really besides the ones that I make with Kat.

Me, my mom, and my dad were all here at the field after one of my little league games. My dad was so proud of me for hitting the winning homerun. He hoisted me onto his shoulders and toted me proudly around the field. I can still see my mother's smile. She was beaming. She always was. A beautiful, happy woman.

It was the perfect day. A day filled with lots of laughs, smiles, fun.

The next day, my mom left.

That's when my dad changed. The way he looked at me. How much he drank. How much he hated me. All of it changed in what felt like an instant.

Rather than forgetting that moment, I latch onto it. I come here to remember that day. To inspire myself. To be happy.

It's why I brought Kat here, shared my place with her. I wanted happy memories with her here too.

When I woke up at Kat's this morning, she was still fast asleep on the couch. Her mother was waiting in the kitchen with coffee and a muffin. We chatted for a bit, just like we always do. She begged me to let her call the authorities, an argument we've had for two years now. Ever since the first time I showed up on her doorstep with a black eye.

I had tried to tell her I got in a fight, but somehow, she knew better. I pleaded with her, telling her it was an accident, begging her not to call the authorities. The best-case scenario was ending up in a foster home. Worst case? A group home. Neither sounded like a good option for me. Not when I still had Grandma Virginia to think about and care for.

Who else was going to do her shopping? Cut her grass?

Mrs. Keller agreed to keep my secret. And she's regretted it ever since.

Now that I'm eighteen, it doesn't really matter much. My staying in that house with him has been of my own accord. Well, that and my inability to afford anything else.

I rest my head back against the chain link fence of the dugout, and close my eyes. I say the same prayer to a higher power that I must admit, I don't much believe in these days, but I say it, nonetheless. It's a plea, begging for a chance, an opportunity – something – to get me out of here. Out of his house, hell, out of Vegas if that's what it takes.

“Thought I might find you here.” Her sweet voice automatically brings a smile to my face.

I'm so grateful for that sophomore orientation. The one where the nervous and unsure girl with dark hair and blue eyes bumped into me. There was fear in her eyes as though I was going to hurt her or torment her in some way. I learned later that she had been teased a lot growing up. That it wasn't until that summer, right before sophomore year, that she grew into what is, by all standards, a heavenly body.

She tried to walk away, though I guess run might be a better word, but I grabbed her hand.

“I'm Sutton Cole, your new best friend.”

Even then I knew it was going to be so much more. When she smiled at me, my cold heart melted.

“You were sleeping so peacefully. I didn't want to wake you.”

“Always do when I'm with you.” She takes a seat next to me. “What are you working on?”

“Praying,” I say with a chuckle.

She squeezes my arm. “It’s going to happen, Sutton. I know it will. You’re too good for it to not to.”

“I hope you’re right. I want this for us.”

“For us, huh?”

Wrapping my arm around her shoulder, I pull her against me. The feeling of her head resting against my shoulder settles a calm over me that only she can cause. “Everything I do is for us, Kat. I want to be a man you deserve. I want to give you the world.”

She lifts her head and faces me, her eyes boring into mine. “You already are. And you already do. Sutton, all I want is you. Us. That’s it.”

I shove off the ground and begin to pace the field before me. I rub my hands over my face and instantly regret the decision as a surge of pain shoots through my eyes near the massive bruise my father left me with.

Admittedly, I’m kind of curious to see what the other guy looks like. I’ve never fought before, but I’m pretty sure I got a few good shots in there.

“And what, Kat? You going to move into a trailer park with me? We’re going to live on paycheck to paycheck? No. Absolutely not. That’s not good enough.”

Kat isn’t like me. That’s not the life she grew up in. I’m not saying she’s some rich hoity toity chick – she isn’t. But she’s never went without. Never struggled. Even now, the money her dad’s insurance policy left them is enough to take care of

her mother, even through all of her treatments. She deserves better than what I can offer her.

“I don’t care where we live. I just want to be with you. What do I have to do to make you understand that?”

“I don’t want that for you. Fuck, I don’t even want it for me, but at least I’m used to it.” I shake my head. “Kitty Kat, I have to do this. I have to make something of myself to...”

“Be worthy of me?” she supplies as she stands. “You have an amazing heart, Sutton Cole. You love me and take care of me without hesitation. You sit by my side and watch movies with me and my dying mother just to be with me. To support me. That... that is what I deserve. A man like that. Not one that can throw money around or buy me shit. I want someone who’s going to stand by me. Be with me. Love me. That’s all anyone can really ask for.”

Her hand touches my cheek and I lean into it. “I just want to make all your dreams come true.” And mine as well.

“You already did. And the music, it will come. I know it will.”

“I wish I had half as much faith in me as you do.”

“Me too,” she replies. Her smile is infectious and has me returning one to her almost immediately.

“What would I do without you?”

“Let’s never find out, okay?”

Chapter 5

Kat

My mother's plate sits unfinished on the table before her. Her blanket is pulled up high under her chin, despite the sweltering heat in Vegas. Sutton hits play on the movie and settles onto the couch with me, his arm around my shoulders.

"I love this movie," my mother says as the opening credits begin to roll.

She's always been a huge fan of horror movies. The scarier, the better.

"Never pictured you as a horror buff, Mrs. Keller," Sutton says, offering me the bowl of popcorn he made.

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Sutton."

The first jump scare happens nearly immediately. My mother is laughing and I'm gripping onto Sutton for dear life.

"Sometimes I wonder how you can be my daughter," my mother teases.

"Not everyone finds being terrified, enjoyable," I reply.

I can feel the movement of Sutton's chest as he tries to hide his laughter. "Not nice," I reprimand him.

"Awe, it's okay, Kitty Kat. I'll protect you."

I roll my eyes at him and settle against him for the movie. Because I am a scaredy cat and will most likely need that exact protection that he's offering sooner rather than later.

It's not long before my mom drifts off to sleep. My eyes gravitate away from the movie and onto her. I watch her for a few moments, peacefully sleeping, and wonder what life will be like when she isn't in it. What do I do without her? How do I go on?

Not to mention the house, the bills, all of it. I don't know how to do any of it, but her impending death doesn't exactly leave me much of a choice.

I gently shake her awake. "Hey, Mom, why don't you go to bed?"

Her eyes flutter open. "Oh, man. I didn't even realize I fell asleep. Sorry, kids. I didn't realize how tired I was."

She might not have, but I noticed. The whole world could have seen it. She, however, refuses to acknowledge any bit of deterioration. Not because she's avoiding the truth of her reality or refusing to accept it. Somehow, she's managed to do that with a grace that I wish I possessed. She's just trying to enjoy every last moment.

She yawns and stretches before standing up from the couch. I move to help her, but she stops me. "You two finish the

movie without me.”

“But...” I go to stand, but Sutton holds me back.

“Let her go. She’s okay,” he whispers.

I tend to hover. A lot. I know this, but I don’t care. I can’t bear anything happening to her sooner than it needs to. Any ounce of protection I can provide her – I’ll do it.

“Listen to your handsome boyfriend,” my mom says, a small laugh escaping her as she does. “Night, kids. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“Night, Mrs. Keller,” Sutton replies.

I sit on the couch next to Sutton, but leave space between us to let him know I’m angry with him. Not that it will last long. It never does.

He just doesn’t understand. He doesn’t know how terrified I am. How desperate I am to keep her, to not be alone in this world.

“Don’t be like that,” he says as he scoots closer to me. “I get it. But...”

“You don’t, Sutton. You don’t get it. She’s dying and I can’t help her. You don’t know what that’s like.”

Emotions that I try desperately to keep at bay rear their ugly head. Watching her suffer, watching the cancer slowly take over her body is its own form of torture. Sometimes I wonder if it would be easier on her, if it just ended sooner rather than

later. But then, selfishly, I pray that she doesn't go, that things don't change.

A strangled sigh escapes and Sutton's arms are around me in an instant. "I know I don't understand, not really. But what I do know is that she doesn't want you hovering. She still needs to feel that semblance of life, of authority over it. She needs to still be here... until she really can't be anymore. And most of all, she wants to enjoy what time she has with you."

"How can I enjoy it when I need to..."

"Because you don't. Not every second of every day. Smile with her. Laugh with her. Be her daughter, not her caregiver."

"I'm trying; I'm just so scared."

"I know." Sutton pulls me against him, my head resting on his chest. "I'll be right here with you though, Kitty Kat. We'll get through it – together."

Chapter 6

Sutton

“**W**hat do you think?”

Liz beams from ear to ear. “I think it’s perfect.”

“Yeah? You think she’ll actually be able to relax enough to enjoy it?” I ask.

After everything that’s been going on lately and how stressed and exhausted Kat is, I devised a plan. It’s not much as far as plans go, but it requires preparations to be made in order to pull it off, so to me, it’s a plan.

“You know as well as I do that nothing can get Kat to relax,” Liz says.

She’s right. Kat is high-strung on a good day. Everything going on with her mom has only made it worsen exponentially. I wish I could take some of the worry from her, lessen her burden in some way but I know that I can’t. What I can do is be by her side. Offer her one night to cut loose and enjoy herself. To help her forget, if even for a moment, that she is still very much alive and there is a whole world out there for her to experience.

As much as I love her, I know she's forgotten that. Yes, she goes to school and comes to my shows, but Christ, the girl spends every other waking moment taking care of her mother. Something I know Mrs. Keller hates but allows because she knows it's what Kat needs in order to process all of this.

When I approached Mrs. Keller about tonight's surprise, she was elated. So much that she sprung for the hotel suite rather than the room I booked for us.

Now comes the hard part of convincing Kat. And getting her to relax.

"But," Liz continues, "we've put everything in place that we can to make her feel at ease. My mom is super excited to help out and hang with Mrs. Keller."

I don't think Kat's been away for a whole night since her mom got sick. Even before she began to deteriorate.

Scrubbing my hands over my face, I begin to pace the room. "You're sure?"

Liz grabs my shoulders. Her five-foot nothing body stopping me in my tracks. "I love that you want this to be perfect for her. And it will be, but I think you're the one that needs to relax."

Sure. Relax. Sounds easy enough. Maybe that would be an option if Kat weren't one of the most stubborn, pigheaded persons that I know. There is every chance in the world that this blows up in my face and she just flat out refuses to go.

"There is no way that girl can say no to you."

I hope to God that she's right.

When I show up at Kat's door, Liz's mom is already there. I see her and Mrs. Keller sitting on the couch, talking and laughing.

"Sutton," Kat exclaims. "What are you doing here?"

I told her I had to work tonight at the shitty part-time pizza delivery job I have. I didn't like lying to her, but if I hadn't, she would have invited me over. And she already knows I would never turn her down.

"I'm here to whisk you away for the night," I reply, a shit-eating grin on my face.

"What? Where?" Immediate excitement tempers by the realization of what my words mean. For the night. The entire night. Her shoulders slump as she sighs. "You know I can't."

"Oh, yes, you can," Mrs. Keller says from behind her.

"Mom..."

"Don't mom me. Patricia is here and we are having a great time. She's going to stay with me tonight and you... you are going to go out with your boyfriend and your friends, and you're going to have fun."

"But..."

"No buts, no arguments. Grab your bag and go. Now," her mother directs her.

“What bag?” Kat asks.

“The one I packed for you,” her mom says with a smile.

Kat’s eyes drop to the overnight bag by the door, then flash back up to her mother. “How?”

“None of your business. I am still your mother, little girl. Now, do as I say and go have fun.”

Kat runs to her mother and gives her a hug and kiss before grabbing the bag and heading out the door.

“I’m nervous,” she admits once we’re out of the house.

“I know. Which is why Liz’s mom is going to send us updates all night. If your mom so much as sneezes, we’ll know about it,” I assure her.

“You’re amazing, you know that?” Her arms wrap around me in a hug. When we reach Mac’s truck, she wraps her arms around my neck. There is a sexy grin on her face as she whispers, “Where are we going?”

Liz’s voice is loud as it escapes the back window of the truck. “Vegas, baby.”

Mac pops his head outside the passenger window, a big goofy grin on his face. “Let’s go before we miss all the fun.”

“What fun?” Kat’s smiling more than I’ve seen her smile in a long time. That alone makes every dime, every sacrifice it took to make this happen worth it.

“Get your sexy ass in the truck and find out,” I tell her as I swat her backside.

Chapter 7

Kat

I don't know how he managed to pull this off, but I am so glad that he did. This was just what I needed. Unwilling to admit it to anyone, even him, the pressure and weight of my situation has been wearing on me. Just because I didn't admit it, doesn't mean that he didn't see it.

My eyes are glued to him as he sits next to me, chatting with Mac. He amazes me in every way. If only he could see that.

"Earth to Kat," Liz says.

I manage to tear my eyes away from Sutton to look in her direction. "What?"

"You look happy," Liz says.

"I am happy," I reply. How could I not be when I have the world's sweetest guy right next to me, and two of the best friends a girl could ask for.

We just finished dinner and are getting ready for the next part of our adventure. My arm loops through hers as the boys settle the tab. I tell myself not to worry about where it was he

got the money from, but I can't help feeling guilty. Rather than saving his money to get a real demo put together, he's doing this. For me.

As happy as I am, I see the pride and joy in his face, too. Sutton loves me. He wants to do this for me. Who am I to begrudge him for that?

"By the way, thank you for this," I tell her.

"All Sutton," Liz says, giving credit where it's due. While I am sure he did most of it, I also know that he enlisted her help. Including asking her to have her mother stay with mine. Not that it would have taken much convincing. The two of them are thick as thieves, just like me and Liz. "He really is something else."

Don't I know it. Sweet, sexy, musically gifted. Never will I need a reminder of how lucky I am. I just hope that when he hits it big, because I know he will, that I don't lose him. That he isn't whisked away into the limelight and blinded by the millions of gorgeous women that will be falling at his feet.

"Yes, he is," I agree.

We leave the restaurant and continue down the Strip. We peek our heads into the various hotels, but make sure to never step onto the casino floor. Where looking at Sutton, you would swear that he is a bad boy, he's actually anything but. He keeps himself on the straight and narrow – now. It wasn't always that way.

When we first met, Sutton was most definitely the epitome of the bad boy from a terrible homelife. He smoked, drank, acted out, and did stupid stunts. He was fun and wild and the complete opposite of me. And while that's what attracted me to him, it was the boy beneath all of that that I fell in love with. The boy with a kind heart, a sad soul, and a jealous streak a mile long. He's strong and protective – loyal to a fault. He's everything I ever dreamed of.

“And what about you?” I ask giving her a nudge.

“Me?”

“Have you not seen how Mac has been looking at you all night? He is seriously into you,” I tell her. “And he is so hot.”

“I'm going to tell Sutton you said that,” she replies. Her words nothing more than a threat to get me to quit pushing her on the Mac subject.

“Oh, come on Liz, he's a great guy.”

“I'm sure he is. But, unlike you, I do not want to start my happily ever after at eighteen. I...” She releases me and stretches both of her arms to the sky. “I want to be free.”

Liz grew up with the typical suburban family life. Her mom and dad were high school sweethearts. They live in a nice house, lead a typical “vanilla” lifestyle as Liz puts it. And Liz? Well, she wants something completely different. Something more. And to get there, she thinks, for some reason, she has to do it on her own, because a man will only bog her down.

“You are free, you idiot.” I lean into her, my arm wrapping around her shoulders. “And spending time with Mac isn’t going to change that.”

She glances back at him. His head is thrown back, laughing at whatever Sutton said. The slightest of smiles crosses her lips before she shakes her head and refocuses her attention back on me. “Nah, not interested.”

I roll my eyes, knowing damn well that the look she just had said that she is interested. She’s just denying herself due to this desire to be fiercely independent.

“What’s next, boys?” Liz shouts into the world.

“Boys?” Sutton scoffs. “Just ask Kat how much of a man I...”

I turn back and place my hand over his mouth. My cheeks feel like fire, burning in embarrassment from what his words imply.

“Oh, come on, Kat. Like we don’t already know.” Liz laughs.

“Why, you embarrassed, Kitty Kat?” Sutton teases, tearing his mouth away from my hand. “Don’t want everyone to know how I make you purr?”

Everyone is laughing, except Sutton who’s looking me dead in the eyes, begging me to say differently. His tongue darts out, licking his lips as he stares at me, with heat in his eyes.

“Ugh, gross. Ya’ll can do whatever you want in your room, but right now, can we please go have some fun?” Liz whines.

Sutton and I are waging a war. A game of fuck me now or fuck me not.

“I second that,” Mac says.

I loop my fingers through the loop on Sutton’s jeans and tug him to me. “Buy me a drink, stud, and I’ll purr all night for you.”

“I am buying you all the drinks.” His arms wrap around my knees and he tosses me over his shoulder.

I squeal in delight as I tug down the short gold sequin dress that I’m wearing out of fear my ass is showing for the whole world to see.

“Don’t worry, Kitty, I won’t let anyone see what’s mine.” His words are possessive and yet so very hot as his hand connects with the material covering my ass cheek.

Sutton stops at the entrance to a club. PUSH is one of the hottest clubs on the strip. There is no way that he got us in here. Especially not with our fake ids.

“Be right back.” Sutton presses a kiss to my cheek before walking over to where the bouncer stands holding the red rope.

The moment Sutton’s standing in front of him, his scowl turns to a smile. He and Sutton shake hands and before I know it, Sutton’s flagging us over.

Draping his arm across my shoulders, he looks at the bouncer, “This is her. This is my Kat.”

“Lucky bastard,” the bouncer says.

I feel awkward and uncomfortable not knowing who this man is, or how Sutton even knows him. I know everything about Sutton. But not this.

“Dax was a friend of my Uncle Tony,” Sutton explains. “When Uncle Tony moved away, Dax always stopped by to check on Grandma Virginia.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Dax,” I say with a smile.

Dax unhooks the rope and lets the very apparent teenagers inside with a wink.

“You’re unbelievable,” I tell Sutton.

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” he says with a wink.

Chapter 8

Sutton

Kat and Liz are on the dance floor, dancing to the music, while Mac and I stand at the bar staring. I'm staring because, well, there is nothing in this world better to look at than Kat. Except maybe Kat dancing. Or, even better, Kat naked. Mac, the damn fool, is staring because he's head over heels for Liz, but refuses to do anything about it.

"Why don't you make a move already?" I say, trying to encourage him.

"It's not like that. I just..." Mac shakes his head.

Does he really expect me to buy that? Even an idiot can see how into her he is. The way he clams up when she's around. How he's staring like a lost puppy right now. "Come on, man. She's hot, she's fun. Go for it."

"No." The stern tone, the stoic expression is his way of ending the conversation.

When I look back out onto the dancefloor, it's not Kat that catches my eye, but rather the two douchebags approaching her and Liz. They keep maneuvering closer until they're

practically dancing with them. The girls are a little tipsy and completely oblivious.

I'm not. And the temper I usually keep under control is tempted to emerge. This is Kat's night though, and the last thing I need is to draw attention to us, especially considering we're all underage.

I'm doing just that until I see the guy nearest to Kat set his hand on her waist. My girl, she pushes it off though. That's my girl. Douchebag numero uno, he doesn't seem to be getting the hint because he just moves right back in.

Mac says my name, my facial expression clearly giving away just how furious I am and that I fully intend on doing something about it. "Let me handle it."

I appreciate the offer, but no one touches what's mine. And I will be damned if I'm not the one to inform them of that.

"Don't do anything stupid," Mac pleads with me as I shove away from the bar and out onto the dance floor.

"Hands off," I tell the guy. This time, it's me removing his hand from her. And if he touches her again, I'm going to start swinging.

"Who the fuck are you?" the douche asks.

"I'm her boyfriend." I pause. "And the guy who's going to kick your ass if you touch her again."

The prick looks me up and down and laughs. "Why the fuck would she want you when she could have a real man?"

“Where is he?” I ask, glancing around the club looking for the guy he’s talking about. There is no way this dick is a real man. A real man would never put his hands on a woman without permission. A real man knows when a woman says no, you step back. This loser is not a real man. Not even close.

“Fuck you, bitch. I’ll pound you in the ground.” The douche takes a step forward toward me, but Kat forces me back. She pulls on my arm, begging me to let it go. “Sutton, don’t. Let’s just go. Please.”

Everything in me is screaming to punch this guy. To fucking teach him some manners as Grandma Virginia would say. One look at Kat though, and I’m over it. I can’t ruin this for her. I can’t let my jealous rage ruin our night.

I can’t just walk away without doing something, though. The guy needs to learn a lesson. But, what? I contemplate my options as I stare the guy down for a moment. That’s when it hits me. I grab Kat, my mouth covering hers hard and hungry. She stills for a moment, shocked by the abrupt, possessive nature of the kiss. But I’ll be damned if she doesn’t look completely turned on by it when I pull back.

Her eyes are dark, filled with desire, and her full, kissed lips are parted and begging for more.

With a smirk, I turn to the douchebag and say, “Like I said, she’s mine.”

With her hand in mine, I lead us out of the club and back onto the strip.

The lights shine brightly, illuminating everything around us.

“Well, that was fun,” Liz says. “Now what?”

“Now, we go back to the hotel,” Kat replies. Her voice sounds stern, almost like she’s pissed.

I turn to her, ready to explain why I had to do what I did and that I didn’t mean to ruin her night. It’s not anger I find in her eyes, though. It’s hunger. One that I am more than willing to sate for her.

“Yeah, I’m exhausted.” I follow the words up with a fake yawn.

“You two just want to go have sex.” Liz rolls her eyes.

“What’s the matter, Lizzie? Jealous?” I tease.

The smartass reply earns me a swat on the arm, one that I’m certain she thinks stung at least a little, but in reality, I barely felt. However, I do begin to run down the sidewalk to avoid any further bodily harm. Much to my surprise, the girl runs at marathon speed in illegally high heels after me.

Kat and Mac rush to keep up and once we’ve finally made our way into the elevator, I make the drunken decision to escalate things even further. The moment the elevator dings for our floor, I toss Kat over my shoulder and say to Liz, “I’m sure Mac here won’t mind helping you out.”

I take off, running down the hallway until we get to our room.

“He’s going to kill you for that,” Kat tells me as we walk inside.

Not wanting to waste a minute, I tear my shirt over my head and toss it to the floor. “He wants her, and she’s an idiot if she doesn’t want him.”

My lips meet hers in a quick, desperate kiss. “Did you have fun tonight, Kitty Kat?”

Her fingers work the buckle on my belt. “Mm-hmm. Know what my favorite part was?”

I quirk an eyebrow. “This?”

“When you got all jealous over that guy touching me.” She pulls the belt out of its loops and tosses it to the side.

“I wasn’t jealous. I just...”

Her hot breath tickles my neck. “Yes, you were. And it was so hot.”

Lips touch my skin. Her tongue licking its way down to my collarbone.

“You’re mine, Kat. I don’t want anyone touching what’s mine.”

One touch. One taste. They’ll realize what goddamn perfection she is and...

I could lose her.

The idea of that is always in the back of my head. It’s why I work so hard on my music, why I try to make myself better.

Because fuck... one day she's going to realize she deserves better. Hell, even that she can do better.

If I can stop that day from coming – I will. I will do whatever I can to prevent it.

I hoist her up, her legs wrapping around my waist.

“I'm all yours, baby,” she tells me.

There's something about this moment. Something that makes me want to turn this hot and heavy thing we were about to start into something more sweet – more tender.

I carry her naked body to the bed, gently lying her down. I hover over her, my lips barely brushing hers. “I love you, Kat. More than anything.”

Her hands fist the sheets at her side as I slowly slide into her. This right here, the feel of her beneath me, it feels like forever. I want to grow old with this girl. I want her to be my one and only. And for her to be mine.

Kathryn Keller and I belong together – a perfect fit.

Chapter 9

Sutton

A tall man with silvering hair approaches the trailer. He doesn't quite fit the profile of a cop or anything menacing, but he sure as hell looks like he's here on business.

"Can I help you?" I ask before he gets too close.

"I'm looking for Sutton Cole. You're him?"

I shrug. "Maybe."

"Bad boy with a chip on his shoulder. Perfect."

Coming to a stop, I stand fully erect. "What do you want?"

"Like I said, looking for Sutton Cole."

"You found him. Now, what do you want?"

The man extends his hand, a business card between his fingers. I glance down at the card. Dante Miller. Rocked Records.

Rocked Records?

Holy fuck.

I brush my right hand off on my pants. “Sir, I’m sorry. I thought...”

He holds his hand up to stop me from continuing. “No need to explain. Now that we’re on the same page, got a minute to chat?”

A minute? I have whatever time he needs.

“Yes, of course.” I glance back at the trailer where my dad is passed out. “I would invite you in, but uh...” I stop myself from continuing. “Why don’t we grab some coffee instead?”

“Sounds great. Hop in, I’ll drive.”

The sports car he’s driving is way flashier than anything this side of town has ever seen. Especially in this part of town.

I direct him to a small café, something close, but where I don’t run the risk of running into anyone I know.

We settle into the corner booth and the man, who looks like a million bucks, still somehow manages to fit into the space.

“I saw your show,” he tells me. “The one at Rock City Lounge,” he tells me.

My last show. The big show. The night I finally fought back.

“What did you think?”

He chuckles at my question. Obviously, he must have been impressed with it to some level if he’s here. The kid in me, the one that lacked any sort of recognition from his father for the

past ten years, needs the validation. I need to hear him say what it is I think I already know.

“Well, I must have thought you were pretty damn good if I flew all the way back here with this.” He sets an envelope on the table. “Go on. Open it.”

My hand trembles as I grab the envelope from the table. I’m almost afraid to open it. Fear my dream is coming true. Fear that it isn’t. And everything in between. I’m scared. Terrified.

Still, my fingers manage to slide open the envelope, and I pull out the sheet of paper from inside. The word *Contract* instantly springs off of the sheet and into my line of sight.

My eyes grow large, and I swear I look like a damn cartoon character. The one whose eyes get big and bug out of their head, stretching halfway across the room. Because the numbers I’m looking at – they can’t be real. None of this can be real.

“Are you serious?”

“Very. Listen, Sutton, not only the set you did was great, but the crowd reacting to you? That was even better. Fucking hell – the women loved you and everyone liked the music. You put on a hell of a show, kid.”

“I... I don’t know what to say.”

“Normally, people say yes.” He glances down at the paper, then back up to me. “Especially when it comes to numbers like that.”

I nod in both understanding and agreement. “I’ll have to talk it over with my manager.”

He lifts a brow, knowing damn well I don’t have a manager. All I have is Mac. And the person I really need to talk things over with is Kat. Because this affects her just as much as it does me. It’s our future.

“Don’t take too long talking to your... manager. If we’re going to do this, we need to get a move on and get you on the summer touring circuit.”

“Touring?”

“Yep. And recording in between.” He quirks up the corner of his mouth. “It’s a nice amount of cash, but they’re going to make you work for it. Good thing is, it’s work you love, right?”

God, do I ever.

Not to mention, I wouldn’t have to be under my dad’s thumb anymore. Christ, being away from him alone makes this worth signing – no matter the dollar amount.

I realize I’m jumping in blindly, that I should read this contract over, or have someone read it over for me. What’s the worst that can happen? I mean, my life can’t get any worse than it is. It can only go up from here, right? So, I take the fancy non-Bic pen from his hand and sign my name next to the x.

“So, when do I start?” I ask.

“How soon can you pack?”

I know he said we would need to get a start on things right away, but I guess I didn't realize how immediate that was going to be.

"I... uh, I have a few things I need to take care of." Like telling Kat. And Mac. I need them with me. I can't do this without them.

For the first time, I crack a smile. The thought of the three of us hitting New York and making it big. They're my family. The only family I need, anyway.

"You've got two days. Wheel's up on Sunday at noon."

Fuck, that's a quick turnaround.

I look at my signature on the page. There's no backing out now. I don't have a choice.

What I need to do is get ahold of Kat. Tell her what happened and that I want her to come with me. Mac, too.

Dante extends his hand to me. "Sutton Cole, I hope to hell you're ready to be a star."

"More than ready," I assure him.

He slides on the sunglasses that are probably more expensive than the damn trailer I live in and walks out of the restaurant.

Still in awe, I sit back in my seat in the booth. The blank copy of the contract lies before me.

This is it.

This is my new beginning.

The start of a future for me and Kat.

Chapter 10

Sutton

*C*ome on, Kitty Kat, where are you?

After meeting with Dante, I immediately called Kat. When she didn't answer, I opted to run home and start packing my stuff. *Wheels up on Sunday*, Dante reminded me before he sped away down the street.

Packing should be easy. It's not like I have a lot. A handful of clothes. A few things of my mom. Some cards that Kat made me. And my guitar. I'm sure they'll want me to play with a decent one, not this resale shop guitar I purchased four years ago. Even so, this, right here, it's my baby. No way am I leaving her behind.

I'm packed. I'm ready to roll. I still have a whole day until I leave.

The message I left for Kat asked her to meet me at the baseball field at six. It's twenty after six, and she's still not here. The minute I finished packing, I headed out to meet her. Sure, I had plenty of time between when I finished and when I was supposed to meet her, but I was too excited to just sit around and wait. Not to mention, I didn't want to risk my dad

waking up. No way in hell was I about to let him ruin the best day of my life.

My feet kick the dirt as I pace the field while I wait for Kat. Memories of meeting Mac here, of the homeruns, the cheers in the crowd, hit me hard. How when Grandma Virginia cheered, everyone else was drowned out. It makes me laugh thinking of that. Even more so how much it reminds me of Kat.

My biggest fans.

“Hey, hot stuff.” The sound of her voice instantly brings a smile to my face.

“Hey there, Kitty Kat.”

“So? What was so important that I had to rush right over here?” she asks as she saunters toward me.

“You’re twenty minutes late,” I argue. I’m mostly joking, but I have to admit, the excitement is killing me. And she was the first person I needed to share the news with.

She rolls her eyes at me and my latest comment regarding her inability to be punctual.

I grab Kat’s hand and pull her against me. “I have amazing news.”

“Oh, what’s that?” she asks as she wraps her arms around me and presses her lips to my neck.

As much as I’m enjoying what she’s doing to me, I’m already overloaded with excitement. “Christ, Kat, you’re

killing me here,” I say, my voice getting hoarse as her hand slides between us.

“Then give me what I want, Sutton,” she purrs in my ear.

I grab onto her arms and pull us apart. I stare at her, with a broad, unstoppable smile on my face.

She smiles back, giving in to the almost childlike excitement I’m exhibiting. “Okay, okay, what is it?”

“Rocked Records offered me a contract.” My heart races as I blurt out the words.

“What?” she screams. “That’s amazing. I’m so proud of you, baby.”

Her arms wrap tightly around my neck as she jumps into my waiting arms. “So, what happens now? Oh, Sutton, this is just...”

“We leave Sunday,” I blurt out.

“We?”

“Yeah, of course, Kitty Kat. This is the beginning of our future. I need you by my side.”

The excitement that had bubbled inside me dies down when I see the distraught look on her face. Trying to make the situation better, I continue, “What do you say, Kitty Kat? You going to come with me and take over the world?”

“No.”

“No?”

“Sutton, I can’t go. I can’t leave my mom. God knows how much time she even has left. I mean... I can’t do this. Not right now.”

“But this is my chance.”

“I know,” she says somberly. “And I know you have to take it. But I’m sorry, I can’t go with you.”

The happiness and excitement that had been surging through me since I walked out of the meeting with Rocked Records fades into non-existence. “I can’t do this without you. Please, Kat.”

“You already are. And I will be there as soon as I can. Until then, we can just do the long-distance thing. This is us; we’ll make it work.”

She sounds so sure. I’m not as confident though. In fact, all I can really hear and feel is her rejection. The word “no” like a knife to my heart. My mom leaving me. My dad hating me. Grandma Virginia died on me. And now her?

She was supposed to be the one person who didn’t leave. The one who stood by my side.

“I don’t want long distance; I want you with me.” Her hand touches my cheek, but I bat it away. “Either you come with me or...or...we’re over.”

“You don’t mean that.”

I’m hurt. I’m angry. I mean it. “Oh, but I do.”

“Don’t do that, don’t make me choose,” she pleads with me.

All I do is shrug, acting all nonchalant about it. As if her not coming with me isn't literally tearing me apart. The boy whose mother walked away from him and whose father hates him emerges. And he takes every bit of pain he's ever felt on the one person that brought him happiness.

It's a dick thing to do to make her choose between me and her dying mother. Her rejection hurt me though, so isn't it fair play?

"It doesn't have to be like this. We can..."

She keeps speaking but the fact is, she's already made her choice. And it sure as hell isn't me.

Knowing about her choice, being angry at her for making it, makes me feel better about leaving. It soothes the ache. If I'm angry, I can't feel the pain. If I hate her, it won't hurt to leave.

Honestly, if she isn't coming with me, there's a big part of me that doesn't even want to go. Getting away from my dad, that's top priority, though. Taking this deal gives me that chance. I can finally escape him, his drinking, the verbal and physical abuse. I can make something out of my life, show him just how wrong he is about me.

"It does. And obviously, you've made your choice."

Kat hardens. Her eyes, usually filled with passion and love, go void of the emotions. They fill with pain and anger. So much anger. "No. You made the decision for me. Have a nice life."

As I watch her walk away, one thing becomes clear, I fucked up. I just ruined the best thing that ever happened to me.

“Fuck,” I shout out, this time kicking the dirt out of anger rather than nervousness.

This was not how this was supposed to go. Kat was supposed to say yes, then we were going to ask Mac together.

I had a plan.

A plan that went to shit the moment she said no. And one that sunk further into the shit hole the moment I gave her that ultimatum.

I hear a door slam shut. The distinct sound of Mac’s beat-up old truck.

“Jesus, Sut, you okay?” he asks, standing no more than a foot from me.

I have to look like hell because I sure as fuck feel like it. The ache in my chest worsens by the minute. The only refuge – the contract. The one that I can’t back out on. The only way for me to escape my father once and for all.

“I will be.” I clear my throat, trying to rid it of the emotion that Kat left knotted in it. “I uh, I got something to tell you. Well, ask you, I guess.”

Please, God, let him say yes. I don’t know if I can handle another person walking away from me today.

“Yeah, of course, what is it?”

“This guy, Dante, he uh... Mac, he offered me a recording contract.”

“Are you serious?”

“Dead serious, man.” I hand him the contract, the terms of the agreement laid out before him.

He flips through the pages doing a better job of scouring the thing than I did. “This doesn’t look like a bad deal. We should probably have someone look it over though. My aunt is a...”

“I already signed.”

“You what?” he shouts.

“I signed. The minute he gave it to me.” Mac’s face burns red with fury. His anger is warranted and understood. “I know. I know. I just... I couldn’t turn it down. What if they wouldn’t negotiate? What if this was my only chance? Besides, what could be worse than living with my dad?”

“You have a point there.”

“Exactly. So, I signed. And I’m thrilled. And I want you to come with me, be my manager.”

His face lights up, a big gooberish grin diminishing the red and taking up most of his face. “You want me to what?”

“Don’t make me say it again, dickhead.”

“Yes, man, of course.” He pulls me in for a hug. “Fuck, Sut, this is it. This is what you’ve been working for.”

“We. We’ve been working for. I couldn’t have done this without you, Mac.”

Stepping back from the hug, he runs his hands through his hair. “When do we leave? Shit, what did Kat say? She’s got to be over the damn moon.”

I shrug. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means, I don’t want to talk about it.” I pause for a moment, knowing unless I give him something, he’s not going to let up. “We’ve over. Kat, she... we’re just over.” Mac begins to speak, but I cut him off, “And I don’t ever want to hear her fucking name again. Do you hear me?”

My voice is thick with emotion as I choke back the tears that I refuse to fall.

I never cried when my dad hit me, I’m sure as hell not going to cry because Kat doesn’t love me. She did what people always do. Walked away.

“Let’s pack your shit and get out here,” I tell him.

There are only two things I know for certain:

1 – I’m going to be a rock star.

2 - Once I leave Vegas, there is nothing to come back for.

Chapter 11

Kat

Walking away from Sutton hurts. Each step I take deepens the pain in my chest. By the time I leave the baseball field, the pain is unbearable.

Not only am I losing him, but he forced me to choose. And when he didn't like my choice – he pushed me away.

Did he really expect me to pick him over my dying mother? Or was this just a way of pushing me away to make it easier for him to leave?

I wouldn't have stopped him. I would never ask him to stay for me. This is his dream coming true, and I couldn't be happier for him.

Why did he have to break me in the process?

Wasn't it enough to know that I was going to have to endure the struggle with my mother alone? Without him, my rock, here to keep me up when I break down?

Shutting the door behind me, I slide down it until I'm on the floor. The sobs I held back, the ones I didn't want him to hear, escape me now despite not knowing what it is that I feel.

I'm sad, I'm angry, I'm so lost.

He's leaving.

We were supposed to be forever.

"Honey, are you okay?" my mother's frail voice says from the doorway.

Shit. I swipe away the tears and plaster on a smile before facing her. "I'm fine, Mom. Go back to bed."

"Fine, huh? That bright red nose of yours says otherwise." She slowly makes her way to me. "Tell me."

As much as I don't want to burden her with anything more than she's already having to deal with, the comfort of her presence sends me spiraling.

I follow her to the couch and rest my head in her lap.

"Sutton's leaving." I sob as she strokes my hair. "He's leaving and I'm never going to see him again."

"Oh, honey, I'm sure that's not true." Her voice is calm and serene, but doesn't soothe me or the anger I feel in the slightest. Anger that I can't express to her.

Sadness over him leaving – understandable. The fact that she's the reason I can't go with him – I can't put that on her.

"He's leaving tomorrow. He's going on tour and recording an album." My words catch in my throat.

My mother soothes my hair. "He made it?"

I nod.

“I’m sure you’ll both make it,” she tells me. “He’ll come back for you, Kat. That boy, he loves you. So, if he has to go now to make this happen, there isn’t a doubt in my mind that he’ll come back for you.”

Except, I don’t want him to.

Of course, I don’t tell her that. Instead, I sit up in the bed and take her hands in mine. “Thanks, Mom. Come on, let’s get you back to bed.”

“Honey, I’m okay. You have to quit hovering over me like this. I’m sure there will be a time when I need you to, but right now – I’m okay.”

I know she wants to think that. I know she doesn’t want to think about the inevitable. She tries to hide the deterioration that I know she feels. I can see it, though. The light going out of her eyes, the slow steps she takes when she used to run marathons. The weakness in the way she grips my hand, even now.

So even though she shakes her head at me, I help her to her feet and walk her back to her room. I tuck her in much like she used to do to me. Her eyes drift shut the minute her head hits the pillow.

“I love you, baby girl.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

And he expected me to what? Just leave her like this?

By the time I return to my room, the sadness subsides and is replaced with anger. So much anger. I resist the urge I feel to

punch or throw something, not wanting to wake my mother.
And because the only thing that I really want to punch – is
him.

Sutton Cole is not the guy that I thought he was.

Not by a long shot.

Chapter 12

Sutton

With our bags at our feet, Mac and I both stand, staring at the chartered plane that sits before us.

“Is this a dream?” I ask him.

“It better not be,” he replies. “If it is, don’t fucking wake me up.”

“I assure you both, this is no dream,” Dante’s voice says from behind us. “This is just the beginning.”

I smile broadly at him, thrilled to be having my dream come true. But I would be lying if I said my eyes didn’t drift past him to the doorway, hoping that maybe, just maybe, Kat changed her mind.

Or at least, quit hating me enough to come say good-bye.

I feel Mac’s hand on my shoulder. “She’s not coming, man.”

His words make a sick feeling settle in the pit of my stomach. I know he’s right. I’m just thankful that he doesn’t know why. If he knew what I did. If he knew the ultimatum I gave her – he wouldn’t be coming with me either.

That's why I don't tell him. I leave it at we're over. It's all anyone really needs to know anyway. I mean, what else is there to say?

"The minute we step on that plane, we never speak of her again. Understood?"

"Sut..."

"Don't Sut, me. We never speak of Kathryn Keller again."

Mac nods, begrudgingly.

We follow Dante onto the plane. Settling into the plush leather seat, I close my eyes and smile.

"Good riddance, Vegas... Hello, New York."

Five years later...

Chapter 13

Sutton

“No.”

Like a petulant child, I sit in the chair across from Mac and cross my arms over my chest. All that’s missing is me stomping my feet and slamming the door. Though, at this point, I’m not beyond doing it, considering what he’s requesting.

“No?” He phrases the word as a question, even though he knows damn well what I said. The surprise in his voice is comical. I’m not exactly sure what other response he was expecting. After all, I’ve avoided the damn city for the past five years. Why in the fuck would he think I want to go back now?

“You heard me.”

“You can’t say no.”

Like hell, I can’t. I am the star of this little show. The top performer for Rocked Records. They don’t tell me what to do. I tell them.

“Yeah, well, looks like I just did.”

Mac stands from his chair and walks around the room. He isn't pacing. He's thinking. In fact, I'm pretty sure I can see the wheels in his head spinning as he tries to determine what he can say to me to get through to me. The promise of money? Nah, he knows that means nothing to me. Work my emotions? That would only get the opposite response. The only emotions I have toward that city or anything in it are negative. Anger and hatred are the first to come to mind.

Vegas. Sin City. Home.

The place where everything bad that ever happened in my life occurred.

Mac knows all this. We've been friends for most of our lives, and he knows me better than anyone. More importantly, he knows there is nothing he can say or do to get me to go back there. That's why I'm not sure why he is so hell-bent on trying.

His first attempt, he tries to commiserate with me.

"I know why you don't want to go back, Sut. I get it. I really do."

Sure he does, but I can hear the "but" coming a mile away.

"But..." Bingo. "There are good things about Vegas, too."

"Such as?" I scoff.

When he finally faces me, a smile plastered on his smug mug, he thinks he's found his loophole, and he looks pretty damn pleased with himself about it. I hate to ruin his moment,

so I allow him to continue, eagerly awaiting his sudden revelation.

“Kathryn Keller.” The name falls from his lips nonchalantly, as though him saying it didn’t just rock my entire world.

Five years. That’s how long since I’ve heard her name spoken out loud. That’s not to say I haven’t thought about her. I have. How could I not? Still, the moment we boarded the plane to New York, Mac swore to me he would never say her name again. It was a promise he kept until now. Not only does he break his promise and say her name, he has the nerve to use her against me. My one weakness. Kathryn Keller. My Kitty Kat.

Fucking Mac.

At one time, memories of her instilled anger, but now they only cause pain. The sound of her name causes an ache in my heart, one so deep, I press my hand to my chest to dull the pain.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?” I formulate the words through clenched teeth.

Mac stares at me. We both know exactly what he said. The words I never wanted to hear again—Kathryn Keller—the name a reminder of the woman who I walked away from. The one every song I sing is about. My one and only regret.

The shit that stirs inside of me at the mere mention of her is astounding. Shit that I thought I had buried the minute I stepped onto the plane to New York hits me full force. It sends

me back to that day when my entire life changed, back to the moment where my dreams came true and fell apart simultaneously.

The music career I had dreamed of but never thought possible suddenly became my new reality. I was hell-bent on getting out of Vegas, and with good reason. And the record deal? It was my golden ticket.

There was only one other thing in my life that mattered. Kat.

I can still see the look on Kat's face as she walked toward me across that baseball field. As much as I want to push it away, I allow it to come back to me, allow myself to feel every damn ounce of pain that night caused me. If I don't, I might just end up doing the one thing I don't want to do. Go back to Vegas.

Five years ago...

I grab Kat's hand and pull her against me. "I have amazing news."

"Oh, what's that?" she asks as she wraps her arms around me and presses her lips to my neck.

As much as I'm enjoying what she's doing to me, I'm already on overload with excitement. "Christ, Kat, you're killing me here," I say, my voice getting hoarse as her hand slides between us.

"Then give me what I want, Sutton," she purrs in my ear.

I grab onto her arms and pull us apart. I stare at her, a broad, unstoppable smile on my face.

She smiles back, giving in to the almost childlike excitement I'm exhibiting. "Okay, okay, what is it?"

"Rocked Records offered me a contract."

"What?" she screams. "That's amazing. I'm so proud of you, baby."

Her arms wrap tightly around my neck as she jumps into my waiting arms. "So, what happens now? What did they offer you? Oh Sutton, this is just..."

"I have to go to New York," I blurt out.

"For how long?"

"I don't know, baby. They said the album is going to take months and then they want me to start touring right away. But it doesn't matter because I want you to come with me. I want you by my side."

The excitement that had bubbled inside me dies down when I see the distraught look on her face. Trying to make the situation better, I continue. "What do you say Kitty Kat? You going to come with me and take over the world?"

"No."

"No?"

"I can't go Sutton. I can't leave my mom. God knows how much time she even has left. I mean... I can't do this. Not right now."

“But this is my chance.”

“I know,” she says somberly. “And I know you have to take it. But I’m sorry, I can’t go with you.”

The happiness and excitement that had been surging through me since I walked out of the meeting with Rocked Records fades into non-existence. “I can’t do this without you. Please, Kat.”

“You already are. And I will be there as soon as I can. Until then, we can just... we’ll make it work.” She sounds so sure. I’m not as confident though.

“If you don’t come with me... we’re through.”

“Don’t do that, don’t make me choose.”

I shrug, acting as if I don’t care when the possibility of her not coming with me is literally tearing me apart. Getting away from my dad, that’s top priority, though. This deal, it gives me that chance. I can finally escape him, his drinking, the verbal abuse. I can make something out of my life, show him just how wrong he is about me.

The tears of happiness quickly turn to tears of sadness. They spill over, rolling down her cheeks and ripping my heart out of chest. Still, I stand my ground.

It’s a dick thing to do – make her choose between me or her mother. I already know what her decision is, but I guess forcing her to say it, to not pick me makes me feel a little better about leaving her. It puts it in her court. Makes it her fault.

“We can make this work. We don’t have to...”

“Sounds like you’ve made your decision.”

Kat hardens. The look in her eyes fill with passion and fire and... anger. “No. You made it for me. Good luck, Sutton.”

“Kat...” I call after her, instantly having regretted the ultimatum I gave her.

As I watch her walk away one thing becomes clear. Once I leave Vegas, there is nothing to come back for.

So, I boarded the plane and never looked back. Not at my father. Not at Vegas. Sure as hell, not at Kat.

The memory fades, the anger returns, but this time, it’s directed at Mac. I glance up at him and see red. My temper flaring, I shove out of my chair and make a beeline for him, grabbing his shirt and shoving him against the nearest wall.

“Why would you do that? Why would you mention her?”

“You asked what was good about Vegas, and I gave you an answer.” He shoves me off him. “Just because you don’t want to hear it doesn’t make it any less true.”

“We agreed to never speak about her again.”

“Even though I thought it was a mistake, I held true to that agreement for five years. Now, you’re about to make another mistake, but this time, I’m not going to just stand by and let you do it. This is your chance to make things right.”

“Why in the hell would I want to do that? And why do you think I’m the one who needs to make things right?” I never

told Mac what happened that night, not the whole truth. I already knew I fucked up and didn't need to hear it from him, too. So, I don't know why he thinks this is my fault.

“Oh, I don't know, Sut, maybe because you're still in love with her.”

“Kathryn Keller means nothing to me anymore,” I argue, though even I'm having a hard time buying the shit I'm trying to sell him. Kat means the damn world to me. Always has. Always will.

“Sure, she doesn't,” he says, rolling his eyes. “As far as how I know, you're the one who needs to make this right? I know you, both of you, and I know there is no way in hell Kat would have walked away unless you did something stupid to make her.”

He might be on point that I'm the one who needs to make amends, but he's dead wrong if he thinks I'm going to do it. There's no making it right. There's no fixing what I did. I sealed our fate the moment that stupid ultimatum fell from my lips. There is no coming back from that.

“There's no fixing what's broken with us,” I tell him without going into detail.

“You'll never know if you don't try. Come on, Sut, you know as well as I do, you two are meant to be. This is your chance.”

“A chance at what?” I ask, throwing my arms in the air. It was hard enough to have him bring her up again, let alone

have memories resurface that I've tried to bury. The last thing I feel like doing is arguing with him.

"To be happy," he says. "I know you love what you do, but for five years, I've watched you become someone I don't know. Someone I don't really like."

"Oh, fuck you." How in the hell is he going to tell me I'm someone he doesn't know? Doesn't like? He's the one who created this stupid persona, the gimmick to sell more records. The sexy, bad boy who sings the broken-hearted rock songs. All I needed to do was act out and become the playboy. Done and done.

Now he hates it? Hates who I've become?

It was his fucking idea.

"You drink too much, party too much. This isn't you, Sut."

"Sells the damn records, though, doesn't it?"

"The show is at the Sapphire," Mac states out of the blue.

I turn to him, confused where the hell he's going with this.

"What the fuck does that have to do with anything?" My voice is loud, filling the room, my anger clouding the space between us and fueling my aggression.

"I know for a fact Kat works at the Sapphire."

I don't know what he's getting at or why he thinks Kat and me being in the same vicinity is remotely a good idea.

"You think me staying at her hotel is going to, what, miraculously change how much she hates me?" And with good

reason. “Nice try.”

“Yeah, well, you’re going. You don’t have a choice.” I open my mouth to reiterate what I told him earlier, but he cuts me off. “You already signed the contract.”

I shake my head, refusing to believe him. He wouldn’t make that shit up. But how? I would never sign something like that. I read every damn thing that is sent to me except...

Mother fucker.

Reaching for the stack of autographs on Mac’s desk, the ones he had me sign yesterday, tossing items side to side, I finally find what I’m looking for—my deal with the devil.

He tricked me.

I scour over the verbiage on the sheet of paper. Binding. Contract. Sapphire. One-night performance.

“I can’t believe you would do this to me.”

“It’s for your own good, Sut.”

That’s when the words hit me.

Extension to residency.

“You have got to be fucking kidding me. No way, not happening.”

“This is a great gig and an even better opportunity.”

I shake my head in disbelief. “You have no idea what you’ve just done.”

“I have a pretty good idea,” he chuckles. “Buckle up, Sut, we’re going to Vegas.”

Chapter 14

Kat

“**Y**es, Mr. Hale. Of course. We at the Sapphire aim to please.”

What the guest wants, the guest gets, and I’m the lucky one who gets to give it to them or, rather, run my ass off and make all their stupid little wishes come true.

Negative as that sounds, I really love my job, just not this client. Oswald Hale is a top-rated client, but on a personal level, I cannot stand the man or the woman he’s brought with him this time, who is no more than a year older than his daughter, tops.

He’s always been difficult, but I can handle him. When you add in the little gem he’s dating, I feel like I’m in a little over my head with these two. If I thought Oswald was demanding, it’s nothing compared to Brittany. Even her name sounds high maintenance. The demands she makes are odd and unpredictable, and frankly, they don’t make sense. It’s as though she merely makes them on principle—she can, so she will.

Tapping away on my iPad, I make a few adjustments to their stay, add in a couple more high-end dinner reservations, and schedule the princess for an all-day spa treatment. That way, Mr. Hale can sneak out and bang whatever stripper he has the hots for this trip.

“You’re all set,” I tell him.

“And none of this goes any further than us, correct?”

“My lips are sealed,” I promise, making the zipper and lock motion over my lips.

“Good.” Oswald stands there and stares at me for a moment.

“Is there anything else?” I ask. *Please say no, please say no.*

“You wouldn’t be free for dinner tonight, would you?” His tongue darts out, licking his dry, cracked lips.

“What a sweet offer.” I smile as though the offer is a compliment when it’s anything but. In fact, the offer makes my skin crawl. “Unfortunately, Jack has me booked all week.”

“Your loss,” he tells me as he walks away.

“What’s your loss?” Callum asks, stepping up beside me.

Callum Rivers, my co-worker, friend, and only competition here at the Sapphire. We both started at the casino two years ago when we turned twenty-one and quickly hiked our way up to VIP casino host positions. Rumor has it there is an Executive Casino Host position opening up soon, so both of us have been on our toes even more than usual.

Oswalt is one client I wouldn't mind Callum poaching from me.

“The fact I'm tied up all week and won't be able to enjoy the immense pleasure of having dinner with him.”

We stare at Oswalt as he walks away, swatting the asses of unsuspecting bystanders. We've tried to stop him before, but he's relentless.

“What's up?” Callum doesn't do idle chit-chat, not at work. If he's here, he's working with clients, no matter how big or how small. All he cares about is building his portfolio.

“Jack wants to see you.” I can hear his frustration, so it must be about a new client.

“Right away?”

Callum nods.

Facing him, I adjust his tie. “Don't be jealous, Cal. One of us has to be the best. Looks like it's me. Again.” I tap his chest lightly before heading off to see Jack.

I stride into Jack's office just before nine, my iced coffee in one hand and his hot black coffee in the other.

“Morning, boss,” I say with a broad smile as I set his coffee down.

“Morning, Kat. Have a seat.” He's busy clicking away on his keyboard for a few moments before he grabs his coffee. Taking a sip with a satisfied sigh, he looks at me with a huge grin. “You've done it again.”

“Done what?” I ask with a laugh.

“Made everyone want you, including our newest client... a big client.”

“How big are we talking?” My skin tingles as my mind races through the long list of prospective clients. The bigger the client, the better.

“Famous, rich, handsome... and he wants you.”

If only this famous, rich, handsome guy wanted me for something other than being his casino host.

“Don’t keep me in suspense. Who is it?” I ask, intrigued by his vague description.

“You are going to love this.” He rubs his hands together, trying to do the complete opposite of what I ask and build the suspense further. “Ready?”

I nod eagerly.

“Sutton Cole.”

He says the name proudly and stares at me, waiting to see my reaction, one I’m sure differs vastly from what he expected.

“No.”

“No? What do you mean, no?” Jack’s looking at me as if I’ve lost my mind. There is no way in hell Kathryn “Kat” Keller would ever pass up a client as elite as Sutton Cole unless it’s actually Sutton Cole. The mere mention of his name

sends her back in time five years and makes her heart flutter and her butterflies beat.

That's not right. It should be...

No, it's right because this is exactly the stupid, illogical mess Sutton turns me into. Especially after he walked away from me. From us. From everything that we spent years building and perfecting.

Sure, maybe we were only kids, but what we had was real. At least, I thought it was. I thought we were forever.

"I think it would be better if you gave this client to Callum."

"You *want* me to give him to Callum? Are you feeling okay?" Jack asks with real concern.

The truth is, I'm not okay, far from it.

Sutton Cole broke me. He broke my heart, my spirit, my world, and I refuse to let him be anything more than a distant memory. I don't care how sexy he is or how the sight of him makes my breath hitch—even after all these years. The man may still have a hold on my heart and my body, but I will be damned if I let him know or put me through that again.

No, there is no way. Sutton Cole is one client I cannot take on.

I nod. "Give him to Callum."

Regardless of what this could mean for my career, I just can't do it. Close proximity to him can only end badly for me and my poor, messed-up heart.

“Kat, you’re the best host we have. Besides, he specifically requested you and...”

“He what?”

All I can focus on at the moment is what Jack said—Sutton specifically requested me? Why in the hell would he do that? Although he had tried to act as though I was the one who decided, he’s the one who walked away five years ago. He decided to give me an impossible choice. The moment that ultimatum slipped from between his gorgeous lips, our fate was sealed.

So, why now? Why, after all these years, would he want to see me? Is it some sort of joke? A way to get me to wait on him hand and foot to show me how far he’s come? To stick it to me? Make me feel as if I made the wrong choice?

The Sutton Cole I fell in love with would never do that, but the rock star? I don’t even know who he is.

Jack’s laughter pulls me from my thoughts. “Exactly. Not to mention this is a great opportunity for you.”

He’s right. It is, and if it was anyone else, I would jump at the chance, but it’s just not a risk that I’m willing to take.

“The thing is, Sutton and I, we have history, and...”

“A lot of women have history with Sutton.” Jack laughs again. “That’s no reason to turn him down as a client.”

“I disagree.”

While a lot of women may have a sexual history with him, I'm certain no one else shares the same history we do, not from what I've seen in the tabloids and on television over the years. The women he's been with have been nothing more than flings. They haven't shared or gone through the things we have.

My eyes plead with him, beg him to see how desperate I am, how much I can't do this. He eyes me curiously, trying to figure out what in the hell has gotten into me and why I would throw it all away because some bad boy rock star broke my heart, but I already know he won't give in.

"Since you'll need to focus all your energy on Sutton, I want you to get with Callum and bring him up to speed on your client list."

My client list? As in my top of the A-list clients? He wants me to bring Callum up to speed on them? Hell, no. I might be stuck with Sutton, but there is no way I'm giving Callum an opportunity to poach any of my clients.

"I can handle them... and Sutton," I assure my boss.

There wouldn't be anything to handle if Jack would only listen to me and give Sutton to Callum. That's when it hits me. The exact way to approach this with Jack.

"Jack, rather than trying to bring Callum up to speed and risk him upsetting several of our guests, wouldn't it just be easier to have Callum handle Sutton? I'm sure Mr. Cole would more than understand. In fact, I'm certain they would get

along great.” Would they ever. The two of them could just chase pussy around the casino all day.

“I’m sorry, Kat, as I already told you, Sutton requested you and...”

“What the guest wants, the guest gets,” I repeat. And it’s my job to give it to them. Only this time, I won’t do it with a smile. Unless, of course, it screams fuck you.

“He arrives tomorrow, nine o’clock sharp. Be ready,” Jack tells me. “And make sure you share your client info with Callum, so he can stay on top of things.”

“Yes, boss.” I nod in agreement because hell if I have any other choice.

Once again, thanks to Sutton, I’m left with an impossible ultimatum. Suck it up and play casino host to Sutton or risk losing the one thing I can’t live without—my job.

Chapter 15

Kat

When I leave Jack's office, I'm fuming. Not at him, but at Sutton for once again putting me in an impossible situation. What the hell does the man want from me? Was ripping my heart out five years ago not enough for him? Now, he wants to make me his servant?

I storm through the casino and straight into Callum's office, angry and nowhere else to turn. Besides, Callum is one of the few people who know my history with the beloved rock star.

"What's the matter, Kat?" Callum smiles when I walk into the office with my face twisted into a scowl. "Did Jack decide to give your clients to the better host?"

"Worse." My heart is racing, my head is pounding, and I'm on the verge of tears. I haven't cried since my mother's funeral. After she was gone, there was nothing left to cry about. No man was worth tears. Sutton proved that. But this? A man, the man, affecting my job? Damn right, it has me emotional.

"This is serious," he says.

“My new client is Sutton.”

“Sutton? As in the rock star, Sutton Cole? As in your ex?”

“The one and only,” I say as I plop into the chair across from his desk. “What the hell am I supposed to do?”

“I can take him if you want,” he offers. This time, he’s not trying to steal a client. It’s him trying to help a friend he knows is beyond deeply affected by Sutton Cole, regardless of the years that have passed.

“Believe me, I did everything I could to get Jack to give him to you, but apparently, he requested me specifically.”

“We both know why.”

I angle my head to the side and glare at him. “And why is that?”

“He still wants you.” Callum shakes his head and laughs. “You two are a mess.”

“He’s a mess.”

“Oh, please. You still have a thing for him, too.”

“I do not.”

“I call bullshit,” Callum smirks.

“Think what you want, Cal, but Sutton and I were over a long time ago. There is no way in hell I would ever go down that road again,” I tell him, his accusation infuriating me.

“You seem to forget who helped you put those broken pieces back together. Pieces that never fully fit because he took some with him the moment he stepped onto that plane.”

I met Callum not long after Sutton left, and my mom died. I was broken beyond repair, everyone in my life I loved had just left me, and I felt like I was drowning in heartache.

Then, like a life ring being tossed to me, Callum stepped into my life. Even back then, Callum only had his eyes on one thing—money and success. He made it clear love wasn't an option for reasons he still refuses to tell me to this day. My heart couldn't handle anything more than what Sutton put it through.

My body, however, desperately needed to shake the memory of Sutton. For a time, Callum and I were pure sex. He was exactly what I needed, the type of man to make me forget all about my jerk of an ex.

Then one day, he found me, broken down, crying. It was my mother's birthday, my first without her, and everything hit me that day. I cried so much, my body hurt. Every emotion running through me made me feel as though I had been hit by a damn Mack truck. I had expected him to take me to bed and fuck away the sadness and pain like we always did. Instead, he wrapped his arms around me and hugged me. He befriended me. He helped me. The sex stopped. Our friendship began. Even now, we might be competitors at work, but I know at the end of the day, he has my back and my best interest at heart.

“You seem to forget just how broken I was. Do you really think I would ever give him another chance?”

“Yeah, I do. Your feelings for him are that damn strong. Even now.” A wicked smile crosses Callum's face, the look he

gets when he's up to no good, which is more often than not. "In fact, I bet you a thousand bucks you wind up in his bed before the week is over."

Callum's also a complete asshole.

"You are so on," I say as I extend my hand to him. This is one bet he doesn't stand a chance of winning.

Feelings or not, no way in hell will I ever end up in Sutton's bed. Not after what he did to me.

Chapter 16

Sutton

The moment I step into the bar, all eyes are on me. It's a blessing and a curse. As much as I love the fame, moments like this, I would prefer to disappear into the crowd. Be someone no one knows or gives a damn about.

The only reason I came to the bar was to escape Kat and the memories of her Mac stirred up with his bullshit idea. Not to mention the hope it instilled of what might happen when we see each other again. She's all I've been able to think about since Mac brought her up.

Hell, she's been all I've been able to think about since he mentioned the word Vegas. That's all it took. That one simple word dragged me back five years and made me relive every amazing moment with her.

After Mac gave me my itinerary for Vegas, I stormed out of the office and headed home, but it was too quiet, deafening almost. The silence only made me get lost in my head and my heart. Thoughts of Kat overran me, and I couldn't take it anymore. I needed noise. I needed something external to quiet the noise inside my head.

The shots I order and subsequently drink won't help me forget. Just like the ballcap on my head won't hide me from my fans or the desperate women pretending to be them. Neither is anything more than a temporary solution.

Moving onto the next shot, my eyes drift up to the television. The Giants are playing, and the view of the baseball diamond shatters me again, serving as a reminder of the field where I asked Kat to meet me to tell her the good news about my contract with Rocked Records. The place where everything went to hell.

I had been so certain we would ride off into the sunset. Instead, we broke. Irreparable damage kind of shit. All because I was an asshole kid who didn't get his way.

“Hey, can you turn the game off?” I ask the bartender.

Several people in the bar Boo me.

“Are you crazy? This is the championship,” the bartender says.

As much as I'd like to pull rank, tell this guy who I am and buy my way out of having to watch the game, I don't. I hang my head and try to focus on the alcohol, even though it's doing little to dull the pain or stop the thoughts running through my mind. The fear that going back to Vegas instills in me.

Fear of facing my past. My dad. Kat.

Christ, how the hell am I supposed to do that? How am I supposed to face her after five years? That's a hell of a long

time not to see someone, especially someone who owns every piece of your soul.

Over the years, I've wanted to reach out. Hell, I almost have a few dozen times, but every time, I chicken out. I'm terrified of hearing her voice, of her anger. If I can't bear to hear her voice? How the fuck will I look her in the face? Her beautiful, perfect face. The one I caused to be etched in pain the last time I laid eyes on it.

Among all that fear, I can't help but wonder what she's like now. Is her smile the same? Do her eyes still have that same sparkle? Has she grown into her curves even more?

Will her kiss taste the same?

With a one-track mind, I focus on the one thing I came here to forget. Kat.

Not that she's ever really been far from it. Fuck, she's haunted my dreams since I left Vegas. In the light of day, I can usually push her out, but now? Hearing her name? She's consuming me all over again.

One thing I know for certain is Kat isn't an option, no matter how much my heart wants her. And if I know her, which I do, I'm fairly certain she's going to make sure that I know it, too.

Which is exactly why I need to get my head out of this fucking tailspin. I need to get my head on right and my heart in check before Kat annihilates them both when she sees me tomorrow. The alcohol clearly isn't working.

That only leaves one other option.

A woman.

I need a woman

Any woman.

Someone to wash the idea of Kat out of my mind and help me remember who I am and who I've become. The woman sauntering toward me is exactly what I need to do it.

"Thought I might find you here," Val says as she runs her fingers down my arm.

"I didn't realize you were looking."

Her eyes scan my body. "I'm always looking, Sutton."

Val Adler works for the record label and was one of the first people I befriended when I arrived in New York. The friendship quickly changed into a friends-with-benefits scenario. I needed sex without emotion, and she wanted to fuck a rock star. It was the perfect scenario. Still is from time to time.

Like now.

"What do you say we get out of here?"

Always ready, always willing, Val's hand cups me through my jeans.

"I say, let's go."

The limo ride from my house to the bar is short but feels like an eternity because Val hasn't shut up since we got in the

car. Her legs are slung over my lap as she continues to babble on about Vegas, the one thing I am trying to get off my mind.

The only plus side is she agrees with me. She doesn't think Vegas is the right opportunity, that there are bigger and better things out there for me.

“That residency is a joke.”

Through my hazy eyes, I can see her scrolling on her phone.

“I don't even want to do the fucking show.”

“Unfortunately, that's not an option. You signed, so you're stuck. Just do the show, get out of dodge, then we can work on your next step. Vegas is too small for you. You need to think bigger. World domination kind of big.”

I chuckle at the idea of world domination.

Her hand slaps my arm. “I'm not kidding. I'm working on something that just might get you there.”

“Oh, yeah? What?”

She waggles her finger in front of me. “Not until it's a done deal. You just worry about this show in Vegas, and I'll take care of everything else.”

There isn't a doubt in my mind she will. Val is nothing if not persistent. Like now. As we step into my condo, she presses her body against mine, lips on my neck, hands roaming my body. Even though I'm not responding, she keeps trying.

“Sut, you okay?” she asks, finally noticing my lack of response.

“Huh? Yeah. I need a drink.” My head is fucked. As good as she feels, I can’t enjoy it or her. All I can think about is the inevitable.

Going home.

Stepping away from her, I make my way to the bar and pour myself a whiskey. I’m not really one for hard alcohol, only keeping it on hand for Mac, but there is no way in hell beer is going to cut it tonight.

I glance back at Val standing in the middle of the room, looking utterly confused. This isn’t the way things typically go down with us. We’re usually hot and heavy. Sex and orgasms. Done and over until the next time.

Our arrangement is usually mutually beneficial, but right now, I can’t focus. I can’t quit seeing Kat. Envisioning the last time that we made love. Remembering everything about her, about us. I miss it. I want it. I knew I would. It’s why I never spoke about her. Never looked back. I knew if I did, I would be lost to her. I would give up everything I worked for—for her.

She was my everything. She still is.

Going to Vegas, staying away from there, doesn’t make a difference. If five years’ time hasn’t changed what’s in my heart, nothing will.

As I drain the liquid in my glass, I feel Val's arms snake around me.

"You need to go."

"You don't mean that."

"I do." Unclasping her hands, I remove her arms from around me. "Go."

"Sutton."

"This isn't up for debate. Leave, Val. Now."

"If this is about your past, about Vegas? Let me reiterate—you're making a huge mistake."

"Looks like I make a lot of them."

Leaving Vegas, leaving Kat—the biggest mistake I ever made. I realize just how much I messed up.

How much I want it all back.

How much I want her back.

Chapter 17

Kat

My best friend, Liz, is sitting on the opposite end of the couch from me with her legs crossed and her face contorted. She's used to my hellish casino stories, but this one? This one takes the cake on all levels.

"You're kidding, right?"

I'm not exactly sure which part she thinks I'm kidding about, but I assure her every damn detail is true.

"No, no, no." She shakes her head. "I mean the part about Sutton."

"Yeah, unfortunately, that's true." I take a sip of the wine in my glass.

"Did you tell Jack the two of you have history?" she asks, though I wish she wouldn't.

"Yep."

"He didn't care?"

"He said a lot of women have history with Sutton."

A queasy feeling settles in the pit of my stomach at the mere thought of Sutton with another woman. It's not like I've exactly been celibate the past five years. I've had my fair share of fun. Still, the idea that Sutton would want anyone other than me is hard to swallow. The girl I buried away inside me long ago doesn't want to believe it, and to a degree, neither does the woman I am now.

It hurts too much.

"That they do," Liz replies, agreeing with my boss, as if that's helping any.

There's an unexpected knock on my door.

"Are you expecting someone?" Liz asks.

I shake my head before looking through the peephole.

"It's Callum."

The moment I open the door, he steps inside.

"Get dressed. We're going out."

"I'm not in the mood." I plop back down on the couch, the wine in my glass sloshing.

"All the more reason to go." Callum tugs on my arm.

Liz is already on her feet. Callum always has the "in" to the hottest places in town, and Liz lives for a good party.

"What better way to forget about Sutton than to drown yourself in dick?" Liz suggests, shrugging at what she thinks is the most obvious of choices.

Despite working in a casino, I'm not one for gambling. Even I know two-to-one odds will not land in my favor. That's why thirty minutes later, I'm sitting at the bar at The Loft, Callum on one side and Liz on the other.

"The best part of all this? He *requested* me," I slur, my emphasis on the requested part. "As in, he's forcing me to be his host. Forcing us to spend time together. Can you believe that?"

"Actually? Yeah, I can. Sutton has always had a weak spot for you. Just like you do for him." Liz laughs, looking at me as though I'm crazy.

"Thank you," Callum proclaims, pleased Liz agrees with him.

"Not anymore," I protest.

"Yeah, okay," Liz says with a laugh.

I want to be mad at her and Callum, but I know what they're saying is true. I just hate that it is. Right now, I hate even more that she's continuously pointing it out to me.

"What does surprise me is he's coming back to town at all. After everything with his dad, I really didn't think he would ever show up here again."

The same thought has been running through my head since I walked out of Jack's office. Mr. Cole is the reason Sutton was so adamant about getting out of Dodge. He wanted to put as much distance between them as possible. Not to mention he was desperate to prove his father wrong. The music Sutton

loves and the talent he possesses were nothing more than a joke to his father. The man was an asshole at best and an abusive drunk at worst. It was no wonder Sutton wanted to get away as badly as he did. Hell, I wanted him to get away. I just never thought he would leave the way he did.

The minute Rocked Record offered him a contract, he boarded the plane to New York and never looked back. Not once. Not for me. Not for us. So, why now, after all this time, would he come back?

“There is only one reasonable explanation,” Callum states.

“Oh? What’s that?” I ask against my better judgment.

“He’s back for you,” they say in unison.

Attempting to stand from my seat, my body wavers, thanks to the amount of alcohol I consumed. Once steady, I sit back down out of fear of falling.

“No way. Sutton proved a long time ago he didn’t really give a damn about me.”

“I know it seems like that, but...” Liz says, her hand covering mine as she speaks. “You can’t be mad at him for following his dream.”

“If he just left to follow his dream, I wouldn’t be mad. That he gave me an ultimatum? That he didn’t even want to make things work between us? That’s why I’m mad at him, Liz. That’s why if I never see him again, it would be too soon. Sutton Cole is nothing more than a self-serving, egotistical jackass.”

“Here, here,” Callum cheers. Mostly because he’s drunk. Partially because he’s still mad, Sutton requested me and took him completely out of the running for what would have been his biggest client. And partially because he hates Sutton for what he did to me.

Liz reaches behind me and slaps Callum’s arm. “That may be true, but he’s an egotistical jackass you’re still in love with.”

“I am not,” I argue, the anger in her accusation making me slam my glass onto the counter.

Liz bursts into laughter. “Seriously, Kat?”

“Seriously. He didn’t give a damn, Liz. Not about me. Not about us.”

“Oh, please. He gives more of a damn than you are willing to admit. We all know every song the guy sings is about you,” Liz insists.

Maybe they are. Maybe they aren’t. Personally, I wouldn’t have a clue because I refuse to listen to him and his sinful voice. The things it did to me when we were eighteen and hanging out in my backyard are nothing compared to what they do to me now. One song. That’s all I ever listened to. My head and my heart reacted in ways they can’t... not anymore, not after what he did.

“I don’t give a damn about Sutton or his music,” I say, anger filling my voice. “All I care about is—”

“My career. Blah blah blah,” Liz taunts. “Quit spinning that story. The fact of the matter is you still care about Sutton, which is why you focus all your time and energy on your career. Besides, we all need something more than work in our lives, Kat. We all need—”

“If you even say love, I will slap you,” I say, cutting her off.

“Oh, catfight,” Callum exclaims, rubbing his hands together.

Liz glares at him. “Hardly.”

I have known Liz since we came out of the womb. Our mothers had been best friends, and we basically grew up inseparable. She’s like the sibling I never had than just a friend. Worst of all, she’s smart—too smart—which means she’s also usually right. It’s the one thing I hate about her. That’s why when she throws this Sutton shit at me, I don’t tell her to fuck off. I think it. I just don’t say it. Deep down, I know she’s saying it with the best of intentions. I just happen not to want to hear what she’s saying.

“Sutton being back in town...” Liz continues.

“Doesn’t change a damn thing.”

Liz shrugs. “There’s only one problem with that statement. You and I both know when it comes to Sutton, you can’t resist him. One look and every reason you hate him will vanish.”

“That’s true. That’s what I said,” Callum interjects.

“Why are you still here?” I ask, turning toward him. “Don’t you have someone to prey on?”

“I’m having fun giving you shit about lover boy.”

“Nothing is going to change how I feel about Sutton. I was a kid back then.” I blow off her very accurate observation. One look into those aqua eyes of his and I’m a goner. Always have been. “He sure as hell isn’t the boy I fell in love with anymore.”

“How do you know?” she asks.

I know because the boy I fell in love with never would have left me.

Rather than admitting that and risking sounding like a lovesick fool, I grab my phone and type his name into the search engine. Picture after picture of him with women populates. I turn the phone toward her, my eyes giving her an “I told you so” look.

All it does is initiate an eye roll.

“Oh, please. You can’t believe everything you read, Kat.”

If it was only one article, I might agree, but it’s page after page of detailed stories about him with various women, wild parties, partaking in drinking and drugs. Then there are the fights in clubs and a plethora of other destructive behavior. Maybe not all of them are true, but it’s enough to know that the man Sutton Cole has become is not the same guy that left Vegas five years ago. The fame, the money, or the women—something changed him.

“Even if only a quarter of it is true, it’s bad enough. He’s not the same guy I used to know.” And love. God, did I ever love

him. Like the endless love songs and romance books are written about.

For as much as I hate him, hate what he did to us, I know being near him again will wreak havoc on my heart. One touch. One touch is all it ever took for him to win me over. One touch is all it will take for him to finally destroy me once and for all.

“I am so screwed,” I say, resting my head on the bar.

Liz laughs as she takes a seat next to me.

“The first step is admitting you have a problem.”

I have a problem all right. A tall, sexy, rocker boy problem.

Chapter 18

Kat

My head aches as I stir awake. Memories of last night slowly trickle in and make it pound even more.

The stiff drinks.

The shots.

The conversation about Sutton.

Only he could make me want to drown my sorrows in whatever liquor I could get my hands on, which apparently, was a lot.

Even worse, today is the day he arrives, and I'm way too hungover to deal with him.

My eyes slowly open and fall on unfamiliar territory. This isn't my room or Liz's. Where in the hell am I?

I jolt up in the bed and glance to my left. The man is facing away from me, so I can't quite make out his face.

How in the hell did this happen? Yes, I was drunk beyond intoxicated. Even so, I was with Liz and Callum. There is no

way they would have let me go home with some random stranger. Unless it's someone I know? But who?

My eyes dart around the room, looking for anything familiar as I slowly slide out of bed, extra cautious not to disturb the man sleeping next to me, whoever he is. Hopefully, I can make a clean break and get out of here without this becoming an awkward situation.

“Morning, Kat,” the deep voice drawls out just as I'm about to escape the bed.

The sound of the voice startles me, and I scream. That's when it hits me. The voice, it's familiar. Too familiar. I jump the rest of the way off the bed, the blue comforter wrapped tightly around my barely dressed body, and stare at Callum. He's lying there with the sheet draped across his waist, his hands behind his head, and a huge smile on his face.

No. Please, God, no. Not again. This was a mistake. A huge, drunken mistake. I'm certain Callum won't let me live it down.

“What the hell happened last night?” I shout at him despite my aching head. How could he let this happen?

“You're acting like you didn't enjoy every minute.”

“I most certainly did not.” At least, I don't think I did. Did I? If memory serves me right, I most likely did. I groan internally, hating myself for the bad drunken decision.

“That's not what you said last night,” he replies with a hint of amusement.

“Oh, God, I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Now, that, you said... a lot.” The sound of Callum’s laughter irritates the hell out of me and confuses me even more.

“Damn it, Callum, tell me what happened last night.”

“Nothing happened, Kat. You got wasted and lost your keys, so I brought you back here.”

“Then what?”

“Then you threw up all over yourself, then in the toilet, then on yourself again. You got out of your clothes, showered, and when I came back, you were passed out naked in the bed.” He shrugs. “Figured you would be more pissed about me touching your naked body than you would be if I just slept next to it.” He studies me for a moment. “Maybe I was wrong?”

“So, nothing happened?”

“Honey, you were too drunk to be of any use to me.”

“Okay,” I say with a sigh of relief. “Thank God.”

“Gee, thanks.”

I glance down at my phone on the nightstand. Double shit. Not only did I wake up in bed with Callum, of all people, now I’m running late because of it.

“Where are my clothes?” I ask as I glance around the room.

“The puke-stained ones? In the garbage.”

Great. I’m hungover with no clothes and no way to walk home. Not to mention, I have to see Sutton in less than an

hour. This day just keeps getting better and better.

“I’ll drive you to your place,” Callum offers. “Grab something out of the closet for now.”

“I thought I lost my keys.”

“I thought so too until in the middle of one of your puking sessions, you found them. In your bra.”

Callum lifts the sheet from his body and gets out of bed, not caring he’s exposing himself to me, which doesn’t surprise me. Callum is proud of his... package. He raises his arms above his head and stretches. Knowing I should divert my eyes and doing it are two completely different things. I take in the view I have intimate knowledge of and fondly recall enjoying before finally looking away.

“See something you like, Kat?” He laughs.

“Let’s go.” Pulling a shirt over my head, I practically drown in the thing, the black material hanging down to my knees.

Callum dresses quickly and drives me back to my place.

“Can you give me five minutes, then drop me off at the Sapphire?” I beg.

“What’s in it for me?” he asks, a shit grin on his face.

I don’t respond, just stare at him. Every ounce of anger and frustration I feel toward Sutton, I direct at Callum. It doesn’t make me feel better, but it’s the best I can do, and it actually makes Callum back down.

“Okay, okay.”

I emerge from my bedroom exactly five minutes later.

“Picture perfect,” Callum says as he appraises. “Come on, rocker boy is waiting.”

I groan at his reminder but head for the door.

When we pull up to the Sapphire, I hurry out of his car. Before I walk away, I turn back and look at him. The tough-as-nails, egotistical, womanizing jerk actually has a soft spot. I give him a small smile, not too big, out of fear of overinflating his ego.

“Thank you.”

He nods. “Oh, and Kat?”

“Yeah?”

“One week.”

“One week?” I repeat, clueless as to what he’s talking about.

He gives me a wink before driving away.

I stand there for a moment, confused, trying to figure out what the hell he’s talking about. Then it hits me—our bet.

Asshole.

Chapter 19

Kat

As I stand on the sidewalk waiting for Sutton's limo to pull up, I regret my decision to drink away my problems last night. I'm exhausted and look more like I'm rocking an eternal hangover rather than just rocking it. I feel like hell, and I'm completely unprepared for this.

Stifling my millionth yawn of the morning, I see a black limo pulling up to the Sapphire entrance.

Nine o'clock sharp.

God, I wish I could make time stand still. Pause this moment so I can keep whatever is left of my sanity a little longer. As the limo slows to a stop, I tell myself I can handle this. That I can face him.

Basically, I lie to myself. Over and over because I am far from ready, the nervous shifting from foot-to-foot proof enough. I will myself to stand still and smooth the fabric of my suit before clasping my hands in front of me. My heart is racing so fast and so loud, there's a pounding in my ears when the limo rolls to a stop directly in front of me.

This is it. Last chance to back out, suck it up, do something because, in just a moment, I'll be face to face with Sutton Cole.

Get your shit together, Kat.

The moment the door of the limo opens, I lose my breath and resolve that any chance of me getting, let alone keeping, my shit together is not an option.

One leg emerges, clad in dark denim, then before I know it, he's standing before me. His pitch-black hair is a little longer than I remember but still meticulously styled. His blue eyes, the ones I used to stare into for hours, are covered in designer sunglasses, allowing me the slightest reprieve. At least I don't have to look into them immediately. I don't have to melt into a puddle right in front of him.

The dressed-not-to-impress look of jeans and a t-shirt he's sporting is a stark contrast to the business pantsuit I opted for this morning. The one I picked because it was the least sexy, most covered thing I own.

Everything about him is different, older, more mature, yet it's all still so familiar. Especially the way he smiles at me. Even more, how his smile makes my heart melt and swell at the same time.

“Hey there, Kitty Kat.”

The deep timbre lulls me in. The nights we spent in bed, him lulling me to sleep with the songs that so easily slip from his tongue, his voice my personal sound machine.

The sound of the nickname he gave me stirred emotion in me, I'm trying to keep at bay.

“Don't call me that.”

“Aw, come on, don't be like that,” he says as he makes his way to me.

We're standing toe to toe when he slips those glasses off and floors me with those godforsaken blue eyes. The ones that make me weak in the knees. He's too close, his body too warm and inviting.

Restrain, Kat. Restrain yourself. You can do this. I give myself a quick reminder of what he did to me and why we're in this position.

“I've already checked you in. Your room is ready and waiting for you. I hope it's to your liking.” I do my best to keep my tone professional. “Please, follow me.”

I turn but haven't even taken a step when his hand grabs my arm, and I yank it away. The feel of his skin against mine burns so hot, I actually glance down to see if my skin blistered from the heat.

“Is this how it's going to be?” His voice is soft yet rough as it ripples through every piece of me.

“It's how it has to be. Professional.”

I have little choice, considering I can already feel the walls I built crumbling. If I give him even an inch, I'll be in so much trouble. He's always had this effect on me. One word, one

smile, one touch, or any combination of the three, and I was a goner.

I can tell by the look on his face, he isn't pleased with my response. Still, all he says is, "Alright."

His giving in so easily takes me by surprise. Sutton may be a lot of things, but a quitter isn't one of them. He doesn't give up until he gets what he wants—case in point, his off the chart's music career. In only five years, he went from singing in dive bars here in Vegas to having multiple platinum records. The man never quits.

"Good," I say, though my voice lacks any sort of conviction.

Luckily for me, Mac joins us.

Mac Foster is Sutton's bodyguard, manager, best friend, and God only knows what else. He stands next to Sutton, shaking his head. There's a smile on his face, one filled with judgment because he knows Sutton and me—too well—and already knows how this is going to go.

I focus my gaze on Mac. Looking at him is easier than facing Sutton. I give him a smile, one solely directed at him.

"Hi, Mac."

"Hey, Kat, good to see you."

"You, too." Stepping forward and wrapping my arms around him in a hug, I hear him chuckle as I do. "Follow me."

Positioning myself in a corner of the elevator, my eyes trained on my phone, I do everything in my power to maintain

my distance and keep Sutton at bay. Sutton, however, doesn't seem to get hint... or care. Not that it should surprise me. He's the one who orchestrated this whole thing.

He inches closer until he's standing right next to me, his arm brushing against mine.

"You look good, Kitty Kat."

Staring at my phone, I act as though I am reading a super important email when in actuality, I'm just trying to ignore him. The elevator dings, letting me know we've arrived, and the light above the door illuminates the letters PPH. Presidential Penthouse—nothing but the best for my new, least favorite client.

I step off the escalator and into the small hallway leading to his suite. Tapping my access card against the panel, I open the door, then push it open further so he can enter.

Sutton cocks his head to the side and looks at me as if I should know better.

"Ladies first."

Grandma Virginia and her lessons in manners at play. I guess there are some things that never change, no matter how rich and famous you are. I wonder if he uses those same manners with all the women he entertains, or if I'm just special.

Despite swooning internally, I roll my eyes at the gesture. Stepping into the suite before him, I point out a few highlights.

"I hope everything is to your liking, Mr. Cole."

When I turn to Mac, I see the grin he's trying to hide, but the chuckle that seeps out is undeniable. I ignore the humor he's finding in a situation I find torturous and hand him a key card. "The suite below is for you and your team. There are four bedrooms, so I assume that will accommodate everyone?"

"You're amazing, Kat. Thank you," Mac says.

As Mac and I chat, Sutton maneuvers through the suite. I'm not sure if he's looking for a problem or impressed with the room. Either way, it's the best we have, so it's all he's getting.

"This is my business card." With a professional and polite smile, I extend the card to Mac. "I am available to you twenty-four hours a day for whatever you need."

Sutton marches back into the room and stops in the dead center of it.

"Get out."

The sound, deep and dark, takes me by surprise, but I am more than happy to oblige his request and leave.

"Enjoy your stay."

I take a step toward the door.

"Not you, Kitty Kat. You stay put. Mac, give us a minute? I need to speak with Kat. Alone."

"Is something wrong with your accommodations?" I ask, knowing damn well there isn't. This room is perfection. I've filled it with everything he loves, including the item he's holding in his hand.

He holds up a bag of Swedish Fish. “They’re everywhere.”

“I aim to please.” He’s addicted. Terrible for his teeth but a hell of a lot better than other things he could be addicted to. Things he very well may be, and I just don’t know about. How would I know? How could I? It’s been so long since I’ve seen him or even heard his voice. A voice he’s using to yell at Mac.

“Mac, leave.”

Mac’s eyes dart between Sutton and me. I nod my head, letting him know it’s okay. This isn’t Mac’s problem. It’s mine, and I need to be a big girl and handle my shit, not hide behind Mac.

The minute I hear the latch on the door shut, I brace myself for whatever Sutton is about to unleash. Yelling, anger, hatred. I’m prepared for any of it, except for what he does. Sutton stalks toward me, and before I realize what’s happening, his hands reach for me, and his lips press against mine. The kiss is filled with need and hunger. He’s a famished man, dying to finally feast on his favorite meal.

I want him to devour me, to give and take whatever else he wants. I’m famished, too. I’ve wanted this, missing this, for years.

“Fucking hell, Kat,” he says a moment later when he pulls away. “How did you only get better these past few years?”

My head is spinning, and my thoughts are all over the place as he stands with me, his hands on my waist and his forehead

resting against mine. It's everything I want and everything I wish would go away.

I urge myself to leave, to walk away just like he did. If I don't do something, if I let this continue, I'm not sure I'll ever be able to stop.

"I didn't. You just want what you can't have. If there's nothing else, I'll be going." I break free of his hold and make it to the door.

"You said you're available to me twenty-four seven."

My hand freezes on the door handle.

"And?"

"And I need you. Here. Now."

My shoulders slump as my head drops. What is he trying to do to me? Doesn't he realize how hard this is for me? Or does he just not care?

"What for?"

Silence fills the room as he tries to come up with an excuse to keep me here.

"I would like a tour of the suite," he says.

When I look back at him, he's standing with his arms folded proudly across his chest and a smirk on his face.

"I'm sure you can find your own way around."

"What the customer wants..."

I curse Jack for always toting that line to customers. Sure, I give them what they want, but him letting them know that? Often it comes back to bite me in the ass... like now.

“Fine,” I say through clenched teeth. Brushing past him, I take the lead, walking through the vast suite and pointing out the obvious in short, one-word sentences. Bathroom. Study. Television. Bedroom.

Sutton’s hand grabs mine and tugs me into the last room. The bedroom. I probably should have skipped over that one.

“Sutton, stop,” I plead with him when he pulls me over the threshold.

“I just want to talk to you, Kat. I want....” He runs a hand through his styled hair. “Fuck, I want you.”

“Yeah, well, that’s too bad. You can’t have me.”

“Is that so?” he asks with a chuckle.

I’m sure the way I so easily responded to his kiss told him a different story. Maybe at that moment, it was true, but I won’t let it happen again. I refuse.

The subtle brush of his hand against my cheek sends a shiver through me.

“Don’t. Don’t do that. You ended us a long time ago. You don’t get to just waltz back in here and...” I take a few steps back so that I am out of his reach.

“And what? What exactly am I doing, Kat?”

“That,” I say, pointing at him. The look in his eyes, the smile on his lips, his amusement in all of it. He’s enjoying this. Hell, he loves it, but him being here is breaking me.

“Looking at you?”

“Looking at me like you used to. Like you’re still the guy I fell in love with.”

“I am,” he says, his voice filled with promise.

“Really? Because that kiss back there,”—I say, pointing toward the living area—“that was one hundred percent Sutton Cole, the rock star. The guy who thinks he’s invincible and can take whatever and whoever he wants.”

“That’s not true. That kiss was one hundred percent the Sutton Cole who still wants you more than he wants his next breath.”

“But not enough to be patient and wait for me.”

“Kat...”

“No. Stop. You don’t get to do this. I might have to be your casino host, but I sure as hell don’t have to like you.”

Stunning him and telling him the one thing he doesn’t want to hear—that I don’t like him—I make my escape. Heading toward the door, I swear I hear a soft apology but choose to ignore it. He owes me more than an apology, even if I’m not willing to accept it.

Standing in the small elevator lobby outside Sutton’s room, I close my eyes and take a deep breath. Being in close

proximity to Sutton again, all the air that drained out of me is refilled. My lungs expand, my head stops spinning, and for the first time since he arrived, I relax. Someone clearing their throat interrupts the moment I need to compose myself before heading back to the casino floor. When I look up, Mac's kind face and knowing smile look back at me.

"You okay?" His question sounds sincere.

"No."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry. I know this can't be easy on you," Mac says.

I'm not sure exactly why he's the one apologizing to me, but I appreciate the sentiment.

"I just don't get why he's here. Why come back? Why now?"

"I think you know why he's here, Kat. He might have to do a concert here, but if he didn't want to see you? He would have found a way out of it. You know as well as I do, he never wanted to leave. Not without you."

"I tried, Mac. I told him we would make it work. He's the one who walked away." I'm angry he's defending Sutton when I'm the one left behind. "Not me."

"You know how he gets, Kat. Once he heard you say no..." Mac shakes his head. "He overreacted and has regretted it ever since."

"Really? You really believe that? Because I don't, Mac. If he really cared? If he ever cared, he wouldn't have walked

away like he did. He wouldn't have made me choose. And he sure as hell wouldn't have been with another woman when he should have been here, with me, at my mom's funeral."

Not waiting for a response, a look, or anything really, I bolt past him and step onto the elevator, refusing to look up. My eyes are on my phone and the client I need to tend to.

Chapter 20

Sutton

When I hear the door to the suite open, I can't help wish it was Kat walking through it. Instead, it's Mac's smug face.

"Looks like that went well." He laughs as he enters the suite.

"Fuck off," I say as I pop a Swedish Fish in my mouth. One of the thousands she has scattered all over this place. Every detail, every touch of the room fits me perfectly. While I'm sure it's her job to know her clients, to give them what makes them happy, it makes me happy to know she still recalls so much about me—about us.

"I was right, wasn't I? You still want her," he says with a chuckle.

"I already told you, what's done is done. Kat and I are over."

She made that more than clear a few minutes ago. The way she looked at me—the disdain in her eyes, the fucking sadness. Sure, that tells me she still has feelings, still cares, but

her hurt and anger far surpass any positive emotion she might have directed at me.

Part of me wanted to push her out the door and never have to look at what I did to her again. The other part, the part that can never fully walk away from her, wanted to pull her in and make all of that pain go away.

Any pity I had for myself in the situation is gone. Yes, I may have been hurting, too, but it was of my doing. I decided to walk away. I decided to never return.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say, hopping to my feet.

“Where do you want to go?”

Honestly, I don’t care where we go or what we do. I just know I can’t sit here and think about Kat. I need to get out of here. Live. Be the man that I’ve become. She rejected me. She hates me. That gives me all the more reason to fit into the bad boy role I’m supposed to be portraying.

“This is Vegas, right? I’m sure I can find something to get into.” Or someone. Preferably someone who will knock the memory of that kiss right out of my mind.

Fuck it all if the taste of her isn’t burned onto my lips. I can still feel hers on mine and smell the scent of her hair. Everything about her is the same, yet somehow, so much better. She’s the girl rock ballads are made of. Every song I’ve ever written has her reflection in it. She’s my Kitty Kat.

Always has been. Always will be.

Glancing around the suite, I take stock of every amazing piece of my life. It was the right decision to leave Vegas and go to New York. The wrong decision was not waiting for her, not taking her advice and finding a way for it to work.

Now?

Now, she hates me. She hates me, and there is no way those damn grocery store flowers I used to buy her will get me out of this one.

“What are you thinking?” Mac asks, concerned.

“I’m thinking it’s time to party. Go get changed.”

Heading to the bedroom to change, the outfit I select isn’t much different from the outfit I was wearing—a black t-shirt and a dark pair of jeans, my staple, simple and easy, just the way I like things.

And Kat? Kat is definitely not easy. In fact, any remote chance I have to fix things with her would require time and effort I don’t have. One week. One week until this show, then I’m out of here. No way in hell am I staying in this town.

When I step back into the living room, Mac is sitting on the couch in the same position I left him.

“You’re seriously going out in that?” I ask with a shake of my head.

“I’m not the one trying to get laid.”

Cocky or not, I laugh. “I don’t have to try.”

While that may be what I'm doing, why I'm leaving this hotel room, the truth is after tasting Kat, there isn't a damn woman on that casino floor who can sate this hunger inside. There's only one thing I want.

It just happens to be the one thing I can never have.

The moment I step onto the casino floor, I'm rushed by a stampede of women and men alike. The women want to be with me. The men wish they were me. They all fawn and gush, asking for autographs, which I sign for them on autopilot. The scribble that is my name is something I've perfected over the years. Mac does his best to keep them at bay, but the truth is, I love it. These people, my fans, are the whole reason I even have a career. Them and Rocked Records, but still, if it wasn't for them buying the records I put out, I wouldn't be here today.

The entire time I sign autographs and smile for photos, my eyes never leave the brunette who's shooting daggers at me. For someone who supposedly doesn't give a damn, she sure can't take her eyes off me. Not that I can't talk because, let's face it, I'm doing the same thing, despite the blonde who has latched onto me.

I hear every dirty thing the woman is whispering into my ear—things she wants to do to me, things she wants me to do to her. Enticing as it all sounds, the only one I want those things with is Kat. Groaning unintentionally only makes the woman latch on harder. I drop my gaze to her for a moment—holy hell, she's gorgeous, everything I could want without even having to try.

Yet all I want is the one person I can't have. The only woman I think I have ever truly wanted.

When I shrug the woman off and allow my eyes to drift back to her, to my Kitty Kat, and see some guy approaching her, I get pissed, and irrational anger rises inside of me. I don't know who this guy is, a client, a co-worker, her boyfriend, but it doesn't fucking matter. All that matters is he's near her, and I'm not. Watching as his head dips down toward hers, my fists clench at my side, afraid he's going to kiss her, then I'll need to use them to kill him. Right here, right now.

Rather than meet her lips, he hovers near her ear as he whispers something.

She has fire in her eyes, giving the guy the same look she always gave me when she was pissed. Instinct has me wanting to rush over to make sure she's okay. Mac must sense it because I can feel his hand on my shoulder.

"Down, boy," he warns.

Kat rebounds quickly, her elbow connecting with the man's stomach. He doubles over for a second before standing and laughing. She shakes her head at him and walks away.

The blonde woman at my side is relentless, clinging and refusing to let go.

"I'll be right back." I'll say whatever I need to make my escape.

Against Mac's advice, I jog over to Kat. She's standing off to the side, her eyes on her phone.

“Hey.”

“Is there something I can do for you, Mr. Cole?” she asks, her voice beyond business professional.

I ignore the tone of her voice.

“Was that guy bothering you?”

“He always bothers me, but...”

That’s all I needed to hear. Validation. My feet move in the guy’s direction.

“Sutton,” I hear Kat call after me, even above all the bells and whistles on the casino floor. “Stop.”

It’s not until I feel her hand on me I actually stop. The delicate touch is a stark contrast to the way the other woman had been touching me. There is nothing like the feeling of Kat. Her touch? Better than anything I’ve ever felt.

I turn and look her in the eyes, begging her to see me. The real me. To see this isn’t the man I want to be. It’s the version of me that doesn’t know how to exist without her, but she doesn’t see that. She only sees the blonde who’s at my side again. She only sees the rock star, not the man behind it. That she can’t look into my eyes and see the truth hurts. We knew each other, knew what the other was thinking with just a look into their eyes.

She no longer sees the boy desperately in love with her. All she sees is the guy who functions as an asshole playboy because it’s all he can be without her. There is only one

woman he will ever love, only one woman he will ever belong to, and she hates him.

“You don’t get to waltz back into town to play hero after five years,” she shouts.

“That’s not what I’m trying to do.”

I’m not exactly sure what I’m trying to do. I know Kat. I know pushing her will only make her push back. Still, I can’t just let some guy hurt her.

“So, you weren’t going to go after Callum and punch him?” Her hands on her hips, she gives me a look that begs me to disagree with her.

“He upset you.”

“He upset me?” she scoffs. “You want to punch someone that upset me? How about starting with yourself?” She turns on her heel to walk away, to escape me.

“Do you really think I don’t beat myself up over what happened between us?” I shout. Silence settles between us, our eyes locked. “Please, Kat, can’t we just talk? Catch up? Something?”

“You want to catch up?” It’s a rhetorical question, and I’m fairly certain I won’t like her response. “You left me, my mom died, I took a job at the casino, and I never want to see you again. I think that about sums it up.”

My eyes drift down to where she’s touching me, then slowly meet hers. She yanks her hand away.

“I hate you, Sutton. I wish I had never met you.”

The “I hate you” she spews is expected but still feels like a knife in my chest. However, wishing she never met me? Fuck. The woman not only stuck me with a knife, she’s twisting it.

In typical Sutton fashion, I lash out. It’s how I was raised. It’s what I know. You get angry, then you get even.

“Back at ya,” I yell after her.

As much as I want the woman, at this moment, I mean the words. I wish I had never laid eyes on Kathryn Keller. The fucking woman is heaven, hell, and everything in between. She’s the only woman who has ever made me feel something—anything—and at this moment, I fucking hate her for it. The pain she’s making me feel, the unbearableness, is the same as the day she told me no. The day she said she wouldn’t come with me to New York.

All I can think to do is make her feel pain, too.

I turn from Kat, my hands reaching for the blonde and pulling her to me. When my lips meet hers, the fire and passion I felt with Kat aren’t there, but seeing the shocked, hurt look on Kat’s face, the pleasure is undeniable.

Fuck her. Fuck this town.

“Let’s go to my room,” I tell the woman whose name I don’t even know.

She’s more than eager to follow as I take her hand and drag her away.

We step into the elevator hand in hand, her babbling about something. Out of nowhere, Mac appears, holding the door open, and the look on his face screams he's pissed.

“What the fuck are you doing?” The anger in his voice matches the look in his eyes.

“I told you this was a bad idea. Me and Vegas, we don't mix.”

“This has nothing to do with Vegas and everything to do with Kat. If you would quit being a dick for five minutes, you might actually fix this.”

Fix it? Didn't he see the way she looked at me? Or hear the words she shouted? The woman hates me. Hell, she wishes she never met me. You don't come back from that.

My mom, she said those same words to my dad before she walked out the door. She never came back. No way in hell Kat will.

I shove his hand off the door. “Maybe I don't want to.”

I'm surprised when Mac allows the doors to shut, but I swear I hear him yell something about me being an idiot. I've been called worse.

“I'm Rose, by the way,” the woman tells me.

Christ, I had forgotten she was even there.

I rest my head back against the elevator wall. Her name is gone from my memory the minute she says it. All I can focus

on is Kat. Pressing the button to the twenty-third floor, I prepare for the slap I'm sure is coming.

Without even realizing where we were, or maybe she doesn't care, she steps off the elevator.

“Aren't you coming?”

“Not today,” I tell her as I press the door closed button. Thank Christ, for once, it actually worked.

Chapter 21

Kat

“So, how goes things with sexy, rocker boy?” Liz asks.
“Awful. Worse than I expected.”

As if it wasn't bad enough, he kissed me and made my toes curl, then kissed another woman while I had no choice but to watch. A very blonde, very busty woman in a very skimpy dress. The worst part is how good they looked together—him, the rock star, and her, the sexy little groupie.

Before the kiss even ended, I stalked off in anger, slammed the door to my office, and sat at my desk to cry. I stayed that way for the rest of the day before sneaking out and heading home. Now, here I am again, hiding in my office.

“What happened?”

“To start, he kissed me, then we fought, and...”

“Then you had make-up sex?”

“Yeah, except with another woman,” I shout into the phone, hating the anger and hurt I hear in my voice. Even more, I hate that Liz heard it, too. I brace myself for whatever she's about to throw my way.

First comes the laughter, followed by her telling me, “Someone sounds jelly.”

“Jelly? Seriously, Liz? Try furious. He walks in here as if nothing happened. Then he kisses me without permission. Not even an hour later, he tries to storm over to Callum and beat the shit out of him for making me mad, then he kisses some other woman right in front of me.” I spew out in rapid succession all the things that have been running through my head since yesterday.

Anger, hurt, love, desire. Yes, I hate the man, but my heart sure as hell loves him. The two are not mutually exclusive. If anything, it’s my love for him that makes me hate him. No matter how hard I’ve tried, my heart still loves him. My mind still wanders to him. And my damn body still desires him. Sutton has some sort of hold over me that’s impossible to break. Or deny.

“I’m not jealous. I just...” I sigh as I take a seat at my desk. “I’m not really sure what I am.”

“Why don’t you just talk to him? Let him explain? Maybe there’s...”

“There’s what? A good explanation for him leaving like he did? Yeah, he’s a selfish prick.”

“He was following his dream and escaping his nightmare.”

“All he had to do was wait for me. If he’d just given me time to take care of my dying mother, I would have joined him. It didn’t have to be all or nothing. He gave me an

impossible choice and acted like a child when I picked my dying mother over him.”

“Okay, when you put it that way.”

“There is no other way to put it. I know why he had to leave, Liz. Hell, I wanted him to go. I just... I wish he hadn’t given up on us so quickly.”

He gave up. He didn’t even try. Instead, he walked away without looking back.

Even then, I needed him and was willing to forgive him, so I went to him. I even knocked on the door. Sutton didn’t answer. A woman wearing one of his shirts did.

Sure, he left, we were over, and he was free to do whatever he wanted, but to see that? After having just lost my mom?

Before Liz can try to defend him or make me feel better, my phone sounds with a text. I’m saved. The smile on my face is automatic when I see it’s from Anthony Russo, my top client. My favorite client.

“Liz, I need to go. I have someone waiting on me.”

“Sutton?”

“No. Someone much more palatable.”

“A client,” she sighs.

“A client.” Who doesn’t make my blood boil, my heart race, and my panties wet. “I’ll call you later.”

I head to the casino floor, more specifically, the Diamond Room, our high roller area, where I know Anthony will be. As

soon as I see him, I pull him in for a hug.

“I didn’t know you were coming in this weekend,” I say as my arms wrap around him.

Usually, he calls me before his arrival to give me a heads-up. There’s a reason Anthony is my favorite. He’s thoughtful, rich, not demanding, and he loves to blow all of his money right here at the Sapphire. It also doesn’t hurt he’s pretty easy on the eyes. Not that I would ever cross that line. He’s a client. End of story. He just happens to be one who tips generously in visual pleasure.

“I ran into Jack, and he said you would be tied up all weekend, so I just...”

“Anthony,” I scold him. “I always have time for you.” I pull up the reservation app on my phone. “Is your room okay? Where did they put you?”

“Kat, relax. It’s fine. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing. Take care of your other client, and uh... just get me an autograph.” Anthony winks at me.

“Of course,” I say, though I’m not sure Sutton will do me any favors after yesterday. “I didn’t realize you were a Sutton Cole fan.”

“Who isn’t?”

Me, for one.

My phone begins to ring and when I don’t answer, it goes off again.

“Must be that important client of yours,” Anthony teases.

When I glance down the phone, Mac’s name is on my screen.

“Something like that. I have to take care of this, but forget what Jack said. If you need me, you call me.”

“Will do,” he says as he presses a kiss on my cheek.

“And we are having dinner this week,” I tell him as I rush off toward the elevators.

“I wouldn’t miss it.”

The message tells me to meet Mac at Sutton’s suite. Standing before the elevator, I impatiently wait for the doors to open, my foot tapping on the floor.

“Everything okay? You look a little... flustered,” Callum teases as he stands next to me at the elevator.

“Just fine,” I lie.

“If taking care of Sutton and Anthony is too much for you...” The suggestion is more than enough for me to catch his drift.

“It’s not. I can handle it.”

“Are you sure? You wouldn’t want to upset your special client.”

“I can handle Sutton,” I reply as I step onto the elevator.

“I’m sure that’s what he’s banking on. You handling him... in all the right ways. Frankly, so am I.” He rubs his hands

together. “I can’t wait for the sweet victory of winning this bet.”

“You won’t be winning anything. I can promise you that. If for no other reason than the fact I don’t sleep with my clients.”

“Are you insinuating I do?” Callum feigns shock, his hand pressing to his chest. “Even I have morals, and not sleeping with clients is one of them.”

“You? Morals? Who would have thought?” I tease with a smirk as the door to the elevator shuts.

The moment the doors open on the PPH floor, I square my shoulders and brace for the possibility of running into Sutton. I would hope Mac wouldn’t do that to me, not under false pretenses, but right now, I wouldn’t put anything past the two of them. For the life of me, I still can’t figure out why Sutton is back in town.

Yes, there’s the show, but why in the world would he agree to a show here? A place he left and never even so much as looked back. Not even for me.

I knock on the door, and relief washes over me when Mac opens it a few moments later, with a broad, welcoming smile.

“Thanks for coming.”

Stepping inside, my eyes dart around, looking for Sutton.

“No problem.”

“You can relax. He isn’t here.”

“And here I thought you two were inseparable,” I tease, trying to make light of the situation and relax my nerves.

That’s when it dawns on me exactly what kind of occasion might make them inseparable, I groan.

“He’s not doing that, either.” Mac laughs. “Though it’s nice to see you still care.”

“I assure you, I don’t.” I hate myself for lying to Mac, but it’s insane how relieved I am that he isn’t with a woman. Doing my best to clear my head, I push out a deep breath and focus on what my client needs from me. “What can I do for you, Mac?”

“He’s working on some new material,” Mac tells me, although I didn’t ask.

I instantly know where he is—the baseball field at the park just outside of my old neighborhood. It was his favorite spot, the place where he went to think and to write. He’s at his favorite spot. Even back then, the baseball field had seen better days. I can only imagine what it must look like now. There isn’t a doubt in my mind that’s where he is. Picturing him sitting there, in the dugout, his back against the chain-link fence, makes me smile.

“What is with him and that baseball field?”

“No clue.” Mac shrugs his shoulders. “Never would tell me. I always assumed it was to be close to you.” He pauses, waiting for a reaction that I refuse to give him, and when I don’t, he continues. “Anyway, about why I called you here.”

“Is there an issue?”

“No, not at all. It’s more of a warning.”

“That sounds promising,” I scoff.

“Nothing that bad, I swear. It’s just... we’re going to have a bit of a party here in the suite tomorrow night, and...”

I silently pray this isn’t the part where Sutton demands my presence because he thinks he can. The man has already pulled the ‘at your disposal’ card once.

“And?” I ask, urging him to continue.

“It might get rowdy.”

Whew.

“Got it. So, I should have an itemized list of what everything costs ready for you in the morning? The Sapphire might be thrilled to have Mr. Cole here, but we won’t be funding his destructive behavior.”

“Mr. Cole?” Mac chuckles. “Of course not, Kat. We wouldn’t expect that.”

“Good. Will there be anything else?”

“You can take the professional tone with Sut, but this is me, Kat.” He gestures to the couch. “Can we just talk for a minute? Catch up?”

“If this is some ploy and Sutton pops out of a closet, you’re in big trouble, Malcolm,” I inform him as I take a seat on the couch.

“I told you, Sutton’s off working on songs. I just wanted to catch up, see how you’re doing.”

“I’m great. I love my job. I love my life. I’m happy.” At least, I was until Sutton came back to town. Now, I’m more like a crazy, emotional mess.

“That’s great. Are you seeing anyone?”

I shake my head. I should have known better.

“That’s none of Sutton’s business.”

“It’s not Sutton asking.”

“Oh? Well then,” I say as I run a finger down his chest.

His hand grips my wrist and yanks it away.

“Kat.”

The way he says my name sounds like a warning as if he’s reprimanding me for being a bad girl.

“Exactly. So, you and Sutton can both stay out of my love life.”

“Then there is one?”

“This was a mistake.” Standing from the couch, I head toward the door.

“You going to hate me forever now, too?”

Mac’s arms are folded across his chest when I turn to look at him. He’s got this fatherly tone he’s taking with me.

“Another stunt like this, maybe I will.”

“He made a mistake, Kat.”

“A mistake? That was one hell of a mistake, making me choose between him and my dying mother, Mac.” Uttering those words, I fight back the emotion and the tears that threaten to fall. The selfishness behind them. The demanding tone when he said them. The lack of emotion he showed when I was completely devastated by his request.

“Don’t tear the whole place apart tomorrow.” Slamming the door behind me, I walk out.

Chapter 22

Sutton

After three hours of sitting here, the sheet of paper in front of me is blank. The whole reason I came to the field was to write and work on a song I had been struggling with for weeks. This field with its broken stands, overgrown grass, and missing bases was always where I went to write. The field was left to wither away, unkempt, and uncared for. Much like I was as a child. My mother gone, my father...

I shake my head, trying to rid it of the thoughts seeping in. That's not why I came here. Neither are the thoughts of Kat I can't seem to clear from my mind. I knew I missed her. I knew I wanted to see her again. What I didn't know was how much it would affect me.

Seeing her again damn near brought me to my knees. She was more beautiful than I remembered, more vibrant. She was everything I missed, with pieces of things I never knew I wanted. The quiet, sweet girl I knew was all grown-up and much less quiet, and something tells me, much less sweet, but in a good way. A way I wish was only intended for me.

That was just the physicality of it. She wreaked havoc on my heart the moment I laid eyes on her. For the first time in years, I didn't feel empty. I didn't feel broken. I just... felt. Love and healing, need and want, completeness I haven't felt since I walked away from her that night.

Why the fuck did I walk away?

A better question is, why the fuck did I come back?

Goddamn Mac and his stupid lies and bullshit.

Shoving off the ground, I brush the dust off my pants. Obviously, clearing my head isn't going to happen. As I step off the field, my eyes catch the sign of the trailer park down the street. The very one that I grew up in. Staring at it for a moment, memories of growing up there, of my father, all come flooding back. I tell myself to turn around and go back to the rental car parked on the street, but my feet have me walking toward my former home.

I'm drawn to it, sucked in like a bad dream, which is exactly what I feel like I'm in as I stand in front of the trailer that I once called home. The man sitting on the steps still instills fear despite his weak and fragile appearance. The drugs and alcohol have taken over, made him even less of a man than I recall him being.

Still, the little boy buried inside, who was physically and emotionally abused, wants to cower and run. The man in me, the one who knows he can't hurt me anymore, wants to hurt him back.

I want my revenge. I want him to feel the pain I felt.

As much as I want it, I won't stoop to his level. I've spent the better part of my life trying not to be like him, to be his complete opposite. I won't change that now. Not just because I'm finally strong enough to give him a taste of his own medicine.

"What are you doing here?" he asks. His voice is gruff and filled with anger. Not that I can ever recall a time it wasn't.

I wish I fucking knew the answer to his question, but I don't have a damn clue why my feet led me here or why I didn't fight them harder.

"I was in the neighborhood," I reply, standing before him with my hands shoved in my pockets.

"You and that stupid baseball field." He shakes his head. The words falling from his lips leave me stunned. I can't believe he remembers. Just like when I was a kid, I want to argue with him, tell him it's not stupid. That I went there because it was the only place I recalled having happy memories. Because I just wanted to feel happiness.

Then I remember, there's no use. The argument my response would elicit isn't worth it. Regardless of how much I feel like a kid in his presence, I'm not anymore. I don't have to explain anything to him.

"I heard you were in town. Didn't figure I would see you, though."

"Didn't plan on visiting."

“Then why are you?”

I shrug, the only response I can give him because I really don't know why I'm here or what drew me to this place. Maybe it's to show him how well my life turned out despite him. To show the asshole, I'm not a loser who wouldn't amount to anything like he always told me. Instead, I stand here in front of him, strong and healthy, rich, and famous.

Showing him, I'm better than he could have ever hoped to be.

“It was a mistake,” I say, turning around to leave.

“Damn right you were.”

My fists clench at my sides as I whip back around to face him again. Years of anger and sadness erupt, and the things I never said as a kid spew out.

“Fuck you,” I shout, not caring who hears or sees. “Fuck you for not caring about me, not caring for me. I didn't ask to be brought into this world, but you punished me for your fucking mistake. Don't worry, though. You never have to worry or think about me again. As far as I'm concerned, you're dead to me.”

My feet move quicker with each step until I'm running. Bolting from the pain, the hatred I saw in his eyes. Coming here was more than a mistake. It was goddamn torture. The words I shouted, truthful as they are, weren't as freeing as I thought they would be. Saying them, a small part of me hoped there would be a sense of relief.

Nothing.

Nothing but pure agony at his hand. Again.

The car ride back to the Sapphire was more than ample time for my mind to wander to places it didn't need to be, roads I didn't need to travel down. Just like the path I took to that godforsaken trailer park. I shouldn't have allowed it, but I did, just like the memories and emotions that flood me.

Leaving the rental car at the valet, I head straight to the nearest bar and demand, not request, a drink from the bartender, my fist slamming on the countertop. With wide eyes, he serves me the shot. Slamming it down, I demand another.

Why I think this is going to work when it never has before, I'm not sure. There has only been one thing that ever calmed the storm inside me, and she's standing just a few feet away.

Kat's head is tossed back, her dark hair cascading down her back, a genuine smile on her face, and some guy's arm around her. It's a different guy, not the one I saw her with yesterday. This guy is into her. I can tell in the few moments I watch them in the way he touches her, the look in his eye. He wants my Kitty Kat.

Downing one more shot, I slam the glass onto the counter and storm over to them.

"Get your hands off her," I yell as I step in front of him. My eyes lock with his, and I stare him down, daring him to challenge me.

“Excuse me?”

Where there should be fear or at least concern, all I see is amusement. He doesn't give a damn I'm pissed or that I want his hands off her. The smug smile on his face only infuriates me more.

“I said, get your hands off her.” My words are an order, no question about it, but an order he isn't heeding. Every second that ticks by with his hands are on her, I get more pissed and more prepared to knock his pretty head off his fucking shoulders.

“Sutton,” Kat scolds me. I can see the warning in her eyes. She's telling me to stop, to back down.

Why is she scolding me when this asshole has his hands on her? When all I'm doing is trying to fucking protect her?

Maybe I'm trying to protect what's mine, but still.

“Listen, man...”

“Don't tell me to fucking listen. Do you have any idea who I am?” I shout, taking another step toward him, closing the distance between us.

“That's enough,” Kat says. As she speaks, she steps out of the guy's arms toward me. When her hands reach me and force me to step back, I put my arm around her and tug her against me. She says my name again, warning me, but I don't feel like listening because having her this close feels too damn good. Hell, if he can have his hands on her, why shouldn't I? She's mine, whether or not she wants to admit it.

I press my lips against hers, hard and demanding. I get a taste, the slightest taste of her before hands are on me, yanking me away.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” It’s Mac... a very pissed Mac.

The guy I wanted to punch resumes his place at Kat’s side.

“I’m fine, Anthony, really,” she tells him.

“Of course, she’s fine, Anthony. I would never fucking hurt her.” Only I did. I’m the reason that he’s at her side, not me. I’m the reason we’re broken. Unrepairable.

Kat’s standing there, tears in her eyes. “Get him out of here, Mac.”

Mac’s hands are on me, dragging me toward the elevators.

“I wouldn’t hurt you, Kitty Kat. I love you.” My words slur as they slip out.

I hadn’t intended on saying them, but the alcohol is controlling me, and it’s doing a fucking doozy on my heart. The words are out there, and I don’t regret them. Not a single one of them because it’s true. I love her. Always have. Always will.

“She’s mine, asshole,” I tell the guy. “I was her first, and you damn well better believe I’ll be her last.”

Dragging me until we’re near the elevators, Mac slams me against the wall next to it and angrily jabs the button.

“Taking the bad boy thing to a whole new level today, huh?”

I'm about to give him a smartass reply when Kat walks up.

“What in the hell was that?”

“That was me staking my claim on you.” I smile. She's here instead of with him, even if it's because she's pissed. If she's pissed, then she still cares. At least, that's what I keep telling myself.

“Staking a claim? You realize if you hadn't left me high and dry, you wouldn't have to do that, right?” Pacing in front of me, the sound of her heels clicking on the tile floor reverberate in my head. “And not that it's any of your business, but he's a client, you idiot. Nothing more.”

“Bullshit. I saw the way he was looking at you. Believe me, I know that look.”

“What if he was? What do you care? Where's your little blonde friend from yesterday? Tired of staking your claim on her already?”

“Jealous, Kitty Kat?” Shoving off the wall, I sway, and the room spins. “You wish it was you I was fu—”

Mac's hand claps over my mouth. “Enough.” The elevator doors open, and he shoves me inside, my back hitting the wall with a thud.

I hear the click of heels on the tile floor and know that Kat followed.

“Let him say it, Mac.”

“This isn’t the time or place, Kat,” Mac’s voice of reason interjects. “Go. You both need to cool off.”

“Tell douchebag I say hi,” I say as Kat exits the elevator.

“Fuck you,” she shouts back.

“So professional,” I taunt.

Luckily, the elevator doors close before our little tantrums escalate even further.

“What the fuck has gotten into you?” Mac yells.

My head rests against the mirrored wall, my eyes looking up at the ceiling. The facade slips away.

“I saw my dad today.”

His sigh fills the elevator, anger dissipating and turning to understanding. We both know what I just did wasn’t fucking right. Mac also knows what seeing my dad does to me. Destructive behavior is always the end result.

“Jesus, Sutton, why?”

“Because I’m a fucking idiot.” I slide down the elevator wall and sit on the floor, my head resting in my hands.

“What did he say?”

“That I was a mistake. I mean, I knew he thought that. Fuck, I’ve heard him say it before, but today, after all these years...” I turn my head and look at Mac where he stands near the doors, ensuring they don’t open. “I can’t do this, man. I need to get this show done and get the fuck out of this town.”

Looking down at me, protecting me, Mac nods. “Okay.”

No questions asked. No arguments.

I tried, for his sake and mine, but I can't live like this. I can't live near him because I'll always be drawn back. I'll always hope for the approval I'll never get. It's why I had to leave. It's why I worked so damn hard at my music. I was willing to do whatever it took to get away from that man. Away from the innate desire to earn his love and respect. Even if that meant leaving Kat.

After today?

I'm ready to do it again.

Chapter 23

Sutton

I wake up in the afternoon, and I'm pissed. Pissed about my dad. Pissed about Kat. Pissed at Mac and the look he's giving me.

"We need to talk," Mac tells me as he hands me my black coffee.

"I already told you, I can't do this. I can't take that residency."

"I know." Leaning against the wall, he sips his own coffee. "That's not what I want to talk about." I look at him expectantly, waiting for him to continue. "I talked to Kat yesterday before everything went down."

"And?" I ask, unsure where he's going with all of this.

"Did you really ask her to choose between you and her mom?"

Whatever emotion I felt toward Kat last night, that moment of weakness when I told her I loved her, is out the window. She outed me to Mac. The only person in my life who didn't think I was a complete asshole.

“I, uh..” Running my hand through my hair, I pace the room. “I didn’t mean to. I just...”

What, Sutton? She told you she couldn’t leave her dying mother, so you tried to force her hand? Because that’s exactly what happened. That’s exactly what I did and why I should be pissed at myself—not her.

“I fucked up, okay?” I shout. “I fucked up and ruined everything. Is that what you want to hear?”

“What I want to hear is why? Why in the hell would you do something like that?”

I can see the disappointment in his eyes, and I’m instantly reminded of the same look my father gave me yesterday.

“I was hurt. Her telling me no hurt me, and I acted out. Christ, I was eighteen. I didn’t know what the fuck I was doing or saying. Now... now I don’t know how to make any of it better.”

I recall the look Kat gave me when I first got here, the disdain in her eyes, the fuck you. There is no way in hell she wants to forgive me. She’s perfectly content hating me. As she should be because I hate me, too. I hate myself for leaving her. For being pissed when I should have been understanding. For walking away from the person who showed me what unconditional love meant.

“For starters, you could quit being a dick,” Mac suggests. While it’s meant to ease the tension at the mention of my little lie, I can’t help but think he’s right. Not only was I a dick

when I gave her that ultimatum, I was one when I left and even now that I'm back. In all these years, not once did I ever attempt to do anything to make it right—to apologize.

“It’s too late.”

“It’s never too late.”

“What about that guy?”

“What guy?”

The guy who had his hands on her. The one touching her in ways no one but I should be allowed to. “The one from last night.”

“You mean the one she said is just a client? A guest of the casino?” He takes a sip of his coffee. “Just. Like. You.”

“She wouldn’t let a client touch her like that.”

“No, what she wouldn’t do is let you touch her like that, and that’s what’s pissing you off, isn’t it? Never mind the fact you brought some chick back to your room the other night just to piss her off.”

“Nothing happened,” I tell him, tossing the covers back and getting out of bed.

She doesn’t know that, though. As I sip my coffee, letting his words settle over me, I can’t help but wonder if maybe that was going on with that guy last night. Maybe seeing me the other night with that woman bothered her more than she wants to admit. Maybe she was trying to get me back with that douche.

If that's how she wants to play things, I'm in. I slide on a pair of fresh jeans and a shirt.

"Two can play at that game," I say as I grab my wallet and head for the door.

"Wait, what? What are you going to do, Sut?" Mac scrambles out of his chair to follow me.

I ignore his incessant questions on the way down to the casino floor. With a grin, I step up to the craps table. The dealer greets me by name, and while I acknowledge him, my focus is on Kat, who is standing nearby, watching every move I make.

Perfect.

Mac is standing close, closer than usual.

"I thought I said to quit being a dick, not be more of one."

I shrug my shoulders, ignoring his comment.

"What exactly do you think you're doing?"

"Enjoying Vegas," I say loudly, my arms extended in the air.

People cheer, and now that my presence is officially known, a crowd gathers around the table. I scope out the onlookers, looking for someone I know will irritate Kat. There's a woman with red hair and oversized tits standing nearby. She's perfect. Not for me, but definitely to piss Kat off. With a nod of my head, I summon her over, keeping an eye on Kat, who is now moving closer.

The redhead saunters toward me with a wicked smile and come-fuck-me eyes. I make no secret of how I check her out, my eyes looking her up and down, my tongue wetting my lips. I might look, but she isn't doing a damn thing for me.

“Hello there, gorgeous. Want to blow me?”

Kat is standing off to the side, close enough to hear every word. She's also close enough for me to hear the scoff of disgust she makes when I say it.

“Just the dice?” she asks, her fingers running down my chest.

“For now. We'll move on to other things later.”

The woman leans in, presenting her tits to me like a damn gift, her lips purse, and she blows, soft and slow. I have to give her credit, the woman knows what she's doing, and under different circumstances, I would have absolutely no problem seeing for myself what else she's capable of.

The only purpose she's serving tonight is to blow on my dice while pissing Kat off.

“Seven,” the dealer calls out. Apparently, she's serving as my lucky charm, too.

“Looks like my luck is improving,” I say to her as I toy with a strand of her hair.

She turns slightly and looks behind her. A few seconds later, another woman approaches, a brunette whose boobs surpass that of the first woman in both size and magnitude.

“This is my friend. We’re both big fans and willing to blow whatever you need us to,” the red-haired woman informs me.

The newcomer nods excitedly, giving me a good representation of what she would look like blowing something. Kat sees it, based on her disgusted expression.

“Whatever I need, huh?” I let out a low whistle. “Oh, the possibilities.”

“Are you going to shoot the dice or what?” Kat snaps. Her cheeks flush the moment we lock eyes, her outburst giving her away. “You’re holding up the game.”

“Come on, Kitty Kat. Why don’t you come blow for me?”

She stalks over, cocks her head to the side as though she’s sizing me up.

“If only your dice were as big as your ego.”

“My dice are just fine. Would you like a reminder?”

“I remember just fine,” Kat replies.

Moving past Red, I take a step closer to Kat.

“Show me, Kat. Show me you remember how good we are together.”

“I said I remember. I said nothing about it being good,” she rebuts.

“Ouch.”

“Enjoy your evening, Mr. Cole.”

“Oh, I will. There is plenty to enjoy right here.” Stepping back, I put my arms around the two women flanking either side of me.

“A slut buffet. Enjoy,” Kat spits out as she walks away, straight toward the man I saw her with yesterday.

My new friends blow on the dice again, and I roll.

Craps.

Yep, just my luck.

Chapter 24

Kat

“Are we going to talk about it or drink about it?” Anthony asks as he watches me from across the table.

We're at the dinner I made him promise to have with me. The one he forced me into when he saw me arguing with Sutton once again.

I raise my glass of wine as a reply.

“Aside from saying I'm sorry, there's nothing left to say.”

Anthony sits back in his chair, arms folded across his chest and a warm smile on his face.

“You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Are you kidding me? I have been acting so beyond unprofessional.”

“It happens.” Anthony shrugs. “You're still my favorite casino host.”

I reach across the table and squeeze his hand.

“Thank you for being so understanding.”

“What I don’t understand is what happened between you two.” Anthony takes a sip of his scotch. “Clearly, there are a lot of unresolved feelings, pretty powerful ones, by the looks of it.”

“We dated back in high school. He left to become a famous rock star, and now he’s back.”

It’s more than I should give him, but a part of me wants to spill my guts. I want to let the tears fall and release all the toxic emotions Sutton’s return has stirred up.

“You still love him.”

“I don’t want to, if that counts.”

“Sorry, but no. So, tell me, if you still love him, why don’t you try to work it out?”

“Honestly?” Anthony nods. “Partially because I’m scared, worried he’ll just walk away again.”

“And?”

“When I tried to make things work, he refused and walked away.”

“So, you’re being a martyr?”

“I prefer to think of it as getting revenge. Well deserved revenge.”

“At your own expense? Doesn’t seem like the greatest plan.”

“Never said it was plan, let alone a good one. It just kind of... happened.”

It happened because I can't control myself around Sutton. When we were in love, we were the happiest couple in existence. When we were fighting, we were combative as hell. Back then, the happiness outweighed the fighting, but now, the tables have flipped. We're no longer lovers with occasional lover spats. We're enemies, with long-lost love feelings still ingrained deep inside of us.

"You deserve to be happy."

The man sitting next to me is the man I should be attracted to. Smart, successful, kind, the guy who calls his mother every day and spoils the women he dates with affection—not gifts. He's all the things I miss about Sutton without the things I hate—his temper, the childish tantrums, the extreme jealousy. As perfect as Anthony seems, I'm not attracted to him in the slightest.

"Thank you. Can we talk about something else? Like you? What about you? Any special ladies in your life?"

Anthony finishes his scotch and sets the glass back on the table.

"Not at the moment."

"But there is someone?"

There's a flush on Anthony's cheeks.

"I get why you didn't want to talk about this stuff."

"Oh, come on, tell me."

“It doesn’t matter.” He shakes his head. “She works for me, so it wouldn’t be appropriate.”

“Believe me, I would quit a job in a heartbeat for a shot with you.”

“I appreciate the sentiment, but this woman...” He blows out a breath. “It’s complicated.”

“You are preaching to the choir.” I can’t help but laugh, completely understanding how he feels. It’s how I feel about Sutton. The attraction. The feelings. The tangled web. What feels like it should be so simple is anything but.

The waitress sets our meals in front of us. I take this opportunity to change the subject. Our usual lighthearted conversation got a little deep tonight. It’s time to return to normal.

“See the couple in the corner?” I whisper.

Anthony looks in the direction that my head is tilted, then nods.

“The one where the guy is... sucking on the woman’s finger? What the hell?”

“Yep, that one. Let’s just say, one of them is my client, and that is not his spouse’s finger he’s sucking.”

Anthony’s smile is instant. “Please tell me you don’t play these games with all your clients. I’m becoming afraid.”

“I assure you, Anthony, the things I do with you, I don’t do with anyone else.” The words come out wrong, the double

entendre behind them, not intentional in the slightest. “That’s not what I meant. I just—”

There’s no need to finish my sentence because there is no way Anthony can hear me over his laughter. I slap his arm across the table.

“Wish I would have known that was part of the package.”

“Oh, shush,” I say, laughing right along with him.

Anthony quiets, his head nodding in the opposite direction.

“See that woman over there? The table by the window?”

“Mm-hmm.” I stare at him intently, curious where he’s going with this.

“I went on a date with her, took her back to my room, and...”

I check the woman out. Short doesn’t even describe her dress. The hair extensions? Poorly done, and her makeup? Way too heavy. Very much not the type of woman I would have expected Anthony to date.

“Then found out she was actually a man,” he tells me.

“What?” I gasp and look back at the woman.

“Luckily, I found out before we got too far.”

“Oh my God. That had to be an awkward conversation.”

“Actually,” he says, scrubbing his hand over his chin. “Monique was quite understanding. I felt like a fucking idiot.”

Thankfully, the rest of our dinner goes back to silly stories and laughter, not having to think about Sutton for a little while.

“Thank you,” I tell Anthony as we head out of the restaurant. “I really needed this.”

“Anything for you,” he says, pressing a kiss to my temple. “Are you sure I can’t give you a ride?”

“I want to walk. I need some time to clear my head.”

“Be safe,” he tells me before he climbs into the car the valet just pulled up for him. “Oh, and Kat?”

“Yeah?”

“At least consider giving this guy another chance. You’re clearly still in love with him, and from what I saw, there’s no doubt he still loves you. We all make mistakes. What matters is what we learn from them.”

Watching Anthony drive away, his words stick in my mind.

Chapter 25

Kat

“Hey, Jessie, what’s up?” My cell is in my hand on speakerphone, leaving her panicked voice for all the world to hear. At least the people walking the Vegas strip.

“Complaints. So many complaints. Noise. Things breaking,” she rattles off.

Sutton.

“I’ll be there in five. Just let everyone know it’s being handled and comp them a free dinner in one of the restaurants.”

Doing an about-face, I head toward the Sapphire. I’m slightly tipsy and a whole lot sad, but there’s no rest for the wicked, certainly not when Sutton’s involved.

When I exit the elevator on Sutton’s floor, Mac is standing at the door.

“Hey, Kat,” Mac yells over the noise.

“You have to stop this,” I shout back.

“What? I can’t hear you?”

I would think it's some sort of joke, but I can barely hear myself, let alone him. The music is insanely loud, worse than any concert I've been to, and there's an abundance of drunk men and women streaming in and out of the room.

"Where is he?"

When Mac doesn't answer, I grab for the door handle.

"You can't go in there."

"Like hell, I can't." I push through, knowing damn well he won't physically stop me.

Stepping into the room is like stepping into an alternate universe. I've seen a lot in my years at the Sapphire, but nothing like this. There are so many people tucked into the room, I can barely move, far exceeding the ordinance for the fire code, not to mention several dozen other laws.

What the hell is this? What happened to the guy I knew? The one who hated parties and crowds. The guy who preferred to spend quiet nights at home with me on the couch, watching movies with my mother. How did he turn into this?

I make my way through the room, asking, "Where's Sutton?" to every person I encounter.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse the two women Sutton was with earlier and brace to see him with them, but he isn't. In fact, there's no sign of him anywhere.

Needing to catch my breath, I step onto the balcony.

“There she is,” a voice says. “I knew you would be back for more.”

When I turn, I see the guy who grabbed my ass when I asked if he knew where Sutton was.

“Like hell, I am.”

Whoever the guy was talking to slaps him upside his head. My eyes adjust to the dim lighting and see Sutton.

“Sorry, he’s an asshole,” Sutton steps out from the shadows.

“A handsy asshole.”

Sutton’s eyes darken as his body tenses. “What’d you do?”

“Temper, temper, Mr. Cole.” The sound of my voice seems to pull him away from his nearing tirade. He stares at me for a beat before turning back to the guy.

“Hands off. Understood?”

The guy nods, refusing to make eye contact with Sutton.

“Give us a minute, will you?”

“Sure thing, Sut.”

A moment later, the ass grabber is gone, and Sutton and I are alone.

“Kat?” I hear his voice, but I’m afraid to look in its direction. Diverting my eyes from the ground where they dropped the moment we were alone, I return them to him.

“Yeah?”

“You okay? Are you sure he didn’t...?”

“He grabbed my ass and immediately let go when I told him to. No big deal.”

“If he upset you, it’s a big deal to me.”

“What about you upsetting me? Is that a big deal? Because you being back here...” I shake my head, my emotions threatening to explode.

“It’s not easy for me to be back here,” he says as if he can read my mind. “And not because of my dad. Though, that wasn’t exactly fun either.”

“You saw your dad?” I ask, shock and concern filling my voice.

“Yesterday.”

His out-of-control drunken behavior yesterday certainly makes more sense now.

“Sorry about that, by the way.” He runs his hand through his hair. “I was out of line.”

“You can say that again.”

“I’m sorry. Seeing him, anyone, with their hands on you just puts me in a rage.”

I know the feeling all too well. I felt the same thing the moment I saw him with the blonde the other night.

Slowly, Sutton makes his way toward me. My eyes focus on him, and I can’t help but admire the view of the man he’s become. Solid muscle, a strong, broad chest—everything is still him, just to the exponential power.

He looks good.

He looks so damn good.

I swallow down the lump that forms in my throat at how close he's gotten.

"Just don't let it happen again."

A sly smile spreads across his face. "I make no promises." He glances down at his hands then back to me. "Now, you want to tell me what you're doing here? I know it's not for the reason I wish it was."

What reason is that? It's the question I want to ask, but don't dare. Even if he was sorry and I was willing to forgive him, his behavior these past couple of days says otherwise.

"The party."

"What about it?"

"You need to shut it down."

"Why?"

"For starters, you are violating the fire code, and more importantly, you're disturbing my guests. Guests who will not bolt at the first sign things are getting tough."

"Way to slide that dig in there," he says before taking a sip of his beer.

"What can I say? You bring out the worst in me."

"We used to bring out the best in each other."

"That was then."

“And this is now. For me? Nothing has changed.”

He takes a step toward me, but for every step he takes in my direction, I take one back. His strides are long and even, the intention written in his eyes unmistakable. My back hits the wall, and I’m stunned into silence. After all these years, Sutton’s body is pressed against mine, and my resolve is melting just like Liz said it would.

“God, you are gorgeous,” he compliments as he gently brushes the back of his free hand against my cheek.

I close my eyes, the touch sending a hot jolt right through my body. My heart races, and I know he feels it. Whatever he’s doing, I don’t want him to stop, so I stand here, breathless, waiting.

“You’re mine, Kat. My gorgeous, Kitty Kat.”

“I don’t belong to anyone,” I say without conviction.

“You belong to me,” he says, the timbre of his voice causing my body to tremble. Then just like that, the heat of his body is gone.

My eyes flutter open to find him clear across the room, the beer bottle pressed against his lips.

The moment he’s away, the anger returns. Anger at him for leaving, anger for him messing with my emotions. Anger for this stupid damn party that is making my job infinitely harder.

“Shut the party down,” I demand.

“Anything for my girl... under one condition.”

Even though he isn't facing me, I know there's a ghost of a smile on his face.

"And that is?"

"Have dinner with me."

"Absolutely not."

"Then that's a no on the party stopping anytime soon, Kitty Kat."

The nerve. Who the hell does he think he is blackmailing me into dinner? Between Jack's mantra of whatever the client wants, the client gets, and my desperate need to get this party shut down and the rest of our guests happy, I don't have much choice.

I huff and puff, then blow out a deep breath as I throw my hands in the air.

"Fine. Just make it stop."

Sutton puts his phone to his ear and makes a call. Moments later, the music silences, and Mac's voice bellows through the suite.

"Thank you."

"Dinner, eight o'clock."

Turning, he heads back into the party, leaving me standing alone on the terrace.

Chapter 26

Sutton

“**R**ise and shine sleeping beauty,” Mac says. “You have a busy day, including a meeting in twenty minutes.”

“That’s plenty of time,” I say as I roll over, a huge grin plastered on my face.

“If I didn’t know better, I would think you got your dick wet last night. Kat finally give in?”

“Not exactly, but she did agree to have dinner with me.”

“You’re that excited over dinner?” Mac laughs. “Because that’s the ‘I got laid’ smile you’re sporting right now.”

“Fuck you.” I throw a pillow at him. “This is all your fault. You’re the one that brought me here.”

“And your damn glad I did now, aren’t you?”

Sitting up, I scrub my hand over my face.

“She agreed to dinner, not to marry me.”

“It’s a step, man, and the best part is you finally pulled your head out of your ass and admitted to yourself you still care about her.”

I press my hands into the plush mattress and shove out of bed.

“I always knew I cared about her, dickhead. It was just easier to drown in booze and pussy than remind myself how badly I fucked up.”

“And did you ever fuck up.” Mac whistles for effect. “I can’t believe you were so stupid. You’re lucky she didn’t kick you in the nuts the minute she laid eyes on you.”

Mac’s a friend, a good friend. The friend who gives you shit and reminds you of your mistakes, so you don’t fucking make them again. Like now. I’m fairly certain he’ll remind me daily just what a prick I was to Kat and how I deserve everything she gives me, all while telling me to fix things with her.

As much as I want that, as much as I want her, didn’t I just say the other night that I couldn’t stay here? I couldn’t come back to Vegas and be this close to my dad—to his bullshit. So, what’s the point? Why bother having dinner tonight? Why bother trying to make things right or hell, even to get her to forgive me?

It was hard enough to leave her the first time. How the hell am I supposed to do it again?

My leaving only wrecked things. Being away from her broke me. I became an angry, sullen dick of a guy—someone I’m not proud of. A man who used anyone he could to satisfy the ache Kat left me with. I ran with the bad boy rep, let everyone believe it, even though deep down, none of it was

true. Being that guy, though, was easier. Much easier than being the hurt, broken man I really am.

If it did that to me, I can only imagine what it did to her. Scratch that. I don't want to imagine. The idea of hurting her is unfathomable. I can't think about it. I won't.

"So, you're going to tell Jack no?" Mac isn't asking to clarify. He's hoping my impending dinner with Kat, the possibility, might have changed my mind.

I stop and face him. He's been so insistent about me taking this residency, actually tricking me to get me here. Something isn't adding up. This isn't all for my benefit. Or Kat's.

"Why is this so important to you?" I ask, knowing damn well there has to be another reason.

Mac left Vegas and came with me to New York. We were best friends, partners. I knew he would never leave my side. While I never looked back, Mac did. He had family, responsibilities. His family may not have been the Cleaver's, but he's the oldest out of five kids, and a part of him has always felt responsible for his younger siblings. I know he misses them. I know he misses Vegas. I just hadn't realized it had gotten this bad.

"Sarah's pregnant." Sarah's his youngest sister, barely out of high school. "I'm going to be an uncle." I can hear the pride in his voice despite being masked in worry. She's young, too young, to have this kid and raise it on her own.

"So, you want to come back to take care of Sarah?"

“Part of it. Part of me... I just miss having someplace to call home. I’m tired of being on the road. You know I’ll do whatever you need me to do, and I get why you can’t come back. I just... I thought it was worth a shot.”

Having laid eyes on Kat again, I get what he means. I miss having someplace to call home. I miss that home being in Kat’s arms.

Having Kat with me last night? Her standing on the balcony, even though she was pissed, it felt right. It’s the piece that has always been missing.

“I won’t say no.” Seeing the confusion in his eyes, I continue. “If I knew how all of this was affecting you, I would have given it more thought. I... I’ll think about it. All of it. You. Kat. Me. I’ll figure something out.”

What that something might be, I don’t have the slightest clue.

“Really?” he asks, shocked by my sudden change of heart.

I put my arm around his neck and drag him toward the suite door.

“Even I’m not that much of an asshole.”

“You kind of are,” he says with a laugh.

When I step into Jack’s office, he stands, and I can’t decipher if the smile on his face is legit. Vegas can be so fake, people just trying to please customers in order to get their money. It’s the business. I get it.

The thing is, I don't give a damn about money. I never had any growing up, never expected to have a dime to my name. Now here I sit on a pile of money exponentially higher than I ever thought possible. I'm set. For life. For about fifty of lives.

So, whatever he wants to offer me is fine. The part I need to be certain of is if I can handle moving back to Vegas because so far, I haven't dealt with it particularly well. Hell, even if Kat came with the contract as a guarantee, I'm not sure I could sign.

"Mr. Cole, it's a pleasure to see you," Jack says as he extends his hand toward me.

I take it, give it a firm shake, and retract.

"Jack."

His name, the only greeting I give him. While I have zero interest in negotiating, I still need to make this deal as lucrative as possible. Not for me, but for my crew. The best way to do that is playing the aloof prick of a rock star I usually am.

"We are so thrilled to have you here for the show this week... and maybe even longer?" Jack offers me a seat.

"Maybe."

"What do I need to do to turn that maybe into a yes?" The gleam in his eye tells me nothing is off the table.

"What House of Cards has to offer me versus any other venue on the strip?"

“Frankly, Mr. Cole, whatever you want. You’re good for business. Hell, your presence here alone has not only increased our food and beverage sales but our coin-in as well. I can only imagine what having you here permanently would do for business.”

“I don’t come cheap.” I try to keep my voice stern. Not professional. Demanding.

“No, you don’t.” Jack laughs. “That’s not an issue. We are more than willing to meet any terms you have.”

I have to admit, I really thought there would be some negotiating. I didn’t think a man like Jack Rhodes would just roll over and give in.

“So, do we have a deal?”

“I’m going to need more time. I still have some business to tend to before I decide if I want to pursue this.”

“Oh, of course. We all need to be in this one hundred percent for it to work.”

I nod in agreement.

“How’s Kat treating you? She’s the best, isn’t she?”

“She’s great.” He has no fucking clue just how amazing she is. “No complaints.”

I can hear Mac chuckle behind me. I’ll get the fucker for that later.

“I’ll let you know my decision before I leave town,” I say as I stand.

“I look forward to hearing your decision. In the meantime, if there is anything you need... don't hesitate to ask. Kat will do whatever you need.”

Somehow, I doubt that.

Chapter 27

Sutton

After my meeting with Jack, I still have a radio interview and an autograph signing on my itinerary.

“Why the hell does Val always schedule me for so much shit?” I ask, looking down at the sheet of paper.

“She wants to be famous.”

I can hear the disdain in Mac’s voice. He and Val are like oil and vinegar, each of them thinking they know what’s best for me. Which can be entertaining, considering their ideas of what’s best for me vastly differ.

“You mean, for me to be famous.”

“No, I know what I said,” Mac says as we enter the studio.

The interview is scheduled for thirty minutes, but knowing Xavier like I do, it will most likely end up taking an hour. Xavier is the deejay from 92.4, Record and Roll, one of the best and a really cool dude. We’ve met several times but never sat down to do an interview, so this is a first. A huge deal for both of us.

“Sutton, man, how have you been?” Xavier greets me over the air, although we just said hi and shook hands five minutes ago.

“Doing good. Living the dream.” Currently, that dream is more like a nightmare, but the audience doesn’t need to know that. Granted, they would eat up that shit, but no way in hell am I sharing that much.

“I’m glad our schedules matched up, and we could finally do this.”

“Me, too.”

I grew up listening to the station and to this day, to Xavier. I know it won’t be a fluffy interview. He’s going to ask those off-the-wall questions no one wants to answer. He doesn’t want to hear about all the women I fuck or why I punched a window at the last venue where I performed. He wants what no one else gets. The secrets. The truth.

“I promise, I’ll go easy on you.” The look on his face says otherwise.

The first few questions are typical, the same that everyone asks. What musicians did you look up to? What made you want to get into music?

“Who’s your muse?” he asks.

Fucking hell.

Easy question for most, but for me? Especially right now?

Mac looks at me, an amused smile on his face as he waits to hear my response. What can I do but be honest?

“Not Mac, that’s for sure,” I say with a laugh. Mac hates the limelight, but he’s pretty famous, thanks to the shit I’ve pulled over the years, and the ladies love him.

“Say hi, Mac,” Xavier says.

Mac throws me a look that could kill before greeting the listeners.

“Seriously, man. You write some great songs. There has to be someone behind them.”

“There is.”

“Someone special?”

“Very special.”

“Does she have a name? Or don’t you remember it?”

“Oh, she has a name, just not one I’m willing to tell you.”

Xavier jokes he’ll get it out of me. No way in hell would I give Kat up like that.

“So, this woman without a name, is she the reason you finally made an appearance in Vegas after all these years?”

I glance over at Mac, then back to Xavier.

“Nope. That one I can blame on Mac.” I hang my head, embarrassed by my stupidity. “Had me sign some autographs and slipped in a contract. Totally blindsided me.”

“Well, thank you, Mac.” Xavier does a clapping sound effect that has even Mac laughing. “So, if she isn’t the reason you came back, is she the reason you left?”

I shake my head. “You’re just not going to give up, are you?”

“Never do. Give it up, Sutton.”

“Fine. You want the truth? Rocked Records made me an offer I couldn’t refuse. Taking that deal meant I had to leave Vegas. Leaving Vegas meant I had to leave someone very important to me behind. Hardest decision I ever had to make. Biggest mistake of my life.”

Mac’s jaw drops.

“The music or leaving the girl?”

“The girl. A great girl. A once-in-a-lifetime girl.”

“The girl your songs are about?”

“Every single one of them.”

We wrap up the interview and head on to my next agenda item, an autograph signing back at the Sapphire. The entire way back to the hotel, Mac stares at me, laughs, then repeats the process.

“What is so fucking funny?” I yell.

“You. You just admitted to the entire city that you’re still hung up on your ex.”

“What can I say?” I shrug. “I took one for the team.”

“You took one for Kat.”

Another shrug. “She probably doesn’t even listen to that station.”

“Probably not,” Mac agrees. “But I sure as hell just sent the recording to Liz.”

“Jesus, man, are you a manager or a matchmaker?”

“Why can’t I be both?” Mac’s laughter fills the car.

“You already got what you wanted. I’m here. I’m trying. What the fuck do you want from me?”

“Nothing, Sut. I just want to see you happy.”

We pull up in front of the Sapphire, and amid all of my fans is Kat. She, along with the casino’s security staff, is trying to hold back the crowd.

“I hope you had a pleasant day so far,” she says when I approach her.

“Did an interview with Xavier on 92.4.”

“I heard.”

“What’d you think?”

“I think you shouldn’t lie to your fans.” She does an about-face. “I’ll take you to where we have you set up for the autographs.”

“I wasn’t lying,” I tell her, closing the distance between us. After the interview, the anonymity I tried to give her might not last long. It doesn’t take much to get a rumor started or for it to be deemed the truth. I know that all too well.

“Then I hope whoever she is...”

“You know damn well *she* is you.”

“When it comes to you and what you’re thinking, I don’t know anything anymore.”

“Now, that’s a lie. You know me, Kat. You know I didn’t want to leave you. You know it killed me to go.”

“I also know you never bothered to come back.”

“Come back to what?” I ask her as I grab her arm and pull her off to the side. “My abusive father or the woman who hates me? What the hell was there to come back for?”

“You could have started with an apology.”

Mac steps into the room but maintains his distance as he surveys the situation.

“Mr. Cole, we’re ready to start,” one of the PR people from the Sapphire tells me.

“Enjoy the show.”

“I’ll see you at dinner,” I call after her.

She waves a hand in the air as she exits the room and heads as far away from me as she can.

Chapter 28

Kat

The knock on my office door startles me.

I'm not in the right headspace, not after a late night and an early morning. Not to mention my run-in with Sutton this afternoon, and that was only after having heard his interview with the local radio station. The whole week has been nothing but a shit show, and it's only Tuesday.

"Come in," I say as I stifle a yawn.

Callum steps inside with a sly smile I'm ready to wipe off the minute he steps into my office.

"What?" I ask, my voice laced with irritation.

"Where do I begin?" Callum says boastfully as he plops himself on the chair across from me. "First, there's a fight between your clients. Then your client mentions his mystery girl slash muse on the radio. Then he comes back to the casino and looks at you all lovey-dovey like, causing a shit storm of commotion on the floor." His laughter billows through the room.

“I’m glad you find my life so amusing. You know damn well I didn’t ask for any of this. In fact, all I have asked for is to be rid of Sutton.”

While it’s not something I want to admit, that slight connection Sutton and I shared last night makes me wonder just how much I actually want that. Walking away from him today, after what he said to the world, was hard. I wanted to press, to ask questions, but my desire not to forgive him trumped all else.

There’s a thin line between love and hate. When it comes to Sutton and me, that line just keeps getting thinner.

“Oh, please, Kat.” Callum cocks his head to the side. “We both know you still have—”

I throw the stress ball on my desk at him.

“Don’t say it. In fact, don’t even think it.”

He catches the ball. “All I was thinking was I could take care of Anthony for you. Make things easier.”

Callum phrases the sentence as though he’s trying to do me a favor when in actuality, he’s doing the complete opposite. He’s trying to poach my client. He can try all he wants, but Anthony will never go for it. The man is very particular about who he keeps company with, the woman at the restaurant last night notwithstanding. There is no way he’d put up with Callum. Nor will he be impressed by all the attention Callum would throw his way.

Don't get me wrong, Callum is a great host, very involved, very on top of things. Sometimes, he just doesn't know when to quit, which wouldn't fly with Anthony.

"You can try," I tell him, knowing full well Anthony won't want any part of it. In fact, it might be amusing to watch Callum get rejected. "But Anthony won't want you."

"I certainly don't look as good in a skirt as you do, but I'm sure we could make do."

Leaning forward, resting my elbows on my desk, Callum's eyes drop to my chest, then fly back up to my eyes. I shake my head.

"Anthony doesn't require the attention you give. In fact, he doesn't really require any. We're more like friends. It's the only reason he even agreed to have a host."

"Are you special friends?" He winks at me. While normally, it would be an attractive move even from him, it makes me roll my eyes.

"I already told you, I don't have sex with my clients."

"You've had sex with at least one of them."

"I didn't ask for him to be my client, and he wasn't my client when we did. To answer your next question... no, nothing has happened between us. I. Am. Winning."

"You're just fooling yourself. I can see it in your eyes. You're already cracking. Just make sure you have that money on hand because the minute he slides inside you, I'm going to be looking for it."

“This is one bet you won’t win.”

“We’ll see about that.” He laughs as he steps into the hallway. “See ya... Kitty Kat.”

I groan at the sound of the nickname.

Reaching for my cell, I dial Liz’s number. Feeling mentally and emotionally drained, she’s the only one who can give me some clarity.

“Uh-oh, What happened?” She opts for the question rather than a nice greeting.

“Honestly, I have no fucking idea.” I plop into my office chair and face the window that overlooks the Vegas strip. Focusing on the hustle and bustle settles me a little. It always has. I love it here. For all the things that Vegas is and all it has to offer, it’s my home, my safe place. “For starters, Sutton almost punched one of my clients.”

“Anthony?”

“Yeah,” I say softly.

Anthony is rich, powerful, and drop-dead gorgeous. Even though there isn’t anything going on between us, I can see why Sutton would have thought otherwise. Anthony had his hands on me but not inappropriately. He would never do that. He is the king of gentle touches and hugs. So, when Sutton saw us standing there, with Anthony’s hand on the small of my back, I can see how it looked.

None of that matters, though—not what he saw, what he thinks, or even how it made him feel. He lost that right the

moment he gave me an ultimatum. The minute he did that, he gave up any say in what I do.

“He had no right to do that or to act that way.”

“Except he’s Sutton, and that’s how he reacts. Remember that time he surprised you, and we hit that club on the strip. That one guy walked near you, and he lost it,” she relates as if I need the reminder. As if every memory with Sutton isn’t permanently ingrained in my mind.

Sutton may have always been a sweetheart, but he has a jealous streak in him the size of Texas and a temper to match it.

“That still doesn’t make it right, Liz.” I pause, trying to collect my thoughts. “Then, right before Mac dragged him off, he told me he loved me.”

Her squeal nearly blows out my eardrum.

“Don’t get so excited,” I warn.

“I was excited the moment you told me he was coming back. Deny it all you want, sugar, but you and Sutton will be back together before you know it. That’s it? That’s what has you so upset?”

Even though she can’t see me through the phone, I shake my head in response.

“No, that’s not all. What has me so upset is he’s forcing me to have dinner with him tonight.”

“Forcing you, huh?” I can hear the amusement in her voice, the insinuation I didn’t need to be forced or coerced into dinner with him more than clear. “How exactly did he force you?”

“He was having a raging party in his room, disturbing the hotel guests. He said the only way he would shut the party down was if I agreed to have dinner with him,” I say with a sigh.

“Well, that’s not so bad. Though he could have come up with something more... pleasurable... for both of you.”

“You’re not helping.”

“Okay, fine. If you’re not interested, if you don’t care, then don’t go.”

“I told you, I don’t have a choice.”

“We always have a choice, Kat. He may have forced you into agreeing, but he can’t force you to follow through. Besides, you already got what you wanted. Why should you keep up your end of the bargain?”

Worrying my bottom lip between my teeth, I contemplate what Liz is saying. Maybe she’s right. There is no reason I have to go through with it. The party is over, the guests are happy, and I got what I wanted. Nothing says he has to get what he wants.

“You are a genius.”

“For the record, I think you should go. I think you should hear him out and work things out.”

“Noted.” As much as I hate to admit it, there’s a small part of me that wants to go. The part that tingled the moment he was near me. The part that misses what we used to be. The part that remembers the pain, the hurt, the end? It’s so much stronger, so much more. “Want to head to Neon Nights tonight?”

Liz groans, frustrated I’m not following her advice.

“Pick me up in an hour.”

“That’s my girl.”

Chapter 29

Sutton

I glance down at my phone for the tenth time. It's twenty after eight. She's late. She's making me wait, trying to piss me off, and she's doing a damn good job.

Strumming my fingers on the table impatiently, I take a sip of my beer. Trying to temper my anger, I tell myself she's going to show. She's just late. Probably stuck taking care of a client. If that's the case, why didn't she text?

Another glance at my phone shows, it's now eight-thirty. Frustrated, I grab the phone off the table and type out a message.

Me: Where are you?

I wait a couple minutes but get no response.

Me: You're not coming, are you?

A few moments pass before her response comes through.

Kat: Nope.

She isn't coming.

Me: You're going to pay for this, Kitty Kat.

I throw some money on the table, more than enough to cover the beer t I drank and the glass of her favorite wine I ordered for her. As I walk out of the restaurant, Mac is standing outside, a smug smile on his face.

“Shut it,” I warn him.

“I wasn’t going to say anything.” He holds his hands up. “Definitely not I told you so.”

“Some best friend you are.” Out of the corner of my eye, I see the guy I saw Kat talking to the other day, the one who was bothering her. I can’t remember his name, but I remember her saying they work together.

“Hey, you,” I call out. The guy turns to face me but doesn’t look fazed by me or my celebrity status. “Where’s Kat?”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

“She’s not answering her phone, and I need her. She is supposed to—”

“I know what she’s supposed to do. I’m Callum, an executive host here at the Sapphire.” He extends a business card to me, which I ignore. “If Kat isn’t available to help, I am.”

“I don’t think you can help me the way Kat can,” I tell him, hoping he gets my drift.

His demeanor changes, a smug smile on his face.

“She doesn’t want to help you in those ways, either, I assure you.”

“Oh, yeah? And just how do you know that?”

Callum leans in with a fucking smirk on his face. I don't need to hear what comes next to know what he's going to say. So, I don't bother waiting, just grab the asshole by his collar and slam him against the wall.

“Sut, stop,” Mac says from behind me.

“Stay the fuck away from Kat, do you hear me?” I shout.

Callum pushes back, and I stumble back into Mac.

“I hear you, but I don't have to fucking listen to you.”

I lunge for him again, but Mac holds me back.

“How about you do her a favor and leave her alone? It's hard enough on her having you back in town. The last thing she needs is to be forced to wait on you, hand and foot.”

I struggle against Mac as Callum continues.

“Haven't you hurt her enough?”

Having had his say, the guy walks away, and I notice the crowd around us. I can only imagine what they're thinking. Worse, what's going to be plastered all over social media in a matter of moments.

“Let's go before you make things worse,” Mac says.

Kat hates me. Apparently, she's screwing this guy. It doesn't get any fucking worse than that.

“Find her, Mac. I need to see her.” The sound of desperation in my voice is clear. “I need to find her. I need to...”

What? What the fuck do I need to do? Be with her? Break her heart again? Put the final nail in our fucking coffin?

“You need to get your shit together, man.”

He’s right. I’m out of control. I let the anger die down, and he releases me. The urge to storm off and find Kat is real, but the worlds Callum said are all I hear, all I feel.

Haven’t you hurt her enough?

Callum’s right. I have hurt her enough. I need to move on. I need to let her live the life she’s built without me in it. That’s what I made her do. I have no right trying to weasel my way back into it.

I scrub my hand over my face trying to erase the emotion the realization instills in me.

“Fuck it, let’s get a drink.”

We make our way down the strip, trying to find a place that isn’t too crowded. The sign for Neon Nights catches my eye, and I remember sneaking into that place as a kid. I nod my head in its direction, and Mac and I make our way there.

Walking inside, it’s pretty quiet, all things considered. The crowd is thin but just enough to give the place a buzz. The dance floor is full of gorgeous gyrating women, and the seats at the bar are filled—including the last person I ever expected to see here.

Kat.

There she is, occupying a seat at the bar, her friend Liz sitting next to her.

Kat.

There may be a plethora of beautiful women around, but my eyes have tunnel vision, and she's the only thing I can see.

"Let's go somewhere else," Mac suggests.

Even though he's the one that orchestrated this, he knows tonight isn't a good night for me to see her. Any interaction we have is bound to be explosive. I know he's right. I know we should leave and find somewhere else to get piss-ass drunk, so I can forget the woman I can't take my eyes off. My feet, however, have a mind of their own. Without permission, they make their way in her direction, Mac hot on my heels.

"Hey, Liz," I say when I approach the two ladies. Kat sits up straighter in her seat, her eyes wide as she stares at me. "Hey, Kitty Kat."

"What... how..." she stutters, completely baffled by my presence. "Did you follow me?"

"How could I when I was busy waiting for you to meet me at the restaurant?" I cross my arms across my chest as I lock eyes with her.

Her cheeks flush a bright red, and she doesn't know how to respond.

"Is there a reason you stood me up?"

"I had a better offer."

Glancing in Liz's direction, my eyes rove over her. I can already feel the heated stare from Mac, telling me to back off, or he's going to kill me. Only this time, it's not because of Kat. It's his precious Liz. "Not bad, but I'm better. No offense, Liz."

"None taken, rock star." She gives me a quick hug, clearly not as angry with me as Kat still seems to be, then turns her attention to Mac. "Hey, Mac."

I glance behind me where Mac is standing. My big, tough manager and bodyguard, rolled into one, looks like a nervous little kid as he stands before his high school crush. And he gives me shit about my feelings for Kat?

"Liz," he says quietly.

The whole situation feels so familiar yet so awkward. The four of us spent so much time together as teenagers, but the last five years...

I scoot between Kat and Liz, copping a nonchalant feel of Kat, and lean over the bar.

"Four shots of tequila," I say. "No, wait. Make that eight."

"I am not staying here, let alone doing shots with you," Kat states adamantly.

"More for me," Liz cheers.

"Liz," Kat scolds Liz.

She shrugs. "If he's buying, I'm drinking."

“You owe me,” I tell Kat as I extend one of the shots the bartender just poured.

“I don’t owe you shit.”

“Whatever the client wants, the client gets,” I remind her.

“You’re not doing this as my client. You’re doing this because you’re an asshole who thinks he can do whatever he wants.”

“I’m doing it because I’m an asshole who misses you and just wants to spend some time with you,” I correct her.

“Aww,” Liz swoons behind me.

Kat eyes me for a moment.

“Fine.”

The bartender delivers our shots, and she grabs one from the tray, throwing it back.

“Happy? Let’s go, Liz.”

“I don’t want to go,” Liz whines. She throws her arms around Mac’s neck. “I miss this.” Mac has a cheesy grin on his face, indicative of just how much he likes this girl. I knew he had a thing for her way back when but didn’t know he still did.

“Stay, Kitty Kat,” I urge, nodding my head toward our two friends. “And I’ll let you off the hook.”

“Off the hook?”

“For dinner. Being my host. All of it.”

“Really? This isn’t just some ploy.”

“I’ve hurt you enough,” I say, using Callum’s words. “I don’t want to hurt you anymore.”

“Okay.”

Kat might have agreed to stay, but she sure as hell doesn’t pay me any attention. She spends the better part of the night chatting with Mac and Liz, making me feel like an outsider.

The only upside is the more they talk, the more they drink, and when Kat drinks... Let’s just say Kat gets a little touchy-feely. Her cheeks are a bright pink, her eyes just a little glassy, and her hands—well, they’ve found their way to me, and they’re all over me.

“Jesus,” she sighs as her hands run down my stomach, then back up under my shirt. “You feel even better than you look.” Her mouth falls open, her eyes popping open wide from the tiny drunken slits they had been moments ago. “I didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

Shocked by her admission, Kat pulls her hands off me and covers her mouth. Unfortunately for her, touching me was doing more than just turning her on. It was also helping her keep her balance. Balance that is clearly gone now. I watch her sway for a moment, almost toppling over.

“Easy there, Kitty Kat.” My hands drop to her hips to balance her.

“I’m drunk.”

“That you are. Maybe it’s time to go.”

“No.” She shakes her head adamantly. “I want to dance.” Kat steadies herself, then walks toward the dance floor, stops, and looks back at me. “Well? Are you going to dance with me or not?”

I’m not much of a dancer, never have been, but no way in hell am I turning that down.

“Lead the way.”

The feel of her in my arms is heaven. The thoughts in my mind as she presses her body up against me are going to send me straight to hell. I know she’s drunk, and I shouldn’t push the envelope, but I can’t keep my hands off her. My palm slides along her stomach beneath her shirt, her skin setting me on fire, and all I want to do is touch more.

She drops her head back onto my shoulder. It’s sexy as fuck, and I’m so damn grateful it’s my arms she’s in.

“I want to fuck you,” she says, her voice far from quiet.

“Shhh,” I whisper in her ear.

“I mean it, Sut. I want you.” She grinds her ass against me. “Now.”

“I thought you hated me?”

“I do,” she moans, “but I still want you.”

Kat turns to face me, her arms wrapping around my neck, and before I can stop her, her lips are on me. I know it’s wrong. I know I should stop her, but fuck, I missed the feel of her. Her touch, her kiss. All of it.

“Easy, baby,” I say, breaking the kiss I never want to end. She may not realize it, but I’m well aware of the prying eyes. People who will do anything to make a quick buck off a photo of me. “Why don’t we take this back to your place?” I suggest because if we don’t, I might do something stupid.

“That’s the best idea you’ve had all week.”

Leading her from the dance floor to where Liz and Mac are sitting, I nudge Mac.

“We need to get the ladies home.”

It’s clear to see that they’re both well over their limit. Mac nods his head in agreement, but I can see the disappointment on his face.

“You ladies want to take a ride in a limo?” I ask.

“Limo,” they both shout, drunk, giddy smiles covering their faces.

Even if Kat is only smiling at me and tolerating me because she’s in a drunken stupor, I’m grateful to see her happy. It gives me hope. Hope that has been slowly dwindling since my arrival.

Kat and Liz seem to enjoy the limo ride, so I have the driver take us around one more time. They’re standing outside the sunroof singing, more like screaming, the words to the song playing on the radio.

Something about the fresh air must have sobered Kat because no sooner do we drop Liz off, Kat scoots clear to the other side of the limo, as far away from me as she can.

The driver opens the door, and Kat steps out eagerly. I'm hot on her heels, wanting to ensure she safely makes it up the walkway to her door.

"I can manage on my own."

Her walking has improved, I'll give her that.

"That's not why I'm doing it."

Arriving at her front door, she slides the key into the slot. Before opening the door, she turns to me.

"Then why, Sutton? Why are you doing any of this? Did you really think forcing me to be your casino host would make me forgive you? Because it didn't."

"Woah, back up. Forcing you? What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb with me. Jack told me your little plan. How you demanded I be your host. How you even went as far as to make it a stipulation in your contract for the show this week."

"Fucking hell," I curse loudly, running my hands through my hair. "I never even read the thing. Fuck, I never would have signed it if Mac hadn't tricked me."

She takes my words at face value, not understanding everything that goes into them.

"So, you didn't want to come back. You didn't want to see me. Or fix things."

"No. I mean, I didn't, but now?" I drop my gaze to the floor, then look up at her under hooded eyes. "Fuck, Kat, I don't

know. I hate this goddamn town and a whole hell of a lot of the memories that come with it, but I sure as hell don't hate you or the memories of us. I'm torn. So fucking torn about what to do. Everything in me says I should run... except my heart. My heart belongs to you, Kat."

"You don't mean that."

"I mean every word." Lowering my head, my lips brush against hers.

As much as I hate this town, as much as I hate my dad, Mac was right. There is good in Vegas.

She's right here.

Chapter 30

Kat

Last night, standing on my porch, Sutton kissed me.

It wasn't like the kiss in his hotel room or even the one I initiated at the club. It was filled with emotion, soft and sweet, his way of apologizing and asking forgiveness. It was the kiss you never want to end.

At that moment, I caught a glimpse of the man I love. The one I thought somehow disappeared the moment he gave me that ultimatum.

That's when I broke the kiss. That's when I pressed my hand to his chest, pushed him away, and told him I couldn't do this.

He stepped back and told me he would give me whatever time I needed but assured me this wasn't over.

“That kiss, Kitty Kat. It proves you still love me, and I'm not letting go this time.”

Rolling over in bed, I grab my phone.

A glutton for punishment, I scroll through social media. Photos of Sutton with random women fill my feed, not just

any women—gorgeous women, models, musicians, movie stars—each one making me more insecure. Why would he want me when he’s been with these women for the past five years? I’m just plain old ordinary me.

Nothing is recent, though. Nothing from Vegas except, of course, the one of Mac dragging him away from me.

Is what he said last night real? Does he really still love me?

The bigger question is, even if he does, can I forgive him?

Needing to think about something else, anything except Sutton, I check my messages.

The moment I hear Jack’s voice, I sit straight up in bed. Not just one message, but three. I listen to the first, then the next. The third is the real kicker. He finally tells me why he’s so pissed at me. Because I didn’t meet Sutton at the restaurant as requested. I didn’t fulfill my job duty.

Son of a bitch.

Grabbing a dress from my closet, I slide it over my head before slipping on my sandals. If Sutton thinks I’ll let him get away with this, he has another think coming. Using my all-access pass, I barge into Sutton’s hotel suite without knocking. He’s sitting on the couch, a remote in one hand and a bottle of water in the other.

“Hooker hangover?” I ask, with my hands on my hips.

He looks at me, confused. “What the hell is a hooker hangover?”

“Hooker, groupie, whatever you want to call them,” I shout.

“I still have no clue what you’re talking about, but if you want to check the bedroom, feel free. We’re alone.”

“Good, then you’ll have no problem telling me why the fuck you called my boss and ratted me out for not showing for dinner.”

“I didn’t call Jack.”

“Oh, really?”

I play the message on my phone—Jack berating me for not taking care of my client. My very important, very rich client, who I’m supposed to be at his beck and call, followed by an order that I better get my ass to the hotel and get things under control.

“Wasn’t me who called him.”

“Then who?”

“I don’t know, maybe your boyfriend. He and I didn’t exactly have the best of interactions last night.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend. I don’t even…” I gasp. “Callum.”

Callum wouldn’t go that far. Would he? I know he was pissed about the Sutton deal, but to attack me? Throw me under the bus? There’s no other explanation, though. No one else would do that to me.

“Ding, ding, ding.”

“I’m sorry for barging in.” I turn my hand on the doorknob.

“Kat, wait, don’t go. Have breakfast with me.”

A part of me is tempted. The kiss last night stirred up a lot of emotion I'm not ready to deal with yet. Spending more time with Sutton will only make things worse. I need time. I need space. I need to deal with Callum.

"I can't, I'm sorry. I have to find Callum."

I walk out the door, and as I wait for the elevator, I half expect him to follow me, toss me over his shoulder, and drag me back inside. I'm not sure if I'm happy or disappointed when he doesn't. Right now, I don't have the time or energy to think about it. I need to find Callum.

My first stop—Callum's office, but he's not there. He isn't at his condo, which leaves one other place—The Loft. It's only ten in the morning, but when I arrive at The Loft, Callum's in his usual seat, with his usual drink in front of him.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing?" I shout at him from halfway across the bar.

Despite the time of day, the bar is pretty crowded, and since he made a scene with Sutton, I have no qualms about causing a scene with him.

His head turns in my direction, eyes filled with confusion.

"Having a drink. You?"

I take the drink from his hand and down it. It's the least he owes me.

"Trying to figure out why you called Jack and told him I wasn't taking care of my client."

“I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about.”

“Like hell, you don’t. Jesus, Cal, is it really that important to you? Are you really willing to sacrifice me, our friendship, for a client?”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence,” Callum says as he grabs the glass the bartender sets in front of him and drinks it.

“Well, if Sutton didn’t call him, and you didn’t call him, who did?” I stand before him, hands on my hips, waiting for him to crack and fess up.

“How the hell should I know?” His voice escalates, his tone angrier than I’ve ever heard it. “Honestly, Kat, I wouldn’t put it past that douche to have done it and try to pin it on me.”

I don’t back down. I don’t break my stance. I just continue to stare at him.

“Believe what you want, but for the record, I wouldn’t do that to you. Someone else? Maybe. But not you, Kat. Not after everything we’ve been through together.” He stands from his seat. “I don’t have a lot of friends, but the ones I do, I don’t screw over.”

I realize it’s not anger in his voice but hurt. We vie for clients. We don’t steal them.

“I’m sorry, Cal. I just... I don’t get it. Who would do this? Who would rat me out to Jack? Who the hell would have even known about the damn dinner?” Aside from Sutton and Callum, who in the world would have a motive to ruin me?

“Anyone who saw the guy shove me against a wall and act like a stark raving lunatic?”

“Oh, Cal,” I say as I plop down into the chair next to his. “I’m so sorry. You don’t deserve to have to deal with him.”

“I told him to leave you alone,” he admits as he returns to his seat, our argument already long forgotten. The premise, however, is not.

“Telling Sutton what to do will only result in him pushing harder.”

“I noticed. He’s crazy about you, you know? And just flat-out crazy.”

I smile at Callum. “I’m well aware, on both counts. I really am sorry. About Sutton, about accusing you.”

He nudges his shoulder against mine. “Forget about it.”

Tilting my head to the side, I eye him. Callum is complex. His heart doesn’t match the persona he exudes.

“Can I ask you something?”

“If I said no, would it stop you?”

I shake my head.

“Continue, then.”

“Why don’t you let anyone else see this side of you?”

It’s a question I’ve pondered over the years. Callum can be such a great guy, yet what he lets the world see is nothing more than a competitive, egotistical jerk.

“Someone might get the wrong idea.”

“Wrong idea about what?”

“That I’m actually a nice guy.” He chuckles.

“You are a nice guy.”

“Shut your mouth. Rumors like that could get a guy... attached.”

“God forbid.”

“I can talk to Jack,” Callum offers. “See if he’ll tell me who it was.”

“No, I’ll talk to him since I did what they told him I did.”

“No, you ditched your ex-boyfriend, not your client. Clients don’t force you to have dinner with them.”

“True.”

“Am I interrupting?” a female voice asks from behind me.

I turn to see a stunning woman standing there, looking past me and straight to Callum.

When I turn back to him, he just shrugs. “Told ya.”

I’m not sure why he thinks this woman will change what I think of him. His desire for sexual gratification with random women doesn’t foreshadow what a great guy he can be. It only tells me he’s hiding from something, using his dick as an excuse.

“Not at all.” I exit my chair, bid them a good day, and head back to meet with Jack.

Chapter 31

Sutton

Kat storming into my room took me by surprise. When I saw her, my first thought was she was there to talk. That maybe, just maybe, after that kiss we shared, she was willing to hear me out. A small part hoped she was there for more, ready to finish what we started last night. I can't help it. After that kiss last night, my thoughts are anything but pure. The woman is perfection, sweet and soft, hot and hard. The perfect mixture of what I used to like and what I want now. The girl versus the woman. The past and the present.

Unfortunately for me, she didn't come for either. Well, she talked, but it wasn't with me. It was at me, throwing around an accusation that I outed her to her boss. I mean, seriously? Does she honestly think I'm that petty?

Yeah, sure, her not showing for dinner hurt. In fact, it fucking killed me. That's why I went after that douche, Callum. The idea of him being with her fucking infuriated me. Even knowing that, even as much as it hurt, there is no way I would ever call her boss. This—her, us—is personal, not professional.

There's no doubt how much her career means to her. That she even took me on despite how much she hates me was proof of that. The casino, this job, keeps her grounded and happy. I'm not sure if she latched onto it so tightly because of me or her mom, but either way, it's her lifeline. There is no way in hell I would ever do anything to take that away from her. She's worked too hard and been through too much.

That being said, I am the one who set this whole thing in motion. I'm the one that invited her to dinner, fought her co-worker, and somehow got her in trouble for not showing up to that dinner when I never should have asked her. That's why I'm standing in her boss' office, his hand extended to me and a fake bullshit smile on his face.

"Sutton, so good to see you," he tells me, his voice boastful.

I cut straight to the point. "We need to talk."

"Of course, of course. I always have time for you," Jack says. "I apologize about Kat's behavior. She is usually more —"

"She's perfect," I interrupt. He offers me a seat, but I decline with a shake of my head. "This won't take long. I just wanted you to know Kat did nothing wrong. Her asshole client demanded she have dinner with him, which was out of line."

"And you're that asshole?" he confirms.

"The one and only." I chuckle. "Kat and I, we have history."

"So, I've heard." He raises his eyebrows with a smirk.

“Not like that. Not exactly. Anyway, the point is, demanding she have dinner with me and forcing her to be my host was wrong. However, through it all, Kat has remained completely professional.”

“That’s what you came here to tell me?”

I nod.

“Are you sure this thing with you and Kat is still history?” There’s a knowing smile on his face as though he can see right through my facade.

I chuckle as I shake my head. “I don’t know what it is. I just know, regardless of the issues we’ve had, Kat has been nothing but professional and accommodating.”

Jack nods his head. “I’ll talk to her when she gets in today.”

“When who gets in today?”

Jack and I both turn our heads, and standing in the doorway is Kat.

“Speak of the devil.” Jack smiles. “Looks like I owe you an apology.”

“Sure do and an explanation,” Kat says. “Who told you I missed dinner with Sutton?”

“I already told you it was that douche, Callum,” I reply before Jack can answer.

“Callum?” Jack sounds confused—and surprised—by my accusation. “It wasn’t Cal. It was someone from your team, Sutton. Someone named... Val?”

No, that can't be right.

“Are you sure?”

“Who's Val?” Kat directs her question at me.

“No one important.” Without another word, I storm out of his office. I know Val is a lot of things, but this? Why the fuck would she do this? How in the hell did she even know?

By the time I reach my suite, I'm fuming. Livid. It may not have been intentional, but I just fucked Kat over. Again. How in the hell am I supposed to redeem myself when this shit keeps happening? Taking my anger out on the door, I slam it shut behind me after I step into the suite.

“What's wrong?” Mac, sitting on the couch, his laptop in front of him, has a concerned look.

“What's wrong?” I shout. “It wasn't Callum who called Kat's boss.”

“Then who?”

I press my palms to the table and stare into the screen.

“What the fuck are you trying to pull?”

“Excuse me?” she gasps.

“What did you do?” Mac asks, his question directed at Val, not me.

I might have a bit of a temper, but it takes a hell of a lot to get me there. So, if I'm pissed, Mac already knows there's a good reason.

“I’ll tell you exactly what she did,” I say loudly. “Val is the one who called Jack and told him my casino host wasn’t fulfilling her duties.”

“So?” Val shrugs. “She didn’t.”

I slam my hand against the table with a force that makes even Mac jump.

“Kat did nothing wrong, and you had no right to step in. Pull something like that again, and you can find another artist to work with.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“Try me.”

Just like I stormed out of Jack’s office, I storm out of my room. I can hear Mac calling after me, asking where I’m going. The thing is, I don’t know. All I know is I need to get away to clear my head.

I wander the streets of Vegas, wondering how I can make everything up to Kat—my leaving, the impossible ultimatum I gave her, not being here when her mother died, and now, Val causing her trouble at her job. I owe her an apology for all of it. Shit, I owe her so much more, but everyone needs a starting point, right? Without that apology, how can I hope for anything else?

It’s why I invited her to dinner. I hoped being alone in public would give me the time to apologize to her, make her understand why I did what I did, and how much I regret doing it.

While I hated that she didn't show, I also understood it. She has no reason to trust me, no reason to want to see me, let alone forgive me. Not after everything I've put her through. Yet, she let me kiss her last night. That has to be a sign there's hope, and if there's hope, I still have a chance.

My mind wanders back to simpler times. A smile crosses my face as I think about our first fight. Christ, I was such an idiot back then. I'd had the perfect girl but ditched her, without so much as a phone call, to fuck around with Mac and the guys. Jesus, I don't even remember what we did. All I remember is the hurt in her eyes and me on her doorstep, begging forgiveness with a bouquet of flowers in my hand. The cheapest shittiest flowers, the only flowers I could afford. For some reason, she loved them. She brought them to her nose, inhaled the scent, then threw her arms around me.

Maybe that kid wasn't such an idiot after all. At least he got one thing right.

Detouring from the hotel, I head to the local florist.

Chapter 32

Kat

The flowers on my desk are gorgeous, and there is only one person they could be from.

Staring at them, I hesitate a moment before removing the card. I already know who they're from, but I'm afraid of what they might say and how the words will affect me. I close my eyes and take a deep breath before I read it.

Kat,

There is so much I need to apologize for.

Please just hear me out.

Sutton

P.S. Does remembering your favorite flowers earn me points?

Short, sweet, and oh so very Sutton. The P.S. makes me chuckle. I'm grateful he didn't write a long, drawn-out apology. I don't think I could have handled that. Just like I'm not sure how I'll be able to handle actually sitting down and talking to him about any of this.

Inhaling the sweet scent brings me back to our first fight. He'd showed up on my doorstep with a bouquet of flowers, but I refused to open the door. He said, "I brought you flowers," and I was so stunned, I opened the door. There he stood, tall and devastatingly handsome with his head hung and his eyes refusing to meet mine. He apologized profusely, telling me he was an idiot and that he didn't deserve me. In return, I kissed him, took the bouquet from him, and said, "How did you know these were my favorite?"

They weren't, but from that moment on, they sure as hell were.

That he remembered this after all these years surprises me. Sure, Sutton was always thoughtful and sweet - at least when he needed to be. He never hesitated to apologize when he knew he was wrong. It's what made forgiving him so easy and resisting him so hard.

And those eyes. Those blue eyes filled with every emotion that he couldn't verbalize and even the ones he could. The hurt, the pain, the love.

He was impossible to resist. Still is.

Sitting at my desk, I stare at the flowers and allow them to take me on a trip down memory lane that I've been fighting since Jack mentioned Sutton Cole. One that's filled with the good memories, the sweet memories, rather than the bad ones I had been making myself focus on. There was so much good between us, so many more happy memories than sad, yet one bad decision, one sentence, took all that away from us.

It happened in the blink of an eye.

One moment in time.

A moment that changed our lives forever.

Does it have to be forever, though? He's apologized. He wants to do more. I just don't know if it will be enough.

How can I trust him when he broke my faith? I want to trust him so badly. I want nothing more than to ride off into the sunset with him. I want to forgive him—but how? How do I just forgive and forget when that singular moment defined who I've been for the past five years?

The sound of knocking startles me out of my thoughts.

"Come in," I call out.

"Hey," Callum says from the doorway.

"Hey."

"You okay?"

"Honestly? Not really."

"Want to talk about it?"

I shake my head. I'm all talked out. I've talked to myself and to Liz. Bringing Callum into the mix will only complicate things more. For whatever he is, whatever we were, he's very protective of me.

"Nice flowers. They from that weird farmer guy?" He chuckles at his joke, the reference to my client from Iowa, who owns one of the largest farms in the state. He's a lucrative client, sure, but he has some odd tendencies.

I look at the arrangement. Simple flowers, nothing spectacular, look like something you would pick up at a grocery store rather than buy from a florist because that's exactly where they came from. Still, they manage to take my breath away. The same way that the man who had them delivered does. The same man who made me fall in love with them all those years ago. Back then, it was all he could afford. Although he never had money, I had a new bouquet every Friday after that first fight, and every time he made me mad after that.

“No.”

“Jesus, rock star boy can't afford anything better?”

Callum toys with the flowers, and I slap his hand away.

“I happen to love them. So, if you're done, I have work to do.”

“Hey, I'm not the bad guy here,” Callum reminds me.

“I know, I just have a lot on my mind.” I sit back in my seat and look out the window.

“Can I give you some advice?”

“You? The man who doesn't believe in it wants to give me advice on love?”

“I don't believe in it for me, but that doesn't mean I don't believe in it for you. And Sutton, he loves you. He doesn't deserve you by a long shot, but that's another story.”

“Can you just give me the advice, so we can get this over with?”

“Quit lying to yourself. You love the man, Kat. Maybe it’s time you actually sit down and talk to him. All you’re doing is hurting yourself.”

“And all you’re doing is trying to win the bet.”

“I don’t have to try. That is going to happen, regardless.”

“I have work to do.”

“That you do.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means you work it so I can win that bet.”

Only Callum could about-face that quickly.

“Not a chance in hell.” Though I have to admit, I say the words with a little less conviction this time around.

“Not a chance in hell of what?” Sutton stands in the doorway, arms folded across his chest, his face like stone as he stares at Callum.

“None of your damn business.” Fearlessly, Callum steps toward Sutton, who, in turn, takes a step in Callum’s direction.

“Oh, no. We’re not doing this,” I say as I move between them. My hands press against Callum’s chest. “Please, Cal, don’t do this. Just go.”

“Whatever you want, sweetheart.” He presses a kiss to my forehead before pushing past Sutton, bumping his shoulder for

effect. “Oh, and Sutton? Why don’t you try actually apologizing to her instead of buying her shitty flowers?”

Much to my surprise, Sutton lets Callum have the last word. The conversation drops, Callum leaves, and Sutton and I are left alone.

All we’re doing is standing here, yet the chemistry between Sutton and me is undeniable.

Sutton is the one to break the silence.

“That guy is a tool.”

“He isn’t... not always.”

“Are you two...?”

“Thank you for the flowers. You didn’t have to do that,” I say, evading his question. I have to admit, I enjoy watching him squirm.

“Yeah, I did.” Sutton shrugs nonchalantly. “I owe you about a hundred more bouquets.” Sutton looks at the floor. “Val, she works for me, she’s the one... Christ, Kat, she was the one to talk to Jack. As much as I hate that douche, Callum, it was me who fucked things up for you, not him.”

“Don’t call him that,” I warn him. He squirms again, his face contorting as though he’s resolved to the idea Callum and I are together or at least have been.

“You can’t be serious,” Sutton says, his hand running through his hair. “You’re going to choose him over me?”

“You quit being a choice the minute you stepped on that plane.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. That’s why I sent the flowers. Why I’m here now.”

“To apologize?”

“To start apologizing. One apology won’t cut it.”

“Damn right, it won’t.”

“I know, that’s why I was hoping you would let me continue to apologize over dinner.”

“This again?” I ask with a roll of my eyes.

“Yes, but I won’t force your hand this time. Please, Kat, have dinner with me.”

“You just won’t give up, will you?”

“Have I ever?” Sutton walks toward me. I take a step back, then another, until I’m against the wall. Setting his hands on the wall, he frames my face. “Give me a chance to show you how sorry I am. I know I messed up, but...”

“But what?” I say breathlessly.

“I want to make it right. I want to fix this.”

“And if you can’t make this right? You’ll leave me alone?”

His fingers graze my cheek when he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear.

“If that’s what you really want, then yes, I will leave you alone, Kat.” His eyes flood with emotion. “Give me this one

last dinner, and if I can't change your mind, then... I'll stay out of your life. For good."

The permanence of his words sends a jolt through me. 'For good' sounds so final when all this time, despite my anger, there was always the possibility of running into him or forgiving him. But for good? Do I really want him gone for good? The idea causes an ache in my chest—even more than the moment he walked away.

"I'll have dinner with you."

"You will?" The always self-assured man sounds utterly surprised... and pleased. To see him so excited to have dinner with me makes me giddy.

"I'll even do you one better." He raises his eyebrows. "I'll actually show up this time."

"Even better," he says with a smile that has me smiling back at him. "I'll see you tonight, Kitty Kat."

This time, when the pet name rolls off his tongue, I don't object.

Chapter 33

Sutton

Pussy.

That's what Mac called me right before I punched him in his stupid face. Now he's sitting on my couch with an ice pack on his jaw. I would feel bad if he didn't know what he was getting into by saying it.

"Not so tough now, are you?"

"The only reason I didn't hit your sorry ass is, if I did, Dante would have my head," Mac says. "Wouldn't want to hurt that pretty face of yours."

"It's the moneymaker."

We sit in silence for a moment.

"So... you think she'll actually show this time?" Mac asks, breaking the silence by pulling out the big guns.

God, I hope so.

She agreed, even said she would show. Sure, she might have been blowing smoke up my ass, but I don't think so. I think the culmination of everything from this week is getting to her.

Maybe, through the anger, she finally sees the undeniable connection we share. It doesn't matter if I've been gone for five years. It's still there. Kat is still my girl. I just hope to hell this dinner tonight means we have a chance.

"Maybe the better question is what are you going to do if she doesn't show?" Apparently, Mac didn't learn his lesson from the first hit.

"She'll show," I assure, rather than swing at him. Though hitting him still isn't out of the question.

"What about the residency? Have you given it any more thought? You're supposed to give Jack your decision on Sunday before we leave."

"I know what I'm supposed to do." Unfortunately, that decision hinges on what happens tonight with Kat. If she's willing to give us a shot, then I'm in. I'll sign the contract and be the latest Vegas act. If not? No way in hell will I stay in this town. I'll leave just as quickly as I came. "And I'll do it. If the outcome isn't what you're looking for, you only have yourself to blame. You're the one who orchestrated this whole thing."

"I did it for you," he argues.

"Oh, I know you did, and you went to extreme lengths."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, not only did you trick me into coming here, you also made Kat a part of the deal by forcing her to be my casino host." I raise an eyebrow in his direction.

"Um..."

“Yeah, that’s what I thought. You’re lucky I didn’t punch you harder. She blamed me for that shit.”

“I’ll tell her.”

“Don’t bother. What’s done is done, but if you ever pull a fucking stunt like that again, you’re fired.”

Mac nods, knowing full well I would never fire him, despite his stupid stunt. A moment later, a smile spreads across his face.

“You’re glad I did it, though, aren’t you?”

I shake my head and laugh.

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“If she shows for dinner tonight.”

It’s time for a little payback, and I know just the strings to pull to wind him tighter than a virgin at a prison rodeo.

“So, how’s Liz?” The question is innocent enough, but asking him rather than Kat, or even hell, Liz, makes him jumpy. It also turns the big buffoon’s cheeks bright red.

“How should I know?”

“You’re crushing on her pretty hard.”

“Am not.”

“Really, bud? You look all giddy and goofy just at the sound of her name. You should have seen what you looked like when you laid eyes on her the other night.”

“What? What do you mean? What did I look like?”

Insert payback now. Without warning, I change the subject.

“You’re going to make sure Kat and I are alone, right? No fans. None of her clients interrupting us?”

“I know my job, Sut. Now, what were you saying about the other night?”

“Glad we had this talk.” I slap him on the shoulder as I get up from the couch. “I’m going to take a shower.”

I can hear him shouting after me as I walk away quietly, laughing. This is the least the fucker deserves after what he pulled. Between tricking me with the contract and forcing Kat’s hand, he’s skating on thin ice. Leaving him hanging eases the frustration.

Stepping into the restaurant, I’m a jumbled ball of nerves. I arrived early to make sure everything was right—The flowers, the wine. I can’t leave anything to chance. Not tonight.

With everything set, I sit at the table, sipping my whiskey. Usually, I’m a beer guy. My dad drank the hard shit, and something about being like him or fear of turning into him typically makes me steer clear of it. Not tonight. Tonight warrants something a little stronger than beer.

My eyes drop to glance at my phone to check the time. She should be here any minute. I’ll be damned if I don’t feel like a teenager on a first date—anticipation, hope, and blinding fear.

Once I see her, all of it will ease. It always does. My eyes gravitate toward the entrance. Like kismet, Kat steps into the restaurant. Not only does the sight of her relieve any anxiety, but it also knocks the wind right out of me.

Nothing in the world has ever looked as beautiful as she does at this moment. Her dress is stunning in my favorite shade of blue, and her dark hair falls in loose waves. My favorite part is when her eyes find me, and she smiles.

I rise from my seat as she approaches, following the hostess. I may not have learned shit from my parents, but my grandmother made sure that if I knew nothing else, I knew how to have manners.

“You look beautiful,” I tell her, completely at a loss for words. Sweet, beautiful perfection.

“Thanks.” Her cheeks flush a pale pink. “You clean up pretty nice yourself.”

Both of us reach for the chair, but when she feels my hand on hers, she slides it out and allows me to pull the chair out for her. “Thank you. Got to love Grandma Virginia and her manner lessons.”

I chuckle as I help guide her chair back in. “That’s because you’re not the one who had to sit through them.”

The waiter arrives with the glass of wine I ordered for Kat, her favorite, according to Liz.

“You really can be a sweetheart,” she admits after taking a sip of the wine and realizing I had researched.

“Shh... people might hear you.”

“Oh, right. What would they think if they found out the bad boy rock star was really nothing more than a teddy bear?”

“Exactly. I have a rep to uphold.”

“Quite a rep.”

“It’s not all true.” She quirks up an eyebrow. “Okay, some of it isn’t true.”

The waiter arrives, and we quickly give him our order. So far, the night is going perfectly. At least for me, it is. Kat still looks as if she’s on the fence about... well, everything. Still, she seems somewhat at ease, smiling and conversing, not scowling and shouting. I’m all about the baby steps, each one getting me a little closer, and I’m okay with that.

“So, what’s it like?”

“What’s what like?”

She rolls her eyes. “Being a rock star. Being on the big stage, under the lights, and singing your heart out.”

“It’s amazing.” I scrub my hand over my face, hoping she doesn’t get the wrong impression. “Even better than I ever dreamed. The music, the fans...”

“The women.” Despite the slight bite to her words, she’s still smiling.

“There’s only one woman who ever mattered. Only one I was trying to impress on that stage.”

Kat takes another sip of wine, and her eyes remain on the glass.

“We have to talk about it, Kat. We’ll have to talk about us, about what happened.”

She nods, her eyes still refusing to meet mine.

“I remember the look in your eyes the night I left. Christ, I can’t get it out of my mind.” My voice is soft and gentle. “The hurt, the pain. I hate myself for doing that to you, for making you choose when there wasn’t even a choice to make.”

“Then why did you?” she asks, her voice elevated, emotions getting the best of her.

“I was a stupid kid who didn’t get what he wanted. So, instead of being understanding, I got angry and said something I have regretted from the minute it fell from my mouth.”

“I never wanted us to end.”

“I know, I just...” How in the hell do I explain this to her when I don’t even understand it myself? “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry I gave you that stupid ultimatum. I’m sorry I walked away. I’m sorry I left town. I never wanted to be without you. I still don’t.”

My admission silences us, the words unexpected. While I’m willing to concede them, I’m not entirely sure she’s willing to believe them.

“I’m glad you left.” Her voice is stronger, filled with confidence.

“Uh... thanks?” Her admission confuses me. The anger, the hurt—how could she be glad I left.

“No, not like that. I just mean you needed to go. You needed to get away from your father. You needed to take that opportunity.” Her eyes finally find mine. “I just wish you hadn’t walked away from us. I would have done anything, Sutton, anything to make us work.”

“I know.” Reaching across the table, I take her hand in mine and squeeze. “I may not have acted like it, but that’s what I wanted, too.”

“I appreciate everything you’ve been trying to do to make it up to me.” She slides her hand out of mine. “I appreciate the apology.”

“But?”

“I’m not sure why you’re doing it, what you’re hoping to accomplish. If it’s us getting back together, that isn’t happening.”

Like hell, it isn’t.

Chapter 34

Kat

The man floored me when I walked into the restaurant, standing there, looking like a real-life, walking, talking sex god. If memory serves me correctly, he's just that. The things he did to my body as a teenager far surpass anything any other man has done to it since. It's as though he has an innate sex talent, which sounds stupid, but it's true. He knew how to touch with reverence and fuck with aggression. How to be sweet and demanding. He made me bend to his will while always making sure I was more than satisfied.

So much history, so many memories, it's hard to keep the good ones from pushing out the bad ones. Most days, I do it. Tonight, I don't even want to try. I just want to enjoy this. Enjoy him. The man who shattered my heart, as much as I hate to admit it, is moving hell and high water to win it back.

Only this isn't just a trip down memory lane or an apology. It's him, trying to win me back. And the moment I realize my defenses go back up. However much I might want that—him—I can't let that happen. I can't put my heart on the line like that again... not even for him.

“Like hell, it isn’t.”

“What’s done is done. We’re two different people now.” He’s the rich, successful bad boy of rock, and I’m still the same girl. A little less shy and a lot more confident, but at my core, still the same.

“That isn’t true. I’m still the same person.” His voice is filled with frustration. “Fuck, this isn’t how I wanted this to go.”

“Sutton—”

“No. Just... stop.” He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “Can we just enjoy dinner? Talk about our lives? Get to know each other again? I want to get to know you again, Kat, find out what you’ve been doing for the past five years.”

I can see the anguish on his face, and as much as he hurt me five years ago, I can’t stand to be the reason he’s hurting, so I let him off the hook.

“As if you don’t already know,” I smirk, certain he’s been keeping tabs on me via Mac and my traitorous best friend.

“I don’t, I swear,” he says, holding up his hands in innocence. “Mac never so much as said your name until he used you to get me to come back here.”

“Used me to get you here? I thought he tricked you?”

“He did.” He leans back in his chair, grabs his napkin, and spreads it across his lap. “But when he told me about coming back here, he tried everything to convince me. When that didn’t work, he said your name, and that’s all it took.”

“I still can’t believe you let him trick you. Here I thought you were the sneaky one.”

I don’t mean to flirt or look like I’m enjoying myself. In fact, I’m trying to do everything to the contrary, but it’s proving to be more difficult than I thought. The effect Sutton Cole has on me is undeniable—pure and utter control, all without him even having to try.

“I was a little preoccupied, okay?” A soft smile plays on his lips.

My face falls. I don’t want him to see the effect that those words have on me, but I can’t control it. The idea of him with anyone else just... hurts.

Luckily, he doesn’t use the emotion against me and lets me off the hook.

“Video games, Kat. I was playing video games with Eli, the drummer.”

“Video games? So, your competitiveness overshadowed your ability to think clearly?”

“Doesn’t it always?” He rests his elbows on the table, and I can’t help but wonder what Grandma Virginia would say about the lack of manners in his current posture. “I promise you, Kitty Kat, after dinner, you can yell at me, hit me, throw the dessert I have set up for us in my room right in my face. I don’t care. I just...”

“Did you say dessert?” He nods his head. “What kind of dessert?”

The smile that creeps onto his face tells me all I need to know. Damn him and the intimate knowledge he has of every piece of me. Shouldn't his memory have faded? At least dulled? He knows exactly what he's doing by saying those words, and even worse, having dessert in his room.

“Let me just say that you, Kathryn, are not the only one who remembers things.”

He made that abundantly obvious with the flowers, but this?

“You didn't. You couldn't have.”

“It's amazing what money can do.”

I worry my lip between my teeth. As astonished by what I'm about to say as I am by how damn good he is at winning me over. “Can we skip dinner?”

“You want dessert first? Or do you want to throw it in my face?”

“You're crazy if you think, for one second, that I would waste that dessert by smashing it in your face.”

The sweet, delectable dessert. My favorite. From a place far away. So far, I would have thought it impossible for him to have arranged this in the short time since I agreed to dinner.

He removes the napkin from his lap and drops it on the table.

“After you.”

When we arrive at his room, he opens the door, allowing me to enter first. The moment I step inside, I freeze. I take in the

flowers, the candles, the cheesecake from the little hole-in-the-wall place, hours from here, we discovered on a random road trip. The dessert I haven't eaten in over five years because it hurt too much to think about, let alone eat it. The memories of the food fight, licking the dessert off his body, the sex—it was too much. Only days later, he disappeared from my life.

When I look back at him, hands shoved in his pockets, eyes filled with hope, I cave. Every damn wall I built to keep this man out crumbles around me.

Going to him, my hands pull his face down to mine. Our lips meet, buried emotions fueling my desire for him, even more than his mere presence does. I slide my hands under his shirt. I don't just want to kiss him. I want every piece of him.

“Are you sure about this?” he asks between kisses. His lips moved with mine, but his hands haven't so much as touched me yet. If they do depends on my answer. If I say yes, all bets are off. Passion will ignite, restraint will be lost, and he will own me body and soul again. It won't be sweet or tender, not that he isn't those things, but five years—five long years without the one person who creates a spark in you, which you've never been able to remotely replicate—doesn't leave much room for those things.

Sex isn't the answer or the solution to our problems. If anything, it's the easy way out. Still, at this moment, it's what I need—the combination of the physical and the emotional. Sex with Sutton was always filled with emotion, the look in

his eyes, the reverence of his touch. Sutton isn't always good at verbal, but physical?

“I'm more than sure.”

“Fucking hell, Kat,” he groans out as his hands grip my hips and pull me against him.

Fucking hell is right.

Our kisses become more frenzied, filled with need, want, and a multitude of things I can't describe, only feel. He moves us until my back is pressed against the wall, his lips making their way to my neck, over my breasts, down my body. Shoving up the skirt of my dress to my waist, he presses a searing kiss to my lower belly.

“Open for me, Kat.”

Parting my legs, I brace myself against the wall. The tips of his fingers run from my calf to my thigh, sending a shiver through my body. Lifting my leg, resting it on his shoulder, he moves his mouth farther south. His fingers slip between my body and the fabric of my panties, teasing my center, making me even more needy to feel him against me. I arch off the wall, my hips thrusting against him, begging him. Sutton is more than happy to oblige. The minute his mouth covers me, my eyes flutter shut, and my hands splay flush against the wall as a needy whimper escapes me. I feel his lips against me, curling into a smile I know is filled with arrogance at the way he can unravel me.

God, does the man unravel me.

“Purr for me, Kitty Kat.”

The aptness of his mouth and fingers against me, in me, consuming me, my hands thread through his hair, my walls tighten around his fingers, and my world spins off its axis as I crash like I’ve never crashed before. Waves of pleasure wash over me again and again as I scream out his name.

“Sexiest damn thing ever.”

My weak and sated body sags against the wall as I smile down at him. Placing my leg on the floor, his arm wraps around my waist as he stands to his full height. The intensity of the moment, the rushed need is gone. I’m a mess with my skirt around my waist and my hair mussed from my head rubbing against the wall.

His fingers intertwine with mine.

“Are you still sure?”

“Lead the way.”

“I always loved the way you looked when you were sexed-up and satisfied,” he whispers in my ear as he maneuvers us to the bedroom, our bodies pressed together.

“You loved knowing you were the only one who could make me look like that.”

“That, too.” He chuckles, then his face sobers, and his emotion-filled eyes meet mine. “You know I love you, Kat, I always have.”

Words I never thought I would speak again fall from my lips.

“I still love you, Sutton.”

Through the anger and the sadness, through every piece of my broken heart and five years of time, my love has never dwindled—I love him just as much now as I did then.

He presses a rough, branding kiss to my lips before turning me around. With seductive ease, he lowers the zipper on my dress, then slides the material down my body until it pools at my feet. His fingers run along my skin as though he’s refamiliarizing himself with a body he once knew every inch of. He sure as hell still knows how to make me weak.

“Lie down.” His voice is thick, laced with sexual frustration, which only serves to command me.

I’m lying there naked, wanton, and waiting for him. His eyes rove over my body, looking at me with such reverence and appreciation. Appreciation for me, for what we both know is coming.

“You’re overdressed.” I prop myself up on my elbows, my legs parted, my sex dripping wet for him.

It’s my turn to watch with appreciation as he peels away the button-down shirt I know he hated putting on. The belt he removes, which once we don’t need so bad, we might put to use later. The hard erection springs free and makes me salivate. I want to taste him the way he tasted me, but Christ, I

want him in me more. I need to feel him—the pain, the pleasure... the love.

The rip of the foil packet is like music to my ears. My eyes never leave him as he rolls the condom on. The head of his cock presses against my entrance, teasing and torturing me. I grind my hips, begging him to be inside me. His face is over mine, and the moment he presses into me, our eyes lock.

Sutton fills me in one motion, every damn inch of him fighting its way through my tightness, as desperate to be inside of me as I am to have him in me. He doesn't ask if I'm okay or allow my body time to adjust to his size, just slides in and out with a reckless abandon that has me moaning, whimpering, and begging for more, despite the burning pain searing through me.

The pain dissipates quickly, the residual effect heightening the pleasure the feel of him brings. As the pleasure mounts, his head drops to my shoulder, and his teeth sink into my skin. I cry out, wanting the sting and needing it to stop because I can't hold on. I'm losing control. My hips rise, meeting him thrust for thrust.

“Harder,” I pant out.

I'm on the verge of more than an orgasm, on the verge of completeness. The goddamn holy grail of pleasure and every nerve ending I have is ignited and ready to explode.

“Oh, fuck,” Sutton grunts out. His cock throbs, pressing against my walls, then explodes. Fireworks and explosions detonate through both of us.

When he collapses on top of me, the weight of him a welcomed pressure, I remember why I loved him so much—no one in the world can make me feel the way Sutton does. Then I remember why I hated him for so long—no one in the world can make me feel the way Sutton does.

Chapter 35

Sutton

Her eyes narrow as she stares at me lying next to her, trying to catch my breath. She's pissed or unsure. I can deal with either. What I don't want to see in her eyes is regret. I sure as hell don't regret what just happened between us and don't want her to, either.

For years, I've been insatiable. Nothing, no one satisfied me, not completely. There was always a residual ache, a desire, a need for more. It wasn't until just now I realized what that more is—the emotion behind it, the love I feel for Kat. That's what completes me. That's what makes sex with her so much better.

That and how damn flexible the woman is.

Before she can speak, I press a kiss on her lips.

“Let's clean up first. Then we can have dessert and talk. We have a hell of a lot to talk about.”

This wasn't how I had planned for the night to go. Dinner was supposed to be a quick apology, something to get us through dinner and hopefully onto reconnecting. Then we

were supposed to come back here to talk more. I wanted to tell her everything, every ounce of pain I felt, how excruciatingly awful life has been without her. I didn't expect us to end up in bed. When I saw that look in her eyes and when she kissed me, all my best-laid plans were thrown to the side.

I nod to the bathroom door before stepping inside, then turn on the water, scalding hot, just like she likes it.

"We're showering?" she laughs.

"I dirtied you up, Kitty Kat," I say with a shit-eating grin. "Now I have to clean you up."

Though there is a bit of uncertainty in her eyes, she follows me.

We kiss as the water cascades over us. I rub my soap-filled hands along her body, then between her thighs. She winces slightly, the powerful sex we had not too long ago leaving her sensitive. Fuck if that doesn't bring a smile to my lips.

"What are you doing?" she asks as her hand grips my shoulders, her red nails digging into my skin.

"I told you, cleaning you up."

"No, you're not. You're making me come again," she says as she moves against my hand.

"Okay, maybe, but after, I promise to clean you up."

Her orgasm shudders through her, her forehead resting against my chest.

"You're going to be the death of me."

“Pretty damn good way to go, though, isn’t it?”

“You’re an idiot.” Her body trembles with laughter.

While she might tease me, I know deep down she’s right—I am an idiot. Only an idiot would have left behind a woman like this.

She’s sitting with her legs crisscrossed on the couch, a hunk of cheesecake on a plate in her hands.

“So... where do we begin?”

We’ve transitioned from an intimate start to her being unable to look at me. I’m not sure if it’s because she regrets what we did, or she’s afraid of something.

“Foremost, you need to know, I never wanted to leave you, never wanted us to end up like this.”

“Then why did you, Sutton? Why did you refuse to make things work? Why did you force me to choose between you and her?” Tears well in her eyes, and the plate with her dessert on it trembles in her hand.

“I don’t have an excuse, not a good one. I was a stupid kid. You turning me down, telling me you couldn’t go with me... it hurt.”

“It wasn’t because I didn’t want to. I couldn’t. You knew that.”

She’s right, I did, but it still doesn’t change how my eighteen-year-old mind reacted to her rejection. Looking back,

I know I was wrong, but then?

“I know, but I was a kid. A fucked-up kid at that. My mom leaving and losing Grandma Virginia, I felt like I was cursed. I lost everything good in my life. You were the only thing left. Then you told me you couldn’t go with me, and... I snapped. I heard nothing that came after that no. The words didn’t register. The anger and hurt consumed me, and I reacted... badly.”

“Yeah, you did,” she says, not pulling any punches, then softened. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this? I would have understood. I would have tried to make you understand.”

“Again, it’s not an excuse, but you know me. You know I react first and think later. Shit, look at the stunts I’ve pulled since I’ve been back, all because I saw you talking to men. Men who were nothing more than clients and co-workers.”

“You always had a jealous streak,” she says with a slight smile.

“Only when it comes to you.” Her face turns somber, and I can tell there’s more, so much more she wants to say, but she’s hesitating, and I’m not sure why. I don’t know what else I did to her, but whatever it was, it wasn’t intentional.

“What is it? Tell me.”

“You leaving was bad enough, but you...” She shakes her head. “Never mind.”

“No, don’t do that, Kat. I what?”

She blinks away the tears in her eyes, trying to stop them from falling.

“You didn’t even reach out when my mom died. You didn’t come to the wake, not even so much as a phone call. I needed you.”

“I should have been here, Kat. I... I tried to be here, but the label had a show booked, they wouldn’t let me out of, and...”

“And there was someone else.”

“Someone else? Kat, I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I promise you there was no one after you for a long, long time.”

By long time, I mean a long, lonely time. One year to be exact. I may have been the one to walk away, but I sure as hell didn’t want to. Being away from her killed me. Until the one-year anniversary of the day I left, I was never with anyone else. I broke that day. The emotions flooded back to me—the hurt, the rejection, how much I missed her. To drown it out, I drank, caused all sorts of trouble, and fucked Val, but not before then and certainly not when her mother died. I was trying desperately to get back there, back to her. I knew what her mother’s death would do to her, how it would tear her apart. But I couldn’t. The record company wouldn’t let me, and the back-to-back shows didn’t allow for it.

By the time I could come back to see her, it would have been too late. At least, that’s what I thought. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I fucked things up even more than I thought.

I shake my head, renouncing her accusation.

“If you saw a photo or something, I promise it wasn’t real. Maybe some stunt the record execs made me pull, but Kat, there was no one after you for a year.”

“It wasn’t a photo, Sut, I saw it... with my own eyes.”

I stare at her, completely confused by what she saw or how she saw it.

“I showed up in New York.”

“What?” She came to New York? “When?”

“The day after the funeral.”

Taking her plate from her trembling hands, I set it on the table before pulling her to me.

“Why didn’t you come see me? Why didn’t—”

“I did. I showed up on your doorstep and knocked. I was still so hurt, by you, by losing her, but I knew... I knew if I saw you... you would make it all better.”

“I would have done anything.”

“Except you didn’t answer the door. A woman did. In your shirt. Your favorite shirt.” Tears stream down her face. “When I needed you, you were too busy with someone else to care.”

“No, that’s not...” I rack my brain trying to remember, trying to figure out what in the hell she’s talking about or who she could be referring to. There wasn’t anyone. Hell, the only people I spent any time with were Mac and Val, and... Val. Fuck.

“Christ, Kat. I wish you would have... Whatever you thought it was, it wasn’t. That was Val. She works for the label. She was one of the few friends I had in the beginning, and that’s all we were then... friends.”

“Then?”

Fuck. Me and my big stupid mouth.

“Yes, then. Come on, Kat, it’s not like you’ve been waiting for me. We both have pasts.”

She pulls away from me and gets off the couch, pacing around the room.

“You’re right, we weren’t together... I have no right to be upset. Except we wouldn’t be in this position if you had just listened to me. Six months, Sutton. That’s all you would have had to wait. Even then, I tried. I tried, and you were with her.”

“I wasn’t with her, Kat. I know you have no reason to believe me, but Christ, I wouldn’t do that to you. I was devastated when I heard about your mom, even more, when I couldn’t get to you, be there for you. Nothing happened between Val and me that night. I swear.”

“She sure didn’t make it seem that way.” Kat moves from the table over to the couch.

“Yeah, well, I learned later on that Val had a thing for me and an agenda.”

“Like trying to sabotage my career?”

I nod because what else can I do? That's exactly what Val did, and I'm pretty sure it was because I rejected her the night before I left for Vegas.

"I promise you, Kitty Kat, whatever Val and I were to each other over the years, we aren't anymore. We're strictly business."

"Stop, I don't want to hear about it."

Taking her hands, I lead her back to the couch.

"I know I fucked up. I know I hurt you. Through all of it, though, I never stopped loving you... not for one second. If you give me a chance, I'll do whatever it takes to prove myself to you."

"A chance? You... you want a chance?"

"I want you to give me another chance... us another chance."

"Even if I could forgive you, how would that even work? We're different people and lead different lives. I'm sorry, Sutton, but I'm not willing to give up this life I built on a chance."

"I am." I sigh. "Along with the show this weekend, the Sapphire offered me a residency at House of Cards."

"You're staying in Vegas?"

"I haven't given Jack an answer yet."

"Why not?"

“I didn’t know where things were going with us. Hell, if there was even a chance of there being an ‘us’ again.” She turns her head, her eyes filled with questions. “Kat, I have no desire to be back in Vegas, but if I have a shot with you, then hell yes, I’ll stay.”

“If not?”

I shrug. “I go back to New York, start touring again.”

She lets the bomb I dropped on her settle over her.

“What about your dad?”

Of all the questions she could have asked me, all the things she could have said, that’s not what I was expecting, not at this moment.

“What about him?”

“Your dad is the reason you were so desperate to leave Vegas and a huge part of what tore us apart. What happens if you can’t handle being back? If you can’t handle dealing with him?”

“I can.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m still here, aren’t I?”

She looks at me confused.

“I saw my dad, and it sucked, but I’m still here and I’m not afraid of him anymore,” I tell her, hoping to ease some of her own fears. Legit fears she has every right to have. “More importantly, I realized something. You are way more important

than my fear of him ever was. I'm sorry it took me so long to realize, but I have, and I want to make things right."

"This is a lot to take in." Pulling her hands out of my hold, she moves to stand before the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the Vegas lights.

"It is, and I don't need an answer right now."

"Why do I feel like there's a but in there?"

"I have to give Jack my decision before I leave town."

Her shoulders sag. "You're not giving me a lot of time here, Sutton."

"We have a week, and you're supposed to be at my beck and call, right?" I give her a sly smile. "Spend the week with me. We already know how great we are at some things." I glance back toward the bedroom. "Give me a chance to remind you how great we are at everything else."

"Can I think about it?"

"Of course." I stand behind her, resting my hands on her hips. "We can watch a movie, relax..."

Kat turns in my arms. "Alone, Sutton. I need some time alone to sort through... everything."

What am I supposed to say? She needs time, deserves it, but fuck if I want to give it to her. A small part of me had hoped she would just say yes. Everything I professed, every apology I made, I thought it meant more than it obviously did. I do my best to shake off the sting of her saying she needs to think

about it. Last time, I let it get the best of me, which is what got us here.

Nodding in agreement, I stand patiently in the bedroom doorway while she dresses, keeping my stupid mouth shut, so I don't say something stupid that will end up making the decision for her. Fighting is a bad habit I picked up from my parents. As much as I hate it, at least I didn't inherit the violent parts, except if some guy has his hands on Kat. My Kat.

She walks past me to the couch and picks up her purse.

“Sut, you okay?”

Putting on my best fake smile, I walk over to her.

“I'm good. It's just... this doesn't feel right, you leaving after we, uh...”

Her hand touches my face. “I know, but I won't be able to think with you staring at me all night,” she says, trying to lighten the mood. Her hands tug at the cotton shirt I'm wearing. “And you'll just keep giving me orgasms until I say yes.”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“I'll call you first thing tomorrow. I promise.” She presses a chaste kiss to my lips.

As she walks out the door, I finally know how she felt. How it feels to be the one left standing there, wondering.

It fucking sucks.

Chapter 36

Kat

“**T**his better be good,” Liz groans into the phone, her voice soft and sleepy.

It’s nearly two in the morning, but I’m sure what I’m about to tell her is well worth her losing a little sleep over.

“I had sex with Sutton.”

“You what?” Liz screams into the phone. “How was it?”

“Amazing. Just like it used to be yet infinitely better,” I gush as I flop back onto my bed.

“Okay, then what happened? You didn’t run, did you?”

“No. We talked after. A lot. And... he said if I want him to, he’ll stay.”

Another squeal of delight.

“Don’t leave me hanging like that. What did you say?” I can hear the excitement in her voice, a slight amount of fear mixed in that I screwed this up.

“I told him I needed to think.”

“Okay,” she exhales. “That’s reasonable. Nothing wrong with that.”

“Then he asked me to spend the week with him, and I said I needed to think about that, too.”

“You need to think about spending the week with a rock star? Who you happen to be head over heels in love with? Are you kidding me? What is there to think about?”

That’s just it. There is so much to think about. My hurt and anger aside, I just can’t wrap my head around a plot where this story works out in our favor. We’re happy for now, not a happily ever after. He has music. I have the casino. Who knows if we have anything in common anymore?

“Our careers. His dad. What if he bolts again, Liz? What if I say yes, then decides it’s not working and leaves? Then what?”

The only outcome I see is devastation—my heart irreparably broken and unwilling to ever love again. Sutton? He would rebound, beautiful woman after beautiful woman throwing themselves at him. I wouldn’t. I’ve already allowed myself to become so detached, unwilling to love, I fear what I’ll turn into if I were to lose him again.

Liz doesn’t see it that way.

“You’ll bounce back. Just like you did before.”

But did I really? If I’m honest, this entire time, I’ve felt as if a piece of me was missing, as though I wasn’t whole. Anyone who tried to complete me, I kicked to the curb. It’s not like I was sitting around pining for Sutton. I’ve enjoyed my life the

last five years, even without him in it. Still, when it came to love, I preferred the adage “fuck ‘em and chuck ‘em.”

It was easy, safe. No risk of getting hurt or screwed over again.

Now, I’m supposed to reconsider that? For the man who led me in that direction, no less?

“For just a minute, put your anger and fear aside,” Liz tells me. “It’s just you and Sutton, nothing standing in your way. What do you want?”

“But there are things standing in our way.”

Her heavy sigh comes through the phone. “Humor me, Kat.”

As twisted up as I feel inside with reality standing in our way, in a perfect world, there is only one resounding answer—Sutton. I want Sutton. I have from the first time I saw him. I may have only been fourteen, but even then, I knew. I knew he was it for me. My everything.

“I want Sutton,” I admit sheepishly.

“Then go get him, Kat. You can play what-if as much as you want, but at the end of the day, the only thing really standing in your way is you. Nothing in life is guaranteed. You should know that better than anyone.”

I do. I know the ‘life is precious’ speech more than I should. First, my dad, then my mom. Both gone from my life way too soon.

Is that what I want from Sutton? Do I want him gone from my life?

Or will losing him for good only worsen the constant ache in my heart?

“I’m still mad at him,” I say, not disputing her advice.

“I know, and you’ll forgive him when you’re ready. Down the road, I’m sure he’ll piss you off again, and you’ll forgive him then, too, because that’s what we do with people we love. We forgive them.”

“Even if I can forgive him, how do I forget? How do I let go of the fear he’s going to leave me again?”

“You have to trust him, Kat. You have to trust what he’s saying to you is the truth. If you want my opinion, I think it is. He came back for you.”

“Except, if you ask him, he didn’t want to come back. Mac tricked him.”

“Jesus, Kat.” I can practically see her rolling her eyes at my constant excuses, and her tone is laced in frustration. “The guy told you he loves you. He said he would move back to town—for you. What more do you want from him?”

“I don’t know,” I say softly. Liz is right. Nothing in life is guaranteed, so how can I expect either of us to make that kind of promise to each other? We’ll try. It’s the best either of us can do. “I have to go.”

“Kat...”

“Goodnight, Liz. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

His hand on the doorknob, his forearm resting on the doorjamb, he rubs the sleep dust from his eyes. Even through the sleepy slits, I can see the confusion in them.

“Kat? It’s five in the morning. What are you doing here?”

I’ve drunk so much coffee, I am nearly bouncing off the walls. Entering the room, the words fly out of my mouth at a million miles a minute.

“I couldn’t sleep. I just kept thinking about what you asked me, and the more I thought, the more my heart hurt.” I turn to face him as he leans against the now shut door. “You broke me, Sutton. You made me pick between the only two things in the world I loved. And when you didn’t like my answer—you left. You left like a goddamn coward and never looked back. Not even for my mom’s funeral. You were too busy to be bothered.”

“Kat, that’s—”

“No. I talk. You listen. Then you show up here. Turn me into your personal servant and tell me you still love me.” I throw my hands into the air. “What the fuck am I supposed to do with that?”

“I... uh...”

“Exactly. Well, you want to know what I did?” He nods, though he looks unsure if he actually wants my answer. “I went home and drank a shit ton of wine, then I drank some

coffee trying to sober up, and now, here I am, a complete fucking mess. That's what I'm afraid of, Sutton." My shoulders sag, and my voice quiets. "If you leave again, I don't know if I can make it back."

"Kitty Kat, I'm not going anywhere without you. Ever again."

"You say that..."

"I mean that," he says, his voice unwavering. "I never wanted to leave you five years ago. I don't want to leave you now. You, Kathryn Keller, are every chord of every song. I'm nothing without you."

Then sentiment is more than reciprocated. For the past five years, I thought I was living, thought I was happy. Sutton being back showed me how wrong I was. Until last night, I didn't realize just how dead I was inside. Life is not nearly as vibrant without him in it.

He says the exact words I need to hear, verbally putting my fears to rest. Like before, the choice is mine if he stays or if he goes. He's not demanding anything of me or giving me ultimatums. There are no threats in his words, only promises.

This time, if he leaves, it's of my doing, not his.

"I'm scared."

Scared to let him in. Scared to give him a chance. All because I know this time, if it doesn't work, it's over—for good—and I'm afraid to lose him for good.

“I know, and you have every right to be, but I can’t fix anything if you won’t give me a chance. Let me show you I’m still the guy you fell in love with, not the asshole who left you.”

“And just how do you plan on doing that?” I ask, a small smile forming on my lips.

“One week, right?”

I nod.

One week.

One week to make me fall for him all over again.

One week for us to come together or fall apart.

“One week,” I tell him.

He smiles, and I melt. The decision I was unsure about moments ago solidifies.

Taking my hand, he tugs me into the suite.

At the least, we’ll have fun trying.

Chapter 37

Sutton

“**W**here are we?” Kat asks, waving her hands in front of her, her eyes covered with a blindfold, leaving her in the dark. The very way I’ve had her since we boarded the plane I chartered.

While I know things like that don’t matter to her, I want her to know what my life is like. What her life with me will be like. And if I’m honest, I want to spoil her.

The moment we stepped on the plane, the blindfold went on. No way in hell was I going to let her figure out where we were going. Not that the short flight wasn’t hint enough. Still, when we disembarked the plane, I led her straight to the limo.

She whined and pouted, but the surprise was definitely worth it.

I’ve spent the past five years in the fast lane. While I love every moment of what I’ve done, the idea of slowing down sounds more and more appealing. I want to live in the here and now, just me and Kat. Like we used to. Time spent at the baseball field just talking and laughing or slow strolls down

the strip, taking in the lights, the atmosphere. Hand in hand. Just the two of us.

That's what I want now, and Tahoe seemed like the perfect place to find it.

"Trust me."

"Famous last words."

"You know I would never put you in harm's way, Kitty Kat."

"So, you keep saying, but I remember a few instances where ___"

"I also remember you enjoying them," I say, cutting her off.

She laughs, knowing full well I'm right. We may have done some crazy shit, mostly me hoping to impress her, but she always enjoyed it, more of a thrill-seeker than she ever realized or would admit. Until her mom got sick. Guilt settles in, knowing that it's one of the things we've yet to talk about. Her mother, her passing—the fact I wasn't there.

I know she harbors anger toward me for it, and I don't blame her. I promised to be there, to help her through it, but when it came down to it, I was nowhere to be found.

"Fine. I'll trust you—for now—but this better be worth it."

If she thought I tried to impress her when we were younger, she has no idea the lengths I would go to now. Anything for her. Any damn thing she wants—it's hers. Just so long as I have a chance.

The temperature changes stepping from the warm outside air into the cool air conditioning.

“A hotel?”

“Yep.”

“Which one? Where?”

I remove the blindfold and step next to her so I can see her face.

The Diamond Peak Lodge, one of several places we always “dreamed” of staying when I “made it.” The beautiful pool, the sandy beach, and the mountain view—the moment she saw it, she fell in love. I promised her we would get here one day. And now that we have...

“Oh, Sutton,” she gasps, her hand flying to her mouth. “How did you...”

“We made it, Kitty Kat.”

“You made it.”

“No way. None of this is possible without you. You’re the reason I’m here. You’re the reason I got that record contract. You and your belief in me. You made my dreams come true. Let me make yours.”

She pulls me in for a kiss, the kind that should be kept behind closed doors, but hell, I return it. We’re a little too close, kiss a little too long, and I love every minute.

“Ahem.”

Reluctantly, I break the kiss and smile at the hotel manager.

“Hi.”

“Mr. Cole, it is a pleasure to have you here at our resort. I’m Donald, the manager. If there is anything that I can do for you, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Our room would be great,” I tell him.

“Of course. Allow me to escort you. I’ll have someone bring your things up.”

Not that we have much luggage. Clothing is extremely optional on this trip. Christ, we have five years of time to make up for. If our sex life now even remotely mirrors what it was five years ago—damn, we have a lot of work to do. Work that is most definitely all my pleasure.

Donald escorts us to our suite. “Our best room,” he tells us as he pushes the door open.

Based on the look on Kat’s face, I would say he’s right. Grinning ear to ear, she takes everything in, but not so much the furnishings. The woman works at a high-class hotel, so this is nothing new to her. It’s the view that’s left her speechless—the lake, the mountains, all picture-perfect. All ours, along with the hot tub on the balcony where we can sit and enjoy it.

“This is... it’s perfect.”

“I’m glad you’re pleased. I’ll leave you for now, but please don’t hesitate to call,” Donald tells me. We shake hands before he exits the room.

“You like it?”

“Like it?” She wraps her arms around my neck. “I love it. I... I love you, Sutton. I always have. I always will.”

“Back at ya, Kitty Kat.” I press my lips to hers. “So, what do you want to do first?”

I know what I’m hoping her answer is going to be.

“I want to go for a swim.”

Definitely not the answer I was hoping for, but I won’t complain about watching her prance around in a bikini.

“Your wish is my command.”

As though I haven’t seen her in all her glory before, she grabs her stuff and heads into the bathroom to change. When she emerges moments later, I’m standing in the middle of the room in my trunks, a towel tossed over my shoulder.

“Christ, Kitty Kat. I could look at you forever,” I exclaim as I take in every inch of her.

“Feeling’s mutual. I don’t quite remember your abs looking this damn good before,” she tells me as she runs her fingers over my stomach. “You work on them to impress all your admirers?”

“All my admirers, huh? You jealous?”

She hesitates for a moment but shakes it off.

“Not a bit. I have something no one else has ever had.”

“What’s that?”

“Your heart.”

“Damn right, you do.”

There’s nothing better than the sight of Kat smiling and happy. I have every intention of doing everything in my power to keep her that way.

“Come on, baby.” I put my arm around her, draping it over her shoulders. “Let’s go swimming.”

Just like at the casino and pretty much everywhere I go, people gravitate toward me. Fans or not, they ask for photos or autographs, all of which I am more than happy to provide. Just not now. Not today when all I want to do is drown myself in everything Kat.

“At least we get privacy in our room, right?” The question is followed by a laugh, though I don’t know that she’s finding much humor in this. In fact, she looks downright uncomfortable.

“Hey, sorry about that,” I tell her as I pull her against me. “I’m so used to it, I forget not everyone is.”

“It’s fine,” she tells me though I’m fairly certain it’s a lie. “Just going to take some getting used to.”

“Mac’s usually around to deflect some of it, but I wanted us to be alone. I didn’t really think—”

She presses her lips to mine to shut me up. In the silence our kiss brings, I hear here the sound of a camera clicking.

“Hope you don’t mind if we go public,” I say with a laugh as we pull apart.

“Do you?”

“Of course not. Why would I?” I’m confused and a little unsure what the driving force is behind her question.

“You’re the one with a reputation to uphold. Quite a reputation at that.”

“I’m well aware of my reputation, Kitty Kat, and we both damn well know it’s bullshit. All I want, all I’ve ever wanted... is you. Tell me you want that, too.”

“I’m still... processing.”

My arms circle around her waist.

“Can you... process, faster?”

“No.”

“Wrong answer.”

“Sutton,” she screams as I toss her over my shoulder. At full speed, I run straight toward the pool. “Don’t you dare throw me in.”

The warning comes out amid my laughter.

“Oh, I wouldn’t dare, Kitty Kat... I’m coming with you.” Hitting the edge of the pool, I leap into the air, and we both land in the water with a splash.

Let the cameras see that. Let them finally see the real me is. This right here—her laughter, her smile, her love—is all the fucking matters.

“You’re crazy, you know that?” she says when we’re still splashing and laughing in the pool ten minutes later.

“Pretty sure we established that long ago.”

Chapter 38

Kat

The whole day was amazing, from the chartered plane to Sutton surprising me with our dream trip to our afternoon by the pool. I even became accustomed to people approaching him. Watching him interact with his fans showed me a whole other side of him I never really thought about. The way his face lights up when they approach him. The way he acts like a little kid when he signs an autograph. Five years and this is all still new and amazing to him. I love it. I love seeing him live his dream. Yes, the photos, the prying eyes can be a bit much, but the smile on his face makes it all worth it. The man I know and the celebrity he is manage to co-exist, and somehow, he does it beautifully.

The air conditioning in the room sends a chill through me when we return from the pool.

“Cold?” he asks, his hands running up and down my arms. I nod. “Well, let me warm you up.”

“How exactly do you plan on warming me up?” As I ask, he disappears, then returns a moment later, stark naked. “Not sure how being naked will warm me up.”

“I’ll show you.” He takes my hand in his and leads me into the bathroom, where the extravagant tub is filled with bubbles and rose petals.

“Was this all the master plan?”

“Me? With a plan? Nah. I’m just winging it.”

“Doing a damn good job of it.” Taking his hand, I step into the tub. I sink into the water and wait for him to join me. Sutton settles himself behind me, and I can feel his cock pressing against my ass. We lie in the bubble bath, wrapped in each other’s arms. This is how life was always supposed to be. Just the two of us, against the world.

“What are you thinking?” His lips are pressed against the top of my head.

“How right this feels.” My fingers draw lazy circles on his knee, sticking out of the water.

“So right.” Sutton slides his hand between my thighs.

“I’m being serious,” I say, though I can’t contain the laughter that escapes.

“Me, too.” His arms tighten around me. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.”

All this while, I knew there was a piece of me missing. A small part of me always, no matter what I did or what I tried to fill it with, remained void. Nothing could fill the hole Sutton left in my heart. That spot was for him, and only him.

“I love you, Sut.”

Hands caress my body as his lips heat my skin.

“You warm now?”

“Not quite.” Turning in the tub to face him, my breasts emerge from the water, directly into his line of sight. Sliding forward, I situate myself over his ready cock and sink down onto him. “Things are definitely getting hotter now.”

After our warm bath, Sutton leaves me to order us some room service. After the last twenty-four hours, I have no energy left to go out to dinner.

When I step into the room, he’s standing on the balcony, wearing nothing but jeans, his feet bare, his torso exposed. He looks beyond striking. My eyes are glued to him, unable to focus on anything else, even the amazing view I know extends past him.

In nothing more than the plush white robe provided by the hotel, I step out onto the balcony. “I could get used to this.”

“I hope you do. This is your life now, Kat. Our life. It’s what I always wanted for us.”

“It’s what I wanted, too... what we could have had this whole time.” No sooner do I say the words, I regret them. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

“You should say whatever you’re feeling,” he tells me as he wraps his arms around me.

“I don’t want to ruin our night.”

“I’m with you. My night can’t be ruined.”

Just as Sutton’s about to kiss me, there’s a knock at the door.

“I hope that’s our food.”

“Expecting someone else, Kitty Kat?” Sutton teases.

“Hey, you never know. I might have groupies, too.”

“No doubt you have at least one.”

“And who would that be?”

“Anthony.” Sutton pulls the door open and allows the room service waiter to bring in our food. I remain silent until the door is shut, and we’re alone again.

“Anthony is just a client.”

“Maybe to you, but to him?” Sutton scoffs. “Way more going on there, Kitty Kat.”

“We’re friends, at most. I swear. In fact, when we had dinner the other night...” Sutton’s eyes widen. Realizing what I said, I know the look on Sutton’s face isn’t surprise, more an ‘I told you so.’ “We talked about you, you jackass. He told me to work things out with you. Then told me he’s interested in someone who works for him.”

“You work for him.”

“You’re impossible.”

“You have a groupie.”

I laugh. “And you have thousands. I think you can handle my measly one.”

“I can’t handle anyone looking at you, let alone anything else.”

Sutton uncovers one of the dishes on the cart. The bowl of spaghetti is larger than my head. The aroma from the garlic bread hits my nose, and I realize just how famished I am.

“Can we table the groupie talk and eat?” I suggest, hungry and desperate to end this conversation.

After dinner, we snuggle on the couch, and Sutton pulls me onto his lap. I rest my head against his bare chest and revel in the moment.

“Tell me about...”

“If you even start talking about groupies again, I’m leaving.”

“Actually, I uh, I was going to say tell me about your mom.”

“Oh.”

“We don’t have to if you don’t want to. I just...”

I squeeze his hand.

“It was peaceful, for her at least. Hospice did a great job, kept her comfortable.”

“Did you say all those things you wanted to say?”

When my mom was first diagnosed with cancer, we fought like hell. All of us. When the treatments didn’t work, and we knew her time was limited, we lived life to the fullest. I had a hard time thinking about the end, about her not being here

anymore. The only thing I was certain of was making sure she knew I loved her.

As tough and trying as her illness was, as terrifying as it was to know we had little time, we knew. Death often comes so suddenly, without warning, and those left behind are often filled with regrets, what-ifs, and I wish I would haves. I didn't want that. I wanted my mother to know everything.

When the end was near, I would lie in bed with her, and we would talk until she drifted to sleep. I would tell her my favorite memories of us. I let her know what she meant to me and how much I appreciated everything she did for me. She deserved to know she was an amazing mother and that everything she did and endured for me wasn't unnoticed or unappreciated.

"I did. The only thing I never told her was the truth about how things ended with us." My eyes fall to my hands. "I guess because I didn't want to believe it was the end."

"It wasn't." Sutton sweeps my hair to the side and presses a kiss to my neck. "It was just a short pause in our song."

I smile. "She knew."

"Knew what?"

"That we would get back together. She said we were forever."

"We are, Kat. I won't let her, or you, down again."

Chapter 39

Sutton

Two days of pure heaven were coming to an end. God, how I wish they didn't have to. What I wouldn't give to hide away in this little bubble, just Kat and me.

“Things have been pretty good these past few days, huh?”

“Mmmm,” Kat says with a sigh of contentment.

We're spending our last few moments on the terrace, sipping our coffee while we wait for our limo to take us to the airport.

“When Mac first told me about coming back to Vegas, I was pissed. Furious the asshole tricked me and forced my hand.”

“And now?”

“Now, I'm fucking grateful. I could have killed the fucker, but now, I just want to give him a fucking hug and thank him for knowing me better than I know myself.”

“I'm grateful, too.”

“Have you, uh... have you given any more thought to us?”

“That's all I've been doing.”

“And?”

“Sutton...”

“You’re killing me here, Kitty Kat.”

“I’m scared, Sutton. I’m afraid we won’t work. I’m afraid of ruining the life I’ve built. I’m afraid of losing you all over again. The perfection of a few days alone together is vastly different from real everyday life.”

“I realize that.”

“How can I bank on a few days when we spent years together and still ended up in this position?”

As frustrated as I am, I do my best not to let it come out in my response. I’m doing everything I can here, but I’m not sure what the hell she’s looking for.

“Do you love me?”

“You know I do.”

“Then isn’t it worth a shot?” I scoot to the edge of my seat, closing the gap between us. “We both know there are no guarantees in life, and forever isn’t guaranteed.”

“I just need more time.”

“Haven’t we already wasted enough?”

The answer is yes. I know it’s my fault, but I’m here and trying to fix it. I can’t if she won’t let me, though. It takes two to tango, and fuck, I need her to dance with me.

“Mr. Cole, your limo has arrived.”

Standing from my seat, I extend my hand to her.

She places her hand in mine.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I want this. Us. I want it to be real. I want to be yours.”

“You mean it?”

“We’re forever.”

Forever. What we’re meant to be.

“Let’s go home.”

When the plane lands, much like when we left Vegas, a limo is waiting for us. The minute we get into the limo to head back to the Sapphire, Kat’s on me, and I don’t want to stop her. If this is her way of thanking me, I’ll take her gratitude any day. Her fingers dig into my skin as her heat settles over my erection, and every damn ounce of self-control I have is tested.

“Baby, slow down.” The words, in relation to her, are foreign.

“Don’t you want me, Sutton?” she asks before pressing her lips against my neck.

“So much.”

“Then take me. Fuck me. Make me yours.”

Only it's her making me hers. The swift removal of my belt, the hand that strokes my cock, if anyone is branding anyone here, it's her. I'll be hers any fucking day of the week.

Soft lips wrap around the head of my cock as she slides to her knees.

“Oh, fuck.”

Her mouth sinks over me, taking me deep in her throat. I groan, resisting the urge to buck up into her. So hard to resist when she's working her mouth, her tongue running along the underside of my cock, sliding down, then back up.

“Fucking hell, Kat.”

“Come for me, Sutton.”

“I'd rather come in you. Lie down.”

Kat moves onto the bench of the limo and lies back, propped up on her elbows. Her dress bunches around her waist, exposing her sweet, wet pussy, making it mine for the taking.

My tongue laps at her flesh, tasting the wetness and tracing the line to her clit. She threads her fingers through my hair.

“More.”

She has no idea what she's asking for. My mouth covers her clit as I slide my fingers inside her, one then another. She grinds against them, much like she ground against my dick when we were dancing.

The dampness increases, her muscles clench, and I pull my fingers from inside her. It's worth the scolding she gives me when my mouth crashes onto hers as I slam my cock inside of her.

The scream she releases is sexy as hell.

“Do I need to... be gentle?”

“Harder.”

I pull out and slam into her again—harder, deeper. Her hands grip the headrest above her as she cries out again.

“Don't stop.”

Pressing her knees until they nearly meet her shoulders, my hands grip her knees as I thrust into her. With the sounds of our wet flesh slapping together and the moans and whimpers that escape her, my cock is in heaven. Her pussy pulls me in, holding me, begging for more. When her body trembles beneath me, I know she's close.

My name is a plea on her lips as her orgasm hits. The tightening of her walls clench my cock and pulls my own from me. When I pull out, I can see my cum dripping from her red pussy, the evidence of what we've done, who she belongs to splattered on her thighs and the seat of the limo.

“That's more like it,” she says.

“Happy to tear that pussy up any time Kitty Kat.”

She runs her finger over the head of my cock before taking it in her mouth and licking off the cum. Sweet Jesus, she's

fucking sexy.

The limo drops us off in front of the Sapphire, our bags at our feet. One of the bellhops arrives and loads them on his cart.

“Not that one,” Kat tells him, pointing to her bag.

“Leave it,” I direct him.

His eyes dart between Kat and me, unsure whose direction he should follow.

“You’re staying with me tonight.”

“I have to get home. I have to work tomorrow, and—”

“After what you pulled in the limo? I’m not letting you go tonight.”

“Sutton...”

“Don’t make me report you to your boss,” I threaten her.

“You’re impossible, you know that?”

I sling my arm over her shoulder.

“And you wouldn’t have me any other way.”

Chapter 40

Sutton

After a long day rehearsing, I'm finally back in my room, waiting for Kat's shift to end. We returned to Vegas last night, and while she fought me at first, I eventually convinced her to stay with me. Tonight, we're heading back to her place. My stuff is packed and ready to go just as soon as she's done working.

While I wait, I grab my guitar and start working on a song that's been stuck in my head since I saw Kat wrapped in a blanket, standing on the balcony in Tahoe. The way her hair fell over her shoulders, the smile when she caught me watching her. Seeing her again has opened up a floodgate of inspiration, music, words, melodies coming to me.

Every chord of every song.

The door to the suite flies open with enough force, it hits the wall behind it. Val charges through it with Mac hot on her heels.

"Sutton, will you call your guard dog off," Val shouts.

“I wouldn’t have to play guard dog if you would just do your job and leave him the hell alone,” Mac retorts.

The sound of their bickering messes up my chord. I stop strumming the guitar and face them. I’m still pissed at her and don’t want to even hear her voice, but one thing I’ve learned with Val is it’s easier to just go along with it.

“What is it, Val?”

“I have an offer you won’t refuse.” Her bright lips spread into a huge smile. “And this buffoon is trying to stop me from telling you about it.”

Mac looks frustrated standing behind her. “I told her you were taking the residency. That you are happy here. That no deal was going to change that.”

The two of them are always going at it, both thinking they know what’s in my best interest. While Mac is right—I’m happy here and have every intention of taking the residency—it’s easier just to placate Val.

“What kind of offer?”

“The kind you don’t turn down.”

The more she gloats, the more irritated Mac becomes. I can see his eyes twitching and the tension in his shoulders.

“So, spit it out already.”

“A world tour with the top bands in the industry. It’s going to be huge. We’re talking crazy numbers of fans, crazy record sales. This is what you’ve been wanting.”

She's right. It's the very thing I had been looking for before coming to Vegas. A boost in my career, traveling the world sounded amazing. It was the *something* I needed, if for no other reason than to keep me from missing my old life. A busy tour to help me forget all the things that were missing.

The thing is, nothing is missing anymore. I'm back in Vegas. I not only got Kat to forgive me but to also admit she still loves me. Why in the hell would I want to jeopardize that again?

"No thanks." Not looking in her direction, I move my fingers over the strings.

"What do you mean, no? Do you have any idea how much work I put into getting this for you? This is what you wanted. What we wanted." When she throws *we* in there, I get what this is about, why she wants me to do this so badly.

"There is no *we*. Not anymore."

"You've got to be kidding me. Because of that—"

"Watch it."

"She's not right for you, Sut, and she sure as hell isn't worth giving up this opportunity."

It's a great opportunity, I'll give her that. I'll even agree it's going to sting to pass it up, but she's wrong. Kat is one hundred percent worth giving it up for. The happiness I've felt these past few days, the calm she brings my soul, things just feel right with her. They always have.

“Well, I think she is. I’m staying in Vegas, Val.” She goes to speak again. “The more you talk, the more you make me want to.”

Standing in front of me, her hands on her hips, her short dress shows nearly everything.

“Are you sure about this, Sutton? All of it?”

“Am I interrupting something?” Kat asks, walking into the room at the most inopportune time.

Thanks to my stupid admission, as long as she’s a part of my team, Val is always going to be a point of contention between us. As much as I would like to boot her, the record company wouldn’t let me. If nothing else, Val is great at her job. The offer she just brought me is proof of that.

“Apparently, an offer I can refuse,” I say with the hint of a laugh. “I mean it, Val. I appreciate the work you put into getting me the deal, but this is where I want to be.” I glance at Kat, the concern on her face easing, though I can still see the anger that Val is even here.

“This isn’t over yet,” Val informs me.

“I’m signing with the Sapphire right after the concert, so I would say it is.”

Val moves toward the door but stops in front of Kat.

“When his career falls apart, you’ll be the reason.”

Son of a bitch.

Kat's face falls, and Val is pleased to have knocked the wind out of Kat's sails.

I am more than happy to fix them.

Jumping from the couch, I storm out of the room after Val. Grabbing her arm, I twirl her around to face me.

“You ever speak to Kat like that again, you're done. Do you hear me?”

“You're making a huge mistake.”

“I don't give a damn what you think. It's my career, my choice, but if you so much as ever look at her sideways again, I will end your career. Understood?”

Val yanks her arm out of my hold. “Understood.”

I watch every movement she makes until the elevator is gone.

When I turn back to my room, Kat is standing next to Mac, visibly shaken.

“She's wrong, you know,” I say, making my way to her.

“Is she? Is this move going to be bad for your career?”

“I hope not,”—I shrug—“but let's face it, it's a fleeting career on a good day. One day, you've made it. The next, you're old news. What I do know is I want to take this residency. I want to live my life here, with you.”

“What did she offer you?”

“It doesn't matter.”

“It matters to me.”

Taking her face in my hands, I look her deep in the eyes.

“I love you, Kat. There is nothing in the world that could tear me away from you again. Not a world tour, not a billion dollars. Nothing.”

“Are you sure, Sutton? The last thing I ever want to do is —”

“I fucked up and walked away from us five years ago. I’m not making that mistake twice. This is where I want to be. I promise you, baby.”

“I don’t want you to give up your dreams because of me.”

“You are his dream,” Mac interjects. “Val’s a bitch. Don’t let her get to you.” Mac’s hand claps down on my shoulder and squeezes before he makes himself scarce.

“He’s right, on both counts.”

“I just don’t want you to resent me one day for missing an opportunity.”

“The only one I resent is myself for being a damn fool and walking away. I’m happy where I am. I’m happy with you.”

“You swear?”

I make an X over my heart.

“Cross my heart and hope to die.”

Chapter 41

Kat

“Well, well, well,” Callum’s voice rings out as he enters my office, loud, boastful, and ready to gloat.

He’s won, he knows it, and now he’s here to collect.

I can’t even try to hide it. Even I can see the change in my face, the sexed-up, satisfied look. Though I do my best to keep my smile at bay.

“May I help you?” I ask innocently, pretending I don’t know what he’s here for. The money I owe him is already in the top drawer of my desk.

“How was your trip?”

“Oh, that? It was okay. Just a business trip,” I say, very blasé.

“Just business, huh? The vertical kind?”

“Sutton and I ironed out some details. Did you know the Sapphire offered him a residency?”

“Really? So, what, he would move back? Or just commute from New York?”

“Oh, he would need to move here.”

Callum moves around my office until he's standing behind me. His hands rest on my shoulders as he lowers his head.

“And did you help Jack... seal the deal?”

“In a manner of speaking. You know what Jack says. What the client wants, the client gets.”

“Ha!” Callum claps his hands together. “I knew it. You are so predictable.”

“Now, Callum, let's not jump to conclusions. I said I gave him what he wanted. I didn't say I had sex with him.”

“Okay, I'll bite. What did he want besides your sweet, delectable—”

Jumping out of my seat, I swat his arm. His words are brazen and unexpected, and if Sutton was to hear them, Callum would be dead.

“Callum.”

“What?” He runs away from me. “It's true. I should know.”

“Uh, please never say that again. If Sutton hears you? He'll kill you. And I'll let him.”

“Then hand over the cash, Kitty Kat,” Callum teases. “We both know exactly what your rock star wants and that you gave it to him. Repeatedly.”

“Fine, here,” I say as I hand him the wad of hundred-dollar bills from my desk. “Happy now?”

“The question is, are you?” Callum’s smirk turns to a concerned smile.

“I am. I’m happy... and scared.”

“That’s to be expected, but I’m sure it will ease with time. You just have to open up. Give him a chance. If you don’t, you’ll regret it.”

“Really? More advice from the eternal bachelor?”

“No, more advice from your friend. The one who knows what this asshole means to you, although he is just that—an asshole.”

“He’s not... not really. He’s been through a lot. And as you damn well know, we don’t always do the right thing when we feel cornered.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’ve moved on to the making excuses portion of the show,” Callum bellows. “So, what happens now? He going to buy some big, fancy condo for the two of you? Make sure you stay barefoot and pregnant?”

“You make him sound like a caveman,” I say with a laugh.

Callum shrugs. “If the shoe fits...”

“I don’t have a clue what we’re going to do yet. Nothing’s official until after his show here.”

Callum pulls up something on his phone. “Looks pretty official to me.” He turns the phone, so I can see it. The tabloid magazine that somehow got a picture of Sutton tying his shoe turned it into a proposal photo.

“Not even close.”

“Not that far off base either,” Sutton says from the doorway. He enters the office and makes his way over to Callum and me. After pressing a kiss to my cheek, he turns his attention to Callum. “We got off on the wrong foot.”

“Not we, you.”

“You’re right. I owe you an apology.”

Callum crosses his arms. “I don’t forgive as easily as she does.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry. I made a mistake leaving Kat—”

“No shit,” Callum interjects.

“Cal,” I scold him.

“No, he’s right. I fucked up, and being back here, seeing her again, did stupid things to me. I acted like an ass. For that, I’m sorry.”

Callum nods. “Just don’t hurt her again. Got it? I don’t want to have to pick up the pieces of your mess a second time.” Callum turns to me. “I’ll see you later.”

After he exits the office, I realize he never accepted Sutton’s apology, though I didn’t really expect him to.

“Pick up the pieces? Want to tell me what that means?”

I throw a look his way, one that tells him he has no right to ask. Just like I didn’t have a right to ask about Val.

“We both have pasts, right?”

With a groan, he agrees.

“Any other groupies I should know about?”

“Besides Jack?” I tap my finger to my chin.

Sutton’s eyes widen, his jaw going slack, and the look on his face is priceless.

“I’m just kidding, Sut. There’s no one else.”

“Jesus, Kitty Kat. You about gave me a heart attack.”

“You have nothing to worry about. I’m all yours, Sutton.”

He presses a kiss to my lips, sealing the words like a verbal contract.

“Ready for dinner?”

With his arm possessively over my shoulder, we make our way out of my office. Sutton’s leading the way but not toward the restaurant where we have reservations.

“Where are we going?”

Wrapping his arms wrap around my waist, he nuzzles my neck. “I thought it would be best if we started with dessert.” He lowers his voice. “Work up an appetite for dinner.”

A giggle escapes me as he nips at my neck. “Dessert sounds perfect. Except... I get the first taste this time.”

The elevator opens, and I reach for his belt, tugging him in with me.

Chapter 42

Sutton

Concert days always have me full of energy. Today, I feel it a little extra, almost like the first time I took the stage. I feel antsy as I sit in the green room with Kat. Well, she's sitting, and I'm pacing. It's all because of her.

I first felt it during soundcheck when she sat on the side, watching. It felt like the old days, only better because I was on a real stage, and I could give Kat the life she deserves.

Finally, after all these years, I feel complete. Everything I ever wanted has come to fruition. This is the way things were supposed to be, how they were supposed to go—Kat and me taking on the world.

All day, everything has just felt... right.

“Is there anything else we can get you, Mr. Cole?” the young kid asks.

The nervous undertone in his voice makes me want to laugh. It always does. I'll never get used to people looking up to me, admiring me. Hell, wishing they were me. I get it. I remember doing it. Some of my favorite musicians and groups

like Johnny Rocket, the Beastly Undertones, and Crenshaw still get to me. I might play with them, be nearly on their level, yet I still feel that jittery nervousness when I'm near them.

The rock star life can be a struggle—endless days on the road, no place to really call home. As much as I love what I do, glancing over at Kat, I'm grateful for this upcoming residency. Nothing ever sounded better than getting to do what I love with the girl I love by my side.

“Nah, kid, I'm good. Thanks.”

“Kid?” Kat laughs. “He's like a year younger than you.”

“Are you laughing at me?” I ask as I take a step in her direction.

“Sutton.” There's a warning in her tone... as if that will stop me.

She bolts from the couch, but there's nowhere to go. She backs herself into a corner. Perfect. My hands press against the walls on either side of her face.

“What are you going to do to me?”

Oh, the thoughts the question puts in my head, especially with her looking like she does. Her dark hair is straight and sleek today, and the black leather dress she's wearing leaves little to the imagination. Good for me, trouble for anyone who gives her a second glance.

My hand slides between her thighs and touches the soft skin of her sex. Christ, she's killing me. My thumb rubs over her clit, and she whimpers. Fucking perfection.

“Hey, Sut, you’re on,” Mac’s voice says. “Oh, shit. Sorry.”

“I’m coming.” I turn my focus back to Kat. “This isn’t over.”

“Promises, promises.”

I press my lips to hers, needing to feel her one more time before I take the stage.

“Keep her close. I want to see her,” I tell Mac as we walk toward the stage.

Mac laughs. “Sure thing, Sut.”

“I know. I know.” One of the guys hands me my guitar. “If I say it, will you quit with this laughing shit?”

“Wait, let me get my phone.”

“Why?”

“You admitting I’m right? This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing I have to get on video.”

“Fuck you.” I try to sound pissed, but I’m laughing. “You were right, okay? Coming back here, fixing things with Kat.” I stop just before the stage and turn to him. When I do, I see Kat a few feet back. She’s smiling broadly, so is Mac. “Thank you.”

“Go get ‘em, tiger.”

A quick wink at Kat, then I head out onto the stage.

It’s electric and intense. The venue is much smaller than where I’ve been playing, but I love it. The fans seem closer, the music louder, and every time I glance to my right, there’s

Kat. She's singing and dancing, Mac at her side, rolling his eyes at her.

Fucking perfection.

Intermission rolls around, and I charge off the stage.

"Where the hell you going?" Mac shouts after me.

Kat's hand in mine, I drag her behind me.

"Sutton, slow down."

I maneuver us down a long hallway into an open door.

"What are you doing?" Kat asks.

"I want you, baby."

"Here? Now?"

"Tonight... it's everything I ever wanted." My lips crash against hers. "You are everything I wanted. I am so sorry, Kitty Kat."

Her arms wrap around my neck as her tongue dances with mine. When she pulls back, she turns around, tosses me a look over her shoulder, and says the only thing I want to hear.

"Fuck me, Sutton."

"Hands on the wall and don't move them."

I know her. She'll want to touch herself, her breasts, her clit, but I don't want anyone's hands on her but mine, not even hers.

I move the tight fabric of her dress up so it's wrapped around her waist and slap her bare ass.

“This had better be for my benefit,” I tell her.

“And mine.”

I run my fingers along her seam, the wetness coating my fingers. I bring them to my lips and suck the liquid from them.

“So. Damn. Good.”

As much as I want to savor her, I don't have much time. I make haste with my belt, my jeans, and my boxers, and the moment my dick is free, I push into her.

“Sutton,” she cries out.

The mixture of pleasure and pain I hear urges me on.

Pulling out, I slam back into her. Her cries are so fucking sexy. I thrust, hard and fast. Time is of the essence, and we both need to get what we want. Her hand slides from the wall toward her body.

I smack her ass, the sound of my hand hitting her flesh filling the room.

“Hands on the wall.”

The woman controls every piece of me. I would do anything for her, but right now, I need her to do this for me. I need to be the one in control.

The hand gripping her hip slides forward, and I press my thumb against her clit. Her response is immediate. Her head falls back, her body tenses, and she tightens around me. She screams out my name again, and I'm done. Her orgasm draws

mine out of me, and I chase it and her with reckless abandon, exploding inside of her.

Resting my head against her back, I'm grateful to feel her skin against mine.

"You need to get back," she reminds me.

For the first time, I'm not eager to run onto the stage. I'm perfectly happy where I am. But she's right. I have to go. Being a gentleman, I tug her dress down before tucking myself in.

"I love you, Kitty Kat."

"I love you, too."

We step out of the closet and walk down the hall to Mac's knowing smile.

"What the hell am I going to do with the two of you? You're five minutes behind schedule."

"He's worth the wait," Kat says.

Chapter 43

Kat

“**K**iss for good luck?” Sutton asks me as we walk toward the stage.

“Didn’t we already do that?”

“Don’t you know by now that I never want to stop doing that?”

Still, I marvel he’s moments away from stepping onto the stage into the limelight, and all he wants is a kiss from me. I step into his waiting arms and press a kiss to his lips.

“Good luck, baby.”

The action takes me back five years. Back to that night, Sutton’s last show in Vegas before he became a major success. So much about tonight feels vastly the same as it did back then, yet it’s all so different. We’re in a venue that holds thousands versus the hundreds that would fill the small clubs he used to play in.

The crowd is already cheering loudly, chanting for their favorite singer to take the stage. This right here is exactly what I knew he was meant for, what I wanted for him. My heart

aches that to get here, I had to lose so much time with him. Stupid, broken kids.

While I know he wants to try to make this work, part of me wonders if we're still those stupid and broken kids or if we can do it this time around.

Mac's on stage, hyping up the crowd. He introduces the man himself, Sutton Cole, and the crowd goes crazier, if that's even possible. Sutton throws a wink my way before heading onto the stage.

Watching him on stage leaves me awestruck.

All these years, I've avoided him, his music—everything. Now, I'm so glad I did because this is how I want to experience it. This is the way I needed to see him for the first time. Live. On stage. In all his glory.

Tears of joy sting my eyes as he belts out the first verse. Awestruck. That's what I am.

Liz is next to me, singing to the songs that, for so long, I refused to listen to. She shakes and moves to the beat, and I notice Mac watching her from where he's standing. Completely submersed in the show, I don't even notice the body standing next to me until the voice attached speaks, sounding more like nails on a chalkboard.

“You're still here?”

If it wasn't for the tone, I probably wouldn't even notice, but the clear disdain made it stick out a little more than it should. I glance over at the overly made-up woman. Val. The

woman from Sutton's team. The one who was with him the night I showed up at his place in New York.

"I am, and I don't plan to go anywhere, so you'll just have to get used to seeing me around. A lot." Lucky for me, I'm well versed in dealing with high-maintenance bitches and keep my voice calm and professional.

"We'll see about that."

I turn my attention back to the stage—to Sutton.

"Are you having fun on this little trip down memory lane?"

She won't give in. Well, sweetheart, neither will I.

"Oh, it's more than that."

"I wouldn't count on it." She chuckles. "There is only one thing Sutton loves, and that's his career."

Following suit, I let out a laugh.

"Clearly, you don't know him as well as you think you do."

"Believe me, I know every piece of him... including that birthmark on his inner thigh. The one you can only see when you're... up close and personal."

I don't need details to know what she's implying.

"Knowing Sutton and fucking him are two completely different things. I'm the only one who has ever gotten to do both."

Mac returns, and based on the look on his face, he doesn't look pleased to see Val standing next to me.

“Val, I thought you were gone.”

“After my chat with Sutton the other day, how could I just leave?” Batting her eyelashes at Mac is more for my benefit than his.

Mac doesn't seem phased by the woman. He looks more hardened and on guard.

“Maybe because he told you to?”

I breathe a little easier. Having Mac as backup makes the woman less intimidating. She isn't an issue because I'm concerned Sutton wants her, but because of what she said the other day. The fear her words instilled in me, that I would be the reason his career falls apart, is still fresh in my mind... and my heart.

She knows it. While she might look at Mac and argue with him, every word she says is directed at me.

“Someone needs to look out for Sutton's best interest. Someone needs to make sure he doesn't destroy everything he has worked for. Apparently, I'm the only one who cares enough to let him know what a fool he would be to pass up an opportunity like this.”

Mac is about to respond, but I cut him off.

“Do you care about his happiness at all?” I already know the answer—the truthful answer. To her, he's nothing but a good lay and a paycheck. “If you did, you would know his heart is here in Vegas.”

“Then why did he refuse to come here for five years?” Hands on her hips and a smile on her face, she thinks she has me.

“He needed to leave to become the man he is today, and now, he’s back.” I step toward her. “And I have no intention of letting him go again. So, whatever you’re after, wherever you think you’re going to send him, know this. I will be by his side every step of the way. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a show to watch.”

Mac tells her she needs to go, and if she doesn’t leave, he’ll remove her... personally.

With Liz in tow, I step closer to the stage. Even though I can hear them behind me, I ignore what’s going on and let Mac do his thing. It’s his job, what he’s good at. I just want to just watch Sutton shine and support him.

When our eyes meet again, the pure joy that radiates off of both of us is undeniable.

“You two are so disgustingly cute,” Liz gushes.

“You okay?” Mac asks.

“Yep.”

“I don’t know what he told you about Val, but—”

“He told me what I need to know. There’s nothing between them anymore.”

“If you ask me, there never was. Not with Val, not with anyone. Everyone was just a placeholder until he could get

back to you.”

“You don’t have to convince me, you know. I’m in.”

We may have taken the long road to get here, but we’re together now, and there is nothing Val can do to destroy it.

I won’t let her.

Chapter 44

Sutton

When I walk off the stage, my eyes are glued to Kat. So focused on her, I barely notice Jack standing next to her, no doubt contract in hand.

Ignoring whatever greeting or compliment he gives me, I sweep Kat into my arms and twirl her around. I'm beyond happy, every dream I ever had coming true in this one moment. This is everything I ever wanted in life—my girl and my music.

“You were amazing.”

When Kat told me she had never heard a song of mine or watched a show, I was a little surprised. It was very telling of how hurt she was and how deep that anger and pain ran. She said Liz told her every song I wrote was for her. Liz wasn't wrong. Despite telling myself I didn't give a damn about Kat or try to erase her from my memory by banning anyone from mentioning her name, everything I did was for her.

Just like the show tonight. It was all for her. Not that I don't give each show my all, but this one, I gave even more. I put my heart into it. My soul, too. Every chord, every beat, every

lyric, all for her. Being able to see her off to the side of the stage, her lips smiling and her body swaying, only made it better.

“I am what I am because of you, baby.”

Jack clears his throat to get our attention, and I assume to stop the deep kiss I pulled Kat in for.

“You were great tonight, Sutton.”

“Thanks, Jack,” I reply, begrudgingly pulling away from Kat.

“The contract for the residency is on my desk, just waiting for your signature. If you’ve made your decision,” he tells me. I can see the hope in his eyes.

“I have.”

Jack continues to stare at me expectantly. The stoic look on my face doesn’t give away anything, not a damn clue what that decision is.

Kat smacks my arm. “Oh, will you just put him out of his misery?”

“I’m staying. I’ll take the residency.”

I swear, the man looks even more excited than Kat and I feel. He claps his hands, then pulls me in for an unexpected hug.

“You won’t regret this. The Sapphire is your home now, your family. Whatever you need... it’s yours.”

As much as I appreciate the sentiment behind his words, I already have everything I need right here. Mac's standing off to the side, smiling. Kat's in my arms. Everything and everyone I love is right here.

Nothing is going to stand in our way.

"Let's go sign that contract," I tell Jack. "I have some celebrating to do."

"Here it is," Jack says as he lays the contract and a fancy pen on his desk.

I stare down at the paper for a moment. I've signed plenty of contracts in my career, but aside from the initial one with Dante five years ago, none have ever been this important.

"Sut, are you sure you want to do this?" Kat's voice is soft, filled with fear.

"Of course, I do, Kitty Kat. I just can't believe I've made it full circle. The first contract I signed was to get me out of this town, and this one is pulling me back in." I look over at her. "You're pulling me back in, and there is no place I would rather be."

Taking the pen in hand, I put ink to paper and sign my name. It's a done deal.

Vegas, I'm here to stay.

There are a million places in Vegas where the four of us could have gone after the show, but there was only one place I

wanted to be.

Squeezed into Liz's tiny car, the cooler filled with beer on the seat between Kat and me, we're headed to the baseball field. The place where my music began. The place where Kat and I ended. Now that it's all come full circle, I can't imagine a better place to celebrate.

"So, what are you two going to do now?" Liz is lying on a blanket next to Kat as Mac and I toss a ball back and forth.

"Sex. Lots of sex."

Mac and Liz laugh as Kat scolds me for my honest answer.

"What? We have a lot of time to make up for."

"As wonderful as that is, I was referring to where you're going to live. If Kat's going to keep working or become a kept housewife," Liz continues.

I choke on the sip of beer I just took.

"Kat? Kept? I prefer my balls where they are, attached to me. No. Kitty Kat can do whatever she wants... as long as I'm at the top of the list of things she does."

"Always, baby." She smiles.

"What about you, Mac?" Liz continues her barrage of questions.

"What about me?" Mac coughs out, taken aback by her interest in him.

"You've been on the road as long as Sutton. What are you going to do now that you're back in Vegas and most likely

won't need to babysit him as often?"

"Trust me, there will never be a shortage of needing to babysit this asshole," Mac replies with a laugh.

I chuck the ball at him a little harder and a little faster. Always the more athletic, he catches it with ease and tosses it back, turning the situation around and taking me off guard. Trying to dodge the ball, I land on the blanket next to Kat.

"What about you, Kitty Kat? What do you want?"

The decision may have been made, but we haven't even begun to sort out the details. I'm not sure what headspace she's in, but whatever we do, we do it together, including where we live. We've been apart long enough. There's no need to waste more time.

Laying my head in her lap, her fingers run through my hair. She's the most at ease I've seen her since I got back into town.

"I have it all, right here."

"You know, maybe this wasn't such a good idea," Mac says. "I don't know if I can stomach the two of you being back together."

"Here, here," Liz agrees, jumping up from the blanket and standing next to Mac. "Us poor single people don't want to watch the two of you kissy facing all over each other. Right, Mac?"

"Kissy facing?" I laugh. "I don't kissy-face. I—"

Kat's hand clamps over my mouth.

“You two need help,” Mac says.

“We need to be alone,” I tell him. “Why don’t you two go kissy-face somewhere else.”

I don’t even have to look at Mac to know he’s scowling, probably Liz, too, but neither of them denies they want to.

“How about you take this shit back to the hotel before I have to bail your asses out of jail.”

“Party pooper,” I say as I help Kat to her feet.

Chapter 45

Sutton

Waking up to Kat was a double whammy, not only my post-concert bliss but the utter satisfaction in waking up with the woman of my dreams in my arms. I slide my hand between her bare thighs to both rouse and arouse her. Unfortunately, my plan backfires. One look at the clock and she bolts from bed, late for a meeting, leaving me all alone to my devices.

The concert last night at House of Cards was phenomenal. I had forgotten how awesome it is to perform in a small venue. Not that the place is that small. It still brought in a few thousand people. Still, there was an intimacy you don't find when you play stadiums. Last night, I could see faces, see their smiles and their mouths moving with the words I sang.

It was amazing.

Any reservations I may have had about the residency were laid to rest. Not that I had any intention of not signing that contract. Kat is enough to make it worthwhile, though a part of me had wondered if it would be enough, if I would find the

satisfaction I did when I was touring. Did I ever! I hadn't felt like that in years.

Fucking perfection.

That's what my life is right now.

A hard knock on the door breaks my blissful moment.

I make my way to the door and pull it open without looking to see who it is. Stupid move on my part.

"What the fuck are you doing here?"

The sight of my father takes me by surprise. I don't know how he found me, let alone why he would want to. We said all we needed to say back at the trailer park when I first arrived. He hates me. I hate him. End of story.

At least, that's what I had hoped for.

Yet here he is in the flesh, looking drunker and dirtier than when I saw him last.

"Is that any way to greet your old man?"

"If by 'old man,' you mean drunk, useless, good-for-nothing prick, then yeah. Sounds about right to me. Now, answer the fucking question."

He smiles at me through grime-filled teeth and pushes past me into the suite.

"Fancy."

"Yeah, well, that's what hard work gets you."

“Hard work?” he scoffs. “You don’t know a damn thing about hard work.”

“And you do?” I chide.

I know better than to argue with the man, but I can’t seem to control it. He brings out the worst in me, but I allow him to say what he wants until I can figure out what the fuck he’s doing here. Even better, how the hell to get rid of him.

“Heard your planning on staying in town.”

I’m sure news of the residency was leaked the moment the pen hit the paper. It doesn’t surprise me, and I don’t really care, except it brought the man standing before me to my door. “I am.”

I’m looking at the sole reason I had any hesitation in signing. I left Vegas because of the record deal but also because I never wanted to lay eyes on my father again. Coming back here means I won’t have that luxury. Nothing will stop him from torturing me. It’s what he lives for, which may very well be why he suddenly looks alive, as opposed to when I saw him the other day.

“Good.”

“Good?” Definitely not the reaction I was expecting. It makes me all the more curious what he’s doing here.

“You heard me.”

“I did. I just don’t believe you. Why the fuck would you want me back here? You want money?”

“Well, you do kind of owe me.”

“I don’t owe you shit,” I scoff.

“I raised you and—”

“Grandma raised me. You tolerated me and weren’t even good at doing that.” My fists clench at my sides. “How much do you want? How much will it take to get you out of my life?” The man can have every damn dime I’ve got if it gets him out of my life for good.

“We’ll get to that,” he says, his dirty fingers running along the back of the couch. “You know, Sut, me and you, we’re not that different.”

“Like hell we aren’t.” I’m nothing like him. I’ve made sure of it. It’s been my sole mission to be anything, anyone, as long as I’m nothing like him.

“You think I haven’t watched you? Seen what you’ve been doing? All the women? The booze? The partying?”

“That’s not who I am.”

“The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree... son.”

“This one did.”

He waves me off.

“I was just like you when I was your age, young, full of life. Then your momma came around. Fucked everything up. And you?” He laughs. “You made it worse. Piece of shit kid didn’t give a damn about nobody but yourself. Ran your momma right off.”

“Thanks for the reminder, but I’ve heard the story before.”

“Ain’t no getting around it, kid.” His hearty laugh fills the room. “It’s in the genes. My dad, me, now, you. You spent your whole life thinking you’re better than me, better than what you had. Well, you ain’t.”

I’ve had enough of him and the doubt he’s filling my head with.

“Get out.” Grabbing the door, I yank it open.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he says, standing firmly in place. “That’s the beauty of you being back. We can have some good old bonding time.”

“Fine. I’ll go,” I say as I step into the elevator.

As I walk through the casino, desperate to find Kat, I can hear him shouting behind me. Stopping dead in my tracks, I face him.

“I give up. What? What is it you want?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Kat and pray to God he doesn’t. I’ve kept them separate for a reason. Kat doesn’t need to be subjected to the man, and I didn’t want her seeing that side of my life or the man I fight so hard every day not to become.

“What you owe me.”

“Which is?”

He turns his head to the side, a smarmy smile on his face.

“Your pathetic life.”

My eyes keep darting back to Kat to make sure she stays away and stays safe, but he catches me. He sees her and smiles even broader.

“Don’t. Don’t even look at her.”

“Never understood what that pretty little thing would want with a piece of shit like you.”

His question reiterates the same thing I’ve always wondered myself. Why in the hell would my sweet Kitty Kat want a guy like me when she could have anyone in the world? Someone who is good... and not fucked up.

“Shut up!”

“She reminds me a lot of your momma, smart, pretty, good in bed.” A sinister chuckle falls from his twisted mouth.

My hands clench at my side, and the only thing keeping me from pummeling him is Kat and the fear I see in her eyes. I focus on it and try to blur out his words.

“That’s how I know you’ll do the same to her I did to your momma. You’ll break her. Destroy her. Hell, you already did once.”

“I am not you. I won’t hurt her again.”

“If you say so. Don’t matter none. She’ll smarten up. Leave your sorry ass. Just like your momma left you.”

“You son of a bitch!” My arm cocks back, my fist aiming for his face. When it connects, it feels like heaven. Years of

physical and mental abuse flood my mind and fill me with anger that makes me continue to hit him.

I can hear Kat screaming in the background and feel Mac's hands on me, trying to pry me off, but all I can do, all I want to do, is let the rage consume me. I want to beat him. I want him to understand the pain I felt. I want to kill him for ruining my life. Not then, but now.

Angry as his words made me, I also know they're right.

Kat walked away from me once. Told me to go to hell, not only because of the ultimatum but because I wasn't good enough. Not then, not now. She felt it then. There's not a doubt in my mind, she'll feel it again.

Then I'll lose her for good. Just like he lost my mom. Because he didn't deserve her. Just like I don't deserve Kat.

The fight leaves me, my hands let go, and Mac finally pulls me off my dad. We land on the ground with a thud, Kat standing over us.

"Oh my God, are you okay?"

From my seat on the ground, I look up at her with a blank stare, completely devoid of any emotion.

"I'm fine."

Standing upright, I turn and walk away.

"Sutton, where are you going?" she asks.

"To jail," an unfamiliar voice responds. I turn to see a cop standing there. "Sutton Cole, you are under arrest. You have

the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.”

As the officer continues with the Miranda rights, I place my arms in front of me. It’s not the first time I’ve been arrested, but it sure as hell will be the last. As soon as Mac springs me from jail, I’m out of here. Fuck this town and everything in it.

Chapter 46

Kat

Unable to gain access to the police station, I stand outside with Liz, waiting for word from Mac.

“Kat, relax, it’s going to be fine,” Liz says, trying to reassure me.

She didn’t see the blank look on his face. When Mac pulled Sutton off his dad and he looked up at me, I got chills. Sutton’s eyes were dark, emotionless. He looked empty. Liz might think everything is going to be okay, but something tells me it isn’t.

Mac emerges through the doors, and I run to him.

“What’s going on? Is he okay? Can I see him?”

“He’s fine... physically. They’re working on getting him released as we speak.”

“That’s great news.”

“Yeah, listen...” Mac scrubs his hand across his face. “It might be better if you weren’t here when he gets out.”

“What? Why?”

Liz joins us. “I’m sure it’s because the press is going to be a nightmare, right, Mac?”

“Yeah,” Mac agrees, but I don’t buy it. I can tell by the look on his face there’s something he’s not telling me.

“Just be straight with me, Mac. What’s going on?” I deserve the truth. I deserve to know what happened and why Sutton seems to be pushing me away when he needs me most. It’s my biggest fear coming to fruition, and I am bound and determined not to let it happen.

“Honestly, Kat, I’m not sure. All I know is Sutton’s in a bad place right now.”

“All the more reason he needs me.”

“Trust me, Kat, just let me get him out of here and back to the hotel. I promise you, once everything is settled, I will call you.”

“No.”

“Let’s just head back to your place until Mac gets everything settled,” Liz says, wrapping her arms around me. “Then we can go to the hotel and—”

“This isn’t the end,” I say, though I’m not sure who exactly I’m directing the statement to, but I think I’m saying it to myself. I want to say it to Sutton, tell him I’m not going anywhere, that I’m unwilling to let this go, let us go, without a fight. Not when we just found our way back to each other.

“No one said it is, Kat,” Mac says, his words not reassuring me.

“You tell him...” I choke down the sob that threatens to escape. “You tell him this isn’t over.”

When Liz and I arrive back at my place, Callum is sitting on my porch.

“What the hell is going on?”

“This isn’t a good time, Callum,” Liz tells him, pushing open the door and helping me inside.

“No shit.” Callum grabs my arm, turning me to face him. “What happened, Kat?”

“I don’t know,” I say, the tears I was holding in finally falling.

Callum wraps his strong arms around me and holds me until the tears subside, then leads me to the couch and sits me down.

“Jack is furious. Not with you, obviously, but Sutton’s little outburst doesn’t exactly look good for the casino.”

“I don’t give a damn about the casino. My life is imploding, and I don’t even know why,” I sob.

“Nothing is imploding,” Liz says, her voice soft as her hand strokes my hair.

Like hell, it isn’t. I saw the look in Sutton’s eyes. It was the same look he had when he left that night. After I made my decision. The wrong decision in his eyes.

“Are you kidding me right now?” I’m screaming and crying and on the verge of a complete meltdown. I don’t need to hear the words to know what’s happening.

My phone rings and I answer it immediately.

“Mac? Is he okay?” my panicked voice shouts into the phone.

“No.”

“I’m on my way.”

“No, Kat. He... he doesn’t want to see you.” I protest, but Mac stops me. “You know how he can get, Kat. I think it’s best if you just stay away until tomorrow. Once he’s calm, we can talk through all this.”

“But Mac...”

“I’m sorry, Kat. This is for your own good and his. Just trust me.”

With a loud scream, I throw my phone across the room.

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what’s happening.

Sutton changed his mind. He’s getting ready to leave Vegas. The promise he made that he could handle his shit with his dad was a lie. Maybe it wasn’t intentional, but it was still true.

Chapter 47

Sutton

“**W**hat the fuck happened?” Mac asks, even though the answer should be clear enough.

My father, that’s what happened. Just like it always does. The man knows exactly how to get under my skin and trigger me. How to ruin the happiest time of my life.

“I punched him.”

“I know that. I just don’t get how he knew where you were or how he got to you.”

“It’s fine. I needed that.” The punch was cathartic and makes me wish I had done it years ago. More than that, I needed the reminder of who I am and where I come from.

“I’ll do what I can to smooth things over with Jack,” Mac tells me.

“Don’t bother.”

“What do you mean, don’t bother?”

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I dial a number I never intended calling again. When the voice on the other end picks

up, I say, “I changed my mind. I’m in. Meet me at my hotel room in twenty.”

“Who the hell was that?” Mac asks.

“Val.”

The mention of her name sends Mac into a tizzy, rattling off questions, demanding I call her back and cancel.

“No good is going to come of this.”

“No good is going to come of me staying.” Tonight was proof of that.

When we step off the elevator, Val is waiting.

“I am so glad you finally came to your senses.”

“Me, too,” I say as I head into the room, straight to the wet bar, and pour the whiskey until the glass is full.

Val stands next to me, her body pressing against mine.

“Back off,” Mac warns her.

“I don’t take orders from you.”

“Don’t do this, Sut. Don’t make the same mistake twice.”

Mac’s words only anger me.

“The only mistake I made was letting you trick me into coming back here. You did this!”

It’s all his fault—being here, having to deal with my father. I’m going to hurt Kat for a second time when I promised her I wouldn’t. I’m not trying to hurt her. I’m trying to save her—from me.

“I know—”

“You don’t know dick,” I tell him. “Just get the fuck out.”

Mac’s eyes dart between Val and me. “Don’t do anything stupid you can’t take back.”

“You won’t regret this, baby,” Val coos as she runs her fingers down my torso. “With this world tour, we can have it all.”

I nod before throwing back my drink and pouring another.

“This is what you want, right? The tour? Me? All of it?”

I reach for her, my fingers digging into her hips.

“I want it all.”

Her smile is instant, but unlike Kat’s, it does nothing for me.

“This feels so right,” she says, her lips pressing to my neck.

So wrong. So very fucking wrong.

“Me and you, we’re going to take over the world.” Val presses further against me. The moment her lips meet mine, I shove her off me.

“Sut?” Val pouts, and I can hear the hurt in her voice.

“Not tonight, baby. I’m too fucked in the head tonight.” Christ, I hope she buys that. The truth is, she isn’t Kat, and on the heels of what Kat and I just shared, there’s no way in hell I can touch her.

“Are you sure I can’t make it better?”

“I wish.”

I allow her embrace because I need the comfort. Closing my eyes, I wish it was Kat's arms around me.

"I'll get the plane ready for first thing tomorrow."

"Thanks, Val."

"This is all for the best." She kisses my cheek. "You'll see."

Rage takes over the moment Val disappears from the room. The glass from the wet bar shatters. The table is on its side. I don't stop until the room is completely turned upside down. Even now, sitting among the destruction, I don't feel any better. All I want is the one thing I can't have—the one person I refuse to destroy.

Walking away now is the best thing I can do for Kat. It's the only way I can save her. I'll destroy myself before I ever let anything happen to her.

"Wake up," a voice shouts.

I blink open my eyes and wonder where I am and why Mac is standing over me, looking more pissed than he ever has. Everything comes flooding back to me. My dad. The fight. Val.

My decision to go on the world tour rather than take the residency.

"You really fucking did it this time." He glances around the room. "At least it looks like you did it alone."

"What do you want?" I grumble, refusing to get up from my very uncomfortable spot on the floor.

Mac drops the paper on my lap, and the headline captures my attention: Sutton Cole: Out of Control.

That reporter has no idea just how right he is. I move off the floor to the couch, reading the article as I make my way through the mess I've made.

Mac takes the seat next to me, sitting silently for a moment.

“The Sapphire pulled the contract. You violated a clause about personal conduct.”

“Good. Even more reason to get out of Dodge.”

Mac just stares ahead of him. I know there are a million things he wants to say—advice, warnings, verbal lashings—all right there on the tip of his tongue, but he doesn't let any of it out.

“Just say it already.”

“I'm not going with you.”

Of all the things I expected to hear, that wasn't one of them.

“What?” My head spins in his direction.

“I can't. Not right now. Sarah needs me.”

“And?” There's more to it than Sarah, always has been. She's just the crutch he can use as an excuse.

“And I don't want to. I need a break. I want to be here, in Vegas. At least for a while.”

It feels more as if he's punishing me than following his dream.

“Whatever, man, I don’t need you.”

“Nope, not at all.” Mac laughs. “You’re doing a bang-up job taking care of things. First, fighting your dad and now, walking away from Kat. Again. Sounds like everything is coming up roses.”

“You did this. You put this whole shitshow in motion. I never would have stepped foot in this godforsaken city if you hadn’t forced me.”

“I’m damn glad I did. You’ve been happier this last week than I’ve seen you in years.”

“Do I look fucking happy now?”

“That’s your fault, not mine.”

“How do you figure?”

“Easy. You know walking away is a mistake. You know you belong here in Vegas. That’s why you’re fucking miserable. Not because of your dad. That’s just an excuse.”

An excuse? Is he joking? Didn’t he hear the things the man said to me? The reminder my mom didn’t just leave him but because I’m just like him. Kat will realize it sooner or later. She’ll see I’m a loser and leave me. Why delay the inevitable?

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Getting up from the couch, I stare out the windows that overlook the city, trying to find the solace Kat does, but nothing about it calms me. It only stirs up more of the same—anger, pain, and sadness.

“Like hell, I don’t. I know you, Sut. I know the effect your dad has on you, and I know yesterday was the best and worst day of your life. You’ve been holding back for years, and you finally let it out. You gave him what he deserves.”

“Lot of good it did me.”

“You know as well as I do, anything can be fixed. The Sapphire knew what they were getting into when they signed with you. If you tell them—”

“I’m not staying. I won’t.”

“Fine. Then you’re going alone.”

For the first time in my life, that’s what I truly feel—alone. Even without Kat, I still had Mac by my side. Now, they’ll both be here, and I won’t have anything or anyone left, just like my dad.

“Like I said, there’s nothing for me in this town. Nothing worth a damn at least.” The words hang between us, the meaning not lost on Mac, who does nothing but shake his head.

“Good luck, Sut. You’re going to need it.”

Chapter 48

Kat

I've waited long enough.

I've given him time and space to cool off, but I can't stay away anymore, not with the fear of losing him looming over my head. I need to know he's okay. That we're okay.

"Sutton," I call out. There's no reply.

My heart pounds in my chest. Dread fills me as I wonder where he is or what he's doing. Negative scenarios run through my head—something that could destroy him or worse, us.

Checking the living room, the kitchen, and the balcony, he's nowhere to be found. That only leaves the bedroom. I step through the partially open door, and Sutton is standing at the foot of the bed, a shirt in his hands and his suitcase in front of him.

"What are you doing?" I ask as I watch him shove his belongings into his suitcase.

"Packing."

"I can see that, but why?"

“I’m leaving.”

“What? Why?”

“Not your problem.”

“Your problems are my problems, Sutton.”

“No, they’re not. I shouldn’t have come back here. I should have stayed gone.”

I remind myself he’s hurting, and despite how much pain his words instill in me, I know they aren’t real. He doesn’t really believe them. He’s only saying them out of anger.

“What about your contract? The residency? You’re just going to walk away from that?”

“I negated the terms of the contract the minute my fist connected with that asshole’s face. It’s over.”

“So, you’re just going to leave?”

“There is nothing left here for me.”

“Nothing left for you? What about me?”

“What about you?”

“Seriously, Sut? You came here and begged me to forgive you. For what? Huh? Just so you can push me away again?”

Sutton turns away from me, unable to look me in the eye, which tells me whatever words he says next will be a lie.

“I thought I still loved you. I was wrong.”

“Oh my God, you are so full of shit,” I shout, furious he would rather let his fear and hurt come between than just let

me in.

“I am who I am, Kat.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it. I don’t think you know who you are anymore. You’ve been playing the asshole for so long, you’re becoming one.”

He just shrugs as if none of this matters when the emotion I see in his eyes tells me differently.

“You’re doing it again!” This time, I’m not heartbroken. I’m angry. So damn angry he’s pulling this shit again, walking away instead of just letting me be there for him.

“I’m doing what needs to be done. I’m going home. Back to where my job is. Back to where I belong.”

“Where you belong is here with me.” I grab his arm, begging him to let me in. “What did he do? What did he say to you to make you feel like this?” He doesn’t reply. “Talk to me, Sutton.”

He yanks out of my hold, tearing his arm away, and walks away.

“The last place I belong is here. New York is my home now. Has been for a long time.”

“Fine. I’ll go with you. We can—”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? Sutton, we—”

“We’re done.”

“No, I’m not letting you do this again.”

He moves past me to the door and opens it.

“Get out.”

Fuck that. I’m not leaving. I’m not walking away this time without a fight. If he wants us to be over, that’s his choice, but he’s going to hear me out this time. He’s going to be the one to feel the pain, not me. I let him break me once. I won’t do it again. Not for some stupid excuse, not because of his useless father, and sure as hell not because of Val and whatever wool she is trying to pull over his eyes.

“I’m not going anywhere until you hear what I have to say.”

Sutton folds his arms across his chest. “Then talk.”

“I don’t know what he said to you, but I know this. You don’t want to leave. You don’t want to hurt me. You don’t want us to be over. So help me God, Sutton, if you get on a plane again and leave me—we’re through. There is no going back. No begging forgiveness. Nothing. It was one thing to act out and throw away a good thing when we were kids, but now? You’re a damn fool if you walk away from us. If you let him win.”

“Him?”

“Your dad? That’s what all this is about, isn’t it? Your dad got into your head, and now you want to run.”

He shakes his head, but he knows I’m right. I know I’m right. There are only three things in his life that have ever driven him to do... anything—me, his music, and his father.

“So, what if he did, Kat? It doesn’t change anything. The contract is void. I have to go back to New York.”

“I’m willing to go with you, right this minute.”

“Your life is here.”

“My life is with you... or don’t you want that anymore? Did he convince you I’m not good enough or that you’re not good enough? Or is it Val? Did you spiral and fuck her last night?”

“Christ, no. I wouldn’t... This has nothing to do with Val and everything to do with me.”

“I know you, Sutton. I know you better than you know yourself. This? This has everything to do with your father. I refuse to believe you’re going to let him win.”

“Win what?”

“This game you two have played for years. He tears you down, you build yourself up. He keeps pushing, trying to destroy you. And you? You fight him tooth and nail. He wants to take everything from you because he blames you for all the shit in his life. Shit that isn’t your fault, but he’s just too weak to admit it.”

Sutton shakes his head adamantly.

“You know I’m right, Sut. You know he’s just a vindictive, hateful man. You’re not him, and you sure as hell don’t have to let him rule your life. Not anymore.”

“I know that!”

Raising his voice means only one thing—I struck a nerve. He knows I'm right, and he's acting like an ass.

“Then don't do this, Sutton.” My hand caresses his cheek. “Stay with me. Talk to me. Let's figure this out. I don't want to lose you.”

“Too late for that, Kitty Kat. I'm already gone.”

Rather than kicking me out, he steps through the door and disappears.

Chapter 49

Sutton

“**Y**ou ready to go, Sut?” Val asks as she approaches. Her arms wrap around me, and while I hate the feeling, I don’t stop her. Val definitely isn’t what I want, but she’s better than the nothingness I feel.

My eyes dart around, searching for Kat, but she’s nowhere to be found.

Mac’s last words stick in my head as I board the plane, Val hot on my heels. Pretty sure luck isn’t on my side. Never has been.

Val takes a seat next to me on the plane, a satisfied look on her face, pleased she won.

“You did the right thing.”

Somehow, I doubt that.

My phone dings, and there’s a text message on my phone from Kat, telling me it’s not too late. I can still get off the plane. I don’t have to go. *We* can still work something out. She says it as though there’s still a chance of *us*. Like my father

didn't just prove how right he was by antagonizing me into behaving just like him.

She's right, though; I don't have to leave. I already have the career I left in search of, and the thing that set me off before, her refusal to come with me, isn't an issue anymore. She offered to come with me. She's willing to do whatever it takes—for us.

I can't ask her to leave Vegas, though. This is her home, the only life she's ever known. How can I ask her to give that up for me? I mean, what if I really am like him? What if I turn into him? How can I give her the life she deserves with that fear hanging over my head? The apple doesn't fall from the tree, right? He wasn't wrong about that.

“Give me that,” Val says, grabbing for the phone.

“Back off.” I yank it away from her.

“Whatever she's texting you, it's nothing compared to what I can offer.”

I glance over at Val, the mistake I almost made last night.

“I doubt that.”

Sex and alcohol have fueled my life for the past four years. I drowned myself in them four years ago, the moment I finally got Kat out of my head. It's how I cope. How I deal. Much like my father. Like what I almost did last night. Only then, the memory of Kat was still embedded in the forefront of my mind. She was too close, too real. I couldn't do it.

That's only one day. What if it happens? What if every time something goes wrong, I succumb to my default coping mechanism?

What if I don't?

A year. It took a year to get Kat out of my head the first time. Now, I don't know if it's even possible. After everything this week, will I ever be rid of her? Do I want to be?

I wonder if my dad ever felt like that about my mom. If there was ever a moment when she mattered more to him than he mattered to himself. Kat means everything to me. I would give my last breath for her. Somehow, I don't find that to be true of my father.

Maybe the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, but it sure as fuck doesn't stay there. It can be found, saved, and made into something good. That's what Kat's done for me. She found me. She saved me.

And like a fucking fool, I walked away again.

But I'm not gone.

Kat has always been the missing piece, the calm to my storm.

"Fuck," I scream as I run my hands through my hair.

One run-in with the man I'm supposed to call dad, and my head is so jacked up, I don't know what to think or feel. Am I really going to let him have this much control over my life? Am I really pushing away the one person I ever really loved?

“Sutton, are you—” Val says but a commotion outside the plane interrupts her.

“I don’t give a damn. Arrest me.”

Kat.

Shit.

I get out of my seat and move toward the door.

“Don’t exit the plane, Sutton,” Val warns me. “Just stay here. Stay out of trouble, and everything will be okay.”

She’s wrong. The only way everything will ever be okay is if I leave the plane. If I go to Kat.

I love the music. I love my career.

I love Kat more.

I refuse to make the same mistake twice.

Just as I’m about to take that step to leave the plane, a fiery brunette enters.

“You couldn’t even be bothered to answer my text?” she shouts.

“I, uh...”

“You’re an idiot. That’s what you are.”

“Agreed.”

“You’re going to let him continue to control you? You’re going to let him dictate who you are and what kind of life you lead? You’re going to let him destroy the only real home you’ve ever known?”

“No.”

I could just tell her she’s right, that I changed my mind and was about to leave the plane, but seeing her like this is sexy as hell. As much of a dick as it might make me, I want to see how she’s going to fight for me.

“You’re not like him, Sutton. You never were. Quit letting him get into your head.” She points in Val’s direction. “Quit letting her. I talked to the Board with Jack, and we explained the circumstances. We told them that’s not who you are. I told them who you really are.”

“Kat, wait...”

“No. You need to—”

I grip her arms and look her in the eye.

“I was just about to get off the plane when I heard you causing hell out there. There is nothing in the world more important to me than you.”

“You were?”

“I’m not going anywhere, Kat. Residency or no residency. I’m staying—with you.”

Chapter 50

Kat

Deciding to fight for Sutton was the smartest decision I ever made. What I should have done before.

Back then, we were too young. We loved each other, there's no doubt about that, but neither of us knew who we were or what we really needed. As much as I hate the time we spent apart, as much as I wish he had been there for me when I needed him, I'm grateful for the time.

The more I think back, the more I realize I was Sutton's girlfriend, and when I wasn't, I was my mom's caretaker. I never really had an identity, let alone a clue who I really was or what I wanted out of life. Outside of Sutton, that is. Painful or not, the time apart did us good. We got to live our lives. We got to grow. And luckily, we grew—right back together.

This time, there was nothing in our way. If we fell apart, it was our fault. I couldn't let that happen. I couldn't let him go, not without a fight or giving it my all. Where I failed before, I don't know. I tell him everything I need to say, the same way I did with my mom.

This moment will decide our future. If he stays, he'll know how I felt, and we can expand upon our love for each other. If he still goes, well, at least I had my say.

When he tells me he was just about to step off the plane, I'm stunned. I really expected more of a fight, especially with Val whispering in his ear.

The woman who set this whole thing in motion.

"You were?"

"I'm not going anywhere, Kat. Residency or no residency, I'm staying—with you." The fog seems to have lifted, and clarity was setting in. The Sutton I know was returning.

"Absolutely not," Val interjects. "You agreed—"

"Things change," I tell her.

"Even after last night?"

I brace for the words I fear are coming next. The admission that in our short separation, Sutton found comfort in her arms.

"Don't do that. Don't insinuate something that didn't happen."

"You told me you wanted this... the tour, us, all of it." Her voice is strained voice, trying to hide the emotion behind it, but it seeps through. I can hear it clear as day because I understand it. The only difference is she doesn't deserve him—not after what she did.

"Is that why you did it?" If she was going to destroy him, I would like to know it was with semi-decent intentions. His

career, for one.

“Did what?” Sutton asks.

I hadn’t intended to tell him this way, not with her standing near enough for him to throttle, but Val made her bed, and now she has to lie in it.

“She paid your dad to show up at the Sapphire. She told him to say and do whatever it took to get you to leave town.”

“Is that true?” Sutton asks, glaring at Val.

“I had to get you out of this town and on that tour. It was for your own good, Sutton. Everything I’ve done is for your own good. You know that.”

“Everything? What else have you done?” Anger rises in Sutton’s voice.

“It doesn’t matter, baby,” I tell him, trying to calm him down. “I’m here. We’re together. That’s all that matters.”

“I’ll take care of her,” Mac says, stepping onto the plane. The gentle man I know appears intimidating as hell, taking me off guard.

“I thought—” Sutton begins.

“Yeah, right. Like your ass can survive without me.” Mac chuckles.

Sutton clearly wants to handle her, but with my hands on him, my lips near his ear, I do my best to distract him.

“Please, baby, can we just go?” I plead with him.

“I want her off the team.”

“That won’t be a problem, Sut,” Mac promises.

“Let’s go home,” Sutton tells me, intertwining his fingers with mine.

“Where’s home?” I ask him.

“Isn’t it obvious? Wherever you are.”

We step off the plane and head to the limo Mac and I arrived in. I sort of stole it from the Sapphire, not that I imagine Jack will disapprove. Sutton’s hand is no longer in mine, and as I turn to make sure he didn’t get back on the plane, my heart stops.

There, down on bended knee, is Sutton.

“What are you doing?”

“What I should have done five years ago. Will you marry me, Kat?”

“What... Are you...?” I vanquish all the doubts and reservations from my head and give him the only response I want. “Yes.”

Sutton jumps up from the ground, scoops me into his arms, and twirls me around.

“Tonight, Kitty Kat. I want to marry you tonight.”

I toss my head back with laughter. The man is crazy, but I wouldn’t have him any other way.

“Good thing we’re in Vegas.”

“I always knew I liked this town.”

His cheesy lines make me roll my eyes, which only earns me more kisses, a swat on my ass, and Sutton bellowing to Mac to get his ass off the plane.

“What the fuck is going on now?” Mac says as he joins us.

“I need you to do something important.”

“More important than firing that good-for-nothing bitch?” Mac asks to confirm.

“Much more. I need you to be my best man. You in?”

Mac smiles. “Damn right I am.”

“Let’s get hitched, Kitty Kat,” Sutton shouts.

Chapter 51

Sutton

If you had asked me a week ago what I thought a week in Vegas would be like, I would have had a one-word answer for you—Hell.

This city is the last place I ever wanted to step foot in, and had Mac not dragged me back, there's no way in hell I would be where I am right now.

Standing at the front of the altar in the Charming Chapel, I wait for Kat to make her way down the aisle. It's taking her a little longer than I would have liked, but Mac assures me she hasn't run. Mac is next to me, the best man any guy could ever ask for.

“Are you nervous?”

“I'm scared to death, man.”

The night has been a whirlwind. First, me leaving, then Kat showing up on the plane. Now, here we are, about to get married. The proposal took her by surprise. Fun fact—it took me by surprise, too. I hadn't intended on proposing. Something just came over me as we exited the plane. Then and

there, I knew. I knew there was no other option for me, just Kat, and I knew I needed to make it forever.

A quick detour to pick up Liz, then off to the chapel we went. Now, here I wait.

“You’re going to make a great husband.” Mac knows damn well my fears aren’t the same as most men standing at an altar. I don’t care about other women or losing my “freedom.” I care about giving Kat what she needs, what she deserves. I care about making her proud to be my wife. I care about spending the rest of my life loving her and making sure I’m doing it right.

Failing her is what scares me.

“I didn’t have the greatest example.”

“No, you definitely didn’t,” Mac agrees. “You had the worst. You may not have learned what to do, but you sure as hell know what not to do.”

Isn’t that the truth?

“Besides, you’ll have me here to whip your ass back into shape if you fuck up.”

That’s definitely the truth.

“I’m sorry about what I said earlier. I need you. You’re not just my best friend, man, you’re my brother.”

“Yeah, well, me being the older, smarter brother means you should start listening to me and not fucking ignoring my advice.”

“Dude, we’re in a church.”

“It’s a chapel, you idiot, run by Elvis. I think he’ll let me slide.”

Liz peeks through the double doors at the front of the aisle.

“We’re set.”

“So am I,” I reply.

The non-Elvis ordained minister we hired, standing in his place, cues the music. The woman on the piano off in the corner plays the classic “Here Comes the Bride,” and the church doors open.

I’m in awe of the woman standing before me. Never has there been a more beautiful bride. Never will there be again. Unless, of course, I decide to marry her over and over, which I just might have to do.

Kat stands in the doorway, her hair pulled back, a sparkling tiara on her head. The long, white dress fits her like a glove. She looks timeless and elegant and so fucking beautiful. How she transformed into a princess in less than an hour, I’ll never know, but she sure as hell pulled it off.

My eyes are glued to her as she makes her way down the aisle to me.

“There’s no backing out now,” Mac teases.

No way in hell would I back out. Hell, if I had this visual, I might never have left the first time.

“Who gives this woman to this man?” the ordained minister asks.

“I do,” Liz replies. “And if he ever hurts her again, I’m also the one who will kill him.”

“Okay,” the minister says slowly. “Sutton, please take Kat’s hand.”

As I reach for Kat’s hand, Liz gives me a look that could kill. The exact one that I’m certain she would use if I ever did anything to hurt her best friend again.

“I heard you, Liz. Loud and clear.”

Satisfied, Liz releases Kat’s hand before kissing each of our cheeks.

With my attention focused on my soon-to-be wife, and only my soon-to-be wife, I smile.

“You look gorgeous.”

“Are you sure about this, Sutton?”

“Are you?” I ask, needing to make sure the panic I hear in her voice is because of me, not her own fears.

“Yes, of course. I just—”

My finger presses against her lips to silence her before slowly moving to her neck.

“So, am I. Coming here was a gamble. Seeing you again was like placing a double-or-nothing wager. We were going to end up here, or we were done for good. Thank God we ended

up here because there is no way I could have lost that bet. No way I could have lived another second without you.”

“Shall we begin?” the minister interjects.

It’s a resounding yes from everyone in the room, including our two best people.

The minister speaks, but I am so lost in Kat’s eyes, I barely hear what he says. I don’t care about the ceremony or the dinner Liz planned for after. All I want is to call Kat my wife.

“Do you, Sutton Cole, take Kathryn Keller to be your lawfully wedded wife?”

“Hell yeah, I do.”

Epilogue

Kat

It never gets old, watching him on stage, doing what he loves.

It's been a year since Sutton came back to Vegas, started his residency, and we eloped.

Our lives have never been by the book, and we sure as hell never took the easy road. Still, every day I wake up happy, fulfilled.

Life is exactly as it's supposed to be.

He sings the chord to the song, the one he wrote for us. Well, he writes all of them for us. He says that's why he's as successful as he is. His music is real. The emotion behind each song strong and unwavering. Just like us.

I press my hand to my stomach, the baby growing inside nothing more than a peanut—a peanut the man on the stage knows nothing about. We never talked about children. I suppose I had always assumed he never wanted any with how he grew up. And me? Well, I never really cared about anything except him.

“He’s pretty good,” Callum says as he joins me stage right.

“He’s better than good,” I reply, the dreamy sound in my voice emerging like it always does when I speak of him.

“Lovesick fool,” Callum chides with a laugh.

“You’ll get there one day,” I tell him, earning another laugh.

“No way, not me.”

I roll my eyes at him.

“Any plans for your anniversary?”

One year ago, the day we eloped, the day we said, “I do.”

“Nah.” I shrug my shoulders. “I think we’re just going to go home when the show’s over.”

“You don’t seriously expect me to believe that, do you?” Callum asks. “After everything you guys have been through, don’t you want to celebrate?”

“I’m sure we’ll celebrate... if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah, thanks to the photos, I’m pretty sure everyone knows what you mean.”

I smile to myself, thinking of just how I ended up pregnant. Though pinpointing when of the many times would be nearly impossible—the elevator, the restaurant bathroom, my office.

So much time to make up for, Sutton keeps reminding me.

“You okay? You’ve been holding your stomach all night.”

I curse how observant Callum is.

“Just nerves.” I’m not much of a liar, but there is no way in hell I’m telling Callum what’s going on before I have the chance to tell Sutton. “I don’t know what it is, but I still get them every time he goes on stage.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, of course. Don’t you have some clients to tend to?” Like the several I gave him to lighten my load once Sutton returned.

Before Sutton came back, I drowned myself in my career, needing something to keep me focused, happy. Now I have everything I could ever want, and it’s all on this stage right now. Still, I adore my clients—most of them—and didn’t want them to suffer because I wanted to spend my time with my new husband. So, I gave them to Callum, who was all too happy to take them. Even Mr. Hale, not that it should surprise me. They’re like two peas in a pod the way they run through women.

“I do. Oswalt is in town. He has me working on preparations for his daughter’s twenty-first birthday. Huge bash.”

“Huge pain in the ass.”

“That, too, but it comes with a hefty bonus.” His shoulder bumps into mine. “Some of us still need those, you know.”

I can’t help but laugh. Money was never my objective, not like it’s his. I did this for the escape. I think he does, too. I just wish I knew what he was hiding from.

“It’s good to see you happy,” he tells me, sneaking a kiss on my cheek. “Happy Anniversary.”

“Thanks, Cal,” I say, wrapping my arms around him and hugging him tightly.

Sutton may not be a fan, and yes, he still has a jealous streak a mile long, but he’s learned to accept Callum and vice-versa. They’ll never be friends, but I’m thankful they peacefully co-exist for my sake.

After Callum leaves, I remain rooted in my spot, watching my gorgeous husband do what he does best. Like after every show, the moment the concert ends, he runs off stage, takes me in his arms, and kisses the breath out of me.

“You were amazing.” It’s the same thing I say after every show, but it’s still the truth.

“Thanks, Kitty Kat. Happy Anniversary.” His lips press against mine.

“Happy Anniversary,” I reply before kissing him back. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Oh? Not wearing anything under that dress?” he asks, his hand sliding up my thigh.

I swat his hand away with a laugh.

“Of course not, but that’s not really a surprise anymore, is it?”

“I can pretend.”

“I got us a room here for the night, your old suite.”

“Fancy.”

“You have no idea.”

“Lead the way, baby,” he says, taking my hand.

Usually, after a show, Sutton is more than happy to spend hours signing autographs and taking pictures. His appreciation for his fans runs deep. Tonight, though, he presigned a bunch of stuff and has his team handing them out to everyone in attendance.

Mac gets us to our room undetected by the masses. I always knew he was good at his job, but the man is truly a master.

“Happy Anniversary.” He tosses us a smile, then closes the door behind him.

The room is decorated with flowers and candles everywhere, just like our first date last year, but Sutton doesn’t care about any of it. I don’t even think he sees it. The way he’s looking at me is as if I’m the only thing in the world.

“Oh, no.” He’s stalking toward me, his intentions written all over his face. I stick my arm out in front of me as if that’s going to stop him. “I have a present for you.”

“I know that, Kitty Kat. I’m coming to claim it.”

“Not that, you perv.”

“What you got?” he asks, stopping just short of reaching me.

“This,” I say as I hand him a box wrapped in baby blue paper.

He tears at the paper, eyeing me curiously, then lifts the lid and takes out the tiny shirt.

“My dad’s a rock star.” He repeats the phrase again. “Dad?”

I nod.

“You’re pregnant?”

I nod again, not wanting to disturb his ability to process. I know this is a lot for him to take in. In fact, I know there’s a good chance he won’t be thrilled. What I do know is no matter how he’s feeling, we’ll get through it together, just like we do the random visits from his father when he’s drunk. Just like we do when crazy groupies throw themselves at him. Or the news articles that are less fact and more fiction. We get through it because that’s who we are. It’s what we do.

“I’m going to be a dad?”

“And I’m going to be a mom.” Saying the words out loud feels so unreal.

I wait patiently as it all sinks in, and a smile slowly spreads across his face.

“We’re going to be parents. This is... fucking amazing.”

In seconds flat, Sutton is kissing me and twirling me around. When he finally sets me on the floor, my hand caresses his face.

“Are you sure you’re okay with all this?”

“Even if I wasn’t, it’s not like I have much choice here, Kitty Kat.” He pauses. “I’m scared shitless. I want to be a

good dad, but I didn't have the greatest example."

"Sometimes, knowing what not to do is as good as knowing what to do. For what it's worth, I think you're going to be an amazing dad."

"Fuck, this is... this is crazy. I just..." He wipes his hands over his face. "I wasn't expecting this." His smile broadens into a sexy, knowing grin. "I guess I should have. We've been busy this past year."

"And I think we should get busy right now," I say, wrapping my arms around his neck.

"As much as I would love that, I want to give you your present, too."

He presses a kiss to my forehead, then grabs his guitar.

"Kitty Kat, this one's for you."

Double or Nothing

Life's a gamble, but I'm not a betting man.

When it comes to you, though, I'll take the chance.

When it comes to us, I'm all in.

It's double or nothing in this life we live.

I was afraid I lost you.

Never again.

You're all I need.

And I'm all in.

It's double or nothing in this life we live.

When it comes to you, it's double or nothing.

When it comes to us, we're going to win.

Lead the way, baby.

It's double or nothing, and I'm all in.

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Whatever She's Got

Whatever It Takes

Whatever Happens

All I Want for Christmas

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L.M. Reid writes contemporary romance filled with emotion and a whole lot of steam. Her heroines are strong and feisty, and her heroes are sweet and sexy.

L.M. loved reading as a child and really fell in love with books while reading the Babysitter's Club. The series spurred her love of writing, leading her to create her own series as a kid, "Best Friend's Forever."

Growing up watching soap operas, L.M. has always had a flair for the dramatic and a love of all things romance.

She's just a Midwest girl with simple tastes and dirty thoughts.

She lives in the state, where they swear there is more than corn, with her husband and son. She's an iced coffee addict and loves Swedish Fish. While her heart belongs to romance, she loves curling up on the couch with a good—or bad—horror movie.

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