

A photograph of Jennifer Foor with long, wavy, light brown hair, wearing a white off-the-shoulder sweater. She is looking down and to the left with a soft expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

Jennifer Foor

*Jenn Foor writes amazing, real, angsty characters that make me want to dive inside of the pages. I love living in the stories she creates!*

Emily Snow  
NYT BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Love's

SUICIDE

2014

# Love's Suicide

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## Prologue

September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001

It was just like every other school day in Washington, D.C. The traffic was wretched and my mother cussed under her breath the whole time. After she'd dropped me and my neighbors, Branch and Brooks, off for seventh grade, we walked inside and went to our lockers. I felt a little weird being around them after experimenting with French kissing with both of them the night before.

It wasn't like it was a big deal. We'd spent every day together since we

were infants. Our parents being friends made it all the worse by basically forcing us to do everything together, all the time, even when we didn't want to.

Branch, being older than his brother by nearly four minutes, was the one who came up with the idea to begin with. It was always the understanding that he was in charge of our friend circle, even though Brooks and I were usually the ones enjoying hanging out and not worrying what other's thought of us.

He said we were twelve and needed to know how to do it, so that when it happened for real we'd be prepared.

Even at my young age I wasn't

stupid. Branch always had ulterior motives and it was his way of admitting that he wanted me to be his first.

I told him that I would only agree to it, if we included Brooks.

So the three of us pinky-promised and went out into the tree house to test out our abilities, hoping that we wouldn't get caught by any of our parents.

It was kind of funny because, even though it had been Branch's idea, Brooks ended up going first. Branch used the excuse that Brooks would need the most practice, but we both knew it was for the simple fact that he was scared. The only time Branch let his twin do anything first was when he was



afraid of doing it himself. Brooks was always Branch's guinea pig and I hated that about him.

So there we were, me and Brooks, slowly moving in toward each other with our lips parted. I couldn't look at him, in fear that he was also looking at me. When we first made contact, our eyes shot open and we heaved away, scared to express what was happening.

I wasn't sure about Brooks, but when his lips touched mine it felt different than two friends exploring something for the first time. It excited me and made me feel nervous. There were butterflies in my stomach and also the urge to vomit.

Branch laughed at us. “I knew you wouldn’t do it right.”

Then Brooks shocked me. He moved forward with an annoyed expression on his face. “Come on, Kat, let’s try it again.”

I leaned forward and felt his soft lips touching mine. We held them together, and then, at the same moment, we touched tongues. I had to admit that a tiny sensation went from my lips through each of my fingertips. The feelings were back in my stomach and I liked it so much that I didn’t want to stop.

Even though we’d promised to never tell anyone, I felt privileged. I knew that all of the girls would be envious, on account of the boys being so

handsome. Not only was I getting to kiss Brooks, but I was also going to do it with Branch too.

Brooks and I separated and smiled at each other briefly before Branch shoved him aside and leaned in for his turn. “Let me show you both how it’s done.”

To be honest they both kissed similar, as if they’d read how to do it and practiced on their hands at the same time.

An hour later we were back to playing spot light in the backyard, like we did on most fall nights. One thing was different though. While Branch went running to the door the moment his mother announced that dinner was ready,

his brother didn't follow him.

When I started to head next door to my yard, I felt someone grab my hand. Brooks smiled at me. His blue eyes were dreamy and I knew why the girls wanted to be his steady girlfriend, even if we were just children. "Thanks for being my first kiss, Kat." I loved when he called me that. It was his special name for me.

I could feel the blood rushing to my cheeks. "Thanks for being mine, Brooks." I twisted my body from side to side out of being nervous. It was so weird. We'd done everything together our whole lives and I knew I was acting ridiculous.

He looked down at the ground

and kicked some rocks. “So, can we try it one more time, so we’ll be sure we got it right?”

I shrugged and leaned in to do it again, all the while celebrating it silently in my mind. We didn’t hold hands or touch each other, like a couple that was going out would do. Instead, we stood with our bodies apart and just leaned in.

This kiss lasted longer. We kept moving our tongues around until his mother called out his name again.

He pulled away, gaping at me. “I gotta go.”

“Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bye, Kat.”

I didn’t wait for him to turn around, to see if he even did. Instead, I

went running towards the gate that connected our yards. He was probably wondering if I was going to tell someone, but I wouldn't. He could always trust me.

After all, he was one of my best friends in the whole world. He'd never be cruel to me or say I was horrible, and I also knew he'd forever keep it a secret between us.

Branch was the one that liked to brag. He would be the one that I fretted about.

So, on our ride to school, none of us said much. My mom asked us if something was going on that she needed to know about, but we were never going to tell her. She'd punish me from hanging

out with them and I couldn't imagine that ever happening, even if it *were* temporary.

While standing at my locker, Branch came over and leaned against the one next to it. "I saw you and my brother last night."

I put my books inside and closed the door. "So what? We were just practicing."

"Whatever. You know he doesn't like you that way, right?"

I rolled my eyes and started walking in front of him, passing Brooks at his locker. He caught my stare, but never even smiled. His attention was on his brother and for some reason he seemed annoyed.

When the three of us got into class I was feeling a little uneasy. If anyone found out that I'd kissed both boys I'd be called a lot of unfair names, which none would be true. The only thing I was guilty of was being in love with both of them.

Our little private school only had a hundred students and went from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Our class had eleven students, and was one of the largest. We stood, like every morning, to say the pledge of allegiance. I placed my hand on my heart and looked up at the flag.

All of the sudden we heard someone scream and go running down the hallway. Over the loud intercom



system, the pledge was stopped and a bunch of commotion was taking place.

My teacher walked out into the hallway to see what had happened, making it clear that we all had to remain in our seats. Branch leaned over. “What do you think is going on? My money’s on a rat.”

I watched the door waiting for the teacher to come back and explain what was happening. A single hand waving caught my stare. Brooks was trying to get my attention from the front of the room. He’d had to move away from me and his brother because we talked too much in class.

When I looked at him, he stuck out his tongue. It was like he knew that

out of the whole class, I was the one who was worried. I couldn't put my finger on it, but somehow I knew something bad had happened.

Then the teacher came running into the room, out of breath. "I need you all to close up your books and remain quiet as we make our way into the cafeteria." She had tears in her eyes and was grabbing a bunch of her things, including a cell phone.

Branch raised his eyebrows when I looked at him and shrugged. We did as we were told and noticed that every class was being sent into the large lunch room.

A bunch of adults were standing in the hallways, talking on their phones,

weeping.

When we got inside the large room, we all sat down at the lunch tables and gave our attention to the principal. “May I have your attention please?”

The room finally got quiet. “I need everyone to remain calm until your parents arrive to get you.”

“We just got here,” some older kid called out.

“I understand that the day just started. It pains me to say this and I know some of you may not understand, but I can’t give you any more information.”

She didn’t have to, because a senior had snuck a phone into school and was already seeing it unfold. “Oh my

God! Someone flew a plane into a building!”

The room went wild with concern and I just sat there, saying nothing. At that point we still didn't know the details of when or even where. We just knew that the adults seemed terrified.

Small children started to cry and the chaos that unfolded was anything but organized. Children and parents scattered around trying to find each other and get out of the city. Branch, Brooks, and I sat there, waiting patiently for my mother to show back up and get us.

I wondered if she'd left her phone at home and hadn't gotten the call yet. School was thirty minutes away, and

with us starting later than other public schools in the area, the traffic could have been pretty bad by that time, so she'd just be getting back. Then I wondered if the school would call my dad. He was right on the other side of town in the Pentagon, a heavily secure building located in the heart of the city. He could come and go in case of emergencies, because he was the boss of his department.

An hour passed and nobody had showed up to get us. The room began to really get empty and only a few of us were left to be picked up. The seniors that drove were the first to leave the school. The younger kids seemed to disappear next, while us stragglers sat

around waiting.

With me still wondering where my parents were, and hoping they'd show up, I had to use the bathroom and I couldn't possibly hold it any longer. On the way, I noticed that the cafeteria lady had a small radio playing. She was sitting on a stool with her hands covering her face.

I walked slowly to see if I could hear what the person on the radio was saying.

Then I heard it, clear as day.

There had been a second plane that had flown into the sister building in New York. Before I could take another step, I heard them also say the Pentagon. They spoke of the government officials

being transported out of the city and the Pentagon, where I knew my father was, having been attacked.

I think it was that exact moment that I knew my dad wouldn't be coming to get me. Somewhere in my gut I knew he hadn't made it, but it was still too soon to admit.

Danica Valentine was standing with the boys when I came back out. She'd been crying and had tried to conceal it by keeping on her sunglasses. Her tears had caused her makeup to drip down on her cheeks, making it very noticeable. "Are you ready to go, Katy?"

"Is my dad dead?" I don't even remember the words coming out of my mouth.

She knelt down in front of me and pulled me into her arms. “We don’t know anything yet, love. I’ve tried to call your mom, but she isn’t home and she’s not answering. Right now a bunch of people are heading down there to find their loved ones. I’m sure your dad is going to be fine, sweetheart. Let’s just get you home safe and then we’ll find out more, okay?”

I don’t remember a lot of the ride home. Danica refused to turn on the radio. She handed me her phone and let me dial my mother’s number, but the lines said all circuits were currently busy.

The longer time went by, the more I worried.



When it got dark we still hadn't heard anything from my mother. I think we were all hopeful that she'd found him and was somewhere without a way to call us. The news, which couldn't be avoided, had been playing all day long. Danica made it a point to keep me out of the living room, to prevent me from seeing anything that would get me more upset.

I'd caught enough to see people carrying bloodied bodies and even a person jumping out of one of the tall buildings before it collapsed. The coverage kept skipping from New York to D.C., so it was hard to look for someone when I wasn't sure where the footage was from.

My mother's phone was found over at our house when Danica had gone to get me some clothes. She took care of me as if she were my mom; comforting me and making me feel like everything was going to be okay.

After dinner, which I didn't eat at all, I went out into the tree house to be alone. I should have known they'd come find me and not let me be by myself.

"I told you she'd be out here."

"Shut up," Branch said rudely as he pushed Brooks towards the wooden wall.

"Any word?" I hadn't given up hope that they'd find them. Not yet.

"No. Mom and Dad keep watching to see if they spot them,"

Brooks assured me.

Then it finally occurred to me that I hadn't shed a single tear. My eyes filled up and I covered my face to keep them from seeing all the pain and worry pouring out of me. "She would have called by now."

They kept quiet, knowing I would make them leave if they tried to comfort me.

Finally, after I'd sobbed so much that my eyes were on fire, Branch got up and started to leave. "I'm going to go see if they found out anything else. Dad said they were doing interviews at hospitals."

Brooks scooted over next to me and grabbed my hand. He said nothing,

but held it and didn't let go. It was a tender moment between us that I knew I'd never forget.

My parent's bodies were both found in the rubble two days after the attacks. I wasn't present for the identification, but Danica and my aunt, who had flown in from England, were. When they came back into the house that day, I could tell that they'd recovered them.

By that point, we'd already known they were gone. After the first day, Danica was smart enough to call the phone company and listen to the messages from our landline. It was there that she heard both of their voices saying their final goodbyes to me.

We didn't know why she'd gone to see him that day, but they had been together when the plane struck the building. They'd called from my dad's cell phone, and in the background you could hear people screaming and suffering. I knew Danica didn't want to let me listen to it, but she knew they'd want me to hear them saying their goodbyes.

We were sitting in my house, just the two of us, when she put the phone on speaker and hit for the message to repeat. She looked away as my father's voice came on the line.

"Katy, it's Dad. Listen, honey, I don't know how to say this to you." I could hear him breaking down and never

had known my father to ever get emotional. “Sunshine, I just want you to know that I love you. Every single day spent with you was a blessing. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me. No matter where you are, or what you’re doing, I’ll always be with you. Don’t forget it, Katy.”

I heard them shuffling the phone around and then my mother’s voice was on the line. “Katy. Oh my God, John I can’t do this.” Her cries were loud and muffled the phone. I could hear him comforting her and felt the warm rush of tears rolling down my face. “Katy, we love you. I love you so much. Katy, I love you, honey. I wish I was there holding you right now. I hate that this is

on the machine, John. I can't say goodbye like this. Wait, what was that noise?"

Then the line went dead.

And there were no other messages.

The phone call had made my biggest fears a reality. My parents were dead.



## Chapter 1

September 11<sup>th</sup> 2006

“I can’t believe it’s been five years,” Branch said as he held my hand tightly.

I took a deep breath and tried to distract myself from getting choked up. “I know. I still remember them that morning. Mom burned a bagel and the whole house filled with smoke. I thought there was a fire when I came downstairs. My dad told her he’d grab something on the way to work, instead of



having her burn another one. Wasn't it funny how she could make anything from scratch, but something as simple as a bagel was an epic fail for her?"

"Yeah. Maybe she was just always too preoccupied. Making a homemade meal takes concentration, but when you throw a bagel in the toaster, you can walk away and do other things. Besides, I'm pretty sure that toaster was from the dark ages anyway."

We both laughed, needing something to smile about as we walked toward the headstones.

"Mom never wanted to buy new things. My dad had this pair of jeans that he mowed the lawn in. I swear she sewed them and patched them at least

four times. He even tried to throw them away and she got them out of the trash.” It wasn’t a secret that my mother saved everything. To people that didn’t know us; they would have assumed we were poor. She never bought anything for herself and I had to beg, borrow and steal to even attempt to have anything in style for school.

I didn’t find out until I was sixteen that they’d saved a lot of money and it was put into a trust that I could have when I was twenty-two. I knew I would cherish that money and put it towards something good that they would be proud of.

Being at the cemetery was something I tried to avoid, but every

year on the anniversary of my parent's death I had to come.

Had it not been for the Valentines, I would have had to move to England with my aunt that I hardly knew. I think in my seventeen years of life I had seen her three times, if that. Compared to living next door to the Valentine's house and spending the majority of our time with them, she was out of the question.

One good thing was that my mom and dad had been organized. They'd had a will and also named the Valentines as my legal guardians in the event that both of them had died. My aunt had tried to have the courts grant her custody anyway, but she lost after they let me talk to the judge in private. No judge in

their right mind was going to give a child to a practical stranger when a loving family that I was familiar with had already been arranged. Since that day I'd never gotten one single birthday call, present, or even a card.

I was twelve when my parents perished in the terrorist attack on the Pentagon and the Twin Towers, on September 11. My father worked as a highly classified agent, who dealt with Presidential events. He was in charge of making sure the security was in order and overseeing any threats. My mom stayed home and designed greeting cards. You know those cards that you open and immediately begin to weep? My mother probably wrote that one. We

still don't know why she was there so early in the morning to meet with him, but their last phone call to me let me know that they were together when they took their last and final breaths. It wasn't exactly peaceful, but it did give me some kind of comfort knowing that they weren't alone. If I had to die that way, I'd want to be with the person that I loved.

My mom was always the romantic, and I guess that explains why she did what she did for a living.

Since the day they died, I've never purchased a single card, nor have I opened one. I couldn't take the chance that it was something she designed.

I stared down at the names on the

matching headstones.

Loving Father. Loving Mother.

Tears filled my eyes, even after I'd promised myself that this year would be the one where I could handle visiting without breaking down. It wasn't as if I never cried for them. Whenever there was a moment in my life that required a parent, I lost it. While seeing my friends with their families, or watching a mother hugging her daughter in public, even a little girl holding the hand of her father would cause me to break down.

I guess that it had been happening for so long that I was just used to it. No matter how hard I tried, I knew I couldn't prevent it. I'd been jipped from having that bond with the two people

that brought me into the world. We'd never share a meal, a cry, or a holiday together again.

I suppose I could blame the President, or the terrorists that took them away from me, but it wouldn't bring them, or the other thousands of people that died back. Instead those of us that were left without them had to suffer. I looked around the cemetery and saw several groups of people standing over graves. When something with an impact like September 11<sup>th</sup> happens, it affects communities. My parents weren't the only people that our town had lost. The total was one hundred and twenty-five people, fifty-five military personnel and seventy civilians to be exact. My

stomach turned imagining all of those people being buried in the ground before they even had the chance to live.

Brooks caught our attention at the right time when he walked up behind us and smacked my ass. “Sorry I’m late. I had something to do this morning.”

Knowing Brooks, he was probably doing another one of our classmates. Ever since Branch and I decided to go public, Brooks had been throwing himself at anything that walked, claiming he was finally ‘free to roam about the country’. Yes, he actually said that. Unlike his twin brother, he wasn’t ever serious and made a joke out of things that were absolutely inappropriate. That’s why I knew I’d



chosen the right brother.

Even though identical, they were very different in my eyes. Branch kept his hair neatly cut. He dressed preppy, and you could tell that he could accomplish anything he set his mind to. They both had light brown hair and the same dreamy blue eyes. Branch had the most beautiful straight white teeth. He excelled in sports and was even up for a baseball scholarship. He'd pitched a perfect game while the recruiters sat in the stands evaluating him. In fact, mostly everything about Branch was perfect.

Brooks, who'd always been my go-to, was now the opposite.

I would say our relationship changed during our sophomore year.

He'd started not to care about anything. He did everything half-assed. Nothing was important enough to make him want to be different, not even me.

Like his brother, their features were the same, but his hair was longer and rough looking now. He dressed grungy and didn't care what anyone thought about him. While his brother played sports, Brooks played video games, built things in the backyard, and caused trouble around the neighborhood.

That's why when the time came to choose between them, I had a terrible time deciding. Though I'd always loved both of them from the time when we were all in diapers, Branch only ever picked on me, while Brooks did

everything in his power to stand up for me and keep me safe.

It was a no-brainer.

Except Brooks never asked to be with me, like Branch had. He acted like being in a relationship with me was like dating his own sister. It hurt.

I'd depended on both of them and shared every emotion possible with them, only to be pushed aside when I was ready to take thing to the next level.

Branch was there to pick up the pieces and be my boyfriend. He wasn't like a consolation prize or anything. I loved him too, just in a different way.

Being with him started out difficult.

Besides the fact that it pushed

Brooks away from our friendship, we also had to attend to the fear that us being involved while living in the same house was going to cause major issues. By the time we told his parents we were seventeen, so close to turning eighteen. After a nice dinner, we sat across from them and let them know that we were in love and together as a couple.

They took it as well as could be expected. For a while they tried to keep us from being alone. Brooks was also involved in that, by wedging himself in everything Branch and I wanted to do together, but never having a good time hanging out with us. Then finally, after about two months, they gave up.

Branch and I had mutual goals.

We were going to attend college together the following year. Once we'd graduated, we'd start planning our wedding, and the rest would fall into place.

If only my parents were around to see the future that we had planned out. They'd have been so proud.

I felt Branch's loving arms holding me close. "Mom said dinner's at six. If you want to go see that movie, we better get going."

Every year, since the first anniversary of their deaths, Danica Valentine would slave in the kitchen for an entire day making my mother's family recipe of sour beef and dumplings. It had become a tradition that was more dear to

her heart than any other normal holiday. Since she and my mother had been friends since college, she took pride in doing it. In fact, that friendship was the reason we lived next door in the first place. My parents and their parents had been close friends and built the houses at the same time.

We spent all of our time with them, so transitioning to their house wasn't hard because of that. I think the hardest part was watching my house go up for sale and new people with children moving in. Every time I saw the little girl come outside I thought about my family, or lack thereof.

I had to be thankful for what I had left, which included Branch, Brooks

and their loving parents. Without them I don't know where I'd be.

"I'm ready whenever you are."

Branch looked over and winked at me.

Brooks jumped in front of us.

"What movie are you going to see?"

"Nothing you'd like," Branch answered abruptly.

I felt bad immediately at the way Branch was acting. Brooks was just trying to be my friend, and his own brother was wedging himself between us.

We left Brooks standing at my parent's graves, and I had to admit that I felt bad about it even though I probably shouldn't have. Even though Branch was my choice, and probably the right

choice, Brooks was still dear to me. He'd always been there when I needed him in a way that Branch never was.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop loving him and remembering back to that moment of our first kiss.

To stick to our plans, I'd decided to bury those secret feelings for Brooks. Branch and I were going to be happy together, and Brooks would just be my brother-in-law. He'd always been in my life and that gave me comfort, somehow knowing that I'd never have to let either of them go.

It was how it had to be.

It was how he wanted it to be.





## Chapter 2

Our annual dinner of sour beef and dumplings was something that we all looked forward to. The five of us would sit there, eating my mother's specialty meal and reminiscing about the good times with my parents.

It would get emotional, but never uncomfortable. This was my second family, and any sadness that I had they shared as well.

After seeing the movie, Branch and I headed back to the house. We were

running late, but Danica had called and said that they were going to wait for us.

Nothing could have prepared me for the shocked feelings that overwhelmed me when I walked into the house and saw Brooks sitting next to a beautiful girl from our school. He smiled as I walked in and hung my jacket on the back of the chair. Sitting across from him was probably a bad idea, but there were only two seats available, and both were directly facing them.

“Sorry we’re late. The movie had twenty minutes of previews that we didn’t anticipate,” Branch explained.

Danica started passing the salad bowl and I couldn’t help but take in the delicious scent of the sour beef and

dumplings. “It smells wonderful.”

She smiled. “I wish one year I could make it as good as she did. That woman had a niche for making it perfect, didn’t she?”

I nodded and accidentally looked up at Brooks. He was watching me, not the girl, who was named Natalie Chambers. I avoided making eye contact with her for the sole purpose of not giving a damn if she was the Queen of England. Any girl that Brooks was interested in would always be my enemy.

I wouldn’t call it jealousy. It was the fact that for so long both of the boys had always been mine, in some weird convoluted way. We’d always had each

other's backs and I hated that my relationship with Branch was causing that bond between Brooks and me to sever.

Mr. Valentine, who I always called Walt, cleared his voice. "We hope you don't mind Brooks bringing a guest. It was my idea, seeing as we had plenty of food."

I smiled, trying to hold in the true feelings of that little bitch sitting at our dinner table for my special meal, to remember my mother, whom she never even met. We'd had bad blood since she'd passed around a note in eighth grade making fun of me for getting my period. I told the teacher and she got into a lot of trouble. Since that day we

weren't exactly friends. "No, it's fine. The more the merrier."

I felt Branch's hand touching my thigh and slowly sliding up my legs until he reached a point where it was starting to make me uncomfortably hot. I reached under the table to stop him and happened to look up. Brooks was looking at me, watching what I was doing. While never taking his eyes off of my arm under the table, he took his hand and stuck it under the table, toward Natalie. She made a little sound, letting me know he was really touching her.

It was so aggravating how he was teasing me. I gave him a dirty look and pulled my hand back up to eat.

We finished our salads and

started passing around the main course. When I went to grab the bowl from Danica, my elbow hit my napkin sending my silverware to the floor. I handed Branch the bowl and leaned down to get them. My eye caught Brooks hand, between the legs of Natalie. Her panties were slid to the side and he was practically fingering her. I came up quickly, banging my head on the table.

It was so sickening that I excused myself to the bathroom after feeling the bile rising in my throat.

Why was he torturing me?

I couldn't understand why he'd do something like that in front of everyone.

I heard knocking on the bathroom

door and cracked it open to see who it was on the other side. Branch smiled when he saw me. I grabbed him by the arm and pulled him inside with me. “You are not going to believe what I just saw under the table.”

He ran his hand through his light brown hair and smiled. “Does it have to do with Brooks?”

He didn’t seem surprised. I smacked him on the chest again. “Yes, but this is legitimately horrible. He was fingering her under the table. Why did he bring her here?”

Branch laughed at me some more. “Why do you care? You know how he is. He’s always looking for attention, and you know he likes to annoy

you. Look, you should be glad he's not sitting there trying to pry into our business. That chick being here is a good thing for us."

I leaned on the vanity. "I guess."

He approached me and kissed me softly on the side of my lips. "Don't let him bother you tonight, Katy. This is your night, and I won't let you get so upset. Let's go out there and enjoy dinner before they come looking for us."

I rolled my eyes, realizing that Brooks was probably thrilled he'd gotten a rise out of me. "Fine."

We were almost to the table when Branch leaned into my ear and whispered, "If you were wearing a skirt, I'd be fingering you at the table, too."



I shook my head and tried to stay composed while blushing and sitting back down.

For the rest of the meal I refused to look forward. He wasn't going to ruin my night any more than he had already.

Branch held my hand under table and nudged me several times, reminding me that he would always be by my side. I appreciated that he was so understanding, where others would have been jealous. He really did love me.

After dessert, Brooks left with flavor of the week, probably so he could drive to an alley and fuck her and then never talk to her again.

I never would have pegged him to be such a douche, but that's exactly

what he'd become.

The four of us remaining sat at the table together. "I saw the flowers at the graveyard today. They were beautiful as always," Danica announced.

"Thanks. Branch picked them out. Mom always loved yellow roses."

I played with the rim of the cup of hot tea in front of me.

"I was thinking that we should donate a bench in their name. I got something in the mail about it, if you'd like to see it," she said.

I looked up and smiled. "That would be great. Thanks again for dinner. It doesn't matter how many years go by, it still means the same as the first time you did this for me. I think since Branch

and I are graduating this year, it's a little more emotional. I mean, you've practically raised me. I know Mom and Dad would be so grateful to you. I just don't know a way I could ever repay you for what you've done for me."

Walt reached for my hand and I placed mine inside of his. "Katy, you've always been a part of this family. Your parents were our closest friends. We miss them every day, too. Having you here with us is like we got to keep a part of them. It's always our pleasure."

I could feel the tears falling down my face. No matter how much I tried, it never got easier for me. The mere mention of my parents was always too much for me to be able to handle. It

was even harder knowing that my father's parents hadn't been in my life since I was two and my mother's parents, who had come over from England, died within a month of each other when I was eleven. At least they didn't have to experience the loss of their child. "I really appreciate it."

Danica stood up and grabbed her husband's empty cup. "You two don't have to keep us company you know. It's okay if you want to go out and be teenagers."

I looked at Branch and smiled, knowing that I didn't have to leave the house to be happy. I had everything I wanted.

"We'll probably just watch some

television,” Branch announced.

I agreed. “Yeah. I’m kind of tired after the movie. It was long.”

“Well, we’ll handle the dishes. You two go relax,” Walt suggested.

I followed Branch into the family room and plopped down on the couch. He grabbed the remote before sitting down next to me and putting his arm behind my back. “I’m so full I might not eat tomorrow,” he shared.

I rubbed my own stomach. “I know what you mean.”

We started flipping through the channels before Branch said anything else. I’d already molded my body against his and gotten comfortable. “I can talk to Brooks if you want. If he’s

really bothering you that bad, I mean.”

I shrugged. “I can handle your brother. Besides, I don’t care who he sleeps with. It’s the fact that he had his hand in her pants at my parent’s memorial dinner. How disrespectful can you get?”

“Just let it go, Katy.”

We fell asleep watching television, and I didn’t wake up until I heard someone come in and change the channel. Brooks was sitting in the recliner across the room from us, looking for something to watch. I sat up, leaving Branch to sleep. Brooks didn’t notice that I’d woken up until I was right up in his face. I slapped him hard across the cheek, and at that exact moment he

scooped me up into his lap. “What was that for?”

“Let me go,” I whispered while trying to free myself from his hold.

He laughed and let go, watching me fall to the floor in front of him. “You look better down there anyway.”

I stood up and kicked him in the shin. “What is wrong with you?”

He was rubbing his leg as he spoke, but I did sense that his look was conflicted and it bothered me. “You wouldn’t understand even if I told you.”

“Is this about me and Branch?” I often wondered if he was mad about our relationship, even though he swore he wasn’t.

He laughed again. “Kat, why

don't you go back over there with your boyfriend and stay out of my shit? You want to ask me if I'm jealous, but you're the one that got all hot and bothered at the table, wishing it was your pussy my fingers were touching. Stop acting like it's not true. I know you, and I can tell it got to you."

I stood there, shocked that he'd said something like that to me. I wanted to yell and scream, but it was late, and I'd wake the whole house up and upset Branch. My breathing was stressed and I could feel the pull of emotions overwhelming me. "I hate you!" I whispered under my breath.

I started to walk away and he grabbed my arm. "Kat, wait. I was



kidding.”

I pulled away from him, shook Branch to wake him up, and we walked out of the room, leaving him there alone.

That night, after Branch kissed me goodnight and we retreated to our own rooms, I laid in my bed crying. Maybe I shouldn't have been bothered so much by Brooks. We'd grown apart and I needed to accept it. After all, Branch and I were getting ready to leave him and start our adult life together. If he wanted to sleep with every girl at school, it was his business, not mine.

I heard my door creaking open and felt the bed move. Branch was there, holding me. “Please don't cry,” he whispered and kissed me. “Don't be

upset because of that asshole.”

“I just want to forget about this whole day. Please, make me forget.”

The room was dark and everyone was asleep. Normally I wouldn't have taken the risk, but I needed to feel close to him. All I wanted was for him to take away all of the pain that I'd experienced. Our kisses were slow and each touch was so endearing. He was more gentle than usual, caressing me in ways that he'd never done before. He took his time, making sure that I no longer cared what happened earlier in the day. Being in his arms made my pain dissipate, just like I'd hoped.

“I love you so much,” he whispered.

He held me briefly before leaving me alone in my room. I knew he'd have to be back in his room when his parents woke up, so it didn't bother me that he'd gone. Him being there had calmed me down, and I was able to finally close my eyes and get some sleep.

I have to admit that my last thoughts were of Brooks. He'd hurt me, and even though I couldn't admit that to either of them, I knew I wouldn't forget it.



### Chapter 3

I woke up the next morning feeling under the weather. My head was hurting from all of the crying the day before and I was so glad that we didn't have school for an in-service day. Branch came into the room, wondering why I wasn't up. "Hey sleepy head," he said as he sat down on the edge of the bed, and leaned over to kiss me on my forehead.

"Hey. I don't feel good."

“Well, why don’t you go back to bed and get some rest? I’m going to go out and run a couple miles, and then when I get back I’ll check on you.”

I smiled and watched him walk out of the room. “Branch?” I called.

He turned around. “Yeah?”

“Thanks for being so great last night. You always know how to comfort me.”

He looked shocked that I was thanking him. “Anytime.” Then he smiled and left me to go back to sleep.

After about twenty minutes I got up to use the bathroom and take some medicine. Brooks was standing at the door when I came out. He had his arms blocking me so that I couldn’t get by.

“Still mad at me?”

I tried to push him away, but he came at me again. “I’m not in the mood for you. My head hurts too bad.” I started to walk down the steps and he grabbed me by the waist from behind.

“Go get back in bed. I’ll get you some Tylenol and water.”

I felt like crap and shouldn’t have accepted his help, but I didn’t care. “Whatever.”

I got back into my warm bed and pulled the covers over my head. A couple minutes later he came into my room with a glass of water and two painkillers. “Thanks,” I said as I took the medication from his hand and shoved the pills into my mouth.

He sat down on the bed beside me. “So, are you still mad?”

“Are you going to ask me this until I answer?” I was becoming more annoyed by the second.

I closed my eyes and hugged my pillow. Brooks climbed into the bed next to me and pulled me into his arms. “I can’t have my sister mad at me.”

“Get off. I don’t feel good, I told you.”

He laughed and rolled away. “Branch isn’t here, you know. You don’t have to pretend to not care, Kat. Natalie was fun, but that’s it.”

I pulled my pillow over my head. “Seriously, I don’t want to talk about this.”

He wouldn't leave, and I was too tired to even begin to deal with him. "I'm staying until we talk it out."

"I guess you'll be here all day then. I'm going back to sleep." I rolled over and put the pillow over my ear so that I couldn't hear his mouth anymore.

Unfortunately I could still hear him, muffled through the fabric and stuffing. "I didn't sleep with her, Kat."

I closed my eyes and pretended that I hadn't heard him. Brooks stayed in my bed for only a few more minutes.

"I really need to talk to you about something. Please, just hear me out?" I kept ignoring him. If he thought I was mad then I'd made my point. He wasn't going to keep messing with my head. If



he was mad about something that I did, he needed to learn to tell me instead of torturing me.

I didn't wake up again until the afternoon. Not only did I feel well rested, but I didn't have an annoying person in my bed next to me.

When I went downstairs I found both of the guys playing a video game. It was basketball, and I knew how long those things lasted, so I sat down next to Branch and closed my eyes.

I assumed they'd been talking about things before I came into the room, because Branch didn't seem shocked when Brooks made his announcement. "So, I told Mom and Dad earlier. They know I leave right after graduation."

I kept my head rested on a pillow when I asked, “Where are you going?”

They never took their eyes away from the television. “He enlisted,” Branch announced.

“What? When?” I sat up feeling like all of the air in the room had dispersed.

“Last week, like you care,” Brooks said as he scored a three pointer in basketball.

I did care. The idea of him going away was tough enough, but imagining that this kind of decision could end his life, if he was ever deployed, made me frantic. I couldn’t stand to lose anyone else that I cared about.

It was irrational for me to take

offense to his decisions. He had every right to do what he wanted, but I was pissed that he wouldn't think it would hurt me. Didn't he know how I felt about him and how all of his actions were eating me up inside?

“We all care. What made you want to do that?” I was trying to ask normal questions without freaking out in front of Branch and making him suspect that I cared more about his brother than I should.

“I want to be able to give back to our country, Kat.” He was being rude, like I had no business even inquiring about his decision. “You’ve got until June to make amends with me,” he added.

I rolled my eyes again. “Whether it’s June or next week, it wouldn’t change my opinion of you.”

Brooks threw the controller and stormed out of the room, like I’d said something hurtful. I had meant it like no matter when he left I was still going to hurt the same.

Branch sat his controller down and pulled my legs towards him. “That wasn’t nice, babe.”

“I meant that we’d miss him the same.” Okay, maybe I said it sarcastically to get a rise out of him, but I didn’t see him overreacting the way he had.

“It wasn’t how it came out. All I heard was you telling him to get lost.”

I felt terrible, but I was hurt. “Well, I didn’t mean it that way. Maybe if he wasn’t being such a jerk lately he would have known.”

He patted me on the legs. “Go apologize. Mom is already freaking out on him. He needs our support. I know he pissed you off last night, but maybe he’s scared and wants to occupy his time. He can’t be up our asses every second. Since we share the same DNA I’d say that he’s probably horny constantly.”

He wasn’t making me apologize for thinking his brother’s whoring around was okay. It wasn’t.

“Fine, I’ll go talk to him.”

I stormed out of the room, desperate to tell Brooks that I was sorry.

I didn't want him thinking for even a second that I wouldn't miss him. I knew we hadn't been on the same page, but not having him in my life anymore wasn't an option for me. He'd promised to spend every weekend with us once we started college.

I found him lying on his bed, throwing a ball at the wall and catching it. I avoided sitting next to him and chose to stand. "Can we talk? I think you misunderstood me back there."

"I didn't misunderstand anything, Kat. I get that you want me out of the way. Trust me, I want to get the fuck away from you and my brother too."

"That's not true and you know it. Why are you saying things like that?" I

knew I said I wouldn't sit down, but I couldn't help it. My ass hit the bed and I turned to face him. "We would never cut you out of our lives. How could you even think that?"

He stopped tossing the ball and looked at me. "Do you love my brother?"

I gave him a flip kind of look. "What? Why would you ask me that? You know I do."

"Yeah. He loves you, too. Don't you get it? I can't sit around here while you two are planning this fantastic life together. I'm drowning in your fucking happiness."

"Don't say it like that. We'd never push you away. It isn't like we're

broadcasting ourselves. We hang out just like we used to.”

“It’s different, even if you don’t see it. As far as pushing me away, well, you don’t have to, Kat. I’m the one walking away.” I used to love when he called me Kat, but this time it was different. It was his way of telling me to drop it.

“I don’t want you to go.”

He laughed. “Did my brother send you up here, or did you come by yourself?”

I shrugged. “Both.”

He shook his head like he was disappointed. “Just go back downstairs. I’m not going to waste my time explaining and I’ve already signed



everything. I'll be eighteen and able to leave on my own free will. You and Branch can go off to college and ride into the sunset on your white stallion for all I care."

I was sobbing silently while my lips trembled. "That's not fair. Why are you being so mean to me?"

He sat up and pointed toward his door. "Kat, we're friends, even family. I didn't do this to hurt you. Get it through your head and get out of my room."

"You're hurting me right now, Brooks. I don't understand what I ever did to you to make you treat me this way. You used to protect me."

"I used to do a lot of things and it got me nowhere."

I leaned over and closed my eyes as my lips got close to his ear. I could smell that his cologne was different from his brothers. It was sweeter, like I'd always remembered. "I don't want to lose you."

He grabbed my arm and kept me facing him. My eyes shot open and were close enough to feel each other's breath on our faces. "Why? Say it, Kat. Tell me what we both already know."

I should have been honest as some desperate plea to keep him near me. It would have been so wrong, but I couldn't stand imagining him not being my friend. In that very moment I knew I loved him so much more than I should have.

Instead of saying it, I pulled away from him. “I’m not saying anything.”

I got up and started walking out of the room, when he said, “Yeah, that’s what I figured.”

I didn’t go back downstairs to hang out with Branch. After shutting my bedroom door, I fell onto my bed and cried harder than I had the day before. Brooks was breaking my heart, and I couldn’t tell anyone about it, because I’d lose Branch, whom I equally loved. How I’d let myself fall for two brothers was beyond me.

I knew I had to let Brooks go if I wanted to have a future with Branch. After all, I couldn’t have both of them,

and I knew it.



## Chapter 4

June 2007

“Congratulations you three. How about you all stand together for a picture?” Danica was making us take a million pictures after the ceremony had ended. Thankfully it was a sunny day outside and the weather wasn’t too hot.

We’d all managed to graduate from our little private school and the big world was out there waiting for us.

As for me and Branch, we’d be attending school at Salisbury State

University in Maryland. It was about two hours from home, but close enough to visit when we wanted to.

Brooks was another story altogether. He was ordered to report for boot camp two days after graduation.

Danica and Walt had flown in both sets of their parents and invited everyone over for a joint graduation-going away party. It was nice for them to see their grandparents since they all lived in Florida. Every year we visited for vacation, but I knew they wanted to be a part of the twins becoming adults.

I was grateful to already be included in the family that I would one day call my in-laws. I'd never have to worry about meeting them or have them

end up hating me. They'd known me since birth and loved me as if I was their daughter for all that time.

The grandparents were the same. They all gave me gifts for my birthday and holidays and never treated me like I didn't belong. For graduation one set of them gave each of us five hundred bucks. Branch and I would use ours toward expenses while attending school. We knew we'd have to get jobs, but that would only get us started without having to depend on his parents.

The morning of the party, Brooks stayed in his room. I'd helped Danica decorate and make breakfast for all of our guests. When he didn't come down to eat, I took a plate up to his room. I

knocked three times before opening the door and finding him lying on his back, shirtless. “Hey, I brought you food.”

He sat up. “Thanks. I wasn’t that hungry.”

I sat it to the side and plopped down next to him. He smiled, but didn’t say anything as he moved a piece of my hair away from my face. “I like when you don’t hide your face.”

I blushed and smiled, finally bringing myself to look over at him. “I’m going to miss you, Brooks. Promise you’ll visit?”

He smiled and kept staring at me. “Yeah. I’ll come see you.”

The room got quiet and I was uncomfortable sitting there with him not



having a shirt on. “I better get back downstairs.”

He grabbed my hand and pulled me back onto the bed. My body fell against his and our faces were super close. Brooks brought his hand up and brushed it across my cheek. “Don’t slap me, Kat. Please, just let me have a few seconds of this.” He kept his eyes open and pressed his soft lips against mine. I should have pulled away, knowing what we were doing was wrong in so many ways, but it was impossible. I couldn’t deny myself a private goodbye.

When I didn’t move away, our one kiss intensified. Soon our tongues were mingling together and his hands were running up the sides of my shirt. I

could feel myself burning for more and reacted as quickly as I could.

I finally pulled away and put my hand over my mouth after standing up frantically. "I'm sorry. I need to go back downstairs." I felt horrible, imagining how hurt Branch would be if he'd seen us. Then again, I couldn't help but feel a pull toward Brooks. As much as I wanted to feel guilty, I just couldn't.

He didn't move, but kept his gaze focused on me, as if he were trying to read what I was thinking. A half-smile formed in one corner of his mouth. "Does he know you're in love with me?"

It was that very moment when I knew if I lied I'd drive him out of my life forever. I didn't want Brooks to go

away thinking he was wrong. I wanted him to know that I'd always have a special place in my heart for him, because as wrong as it was, it was also true. "Please don't do this, Brooks."

He smiled and scratched his head, possibly to consider calling me a coward. "Kat, have you asked yourself how long you're going to go on with my brother before you realize you picked the wrong guy?"

I put my hands on my hips. "Don't go there. You know I love Branch."

He got up on his knees, separating the distance between us. "When I'm on that bus tomorrow and you're done waving goodbye to me, I

want you to do me one favor.”

“What?”

“I want you to think about being without Branch for a few months. Then switch it around and think about being without me. When you have your answer, you’ll know why I had to leave.”

I was so confused. “That makes no sense. You already know I’ll miss you.”

He started laughing and fell down on his back. “Kat, this ain’t even about missing me. This is about you living with a lie. It’s about my brother getting everything he wants, and never considering that you were never his to have.”

My heart was beating a hundred miles per hour, and I wasn't sure if I should jump back in bed with Brooks and profess my love, or punch him for assuming I'd made a serious mistake.

“Please stop.”

“Stop what? Stop feeling sorry for myself because I wasn't man enough to fight for what I wanted?” Out of all the times that he could have come to me with this, he was picking when he was about to leave.

I paced around the room and threw my hands in the air. “What are you talking about?”

Just then the door opened. Branch was standing there smiling. “Hey, I was wondering where you two

were. Mom needs us to get the grill going. Dad had to run out for the cake.”

Brooks stood up and pulled a shirt over his head. He said nothing to me as he walked out with Branch. All I could think about was him kissing me and the way it felt. I’d kissed Branch a million times and never felt that kind of desperate connection.

While they were gone, I laid on Brooks’ bed trying to calm myself down. Out of the corner of my eye I saw his art book. We had to have one our whole senior year and do all of our assignments for that class in it.

I was just being curious, not really prying when I opened it to the first page. What stared back at me was

something I would have never thought I would see.

He'd gotten everything perfect, from my blue eyes to the highlights in my brown hair. My fingernails and even the color of my skin was so precise that I could have been looking in the mirror.

Under the picture it was titled, "My Kat". I closed the book and tossed it when I heard someone approaching the door. I hadn't realized that I'd been staring at it long enough for the guys to be done helping out.

Brooks walked into the room and was shocked to find me still inside. He closed the door behind him and crossed his arms over his chest.

I stood up and walked toward

him, until our faces were almost touching. “How long have you been in love with me, Brooks?”

He smiled, but didn’t drop his arms from his chest. “That question isn’t going to get answered.”

When he started to walk to the side, I grabbed him. There was no way I was going to be able to let him go without knowing the truth. “I would have picked you, and you know it. So I need an answer. How long?”

He turned to look at me, and his eyes were full of tears. I felt him touching me on my cheek again and tilted my head as an automatic reaction. “I’ve loved you for as long as I could remember.”



My lips were trembling again as I started to cry for a different reason. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. You’re going to be happy with Branch. He loves you. I’ll be out of the picture and it will get easier. The distance between us will help.”

I shook my head, unwilling to accept that he was leaving to make things better.

He leaned in and kissed me one more time on the forehead. “Just remember that you were my first.”

I tried to smile. “I’ll never forget our first kiss, Brooks.”

He moved out of the way and I knew I had to get out of there. I put my

hand on the doorknob when he said something that shocked me. “I wasn’t just talking about a kiss, Kat.”

I turned around and looked at him, wondering what he meant. “Huh?”

“September 11<sup>th</sup>, for the past two years. I’m surprised you didn’t know, being as I’ve always been there for you on that day, because unlike my brother, I never could sleep that night knowing you were so upset.”

I thought back to that night last year and how I’d been so sad and gone to bed. I remembered Branch coming into the room and me asking him to sleep with me. I remembered thanking Branch the next morning and him responding like he hadn’t done that much for me.

Oh my God! It wasn't Branch.

Then I looked up at Brooks as chills overwhelmed my whole body. "You...oh God. You."

I put my hand over my mouth. Brooks walked up close to me, so that nobody could hear. "I waited until the perfect moment to have you for myself. You had to be my first Kat, and I knew it was the only way it could happen."

I didn't know what to say or do. He hadn't raped me. I wondered if I had known would I have told him to stop.

The answer was *no*.

I would have let it happen, because somewhere inside of me I always knew I was supposed to be with him.

I ran out of his room and into mine, where I locked the door and prayed Branch wouldn't come looking for me.

My God, I'd slept with his brother and nobody had even known.

Not even me.

I was a horrible person, for not only having feelings, but for letting him stay so close to us.

He'd taken advantage of me.

He'd stolen from me.

I rushed back into his room, loaded with anger. "Don't come visit me in college, Brooks. You're right, I need to be away from you so that I can be happy with Branch. We don't need you trying to push us apart. And as far as

those two nights go, that goes to your grave with you. I won't lose Branch over this."

I didn't know how he felt when I left his room and I wanted to believe that at that moment I was too pissed at him to care. The truth was I was ripped in half, finally admitting that I was madly in love with both of them and the only way to move forward was to let one of them go.

The next morning we all drove to the bus station to say goodbye to Brooks. Danica was crying, and I was doing my best to keep my composure. He hugged everyone before approaching me, maybe because he was afraid I was going to punch him in the face. When his arms wrapped around me, I expected it to be a

fast hug. Instead, he whispered something in my ear before walking away.

“It’s our secret, Kat.”

Watching that bus pull away from the curb was gut-wrenching. I wanted to run after it, screaming until they let him off. I wasn’t ready to say goodbye. He needed to know I was sorry for being angry.

But it was too late.

Brooks was gone, and he’d taken a piece of my heart with him.

There was nothing left to do but move on, because I knew that I’d lost my chance at finding out what we could have been.



## Chapter 5

December 2009

“Merry Christmas, babe.”

Branch stood over the bed with a tray full of breakfast and a tiny package wrapped with a large bow on the top.

“Wow, breakfast in bed and I get to open my first gift.” I rubbed my hands together and let him arrange the tray, before he climbed into bed next to me.

“I know we said we weren’t going to go overboard for Christmas this year, but there was something I saw and

I knew you had to have it. Go ahead, open it.”

I took a bite of toast before grabbing the small box and shaking it. It didn’t make a sound, so I figured that it would probably be a pair of stud earrings. I’d been hinting that I wanted a real pair to wear in my second hole.

Branch nudged me. “Well, go ahead and open it.”

I ripped open the paper and was holding a small red velvet box. I looked at Branch before opening it and getting the shock of my life. Inside was a very sparkly emerald cut diamond surrounded by smaller diamonds on both sides.

“So, what do you say? Do you still want to be my wife? I think we’ve



waited long enough.”

I threw my arms around Branch. “Yes. Oh my goodness, yes, of course I do.” I closed my eyes and tried not to cry, removing the thought of my mother’s ring that had been recovered and given back to me all those years ago when they’d found her remains. In fact, her body was so damaged that her ring was one of the key points in identifying her. I’d promised myself that if I ever got married I would proudly wear the ring that she married my father with.

Now I had been presented this spectacular, very expensive, piece of jewelry and I felt obligated to accept it, no matter how sentimental the other one was.

I placed it on my finger and admired it sparkling against the sunshine coming in our window. “It’s beautiful, Branch. I never expected this.”

He held up my hand and looked at the ring on my finger. “I knew it would fit perfectly. They tried to convince me that you would need it sized. I told them that I knew my girl.”

I kissed him softly on the cheek and looked back at my hand. It was surreal making our engagement official. Of course, for years we’d discussed being married. It was never a matter of if, but more of when.

Granted, it wouldn’t be until we graduated, which was still two years away.

Branch and I had made a home in Salisbury, Maryland. We still went home once a month for dinner at his parents, but our lives were busy. Aside from school, we both worked jobs to pay the bills. In our spare time, we were either studying or sleeping. Even our sex life suffered, not that it was enough to complain about. We had it often, but other couples our age were doing it all of the time, and neither me nor Branch had the energy for that kind of thing.

I put my hand down and looked into Branch's eyes. "This calls for some extra celebrating, don't you think?" Without him answering me yet, I climbed into his lap and started rocking my body over his.

Branch groaned and kissed me softly. "I'm at your mercy."

Of course he was. I had a lot of thanking to do, and we weren't leaving our bed until he was a very happy fiancé.

After we'd celebrated in bed for the entire morning, we dressed and got ready to spend Christmas at his parents, where we would spend the night instead of making the long drive home. We both liked to have a few glasses of wine and neither of us wanted to get on the road afterwards.

Branch and I stood in the driveway as the car warmed up and flipped a coin for who would drive first. He lost and climbed into the driver's

seat, while I took the co-pilot spot next to him. We were holding hands before we backed out of the driveway, and I'd never felt so excited to share something with the family.

Then my mind went to Brooks.

This would be the second Christmas in a row without him. Since joining the army he'd been away. After boot camp, he was stationed in Texas. Even though he was allowed leave, it always happened when we couldn't get away. Even though the distance had been good for my and Branch's relationship, it still hadn't filled the hole that he'd left in my heart.

For the first whole year I never received any form of communication

from him. I still wrote him letters once a week, no matter how trivial the topic was. I just wanted him to know I was thinking about him and that I hoped he was well.

Then, just a few months ago, I'd started getting letters back. They weren't anything spectacular, but my heart beat double on the day I received the first one.

I memorized his words and kept the letter hidden in a pair of old wool socks that itched too much to wear.

*Dear Kat,*

*Thanks for writing me all those letters. Sorry it's taken me so long to respond. My life's been busy and I know yours has too. I hear you and*

*Branch are doing well from Mom's letters. Tell him I said hi.*

*I will try to write more.*

*Love, Brooks*

It wasn't anything mushy, but it was still something. He'd finally stopped ignoring me and accepted that we'd all grown up and that it was time to be friends again.

Although I'd never forget what happened between us, the secret I would take to the grave, I knew I couldn't hate him. He put his own feelings aside for his brother and even though I could never understand it, I had to respect it.

Besides, somehow knowing that we'd shared something so intimate helped me cope with losing him. Maybe

it was the reason he did it. I'd probably never find out and, by that point, I didn't need to. Branch and I were on our way to share our good news. We were engaged and I wanted to shout it from the rooftops. The handsome man holding my hand, who made me smile every day wanted me to be his forever. I was honored to have his love and vowed to never take it for granted again.

We were greeted by his parents at the door, who then helped bring in the rest of the presents that we couldn't carry in on the first trip inside. The house smelled like ham, and I couldn't wait to tear into a nice family dinner. We'd been eating microwave dinners for two years, so any chance to have real



food was like putting a child in a candy shop with free reign.

I didn't care if I left there weighing ten more pounds. All I wanted to do was eat, drink, and be merry.

That's exactly what I did too. We caught up with Danica and Walt, answering all of their questions about school and work.

It took them nearly an hour before they noticed the ring on my hand. His dad saw it first, but didn't say anything. I caught him glancing at it as he spoke. When Danica finally spotted it on my finger, she snatched my hand up and looked down at it. "It's more beautiful than the pictures, Branch. You did good picking it out on your own."

I was shocked. “You knew?”

She dropped my hand and folded hers together. “Well, of course we knew. He had to call me for shopping advice. It wasn’t like his brother or father would know anything about what you’d like.” She winked, but of course my mind went to Brooks and how wrong she was about him knowing me.

After a little too much celebrating, I found myself climbing the ladder to the tree house. I don’t know why I thought it was a good idea, but there I was, pushing myself through the small opening, wearing a dress and a shawl. One of my shoes fell to the ground and I didn’t bother going back down to get it.

It was already dark outside, and surprisingly the push light still had enough battery to come on when I tried it. I looked around the small wooden house and thought about all of our great times and some of our bad ones.

When I got a chill, I grabbed an old blanket and went to put it around me. A big spider crawled across it and I threw it down on the floor. An envelope fell out of it that had my name scribbled on it.

I shook off the blanket and squashed the spider before wrapping it around me to keep warm. Then I sat down on the hard wood floor and opened the envelope. It was weird. I didn't remember ever bringing a note up

into the tree house, and I knew Branch hadn't been up in there for years.

When I unfolded the paper it was all explained.

*Dear Kat,*

*If you're reading this letter then I've already left for the Army. Which also probably means that I was too chicken shit to tell you how I really feel about you.*

*I don't even know why I'm writing this, because you'll probably never come up into this tree house again. In the chance that you do, I need to set things straight, once and for all.*

*The first thing you need to know is that from the first day we met, as infants even, I loved you. I can't*

*remember one day where I didn't, so it has to mean it's since birth.*

*The second thing you need to know is that I wanted to tell you when we were twelve and had shared our first kiss. I know you remember that night. I pulled you aside and asked you to do it again. I was going to tell you, but I got called in for dinner. That next day you lost your parents and being your friend was more important than any horny kids' feelings.*

*So I waited.*

*The thing was, I accidentally told Branch all about it. He told me that you secretly confided in him that you liked him, but didn't want to hurt my feelings. It was a shitty move, but*

*well played by him. He knew that if I thought you wanted him, I'd back off.*

*I waited for the day that you would break up with him, hoping that one day you'd want me instead. After time, I knew it wouldn't happen. Our family was too close, and my parents wouldn't tolerate a scandal like that, besides the fact that I couldn't destroy the whole family over it.*

*I stepped aside and let him have you. I watched him hold you and kiss you, day after day, until I finally couldn't take it anymore.*

*One night, I snuck into your room. You thought I was Branch and I didn't correct you. You asked me to make the pain go away and so I did. I*

*wanted to be that guy that you needed.*

*That was when I lost my virginity.*

*I'm not sorry about it either, because I know it is something I will never regret.*

*You'll probably hate me now, but that wasn't the only time it happened. I snuck into your room the next year, on the anniversary of your parent's death, again. I wanted to be the one to make your tears go away.*

*Now that you know the truth, you'll understand why I had to leave. I want you to be happy with my brother. He'll treat you right and give you everything you want.*

*Maybe when we're older, with*

*gray hair and lots of children, we can be friends again.*

*Until then, know I love you.*

*I always have and I always will.*

*Love, Brooks*

All I could do was sit there, reading what he'd written to me years ago. My mind was going crazy for more answers. I was desperate to reach out to him, but knew I'd be ruining my happy day with Branch. He'd just proposed to me. I couldn't just spring something so extreme on him without it causing a major strain on our relationship.

I sat in the cold tree house rereading the letter, experiencing it like it was the first time, over and over again. Snot was running out of my nose



and I knew I was a blubbering mess to look at.

Finally I got myself together enough to climb down and go back inside. Branch met me at the door, got one look at my face and wanted answers. “What’s wrong?”

I shook my head and thought of the first thing I could to not bring attention to the real reason I was a mess. “I miss my parents. I went out into the tree house and saw the lights on next door. I could see them inside, so happy.”

He pulled me into his arms, and I felt both relieved to have his support and happy that he’d believed me. It wasn’t like it was a total lie. I had noticed the family next door through the kitchen

window, but they'd lived there for a while, and I was used to it being someone else's.

Branch took me by the hand and led me upstairs. Once inside of his room, he shut the door with his foot and covered my cheeks with both of his large hands. "I don't want you sad today, babe. We're celebrating the birth of Jesus and the future that we're going to have together."

I looked at my ring and it immediately calmed me enough to smile. "I know. I'm sorry."

He backed away from me. "How about you take off that dress and come show me how happy you are to be engaged?"

In that moment I was a bit confused to be honest, albeit I wasn't about to divulge that type of information to him. Instead I backed up and started slowly taking off my clothes. He was sitting on the bed removing his clothes with all eyes on me.

When I was standing there, completely naked, he held out his arms, in which I walked over and fell into. Our kisses were slow and he moved his tongue against mine as if we had all the time in the world.

I could feel his warm hands running up my waist and over my chest. He circled my nipples with his finger and leaned in to caress and touch each one of them. I bit down on my lips and

concentrated on every single inch of me that he was handling. When he reached between my legs, I closed my eyes and let the fire ignite. Branch was there, giving me everything that I ever wanted. I cried out when his fingers entered me, and we were finally on the bed together.

He kissed my abdomen, then my thighs, before trailing his lips over the top of my sex. His mouth lingered over it, brushing it enough for me to yearn for more. Then like every time we were together, he applied protection, moved up and entered me.

He was almost always on top, not that I minded. I liked wrapping my legs around his back and watching him work up a sweat. Except, only moments

later, he was biting on the pillow next to me and finishing.

Afterwards, I lay there next to him, watching him until he fell asleep. He looked so peaceful that I didn't want to wake him when I couldn't get comfortable.

I dressed into comfortable clothes and roamed around the house until I came to Brooks' door. It creaked when I opened it and I made sure nobody had heard me before I snuck inside.

His room had been straightened up, either by Danica or their new cleaning lady that came monthly. It took me a couple minutes to find his art book and turn to the page where I'd found my picture. I traced the lines of my face on

the paper and cried to myself, thinking about how different things would have been if my parents hadn't died that day.

Then, I went back into the Branch's room and pulled the letter to me out of the pocket of my dress. I crept back in Brooks' room and stuck it under his pillow. When or if he came home to visit, he'd know that I'd seen it.

I knew I couldn't respond, but needed him to know that I'd found it.

In my heart I knew that if I'd found that note when he'd wrote it, things may have been different. I wouldn't have been so vested in my relationship and future with Branch and we could have tried to sort out whatever feelings we had for each other.

The damage was done.

I was marrying his brother, because we loved each other and it was the right thing to do. We'd been together for years and no old love letter could change that. Brooks had made his choice. He could have fought for me, but he didn't. Him giving up on us was the reason I knew I was making the right choice.



## Chapter 6

May 2010

I'd been engaged for a little over five months, and in that time, I'd been planning the perfect wedding for Branch and me. He did his best to help me, but as far as details went, he couldn't care less as long as I was happy.

Danica helped me most of the time, since I was as close to a real daughter as she'd ever get. I remember when I drove over to spend the weekend at her house and go dress shopping. My



friend Melissa from school had come with me. She was familiar with the surrounding areas of D.C. and had grown up close to there herself. I'd met her through my job near the college, and after working together for almost three years we'd become pretty close.

She was thrilled to have been asked to be in the wedding and I was glad I had her in my life to ask. Of course, Brooks was going to be the best man and knowing that made me feel uneasy. I'd had several dreams where the pastor asked if anyone objected and he did every time.

Since I'd only received a few messages since Christmas, I was concerned how it would be once we

finally got to see him again.

Of course time had passed and with that I was able to build a stronger relationship with Branch. My letters to Brooks were nothing but hellos and it made me feel like eventually we'd be able to be around each other without weird feelings.

Dress shopping was exhausting, and after trying on practically the entire store, I ended up getting the second one. We stopped in town for nice dinner and chatted amongst ourselves until the sun went down.

It was nice spending time with Danica without any of the men around. I looked forward to doing it more, especially when school was over and

we could buy a place of our own. They'd want us to live close once our children were born, so they wouldn't miss out on seeing them.

After our long day, we had a few more glasses of wine, and I got Melissa situated in my old room. While making my way to Branch's, I happened to stop in to Brooks'. I don't know what made me do it, but I lifted up the pillow and noticed the note was gone. I was overwhelmed with panic and guilt imagining that one of his parents had discovered it and knew our secret.

I searched his room and couldn't find it, but refused to make a scene over it.

That next morning I think Danica

knew something was up with me. It was a good thing we had to get back early for a shift, because I had no idea how much longer I could pretend that I wasn't freaking out.

The first thing I did when I got home was sit down and write Brooks a letter. I needed to warn him that someone else knew about us being together. If Branch found out, he'd kill him.

It was hard to explain how I was the one who'd moved the letter and it was all my fault that his private thoughts were exposed.

*Dear Brooks,*

*I hate to be the bearer of bad news, and maybe I should have told you*

*a long time ago, but I found your letter in the tree house. Before I make you hate me, I want you to know that your words touched my heart. I don't hate you for being there for me. I was mad, but I didn't hate you.*

*Look, I took the note to your room and put it under your pillow so you'd find it when you visited. I didn't know someone else would go in there.*

*Now it's missing and I'm freaking out. Someone knows your secret; our secret.*

*Please don't hate me, Brooks.*

*Love, Kat*

*PS: Please come home for the wedding. Whatever happens we can explain that it was all in the past.*

*We're a family and we'll work through it.*

For the next couple of weeks I was a nervous wreck, trying to stay focused on finals and worry about everything else, including the ticking time bomb that could occur at any time. What made it worse was that Danica had a number to reach Brooks, but I was too afraid, at that point, to ask for it.

The hardest thing for me was knowing that all of this could blow up in my face and I hadn't done anything except for kiss him goodbye, which I was pretty sure Branch would forgive me for. All of the sneaking in my room was something I never knew that happened, so it wouldn't have been fair

to hold me accountable for it.

Okay, I knew that wasn't true. I had feelings for Brooks that had never gone away, but there are no rules for who you love. I felt the same way for his brother, whom I was marrying.

Although, a part of me was still very upset with Branch and the way he'd wedged himself into a relationship with me, knowing how his brother felt. It didn't seem fair and I felt sorry for Brooks.

Except now, Branch and I had history. We'd been together for years and had a life that we'd planned together. No matter what my feelings about Brooks were, they couldn't take away everything Branch and I had built.

I received a letter back from him sixteen days after I sent mine.

*Dear Kat,*

*I can see how you're freaking out right now. You don't need to be. The person that found the letter isn't going to say anything, I can assure you of that.*

*Maybe if you weren't always going into my room when you visited, they wouldn't have went looking.*

*Anyway, it doesn't even matter now. All is good and you can calm down.*

*As far as me coming for the wedding, that may be a problem. I'm being deployed in January to Afghanistan and I've signed on to stay*



*for two years.*

*By the time you get this letter Mom and Dad will already know and I will have made them promise to let me call Branch to tell him the bad news.*

*I'm really sorry I can't be there to see you walk down the aisle. I know you'll be the most beautiful woman that this world has ever seen.*

*Take care of my brother and yourself.*

*Love, Brooks*

I sat there crying, and I wasn't sure if it was because I was in the clear, or that he wouldn't be coming to the wedding. I missed him and the friendship that we used to have. Melissa was a great friend, but she'd never be

the friend Brooks was to me. It was a bond that had grown since we were infants and it was irreplaceable.

It took Branch two days to realize something was wrong, and a week to tell me about his brother being deployed. I'd been testing him, waiting for him to tell me, and was sort of pissed that he'd kept it from me.

For the next month I went through the motions of life, knowing something was missing. Finally, I sat Branch down and told him that we couldn't get married unless Brooks could be there too. It wasn't fair to leave him out of such a big event that impacted our whole family. We'd done everything together our whole lives and I wasn't about to

start changing things because he was out there defending our country.

Branch wasn't happy. In fact, he paced around the room, like life depended on him making a decision. "What do you suggest we do? You want to wait until he returns? I'm not putting our life on hold because of him."

I could tell he was angry, albeit I refused to go there knowing it would escalate and be like living in Hell for days. "I say we move up the wedding. Who cares if we're still in school? We'll be married six months before we graduate college. It's one semester, and it won't kill us. Let's just do it."

Branch turned with a cocky smile on his face, like rushing to the aisle was

the best decision that I'd ever had. For a second, I swear I wondered if he was afraid that if it didn't happen soon, it wasn't going to happen at all. I also got the vibe that he didn't care if his brother was in attendance and it didn't sit well with me.

He scooped me up in his arms and spun me around the room. "Do you know how happy you make me?"

I giggled and became caught up in the moment, kissing him lightly on his cheek. "Tell me."

"Woman, we can get married tomorrow if you want."

He sat me down and I continued laughing as I walked over to the desk and pointed to the mounds of planning

that I'd done for our event. "I've put too much time into this for it to be at a court house. I want a real wedding."

He walked up to me and looked deeply into my eyes. "Fine. Call my mom and get things going. I'll call Brooks and let him know a date, so he can file for leave."

"Christmas. Let's do it Christmas when he'll already be home. It's right before he leaves and he won't have to worry about getting more time approved."

"Fine, I'll let him know."

I stood there staring at him, realizing that he knew Brooks' number and had been talking to him, but never once mentioned it to me. I would have

liked to say hello and hear his voice every once in a while. Instead, I smiled and pretended it didn't bother me at all. "Sounds great. Tell him hello for me, would ya?"

"Yeah, sure."

After speaking to Danica and making lots of calls to get our venue changed in such short notice, we were able to find a local hotel to hold the wedding at. The date was set for December 22, 2010 and it was all falling into place.

I got my next letter in the beginning of July and reading it got me a little worked up.

*Katy,*

*I'm all set to be home for the*

wedding and the holidays. I'm sure you've been real busy planning that dream day that you always wanted. I'll be home on the 20<sup>th</sup>, but have arranged to get fitted here in Texas and have the company call the measurements in to the local rental place in town. Branch said he'd pick it up when he gets his.

You're probably worried about everything going perfectly.

Don't.

You'll be the life of the party and everything will be perfect. Your mom and dad would be so proud of you, for all that you've accomplished.

I'll see you in a couple of months.

Don't bite your nails. You need

*them to be perfect for the wedding.*

*Love, Brooks*

Knowing that I didn't have a number to call, I started writing him a message. Then I crumbled it up and decided that I was going to call, even if I had to sneak the number from my fiancé's phone.

So that night, I waited for him to fall asleep and walked over to his side of the bed where he kept it on the charger. I grabbed the phone and took it into the living room, in case he'd saved it under something different to make it harder to find.

I found it in seconds, seeing that, according to the call log, they'd been talking weekly for months. I felt



betrayed, like Branch was keeping it from me on purpose.

I quickly wrote down the number and transferred it to my phone, returning his before he could wake up and notice it was missing.

It was hard sleeping that night knowing I was only hours away from hearing his voice. It had been so long, and I missed my best friend more than words could explain. The fact that Branch was keeping us apart hurt me. Did he really not trust us together?

Then I laid there, thinking about being alone with Brooks.

Suddenly I realized why Branch had every right to worry.

The last time I'd been alone with

Brooks we'd kissed and I would have done more if we hadn't come to our senses.

Then I became mad at myself.

If I wasn't able to control my emotions and feelings around Brooks, then being around him was a bad idea. I had to remind myself that things happen for a reason and I was with the right man, no matter what his methods were for getting us together. In some ways, he'd stolen me from Brooks. I'd probably never forgive him for that, but the damage was done. Branch was my first and he was going to be my last. Our marriage would finalize that for us, and no one, not even Brooks, would come between us.

On the way to work that next morning, I sat in my car and dialed the number. It rang five times before he picked up and when I heard his voice I hung up quickly.

My heart was racing and I couldn't believe that I'd done something so silly.

When my phone started to ring and the same number showed up, I knew I had to answer.

“Hello?”

“What, did you change your mind or something? Is my voice not as sexy as it was before?”

I had no idea why, but I burst into laughter. Of all the things he could have said, he'd broken the ice with that

statement. “Your voice is fine. I just... I had to sneak to get your number and I don’t really know why I’m calling. I guess I just wanted to hear your voice.”

“Is it everything you wanted it to be?” he teased.

“All that and then some,” I joked back.

“I miss you, Kat. It gets real lonely sometimes. On nights like that I wish I could call you and talk about damn near anything to pass the time. You and I never ran out of things to talk about, did we?”

I traced my steering wheel, feeling warm tears running down my face. When I sniffled, he must have known I was emotional. “Please don’t

cry.”

“I can’t help it. I think Branch is keeping us from each other and I don’t understand. We’re family, and he knows how important you’ve always been to me. You’re thousands of miles away. I don’t understand why he wouldn’t want us talking.”

“Kat, Branch found the letter. He went into my room after you fell asleep and read it. He called me that morning, before you woke up.”

“What?” I was in shock. Branch had known the whole time and never said a word to me.

“Yeah. Do you really think that I would talk to everyone else on the phone and not you? If I had to pick anyone to

call, you'd be my first choice."

I started worrying about what Branch had said to his brother. After all, he'd written about sneaking into my room, so Branch knew I'd been with his brother. "He knows about what we did."

"Yup. He knows."

"What did he say to you? Did he threaten you? Do your parents know?"

Brooks got quiet for a second, and I heard him saying something to a man before telling me to hang on. The background noise changed, and I realized he'd walked somewhere else for privacy. "Kat, he doesn't blame you. You didn't even know which, I'm just going to put it out there, it's sort of weird. I know I'm a way better lover

than my brother, but that's beside the point."

A tiny giggle escaped me when I realized he was trying to be funny in the midst of chaos.

"Anyway, we had words and he made threats. It's why I wasn't going to come to the wedding."

"You have to come, Brooks. I want you there."

"Yeah, I heard. When he called to tell me the date had been moved up, I was shocked I was invited again. He's pretty much said that if I come within ten feet of you and he isn't around he's going to kill me with his bare hands. Honestly, I'd like to see that fucker try it. After all this time, I'm pretty sure I'd rip

him apart.”

“Okay, I don’t need to know all that. Forgive me for saying that, but I find it hard to believe that he’s never confronted me about us being together.”

“Kat, you’re innocent in all of this. Don’t you get it? He doesn’t even know you saw the letter. He thinks I left it under my pillow and you never found it. At least, that’s what I convinced him happened. As far as you know, we’ve never done anything. It’s all on me.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I think you know why.” My stomach dropped when he said it. I hadn’t called him to hear him saying things like that. I called him because I’d missed my friend.



“Brooks, I want you at the wedding, and Branch isn’t going to touch you. I appreciate that you kept me out of it, but it doesn’t change anything either way. I’m marrying Branch because I love him and we have a life together. I hope you understand that.”

It hurt me to say it. I knew he cared about me deeply, but I feared for a huge confrontation between him and Branch. To keep the peace, I had to hide any feelings that I had for him deep inside.

“I get it, Kat. I’ll be there for you on your special day and I won’t cause problems. I’d never do anything to hurt you.”

Didn’t he know that his leaving

tore me apart? “Thank you.”

“Listen, I need to go.”

“Wait.” I wasn’t ready to say goodbye. “Can I call you again?”

“You can, but you may want to use someone else’s phone. Branch may act all innocent, but I guarantee he checks your phone bill for my number. You’ve got a month to come up with a good excuse as to what we talked about and why you called me today.”

“I’ll handle it.”

“Bye, Kat.”

“Bye, Brooks.”

I didn’t go to work. Instead I went home and crawled into my bed, where I cried for the whole day. Branch may not have been running around

cheating on me, but he was certainly hiding things. I didn't want to start our marriage like that, but knew at some point it would have to be addressed.



## Chapter 7

October-November 2010

The wedding was just two months away, and believe it or not, I had everything in order. Finals were scheduled for November for three of my classes, so I'd have time to run around once school was over.

Branch was busier with school than I was. He'd doubled up on classes and decided he was going to stay in school for another year and work his ass off for a higher degree. He assured me

that it would benefit our future.

I don't want to say that a wedge had formed between us, because I was extremely excited to become his wife, but the lingering secrets he was keeping from me still didn't sit well. I wanted a marriage where we could tell each other everything. It was understood that Brooks would always be someone special to me, but I couldn't just cut him out of my life.

With that being said, I called Brooks at least once a week, using a phone at my workplace. I understood that I was sneaking around, but I wasn't doing anything bad. We weren't talking about being together; in fact it never even came up. We talked about work,

school and things that Brooks had gotten into since joining the military. Finally, after so long, I felt like my life wasn't missing anything. I knew he wasn't back, but talking to him filled the void of him leaving.

One thing I did notice was that the happier I was, the more strange Branch was acting. He started bringing me flowers every Friday. I wasn't complaining. The thought meant a lot. Maybe it was just my guilty conscience, but I felt like he knew I was talking to Brooks. By November he was showering me with gifts and doing everything to help with the wedding. I appreciated it, but remained skeptical, like he had ulterior motives.

By Thanksgiving, the wedding jitters were back in full force. They got so overwhelming that I took on extra shifts to keep myself busy. I stopped calling Brooks, in fear of telling him that I was nervous and him taking it the wrong way. We hadn't spoken about feelings, but it was no secret that he still loved me.

The last thing I needed was him telling me that I was choosing the wrong brother.

AGAIN.

When he hadn't heard from me in three weeks, he called my cell phone.

I'd erased his number, but knew when it said Texas, that it was him.

“Brooks, now isn't a good time.”

“Why haven’t you called me, Kat? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lied.

“I know you better than that. Did I say or do something that made you mad?”

“No. It’s not you. It’s me.”

“So, I guess we’re breaking up?”  
He was trying to make me laugh.

When I didn’t say anything, he changed his approach. “You can tell me anything.”

“I’m scared.”

“Has he hurt you?”

“No. Of course not. I guess how I’m feeling is normal.”

“When’s the last time you ate?  
You know you have to take care of



yourself, and you forget to eat when you're stressed." I was shocked that after all these years he still remembered the little things, where Branch had never asked or noticed that, and we lived together.

"I'm fine, Brooks. I've just been busy and nervous."

"I worry when you don't call."

"I'm sorry."

"Kat, you know you don't have to go through with this. You have a choice. You always have. If you aren't sure about being with Branch for the rest of your life, then don't do it."

It was the first time that he'd talked about me leaving his brother. "Why would you think that?"

“Isn’t it true?”

“No!” He couldn’t talk to me like that.

“Okay. Whatever you say. I’m just telling you that you’re allowed to change your mind.”

“Why would I change my mind? Do you honestly think I’m in love with you?” I couldn’t believe that I’d said it out loud and I surely wasn’t prepared for how he answered.

“Yeah. I do.”

I didn’t know what to say. Arguing with him was only going to make my thing even more frustrating.

So I hung up.

Brooks didn’t call me back and he didn’t try to call me during

Thanksgiving.

As the weeks got closer to the wedding, I started to feel better. I kept focused on what needed to be done and avoided negative thoughts.

We spent the holiday with the family, and I avoided going into Brooks' room. Branch was especially affectionate, and it reminded me why I was marrying him. He'd been by my side since we were children, and I knew I could count on him to give us the best future possible.

A few nights later, Branch took me out to celebrate our upcoming nuptials. He made me get dressed up and surprised me by taking me to a five-star steak restaurant.

We were seated down in a section all alone. Being that it was a Monday, I just figured that it was probably a night where they weren't packed. The lighting was low and candles lit our table.

After we sat down, we were immediately offered a glass of wine and given our menus. "This is really nice," I whispered as the waiter walked away.

"I only want the best for my girl, Katy. You deserve to be treated like a princess."

"I wouldn't go that far. I'm just my normal self. I have flaws, like everyone else."

"You're perfect to me. You always have been."

I reached over the table and took his hand. “I love you, Branch.”

He smiled, seemingly pleased with the moment. “The big day is coming up. Are you getting nervous?”

“Of course not.” I pulled my hand away and acted offended, even though his question was closer to home than he probably knew.

“I just want everything to be perfect. Once we’re married all of your worries will fade away. I’m going to make you happy, you know.”

“Yeah, I do know that you’ll take care of me. You’re a good man, Branch. I’m lucky to have found you so early on in life. I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

He said something snarky under his breath and waved to the waiter to tell him we were ready to order, even though I'd barely looked at the menu. He didn't look at me when he said his next comment. "You should just be glad you ended up with me instead of Brooks. He never could have made you happy anyway."

I don't know why I felt like I had to defend Brooks, but I slammed the menu shut and waved away the waiter before speaking my mind. "Don't even go there with me, Branch. I can't believe that you brought that up. What did he ever do to you?"

He folded his hands and put this

annoyingly fake smile on. “Where do I even begin? Let’s start with our first kiss. Do you remember it?”

I shook my head and acted like it was petty to be bringing up, especially in such a nice place. “Are we seriously talking about the day before my parents died?”

“Yeah, Katy. We are.” He shook his head. “My dear brother waited for me to walk away before trying to get more action.”

“We were twelve, Branch. Are you seriously telling me that you’re holding a grudge over something that happened that long ago?”

“You’re damn right I am. If you knew half of what he’s done, you

wouldn't be sitting there defending him."

That's when it hit me. Branch still thought I didn't know about Brooks coming into my room. He thought that if I found out I'd hate Brooks. Instead, it made me feel closer to him. I couldn't explain it, but it was impossible for me to hate that I'd been with him. "Listen, no matter how bad you think he is, he's still family. Nobody is perfect."

He finished off his glass of wine and slammed it down so hard I thought the glass was going to break. "Do you know what you want?"

I shrugged. I wasn't even hungry anymore. "Just order for me. I'm sure you know what's best," I said, sarcastically.



Branch ordered and tried to change the subject, although I had tuned him out even before our next round of wine was poured. In his defense, I could see why he felt betrayed. Branch wasn't exactly innocent himself. He'd threatened Brooks about me when we were kids and Brooks, being the considerate brother, stepped aside.

After dinner, we drove home in silence. I didn't have a nice thing that I could say to him, and I think he knew it. We went to bed angry, which was something I promised I would never do.

That next morning I explained everything to Melissa. Well, most of it. Since I'd left out all of the negative things about Brooks, she was on my

side. Had she known about Brooks doing the switch-a-roo thing she'd probably have a different opinion.

"I don't get it, Katy. You're marrying him. What's the big deal? I never saw Branch as being a jealous kind of guy. You two are so happy together."

"He isn't jealous in general. It's only when it has to do with Brooks."

She shook her head and laughed. "Girl, I wish I had the man problems that you have."

"Don't say that."

"It's true. Anyway, maybe after you're wed Branch will finally settle down."

"Just help me get through things

until then. I'm going to need the support."

She laughed and put her arm around me. "I've got your back, chick. Nobody's going to ruin your day, I promise."

I wish that I could believe her, but a feeling in the pit of my stomach wouldn't go away. With less than a month to go, I worried more than ever if I was doing the right thing, and if I wasn't, would I be able to walk away from both of them, to keep our family together?



## Chapter 8

December 21<sup>st</sup> 2010

I woke up next to Branch wide-eyed and smiling at me. “Good morning, beautiful.”

After yawning and giving my arms a stretch I fell into his chest. “Good morning to you.”

He rubbed my back as he spoke. “You ready to get up and head to the hotel, where we’ll be married tomorrow?”

I leaned up and kissed him.

“Yes.”

We'd been getting along better after our date night from Hell weeks ago. As long as we didn't talk about his brother, everything was fine with the world. Our sex life sucked, but considering the stress we were under, I felt it to be normal.

While getting ready, I silently thought about seeing him again after so long. I'd missed him so much, but didn't want to offend Branch the night before our wedding. We just needed to get through the rehearsal dinner and wake up and get married. It was going to be easy enough.

Branch and I had much to discuss on our way to the city, like what time

people were arriving and where I needed him to be. I'd also booked everyone's room in advance, putting me and Melissa on a separate floor than him and his brother. After all, it was bad luck for the groom to see the bride, so we were spending the night apart.

My jitters weren't really apparent anymore, as I just wanted to be married so we could finally stop living on edge. Once Branch knew that I'd committed my life to him, he'd be able to settle down and let Brooks back into our life.

I wasn't asking to spend every moment with him, but seeing him every few months would have been nice.

We'd arrived at the hotel before

anyone else, and I couldn't help but watch the sliding glass doors for Brooks to enter. It had been so long, and even though I knew Branch was going to be mad, I wanted to at least say hello.

When Danica and Walt arrived, they had a bunch of things to carry. Branch headed outside to give them a hand, while I was talking to the concierge about the banquet room and what time we would be able to get in and start setting up.

Now, there is something to be said about any man in a uniform. It's like it makes even the most non-attractive man much hotter, but when I heard someone behind me clearing his voice and turned around to see him in full

military fatigues, I thought I was going to pass out.

He sat his bags down and opened his arms for me. Without regard for who could see us, I fell right into him, not willing to let go. "I missed you so much," he said into my hair.

I pulled away and looked up at him. He'd changed.

His baby face was gone and replaced with a roughly shaven, more squared jaw. His hair was short, around the same length as his brothers, except his was covered by a hat. Those blue eyes that I looked into every single day shone back at me, but were somehow different than Branch's. "It's been a long time."



He smiled and wouldn't stop looking at me. "You look great, Kat."

"Can I help you, sir?" The lady behind the desk interrupted.

He stepped forward and pulled out his wallet. "I'm here to check in. The name is Valentine, Brooks Valentine."

I stayed back letting him finish his transaction. I couldn't explain it, but it seemed like I'd forgotten what I was there for in the first place. All I wanted to do was sit down and have a drink with this person that I'd known my whole life.

"Well look at what the cat dragged in." Branch came walking in with his arms full of boxes. He sat them down in a chair and walked over to

greet his brother. I was actually in shock that he seemed genuinely happy to see him. They hugged, before Branch backed up and put his arm around me. “It’s real good to see you, bro.”

Brooks smiled. “Yeah, you too.”

I watched as his parents took their turns hugging and checking out that their son was really standing in front of us in one piece.

While they seemed occupied, I took it upon myself to walk away and catch a breather. I didn’t know why, but something felt wrong, as if it was rehearsed.

I grabbed the boxes and started carrying them into the banquet hall.

Once inside, I sat down on a

chair and tried to calm down. For a couple moments I felt like I couldn't catch my breath. The room was spinning all around, and I had to put my head between my knees to stop it.

I heard the door open and someone approaching me, but I didn't look up to see who it was.

Danica sat down beside me and put her hand on my head. "Just breathe."

"What's happening to me? My chest feels tight and I can't catch my breath."

"You're having an anxiety attack." She pulled me into her arms and started rubbing the back of my hair. "Just take nice even breaths and focus on one thing. Block everything else out."

I tried doing as she said, but the room was still spinning. “I think I’m going to pass out.”

“You won’t.”

After ten minutes, when I still wasn’t feeling better, she helped me up to my room and removed my shoes while I laid down on the bed. She pulled the covers over me and got me a damp towel for my head. “You’ve gotten yourself so worked up. We need to get you feeling better before dinner time.” I watched her walk over and grab something out of her purse. “Take one of these. It will help.”

I put it in my mouth and accepted the plastic cup of water to swallow it down with. “What is it?”

“Xanax. It’s for anxiety. In a couple of minutes you’ll start to feel better.”

She sat with me and held my hand until I finally started to relax. All of the sudden I felt so tired. “I can’t fall asleep. There’s too much to do.”

Danica leaned down and kissed my forehead. “You need to rest. There are plenty enough people here to take care of things while you get yourself feeling better.”

I don’t know why I said it, but the words came blubbering out. “Make sure they don’t fight with each other.”

For some reason she knew exactly who I was talking about. “Katy, I don’t think anyone could predict what

those two will do. For the sake of the wedding, they've both agreed to behave."

"Thank you." I closed my eyes and let myself rest.

I woke up to someone coming into my room. Melissa left her stuff at the door and plopped down on the bed next to me. "What are you doing sleeping? We've got celebrating to do."

I sat up and noticed that I'd been asleep for nearly three hours. "I had an anxiety attack. It was horrible. I felt like I was dying."

"Girl, I used to get them. You've got to stay calm."

"Danica gave me a Xanax. I fell asleep and it's gone now."

She reached over and hugged me. “I’m so excited for you. I already saw Branch, and I met that fine ass brother-in-law to be. You were right. They are identical, but different. Do you think he’d like to have a good time with a complete stranger for a weekend?”

I felt like my closest friend had just kicked me in the face. It shouldn’t have bothered me. I’d been living with and was marrying his brother. Brooks didn’t belong to me, not that he ever did. “You’ll have to ask him yourself.”

I walked into the bathroom to freshen up and sat down on the toilet, covering my face with my hands. I was jealous of Melissa saying Brooks was hot.

What was wrong with me?

She waited for me to come back out, and then we headed out to find the guys. I spotted Branch first, because Brooks had changed from his uniform to regular civilian clothing. He smiled when he saw me approaching, but I quickly turned my attention to Branch.

He asked Melissa what she wanted and went up to get us drinks. Brooks leaned over and asked, “Are you feeling better?”

Why hadn’t my fiancée asked me that? “Yes, thanks.”

“Nerves got the best of you, I assume.” He took a sip of his beer and stared at a game on the television, instead of looking at me.



It was probably better, since Branch was heading over with a round of drinks for all of us. “Thanks,” I said as I grabbed mine out of his hand.

“We can have one drink before we need to meet in the restaurant for dinner,” Branch explained.

We stood around mingling, and finally things started to feel alright. Aside from Melissa staring at Brooks and him actually speaking to her, I was in a good mood. Branch seemed happy to have his brother home, and it was almost like old times.

We headed to dinner and sat at a large table with his parents. Brooks told stories of being in boot camp and things him and his buddies did to make the time

go by faster. He talked about his upcoming deployment and what his job would be while he was gone.

I could see that it bothered Danica, knowing he was basically being shipped into a war-zone. I knew how she felt, because I was worried about him too.

While he spoke and everyone listened, I caught him catching my gaze every once in a while, and each time I got butterflies.

I hated myself for it, because I knew it was wrong and I couldn't stop it.

To make myself feel better, I held Branch's leg under the table, reminding him and myself that we were the couple everyone was there for.

After dinner, we met the pastor to go over the ceremony. We hadn't planned anything special, but were expecting one hundred people and wanted the wedding to be pretty as well as quick, so we could get to the celebration afterwards.

Melissa was going to sing a song, and Danica was going to read a verse from Corinthians. Aside from that, we were going with traditional vows, because Branch insisted on it.

During the practice run, the pastor was going over where the guys would be standing. Accidentally, he grabbed Brooks and stood him with me. Branch hurried and corrected him, but my heart had already felt that pull again,

seeing him standing there for that second and looking into my eyes, like he belonged there instead of his brother.

The worst part about it was I felt it too.

I went through the motions of the rehearsal, but after that happened, I was at a loss for words. While everyone in attendance was laughing, I was crying inside and had to avoid looking at either of the guys, in fear of them seeing right through me.

I couldn't ruin things.

I was so close to having my forever with Branch.

What was happening to me? Why couldn't I compose myself?

As the questions rolled through

my mind, I felt the anxiety becoming heightened again.

Thankfully, the rehearsal was over and everyone retreated back to the bar.

Once we were all standing around having drinks, I settled down and started enjoying myself again. Melissa continued to hit on Brooks, but I was determined to let it go, because it wasn't my business.

Branch seemed thrilled that Melissa was digging her paws into his brother. He'd even made lewd comments implying that he had a nice room upstairs. When he told her Brooks' room number, I was shocked. I laughed with everyone else, but I caught his eyes

looking at me again.

My smile disappeared and I knew that this was exactly what Branch had been worried about.

The time apart hadn't made things go away between me and Brooks. For me, they were stronger and the more I tried to fight them and look forward to my wedding, the more drawn I was to figuring out why I couldn't let Brooks go.

It was going to be a long night, and all I could hope for was that I drank myself out of all my irrational thoughts and woke up tomorrow prepared to spend the rest of my life with Branch.



## Chapter 9

We'd been drinking steadily for nearly two hours, and it was getting close to midnight. Branch was getting belligerent, joking and making fun of strangers that were around us.

His parents had called it a night hours ago, probably guessing that us all hanging out was going to end in catastrophe. I think Brooks and I both knew that pretty soon he'd start running his mouth about us and we couldn't let that happen.

I followed Melissa into the ladies room to tell her that our night was going to end abruptly.

She wasn't upset. "I asked Brooks if he wanted company." She leaned over and re-applied her lip-gloss. "He told me we could hang out later."

I'd never wanted to punch my friend, but for some reason, it's all I could think about doing. I didn't want her hands touching on Brooks. I knew he wasn't a saint and he'd probably been with plenty of women by now, but it still didn't make me feel better with it being one of my friends.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," I said while trying to keep my



emotions under control.

I hated myself for feeling the way I was. The only person I was hurting was myself. He needed to be with Melissa, so that I could have closure. It would be the best for everyone involved. She was a nice girl, and with her strawberry blonde hair and pretty blue eyes, she was always getting compliments. I knew he had to find her attractive.

She turned to face me. “How do I look?”

“Hot,” I finally said while smiling. It wasn’t a lie. She looked stunning.

She adjusted her cleavage and took another look in the mirror. “I can’t

believe I'm doing this.”

I held the door open for her, thinking of how to respond. It didn't matter anyway, because Branch was up in the face of another bar patron. Brooks had jumped up and pushed him away from the guy with ease, but he was still going off at the mouth, yelling profanities across the bar.

“Alright, bro. It's time for you to call it a night, man.”

I walked up to him and grabbed his hand. He was so drunk that he fell on top of me. His weight was too much, and luckily Brooks grabbed the other side of him. I turned to Melissa. “I'll see you back at the room?”

She smiled and pointed to

Brooks' back. "Yeah, I'll see you later."

I cringed when I turned around, but only focused on getting Branch to the elevator. When we got inside, he started singing at the top of his lungs. "Going to the chapel and I'm gonna get married."

I couldn't look at Brooks as we basically dragged his brother to his room. After reaching inside of his back pocket, I found his room key and opened the door. Brooks carried him in and tossed him on the bed. "Don't leave me baby. Give me some love before you go."

I swatted his hand away. "I can't stay, Branch. It's bad luck."

He motioned for me to go. "Then get the fuck out. I knew I should have

gotten strippers.”

I couldn't believe he'd said something so hurtful to me, and Brooks didn't seem too happy about it either. He slapped his brother upside his head. “Be respectful, you drunk piece of shit. That woman is going to be your wife tomorrow. Don't talk to her like that.”

Branch rolled over on his back. He pulled his knees up and started laughing. “Listen to you, standing up for her still. Do you know how many times I've been inside of her? She's never going to be yours now. I marked her.”

I felt another stab in my heart, while hearing him talk to Brooks about me that way.

Brooks pointed toward the door.

“Go outside and wait for me.”

“But I-”

He pointed again. “Kat, go outside. Now!”

I looked back at Branch, who was watching me leave. “In twenty-four hours you’ll be my wife, Katy. Don’t forget it!”

Once outside of the room, I could hear Brooks yelling at him for disrespecting me. It wasn’t just because it was Brooks either. Had Walt heard his son talking to me like that, he would have killed him with his bare hands.

I sank down to the floor in the hall and tried not to listen to them. It was a terrible idea to think that everything was going to go smoothly, and if I

wasn't already feeling anxious about the wedding, Branch's words were like a nail in the coffin.

What kind of man, who is supposedly in love with a woman, speaks to her that way on the night before they are wed?

By the time Brooks came out I was in tears. He held his hand out to help me up. "I'm really sorry about that. He didn't mean it."

We started walking toward his room. I pulled my hand away from his and crossed my arms over my chest. "People say the truth when they're drunk."

"Not all the time. His issues are with me."

I stopped walking, causing him to stop as well. “Maybe I shouldn’t go through with it?”

His face changed before my eyes. I saw pain when I looked at him, and it was almost like I could feel it radiating through me. “Don’t say things like that.”

“No. I mean it. I’ve been having all these feelings and I can’t shake them.”

We started walking again until we came to his room number. “This is me.” He looked down at his key card. “Listen, get some sleep and things will be all better tomorrow. You can marry Branch and start your happy lives together.”

He started to open his door and the words blurted out of my mouth unexpectedly. “Do you still love me, Brooks?”

He leaned his head on the door and closed his eyes. I wanted him to look at me, but he wouldn’t turn around. “Don’t do this, Kat. You’ve been drinking and you’re upset at Branch.”

“It’s a yes or no answer.”

He finally turned around. “It changes nothing.”

My bottom lip started to quiver, and I could feel myself breaking down. I was standing in front of someone that I’d been in love with for as long as I could remember. Every time we’d touched, even when I didn’t know it was him, it



was intense. We had this connection and it pulled me toward him, no matter how much I fought it.

I closed my eyes and let the next question come directly from my heart. “What if I don’t know how to stop loving you?”

Time stood still as I looked up into his baby-blues and peered into his soul. His eyes started to get glossy and he bit down on his lip, while pondering how to respond to me. I covered my mouth and started crying again. Brooks pulled me into a hug and kissed the top of my head. “You have to.”

I cried harder. “I can’t.”

He pulled my face up with his hands. “You have to, Kat. You can’t do

this now. Your future is already determined. The choice was made years ago. There's no going back."

I closed my eyes and thought back to when I knew he was leaving. He'd asked me for a good bye and I'd given it to him, with no regard for any consequences. "Fine. If it has to be that way, kiss me goodbye. Kiss me for all the years we've lost and all the ones we'll never have together. Kiss me and make me forget that every moment without you in my life crushes me."

"No!" He pushed me away like I was diseased. "Please don't do this." Brooks ran his hands through his hair and started pacing around the hallway. "We can't go there."

Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I could taste the salt on my lips. When he finally stopped to look at me, I could see him considering. “Please, Brooks. I don’t care if it’s wrong. I need to feel it one last time. Just make this pain go away, because I’m suffocating in it.”

His brow creased. “And you think I’m not? My God, Kat, I left the state because I couldn’t watch you with him for another second. You think it’s hurting you? How do you think I felt when that pastor put me in his place? Do you know how hard it was for me to not announce to everyone in the room that I belonged there and it wasn’t a mistake?”

My sobs were continuous as I

stared right at him. “What am I supposed to do, Brooks? It’s too late. You should have fought for me back then. You should have told me how you felt. Branch said you didn’t like me that way. How could I have known?”

“Because you felt it in here.” He pointed to my heart and kept his hand there. “Because deep inside you knew how I felt about you. It was never a secret. I worshipped the ground you walked on. When you were sad, I was there. Not him! I was the one to wipe away your tears. You should be wearing that God damn dress for me, not my brother!” He was so angry, and it was pouring out of him. When he turned to face me, he had tears falling down his

face. “You broke my heart, Kat. You pushed me away, like an old toy. That’s why I stopped hanging out with you. It’s why I stopped wanting to do things and stayed by myself. Do you know what it was like to hear you and him sneaking around together? How do you think it made me feel?”

I was crying so bad that I could barely see him. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t know.”

He threw his arms in the air. “You didn’t know? How could you not know? Even my fucking parents knew. Don’t tell me that you lived in the same house with me and saw me every single day, but were oblivious to how I felt about you?”

“I swear, it’s true.”

He started pulling out his key card again. “You know what? It doesn’t even matter now. There *is* no us. You’ve never really been mine and I’ve spent the last few years being okay with that.” He opened his door, but didn’t go inside. “I’m not going to kiss you, because it won’t get us anywhere, and you’d be cheating on my brother. No matter how much of an asshole he is, you’re marrying him in less than twenty-four hours. I can’t go back there again. It hurt too fucking much the first time, and it’s going to take everything I have in me to get through tomorrow.” He looked down and then back to me. He’d stopped crying and just seemed annoyed at the

situation. “I think we should just call it a night and start over in the morning.”

I stood there watching his door close with him inside and me standing in the hallway.

Seconds passed and he never opened the door again. All I could do was walk away. I knew it wasn't healthy for me to be so upset about Brooks, and after Branch's rude statements I couldn't even think about him without cringing.

When I got to the elevator I watched the doors open and saw Melissa standing there. She'd changed her clothes and came walking out smelling like she'd even showered. “Oh my God. Are you alright?”

I wiped my face. “Yeah. Branch

just upset me, that's all. Just wedding drama. I'm fine, really."

"Do you want me to come back to the room?"

She was going to be with Brooks. I knew it and I couldn't do anything about it. I needed to get away from her and everyone else before my heart exploded out of my chest. "I'm fine. I'm going to take a walk and then go to bed."

She kissed me on the cheek and got all giddy. "Wish me luck. I'm going for it."

The elevator doors closed as she started walking towards Brooks' room.

I hit the button to the top floor and sank to the bottom of the elevator,



unable to hold myself up. I knew it was going to be impossible to calm down before morning and without my parents I felt like I was all alone. For the first time in a long time I needed them to hold me and tell me what to do.

I don't know how I found it, but I made it to the rooftop and ignored the signs telling me that it was for employees only. The brisk air hit my face, and I covered my body with my arms. The little lights brightened the skyline, and I walked close to the edge of the building to get a better view. From afar I could see the Pentagon.

That's when I fell to the ground and began to weep.

Without the twins I was

completely alone. Sure, I had Walt and Danica, but they'd never be my parents. I didn't have anyone to tell me that I was being irrational, or that I should follow my heart, no matter what the cost.

I was so empty that I wanted to close my eyes and never wake up. Love had ripped apart, so much that I was considering not going on at all.

It was a shame that imagining ending my life was better than hurting the two people in the world that I loved the most.



## Chapter 10

I don't really know how long I'd been lying on the freezing cold rooftop, nor did I hear anyone approaching, but there he was, crouched down in front of me.

I looked up at Brooks and tried to wipe the snot off of my face. "How did you find me?"

He shook his head and looked around. "Well, it's not exactly a tree house, but I figured you'd run to high ground. You always did."

I sat up and watched him remove his jacket and wrap it around my back. “It’s freezing up here, Kat.”

“I know. I don’t care.” I looked away from him. “Where’s Melissa? I figured you’d be all over that.”

He knelt down across from me and put his hands on his knees. “You would assume that. Look, I never said I wanted to sleep with her. I told her that maybe we could hang out. Honestly, I figured she’d get so drunk that she’d pass out and forget I said it.”

“So where is she?”

“I don’t know. She showed up and knocked and I thought it was you. When I saw her standing there, talking about how much of a mess you were, I

told her to get lost; in a nice way, of course.”

“She’s probably looking for me.”

“She thinks you ran to Branch to make amends, because you have that motto where you never go to bed angry.”

I wanted to laugh. That motto had been thrown out the door months ago. “Yeah, I don’t really care about that anymore. In fact, I don’t really care about anything anymore.”

I put my head down between my knees and tried to calm down.

“You look like shit.”

“Thanks. I appreciate that.”

“No, I mean I’ve never seen you look so upset. Is it because of me? I didn’t mean to be so harsh with you. I

just couldn't let things happen between us. You understand, right?"

I shrugged, even though I did understand. "Yeah, I know."

"Branch will make you happy."

I kept looking down. "You don't know that."

"Yeah, I do. It's his life's mission to love you more than I do. So I figure that as long as I still love you, he'll worship the ground you walk on."

I looked up at Brooks and tried to stay serious, even though in the midst of the horrible mess I was in I wanted to smile. "You just admitted that you still loved me."

He reached for my hand and I let him take it. When our eyes met, I felt

warmth running throughout my body as if we'd walked inside. "I will never stop loving you, Kat. For as long as I am breathing I will love you with everything I have in me, not because I hope to someday have you, but because nothing could ever make me stop, even you marrying my brother."

"You know, you have everyone fooled. They all think you're the son that they could never count on. It turns out that you're the most beautiful soul they've ever known."

We sat there looking at each other for couple seconds, not saying anything.

Brooks smiled and looked down at the ground before responding. "Don't

go calling me a saint just yet. I've been reconsidering that kiss since I let you walk away earlier."

It was wrong; so wrong that I would be the scum of the earth for even considering it, and there I was, imagining those soft lips touching mine. It wasn't just his lips that I wanted touching me either. I wanted all that Brooks could offer me, because once I knew he was the one who'd snuck into my room, I couldn't stop wanting to experience it again. I wanted to know he was the one touching me and making me feel things that I'd never been able to feel before. The intensity wasn't because I'd been emotional. It was because it wasn't Branch.



“Please don’t hate me for saying this. I’m probably already going to Hell anyway.” I looked down before getting the courage to continue. “The thing is, I’m not married to your brother, not yet at least. If I had one wish in the world, besides seeing my parents one more time, I know what it would be.”

He smiled, because he already knew what it was. “We can’t, Kat.”

He was right. I was losing my mind even considering it. “We shouldn’t.” I felt myself leaning into him, so slowly that it was hard to notice.

“It’s wrong on so many levels.” I could have sworn that he was coming towards me as well.

“We should probably call it a

night then.”

Our faces were almost touching and I could feel his hot breath touching me. “Yeah, we should.” His lips brushed over mine and I couldn’t help but close my eyes. He smelled like musky heaven and I wanted so much more than he was giving me.

“It’s just one kiss, Brooks,” I whispered against his mouth.

We opened our eyes at the same time, and I’m not really sure whose tongue came out first. They were barely touching, and the electrical surge between us was just as powerful as it had ever been. Then it turned into something that neither of us could control. One kiss was never going to be

enough, and I was done trying to fight my feelings for him.

For the first time in my life nothing mattered to me. I didn't care about the people downstairs or the fact that we were out in public for the whole world to see. The only thing that was going through my mind was being with Brooks and feeling all of the love that he had for me pouring through the both of us.

His ravenous kisses set me on fire as the blaze igniting from our lips was traveling down between my legs. We were no longer leaning in to kiss each other. He'd grabbed me and sat me on his lap. I wrapped my exposed legs around him and felt the heat building

between us. His lips were on my neck, while I gave his hand free reign to touch whatever he wanted.

I closed my eyes and pictured it going further before it was even happening. Our lips met again and I ran my hands underneath of his shirt. His hot chest was smooth and a small patch of hair was at the top. I tugged on it the next time he kissed me and he growled something under his breath as he pulled away.

We kissed again. “We should stop.”

I lifted his shirt over his head. “Five more minutes.” We kissed again, mingling our tongues together.

My dress was pulled up to my

ribs and he started rubbing the base of my panties. My pussy was throbbing to be touched. He slid them over and ran the back of his hand over my smooth lips. I'd gotten a wax just a day before in preparation for my wedding night.

I put that thought in the back of my mind and buried it.

This moment was for Brooks. Nothing was going to stop us.

He looked down and watched himself touching me. I caught my breath seeing him watching his fingers sliding inside of my hot sex. His thumb worked magic on my clitoris and our mouths met again, allowing our harmonizing tongues another opportunity to play.

The air may have been cold and

the roof wasn't an ideal place, but I felt none of it, because I was on fire. He was inside of me, moving his fingers in and out and I rocked my body against them, trying to get them to go deeper. I reached to the side and started unbuttoning his pants. He froze and looked into my eyes, while leaning my head into his. "We need to stop."

I fought for another kiss. "Don't you want me?"

He kissed me and pulled away again. "I've got two fingers inside of you, on the roof of a building. My dick is going to rip out of my pants, and you're asking me if I want you." He leaned in and let our lips meet. I felt his tongue brushing over my bottom lip. "You're all

I've ever wanted." I didn't wait for permission. The button came apart, and I reached down inside of his pants until I felt the smooth skin of his erection against the palm of my hand. From that instant I don't think he could have stopped me. I stroked him and looked into those blue eyes that were catching the lights of the building next to us. He closed them, enjoying the way it felt to have me doing it to him.

When he knew he couldn't stand it much longer, he grabbed my arm, causing me to stop. "How far are we going to take this, Kat?"

I pulled my hand out of his pants and stood up. He sat there, wondering what I was doing, until he saw me

pulling off my panties and flinging them off the side of the building as if they were a sling-shot. I looked down at him. “That was the only thing standing between you being inside of me. You can sit there and think of a million reasons why we shouldn’t be together, or you can take me in that stairwell and fuck me like we both know you want to.”

It was direct, getting my point across without much explanation. Like I’d said before, I’d thrown all my cares out the window and went for what my heart and body wanted. This wasn’t about me being selfish. It was about me feeding a craving that I’d had for as long as I could remember. I’d tried to deny what was in front of me. No matter how



hard I'd fought to not want Brooks, it made me want him more. His touch was like nothing I'd ever felt before. Every bone in my body reacted to him, as if I were metal and he was the magnet.

Brooks stood up and put his shirt back over his head, and then pulled me against him. "I'm not fucking you in that hallway."

For a second, I thought he was done risking everything to be with me. As he pulled me toward the door, he finally answered that question. "You're coming back to my room and I'm making love to you, and this time, you're going to know it's me you're in bed with." He pulled me toward the elevator and once we were inside, he pulled me against

him, placing his lips on mine again. We kissed until the bell dinged and then separated, knowing we couldn't risk being caught.

He peeked out of the door to make sure nobody was around and we made a mad dash to his room. Once inside, we both leaned against the door and started laughing. The excitement of sneaking around made what we were about to do even hotter.

I tossed his jacket off of me and started pulling on his shirt until he let me lift it off of his head. He cupped my breast and pulled down on my dress until my nipple was exposed. I watched him lick it and begin flicking it with his tongue. He sucked on it hard, and I threw

my head back against the door, taking a chunk of his hair into my hand. When he finally pulled away, he took his thumb and rubbed it around where his wet saliva glistened on my nipple.

He pushed me harder against the door and looked into my eyes. Our lips were almost touching and I was fighting his hold on me to be one inch closer for another kiss.

He started to relax and kissed me, then pulled away. "Are you sure?"

I nodded. "Are you?"

"Baby, I've never been more sure about anything."

When he picked me up and carried me to the bed, I knew that I was selling my soul. Somewhere in my mind,

I was aware that being with Brooks was going to ruin my happiness.

In that moment, I didn't even care.



## Chapter 11

Brooks lay next to me naked on the bed. His fingers traced over my lips, my chin and down the whole rest of my body. Our eyes were on each other's and I could see his love radiating through them.

I brought my hand up to touch his face. He leaned in, kissing it softly while watching me.

This isn't about sneaking around or doing something selfish. He'd been patient, sacrificing his own happiness

for mine. Words could never explain how overwhelming it felt to have someone love you so completely that they would do that.

It's not just what he's done. It was the way he loves me; the way his touch makes my skin feel like it's molten lava. His tenderness gave me chills and with one brush of his fingers, I was offering myself to him, with no regard for anything except being with him in that moment.

Our kisses were slow, passionate and full of emotions. Tears fell down my cheeks and he kissed each of them away. I'm totally in love with this beautiful man and, at that very instant, he knew that I was giving him my

soul.

The room disappeared around us as his body moved closer to mine. I was aware of his excitement pressing on my leg as I savored his lips over and over. Our bodies moved together, giving a hint of the rhythm that was soon to come.

He kissed the side of my mouth and his short whiskers tickled me and reminded me that I was not numb of this euphoria. I took mental notes of everything as if being with him heightened all of my senses.

When his hand traveled between my legs, I gasped, accepting his touch and affection. Brooks drug his lips over my skin, moving slowly down my arm, while brushing my sex lightly on the

outside. I could feel his hot breathing as he moved and it caused my nipples to harden, as if the room was cold, but it wasn't.

He kissed my hip and I looked down to watch what he had in store next.

I knew what he was going for; what he wanted to do to me, and my body began to shake. I was in awe of this man and offered him all that I had, without shame or regret. We'd both wanted this for too long, and after denying ourselves that kind of pleasure, we'd lost all self-control.

Brooks watched his hand rubbing my pussy. His lips separated and I watch as he licked them. He was so close that I could feel the air coming from his mouth.



He kept his eyes on me and brought his lips to my moist skin. I felt his chin dragging over it and my head fell back, unable to control the overwhelming desire. He was about to lick me, and as I watch his tongue come out of his mouth, I could feel myself beginning to float, as if his pleasing me caused us to levitate in the room.

Brooks brought me to the brink and then back again. He was skilled in what he did and I'd never felt so satisfied before. His mouth was created for the purpose of bringing me to ecstasy and I was losing myself in it each time.

When he finished, he kissed his way back up to my lips. I was ready for more, and our first kiss led to me

wrapping my weak legs around his back. I could feel his hardness pressing against my sex, begging to be inside. Without him asking, I moved my hips and felt it there, perfectly positioned. My body pressed once more against his and it inched inside.

Our kisses got harder, and I opened my eyes to watch the waves of pleasure hitting him as if it was his first time ever experiencing a woman. His tightened brow told me that bliss had been found and when our lips stopped touching, he dug his teeth into my shoulder, I knew it was too intense for him to handle.

I grabbed his face and forced him to look into my eyes as he pushed

himself all the way inside of me. I rocked my body against him by using my legs and feet that were placed around his back. “Don’t stop, Brooks.”

He kissed me again, this time holding his lips over mine while keeping our eyes in a constant stare. I could feel his trembling over mine and felt the most emotional connection to him. “I love you so much,” he whispered over my lips.

I reached one hand up and ran it through his short hair. I could feel myself losing control, coming to a moment where I felt like my soul was leaving my body. I clung to him as he brought me to euphoria, again. Then I watched him, losing himself inside of me, filling me with so many years of heartache. I held

onto him, not willing to waste any of the love he was filling me with.

It was beautiful and I knew I'd never experienced anything like it for as long as I would live.

When we'd rested, it happened again and then once more until the rising sun was peeking through the curtains. I'd given myself completely to Brooks and it had been more than I ever anticipated. Years of pent up feelings rushed through us, until we'd finally stopped fighting it.

I knew then that my heart belonged to Brooks. It had been him all along, but I was too naïve to let myself admit it. We'd been cheated out of our chance, and once we stopped battling what was right, the truth had set us free.

Afterwards we lay there naked, wrapped like a pretzel together. The covers had fallen off the bed, but we didn't need them. The heat still radiated off of us. Brooks brought my hand up to his lips and kissed it a dozen times. I moved it away, touching his face and staring into those blue eyes.

We'd made beautiful love and had been so caught up in each other. I hadn't taken a moment to accept that this connection between us was going to end again, before we'd ever have the chance to see how good it could be.

Then I started to cry.

Brooks wiped away my tears. "Please don't do that."

"I can't help it," I sobbed. "It

was a mistake. It was all a mistake.”

Brooks sat up and looked at me like I’d just stabbed him. “Us? This?”

“No. Branch. Being with him was a mistake and if I’d just admitted that a long time ago, I wouldn’t have to say goodbye to you.”

His eyes filled with raw emotion. “What are you saying, Kat? Are you still marrying my brother today?”

I shook my head. “No. I can’t marry Branch. I couldn’t live with myself and how I feel about you. He deserves to be with someone that isn’t hiding the fact that they’re in love with someone else. I know it doesn’t make what we did any better, but he should have known this would happen,

eventually. I mean, did he really think this would never happen? Is this why he kept us apart? Did he do this to us, Brooks?"

He tightened his lips and I watched tears falling down his face. "I'm sorry, but all I heard from that was you saying we couldn't be together."

"You know it isn't possible. What we did will destroy the family."

"Last night was the best night of my life. I won't regret it, and I won't let you walk away from this. I'm tired of letting him have you. He doesn't deserve you. I deserve you, Kat. You've always been mine and you know it. How could you lay there saying you can't be with me?"

I shook my head and cried harder, feeling his pain and knowing that his heart was also breaking. “I’m sorry. I can’t look at your parents knowing what I’ve done. All these people are here to see me marry your brother and I’m in bed with you.”

“I don’t give a fuck who’s here.”

“Brooks, please don’t get angry.”

He stood up and started pacing. “Do you know how long I’ve waited for this to happen? Kat, wake up! I want you. How people feel about it doesn’t matter to me. I don’t give a shit about anyone else. You’re all that matters.”

I opened my mouth to speak and heard someone knocking on his door. When I started to freak out and run to the



bathroom, I decided to stay on the bed. I'd known we'd been loud enough that they would know he wasn't alone.

Brooks pulled up his boxer briefs and went toward the door, while I covered up and waited for him to send whoever it was away.

"Where is she?" It was Branch, and he wasn't happy. Before I could hide my shocked face under the covers, he came walking in.

"Branch, don't hurt her. It was my idea. I made her do it."

He stood over the bed, staring at me, knowing that I'd spent the night with his twin brother. He was fuming and my crying became very apparent. In that instant I was afraid for my life, but

especially Brooks'. "The night before our wedding, Katy? How could you do this to me?" His anger was felt through his words and I didn't know where to begin to explain.

Brooks took the lead, defending our actions as if what we'd done was okay. "You did this, bro. You kept her from me for all these years. I told her everything. She knows you kept us apart to have her for yourself."

Branch turned around and shoved Brooks against the other bed. "Get the fuck out of my face, Brooks."

Brooks stood up and got right up in his face, challenging him. When I knew it was about to explode into something horrible, I jumped up and got

in between them.

Maybe I should have kept the sheet on, because standing there naked wasn't exactly helping the situation. "Please don't do this. We all need to talk this through."

Branch looked down at me and shoved me down on the bed. Brooks had him by the neck and threw him to the floor. "If you ever touch her like that again, I'll kill you."

I'd never seen Brooks act so violently, and realized that he'd been trained to kill. His years away had changed him, and after losing me and knowing I was living a life with his brother, he'd built up so much animosity that it was bleeding through him.

I ran up and put my arms around his back, calmly coaxing him to release Branch's neck. "Please, don't do this."

Brooks calmed and sat back on the floor across from his brother. I grabbed a sheet and sat across from them. "Branch, we need to talk."

"Bullshit. You need to get dressed and go get ready. This shit never happened, do you hear me?"

I stood up before Brooks could come at him with anything else. "No! I'm not marrying you. I can't. I don't love you like you need me to. I've never loved you like I love him, and you've always known it, haven't you? Why did you tell me he never wanted me? How could you do that to your own brother,

and to me?”

Branch stood up and got close to me. I knew Brooks was ready to pounce again, so I held up my finger to keep him from making a move. “Are you really going to bring up shit from when we were teenagers to justify you fucking my brother the night before our wedding? I should have known you’d whore yourself out to him. You always did want things that were beneath you.”

I slapped him as hard as I could across the face. “Get out! Get out of my face!”

He grabbed my arms and Brooks had finally had enough. He placed his hand on Branch’s back. “Let go of her, Branch.”

“Screw you.” He looked from me to Brooks. “You two make me sick. If I never see you again it will be too soon. Get your shit out of my apartment before I get home, Katy. After I’m done telling my parents about the two of you, I’ll be the only child that this family has. You just ruined your lives. I hope that pussy was worth it.”

Brooks hit him so hard Branch fell to the ground. Then he picked him up and threw him out of his room. When the door was shut, he turned to see me falling back down on the floor, unable to breathe. I was having another attack, and this time it was because I knew we’d ruined our happy lives.

It wasn’t about me, but more

about Brooks losing more respect from his parents when he'd done nothing but love me.

In that moment I knew what I had to do and neither of us were going to like it.



## Chapter 12

I started pulling my dress down over my head, before Brooks could say anything. He approached me with a worried look. “What are you doing? You don’t have to leave. We can do this together. Did you think I’d expect you to face them by yourself?”

“I need to get my bag out of my room, before they all come looking to kill me. I’ll be right back, I promise. You don’t have to worry.”

He grabbed my arm as I began to



reach for the door handle. “Kat, you are going to come back so we can talk, right? You’re not just saying you are?”

I gave him a look, as if he was crazy for thinking it. “Of course. Stop worrying. I’ll be right back.”

He leaned down and kissed me passionately, like we had all of the time in the world. I savored it, knowing I wouldn’t be back. This was our last kiss, and I had to remember it forever. His love radiated through me and I couldn’t help but start to cry. He had my heart and I wanted him to always remember that. Without it he wouldn’t be able to move on and I wanted him to be happy, even if it would take him a while to open up again.

I'd ruined our happy family and the only way to make amends was to leave. Without me in the picture they could work on forgiveness. My love had destroyed the three of us and I couldn't live with myself knowing it.

When I finally pulled away, he wiped the tears off of my cheeks. "Hurry back to me. We've got forever to spend together."

Those words were going to haunt me for the rest of my life.

I was a bawling mess by the time the elevator doors closed. When I reached my room I rushed in, finding Melissa standing there trying to call someone. She threw her phone on the bed. "Where have you been? I called

Branch looking for you and he cussed me out. What the hell is going on, Katy? I thought you spent the night with him? Where were you? What is going on?"

I started throwing all of my things in my suitcase. "I can't talk about it right now."

"You need to be downstairs for pictures in two hours and you look like death. What is going on? I'm your friend. You can talk to me. Just tell me what happened. Are you two fighting?"

I looked right at her with the most serious face. "I spent the night with Brooks. You know, the guy who shut you down last night? He did it because he wanted me. He's wanted me since we were little kids. As much as you're

probably judging me in your head right now, I'm already judging myself." I shook my head and zipped up the luggage. "Look, I don't have time to explain the details, and I don't expect you to even consider me a friend again. There's so much more to the story than you could ever know, and I feel like if I had the time to explain you'd understand. I just can't talk about it, right now. I've got to get out of here."

She stood there, stunned and speechless.

I pushed her to the side to get my bags near the door. I was running out of time. At any moment Branch was going to come after me. He'd probably already told his parents, who were equally

devastated. The thought of that made bile rise to my throat. I could feel my body getting dizzy and my chest felt tight. My anxiety was through the roof and I had to disappear before it could get even worse.

She came up behind me and smacked me right in the face. “That’s for lying to me, because I’m assuming you’ve been in love with him for you to do something so scandalous the night before your wedding. I made a fool out of myself, and you knew he didn’t want me the whole time. And you-- how could you do that to Branch? This hotel is filled with people that came here to see you marry him. They are here to see you promise your faithfulness to him. Does

that mean anything to you?"

I looked down at the ground and accepted the sting as payment for being a shitty friend. "I'm so sorry, Mel. I couldn't tell you. I couldn't accept it myself. I do know what it means to be faithful and what I've done is unforgivable. It's done. The damage is done and I can't change it. They're never going to forgive me for what has happened. Branch will make sure of it. He'll make sure they never speak to me again. He's not going to stop until he's satisfied. I know how he is. I've started a war that I can't defend myself in and I've got to get as far away from him as I can."

She grabbed my suitcase. "Let's

just get you out of here and we'll talk on the road."

I dropped my other bags and wrapped my arms around her. "Thank you."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm still mad at your ass and maybe even a little jealous."

"Don't be." We walked out and I hit the elevator button. "You wouldn't want my life. Nobody would ever want this life."

When we got down to the lobby, my heart was weighing heavy on the fact that I was destroying Brooks by leaving him. I knew I owed him a better explanation, so after we got the car loaded I found a pen and piece of paper

from one of my schoolbooks and started writing him a goodbye letter.

Melissa sat there rubbing my hair as I cried and wrote the words that I was too chicken to say to him.

*Dear Brooks,*

*This letter means that I broke my promise to you. I had to walk away from this before I had to look them all in the eye and admit what I've done. I couldn't stay and face the consequences. I know I'm a coward and that a part of you will never forgive me for this.*

*Not only have I destroyed the bond that you and your brother once shared, but I've disrespected your parents and all of the generosity that*



*they've given me for so many years.*

*This letter isn't something that my heart takes lightly. I know what I'm giving up, and it hurts more now knowing how absolutely perfect it felt to be in your arms and feel your love radiating through me.*

*I will cherish the night we spent together and remember it every day for the rest of my life.*

*Please don't look for me. I've decided to finally go out and make my own decisions for once. I want to move forward and start fresh where I won't be judged for loving you. Just know that no matter where I end up, you will always have a piece of me.*

*Some people say that love never*

*dies. If that's true then I hope you can forgive me for walking away from it. I know I'll never be able to forgive myself for this.*

*I would do anything to take back the last few years and be with you, instead. If I had known what I know now there would never have been a question as to who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. It's always been you, Brooks. I've known that I loved you since our first kiss. Maybe even before it. Denying it will always be my biggest regret. I know what we could have had together and it kills me inside.*

*This is my goodbye. It will be the last time you ever hear from me*

*again. Please tell your family that I'm sorry for what I've done. I hope in time they can forgive you. After all, you're the son they should be praising, not your brother. In fact, you're the most brave, beautiful man I've ever known. Don't let my actions change that.*

*I'm sorry and I love you,  
Katy*

With trembling hands I wrote his room number and name and handed it to the bellhop before we pulled out of the hotel valet slot.

After the two-hour ride, where I sobbed and tried to explain the whole story to Melissa, we pulled up at the apartment.

Since I didn't know where

Branch was or if he was coming to murder me for embarrassing him, I hurried inside and started packing everything that I'd be able to fit inside my tiny car. I grabbed clothes, jewelry, toiletries, and one picture collage of the three of us throughout the years growing up. Melissa helped me carry out several bags before she left me alone to say a final goodbye to the life I was leaving behind.

I played with the engagement ring on my finger and finally took it off. Then I grabbed a sticky note and wrote the words "sorry" on it. After putting the ring and my cell phone on top of it, I took one last look around the room and closed the door behind me.

Melissa was in the driveway waiting. Her face showed that she was not only still my friend, but also a concerned one at that.

“I guess this is it?” she asked as I approached. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I don’t have a choice. They’re the only family I have and I know they hate me.”

“Will you call me when you’re safe?” I felt bad that she was concerned.

“I’ll send word your way that I’m fine. I’ll try to keep in touch.”

“This isn’t goodbye. I’m going to hunt you down if I have to.”

I hugged her tight. “Thank you for today and everything else. I’m sorry I

lied to you.”

She pulled away. “Given the circumstances, I get it. Don’t worry about me. You take care of yourself.”

She waved as I pulled away, and to be honest, I seriously contemplated driving myself off a bridge. I had nothing to live for; no reason to continue going on. The only thing that was coming my way was pain and loneliness and it was all my fault. I was a horrible person that needed to suffer for hurting them.

I don’t remember half of my drive, or even the fact that I’d crossed over state lines twice. All I knew was that I was sitting in front of a country restaurant and it was dark outside. Opposite the building, there was a motel

lit up with the word “Vacancy.”

I parked my car and checked my face, realizing that it was completely swelled and impossible to hide. Then I walked inside to get a room.

Thirty-seven dollars later, I was walking inside a room that looked like a horror movie had been filmed in it. Unable to care about anything, I fell down on the bed and let out the rest of the tears that I had in me. Exhaustion had taken over and I was tired of fighting it. My last thoughts were of Brooks and how twenty-four hours before I was in his arms.

I hugged the pillow and fell asleep, unable to accept that I'd walked away from the only family I had left.



## Chapter 13

Waking up in a filthy motel only reminded me of how messed up my life was. I hadn't just given up on my love life. I'd left everything behind.

School.

Friends.

Family.

Everything!

I sat up and looked around the room, noticing the old wallpaper was peeling in the corners. Just being inside of a place so dilapidated made me need



to take a shower. After going outside and getting my toiletry bag, I locked the door, attached the chain and headed into the bathroom. A roach was crawling around the bottom of the tub and I was too tired to even care. I turned the water on and watched him circling around the drain. That was how I felt; like my whole life was circling around a drain, waiting to be drowned by misery.

I waited for the water to get hot and the bug to have fallen down the opening before stepping inside. The hot water fell over top of my traumatized body. I closed my eyes and tried to recuperate enough to run the soap over my skin. As my hand stroked my arm, I thought about Brooks touching me. I

imagined the way his lips had felt against my skin.

Just seconds after stepping in, my legs gave way. I fell down and crouched myself into a ball, then buried my face between my legs and let out even more agonizing thoughts. It wasn't just the fact that I was completely alone. I was utterly broken.

I'd destroyed my life, and I wished that I had enough guts to take a bottle of pills and douse them in a bottle of alcohol, knowing that when I closed my eyes they would never open again.

I felt as if I'd reached the lowest point in life and that trying to overcome it wouldn't just be impossible, but it was unattainable.

I stayed in the shower until the cold water became unbearable. Shivering, I climbed out and dressed into something comfortable. My journey wasn't over. It had only just begun. My motivation was finding distance and I knew the further I drove it would better the chance of them *never* being able to find me. I wanted to be invisible, so they could pretend that I didn't exist.

After checking out, I got back on the road, stopping at a branch of my bank to withdrawal all of my funds. It was a good thing that I used a well reputable bank with locations in all fifty states, otherwise I would have been screwed. It wasn't like I was able to think rationally. There was too much running

through my head all at once.

All I knew was that I couldn't leave them clues. I couldn't have them searching for me and finding me, because I'd left a trail of receipts. I needed to remove the evidence and never use the account again.

One thousand and forty-six dollars later, I was stuffing my savings account into my purse and praying it would last me until I could find work and a place to call home.

After driving another day, only stopping at rest-stops to use the bathroom and buy stale vending machine snacks or get gas, I had entered into South Carolina. Not only did I enjoy the country views, but it felt like I was

meant to call it home.

I kept going, deciding not to stop until my car needed gas again. When I came to a town called Sumter, I looked at my gas gauge and knew I'd found my new home.

Once I'd fueled up and proceeded with new directions, I was standing in front of another restaurant and motel. This one seemed just as old as the last, but not as scary. The restaurant was a local tourist favorite, and very reputable at that.

I sat down at a table and ordered something to eat, not being able to remember the last time I'd had a meal.

The first thing I noticed was that not a lot of people were in the

establishment. One waitress was running around serving the four tables occupied by patrons. I was patient, waiting for my turn to order.

After getting my food, nearly a half hour later, the waitress approached me. “Sorry about the wait, hun. I’m short-handed. It’s been that way for the last week when my best girl decided to pick up and move in with a man she met only twenty-four hours earlier.”

I smiled, imagining her dilemma to try to find someone on such short notice and wondering why someone would hook up and plan a future with someone they barely knew. “It’s really okay. So, are you looking for help? I’m just arriving in town and I’m looking for

something. My former job was waitressing near the beach. I'm used to working hard, if given the chance."

The lady put her hand on her hips and gave me a good once over. "You runnin' from somethin'?"

I shrugged. "Only a broken heart, if that matters."

"You got references?"

I had references, and probably good ones too. The thing was, I couldn't have them knowing where I was. "I'd rather not contact them if I don't have to. It's just that I don't really want certain people knowing where I am."

"Are you in trouble with the law?" It was a good question to ask. I'd want to know if I was helping out a

criminal.

“I’m a runaway bride, not a murderer. Look, I get it if you can’t trust me.”

She kept looking at me and I looked down at my hands, feeling completely uncomfortable. “Be here tomorrow mornin’ at seven. I’ll give you a shot for one shift and see how it goes. No promises.”

I smiled, feeling like I’d succeeded in making the first step. “Thank you. I promise you won’t be sorry.”

She raised her eyebrow and shook my hand anyway. “I’ve heard that before, but I hope you’ll be different.”

She started to walk away. “My



name is Katy, Katy Michaels.”

“I’ll see you at seven, Katy Michaels.”

Once I’d paid for my check and gotten a room at the motel, I settled in and drove over to a local grocery store. My room had a microwave, a mini refrigerator, and a sink. I knew I could find a few things to eat that weren’t considered junk. After getting a few bottles of water and a bag of microwave meals, I stood in front of a wall of prepaid phones. Feeling naked without mine, I picked one up and headed to the register.

The clerk looked at me like I didn’t belong. It made me feel uncomfortable. I tried to shake it off,

understanding that people in small towns worried about newcomers stomping on their lives. I didn't mean anyone harm. I just wanted a chance to start over.

I climbed in my car and turned the key, but it wouldn't start. I tried two more times and got nothing. The motor would turn but it wouldn't come on. "Great! Just great!" I said as I stepped out of my car and looked around.

A woman with two young children came walking out with her hands full of groceries. I approached her. "Do you need some help?"

She handed me one and smiled. "Thanks. I'm always afraid one of them is going to run out into the street."

The two children climbed in the

back of the car, leaving us adults standing there. “It’s no problem. Have a good day.”

I started to walk away. “Are you new here? I haven’t seen you around.”

“Yeah. I just got here actually. I stopped to get some groceries and my car won’t start. Do you know a tow company?”

She looked at me long and hard. “I usually don’t do this, but you seem harmless. Hop in, I’ll give you and your groceries a ride home.”

“I’m just staying down the road at the motel. Are you sure it’s okay?”

She smiled. “You’re really not from here, are you?”

“No. I’m from the city. Is it that

obvious?”

“Yeah. You see around here everyone knows everyone. If someone is in trouble we help them out, knowing that one day they’ll return the favor.”

She laughed and shook her head. “Get your things out of the car. I’ll call Bobby, who runs the repair shop, and have him pick your car up. “I climbed into the passenger seat and buckled my seat belt. “So what city?”

“D.C. originally.”

“Wow. This must be like a ghost town. Why would you want to live here?”

I looked out the window and admired the scenery. “I’m starting over. My parents perished in 9-11, and it’s

never been the same for me. I needed a fresh start, somewhere quiet and equally beautiful.”

“I’m so sorry about your parents. I can’t imagine what that was like for you. How old were you when it happened?”

“Twelve. I was twelve when it happened.” It still hurt to talk about.

“I guess you had family to take you in?” I’d answered these questions so many times in my life and it never really got easier. They were still gone and I was alone.

“My parent’s friends took care of me.”

“Did somethin’ happen to them?” She shook her head. “I’m so sorry. It’s

none of my business. Please excuse me for askin’.”

“Nothing happened to them. I fell in love with both of their twin sons, and on the night I was to wed one, I spent the night with the other.”

She pulled the car over and stared at me. “Tell me you’re kiddin’? When did this happen? It must have been just awful.”

I sighed, imagining her kicking me out of the car. “Two days ago. I woke up, leaving my mess at the hotel and everything and everyone behind.” I started to cry and she threw the car into park. I felt her hand touching my arm and I looked up at her. “Are you okay?”

“No. I feel terrible. They were

the only family I had left. I can't go back there. I've got nowhere else to go."

She looked in the backseat at her children and then back to me. "We've got a trailer on our farm. It used to be for our farm help to live in, but he's got his own place now. It's a filthy mess, but with a good scrubbin' it could get better. I'll have to talk to my husband about rent, and he's not the givin' kind of man, but it's better and cheaper than stayin' in some hotel."

I couldn't take my eyes from her. "You don't even know my name. Why would you do this for me?"

"I try to live my life like a Christian would. Now, I don't know what happened to make you do what you

did, but it's not my place to judge you. Anyone can tell you're hurtin.' It ain't like I'm handin' you a bone and not askin' for anything. To be honest, we could use the extra income. I'd much rather have you livin' there than some derelict."

An hour later, I'd gotten my things from the motel and we were pulling up at the farm. The main house was two-story and looked a hundred years old. The trailer was off to the side of the property near a barn. We pulled up to it and a man, wearing bib overalls approached us.

"What are you doin', Sarah?"

"This is..., " she paused waiting for me to say my name.



“I’m Katy Michaels.”

“What’s she doin’ here?”

Sarah handed me a bag, seeming to not care about his questions. “She’s goin’ to be rentin’ out the trailer. I told her we’d come up with a good amount for rent. She’s already got a job, so you won’t have to worry about money.”

He looked at me and spit in the plastic cup he was holding. Black saliva sat at the bottom of it, and I wanted to cringe knowing what it was. “It’s three-hundred a month, due the first. If you’re late, it’s an extra fifty.”

I smiled. “Sounds good. Thank you.”

He gave Sarah a dirty look and walked away.

“My husband can be a jerk sometimes. Don’t mind him. We’ve had a bad year.”

My first thought when I walked into the trailer that smelled of stale cigarettes was to run and never look back. I wanted to be back in that roach infested shit-hole hotel instead of calling this place home.

“I’ll bring over some cleaning supplies and we’ll give it a good scrubbin’. Why don’t you take a look around while I unload my groceries and feed the kids lunch. I’ll call Bobby and have him get your car towed while I’m inside.”

She turned around before walking outside. “I know you probably

heard it already, but I'm Sarah."

I held out my hand. "It's nice to meet you."

She smiled and agreed. "I'll be back soon."

The furniture had been covered with sheets. After putting the groceries in the cabinets, plugging in the refrigerator and other appliances, I started looking around. The trailer was old and needed work, but it had two bedrooms and one bathroom. The kitchen was big enough that it had a table and the living room had a sofa, loveseat and small television.

Once I'd familiarized myself with the place, I sat down and started opening my new phone. The service was

terrible from being out in the country, but with two bars I dialed Melissa's number.

“Hello?”

“It's me, Katy. I just want you to know I'm okay.”

“Where are you? Branch came looking for you. The shit hit the fan when you left. He thinks you and Brooks ran off together. It seems that he disappeared around the same time you did. Have you heard from him?”

“No.” I started to worry, wondering what had happened. Then I remember writing the letter. If he'd gotten it, I'd shattered him so bad that he had to leave. I started to cry. “Oh my God. What have I done?”

“Just breathe, Katy. Where are you? Are you safe?”

I looked around the trailer. “I’m safe. I even have a place to rent already. It’s a long story, and this is one of those prepaid phones so I don’t want to use all my minutes. Just know I’m okay. I’ll call you once a week to check in.”

“Katy, I’m really going to miss you. Just so you know, I’m not mad at you. You and Brooks should have been together. I hope you know that.”

I did, but it didn’t change anything. “Thank you, Mel. Don’t forget not to tell anyone you heard from me.”

“Take care and Merry Christmas.”

When we hung up I lay down on

the covered couches and cried. I hadn't even considered that I was two days from Christmas. In the midst of all of my problems it made sense why two strangers would take a leap and give me a chance. I probably didn't deserve it, but I was grateful.

I'd run from my mistakes and taken the cowardly way out. I'd never considered what Brooks was going to do when he found out I'd left him.

My heart hurt for a whole different reason and I knew it was never going to heal. I didn't know what I could do to keep going when I felt like I was already dead on the inside.

Finding a place to lay my head and a job to make money was only half

of my battle. Coming to terms with my actions was another kind of war.



## Chapter 14

January 2011

I'd been living in Sumter South Carolina for nearly a month. The holidays had passed and with them went the last of my hope of ever being happy again. Don't get me wrong, I was glad to have a roof over my head and a friend like Sarah to talk to.

Earlier in the month I'd received good news and gained another friend.

My car was on its last leg, and after hearing what it would take to fix, it



had sat at the repair shop, untouched. Sarah drove me to the restaurant in return for me watching the kids one night a week so she and her husband, Dave, could have a night out together.

He was coming around, being nice to me when I was nearby, and he'd even let me spend Christmas dinner with them. I had to admit that seeing them interacting like a family was hard. The last time I'd seen a little girl with her father, it had been my own. Sarah was kind and sat with me, offering comfort.

I guess for messing things up so badly, I had a bunch to be grateful for. My job was steady and we had regulars that tipped pretty well. I'd used half of my savings to pay my first month's rent

and buy myself some things for the trailer.

Sarah had been right about it needing a good scrubbing. It took us nearly two days, but we managed to bring it back to life. Underneath a few years of filth were some surprisingly nice things. We ended up covering the couches in some old fabric she had in her attic. She taught me how to use her sewing machine and make patterns to guide me. We even had enough fabric to make matching curtains.

On the weekends we visited farmer's markets, and I was able to purchase a new dining set, dishes, and even a whole silverware set. Then I purchased a mattress cover and new

bedding from a local store and found a cheap shower curtain that changed the whole look of the eyesore that the bathroom used to be.

During the day, when I wasn't working and the kids went to school, Sarah and I did chores around the farm and got to know each other.

I found out that she was an orphan too. The preacher and his baron wife had adopted her when she was five. She'd met her husband when they were both nineteen. They married and inherited the farm from his father, who passed about a year before. Sarah was one of those people that anyone would envy. She didn't have a stressful life. Their small town values kept their

family whole, and through prayer and worship they'd found their purpose in life. I don't like admitting I was a charity case, but knew in some ways I was. She liked knowing that she could help.

It also made her feel like she had the right to push me to move on. She'd invited their friend Bobby over for dinner, and from the way he smelled, I could tell he wasn't just there to have a few beers with his buddy. I recognized him from the car repair shop, but this time he was cleaned up.

I supposed, if I wasn't madly in love with someone else, I could see myself finding him attractive. He had dark wavy hair that curled a little in the front. His eyes were light greenish,

maybe hazel and two dimples were placed perfectly on each cheek.

After two invites we'd become friends. The second night, which happened to be New Years Eve, he walked me out to my trailer. I think maybe he thought I was going to invite him in. "Thanks for walking me."

The sound of a shot gun made me scream. I fell into his chest and covered my face, fearing that we were being fired at. Bobby held me there, laughing the whole time. When I looked up at him, his face got serious. "Happy New Year, woman. Ain't you ever heard a gun before?"

I pulled away, feeling like a complete idiot. "I guess I didn't expect

that.”

He leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. I got that it was a casual gesture to celebrate the new year, but I hadn't expected it.

He waited for more, in which I didn't even move. “You know I can fix your car. It's been slow and I need somethin' to do. I know money's tough. We can just do an I.O.U.”

“You're kidding right? Are there some kind of strings attached to this offer?” We were standing in the pitch black. If he wanted to take me on the side of the trailer, nobody would hear my screams.

“Sarah's told me about your troubles.”

I shook my head, feeling completely embarrassed. “I’m not a terrible person. There’s a logical explanation for why I had to leave.”

He laughed and looked down at his feet. “Katy, you’re a nice girl. I don’t expect anything from you in return. Any friend of Sarah’s is a friend of mine.”

I reached out my hand, offering a thank you in a professional manner. He shook it and smiled. “Thank you, Bobby. I will pay you back, I promise.”

He tipped his hat and watched me walking up the two steps to my front door. “Have a good night, Katy.”

When I walked inside I felt happy, like things were turning up for me. I was making friends and feeling

comfortable with everything that was happening in my life. Sure, I could have been in my last semester of college, getting my degree, but that would have required me to face the Valentines. I wasn't ready for it and I didn't know if I ever would be.

The next month brought many gifts, like Bobby fixing my car, getting promoted to night shift manager at the restaurant and even being asked to assist with Sunday school at the local church. I'd never been one to be involved, but was raised Christian. In the few short weeks I'd been living in South Carolina, I'd attended church weekly. Sarah was the reason and she was happy to have someone to sit with during service, since



her daddy was the preacher and her mother played the organ.

By February we had a standing night of cards, where Bobby and I would go over to Sarah and Dave's. We played a game called pinochle. It was hard to get used to, but after the first couple of times, I felt like I was an expert.

Aside from my new friends, I'd met plenty of people from the restaurant and church. It was nice to drive into the town, in my newly repaired car, and have people greeting me by name. I'd never lived in a place so small, and appreciated the importance of it.

Halfway through that month, I came down with a stomach bug. It was weird because nobody around me was

sick. I couldn't keep anything down and felt exhausted.

A week passed and then another. On March first, after still not getting any better, Sarah and I both knew something was wrong with me. I didn't want to spend the money, but she took me to the hospital anyway.

They drew blood and did a full work-up to see why I couldn't keep anything down. I'd also discovered that I'd lost fifteen pounds in two short months. My reflection was almost hard to recognize and I was ashamed that I'd let myself get into such poor health.

With Sarah sitting next to me, the doctor came back into the room nearly an hour later. "Do you want the good

news or the bad?”

“Both?” All I needed to hear was that I was dying. My pathetic existence was ending because I’d eaten a bad batch of tuna or something ridiculous like that.

“The bad news is that you’re probably not going to get better for a while.”

“What’s wrong with her? Is it treatable?” Sarah was as concerned as I was.

“Your friend here is pregnant. She’s sufferin’ from a bad case of first trimester sickness. It happens from time to time. There’s a couple things she can eat and drink that can help alleviate it.”

“Whoa!” I sat up and looked

right at him. “Did you just say I’m pregnant?”

He smiled. “I’ve been doin’ this for thirty-seven years. I think I know what I’m talkin’ about.”

I put my hands over my face, unable to speak. “How far along am I? Can you tell?”

“I’ll have to schedule you for a sonogram before we can diagnose something like that. Do you know when your last menstrual cycle was?”

I tried to think back to when I’d had my last period. I knew it was a couple weeks before my wedding date, because Branch was trying to get some until he found out I was bleeding. Then we got busy with the wedding.

“December fourth, maybe. It was somewhere around that time.”

“Just based on that I would say you got pregnant somewhere around the nineteenth to the twenty-fifth of the month maybe a little later. Does that sound about right to you? The normal ovulation cycle is usually around fourteen days after your menstrual cycle starts.”

I began to cry, so uncontrolled that a nurse came in to see what was the matter. The doctor dealt with a couple other patients and came back in with all sorts of paperwork and different options.

I flipped out after looking down at one of them and seeing something on being pro-choice. It went on to say that

abortion was a legal option.

I threw the pamphlet at him and said words that I knew I shouldn't have. By the time that they'd gotten me calmed down enough to walk to the car, Sarah was practically in tears with me. I'd embarrassed her and I was so sorry for it.

None of them could understand the complexity of the situation. They could never understand how important this pregnancy was to me. I couldn't kill something that belonged to him. I couldn't ever fathom that as being an option.

She closed the door on the driver's side and handed me a prescription written out for prenatal

vitamins. “You didn’t have to be mean to him. He was just doin’ his job.”

“I’m sorry. It’s not like you were happy about that flyer.”

“I would never have an abortion, but I’m not stupid enough to believe that everyone around feels the same way I do. I respect your decision, no matter what it is.”

I put my hands over my face and started to panic. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Let’s get you home and in bed and we’ll figure it out. I’ve got plenty experience havin’ babies. We’ll get through this. You need to remember that you’re not alone.”

But I was.

Sure, I had friends, but the friend that I needed the most wasn't around. He had more vested in my pregnancy than any of my new friends could have.

I shook my head and looked at her, unable to still admit what was burning through my mind. "I'm not ready to be a mother. My child won't have a father."

"Katy, calm down. It's bad for the baby. We'll figure it out. I promise."

She drove us to the pharmacy and waited for my vitamins to get filled. She also picked up a bag of ginger snaps, in which she swore would settle my stomach.

After helping me get into a nightgown and back in my bed, she left



me to rest.

I didn't get out of that bed for two days, and in that time I'd soaked my sheets at least three times with buckets of tears. Not only was I having a baby, but based on the doctor's calculations, there could only be one father. Brooks, the man that I shattered and abandoned, had given me more than his heart that night we'd made love. He'd given me something even more fragile.

I was having his baby, and he was never going to find out about it.



## Chapter 15

April 2011

I stared into the full-sized mirror, looking at my stomach from the side. Sarah sat on my bed laughing at me. “It says here that in the second trimester you can expect the sickness to go away. It makes sense since you haven’t thrown up in a few days.” She liked reading my baby books, as if she’d never seen them before. Since she’d been the person to give them to me, with half of the pages dog-eared, I knew she was just

revisiting her own two pregnancies.

I often wondered if she'd end up pregnant one day because she actually liked it.

“Does it say how fat I should be at four months? Look at my stomach. I don't know whether it's gas or the baby.”

She laughed. “It was a good thing you finally had the first sonogram. Can you imagine if it was twins? I know you were freaking out for a while.”

I shot her a dirty look and went back to admiring my little bump. We'd made a pact not to bring up the word twins anymore. That word only brought me memories of a something that I'd never have again. My whole childhood

was like I lived it in another life.

I kept running my hands over my belly. It wasn't like I was worrying about getting fat. I had no one to impress.

It had taken me a while to accept that I was going to be a mother, and even longer to be okay with raising the child by myself. In a couple of days I'd be far enough along to find out what I was having. All I could hope for was to look at that screen and see ten fingers and ten toes. The sex didn't matter to me. I wanted my baby to be healthy since my first trimester had been so filled with stress.

I'd had a sonogram a few weeks earlier that verified my conception date and that I was only carrying one fetus.

For a while I had nightmares that the baby was Branch's. Knowing that I hadn't been intimate with him since before my period, and even then we used condoms, put my mind at ease.

Don't get me wrong, I didn't hate Branch. I knew I'd hurt him and he'd never forgive me, but somehow, knowing that this baby was Brooks' and mine, helped me cope with losing him. I knew that a piece of him was growing inside of me and that we'd made it out of a life-long love for one another.

I also was aware that my baby would always signify that love, even if we'd only had one real night together.

I'd finally stopped puking every day and my face was beginning to fill

out. My friends, Sarah, Dave and Bobby were so supportive, and between the three of them and the kids, they never let me out of their sight for long. Sarah took me to my doctor appointments and basically shoved my vitamins down my throat every day.

My boss at the restaurant, Sherry, was even getting excited, claiming she was dying to hold a baby again now that her three kids were teenagers.

I felt supported, and I needed it more than ever before. Without parents, or even family to have my back, I depended on my friends and was thankful they didn't mind being my shoulder to cry on.

And boy did I cry.

My emotions weren't just heightened from being pregnant. I was always on high alert, and something as silly as a commercial could have me sobbing.

I tried to be strong and focus on the good in my life. I had my health and nice place. My job was flexible and I'd been welcomed into a town that I was happy to call home.

But I still cried.

On the day of my sonogram to find out what I was having, Sarah's youngest Maddy came down with a fever. It was rainy and cold outside, and I knew she couldn't go with me. I'd stopped on my way because I needed gas, and when Bobby saw my car, he

came running out and insisted on pumping it while I stayed warm and dry. I rolled down my window to pay him and say thanks for him helping. “Hey, here’s a twenty.”

He smiled and leaned against my window. “Your money’s no good here today, Katy. What are you doin’ out on this nasty day?”

“I’ve got a doctor’s appointment. It’s the big one where I find out what I’m having.”

Bobby looked over at the shop and then back to me. He tapped on the roof of my car. “Hey, pull over a minute and wait for me to come back.”

I did as he told me, especially after he wouldn’t take my money.



Surprisingly, he hopped into the passenger seat, minus the coveralls that he'd just been wearing. "What are you doing?"

He smiled and looked over at me. "A pretty woman like you shouldn't be doin' this all by herself. I'm goin' with you."

"You don't have to. I'm perfectly capable."

He put his hands up. "Katy, it's not a big deal. We're friends and I'm just tryin' to be supportive."

Since I really didn't want to do it alone, and we really were friends, I accepted his offer. After an hour wait, we were taken to the back. Bobby turned around while I got myself ready for the

procedure. Once I was covered up with only my belly exposed, he sat down in the chair beside me.

The technician came in the room and started lubricating the roller. I watched the screen and recognized the head right away. A little heart was beating in the middle of the body.

The tech took a couple measurements and then started looking between the legs. “Do you want to know the sex?”

I was so excited. “Yes. Yes I do.”

She double checked before announcing, “It’s a girl. Congratulations.”

She printed out a picture

showing that it was girl and left me to get cleaned up. I was so excited to know I was having a little girl that I started to cry. Bobby reached over and held my hand. “Are you goin’ to be alright? Did you want a boy?”

I laughed through another bout of tears. “No. A girl is perfect. I think it’s just overwhelming. You must think I’m crazy.”

He squeezed my hand and looked down at the picture. “I’ve never seen anything quite like that. It’s pretty amazin’, ain’t it?”

I nodded.

“I hope you’re not mad I tagged along. Sarah called earlier and mentioned she couldn’t go with you. I

planned my lunch out so I could fill in for her.”

I sat up and wiped the mess off of my stomach. “You didn’t have to. As you can see, it wasn’t painful.”

He helped me slide off the table and stood there facing me. “I um, this is probably the worst time and place to do this, but I was wonderin’ if you like to have dinner with me sometime, other than on our card night of course.”

I wasn’t ready to date, but Bobby and I were friends. Along with Sarah and Dave, we’d all bonded. He knew my backstory and didn’t judge me for it. With a child on the way and no hope of ever falling back into a life with Brooks, my options were limited. If a nice guy

wanted to take me to dinner, I knew I had to take him up on the offer, before I was too fat and pregnant to be able to get into a car and go anywhere. “That would be nice. Thanks for asking.”

He smiled, “Really? I figured you’d say no at least ten times.”

We both laughed. “We’re friends, Bobby. I’d like to go out for a night on the town with you. I trust you.”

He looked embarrassed that I’d complimented him. It was one of the things that I liked about him. Everything about Bobby was innocent. It made me feel safe, like I knew he would never hurt me. “I reckon we best be gettin’ back then.” And there was his sexy southern drawl that added a little

masculinity to his voice.

He drove us back to the repair shop, and I hugged him before getting into the driver's seat to head home. "Thank you, again. It was nice not being there alone."

He smiled. "I'll never forget it."

I looked down at the picture and tore one of them off for him. "Here. I don't need all of them. You can keep this for when she's born and compare it."

He stuck it in his pocket and smiled. I waved goodbye before pulling out.

Sarah was at her door waiting to hear the news. I walked up and handed her one of the sonogram pictures. "Oh my goodness! A girl? That's

wonderful!”

“I know.”

“I heard Bobby went in my place. How did that go?” She asked as we walked inside.

“You’re trying to set me up, aren’t you?” I wasn’t born yesterday and he was clearly being coaxed.

“Maybe. Just go out on one date. It won’t hurt you. We’re all friends, right?”

I played with her placemats. “Yeah, I guess. I just don’t want to hurt his feelings. I mean, I’m not ready to start dating, especially now that I’m pregnant. It wouldn’t be fair to him.”

“Katy, Bobby likes you. He doesn’t care if you’re pregnant. Besides,

what do you have to lose? Nobody is going to judge you. At some point you're going to have to let go, if you ever want to truly move on."

She was right, but it was still too soon for me to consider. I knew *that* life was over, but I wasn't ready to completely move forward, almost as if I needed to punish myself some more before I could be able to do that.

Once we'd celebrated with a big glass of apple juice, I headed to my trailer and hung the picture on my refrigerator. I lay down on my couch and started thinking about names that would be suitable for a beautiful little girl.

I closed my eyes and dreamed of her running in a field of daisies, with her



father's crystal blue eyes looking back at me. Her hair was light brown like his and when she smiled she made the sun get brighter. I grabbed her hands and spun her around, feeling the same love that Brooks had shown me, radiating through her.

I woke up in tears, imagining him never knowing she existed. It broke my heart, but I knew he was in another country, risking his life and wishing he'd never known me. The fact that I'd chose to leave him severed any chance of me getting another chance. The last thing that family wanted was to hear I was carrying a Valentine child. Then I feared that if they did find out, they'd try to take her from me and I couldn't ever let that

happen.

## Chapter 16

May 2011

Due to my having to stand so much, I was ordered by my doctor to stop working at the restaurant. I was worried that my boss would flip out. Instead, she looked a bit relieved.

After the first week of being home with nothing to do, I decided to make a phone call, to let an old friend know that I was doing alright. Of course, I had no intention of telling her I was with child.

The number to Melissa rang five times before she answered it, and when she did she was giggling uncontrollably. “Hello?”

“Melissa, it’s me, Katy. How are you?”

Even through the phone I could sense that she was shocked to hear from me. “Katy, oh my God.” She put her hand over the phone so I couldn’t hear her asking whoever she was with to give her a second. “Sorry, I have company and didn’t want to be disturbed. So, how are you? Where are you? You told me you were going to call me once a month. What happened?”

I let out an air-filled sigh and looked down at my belly. I had so many reasons why I hadn’t kept in touch. “I’ve just been busy. Starting over can be a little overwhelming at times. So tell me, how are you? Did you finish school?”

She hesitated to answer. “School is over, finally. I’ve started job hunting, which isn’t going very well. I moved into a new apartment and happened to get a new boyfriend in the shuffle of it all.”

“That’s awesome.” I was so happy for her. “Anyone I know?”

“No!” she answered quickly. “You don’t know him at all.”

It was weird how defensive she was, but I wondered if it was because of my actions the day I left town. Maybe she thought I had a habit of sleeping with men that I wasn’t engaged to. “Wow, it’s been a long time coming. You did so good not settling down so you could keep your focus on school. Had I done

that, I wouldn't have had to give up everything.”

I could hear her moving around as she spoke. “So tell me, where exactly are you?”

Of all the questions she could be asking me, she wanted to know my exact location. I felt reluctant about it, like she was fishing. “Florida. I’m living in Florida now and I have a roommate. Her name is Sarah,” I kept going with the lies. “I work at a large manufacturer of oranges. It’s nothing fancy, but it pays the bills.”

“So, you’re doing okay for yourself?”

“Yeah. I am.” I rubbed my stomach and smiled. “I’m happier than

I've been in a long time. I've got a lot to look forward to and good people around me that have helped me tremendously."

"Good for you."

The line got quiet and I didn't understand why she didn't want to chat about everything under the sun. "I'm sorry it took so long for me to call, Mel. I know you're probably mad at me."

Finally, she seemed to calm down. "It's fine. I guess I just expected something. For all these months I didn't even know if you were alive. It's really good to hear your voice. Is this your number? Do you mind if I keep it?"

I got excited thinking that enough time had gone by that she could keep my number. "Yes, of course. Call me

whenever you want.”

“Great. Listen, I’ve got to run out, but you take care of yourself and keep in touch.”

“I will. Talk to you again soon.”

“Okay, bye.”

When I hung up I napped for the rest of the afternoon. The windows were all open and a cool spring breeze was coming inside. South Carolina was such an amazing place to live and I was somehow glad that I’d lied to Melissa about where I’d settled down at. Something about that call made me feel very uneasy. I wondered if maybe she’s promised Branch to tell him if I was ever in contact with her again.

When I finally woke, feeling



well rested, I found Sarah outside hanging up some clean clothes on the line. They smelled like fabric softener and bleach and I loved how it was the first thing that popped in my nose when I walked out my door.

“Hey there. Did you have a nice nap?”

I smiled, realizing she'd come in to check on me. “Yes. This weather feels amazing.”

“Just wait a couple of months when your belly is double in size and you feel like you're goin' to melt. Our summers are hot. I reckon one weekend we can all go to the beach. It's not a far drive from here. Myrtle Beach has lots of families at it. The kids love it.”

I helped her hang a shirt and walked over wrapping my arms around her. “I love you, Sarah. You’ve given me hope when I thought I had nothing to live for. I don’t know where I’d be without you.”

She hugged me back and started patting my shoulder. “Don’t talk like that. You’d be fine. Besides, everything happens for a reason. I’ve always believed that. Helping you was the Christian thing to do. Us being friends was an added bonus.”

“Yes, but you welcomed me into your family. I could never begin to repay you.”

“Your money is no good here.”

I looked down at the ground

when we separated. “Actually, there’s something I should probably tell you.”

A look of concern washed over her face. “Are you in some kind of trouble?”

I shook my head, immediately reassuring her that everything was fine. “No, it’s nothing like that. You see, when my parents died, they left me a lot of money. I’ve never been allowed to touch it, well, not until I’m a certain age. Anyway, my birthday is next June, and I was just thinking that maybe I could give you and Dave some of it, to help fix things in your house and such. It’s the least I can do and the baby and I aren’t going to need much. I’d have plenty of money to build us a house around here

and bring her up right.”

Sarah sat down on the grass and I followed her. She helped me get my footing to sit and we looked out at the green pasture. “I’ve never had someone offer anything like that for my family. I’m not real sure I could take it.”

I placed my hand on top of hers. “It’s a gift, Sarah. When I get it, I want it to be a gift.”

“So, are we talkin’ like a grand? Dave would crap his pants if we had a grand.”

I laughed, realizing how much different money was from where I was from. “I’m talking like twenty-five grand.”

Sarah started to cry. “I can’t let

you do that.”

“Yes, you can.”

She wept in my lap for the longest time and it was the first time I’d ever felt someone being grateful for something I was going to do. It made me feel so good to be able to offer something to them. After all, they were all I had and I wanted my daughter to always know she could count on them if something happened to me. That’s what led me to my next statement. “Sarah, before the baby is born, I wanted to ask you something. You can talk to Dave about it, but it’s important to me to have it in order.”

“Anything.” She wiped her eyes and perked up.

“I want to sit down with a lawyer and have something drawn up, in case something happens to me. I don’t want her being taken by the state.”

“I would never let that happen.”

“There’s one more thing. If something does happen to me, I want you to find Brooks. I’ll make sure his parents contact information is in the documents. He deserves to know about his daughter. I know it would mean the world to him.”

Sarah agreed, but a few minutes later, she had another question for me and I wasn’t all the way prepared to answer it.

“Katy, I’m wondering how you’re goin’ to feel once she’s here. I mean, you obviously still love the man. I

can't blame you for that, but can you honestly raise her without telling him she exists?"

I started to tear up. "I don't know. I think about it every single day. It eats me up inside. There's nothing I want more than to show Brooks what our love made together. He's away for the next two and a half years. By the time he comes home, she'll already be walking around. I feel like it will be too late for him to understand and I sure as hell can't send it to him in a letter, not that I even know an address to send it to."

She held my hand again. "No matter what you decide, I'll stand by you. I just don't want to see the regret in your eyes every time we talk about him."

She didn't understand that I woke up with that regret and went to sleep with it at night.

Chapter 17

July 4<sup>th</sup> 2011

“Katy, where are you?” I heard Sarah calling me, but I was too busy trying to find a sundress that didn't make me look like a beached whale.

“I'm back here.”

Sarah came walking in wearing an American flag themed dress. “Aw, don't you look cute?”

“Don't even go there. I can't even see my whole body in the mirror anymore.”

“Oh please. You're the cutest pregnant woman I've ever seen.



Besides, you've got a hot guy that would do anything for you. What do you care what anyone else thinks?"

I smiled, thinking about Bobby. In the past three months we'd been spending one night a week together. Sometimes he would take me out to dinner. Other times we would rent a movie and just hang out at either of our houses.

It wasn't anything serious, considering that I was growing by the second. Sure, we'd kissed and I enjoyed his company, but we both knew I'd never be able to really love someone again.

"Yeah, Bobby's nice."

"Nice? Is that what you call it?"

I'd say he's smitten over you. Dave said you're all he talks about. They can't even go huntin' now without him talkin' about you and the baby."

I rolled my eyes, assuming she was exaggerating. "I wouldn't go that far. It ain't like we're madly in love, Sarah. We're just good friends that enjoy each other's company."

She laughed at me and watched me change my outfit again. When I'd exhausted my options, in which I mean I tried on the only three dresses that fit, I decided that I didn't care anymore. It was hot as Hell and I hated being pregnant in it.

This was my first Fourth of July living in Sumter, but I'd already seen the

way the town celebrated. They had a parade practically once a month and the volunteer firemen were the next best thing since chocolate was invented. Coming from a place like the District of Columbia, where paid firefighters and police officers were one in every third person on the street, it was still hard for me to understand.

However, I got that things were different and small town heroes were what kept the community feeling safe. It gave them security, when they really didn't need it.

Bobby picked me up in his antique hot rod pick-up truck that he'd restored himself. It was a cherry red and he'd attached American flags to either

side since it was going to be driven in the parade.

“Don’t you look pretty,” he said as I came outside and let him take my hand. He opened the door for me and gave my fat ass a boost to get me inside.

“I feel like a blimp. Maybe you should fill me with air and let me float around in the sky.”

He laughed as he shut the truck door and walked around to climb into the driver’s side. “You’re really not that big. From the back you don’t even look pregnant, if you don’t mind me saying.”

I played with my hair as we began our drive down the gravel road. In the rearview mirror I could see Dave and Sarah following behind us. “Did you

bring a blanket to sit on?”

“I got a couple chairs in the back. Most people just sit on the curb or stand. It gets busy since the military comes and participates. They bring their families to watch.”

“Military?”

Right away my mind went to Brooks. I put my hand on my stomach and thought about our perfect little girl growing inside of me. She was my only connection to him and the love we'd shared. The mere mention of the military or anything Army had me on high alert, even though I knew Brooks was halfway across the world from me.

“Yeah, Fort Jackson is right down the road a ways. It's an Army

training facility. I'm surprised you've never heard of it. It's one of the most popular in the country."

Aside from Brooks joining the Army, I'd never really looked into where military stations were located. I guess it was because I'd always been against war and fighting. Terrorism had cost me my parents, but I didn't see the point in more people dying to defend their honor. I hated death, no matter how it came.

I suppose it was sort of ridiculous considering that I'd thought about ending my life only months before.

My baby changed that for me. Ever since the day I found out that she was inside of me, I'd never wanted

anything more than to take care of her. I don't know whether it was some motherly instinct or the fact that I was willing to scathe the ends of the earth for one chance to have a piece of Brooks with me forever.

I tried to play it off so Bobby wouldn't get worried. "I really didn't know."

Bobby had grown up in Sumter. All of his friends still lived in town and he'd never really been anywhere else. For our first date, he'd taken me to a fishing spot on his granddaddy's property. It wasn't what I was used to, but it meant a lot for him to share such a special place with me. He'd also take me to the town's favorite watering hole,

where a rope swing had served as fun for his whole life.

I thought about living so close to Richmond and Williamsburg and being able to go to the water and amusement parks whenever I wanted.

Everything about my life was different. Instead of seeing it as a negative, I appreciated that I'd be able to raise my child in a safe environment. We didn't have crime. The schools weren't overcrowded. She would be able to play outside with her friends and not get into trouble. It was nothing like we're I'd grown up, even if it was a nice community.

We pulled up onto Main Street, and when I saw the crowds of people, I



was shocked. I had no idea that there were even that many people in the nearby towns. Crowds of people stood on the sectioned off part of the street, the children waving flags and listening to music as it played.

It was like one would see in the movies and I started to get emotional knowing that life like that still existed. I thought about my mother and how she would have loved to be a part of something so wonderful.

Bobby came around and helped me get out of the car. He brushed a piece of hair back out of my face and smiled, showing his dimples. “You really do look beautiful today, Katy.”

I took his hand and let him lead

me to a safe spot to sit my chair. We recognized a few women from church and they waved back to us. “Are you thirsty? I brought a cooler with water in it for you.”

I had to give it to him for trying. The man never stopped. We’d been seeing each other for months and I’d given him nothing except a few kisses. He never asked for more, or pushed me for what I wasn’t ready to give. His friendship was dear to me and I liked the way that when we were together, I always felt protected.

“I’ll take a water, thank you.”

He left and came back with a bottle of water and bag of popcorn. I spotted Sarah and the kids running

across the parking lot. Maddy was dressed like her mother, while Seth was wearing a pair of shorts and a red shirt. He had a mini flag in his hand and was waving it all around.

I could hear the band playing, and it was starting to get louder. A procession of horses came first, moving their hooves in unison. The sound of their metal shoes clanked against the concrete and I watched them walking in single file, each uniquely decorated for the occasion.

The next group was the women's auxiliary, then the Knights of Columbus. They were then followed by the High School Marching Band, the electric company float and three decorated fire

trucks. I waved as the crowned princesses and queens of different events were escorted and sitting in the convertible cars, and clapped when a group of clowns came tumbling down the road.

Then I saw fatigues and knew what was coming next. The military float was decorated with war veterans and then the band followed them. To finish the parade they had over a hundred decorated soldiers marching together.

I knew he wasn't there, but I checked every single face in the crowd for him, hoping for one more look at his beautiful face.

The awe of the parade was still showing in the crowd and lots of fun

things were going on all around us. According to Sarah, the celebration had only just begun.

They led me to where the picnic area was, and women from everywhere were carting in homemade food and baked items. I could smell the barbeque and couldn't wait to stuff my face with whatever was offered.

A loud announcer ordered the music to cease while we all bowed our heads and said grace. The town of people got quiet and waited for the official to begin.

“Dear Heavenly Father, I'd like to first thank you for giving us this beautiful day to celebrate with friends and family. Thank you for giving the

hands that provided all this delicious food, and the families of everyone in attendance. I'd also like to take a moment to give thanks to the battalion of soldiers in Afghanistan that lost their lives yesterday. Their courage and devotion to this country will never be forgotten. In Jesus name we pray. Amen."

I opened my eyes and felt weak in the knees. A whole battalion of soldiers had died in Afghanistan. Brooks was in Afghanistan. Everything around me started to spin and I felt myself falling, realizing that I was passing out.

I saw people looking over me and realized I was lying on the ground. Someone had my head and I quickly

realized it was Bobby. “Hey there. You alright?”

I tried to sit up, but it was too fast and I got queasy. I began to ask what happened, but remember the blessing and everything came back. I sat up again, this time determined to know the truth. I had to know if Brooks was okay, even if it would reveal where I was living. I was desperate to know and I wasn't going to be alright until I had verification from a legitimate source.

I grabbed Bobby's phone out of his pocket that he used for emergency roadside calls and made sure I blocked the outgoing number. Then I started dialing the number to the Valentine's house. I didn't care who answered, or

what they were going to say to me. My heart was racing and I had to know, no matter what the outcome. I had to find out if he was alright.

It was hard to hear in the crowd of people and Sarah wasn't going to let me out of her sight. She stood next to me holding my arm as I waited for someone to answer.

“Hello?”

It was Danica. I took a deep breath, swallowed my pride and asked. “I just need to know if he's alright. Just tell me Brooks wasn't one of those soldiers that died.”

“Katy? Katy is that you? Sweetheart, please answer me.”

I was crying, hearing her voice



after so long. “Please just tell me he’s okay.”

“Brooks is fine. He called us this morning. Katy, I want you to come home. We can work this out as a family. Branch is a mess over you leaving.”

I hung up the phone. Even if I could go home and make amends I knew it would never happen. I couldn’t risk them knowing about my baby.

Bobby pulled me into his arms when he saw me crying. “What’s wrong?”

“Can you take me someplace quiet?”

He kissed me on my forehead. “Of course. Let me go make us two plates and I’ll take you wherever you

want to go.”

I didn’t stop crying until we were sitting in a nearby field and Bobby had turned off the truck. “What’s got you so upset?”

I knew he didn’t want to hear about Brooks, but I wasn’t going to lie about it. “I heard that those soldiers died. The father of my baby is in Afghanistan. I thought he was one of them.”

Bobby pulled me into his arms and let me finally settle down. “I take it he wasn’t?”

I shook my head.

“Katy, do you think you’ll ever make amends with him?”

I sat up and looked out the

window, trying to fight another round of tears that were attempting to come out. “No. I ruined my chance to be with him. Too many bridges have been burned. I’m sure he hates me by now.”

“Can I ask you somethin’ without you gettin’ mad?”

I shrugged. “Of course.”

“I was wonderin’ if you’d let me take care of you. I get that you’re fine by yourself, but we could do it together.”

“You’re asking me to move in with you?”

He laughed. “Well, I was hopin’ that maybe one day you’d learn to love me, the way that I’ve fallen in love with you.”

I sniffled and reminded myself

that I'd just been crying about Brooks. Bobby was a wonderful man. He ran a business and everyone liked him. I was lucky to have someone like him offering to take care of me. The thing was, I knew I'd never love him, not the way he'd want me to. "I can't make you promises that I don't know how to keep, Bobby. Right now my heart is still broken. I've got a baby growing inside of me that will never know her father. It's eating me alive with guilt. The last thing I want to do is put a label on us. I hope you understand."

He smiled, but looked defeated. "Yeah, I reckon I do. Just know that the offer will still stand if you change your mind. I'm not goin' anywhere."

I kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you. You’re a good man, you know that?”

He reached on the dash and handed me a plate. “I made you a hotdog, extra onions, just like you wanted.”

I opened the foil and smelled the delicious food. If I’d just broken Bobby’s heart, he wasn’t letting me see it. Instead he was taking care of me, like he was always doing. Seeing him doing that made me wonder if I was passing up on something that I’d regret later. Maybe Bobby was as good as I would ever get.

Only time would be able to tell me that and from the shambles I’d made of my life, it was all I had.

## Chapter 18

August- September 2011

“Look at these doctor bills, Bobby. How am I ever going to afford the delivery?” I had been staring at them since they arrived in the mail and the numbers weren’t changing. Already, I’d accrued ten grand in doctor’s visits and prenatal testing, alone. With me not working, my savings account didn’t exist and worrying wasn’t allowed.

Bobby wrapped his arms around me. “You know, Katy, it’s probably not realistic and you can kick me in the balls for askin’, but I’ve got real good health insurance. If we got married, you’d be covered.”

I hated the word marriage,

because it reminded me of a time that I wanted to bury and never speak of again. “Bobby, we can’t.”

He got down on his knees on my kitchen floor and looked up at me. “Like I said before. It ain’t ideal circumstances, and that you’ll probably never feel the same about me, but we’re friends and I want to help. You don’t have to move or anything. It will all be on paper.”

I looked at the paper and then back to Bobby again. “You’d do that for me? Just to save me money?”

He’d asked me to be with him before and was kind when I’d turned him down.

He nodded. “I told you before

that I loved you. I know it's too soon and I don't expect anything more than an arrangement between two friends. Just let me help you. I don't want to see you sufferin' with money when you don't have to. God knows I've paid that damn company enough money through the years. They need to start kickin' it back in my favor."

I grabbed his hand and squeezed it. "Are you sure? What if you meet someone else that can give you what you need?"

He shrugged. "Katy, I doubt that will ever happen."

I leaned in and kissed him tenderly on the lips. He was an honest man and I felt blessed to know someone



like him. “I guess I can’t take long answering?” I was due in one month.

“It’s going to take a couple weeks for you to get added, so I wouldn’t wait too long.”

“Can you give me a few minutes by myself?”

Bobby stood up and walked outside. I watched him out the window, picking up one of the children and twirling them around. I closed my eyes and pictured Brooks doing that with our daughter. It was apparent to me that it was just a dream. He’d never be the father that she knew and I hated myself for it.

Then I opened my eyes and focused on Bobby. I hadn’t known him

long, but he was willing to do so much for me. He'd told me that he loved me, even knowing that I didn't love him back. It wasn't that I didn't like him, because I did. I cared deeply for him, but that's all it was. I could never give him my heart when I didn't have it anymore. I'd left it in that hotel room with Brooks and I wasn't ever going to ask for it back.

I looked down at the medical bills and knew that if I wanted to be able to afford things, Bobby's offer was the best way to make that happen. It was obvious he'd take care of me and treat my daughter like she was his own.

After getting up from the chair, I opened the door to wave him back

inside. Bobby stood in front of me with his hands in his pockets.

“Fine. I’ll do it. I’ll marry you, and I’ll try my best to make it up to you and make you happy.”

And there it was.

In less than a year, I was engaged for a second time and this one was even more shameful than the first occurrence. This time I aware I didn’t love him and that for my own selfish reasons I was doing it anyway.

We were married at the courthouse four days later, after our license was approved. Sarah and Dave were our witnesses, and we celebrated afterwards with our normal card night.

Bobby knew it would be too

much stress on me to move in with him right away, so he opted to stay the night with me. I still couldn't believe that I was married. It felt surreal and sad at the same time. It was as if I knew I was closing a chapter of my life even when I didn't want to.

When it got late, Bobby grabbed a pillow and started to get comfortable on the couch. I felt so bad because he wanted more and I hadn't given it to him. After lying in my bed alone for nearly twenty minutes, I walked back out into the living room and reached out my hand. "Bobby, you're my husband. We've been messing around for months, and I feel like it's time for us to consummate our relationship. I can't let

you sleep on my couch and feel right about it. You belong next to me in my bed.”

He looked down at my belly and touched it with both hands. I ran my hands through his hair when he kissed my bare stomach tenderly. “You don’t have to, Katy. I can wait for as long as you want me to. I didn’t do this to push you into movin’ forward. We’ve got plenty of time to be together.”

I cupped his face into my hands, knowing that he was the best I was ever going to get. “You should never make a bride beg for it on her wedding night.”

For the record, I wasn’t considering how difficult it was going to be to be intimate at nine months

pregnant. Bobby climbed into the bed beside me and pulled me into his arms. I expected him to undress and get right to it, after making him wait for so long. Instead, he kissed me slowly and pulled away to look into my eyes. “This is all I need tonight.”

I wrapped my arms around him and felt safe. Bobby was going to take care of us and it was the most important thing to me.

My due date was September 10<sup>th</sup> and I was in a nervous wreck when I hadn't gone into labor yet. One thing I was happy about was that the baby was without a doubt Brooks'.

As I prepared for my first year without the Valentines, on the

anniversary of my parent's death, I knew if I could just get through the day in one piece, I'd be okay. My biggest fear was going into labor on a day where I was haunted by death and despair.

My water broke that morning, and six hours later I was pushing out a seven pound, seven ounce little girl. With Bobby and Sarah by my side, I was able to get through it while being completely grateful I wasn't alone.

After they'd done her measurements and gotten her cleaned up, I saw them walking her back in my direction. My heart was beating so fast, knowing that I was moments away from feeling her for the first time. I held my arms out and watched her being set

inside of them.

She was the most beautiful thing that I'd ever seen in my life. Her head of hair was light but was still apparent and her gray eyes, that I knew would change, were alert and looking right up at me. "Hi. I'm your mommy." I was a babbling mess and she just kept blinking and looking at me. "I love you so much. I don't care what I have to do, I promise to make you happy. I'll do anything for you."

I hadn't discussed her name with anyone, because I didn't want to make a big deal out of it. I knew once she was there, they couldn't argue with me.

Brooklyn Micheala Valentine was born at four in the afternoon on



September 11<sup>th</sup> and I knew my parents were with me in that hospital room. She was a gift to me from them and believing it made the moment the most special experience of my life. For a day that had held so much pain for me it was immediately replaced with something so much more powerful.

Named after her birth father, she was healthy, with ten tiny fingers and ten tiny toes. I knew I had to share, but I couldn't stop holding her and looking at every wrinkle remembering the night that she was made. She was a real life miracle and I'd never felt so blessed before.

Out of tragedy I'd been given this beautiful gift and I was going to spend

my whole life giving her everything she could ever want.

Bobby took on the responsibility of being a father just as I suspected. Even though I wasn't working, he still took turns with late night feedings and diaper changes and I admired him for loving us when I knew he really didn't have to.

Brooklyn became his princess and after one month he lived and breathed for her. I think that's when I started to really fall for him. I'd held a wall up, unable to accept the things that I couldn't control. Bobby had saved me and through the fire, he'd brought me peace.

Seeing him with Brooklyn

reminded me of how lucky we were and I knew it was time to let go. I wanted to love Bobby and be a family, but for some reason whenever I felt like I did, my mind went back to Brooks. I kept telling myself that time would heal my wounds, but then again, I'd loved him my whole life and I wasn't sure if I'd ever be able to stop.

Chapter 19

May 2012

“Hey, it's me. We're out of milk. Do you think you could pick some up on your way home from work?”

Bobby said something under his breath. “Anything else?”

“No. Just milk. I've already started dinner.” I'd been trying to have it

ready every night when he got home from working all day.

“What are we havin’ tonight?”

“Meatloaf. I figured I’d use that ground venison that you’d thawed out.”

“What?” He was angry. “That was for me to make chili for when we get back from turkey huntin’. That’s just great, Katy. Thanks for askin’ first.”

“I’ll just get another two pounds out of the freezer. It’s not a big deal, really.”

“It *is* a big damn deal when I had it out for a purpose. Can you do anything without pissing me off?”

I hung up the phone before he could say anything else that was hateful. We’d been married since August and for

the first six months everything was perfect. He was a good father and did anything for me that I'd ever asked. But lately, something had changed. I knew what it was, but didn't know what to do to make things better.

A couple months ago he'd come home with flowers. I greeted him with a long kiss and soon we were both shedding our clothes. Bobby was good lover, as long as he was being equally pleased. He wasn't the type of guy to get between a woman's legs, give her a good time, and then call it a night. Bobby was about pleasing Bobby first.

That particular night he was extremely horny. He practically ripped off my clothes before we'd made it to

the bedroom. I was lifted up against the wall in the hallway, feeling his stiff erection pushing against my entrance.

Since he didn't come home like that often, I figured I'd go with it and give him a good time, after all, we'd been living as husband and wife for a while and things were good between us.

Once he'd carried me into the bedroom, he jumped on top of me and looked me right in the eyes. "Tell me you love me."

I hesitated, because, up to that point, I'd only felt a deep admiration for him. I could see me loving him, but it still hadn't happened.

I felt his large hand coming across my face before I could respond.

“I said tell me you love me, bitch. How long do I have to wait?”

I started crying and reached up to touch my burning cheek. He pulled my hand away and got up in my face. At this point I was getting scared. He'd never laid a hand on me, and to say that I was frightened would have been an understatement.

When I could do nothing but cry, he got mad at himself. “God damn it!” He leaned down and kissed me where he just injured my face. “I can't stand this, Katy. It's makin' me do things I swore I'd never do. I don't want to be like him.”

He climbed off of me and walked into the bathroom. I sat there,

waiting for him to come back and hurt me again. “Like who?” I whispered.

“Like my father. He beat my mother, and I swore I’d never let myself get that angry.” He came up to the bed and started to cry. I didn’t know what to do. One minute we were naked and having a good time and then he was losing his temper on me.

While still sobbing, I pulled him against my body and listened to him crying like a baby. “I’m so sorry, darlin’. I didn’t mean it. It just hurts so much knowin’ you don’t love me. I don’t know what else to do.”

I cried with him, feeling horrible that I’d been unable to move on. “I’m so sorry if I hurt you. I do love you, Bobby.



I do.”

He looked up at me and finally stopped sniffing. “Really? Even after I hurt you?”

I nodded, knowing I was lying, just to make amends. “Really.”

He kissed me hard, as if makeup sex was going to help me forget what he’d done. I spent the next twenty minutes holding in my emotions, while he hovered over me, pumping me with all of his pent up anger. It was then that I knew I had to change or things were going to gradually get worse.

Since that day he hadn’t laid a hand on me, but I’d done everything in my power to not piss him off.

When I told Sarah what

happened in confidence, she discussed it with Dave. It had gotten back to Bobby, and after being mad at me for telling, he vowed to never do it again. We'd even gone to the pastor, Sarah's father, and had him counsel us on our issues.

I would have liked to think that things would get better, but day by day I could see him changing. He no longer wanted to be home with me and Brooklyn. On most nights he worked late at the shop, claiming we needed the money. I didn't mind being alone, spending quality time with my little girl. Still, when I gazed into her crystal blue eyes, it made me think of her father.

Looking back now, I wondered if it bothered Bobby that she resembled her

father. I'd never said it out loud, but the child looked nothing like me, so it was only natural to assume she favored him.

Her smiles were contagious and when she first called me Mama, I thought I was going to melt. Bobby had been the only dad she'd known. I'd given her Brooks' last name, and wondered if that was the right move.

As much as Bobby loved her, I didn't see myself staying with him forever. The longer I stayed, the worse it was going to be.

After his newest temper tantrum, I'd about had it. I wanted out and I knew I needed to do it while Brooklyn was still too young to understand.

On the outside, Bobby was the

perfect man. Behind closed doors, he had become hateful and nothing I ever did was good enough.

A good example was dinner. I saw meat in the refrigerator and used it to cook us a meal. I didn't see any harm in doing it. We had to eat, and I knew how much he liked to eat meatloaf sandwiches for leftovers. Besides the meat, I'd prepared homemade mashed potatoes and his favorite garlic green beans.

I thought I was doing a good thing and instead had been yelled at for it, as if we weren't in an equal partnership at all.

Bobby made the rules and decisions and my opinions were

obsolete. He'd stopped complimenting me the day he'd gotten me into bed, and since then, his Jekyll and Hyde actions had showed me that the man I married wasn't the one I'd come to know. He had secrets and with them came a side of him that scared me.

Bobby came walking in the kitchen, lifting his nose up in the air. "Here's your damn milk."

He sat it on the counter and walked into the freshly vacuumed living room with dirty, grease covered boots. "Take your shoes off next time," I said as I bent over to check on the meatloaf.

I felt his presence behind me and stood up abruptly, just in time for the back of his hand to come in contact with

the side of my face. I fell to the floor, leaving the oven door open as I began quickly backing away from him. “You don’t tell me how to live in my own house.”

I put my hands up blocking him from another blow to my face. “Please, don’t. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” I was pleading like my life depended on it.

His eyes widened and, after a stare-down, finally he walked out of the room.

At that same time I heard Brooklyn crying. I rushed to her side, finding her unscathed and wet in her crib. I held her tight against my bosom. “It’s going to be okay. Mama was just scared. Shh, you’re okay.” Inside I was

crying, because at that moment I knew his hitting me wasn't a one-time thing. I'd read enough on abuse to know that once it starts happening, it would only get worse.

I had to get out, the sooner the better for the sake of my daughter's and my own well-being. I wasn't living in a loveless marriage and subjecting my child to such horrible things. She deserved better.

With my trust fund becoming available within weeks, I knew I'd have a way to leave, even if I had to buy my freedom.

Chapter 20

September 2012

“Happy Birthday, sweet girl. I

can't believe you're one today." She smiled and ran away from me with her party dress only half on.

Her celebration was in an hour and I still had to decorate her little cake.

I heard the door opening and turned to see Bobby standing in the doorway. Brooklyn, who I'd gotten used to calling B, had run up to him. "Dada, up."

He picked her up and kissed her on the cheek.

I put the other strap to her dress on her arm, but avoided eye contact with him.

We'd been separated since June, a day after I gotten my inheritance. I took B and moved us back into the trailer



while looking for a piece of property to build on. Bobby showed up that night beating on the door until Dave came and made him leave.

For a while I was scared he was going to break in and hurt me. His sweet-talking wasn't going to get me in his good graces and he knew it.

The problem was that he loved B. She was his world and I couldn't keep him from seeing her, even if I was mad at him. I knew he'd never hurt her, since his anger had always only been geared toward me.

She grabbed his face and kissed him again. "Happy birthday, kiddo."

He looked at me and smiled. "Is there anything I can help with?"

I walked by him, heading into the kitchen. He followed and was waiting for an answer. It was hard being around him, even though he wanted us to get along. “If you could watch her while I decorate the cake, it would be a huge help.”

“Sure.” He walked B into the living room and I could hear them playing.

Bobby wasn't always offering a hand to me. When he found out I'd left he began threatening me, saying I could never make it without him.

Then he found out about my money.

I didn't blame Dave and Sarah for not being able to keep a secret. The

money that I'd given them had paid off all of their bills and they were in the process of upgrading their kitchen.

When his shock wore off, and he realized that without money to hold over my head, he had nothing left to barter with. He knew that it was my choice if I wanted him to see B at all.

Since then he'd put himself into therapy and was doing everything he could to get back in my good graces.

The thing was that I knew that what Bobby wanted was for me to love him; something I knew I'd never be able to do. It hurt me to watch him in so much pain. No matter how he'd acted to me, B was everything and without her he seemed lost.

Since the separation, he'd stopped hanging out with Dave and spent most of his time alone, drinking. In some ways I felt responsible for his downfall and it was the main reason that I'd asked him to come over for the party.

Bobby had sacrificed so much to be with me. In the beginning he hadn't expected much, but since I'd offered it, and then rejected him, it had done something to the man. He'd changed.

I knew he'd come into the kitchen, because I could see him out of the corner of my eye. "What's up?"

"I was wonderin' if after the party you and me could talk."

I shrugged and kept writing on my daughter's cake. "I guess. What do

you want to talk about?”

“I miss you, Katy. I miss you and B so much. I know I’ve been a bastard to you, but I’ve been in therapy, and I’m doin’ good. I want our family back.”

I looked up at him, astonished he would have the balls to ask me for another chance. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. You said you changed before and we both know how that turned out.”

He got down on his knee and I remembered the last time he’d been in that same position in this very kitchen. “Please. I’m not askin’ you to move right back in. I just want to be around you. It’s been Hell bein’ at the house by myself every night. I miss you bein’ with me and the way it felt to wake up next to

you. I just wish you could understand what it was like to love you so much. I wish you could be in my shoes and know how hard it's been, day after day wantin' you to feel somethin' that ain't never goin' to happen."

I sat the cake decorator down. "Can we please discuss this after the party? Now is not the time or place."

He sighed and got back up off the floor. "Yeah. Sorry."

I watched him walk out of the kitchen and heard him lighten up when he got close to the baby.

Did I feel sad for him?

Of course I did.

He'd been with me for my whole pregnancy and held my hand when she

was born. He'd gotten up with her at night and she was always the one thing that could bring a smile to his face. Imagining him at home in that house all alone must have been torturous.

It was a good thing that Sarah came in to break my salty mood. We carried everything outside and sat the kids at the picnic table, while Dave and Bobby started to cook on the grill.

B had climbed down and was playing with their old dog. She'd pull his ears and he wouldn't even make a sound. The more she did it, the less he paid any attention to her.

I swooped her up and spun her around, getting a kick out of her laughing. When I sat her down, she

looked drunk and fell down on the ground. “B, are you ready to eat?”

“Apple.”

Everything that was edible was called an apple. After attaching the chair to the edge of the picnic table, I sat her down and gave her tiny pieces of hot dog. She grabbed them up into both of her hands and started shoveling them in her mouth.

Then I spooned some macaroni and cheese onto her tray and watched her smile. “Is that your favorite, sweet girl?”

B clapped and hot dog particles flung all over my face.

When I knew she was content with her food, I made myself a plate and



sat across from Bobby, who was already stuffing a burger into his mouth. I couldn't help but notice him watching me, reminding me that I'd broken his heart. He didn't understand that mine was also in the same shape.

I wanted to be able to count on him, because after everything I'd been through, he'd given me hope. Instead, after he'd hit me three separate times, I was left with scars that would never heal; the internal kind.

I wanted to forgive him, because inside of that angry man was someone that could be gentle and adoring.

My little Brooklyn took her time digging into the cake, at first. Then she let her face fall in it. I recorded the

whole thing and knew that once she was older I'd play it back and remember how cute she was.

Her first year had gone by so fast and I was blessed to have such a healthy, well behaved baby. Now that she was starting to walk around, I had a bunch of obstacles. The first priority was getting the trailer baby-proofed. She'd started putting everything in her mouth and one of the newest things she was doing was sticking her fingers in any openings she could find.

B fell asleep at the table. I had to wake her up to get her clothes off and wash her, but she fell back asleep without a fight. Sarah helped me do all the dishes and put the extra food away,

while the guys stayed outside watching the kids.

“So, Dave told me Bobby’s really been tryin’.”

I dried a dish and put it away. “Yeah, he is. He asked me if we could talk tonight. I told him it was alright.”

Sarah stopped washing the dishes. She turned around to face me. “My dad seems to think the therapy is helpin’.”

I shot her a dirty look. “Isn’t that supposed to be private?”

She smiled and tried to look innocent. “Well, we’ve known him for years. I wanted to be sure he wasn’t a danger to himself.” She grabbed my hands. “Katy, I think you should give him

another chance. He's working really hard at getting better and we've never seen him so upset before. I'm not sayin' that you should move right back in, but maybe you could take things slow. Go to a few anger management meetings with him. Show him that you still care."

I covered my face with my hands, feeling frustrated and cornered. "I can't give him what he wants. We all know that."

She motioned around the room. "Katy, look around you, darlin'. Brooks isn't here and he's never goin' to be. You have a man that loves you and your daughter. Isn't it worth it to try and save the family that you have right now? After all you've been through, wouldn't it be

nice knowin' you're not alone?"

I hated that she was trying to make me feel sorrier for Bobby, so I finished our conversation by saying goodnight to her.

Within minutes Bobby was coming inside and sitting across from me in the kitchen. He was just as handsome as he'd ever been and it hurt me more knowing how wonderful he was when his head was on straight. "I want to go to a meeting with you. Can we arrange that?"

He perked up. "Does that mean there's a chance that we could get back together?"

I placed my hands flat on the table and took a couple deep breaths.

“I’m not making any promises. I think we should take it day by day and see how it goes.” I looked down at his hands and saw his wedding ring. He was swirling it around like he was nervous. “Bobby, we never should have got married when we did. Don’t get me wrong, I’m grateful, but rushing into it hurt us. Now we have this mess that we have to clean up before anything can be settled.”

He was starting to cry. I reached over and put my hands in his. “We both made mistakes.”

“I’ve hurt you. I know that.”

“One day at a time, Bobby. Okay?”

He smiled and agreed.

By no means was I inviting him

back into my bed any time soon, but I was willing to mend fences to see if he'd changed, and if there was a way that we could get past it.

## Chapter 21

November 2012

I was doing good, standing on my own two feet and not letting Bobby's guilt trips get the best of me. Though he still tried to make amends, I'd come to the conclusion that I didn't really want to take the chance of him hurting me again.

Then it all changed.

It wasn't long after our little heart to heart that things went awry.

I got the call at nine in the morning from his shop cashier. She worked three days a week for him, and if

she wasn't there, I don't know how long he would have been stuck with no one to call for help.

Bobby was working on an oil change for one of our neighbors. On the mornings that he would do things like that, he'd pick up their cars and leave his truck for them to use.

Sally, the cashier called, speaking so frantically that I couldn't understand what she was saying. "Bobby's gone to the hospital in an ambulance. It's so bad. You have to go there, right now!"

In complete worry, I grabbed my keys, left B with Sarah and drove as fast as I could. Again, with Sally's vague details, I had no idea how injured he



was or what could have possibly happened. My worst fear was that he'd spilled some kind of flammable chemical on himself.

When I arrived at the hospital, I found out that one of the lifts in the shop had malfunctioned. While he was under the car, it collapsed. He managed to try and move out of the way, but landed on his side and had both of his legs crushed in the process.

I was told that he was sedated due to the extreme amount of pain he was in, so I wasn't going to be able to have a conversation with him to find out more details, like if I needed to contact the insurance agency for the business.

Bobby was casted from his chest

and then down both legs. They had his lower body elevated, I assume to prevent clots. He looked terrible and I felt horrible for what had happened to him.

Since he was in the intensive care, he was only allowed one visitor and I knew I couldn't leave him there by himself. I had to be at his side to let him know that I cared.

Because I did care.

Bobby's anger problems didn't change the fact that he'd taken care of me for so long. He'd provided comfort when I felt all alone. I needed to give that back to him, for as long as it took.

He was released two weeks later, in which I'd already moved his

things into my place, since it was easier for Dave to come over and help me with getting him up. Bobby wasn't happy about not being in his own home, but I think once he realized that we'd be living together, he never said another word about it.

B was happy to see him all of the time, even though she didn't understand that his boo boo couldn't get better from a simple kiss.

Bobby would have a long road ahead of him to rehabilitate and the doctors had already scheduled him for his first surgery, requiring a rod to be placed in his back.

The shop closed for three weeks before the insurance company could

deem it safe. Thankfully, his employees could work even if he wasn't around, so once they'd reopened he'd still get a check to pay some of his bills.

In the meantime, I kept the construction going on my new house, including ramps for Bobby's wheelchair. They'd be temporary until he would no longer need them.

I know it was wrong to think it, but I knew he couldn't hurt me if he was helpless. It was game changing, giving me that last push to let him back into our lives.

I'd always believed that things happened for a reason. Bobby getting hurt was as if someone was telling me that we needed to stay together.

By Christmas Bobby was mobile in only a wheelchair. He spent a lot of his time propped up in bed and had lost twenty pounds since his accident. On most days he was in good spirits, considering that he could have lost his life.

He liked to read and play with B. She enjoyed pointing to pictures and having someone tell her what it was.

Things were good for us.

I don't know what made me do it, but I made a call without thinking it through, not knowing that it would set things into motion that could change everything.

I'd been thinking about Melissa and how I'd missed her. Since I was at a

good place in my life, I felt that it was finally alright to reach out to her.

“Hello.”

“Merry Christmas, stranger.”

“Katy? How are you?” She seemed happier to hear from me this time.

“I’m doing well. How are you?”

“Actually, I’m really good. I got engaged last night.”

“Are you kidding me? That’s amazing. Congratulations.”

“Yeah. I wasn’t expecting it.” I could hear the excitement in her voice.

“So, who’s the lucky guy? Do I know him?”

The line got quiet.

“Mel, are you there?”

“Katy, there’s something I need to tell you.”

All I could think of was that something happened to Brooks and she’d somehow heard about it. “What is it?” I needed to know immediately.

“I’m engaged to Branch.”

Biting my tongue was the best response, considering I was literally speechless.

“Katy, say something.”

“What do you expect me to say?”

“Say you don’t hate me. I didn’t go after him, if that’s what you’re thinking. He was upset and I missed you. It just happened.”

“What? How long has this been going on?” Suddenly I was curious.

“About a month after you left.” She started to cry on the other end of the phone. “That’s why I probably sounded short last time. He was standing next to me and I didn’t know what to say.”

Hearing her stating that Branch, who’d always loved me, was with her, made me cringe. It wasn’t because I wanted him. I hated that both of them would hook up. She knew what I’d gone through and what he did to keep me from Brooks. How could she think he would be good to her? “As long as you’re happy, I guess that’s all that matters.”

“Katy, I miss you. Please say you don’t hate me.”

“I don’t hate you, Mel. I’m shocked, but I don’t hate you.”



The line got quiet.

She was sobbing on the other line. "I feel horrible now."

"Does Brooks know?" I had to change the subject.

"They don't speak. I sent him a Christmas card from us, but he never responded."

"Is he okay?"

"Honestly, I have no idea. He hasn't come home and Branch doesn't think he will."

I was shaking, feeling my teeth chattering as I closed my eyes and thought about Brooks. I couldn't be mad at Melissa, especially after I'd had Brooks' child and kept it from everyone. I was the awful person. "Mel, can I have

his address?"

"Are you sure that's a good idea? It could make things worse."

Tears rolled down my eyes imagining him all alone, while I was shackled up raising his child with someone else. "Please, just give it to me."

I grabbed a pen and paper and wrote down the long international address and then I hung up with Mel. I didn't know if I'd ever call her again; not because I was jealous, but because I felt betrayed by everyone in my life.

I stared at the address for two days before throwing it in the trash. Reaching out to him would only make me feel worse.

Then B came walking into the room with the television remote. I know it was silly, but she flipped the channel and held onto the volume button. I rushed into the living room to turn it down before it could wake up Bobby.

On the screen was an interview from an army cadet that was stationed in Afghanistan. I looked from my daughter and back to the television. She was reaching for the remote again and started to get mad.

I knelt down in front of her and started to tear up. "I can't keep lying to myself can I, B? Mommy needs to do the right thing, doesn't she?"

She reached for my face. "Mama."

I went through two bags of trash before I found the paper with his address and then I sat there staring at it again.

Finally, the next night after dinner and putting B to bed, I sat at the kitchen table and started writing. I wasn't sure what I wanted to say, but knew the words would find me.

I had to close that chapter of my life and so did Brooks. Life was too short to be miserable. I wanted him to be happy, no matter where his future took him.

*Dear Brooks,*

*I hope this letter finds you in good health. I know it's been a long time and you may not even want to hear from me. I don't blame you for hating*

*me. I hate myself for what I did to you.*

*I walked away from everything because I wasn't willing to fight. I was a coward.*

*I'm not writing this letter to beg you for forgiveness. I don't deserve that. I'm writing to you because I know it's time to move on. I've held onto some crazy idea that one day you'll be back in my life again.*

*So, that brings me to the reason that I'm writing you this letter.*

*Tell me that I shouldn't hold onto you.*

*Tell me we're definitely over, so that I can finally let go.*

*Katy*

*After leaving my number and my*

new address, I sealed it up.

It took me a week to get the courage to mail it and then I played the waiting game. Nearly a month went by and I hadn't gotten a reply, but I also hadn't moved into the new place yet.

I was beginning to give up hope until I stopped by the new construction site and happened to be there when the mail man was driving by.

He pulled into the messy driveway and started walking toward me "Excuse me. Are you the owner of this property?"

I nodded. "Yes." I reached out my hand and shook his. "I'm Katy Parsons."

He looked down at an envelope

and seemed confused. “Parsons? Did you ever go by another name?”

“Michaels. What’s this about?” I knew what it was, because I hadn’t given anyone else my new address. I’d been meaning to buy a new mailbox, but it hadn’t been first on my priority list.

He handed the envelope to me. “I’ve got these two letters for you, but since you didn’t have a mailbox I was about to send them back. If you’re goin’ to be receiving mail here, I’d advise you to get a box out at the road. Otherwise, I’ll have to return it undelivered.”

I watched him leave before looking down at the envelope.

All I could do was stand there staring at the postage. There was no

return address, but it didn't need to be. I only knew one person in Afghanistan and that is where it had been postmarked.

With shaky hands and tear-filled eyes, I opened up the first envelope and pulled out a hand written letter.

*Dear Kat,*

*I hope this letter finds you.*

*I considered not writing you and letting it be, but I've kept things bottled up for so long and I don't know where to begin.*

*I'll start by asking you the one question that has been on my mind for two years now. Why did you run?*

*Please tell me it wasn't because you regretted being with me. Still, to this day, nothing has ever compared to*



*feeling you in my arms that night.*

*My life hasn't been easy the past two years. I've seen things that I wish I could wipe out of my memory and just when I think it can't get any worse, I see something even more devastating. I've seen children slaughtered and fathers being shot by their own sons and brothers.*

*I'm sorry for sharing that. It's just so hard, living here.*

*I still miss you every day Kat, so I guess that finally brings me to answer your question.*

*If you think it's time to let go, I will understand. Just know that I've thought about you every day since you walked out of my life. I'll never give up*

on you.

*Take care of yourself in  
whatever you decide.*

*Love always,*

*Brooks*

The second letter was postmarked two weeks later. I assume from it coming from another country that one got held up, or the mail man was a really nice guy, holding out in hopes to catch me.

*Dear Kat,*

*Okay, I lied when I said that it was okay with me if you let go. It's not okay.*

*I'm miserable over here and feel like I have nothing to come home for. I don't want to see my brother and*

*visiting my parents only reminds me of you.*

*You're still everywhere I turn.*

*God, I miss you so much. I miss the way you smell and the way you twirl your hair when you're nervous. Most of all, I miss my best friend.*

*Please Kat. Write me back.*

*Tell me to go to Hell.*

*Say something.*

*I have to go away for a few days, but I'll check the mail when I get back.*

*All my love, Brooks*

*That letter had a return address.*

*I folded them both together and got back in my car, realizing that I had to calm myself down before heading home.*

My heart was pounding like it was going to pop out of chest. I couldn't breathe and I knew I was having an anxiety attack. It had been so long since I was that upset and it wasn't because I was angry.

Brooks hadn't given up me and I didn't know what to do about it. I was married, caring for a handicapped husband who depended on me. Then there was Brooklyn. He deserved to know he had a daughter, but telling him in a letter wasn't going to happen.

No matter how I tried to calm myself down, it wasn't working.

I needed my mother, for yet another catastrophe that I'd put myself right smack in the middle of.

Hiding a child from her father and his family was no easy task. How could I have thought that it would ever be okay?

I started driving home, knowing what had to be done. I was going to keep writing Brooks until I got the courage to tell him the truth. In the meantime, I'd have to keep it all from Bobby. If he got wind that I was in touch with Brooklyn's father and I didn't know what he would do.

I feared for my life when it came down to the possibility of him feeling like he would lose Brooklyn.

Chapter 22

February 2013

Ever since the day that I got his

first letters I'd been going to the new construction house and checking for more. It took a whole week for the next one to roll in and I opened it with shaking hands, like the one before it.

*Dear Kat,*

*I can't even explain how happy it made me to get your letter. Now, it seems like I can't stop writing you. Every day I sit down and think of all the things that I want to tell you.*

*If you saw the pile of paper bundled in my trash can, you'd understand.*

*While this place lacks the feeling of home, I find peace knowing that you're out there somewhere thinking about me too. I can only hope*

*that one day, when I'm finally done with this tour, I can see you again. Would you be opposed to that? I understand if I'm being too forward. I just feel like we've missed so much time together.*

*Please write me back, as getting your letters is the happiest I've felt in a very long time.*

*Love, Brooks*

I could feel that lump in my throat, knowing guilt was the culprit. I was beating around the truth, unable to admit that I was not only married, but also the mother of his child.

Then again, I was so excited to hear from him that I couldn't help myself. I had to keep talking to him and

reading about how, after all this time, he still loved me.

I sat in my car and wrote him back.

*Dear Brooks,*

*I'm happy too. For so long I felt like you hated me. I've kept so much pain bottled up inside of me for what I did. I want you to know that walking away from you that day was still the hardest thing I've ever had to do. It was harder than losing my parents, because I knew I could have changed it, if I'd just been brave enough.*

*It's taken me a long time to be able to accept that there are things I could have done to prevent what happened to us. It all starts with*



*admitting that I should have known Branch had lied to me about your feelings.*

*About your brother...*

*I almost don't want to know when he and Melissa hooked up. It isn't like I care if it happened the day after I left. I knew I didn't want him. In fact, if I never see him again it will be too soon. Your brother is the reason that we are worlds apart. He's the reason that we've lived in Hell for two years. I will never forgive him for that.*

*Looking back now, I can actually see how he was full of shit most of the time. It makes me sick knowing I was that naïve.*

*I should be the one begging you*

*to write me back, because I sure as hell don't deserve your heart after what I did to you and have still been doing to you.*

*Getting our friendship back would mean everything to me.*

*I hope to hear from you soon.*

*Love always,*

*Katy*

I pulled the box of envelopes out of the glove compartment and addressed it, before sticking it in the mailbox for the next day's mail. I knew I couldn't risk Bobby finding out what was going on behind his back and I didn't even know how to approach it. We were finally at a point where we were both getting along. He was working hard on

being able to walk again. I'd put him through too much to break his heart when he was at his lowest. I'd already done that to someone I cared about and knew it would end badly.

For the next week I helped Bobby with his therapy, took care of B and fantasized about a future with Brooks. It was wrong. I needed to tell him so much that I was withholding.

I just couldn't seem to give up on the excitement of getting his letters.

Each one was more endearing than the last and soon I had a shoebox full of them.

By March, we were writing each other every single day. I knew things had gotten out of hand, but once again, I

couldn't stop myself.

It wasn't like I was going home to Bobby and professing my love to him. I took care of him, because he didn't have anyone else.

Then it came time to move into the new house. For a while, I'd thought that maybe he would be better and I could move there by myself, but Bobby had reached a halt in his progress. The physical therapy wasn't getting him any further and I feared that he was going to depend on me to be there for him.

Once we were in the new house, I had to sneak out to get the mail. I couldn't let Bobby see who my letters were coming from and he certainly couldn't know the things that we were

talking about. I knew, even without two good working legs, he'd find a way to hurt me.

The new house was bigger, giving us more room to live in, albeit it seemed small since we were all stuck there together. I knew I had to get out of the house a couple days a week or I was going to go crazy.

My problem was, I couldn't give Bobby the opportunity to get the mail. I got so afraid of it that I'd sometimes meet the mailman down the end of the road and retrieve it, in fear of him looking out the window and counting the pieces as I pulled them out of the box.

I know it was my guilty conscience, and that Bobby didn't have a

clue that I was talking to Brooks. Still, there had been so many days where I couldn't stop smiling and he had to know there was a reason.

About the same time as Bobby starting really questioning me, was when the letters came to a sudden stop.

I was okay for the first week, knowing that sometimes Brooks had to go to places where he couldn't mail anything.

During that time, Bobby confronted me.

“Katy, what's goin' on?”

“What do you mean?” I was washing lettuce to make a salad for dinner, while he sat at the table feeding B pieces of chicken.

“You know what I mean. For two weeks you’ve said hardly anything to me. You think I haven’t seen you watchin’ for the mailman?”

It was a good thing I wasn’t looking in his direction. “Bobby, seriously, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was probably just hoping one of my magazines would come, since they have such good coupons inside of them.”

I turned around and started setting the table. “No. I think you’re hidin’ somethin’ from me. I think you’ve gone out and got yourself a lawyer and you’re plannin’ on slappin’ me with divorce papers. I’m tellin’ you right now, Katy. If that’s what you’re doin’,

you best rethink that decision. Cripple or not, I won't let you divorce me."

I looked right at him, relieved that's all he thought it was. "Bobby, I haven't seen a lawyer. I think being in this house for so long is getting to your head."

I couldn't admit that I was worrying more about Brooks as the seconds passed.

Bobby grabbed me and pulled me toward the side of his wheelchair. "I miss you."

I felt bad for him sometimes, knowing for sure that I'd never love him like I should. "I'm right here."

"Can I have a kiss?"

I closed my eyes and pressed my



lips against Bobby's. What I thought would be a short peck turned out to be more and I knew I couldn't pull away and make him more curious about my actions.

He finally ended it, only to reach his hand in between my thighs. "You know, it's been a long time since I've felt you. Maybe we should put B to bed early and break in the new bedroom."

I smiled and ran my hands through his hair.

As I thought of Brooks, and knew that I wanted it to be him, I was obligated to be the wife that Bobby needed, even if it felt more like a job than a relationship.

I leaned down and kissed him

again. "It's a date," while cringing inside.

It wasn't until April that I received my letters returned back to me. There was no explanation. They were just stamped return to sender.

I went into town one day, after the mail had been delivered, and headed to the library. From there, I was able to locate where Brooks had been stationed and a contact number for his commanding officer.

I feared that Brooks was gone, knowing that he'd have to have a good reason to cut off communication with me, especially when his last letter talked about us being together again.

Of course, you can't just call a

commanding officer and expect him to answer. I was transferred nearly ten times and finally got a voicemail. After leaving my information, I hung up knowing that he'd never call me back. I didn't have security clearance, and I certainly wasn't his family.

Finally, by the end of the month I was so upset that I called Melissa.

“Hello?”

“It's me, Katy. Listen, I need to ask you something, because I can't stand not knowing.”

“Are you calling about Brooks? How did you hear?”

I dropped the phone and it shattered into a million pieces on the floor. I didn't need to put my phone

together to know what had happened, and I certainly didn't want to put it back together to have her call me back and tell the details of when or how it happened.

Brooks was gone, and my heart was shattered.

I'd never have that reunion with him, or be able to wrap my arms around him. I'd never be able to look him in the eyes and tell him how much I loved him.

I'd never be able to introduce him to his beautiful little girl.

I fell to the ground realizing that he was never going to know about her. I could have told him and he could have died knowing that he'd created something so perfect. I'd written him

more than fifty letters and never mentioned having a child or being married. The latter I knew was for the better, assuming that when he died at least he'd known we were on good terms.

An older lady that I recognized from church came and helped me get up off the floor. It didn't help. The moment I climbed in my car I lost it. I didn't know who to call or what to do. I didn't even know if they'd bring his body home.

What if there was no body left?

What if he'd died and been blown up?

It happened all of time.

The longer I had to think about it, the more it stabbed at my heart.

He was my everything, my reason for breathing. How could I look at B and know she'd never meet him?

I didn't go home for another two hours, in which I sobbed uncontrollably in my car. I didn't know what to do or who I could talk to about it.

Finally, I pulled up in the driveway knowing I had to go inside.

He was waiting for me. "Where have you been? B's hungry."

I stood there, with swollen, burning eyes, and just stared at him.

"Katy, what's wrong, darlin'?"

Then I lost it, right in front of Bobby and B. "He's dead, Bobby."

With two braces still on his legs, he swung around in his chair and

grabbed my hand. "Talk to me, Katy. Who's dead?"

I closed my eyes and prepared for him to smack me, or worse for sneaking behind his back. "Brooks. He's dead." I sobbed.

Bobby pulled me on top of him, fighting how it must have hurt him. He wrapped his arms so tightly around me. "Baby, I'm so sorry. It doesn't even matter how you found out. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

Of all the times that he'd had a right to hate me and be angry, there he was holding and comforting me. "He's never going to know her, now. I should have told him when I had the chance. I kept her from him and now he'll never

know.”

He kissed my head and rocked me, while keeping a tight hold on my body. I knew I was shaking and it was probably bad for B to see me like that. The only good thing was that she wouldn't remember it when she was older. She'd never remember the day when I found out her real daddy was gone. She'd never have to feel the pain of being without him and it was the only thing I was thankful for. If she felt half of what I was feeling, I'd never forgive myself.

While Bobby held me, I realized that the only reason I didn't want to die myself was sitting there in her high chair.



For as long as I lived, I was going to teach her about her daddy, and the hero that he was to his country and especially to me.

Chapter 23

Pain.

Hurt.

Agony.

Torture.

Fear.

Nothingness.

Those feelings repeated over and over.

I didn't know how to carry on, or even if I wanted to.

I was lost, holding onto memories, hoping for miracles.

I knew he wasn't going to walk

through my door, but admitting that meant admitted he was gone forever.

I couldn't fathom the idea of him not being somewhere, thinking about me the way I was thinking about him. It hurt so much knowing I couldn't have been there with him in his last minutes on this earth. I wondered if he thought about me, or if it happened quick and he didn't have to suffer.

I was also curious how his family was coping, and if Branch had finally admitted that love was more important than any competition.

With Brooks death came so many unanswered questions.

It's amazing how life can change in the blink of an eye. Within seconds,

all of my hopes and dreams were gone. The only thing keeping me coherent was the two people that depended on me every day.

Bobby held me all night, only taking breaks to lend a hand with B. I think me being upset was making her on edge. She was fussy for no apparent reason. No matter what I tried to do to comfort her, she wouldn't settle. He coaxed her and sang to her like he always did and she was soon fast asleep in her room.

That night I laid in bed, wrapped in his arms and weeping uncontrollably. He never asked me for an explanation, nor did he act jealous or inconsiderate. In fact, Bobby was heaven sent,

worrying only about getting me calmed down before anything else.

Even when I woke in the middle of the night, he was there for me until I could fall back asleep.

This didn't just happen for the next day or two. Weeks went by and my depression only got worse. By the time I'd gained enough courage to reach out, it was too late. I knew Brooks' family would have already had some kind of memorial, besides, knowing I was the reason that he'd joined the military wouldn't sit well with two parents who'd just lost their son.

With the help of the church and Bobby, I found a therapist who I started going to that was trying to help me cope.

They didn't just need to help me heal my broken heart. They needed to replace it completely. I was shattered, so much so that I felt like every day was like living in a parallel universe. I went about the motions, but never accomplished anything. I hardly ate and barely slept.

Night after night, I'd sit there reading my shoebox of letters, treasuring Brooks' last words to me, as if we were meant to reconnect again, just to say goodbye.

Aside from my therapist, I'd finally decided that it was time to share my feelings with Bobby. After all, in the wake of losing Brooks, he'd been my rock and still was.

I'd asked him to give me a

couple days to conjure up enough courage to talk about it. It used up my energy when all I could do was cry about it.

We sat down and I had the box of letters so that he could have the option of reading every one. If I wanted to move forward, he needed to know what I'd done behind his back. If he hated me for it, I would understand. I deserved it.

He wasn't exactly a saint himself, and knowing that was the only reason that I'd decided to tell him the truth. I figured if I could forgive him for hitting me, he could forgive me, even though loving someone else may have seemed a bit different than a few slaps. After losing Brooks, I would have

traded a lifetime of physical abuse for one more day with him.

Bobby sat there across from me, waiting.

I folded my hands together and started crying even before I could say two words. “I’m sorry. It’s harder than I thought.”

He reached over and grabbed my hand, squeezing it tight. “You sure you want to do this? I’m ain’t goin’ anywhere, Katy. I can wait until you’re able to do it.”

“No,” I shook my head. “I have to.”

Bobby waited for me to get myself together. “Baby, just breathe.”

I took a few deep breaths and

looked right at him. “I told you the story about how my parents died and I had to go live with the Valentines. You know I was engaged to Branch and on the night before my wedding I slept with Brooks, and that was the reason that I left town and everyone behind. I couldn’t take the embarrassment of what I’d done. I couldn’t look them in the eyes, so I ran.”

“I remember you tellin’ me.”

“And then you remember when we met I told you that I wasn’t ready to move on, because my heart was broken?”

He pulled away and held up the palms of his hands. “That, my dear, is somethin’ I wouldn’t forget. It’s been hard knowing



you'd never feel that way about me. Hell, I think it sent me over the edge several times. I never meant to hurt you, Katy. You have to know that.”

“Yeah, I do. Anyway, I swear to you that I never spoke to Brooks since the night before my wedding. He was in Afghanistan, and I was here with you. Then I got pregnant and we got married. I suppose if I was given the chance, I would have tried to reach out to him, but I never had the nerve, at least not until a few months ago. You see, I felt like things were going good and enough time had passed to ask him for closure. After getting his address from my old friend, I sent him one letter, asking exactly for that. I just wanted him to somehow tell

me to move on, so that you and I could move forward. I didn't know he would write me back. Not only did he tell me he'd never given up on me, but he talked about seeing me again someday."

I waited for Bobby to yell or scream. He ran his hands over his face a couple times and tightened his lips, but didn't say a word.

"Bobby, the letters continued. We wrote to each other almost every day until they just stopped." I started crying again. "I think that's when I knew he was gone."

I sat there with my face covered sobbing. I could hear him opening the box and unfolding one the pieces of paper. The room got quiet and finally I

looked up to see him reading it. I didn't know which letter it was, or what it said exactly, not that it mattered. Bobby was getting the full truth, because he deserved it. I couldn't live with the lie when he was offering me comfort without question. He needed to know that Brooks was my weakness, no matter what it did to our marriage.

Letter after letter, he read them, sitting there across from me in silence, until he was finished. He sat the last one down and looked at me with tears in his own eyes. "Katy, he never mentioned B."

I shook my head and sobbed more. "Because I never told him."

His concerned face turned to

shock and all of the sudden it was like a light switch had gone off in his head. “Why would you do that?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I was scared of how he would react. I was scared of what it would do to you and your relationship with her.”

A tear fell down his face. “You thought about me?”

“Of course I did. Just because I have feelings for Brooks doesn’t mean I don’t care about you, Bobby.”

He covered his face again and I prepared for him to lash out. “I just have one question for you.”

“Okay. Just ask.” I was still sobbing, but I was calm enough to hear what he was saying to me.

I watched as he wiped his eyes and looked right into mine. "I'm real sorry to ask you this right now, but I think considerin' all you've told me, I have the right to ask." He sniffled and played with his wedding ring as he spoke. "What happens now? What happens with us?"

"What do you mean?"

"What I want to know is, after all that's happened it's clear he was what was standing in the way of us being happy. Now what happens? Do I get another chance? Can we rebuild all that's been broken, or is this your way of sayin' goodbye to me to? Because, I'm tellin' you right now, I've been patient and understandin'. I've sat here listening

to you tell me you loved someone else. I read that man's letters to you. All I can tell you is that I want what he had. I want to feel that love and what it could do for us."

Bobby was right. As much as it hurt to admit, I'd strewn him along and pretty much used him, knowing all along that if Brooks showed up one day, nothing would stop me from being with him.

I hadn't been fair.

The thing was, at that very moment, I needed Bobby. I needed him more than ever before. It wasn't just about me either. Bobby was the only father B would ever know. I owed it to her to give things a second chance; to

start over, even if it was because my first choice was gone forever.

“I never realized how important you were until all of this happened. I don’t expect you to understand, but I need you.”

Bobby crossed his arms and looked right at me. “You need me? Since when?”

“Since right now. Does it really matter what circumstances made me say it?”

He finally smiled. “No, you’re right. It doesn’t matter. What matters is me being in that little girl’s life. She’s my world, Katy, and so are you.”

I could feel my lips trembling. “I know.”

He reached over and touched the top of my hand. "I love you."

I closed my eyes, feeling that love radiate through me; the love that Bobby had always wanted to give me. Without regard for what I was doing, or even if it was the truth, I looked right at him. "I love you, too."

I'd never love Bobby the way that I loved Brooks, but I loved him for loving me and B. I loved him for putting all of his feelings aside to comfort me when I lost the other man in my life. It took courage and understanding and not every man would have been able to do it. Bobby had showed me compassion and now it was my turn to stop holding onto something that would never be and



move forward with what already was.

I owed him a lot and I vowed right then and there that I was going to do everything in my power to be a better partner to him and to our family.

In my eyes we were even.

Chapter 24

May 2013

There was one thing good about my situation. The more I focused on my marriage, the less I dwelled on things I couldn't change, like losing Brooks.

Bobby and I were still seeing a counselor, except we'd been going together to help our marriage move in the right direction.

Since I'd destroyed my cell phone and never wanted to hear from

Melissa or anyone else again, I decided to get a new phone with a new number. My life had enough drama and I just needed to stay focused.

It was amazing how much a difference it made in my relationship when I gave it my all. I'd never been able to communicate with Bobby the way we were, and to make things even better, he was getting around with the help of a walker. He'd been going into the shop a few days a week to make calls and do some backed-up paperwork. I spent those days visiting Sarah, grocery shopping and spending quality alone time with B. I can't say it was easy looking into her blue eyes and seeing so much of Brooks there. When

she smiled, it melted my heart and I knew she was the greatest gift he could have ever given me.

It was in the middle of the week when I started noticing an unfamiliar truck parked outside of my house. The first day I just figured it was someone from the permit office doing a double check on the property.

The next day, when Bobby noticed the same truck, I started to get nervous. After we'd both agreed that we didn't recognize the vehicle, we called the sheriff, feeling as if we were being scoped out for a robbery.

As a favor to Bobby, he parked on the road and waited for the conspicuous truck to show up.

It never did.

A week went by and we didn't see it again.

Bobby had made a commitment to service all of the school buses in the area for their annual inspection and it required him to be present to sign off on each job. I knew he was going to be gone the whole week during the day, so after dropping him off at work that Monday, B and I went into town to do some shopping.

I'd wanted new things for the house and hadn't had time to really go out and shop. We headed to a bigger town, called Columbia, where there were malls and larger stores to shop at.

I hadn't thought about it being

extremely close to the Army base.

Everywhere I drove, and each store I entered, I saw people wearing fatigues. As a direct response to it, I would lose it, thinking of Brooks and how I'd never see him again. I ended up spending the majority of the day sitting in the car with B, crying my eyes out.

On the way home, we were sitting at a light and a group of soldiers pulled up in an open camouflaged jeep. My windows were down and I was trying to avoid eye contact. I didn't notice if they were waving to her, but in the rear view mirror I could see her waving to them, full of smiles.

When the light changed to green I started driving. They were still beside

me and she was waving up a storm. I reached back and touched her little foot. “B, your daddy was a soldier. One day, I’ll tell you all about him.”

We kept driving until finally we were on the open road with no vehicles near us. Out of nowhere, B started saying the word, ‘daddy’, over and over again. My stomach dropped as she continued to repeat it. By the time we’d made it to Bobby’s shop, she’d fallen asleep, but the damage had been done to my heart.

He climbed in the car and immediately knew that I’d had a terrible day. After leaning over to kiss me, he let his lips linger near my ear. “What’s wrong, baby?”

I grabbed his hand and nestled my face against his. “I just want to go home, put on some pajamas and lay with you, if that’s alright?”

He kissed me slowly, making sure I knew he was perfectly alright with holding me for as long as I needed it. Out of nowhere, things started to heat up in the front seat. Bobby had his hand down my pants and had started massaging my sex while our tongues mingled together. I was desperate for his affections to heal my heart and was ready to climb on top of him and make it happen.

Then B woke up. “Mama. Dada.”

We stopped and looked back at her sitting there, smiling. Bobby gave

her all of his attention. “There’s my girl. Did you have a good nap?”

“Out!” She was done being in her car seat and I knew it was time to get home.

It was weird pulling on our road and seeing the truck sitting there again. Bobby seemed alarmed, but as we approached, it pulled away. Bobby got a license plate number and called the sheriff again. As nervous as I was about it, I stayed focused on finishing what we’d started in the car.

We worked together, playing with B until she was exhausted and out cold for the night.

Bobby led me into our bedroom and pulled my shirt over my head. He



was doing well standing up, but couldn't do it without help for a long period of time. One of his legs was almost fully healed, while the other was still in pretty bad shape.

I looked into his eyes and pulled off his shirt. "Make love to me."

He kissed me, sucking on my bottom lip before pulling away. "I love when we're like this, Katy. I feel like, after all this time, I finally have you."

I pushed him until he sat down on the bed. My pants and underwear came off next, and I climbed on top of him. "You do."

That was all he needed to hear. After removing his pants we got under the covers. Bobby took his time, kissing

me in all the right places, while holding both of my hands. I savored his kisses and the way our hands fit together. Giving myself to Bobby was easy when it was what I wanted. It had taken me a long time to do it, but since I had, I'd discovered that he wasn't just a wonderful lover. Bobby was an emotional lover, and the more he received himself, the more he gave back. I could feel his love with every kiss and absorbed it into my body as if it were giving me strength to move on.

He let go of me so that his hands could trace over my skin. With every slip of his hand, my breathing increased. He thumbed my nipples and flicked them with his tongue, causing me to gasp. I

was so hot for him and wanted him inside of me, giving me everything he had to offer.

When I knew he was starting to hurt, we switched positions, with me on top. I sat up and released my hair-tie, letting my long strands fall down over my nipples. Bobby licked his lips, watching me run one hand between them. He positioned himself and entered me slowly, never taking his sexy eyes off of me. We moved in sync, enjoying the feelings that being intimate gave us.

After some time, we lay there naked next to each other. He played with my hair while kissing on my hand. “Katy, can I ask you somethin’?”

I nodded and smiled, while

running my hand through his thick, dark hair. “Anything.”

“Have a baby with me, darlin’. Let’s give B a sister or brother. I love her as if she were my own, but nothin’ would make me more happy than to have another one.”

It was one thing that we’d never talked about. I considered the idea for only a few seconds before knowing what my answer would be. After placing a long kiss on his lips, I pulled away and looked him right in the eyes. “Okay.”

Bobby’s smile let me know he was thrilled. “Really? You’d have a baby with me?”

I shoved him playfully. “You’re my husband. We’ve been through Hell

and back. I get that it hasn't been easy being married to me. Things are different now. I can't live in the past and expect to be happy."

"All I've ever wanted was for you to be happy. I know I never told you this, but I knew the first time I met you that you were somethin' special. After what I've done, I never would have expected you to let me back into your life. I get that you did it because I got hurt. No matter what it was, I'm grateful, Katy. You and B give me all I could ever need."

I smiled, knowing that if I hadn't had Bobby, I didn't know where I'd be. "I'm not going anywhere, you know."

He pulled me close up against

his chest. "Hearin' that never gets old."

While playing with the small patch of hair on his chest I smiled, knowing that we had a chance at making a good life together. "Get used to it."

I knew a baby wouldn't solve all of my problems, but we were in a good place and I wanted him to know it.

Through our worst of times, Bobby had always done one thing right; being a father.

B was the perfect example of how deep his love could go. I wasn't making excuses for his violent side, but for some reason I could sympathize with why he felt like it had to go that far. After trying so hard to make me happy, I was basically shoving it in his face that I

would never love him. It had to have hurt him intensely. How else would someone feel if the one person they loved unconditionally could never be true to them?

Being in Bobby's arms was so different than how it used to be. I felt safe and protected, how a wife should feel. I knew that being pregnant with his child would give him that one thing that he thought he'd never have with me.

I wanted him to know I was fully vested in our family.

Though my heart would always ache for Brooks and what we could have been, I had to believe that he was out there somewhere watching over me and B. Believing that was going to give me

the strength to move on.

The only thing standing in the way had been me and I was ready to accept that it was time.

I had to.

Chapter 25

July 4<sup>th</sup> 2013

Our town's annual parade and celebration was in full swing. My almost two year old, B, swung a flag around in her hand as the first group of performers walked by in the parade.

I knew he'd be miserable later, but Bobby was insistent on walking with just a cane.

I scanned the crowd to try and find Sarah and Dave. Their daughter was going to be riding on the church float and



they went off to get a closer view so they could snap pictures.

Bobby grabbed B and put her on his shoulders when the crowds got too heavy for her to see. Besides, I felt much better about her being in his arms than on the ground, where she could run off in a second.

I had to say that two years had made a huge difference. I stood next to Bobby and felt proud of the life we had. Though I still wasn't pregnant, I was hopeful that we would get good news before the year was over.

B was getting a kick out of the attractions. She clapped and screamed in excitement as she watched, and when the horses came trotting through she started

hopping on top of her father's shoulders. I laughed and snapped a picture, loving the memories that we were making together.

It was astounding how different my life was going with the help of a good therapist. I guess the reason it was working this time was because I wanted it to. Before, I was incapable of letting go. I wanted to have that piece of hope that I'd be with Brooks again. Now that I knew it would never happen, it had changed my whole outlook on life.

Just like my parents, someone else that I'd loved was taken too early in their life. This time, I didn't get a call saying goodbye, not that I think I would even want something like that. I don't

know what I would have done if I heard him in pain or suffering and I hated even imagining it.

That was the thing that I talked about when I met with my doctor. I still had feelings, even though I was making baby steps at getting on with life.

When people say out of sight out of mind, it isn't always that easy. I still thought about Melissa and Branch. It wasn't my business, but I wanted to know how and when they'd gotten together. I wanted to know what he'd done to gain her trust and earn her undying love. Most of all, I wanted to know when she knew she wanted him.

The night before my nuptials, when all Hell had broken loose; she

thought she was going to have Brooks. My thoughts now were that maybe she always had a thing for Branch. It was possible that they'd even messed around while we were a couple. It wasn't like we were compatible. Branch was the worst lover that I'd ever been with, not that I had much to compare him to.

All I knew was that Brooks and Bobby made making love a satisfying experience, where Branch lacked the ability to satisfy anyone other than himself. If Melissa was okay with that, then it was her loss, not mine.

Bobby turned to look at me with a big smile on his face. We'd been making love almost every night, hoping that one of those encounters had given us

the miracle we desired. I was becoming so content with him and our life together, knowing that if he was all I had for the rest of my life, it would be enough. Given the chance, he'd proven to be exactly who I needed him to be.

A father.

A husband.

A friend.

Just as I turned back toward the parade, I noticed the soldiers and veterans marching by. Then, on a float, were a bunch of disabled vets that had been injured fighting for our country. The crowd got loud with applause to honor the beautiful men that had risked their lives for the love of American. I got butterflies, hearing the amount of

people cheering them on and filling them with such a respectful salute. My heart was heavy as I watched each of them passing by us.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw B waving to them, as if she somehow remembered waving to them in the car a while back. She was dressed in her red, white and blue outfit, with two curly pigtails in her hair. Out of every child there, I swore she was most beautiful.

As I turned to look up, my mind started playing tricks on me. I swore that a soldier in fatigues looked just like Brooks. He was sitting in the back of army vehicle with a bunch of other soldiers. It was too fast to make a

distinction and he was wearing a hat, so I knew I'd been imagining it. It still didn't make me feel any better. As much as I tried to block it out, there were reminders all around me that would never go away.

After the parade, we retreated to the area where the food stands had been set up. Bobby insisted on standing in line and getting a funnel cake to share with B and me. I was reluctant for the reason that I knew she'd be covered in powdered sugar and ruin her pretty clothes, but her dad said all he cared about was her having fun and being happy. What makes a child happier than a handful of sugar?

While we were standing there, I

looked around the crowd for people that we knew from town and from church. Everyone was in attendance, and even though our town was small, it was still a huge crowd that came from all around to celebrate.

From a distance I spotted the military truck and the soldiers climbing out of it. I squinted my eyes and attempted to focus enough to spot the guy that reminded me of Brooks.

I followed the group of them walking through the crowds of people and tried to single out each of their faces. From far away they all looked the same, unless they were a different race.

We moved up in our line and my view of them became restricted. I felt



like I had to keep looking, as if seeing this guy would reassure me that I was acting and being crazy again. I knew it wasn't Brooks, but I had to see it for myself.

When four of them came back into view they were getting closer. I caught eyes with each one and didn't see the guy that had gotten me so worked up.

By the time we got served our drink and dessert, the men had walked by and I was left with disappointment.

We found a spot in the grass and sat down so that our food would cool and B would be comfortable. She played in the grass, picking some and tossing it in the air. A group of balloons had gotten loose and were rising in the blue sky

above us. B stood up and pointed to them. When they got up higher, she went running into the crowd of people. I stood up and ran after her, knowing she was going to get knocked down by someone that didn't see her coming. I could hear Bobby saying something behind me when I caught up to her and snatched her up in my arms. While hugging her and explaining that she couldn't do that again, I spotted the soldier that I'd been looking for. He had a sling on his arm. From the side he looked so much like Brooks, but with short hair and a hat, anyone could look similar. I smiled and turned to see Bobby coming and reaching for B, and when he grabbed her I flipped my hair and looked over one

more time, hoping to see the face of the Brooks look alike.

That's when everything went *very* wrong *very* fast.

The guy turned, enough for me to see his face and the resemblance was uncanny. He was still far enough away and I knew part of it was because I wanted it to be him so much.

I finally caught eyes with him and felt myself getting dizzy. The next thing I knew I was lying down on the grass with a bunch of people around me. I sat up quickly, looking out frantically for the soldier, but he wasn't anywhere around me.

This was the second year in a row that I'd passed out over seeing a

soldier. I seriously needed mental help.

“Katy, are you alright, darlin’? You passed out?”

I nodded and looked over to see him holding B’s hand. “I don’t know what happened.” I lied.

The truth was that I’d gotten myself so worked up that I made myself believe that Brooks was not only alive, but in the same small town as me, walking around as if nothing had happened.

“Do you want to go home?”

I felt horrible and going home would have been the best medicine, except I wanted B to see the fireworks. “No. I’ll be fine. I didn’t eat all day and I felt dizzy.”

Bobby took B and went to get me something to eat, while I sat under a tree feeling like an idiot.

Sarah came running up, seeing if I was alright. “Girl, what happened to you? Bobby said you collapsed. Are you feelin’ alright? Do you think you’re pregnant?”

“No. I’m not pregnant. I just got my period yesterday.”

“What is it then? Were you feelin’ bad? Do you think it’s the heat?”

It was pretty hot out, but I knew that the weather wasn’t the reason for me losing my head again. “No. I think I’m just going crazy. Sarah, I could have sworn I saw Brooks. I know it wasn’t him and that he’s gone, but I swear it

was him.” I started to get upset. “What is wrong with me? Why can’t I just let go? Every time I feel like I’m doing good, something brings me right back down.”

She wrapped her arms around me. “Healin’ takes time, Katy. You of all people should know that. Sometimes, you need to take a deep breath and thank God for all the things you do have in your life.” She pointed to Bobby and B. “You’ve got two people right there that love you to pieces. Maybe instead of dwelling on the things you can’t change, you could focus on the beautiful life you already have.”

I smiled at her. “I do love them, you know. Bobby’s been my knight in shining armor. Without him I don’t know

where I'd be."

She patted me on the leg. "I'm glad you gave him another chance. He seems real happy."

I looked up and saw them walking toward me. Bobby smiled and I did too. "We both are."

They sat down beside me and B had an ice cream that she was licking. "More chocolate?"

Bobby kissed me on the cheek. "Anything for my girl."

He handed me a sandwich and opened one for himself. Sarah stood up as I bit into mine and savored the pit beef and barbeque sauce.

"I'll see you all later. Dave's over there buyin' the kids sparklers. I

just know it's a terrible idea, but you know how men are. They've always got to be the ones to buy kids dangerous things, like pellet guns and things that require bein' lit on fire.”

We waved goodbye and I turned my attention back to Bobby. He reached over and wiped the sauce off of my face. “You feelin’ better?”

I smiled. “Everything’s better when you’re with me.”

I meant it too.

Everything was better.

Chapter 26

July 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013

It had been months since I’d gotten my last letter from Brooks, and I was so sure that there wouldn’t be any



more, but two days after my episode at the celebration, I was staring at a letter in my mailbox that had been postmarked in February.

I felt nauseous.

When I headed inside, and checked on my sleeping daughter, I sat down at the kitchen table staring at it, as if it was my mind playing tricks on me again. How, after all this time had something gotten lost in the shuffle and then reappeared when I was trying so hard to move forward.

Even without opening it, the damage was already apparent. I couldn't sit there and lie to myself. Assuming that it had gotten lost, why would the Lord be so hard on me? Was I really that bad of a

person that I needed to be reminded everywhere I turned that Brooks was dead and he wasn't coming back? Was it some sign that I was on the wrong path in life? Did God or my parents from up above somehow have other plans for me besides my life with Bobby?

Whatever the case was, I knew that opening the letter was going to destroy any progress that I'd made.

An hour had passed and I was still sitting there, avoiding the tears and doing my breathing exercises. As I looked over at the clock a second time, I was sure that I needed to get up and leave the note intact.

To say that I went about my day as if nothing had happened would have

been a lie. No matter what I was doing, I was thinking about that envelope and what could be inside. After hours of trying to reason with myself, I was sitting back down at the table, staring at it again.

My hands were shaking and my entire body felt cold. It was a terrible decision, albeit I was making it anyway, on account of having to know what it said. My heart yearned for one more acknowledgement of his love for me.

I tore open the envelope and started unfolding the paper. After closing my eyes and giving myself a few minutes to relax, I opened them again.

The first thing I noticed was that it wasn't his handwriting.

*Dear Kat,*

*Sorry it's been a couple weeks since I wrote you and I know you're probably wondering why my handwriting sucks so bad. I will first start by saying that I'm alright. You can stop worrying about me.*

*My left hand, the trusty one that I've done everything with my whole life, is out of commission.*

*It was a late night call and none of us had gotten much sleep. My lieutenant had us running into building that had been attacked, retrieving any living bodies we could find. I came across this father, holding a little girl tight in his arms. As I approached, I realized that he'd shielded the impact*

*and lost his life protecting her.*

*After prying her out of his rigged hold, she started to scream, as if I was there to harm her. Everything happened so fast after that. I started running, holding her in one arm and my gun with the other. I got to the corner of the building when I heard the grenade being thrown. The only problem was that it was so dark I couldn't see the direction that it had rolled. Knowing that any second it was going to blow, I threw myself over her, blocking her with my arm and hands from injury.*

*The impact was insane, shoving shards of metal and debris into my arm. I could smell my flesh burning, but*

*knew saving her was still a top priority.*

*Then my body gave out on me; unable to withstand the amount of pain I was under any longer. I collapsed out on the road, with the girl still in my arms.*

*When I woke up, I was in the hospital. I had no recollection of the day it was, or how I'd gotten there. One thing I did know was that my hand and arm was casted and I had no feeling in my fingertips.*

*I found out that I suffered from a concussion and messed up my arm pretty bad. They think it will get better, but for now, I can't perform my Ranger duties.*

*So, that's the bad news.*

*Now for the good.*

*Katy, I hope you're sitting down.*

*I'm coming home.*

*Well, not exactly home. I've been re-assigned to a new base and you're never going to guess where.*

*Fort Jackson.*

*I can imagine that you're probably in tears and wondering how long you have to wait to see my handsome face again. It's going to be soon, but I'm not exactly sure when they'll give me the go-ahead. It's just a bunch of ridiculous paperwork really.*

*At some point I'm sure I will have to have surgery in Bethesda at Walter Reid, so that will be a joy.*

*Seeing the family hasn't been the highest of my priorities.*

*None of that matters right now.*

*My temporary profile for now will allow me to assist with combat training and since it's what I do best, I know I'll enjoy it.*

*So, I want you to know, I'm coming home for you, Katy. We're going to start over and be together. This time there won't be anything standing in our way. We can make our own lives now.*

*I can't tell you how excited I am to hold you in my arms. I feel like it's been forever.*

*I'll let you know when I'm in town, by probably stopping by*



*unannounced to surprise the hell out of you. Be on the lookout for me.*

*I love you so much.*

*See you soon,*

*Brooks*

There were no words.

I couldn't move.

It wasn't possible.

He couldn't be alive?

With no regard for anything else going on in my life, I grabbed my phone and dialed a number that I never thought I'd ever be calling again. I didn't even know if he'd still have the same number, but I had to try. I had to know the truth and didn't want to upset Danica if it was all a mistake.

“Hello?”

I recognized it, even after all the time that has passed. “Branch, it’s me, Katy.”

“Katy? Wow.” He cleared his throat, as if I’d left him speechless. “Are you okay? Is it Brooks?”

Hearing him ask that answered the burning question. I had to still ask. “He’s okay?”

Branch seemed confused. “I have no idea if he’s alright. We don’t exactly speak you know.”

“I called a while back and Mel...”

He interrupted. “She started to tell you he’d gotten hurt and you hung up on her. When she tried to call you back, you wouldn’t answer. What happened?”

Are you in some kind of trouble? Did my brother run out on you or something? I know you're together now. It's no secret why he purposely got stationed so far away. We could all guess the reason."

I was already crying. "No. I'm fine. I think I just got confused. I need to go."

"Katy, wait! Mom and Dad miss you. Hell, even I miss you. You should come home in September. We all still visit the graves on the anniversary. You not being there makes it even harder."

"Branch, I wish it were that simple. I have a life here."

"Just think about it. It would make my mom's year if you called her or came to visit. She loves you so much."

“I left you at the alter after sleeping with your brother. How could you say she loves me?”

Branch chuckled. “Katy, I’m in a good place now. You were supposed to be with Brooks. I let my jealousy control my life back then. Now I lost my best friends because of it. You leaving didn’t just hurt us. It ripped us apart.”

“I have to go, Branch.” I hung up the phone knowing that I couldn’t get into a deep conversation with him until I found out where Brooks was and why I hadn’t seen him yet.

Then it hit me.

I thought about the man in the conspicuous truck outside and how it appeared like I was being watched.

After looking in the phone book, I called the sheriff's office and left him a message to call back.

Ten minutes later, I had him on the phone. "Mrs. Parsons. Is your visitor back, because he assured me that he wouldn't be bothering you or your husband anymore? I'd like to think that a soldier is good on his word."

My mouth dropped.

Another confirmation.

"Soldier? Did you happen to catch his name?"

"Let me see if I can remember. It was a weird one, like his parents were hippies or somethin'. Thorne, Storm, or maybe it was Brooks? I know his last name was Valentine. Sergeant Valentine.

Do you recognize it?"

I was shaking so badly that I wondered if he could hear my teeth chattering. "No. Thank you for your time."

I hung up before he could start asking me questions.

I closed my eyes and tried to think about everything for the past few months. I thought about all of the times that the little truck had been parked outside and why he hadn't contacted me.

That's when I think I knew the reason and I understood why he'd never talked to me again.

He'd seen Bobby and maybe even B. He'd seen the name on my mailbox and realized that I was married.

I covered my face with my hands and bawled like I'd never cried before in my life. Not only was Brooks alive, but I'd broken his heart again and not even realized it.

How could I have been such a fool?

For that matter, how in the hell was I going to even explain it to him?

When I heard Bobby's truck pulling in the driveway, I wiped off my face and stuck the note under our mattress. He was going to notice that I hadn't done anything all day, so I got under the covers and pretended to be resting.

He came in and kissed me on the forehead. "Hey, babe. Are you sick? I

could have come home early.”

I pretended to have just woken up and rubbed my eyes. “I don’t feel good. I thought if I took a nap I’d feel better.”

He sat down on the bed and pulled me into a hug. “I’ll make you some soup and have leftovers. B can share with me.”

He got up and walked out of the room, leaving me to sulk in my web of guilt. I had so many emotions running through me that I knew I was about to lose my mind. I had to get control over myself until I could figure out what to do and how to reach out to Brooks. After all the time that had passed, he had to know that I was sorry. It wasn’t just that. After



thinking that he'd died there was a part of me that needed reassurance that I wasn't just dreaming all of this up. I had to know for sure that he was real and he was living close to me.

It was difficult not putting on shoes and getting into my car until I found him. He deserved answers and I knew he at least had questions. I needed to know how much of my life he'd put together and if he even suspected that B was his child.

Waiting until Bobby went to work the next day was going to be impossible, but it had to be done. Until I knew what was happening, I had to keep it a secret. My sanity, as well as my child's well being was at stake and there

was nothing that I wouldn't do to make sure she always came first.

## Chapter 27

After faking an illness to avoid my husband, I woke up the next morning feeling like crap. I think between all of the crying and honest to goodness guilt and worry, I'd come down with a cold. My nose was stopped up and my head was pounding.

I was determined and my health wasn't going to keep me from doing what had to be done.

Nothing was going to stop me from hunting down Brooks and forcing him to listen to me. I couldn't let him be so close to me without reaching out.

After calling Sarah and telling

her a huge lie as to why I needed a sitter, I was dropping off B and heading to Columbia, where the Fort Jackson barracks were located.

I didn't know what I was going to say, or if he'd even be there, but I had to try.

I'd made it one mile outside of town before I had to turn off the radio. Every song reminded me of the pain that I caused myself and possibly Brooks. I knew he must hate me and even if those feelings stood, I had to apologize. He had to know how sorry I was for breaking his heart and lying to him.

When I pulled up at the barracks I was stopped by a guard that wanted to know my business for being there. Since

I only had a name and nothing else, I pleaded my case, as if it were life and death.

“I’m here to see a soldier named Brooks Valentine.”

“Is he expecting you?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry ma’am, but this is a restricted area. I suggest you get in contact with him and have him put you on the visitor’s list.”

“You don’t understand. I have to get to him. I have to talk to him. My life depends on it.”

“Ma’am, are you in some kind of trouble?”

I started crying. “Please. You don’t have to let me through, but can you

at least ask him to come out to meet me? Just tell him Katy Michaels is here to see him.”

The man rolled his eyes and went inside of his little booth, where he comically shared my desperate situation with his partner.

I felt violated, like they were trampling on my already fragile heart.

Thankfully, I watched him make a call. I sat there biting my nails, refusing to take no for an answer when he came back and told me Brooks wasn't coming out.

As he approached my vehicle, I thought I was going to throw up in his face. My nerves were making my stomach queasy and even though I was

sitting, I felt lightheaded.

He handed me a paper to put on my dashboard and a visitor badge to wear on my shirt. "Take this road until you come to a stop. Make that first left and pull into the second building. He said he'll come outside to meet you."

His words were ringing in my ears. After all the time that had passed I was going to see Brooks. *My* Brooks that I thought had been killed. *My* Brooks, that I never stopped loving, not even for a second.

I followed his directions and parked in a vacant spot. Soldiers marched around in the grass and I focused on them instead of the door where he'd be coming out of. I couldn't

bring myself to look at it, in fear of passing out.

My hands were shaking and the bile was in my throat. I had to close my eyes to breathe without straining.

Then I heard his boots hit the pavement when he walked. They crunched against the little gravel pebbles and I knew he was standing there outside my window.

I couldn't, for the life of me, turn to look at him. I knew his beautiful face was looking in waiting for me and I couldn't do it. I was so afraid of so many things, but mostly I was afraid to look at him and accept that I'd been wrong.

He wasn't just alive. He'd come

for me and I'd destroyed him once again.

When I felt like I was going to start the car and pull out without explanation, he startled me by climbing into the passenger seat. My heart was beating out of my chest and even without looking at him, I began to sob. I could smell him and I knew he was real; so real that I could reach over and touch him.

Brooks was alive and he was sitting in my car. "Kat, look at me."

*His words.*

*His voice.*

It was all I could think about as I turned and looked right into the eyes of the most beautiful, perfect man in the world. "Brooks."



He smiled and reached over to wipe away my tears. “Don’t cry. I can’t handle it.”

I cried worse. “I just got your letter. The last one you sent. It must have gotten lost.”

He put his fingers over my lips. “Like the letters you wrote to me, telling me you were married with a kid?”

And there it was.

The reason why I hadn’t heard from him.

He knew the truth and it was the reason that he wasn’t beating down my door looking for me. I looked at the steering wheel and covered my face. “I’m so sorry, Brooks. I didn’t have the heart to tell you. I never expected that

you'd still love me and when I found out you did, nothing else mattered except for you and me."

I couldn't look at him.

"Kat, Do you have any idea what I had to do to get stationed near you? It was a pain in the ass and involved a lot of ass kissing. I figured that it didn't matter as long as I had you. We could get married and live on or off a base somewhere, and maybe even have a couple of kids. Do you have any idea how it felt to pull up at your house and see you with them? At first I couldn't believe it. I thought maybe you were living with friends. Then when that cop called and told me that you and your husband were concerned, I knew my

fears were true.”

“I’m sorry.” It was all I could say, but my voice was pleading. “You don’t understand what happened to me.”

Finally, I had to face him. I couldn’t let this be our goodbye and not take in every inch of him. “How long have you been married, Kat?”

My bottom lip quivered as I looked into those blue eyes. If only I had the strength to tell him about B. He’d understand why I couldn’t do it on my own. “Two years,” I whispered.

Brooks stared at me, peering into my soul for explanations that I wasn’t ready to give. “Jesus Christ. Did you even mean the things you said to me, or were they all just bullshit?”

“Everything I said was the truth and you know it!”

He looked out the window and I saw him clenching his jaw, like he did when he was angry. “I wish I could believe that.”

I felt like I was losing him over and over again and no matter what I did, I couldn't stop it. I reached for his hand. It was in a splint and I knew he was the man I'd seen at the parade. I hadn't been imagining that he was real. Brooks was really there, right in front of my face the whole time.

As our fingers touched an electric shock ran through me. I knew he felt it. He turned to look my way and sighed. “I can feel your touch. It's gotten

worse. The feeling comes and goes. If it keeps up I'm going to fail my next PT-test and then I'll be up shit's creek."

I watched his face full of anger turn to pain.

"You're the only man that I've ever truly loved, Brooks. Look at me and tell me that I'm lying." I peered into those baby blues, baring my soul to him.

"It changes nothing. I won't be a home wrecker. You never really belonged to Branch, but the man you're married to doesn't deserve to get his heart ripped out. If he loves you half as much as I do, that's what will happen. I can't live with myself for doing that. As much as it hurts me to say this, I've got to walk away from you, for good this

time.”

I cried more, silently pleading with myself to tell him the truth.

We sat there, in my car, staring at each other in silence. So many mistakes, so much lost time had come between us for too long. I wasn't ready to give up.

He put his hand on the door to open it and I watched him starting to climb out. He turned back and had real tears falling down his face. “Take care of yourself, Kat. Be a good mother and wife. Give them the love that we have and you'll be happy. I know you will.”

He climbed out and started walking toward the building. I was hysterical and didn't know what to say or do, but letting him walk away from

me wasn't an option.

I jumped out of the car and ran toward him, grabbing the back of his fatigues. "Don't you dare walk away from me. I won't let you say goodbye this time."

People around us were starting to give dirty looks as they walked by and I knew Brooks didn't want them seeing him emotional. He pulled me inside of the building, past a few desks and into an office, before shutting the door.

He paced around the room, while I stood there crying. Then he sat down on the other side of the desk and motioned for me to sit down. A box of tissues was on it and I helped myself. "Please don't do this. Don't push me

away.” I cried harder. “I can’t live without you. I don’t even want to.”

He leaned over the desk. “Listen to yourself. You have a child. How can you say that without me you don’t want to live? Do you know what I would give to have a wife and a child? After everything I’ve seen, all I want is to care for the people I love.”

“You don’t understand.” I shook my head, unable to say the words.

He stood up and leaned in closer to me. “Then tell me. Give me one reason why I shouldn’t watch you drive home to your family and never look back.”

“I can’t. You’ll never forgive me. I’ve ruined everything. I’m so sorry,



Brooks. Please don't say goodbye. Don't give up on us."

He put his head down. "Katy, I can't do this with you. I'm already going to hear shit for you coming here. This is a serious place and I have a damn job to do. This isn't high school anymore. I can't deal with the drama and I won't be involved with a married woman. Please, if you have nothing else to say then you have to go."

"What about our love?" I was so desperate.

"Our love has never been our problem."

I hated that he refused to look at me. No matter how I tried to rationalize why I couldn't tell him the truth about B,

I knew that it was the only way that I wouldn't lose him forever.

Without considering what it would do to Bobby, to B and to the life that I had, I closed my eyes, took a few deep breaths and opened them back up to be staring at him. "She's yours, Brooks." "What?" He seemed confused.

"My daughter. My husband isn't the father, Brooks, you are."

## Chapter 28

I could see the flash of pain and despair across his face. "Come again?"

I was sobbing uncontrollably, knowing that he was going to hate me even worse. "She's yours."

"Why would you say that to me? We spent one night together in a hotel

room.”

I wiped my eyes with the tissue. “Because I hadn’t been with Branch since before I had my last cycle. My doctor, who gave me the exact date of conception, also verified it. She’s yours, Brooks.”

I reached into my purse and pulled out my new cell phone that was full of photos of B. “See for yourself.”

Brooks yanked my phone out of my hand and looked at the first picture. He sat down in his chair, but never took his eyes off of the screen.

“Her name is Brooklyn Micheala Valentine. I named her after you.”

He sat my phone down and covered his face with his hands. “Kat, I

think you need to leave. Please, just fucking go. Get out of here!”

When he finally looked at me I could tell that he was conflicted. “Don’t you want to hear about her?”

His eyes were red and filled with tears. “How could you keep this from me and our family? God, how could you do this to me? She’s got to be two by now. You’re telling me that I’ve had a child for two years and never known? You were pregnant for nine months and never thought to get in touch with me? I would have taken care of you. I would have wanted to know and you should be ashamed for not telling me.”

I fell to my knees, unable to

express my sincere apologies to him. There was nothing that I could say to make it better. I knew that if this day ever came, it would crush him. Why I thought it was alright to hide it from him was beyond me.

I couldn't answer.

He tossed my phone on the floor in front of me. "Get out of my face, before I say something I'll regret."

I ran out of the building completely shattered. For what it was worth, Brooks knew the truth. He was alive and out of danger. Even if he never wanted to talk to me again, at least I could be at peace knowing that.

I don't remember my drive to pick up B. Sarah asked a million

questions, trying to find out what was going on. Finally, I knew I had to tell someone. “It’s Brooks. He’s alive.”

She looked at me. “Say what?”

“He’s alive. He was reassigned. That’s why I never heard from him. He came here to be with me and found out I was married.”

Sarah put her hand over her mouth. “Oh my God. Is that where you went today? Did you go and see him?”

I nodded and cried harder “Yes. I’m sorry for lying to you. I couldn’t risk Bobby finding out.”

Sarah put her hands on her hips. “What are you going to do, Katy? Are you going to leave Bobby and rip that little girl right out from under him?”

I don't know why I was angry at Sarah's question. She's seen what Bobby and I had gone through. She of all people knew how much he loved B. Brooks was a stranger who seemed to be a threat. "No. Even if that's what I wanted, Brooks doesn't. He said he can't even look at me."

I couldn't talk because I was freaking out.

Sarah wrapped her arms around me. "You didn't tell him about B did you?"

I pulled away and couldn't answer her. The truth was written all over my face. Her mouth dropped and she gasped. "Tell me you didn't, Katy."

"I had to. He deserved to know."

Sarah was angry with me. She wasn't hiding it either. "So now you're goin' to go home and tell Bobby, aren't you?"

I threw up my arms. "I don't have choice. I know Brooks and he's not going to ignore the fact that she's his. He deserves to know her. I am the one that kept the truth from him."

"Katy, I don't think you're realizing the impact that this has on all of us. What are you going to do if he wants to take her from you? Have you even considered that he has a right to do that? He's listed as her father on that birth certificate, so you need to be prepared for what comes next. I've seen mothers lose their children. You won't be able to



handle it, not after everything you've done for that child on your own."

I shook my head. "He wouldn't do that to me. You don't know him. Brooks would never hurt me. He's not capable of it. No matter how mad he is, he's always protected me."

She shook her head. "You're living in a dream world. You aren't children. People change."

The idea of Brooks hurting me worse was horrifying. I couldn't fathom something like that happening. For the second time in one day I'd been accused of acting like I was an adolescent. "He's been my best friend since I was born. I think I know him a little better than you."

Sarah wasn't being my friend, no

matter how hard I tried to convince her. “You should probably tell Bobby tonight. Something like this can’t be ignored. You of all people should know what withholding the truth can do to someone.”

Her flippant comment stabbed me right in the heart. Apparently, I was the worst living person on the planet.

B smiled and giggled as I drove home, barely able to see the lines on the road. When I pulled into the driveway I saw that Bobby was home and he wasn’t alone.

Brooks’ truck, the one that had been parked outside of our house for all those days, was parked next to his. I could barely open the car door fast

enough to start vomiting. To say that I was under the most pressure of my life would have been an understatement.

I finally managed to get B out of her car seat and she went running toward the door. I frantically chased after her, knowing that Bobby wasn't going to be okay with whatever was going on. As much as Brooks had every right to know his daughter, I needed time to explain it to Bobby to make him understand that I didn't have a choice. I couldn't keep the truth any longer and now that he knew, we were going to have to let him get to know her.

I opened the door and she went running in, finding both men sitting at the kitchen table across from one another.

One look at Bobby and I knew he was falling apart inside. He also knew that I'd most likely lied to him about being sick and that finding out Brooks was alive had changed everything.

I didn't know what to say as I looked from one man to the other.

Bobby finally spoke. "Brooks was here when I pulled up. He told me about your visit today and I thought it seemed right that we all get everything out in the open."

I looked over at Brooks, who had both eyes on the mirror image of him that was standing across the room acting shy. I'd never seen him so emotional, but he looked over at Bobby and asked, "Is it okay if I say hello?"

The excruciating reality of what I'd done to him was utterly horrifying. Bobby nodded, with eyes glossed over. "She's your daughter, too."

The moment Brooks got on his knees and waved to her, Bobby lost it. He got up with his face covered and walked into the other room. I knew he wanted to be alone, to cry in private. I should have run after him and pleaded with everything I had in me for him to forgive me. He didn't deserve to be hurt in all of this.

All I could do was stand there, watching my daughter, my precious little miracle, meeting her father and my soul mate for the first time.

B was reluctant at first, but after

a few seconds she walked right up to him and touched his face. I continued standing there mesmerized with their instant connection, as if she knew he was someone important to her.

Then Brooks began to sob. He pulled our daughter into his arms and squeezed her tight against his body. I could see his chin shaking and could only imagine how left out he felt.

I got down on my knees beside him and reached for him, but he wouldn't look at me. He was too focused on her and I was okay with that. I kept my hand on his shoulder as I spoke. "I know you'll never forgive me, Brooks. I never meant to hurt you, I swear."

He turned with her still resting her head on his chest. “How could you keep her from me? Why, Kat?”

I had to leave the room.

Already feeling worthless, I found Bobby sitting on the end of our bed. He was staring at the wall, unable to look up when I entered. I sat down next to him and reached for his hand.

He pulled away. “Don’t, Katy.”

I cried more, not because I wanted sympathy, but because I felt wretched for what I done to both of these men out of my own selfishness. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know he’d come here.”

He peered over at me. “You didn’t know? You practically invited him here, Katy. My God, how could you

go behind my back and do somethin' like this?"

"I thought he was dead. You know how much that hurt me. I didn't go there to be with him. I went there to see it for myself. The truth came out and I'm sorry if it hurt you, but if you were in his shoes wouldn't you want to know? He deserves to be a part of that child's life."

Bobby was angry and if I hadn't known Brooks was only a few rooms over, I would have feared for my safety. I could see the pain mixed with anger in his eyes and that was a potion for disaster. "I'm your husband and you went behind my back again. Do you know how it made me feel to see him



walkin' up those steps? For all I knew, he was dead. How long have you known?"

I put my head down. "I got a letter yesterday that had gotten lost from February. It said he was being moved to Fort Jackson. During the parade on the fourth, I thought I saw him. You have to understand, I just needed to know for sure. I had to see him in the flesh."

"Did you fuck him while you were there, or was he too smart to fall into your slutty two-timing ideas?"

I don't know whether I deserved sympathy, but I certainly didn't deserve to be called names. I didn't go to see Brooks to jump into bed with him. I definitely hadn't gone there to ruin my

husband's life. "Don't say that."

Bobby started to cry. "Darlin', I'm sorry. That man in there may not have deserved to have the truth held from him, but at least he didn't have to live in fear that one day she'd be ripped out of his arms."

I fell on the bed, unable to respond. It felt like the air had left the room and I couldn't catch my breath.

I'd ruined everyone's lives, including my own and couldn't come up with anything to say to make things better. All I could do was sit back and watch one man fall in love with a child he never knew he had, while the other sat there watching her bond with the one person in the world that could take her

away from him.

## Chapter 29

Two hours went by and not much had changed. Bobby had left me in the bedroom for a while, to sulk in my own pitiful existence. Time wasn't making things better for me.

When I heard the door shut loudly, I rushed out thinking Brooks had left. Instead I saw him on the floor with B. His brows creased when he spotted me, and then just as quick he went back giving our daughter his attention.

I knew I had to reach out to Bobby. He needed to know that I wasn't going anywhere, not that Brooks wanted me anyway. Seeing him in so much pain had only made it easier to know that I

could never take B away from him. Like it or not, Bobby was her stepfather and she loved him. He'd done nothing but love her since before she was born. I owed him so much more than he was getting.

It took me a while, but I found him sitting outside. He was leaning forward with his head down. I squatted down in front of him and placed my hands on his legs. "Bobby, please talk to me."

He looked up. "What do you want me to say?"

"Anything. Tell me you hate me. Tell me I'm the worst person in the world. Just don't sit there saying nothing."

He shook his head and rubbed both of his eyes. "Darlin', I don't know what to say. I'm mad and I suppose in some ways I don't even have a right to be. That man in there deserved to know the truth. I never expected to come face to face with him. I sure as hell didn't think he'd be respectful of our marriage, but that's exactly how he is. The first thing he said to me was that he wasn't here to cause us problems. He said he just wanted to meet his daughter. I could see it in his eyes that he was hurtin'. As much as it killed me, I knew I had to invite him in. Seein' them together, though, it's tearin' me apart. B's goin' to grow up, and at some point she ain't goin' to want to be around me anymore,

not when she's already got a real dad."

I watched my tough husband begin to bawl. "I just wish I could have prepared for this, Katy. I get why you didn't say anything about the letters, but this is huge. Why would you do this to me? Haven't I been good to you?"

I reached for his hand and he let me hold it. "You've done everything for me."

"Then why would you promise me a future when you know it's never goin' to happen?"

My throat burned, hearing him implying that we were over. "Because I meant it. We can still be a family."

Bobby smiled through his tears. "Baby, as much as I want to believe that,

I know it ain't true. You say one thing, but that heart of yours will never let him go."

I let my head fall against his legs. "You're wrong."

He stood up, not even waiting for me to move. I fell down on the ground and watched as he limped toward his truck. "I'm goin' to stay at my place tonight."

I got up and ran toward him. "Bobby, please don't go. Don't walk away. I need you."

I never, in my whole life pictured myself begging Bobby to stay with me, but there I was. Our bond had gotten stronger, and I wasn't ready to lose him.

He sat down in the driver's seat and looked forward when he spoke. "I'll come by in the morning."

I leaned in and kissed him on the cheek, watching him close his pained eyes and accepting my support. "Bobby, I love you. I want you to know that."

He smiled. "I just need some time to think, Katy. I promise I'll be home in the mornin'. If your friend needs to stay, you make sure he stays on that couch. I can't promise to keep my cool if I catch him touchin' you."

I shook my head, thinking he was insane for implying it. "He won't be staying."

Bobby pulled out, leaving me standing in the driveway. I turned to



head inside and saw Brooks through the window. He was holding B in his arms and dancing around with her. In all honestly, since I'd never thought I'd ever see the day, a part of me melted. There hadn't been one day that went by where I didn't think about the two of them being together. I hated that while Bobby was being torn apart, Brooks was falling in love. It wasn't fair and I didn't know how to make things right.

Either way someone was going to get hurt.

There was no happy ending in our future that I could see.

When I headed inside, I made it a point to stay away from Brooks and B. I stood in my kitchen washing dishes,

while tears poured down my cheeks. When I thought I'd run out of them, another bout would overwhelm me. I'd never felt so helpless in all of the times where I was lost.

It got quiet and I peeked into the living room to see him rocking back and forth with her falling asleep on his shoulder.

It was the most beautiful thing that I'd ever seen in my life.

My new tears were pain and joy mixed together. Brooks may have hated me, but he'd finally found his purpose in his daughter. No matter where he went or who he decided to give his heart to, I knew he'd love her forever. Knowing that I gave him that helped me feel a

little better.

I ducked back into the kitchen, sitting at the table while thinking about Bobby.

A few moments later Brooks came in and sat down across from me. He was calmer and I was afraid to speak first, in fear of pissing him off.

“I’m sorry if I caused you problems, Kat. When you pulled away earlier, I couldn’t stop thinking about her. I had to see her and I wasn’t even thinking that I would be walking into what I did. He didn’t even know I was alive. My God, he looked like he was staring at a damn ghost.”

I kept looking at my hands, avoiding eye contact with him. “I’m not

mad at you for coming. I don't even think Bobby's mad. He's just scared."

Brooks crossed his arms.  
"Scared of what?"

"He's scared of losing B. He was there for me when I found out I was pregnant. He married me so that I could be on his insurance. I suppose he's been in love with me since then, but it wasn't until recently that we really started living as a married couple. Now out of nowhere you're in the picture and no matter how he plays this out in his head he loses."

"Why would he think that? I told him that all I wanted was to have a relationship with my daughter. I stressed to him that I meant your marriage no

harm. My word is the truth, Kat.”

I rubbed my face and thought about what to say. Too much was happening all at once and I needed a breather to sort it all out in my head. “I know, but he doesn’t know you like I do.”

“Look, I’m not here to discuss your marriage. I’m here because I have a right to see my child whenever I want. I have a right to introduce her to my family.” He pointed at me. “Let me get something clear with you right now. You will not keep me from her ever again. Do you understand me?”

I nodded.

“I can’t believe you did this to me. My God, why? Why would you

write me those letters, professing your undying love and devotion to me, when all the while you're hiding my child from me? How could you ever think that I would be alright with that?"

I shook my head and scrunched up my face, fighting back tears so I could respond without being a blabbing idiot. "I don't know. I don't know why I couldn't tell you. After the first letter I wanted to. I even told myself that if a second one came I was going to tell you all about her. Then you wrote me back and when I got it all I could think about was being with you again. I knew if I told you about Bobby and B it would change everything and so I got scared. The longer it went, the more scared I

became until finally the letters stopped coming. Brooks, you have to believe me. I wanted you to know. I've always wanted you to know."

He ran his hands through hair. "It doesn't even matter now, does it? We can't go back. What's done is done."

I shrugged. "Yeah. I'm the devil and you wish you never grew up loving me, right?"

"I never said that. Don't even make this about you."

"It is about me, though. It's about me and my mistakes. It's about me holding onto some kind of false hope that someday we could ride off into the sunset with our daughter and live happily ever after."

Brooks chuckled and shook his head. “That’s never going to happen, Kat, not anymore.”

I brought my legs up to my chest and rested my face on my knees. “I know.”

I figured he’d offer some kind of truce, being that he never wanted to argue with people, but Brooks had nothing to say. I don’t know whether he was even looking at me. I kept my eyes closed and sobbed at the mess I’d made out of all of our lives. I thought about Brooks, having to explain to his parents how I’d had his child and kept it from all them. I imagined their faces when they found out, and then having even more reasons to hate my guts.



No matter what else I focused on, my mind kept coming back to every single mistake that I'd ever made.

Finally, after a good five minutes passed, he cleared his throat. "I better get going. I need to check in." He pulled his keys out of his pocket. "I've got a lot of figuring out to do, but I'm coming by here once a day to see Brooklyn. You can choose to be here, or arrange to meet me somewhere that I can spend time alone with her. The choice is up to you."

He started to walk out the door and I followed him. "Brooks, wait."

I watched him turn around and look at me. He was hurting. I knew him well enough to see it. "Kat, don't ask me for anything right now. You can't just

throw all this on me and expect us to go back to being the way we were. I'm really biting my tongue from saying what's on mind. The last thing I want to do is hurt you. I probably have every right to, but I'd like to think I'm better than that. Besides, I'd never want you to feel the betrayal that you've made me feel. So, let's just call it a night and we'll see if tomorrow it gets easier."

I closed my eyes. The thought of him hating me was like a million daggers being driven into my heart repeatedly. "For what it's worth, I think she knows you're important to her. I could see it when you were holding her. She's young, Brooks. She'll never be able to remember a time when you weren't in

her life.”

He let out an air-filled laugh, like I wasn't worth his time. “She may not remember, but I will. For nearly seven hundred days she's been here on this earth and I never knew she existed.”

I don't know why, but I felt like I needed to defend myself. “You were in another country. Even if you knew, what were you going to do? Would you have escaped the country just to get court marshaled and ordered back? Think about it, Brooks. How hard would it have been for you knowing that I left town with only the clothes on my back? I didn't know anyone here and then found out I was carrying the child of a man who wasn't going to return for years.

Even if I told you, what would it have changed? You missed contact with her since you got here, which has only been a couple of months, in which if I knew you were here, I would have come to you. So tell me, Brooks. Look at me and tell me how all of this is my fault. You left me too, you know. You left me before we even had a chance. No matter if I would have stayed in that hotel room with you, I would have still watched you leave for Afghanistan and that would have been even harder to do. You think I did all of this to spite you. I did it because I knew that either way I was going to lose you.”

He got up in my face, like he did when were kids.

“Don’t go there. You kept the secret from me.”

“We weren’t even talking!” I reiterated.

“Because you walked out on me, on us.”

“Because you were too much of a pussy to admit that you were in love with me the whole time.”

All of the sudden it got quiet. I could hear the crickets chirping as we stared right into each other’s eyes. “Katy, you knew how I felt,” he whispered.

I shook my head. “No. I didn’t.” I threw my hands up in the air. “We’ve both made mistakes and maybe mine were worse. I can’t change the past. I

can't change that I spent years with your brother. I can't change the fact that I ran away from what we had, and I certainly can't change having our daughter and finding someone to take care of us when you weren't around. You didn't have to join the military, Brooks. You could have fought for us too."

He tightened his lips. "I need to leave."

I watched him walking toward his truck. "You were always good at walking away."

He turned around and got right up in my face again. "I refuse to do this with you tonight, Kat. I'm mad and I need to take some time to calm down. I have a shift in the morning, but I can be

here around three. Have my daughter dressed and ready to go.”

“You’re not taking her without me.”

He threw his hands up. “Great! Why don’t you invite your husband so we can be one big happy family?”

I was so frustrated with him. “I don’t know why I ever loved you!”

He laughed. “I feel the same way.”

It didn’t sink in that I’d said it until he was all the way down the driveway. I sat down on the step and watched him brake. I was already crying, regretting saying something so horrible to him, especially knowing that I’d never felt that way about him.

All of the sudden he was backing up his truck and getting out. I stood up and prepared to be bitched out again. We were face to face and he was furious. "Take it back."

I had to keep myself from laughing at his comment. "No!"

He scratched his head. "You see, I can't go to bed mad, so I'm not leaving until you take it back."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I guess you're going to be standing here for a while then."

"You know, I could be a real dick right now if I wanted to be."

"Who said you aren't already?"

He laughed. "Some things never change I see."



“What’s that supposed to mean?”

My hands went right to my hips.

“You can’t lie to my face. You never could.”

I threw both hands in the air surrendering. “Fine! I don’t wish I never loved you. Are you happy now?”

He started walking away with a smile on his face, in the midst of still being angry with me. He never turned around when he spoke. Not that he needed to. I could hear him just fine. “Our daughter is beautiful, Kat, just like I always knew our kids would be. Have her ready tomorrow. I’ll be here at three thirty, and we’re going out, with or without you.”

Chapter 30

As anyone could have imagined, I didn't get any sleep.

I tossed and turned until my head was going to explode. When I knew my frustrations and angst had gotten the best of me, I called Bobby, hoping he would pick up.

“Hello?” He sounded awake.

“Please come home.”

“Katy, it's nearly three in the mornin', babe. I'll be home in a few hours. Did somethin' happen? Are you alright?”

It made me cry more knowing that he was concerned about me, when I should have been asking him the same thing. “I don't even know how I am. Are you okay?”

He sighed. "I've just been sittin' up thinkin' about things. It all still seems like it's not real. One day he's gone and then the next he's at our front door. It don't help that he appears to be a straight up nice guy. I still want to hate him, though."

I laughed through my tears. "I can understand why."

"It's not just that he's always been that one guy that you'll never get over. I sat with him for a good bit and could see how torn up he was over all of this. I should have pushed you to tell him, because if I were in his shoes, I'd want to know my little girl, too."

I was quiet for a few minutes, already settled on the fact that I'd done

all of this. Both of the men in my life were torn up and I was to blame. “Bobby, I want you to come home. You never should have left. Brooks didn’t even stay for more than an hour. He put B to sleep and said goodbye. Not that I blame him, I said some pretty shitty to things him.”

“Katy, you’re both goin’ to need to sit down and straighten it all out, whether I’m there or not. You’ve got sixteen years left that you’ll have to share your daughter. If you think this is all goin’ to get better on its own, you’re blindly mistaken, darlin’.”

“I know. Brooks is hard to explain. Right now he hates me for what I did, but I know he’d never hurt me. I

don't know why and I've never asked him, but he doesn't like to hold grudges when it comes to me. Brooks was always the one person who would protect me."

"You do realize that you kept his child from him. Somethin' like that can change a man, you know?"

"Yes, but even tonight, he started to walk away angry and didn't leave until he had calmed down."

Bobby stopped talking. I half expected him to have fallen asleep, being that it was in the wee hours of the morning.

"Are you there?"

"Katy, I think I shouldn't come home for a while. Maybe you need to get

things figured out first.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“The reason that man can’t hurt you is because he loves you.”

I shook my head even though I knew he couldn’t even see me. “No. He’s over feeling something like that for me. B was the last straw for him.”

Bobby chuckled. “Katy, open your eyes. He’s back from the dead. Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about bein’ with him. You forget sometimes how well I know you.”

“It won’t happen. I’m married to you, Bobby.”

The line was quiet again. “Yeah, you are. For now.”

It hurt to hear him say that. My love for Brooks was forever, but it didn't mean that I would ever want to hurt Bobby and end my marriage. Life didn't work out the way we wanted it to. Mine had been filled with heartache for as long as I could remember. It wasn't going to magically fix itself.

"I promise you that I'm not going anywhere. You may not believe me, but I love you, Bobby. I owe you so much and I want you to be able to come home knowing that we're in this together."

I meant what I said. I wanted him home with me.

"Are you sure it's what you want?" I hated that he couldn't accept I was sincere.

“Yes. Come home to me and B. We need you.”

After we'd hung up, I went and stood at the door, waiting for Bobby to pull down our long driveway. I think it pleased him to see me standing there watching out for him.

As soon as he took that last step onto the porch, I was outside wrapping my arms around him.

He pulled away and brushed the hair away from my face. “Let's get you inside.”

I held Bobby's hand as we walked to the bedroom. We were both too exhausted to change into pajamas. I stripped down to my underwear and climbed under the covers, watching



Bobby do the same thing. He pulled me close against his chest and ran his fingertips over the skin on my back. "I'm scared of losing you, Katy. It's not even of question of if. It's a question of when. I'm not a fool. No matter how much you love me, he's still the one. He always will be. I can't compete and I'm thinkin' that I'd rather pull myself out of the game before you yank it all away from me."

I sat up and looked into his pain stricken eyes. "Don't talk like that. Please, Bobby. Close your eyes and hold me. It's you that I wanted to be with tonight, not Brooks."

Bobby sighed, but right away I could hear him crying. It hurt me so

much knowing that no matter how much I tried to deny it, my feelings for Brooks weren't going to go away. It was important to be true to my husband, but if Brooks wanted me, I didn't know if I'd be able to reject him. Knowing that killed me and I vowed to do whatever it took to spare my marriage. After all, B deserved to have both of her daddies in her life. That I was sure of.

She woke us up at about eight, after sleeping for only a few hours. I left Bobby in bed so that he could sleep in while taking her out into the kitchen to give her breakfast. She was such a happy little girl, always smiling and filling me with joy. It was good that she was still so young though, because I'd never want

her to have to go through all of this while understanding the seriousness of it all. Besides, she'd end up hating me for it and I never would want that to happen.

I noticed she was looking all around the house and turned to look behind me, thinking Bobby had woken up. "What is it pretty girl?"

"Where man, Mama?"

My stomach twirled around hearing her asking where Brooks had gone. Of course, when she'd fallen asleep he was with her and now he'd vanished. In her eyes she probably assumed he was magic, like some of her cartoons.

"He went bye byes."

She turned and looked out the

window.

“Sweetie, he’ll be back later. You’re going to be seeing him every day. How exciting is that? Mama’s so happy for you.”

My daughter turned and her eyes were lit up with excitement. She’d only known him for several hours and already she was infatuated with him.

I heard Bobby cough and turned to see him standing there behind me. The sheer pain in his face brought me to the brink of emotional despair. He’d heard what I’d said to B and it had broken his heart even more than it already was and I didn’t know what to say or do to make it better.

Without a single word, he took

his cup of coffee and walked out of the room, leaving me to sit there and regret ever talking about Brooks to his daughter.

After she was done shoveling eggs and bananas into her mouth, I washed B's face and let her out of her chair. She went running into the room, looking for her dada. I heard him get excited when he saw her and I walked in to find him rolling on the floor with her. She was laughing and holding him as he playfully tickled her belly.

Then, all of the sudden he stopped. Bobby just lay there staring at B. He brushed her face with the back of his hand. "Dada loves B so much."

B giggled. "B lob Dada."

Her sentences were getting better, but her pronunciation was still hard to decipher at times. Still, that was as clear as day.

She touched his whiskered face and he lost it.

His head fell onto her body and he sobbed like I'd never seen a man do. He turned and looked at me, his eyes soaked with anguish. "I don't want to lose you. Dada loves you with all his heart."

Finally, when it became confusing for B, I had to literally pull him away from her. He seated himself down in a recliner, while she followed us and climbed on his lap. I sat on the chair next to them and watched her

wiping away his tears. “No cry.”

She was so confused and didn't like seeing him in pain. Watching her responding to his emotions was heartbreaking. I wished I knew a way to make it all disappear, but I didn't. To make matters ten times worse, Brooks was going to be showing up in the afternoon to take her somewhere and I hadn't even told him that part yet.

He was at a breaking point, so fragile and yet so destructive bottled into one man. At any moment he was going to lose it and I feared the outcome.

I could deal with emotional Bobby, but I couldn't deal with the side of him that filled with rage. If it peeked its ugly head out, it would change

everything.

I had to keep him in the loop, and feeling like he was a part of all of this. Our happiness depended on it and I wasn't going to take it lightly. The three of us adults had an opportunity to give our little girl the best life possible, if we could work together.

“Bobby, why don't you go back to sleep for a while? You're so tired and there's nothing going on this morning that's important.”

“You trying to get rid of me,” he joked.

“Of course not.” I reached over and stroked his thick dark hair. “I just know when I'm tired my emotions get crazy. If you were better rested you'd



see that both of your girls are right here where we belong.”

Bobby looked at B when he spoke. “I’d rather you go and get some rest. Me and B are goin’ to watch cartoons for a while, aren’t we?”

She shook her head and got excited when he grabbed the remote.

I stood up, knowing he wasn’t going to change his mind. If he wanted alone time with her, I was going to give it to him. After all, when he found out Brooks was coming to do the same thing, he’d be happy knowing he had her all morning.

I leaned over and kissed him on the head. “If you need me, just call.”

He grabbed my hand and I

stopped. “When’s he comin’ again? Did he talk about it?”

I looked down at the floor, hoping to wait out on telling him. “He said something about coming this evening. I think he said around three thirty. He wanted to take B to the park if it was nice, but I told him he wasn’t taking her anywhere without me or you there.”

He raised his one brow. “You said me?”

I smiled, remembering Brooks suggesting in a joking way that we all tag along. “Yes,” I lied. I hated myself for doing it, but I knew it put his mind at ease.

Bobby said nothing.

“We could just meet him there if you want.”

He shook his head. “No. I’ll stay here. You can go and make sure she don’t get scared. He is still a stranger.”

I understood what he meant, but hated that’s what he was to her. It was about to change.

When I climbed back into my bed my head was pounding. Bobby was probably cussing me out in his mind and Brooks, even though he seemed calmer, wanted my head on a stake. I was tired of crying, knowing it got me nowhere.

Just like B learning something new, I had to learn to take baby steps. I had to be patient and kind if I wanted this to all work out. For the sake of my

daughter and my family, I had to put my feelings for Brooks aside and focus on everyone else. I was the glue that was going to hold it all together and I wasn't willing to lose any of them in the process.

### Chapter 31

“Katy, wake up.”

I sat up in the bed and saw Bobby standing at the door. “What time is it?”

“Around three forty. Brooks is here.”

I jumped out of bed, scrounging around for clothes. “Why didn't you tell me sooner?”

“You needed your rest. Besides, he's got B outside and said he'd wait if

you wanted to go with him.”

I stopped what I was doing and looked at him. “What should I do? I won’t go if you don’t me to.”

Bobby scratched his head. “It’s fine, Katy. I’d rather you be there.”

I pulled on a pair of shorts and rushed to find a shirt. “When I get home, I can bring us a pizza.”

“You probably won’t be back for a while. I’ll make somethin’ here.”

I felt so bad, knowing that he was going to be sitting at home, consumed with hurt. “Are you sure you don’t want me to stay?”

“I’m sure. If B gets scared she’s goin’ to need you there.”

I ran into the bathroom, to use the

facilities and brush my teeth. When I came back out, Bobby was sitting on the bed with his face covered. I walked up and wrapped my arms around him. “If you need anything, you let me know by calling.”

He nodded, but said nothing as I walked out the door.

Part of Bobby’s problem was that he was exhausted. He needed to rest and would probably go to sleep as soon as I was gone. By the time I got back he would be feeling better and we could have a rational conversation about how the afternoon had gone with Brooks and B.

Upon going outside, I spotted Brooks pushing our daughter on her

favorite swing. She was fastened up in it so she couldn't slide out. She didn't even notice me standing there. No, she was too occupied with her new friend to notice her own mother waving.

Brooks however, noticed me right away. I watched his jaw clench as I got closer. "Hey. Sorry about that. I didn't get much sleep last night."

I heard him let out an air-filled laugh. "You think I could sleep? Kat, I just found out that I have a kid. Every aspect of my life is about to change. Sleep is the last thing that's on my mind."

I didn't know what to say to that. "So would it be easier if I drove, since I have the car seat in my car already?"

He stopped the swing and started getting B out. “Yeah, if you don’t mind.”

I walked to the car figuring he would follow me over. He sat her down in the seat and looked at all of the fasteners. “I might need your help. I’ve never done this before.”

I rolled my eyes, laughing at his inexperience. “There’s a lot of things you’re going to have to learn.” I hooked B up and pointed to the travel bag that I kept in the car. She didn’t need formula or bottles, but when duty called I knew I had to have diapers and wipes on hand. Though she’d been using her little potty more frequently, she hadn’t conquered the whole potty training thing.

He climbed in the passenger seat



and we were soon on our way. “So where are we going?”

“Is there a park nearby?”

“There are several. If you really want to see B smile, we should take her to the indoor play park. She gets a kick out of climbing through the tunnels and going down the slides.”

Brooks gave B his attention as I was driving, and to be honest, I didn’t know what to say to him. This had all come out so sudden that we all needed to remain calm and not jump into any decisions.

I could tell that Brooks wasn’t used to being around kids when we walked inside of the play park. Screaming kids were running around like

crazy animals. With his one good arm, he held onto B, like he wasn't willing to put her down in the madness.

I laughed at him and reached for her. "Come on sweet girl. You want to go play?"

"Mama, slide. I go slide."

Brooks smiled when she spoke. "Have fun, little bug."

"Bug? You nicknamed our daughter already?"

He shrugged and smiled with a full mouth of those stunning white teeth. "I couldn't help it. She's my little B."

We sat down on a bench next to each other so we could watch her enjoying herself. Right away she was following around two little girls that

looked to be a couple years older than her.

“So, I had a lot to think about when I left last night. I think the first thing that needs to be addressed is my parents. Look, Kat, I don’t care about my brother, but Mom and Dad need to meet her. I get that you’re going to be mad, but I asked them come visit next weekend. I hope you don’t already have plans.”

I started to open my mouth and make something up, knowing how them finding out was going to add to the stress of the situation. Then I retracted those thoughts. I’d had two years to love my sweet girl and they didn’t even know she existed. They would love her and do anything to be a part of her life. Keeping

them from knowing would only hurt her in the long run and I didn't want that. "I guess I'll talk to Bobby and see if we can drop her off to you. Are you able to baby proof your house? Do you even live in a house or an apartment?"

Brooks laughed. "I live on base for now. There's family housing available and I filled out the forms while I was on shift this morning. If everything goes the way it should, I may be able to move into something in the next seven days. I had to explain my situation to my commanding officer, but given the importance, he said he can pull some strings. "So, you'd have a whole house?"

"It's like a duplex. Two small

houses connected. Some are one bedroom and some go up to three. I can also live off base, provided I can find something affordable and close. I'm not going to rush into anything. My parents won't care what my living conditions look like."

I don't know why I would do it, but I blurted out a solution to make their stay comfortable. "They can come to my house. Bobby still owns another house, so we'll go there for the weekend. The house is already baby proofed and B will be comfortable."

"Wow. That's pretty generous of you. Are you doing this to kiss my ass?" I sensed a hint of sarcasm in his question.

“Is it working?”

He laughed and shook his head and then, at the same time I was looking at him, he looked at me. My stomach began to twirl around, as if I was in high school, crushing on a boy.

Brooks smiled. “I’m still mad, but some of the things you said last night were true. Knowing you were pregnant and alone would have been torture for me. It doesn’t make what you did right, but I don’t know if I could have handled not being able to get to you.”

I could feel our conversation getting deep. Thankfully, B came up and grabbed Brooks’ hand. “Pay wit me.”

I watched a grown man melt. He ducked down and walked at her level.

Seeing them, watching them interacting as if they'd known each other forever made me feel so happy.

After a few minutes, when it was apparent that Brooks wouldn't fit in all of the crawling tubes, he came back over and sat next to me. "Is she always so playful?"

"Unless she's in grumpy mood. Then she won't want anything to do with you."

I had my hand on the bench seat, sort of leaning forward. Brooks put his hand down to adjust himself. When his hand touched mine my heart reacted. I looked at him and he looked at me. In that moment I could feel it happening; that pull toward him that I'd had for as

long as I could remember.

He pulled his hand away.  
“Sorry.”

I looked forward. “Yeah, so that was weird.”

We didn’t look at each other.

He cleared his throat. “Your husband seems nice. Does he make you happy?”

The last person that I wanted to talk to about Bobby was Brooks. “He’d do anything for me.”

Brooks turned to look at me. “So, you’re happy? Well, before all this happened I mean.”

His eyes were mesmerizing me, making me think that the things he was asking were loaded with intent. “Yeah, I



guess. We've had our problems. Bobby had an accident at work and his legs were both broken. It's taken him a long time to be able to get himself mobile again."

"I guess I just want to know if he gives you everything you need, because for all the years that I've been away, I somehow believed that I was the only person that could be all that you wanted."

Was he being cocky?

I couldn't tell.

B ran by, carrying on with a little boy her age. I smiled, thinking about it reminded me of Brooks. "Do you remember how I used to follow you like that?"

“I remember chasing you.”

I knew he was waiting for me to answer, albeit I couldn't bring myself to.

“Kat, all of this feels like some sort of out of body experience to me. I've got a two-year-old daughter and you're married to someone else. I feel like at any second I'm going to wake up and it will have all been a wonderful dream.”

I finally looked into those baby blues. “It's real. I've been living this life for almost three years now. I can assure you that you're not going to wake up.”

He leaned in close to me, so nobody else could hear us. “Then I just need to know one thing.”

“What?”

“You’re not going to like it. It’s just really been bothering me.”

“Say it.” Our conversation wouldn’t go anywhere if he didn’t spit it out.

“Did you ever consider having an abortion?” He threw his hands up before I could scream at him. “I’m asking because you were all alone. You knew I wasn’t coming home for years and that you’d have to raise the child yourself. I keep trying to make sense of everything. I won’t be mad if you did. Looking at what we made was the most fulfilling kind of feelings I’ve ever experienced, but I get that you were alone and scared. So tell me, Kat. How did you know you were going to be

okay?”

My answer was simple. I didn't even need to think about it. "I never considered terminating the pregnancy, Brooks." I looked over at our daughter who was still smiling and enjoying her day. "Because no matter where you were, I knew I had a piece of you growing inside of me. Giving that up was never a question." I looked right at him, finally able to face my fears and be honest. "That night we spent together in that hotel room was the second best night of my life."

I could tell that I'd affected him. "What was your first?"

"The day I gave birth to your daughter."

Brooks closed his eyes and leaned his head down. His hand reached over and touched my knee. He squeezed it and kept it placed there. “I can’t stop loving you, Kat,” he whispered.

It took my breath away and I think he knew it too. He finally looked up at me and smiled. I smiled back, unable to respond. Those words, those heart pounding five words echoed in my mind.

I couldn’t say it back, because giving Brooks my heart meant I was shattering Bobby’s, the man who’d taken care of me and B. I couldn’t do that to him.

## Chapter 32

For the rest of the time we were

at the indoor play park Brooks didn't ask me anything too concerning. He wanted to know about life, jobs I'd had and where I'd lived. He asked me about my friends and told me about some of his.

We took B out for dinner to get her chicken nuggets and fries. I knew we'd been out a while, but I couldn't get enough of seeing the two of them together. Every once in a while I'd catch eyes with Brooks and get those waves of excitement. If that wasn't bad enough, it seemed like he wanted to get a rise out of me.

After a couple hours of talking, it felt like our friendship was back intact. We had a bunch of issues to overcome, but our bond was still there. B starting

yawning halfway through her meal. I knew our day was going to come to an end soon and it hurt knowing that we'd have to say goodbye.

Brooks picked up the check for our food, insisting that he somehow owed me so much more. I'd never expected, nor would I ever ask him for child support. We'd share responsibilities for our daughter, even if we weren't ever together as a couple.

Once we paid and got in the car, it only took B five minutes to fall asleep. Brooks had offered to drive to give me break, even though he was the one that hadn't slept. We'd been driving for a good ten minutes before he pulled over in a gas station parking lot. When he

didn't get out, I knew he had something to say. "What is it?"

Brooks turned to look at me. He wasn't crying and didn't seem upset, but something was off. "You know, I kept your letters, even after I moved back home and found out you had a family. I don't know why, but I couldn't come to terms with throwing them away, because it felt like I was throwing away our love." He looked directly into my eyes and brushed the back of his hand over my cheek. I closed my eyes when he did it. "I don't know what I'm supposed to be feeling Kat, but when I'm with you, I feel like nothing has changed between us. Now we have a little girl. I mean, Jesus Christ, we made a baby together.



She's so freaking perfect, too. I look at her and I see both of us. I can't be angry with you, because all I wanted for so long was to be a part of your life again. I get that you're married and he makes you happy. I can respect that. I won't push or ask you for something that you can't give me, but I have to know the truth. I have to know if what you said to me in all those letters was true. Do I still have your heart, or did you already give it to someone else? When you look at me do you see me as a threat or is it something entirely different? Kat, I can't see you every single day and not want to touch you. It's been one and I'm already freaking out, because I'm having to take you home. Just tell me to back off."

I reached over and touched his injured arm. He looked at me and I leaned in closer. I could feel his breath on my face and a hint of his cologne. I didn't want to cheat on my husband, or say things that would cause more harm than good.

It had been twenty-four hours since Brooks came back into my life and in that time I'd experienced every kind of emotion. I was mentally and physically drained and he was too.

We were so close.

My eyes started to close, as if I was letting myself fall from a high building. He wanted to know and I had to tell him. "I'm not afraid of you Brooks. I know you'd never hurt me.

You love her already, I can see it in your eyes. I've watched you holding her and falling for her. Somehow she already knows you're special."

"You're avoiding my question."

"You don't want the truth."

He looked away, assuming the truth was that I didn't want him. "I think you just said it."

He pulled out of the parking lot and headed in the direction of my house. Every couple of seconds he would clench his jaw, meaning he was holding his tongue from saying something he would regret. Sometimes I hated that I knew him so well.

When we turned onto the road where my house was on, he finally

decided to address our upcoming schedule. “So tomorrow, can I come by the same time?”

“Yeah. It’s Sunday. We usually go to church, but we’re back before one. You can come over anytime after that.”

“And you’re going to tell Bobby about my parents coming?”

“Yes, but just so you know, the house is mine. I had it built when I was separated from Bobby. It was part of my trust money. I own it free and clear.”

Brooks looked at me real quick with a smile on his face. “I should have known you’d spend it wisely. Your mom and dad would be happy about that.”

“I think so too. They’d want B to have a home that she loved. I always

loved where we lived. The only hard part was watching another child moving in after they were gone. Hopefully B won't have to deal with something so tragic."

Brooks agreed, "Yeah. You don't have to worry about me going anywhere. Due to my injury, I'm no use in the field. All I do nowadays is train recruits on procedures. I feel more like a school teacher than a soldier."

"You're safe. That's all I care about."

I looked out the window, realizing we only had a few more minutes together. "It's going to be nice seeing you again every day. I really missed you."

I touched his arm. “I missed you, too.”

He pulled into the driveway and I saw Bobby’s truck. He was home waiting for his girls to arrive. I knew I couldn’t stand around talking to Brooks, so I had to grab B and go inside.

Brooks hopped out of the driver’s seat. He opened the back door and started unfastening her clips. It took him a few seconds to figure the buttons, but he managed to do it with little effort. When he climbed out of the back, he was holding her and kissing her on the cheek.

Then I heard him say something so beautiful. “I love you, bug.”

I tried to hold back my emotions, knowing it would upset Bobby if I went

inside crying.

Brooks handed me our daughter and started to walk toward his truck. He came running back just as I'd turned around, forgetting to give me my keys. When our hands touched I felt that electric jolt hitting me again. Our eyes met and instead of saying goodbye, I said something entirely different. "I meant every word that I wrote in those letters, Brooks. I could never completely give my heart away, not when it was with you the whole time."

Realizing what I'd just said, I turned and started moving quickly up the stairs to my porch. I couldn't look him in the eyes, or see his face. I certainly didn't want to stand there waiting to hear

how he responded. The cat was out of the bag. I'd made it one day and I knew that Brooks wasn't going to just give up on us like he said. If he was willing to sleep with me on the night before I married his brother, I feared what he was willing to do for me and our daughter. Brooks was a good man. He put others before himself. He'd never known what it was like to have a child. He didn't know what unconditional love was like. Now that he was feeling that love radiating through him, all bets were off.

I opened the door and walked in to find Bobby on the couch. Five beers sat on the table next to him and I could tell they were empty. He looked rough,



like he hadn't showered, or even changed all day. The expression on his face was horrifying, as if he heard and known everything I'd said to Brooks. I put B in her bed before coming out into the living room. Just as I was sitting down in the chair next to him, he startled me by standing up. I watched his tall body come to be standing in front of me. "How was your night? Did Mommy and Daddy have fun together?"

"It wasn't like that, Bobby. It was about B and you know it."

He let out a phony air-filled laugh. "Yeah, you keep sayin' it, but I think I know you a little better than that. So where'd you go?"

"We went to the indoor play park

in Columbia.”

“And let me guess, you and pretty boy soldier played catch-up. Did you plan out your future together, because God knows you had plenty of time to.”

I felt bad for staying out so long, and even worse for being guilty of a lot of things he was accusing me of. I had spent the day with Brooks and we did talk about our feelings. As far as making plans to be together, it hadn't been said out loud, albeit I wasn't doubting Brooks' intentions. He wanted me and I knew I'd only be able to fight it for so long. “He was with his daughter, Bobby. It wasn't about me and him. I told you that I didn't have to go.”

“Yeah, you said a lot of things. So, I’m just wonderin’ how long this is goin’ to continue? Is he going to file somethin’ with the court? Do I need to start watchin’ my back?”

“What are you talking about? Watching your back?”

He got real flip. “Yeah, like that marksman is goin’ to shoot me dead, watch my back.”

I stood up and walked into the kitchen. “Brooks would never kill someone. Don’t even talk like that.”

He pulled another beer out of the refrigerator. “That man wants you, Katy. It ain’t a secret. He’s goin’ to ride this out for as long as it takes. You’re the only one with blinders on here.”

“Blinders? Bobby, listen to yourself.” I sat down at the table. “Brooks just wants to be a part of his daughter’s life. Right now, he wants to see her every day. It won’t last forever. He’s going to get a bigger place so he can start keeping her overnight and...”

I felt something hitting the back of my head and my face slammed into the table. “He’s not keepin’ her overnight and that’s final. You tell him that, Katy. He thinks he can walk right in here and do what he wants with my daughter, he’s got another thing comin’.”

I was already crying and shaking profusely. Bobby mixed with alcohol and pain was a bad concoction. “We can’t keep him from seeing her and you

know why. Please just calm down.” I kept my hands over my head to prevent another blow.

He grabbed my face and squeezed my cheeks together like a child being scorned by their parents. “Don’t you dare tell me what to do. I’m done doin’ shit for you, Katy. If I find out you’re screwin’ around with him, you’ll be sorry. You’re my wife, you hear me?”

He let go of me and I covered my face with my hands. The sting was still there, reminding me of all the other times he’d lost his temper and took it out on me. I should have seen it coming, and been prepared for more.

With my little one asleep a couple rooms over, I knew I couldn’t

make him anymore mad at me. I shook my head. "I'm not messing around with him, Bobby. I swear."

He got back in my face one more time. "Let me find out you're lyin', Katy."

I cried harder. "I'm not, I swear. I'm with you, Bobby. I'm only with you."

He grabbed my hand and pulled me against his chest. I was petrified that he was going to throw me across the room, but instead he started crying.

I was in trouble and I didn't know what to do. The only thing I did know was that Brooks couldn't find out. If he did, he'd kill Bobby with his bare hands and then we'd never be able to be

together, because he'd go to jail.

## Chapter 33

That following morning I was in no shape to be able to face Brooks. My cheek was bruised and even though I had a small cut on the back of my scalp that I knew I could hide, my head was pounding from it.

Bobby got up and went to work, instead of church. Before he left he acted as if nothing had ever happened. I swear, when he was drinking, he lost all sense of himself and became a monster.

I sat in the kitchen looking at Brooks' information that he'd left for me the first night he'd come over. I suppose he'd started jotting it down because I wasn't home at the time. When I showed

up, Bobby threw it away, so I dug it out of the trash the next day.

I looked down at my phone and started dialing the number. Since I wasn't sure if it was a landline or a cell phone, I had to call it instead of leaving a text.

“Sergeant Valentine speaking.”

I laughed, hearing him announcing his name. I guess I wasn't used to it. “Hey, it's me, Katy.”

“You don't have to say your name. I don't have a slew of women calling me on this number.”

I felt my cheeks reddened, but realized he had been leaving his information because he wanted to meet his daughter, not see me. “Oh. Well, I'm



calling to tell you that today won't be good to come over. Bobby made plans and I didn't know it."

I knew he was disappointed.

"Man, I got off early in hopes to spend extra time there." He paused. "It's cool. I'll figure out something else to do. I guess I can always start looking for places. My roommate in the barracks isn't going to want me bringing a kid to spend the night."

"I'm sorry, Brooks. I don't want you to feel like I'm keeping her from you. I'd never do that."

"It's fine. I know you wouldn't keep her from me."

"So, I better get going. It's early and I need to get B ready for Sunday

school.”

“Can you take a picture and send it to this number? I’d love to be able to show the guys.”

My heart started to patter, feeling his love and excitement for her. I closed my eyes and tried to not get emotional. “Sure.”

“So, I guess I need to hang up now?”

I sat down in the kitchen chair, not ready end our conversation. “What do you do on your days off?”

“I hook up with random chicks that love a man in a uniform.”

Before I could freak out, he started laughing. “I’m kidding, Kat. Although, there are women that would

pretty much do anything for a man in fatigues, I only have eyes for one girl.”

“Stop it, Brooks. Today is not a good day to joke around.” He felt comfortable around me again and it made me happy, but I couldn’t let statements like that get to me.

“Sorry. Are you alright? You seem kind of snappy. Did your being with me last night cause problems with you and your husband? Was it what you said last night?”

I was quiet, contemplating on what I should tell Brooks.

“Talk to me. Am I overstepping? If I’m causing you problems, we can make other arrangements. I mean, I’ll miss being able to see you, but I

understand.”

“I’m fine.”

“I know it’s been a while, but I’m pretty sure there’s something you’re not telling me.”

I wanted to tell Brooks the truth. Lying to him hurt me, because it reminded me of the pain that I’d caused him.

“Would it be okay if we just talked tomorrow? I’ve got to go get ready for church.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll call you in the morning.”

After we hung up I looked over at the clock. Even though I had plenty of time, I knew I wasn’t going to leave the house. The last thing I wanted was to

have to explain to my pastor that I walked into a door. He'd know the truth and it would cause even more problems with Bobby and me. I didn't see my husband for another couple of hours. He showed up at the house around eleven with a bouquet of flowers and a card. When he came in he handed it to me and kissed me on the head, as if I would have instantly forgiven him. "Sorry I lost my temper last night, Katy. You need to understand what it's like to watch you with him." He sat down at the table across from me. "I don't want you hangin' out with him anymore."

"He's my oldest friend," I argued.

"I don't give a shit. I don't want

you alone with him, ever. Do you understand me?"

I stood up and walked over to the sink. "You can't ask me to stay away from Brooks. That's not fair."

Bobby came up behind me and pulled my hair back so he could shove his face in mine. He'd been drinking again, already this morning. I could smell it on his breath. "I wasn't askin'. He stays away, or I'll make damn sure he doesn't get near that little girl again."

His threat rubbed me the wrong way. I swung around while my hair was still in his hand. My shove didn't do much except get him even angrier. He pushed me hard against counter. "Bobby, please. You don't want to do this. Let's

just sit down and talk.”

My pleas meant nothing. He took his hand and shoved it against my throat, staring me right in the face. As he talked, I could feel his spit hitting me. I tried to squirm free, so I could grab something to defend myself with. “Keep fightin’ me, Katy. You’re goin’ to be sorry.”

I finally got free and ran towards the table. The only thing I could grab was the bouquet of roses. I took ahold of the petals and swung the thorny sides at his face. When he tried to pull away, I shoved them in harder, drawing blood.

He grabbed a paper towel to assess the damage that I’d done to his face and I hauled ass into B’s room. Once inside I locked the door and leaned

over to catch my breath. He immediately started beating on the other side. “Let me in, dammit.”

B stood up and started crying in her bed. Bobby was scaring her and I didn’t know what to do. Thankfully, I still had my phone in my pajama pants pocket. I was digging my own grave, albeit desperate to get away from him before he could hurt me.

“Sergeant Valentine.”

I was crying. “Brooks.”

“Kat? What’s wrong?”

I looked toward the door and saw it starting to burst. I knew he couldn’t get to me in time, so I closed my eyes and prepared for what was coming next. “If something happens to



me I want you to take her far away from here.”

“What are you talking about?”

Bobby busted through the door and seeing me on the phone made him even more angry. “Is that him? You think he can save you?”

I took the phone and put it back in my pocket, shielding myself with my arms, hoping Brooks could hear and that he’d save me before something terrible happened. “Please don’t hurt me.”

He grabbed me by my hair and pulled me out of the room, leaving B crying on her bed. Once we were in our bedroom, he shoved me down forcefully on the bed and sat on my legs so I couldn’t move. I could hear B screaming

and I was so afraid for her.

My face was being shoved into the covers and I was wondering if he was going to suffocate me. He yanked down my pajamas pants and all I could hear was my baby crying in the other room. “Bobby, please. I didn’t do anything wrong. You don’t want to hurt me, I know you don’t.”

He froze and I swung my body around and backed up on the bed. After yanking my pants back up, I stared in horror, waiting for him to jump on me again.

He started sobbing and sat down on the bed.

Honestly I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to run and grab B and get

the hell out of there, but I knew it was a fat chance that he'd ever let that happen.

So I ran into B's room and picked her up, comforting her so she'd calm down. "Mama, I scared."

That was it. The last straw for me. I had to get out of there until I could get a restraining order against Bobby. I wasn't going to let him hurt me anymore.

He came into the room, looking even more angrier than the first time. "We need to talk."

I held B tight. "Not while you're acting like this."

He punched a hole in the wall. "You see what you make me do? That pretty boy comes anywhere near you and you're goin' to be the one to pay, you

hear me, Katy?"

I nodded my head, while shaking profusely. Brooks was already on his way. I knew it because I knew him. That man was born to protect me and if he thought that I was in trouble, no matter how mad he was at me, he'd come. I closed my eyes and thought about Bobby trying to hurt him.

"Leave Brooks out of this. He's got nothing to do with the way you're treating me. He's done nothing!"

Bobby held out his arms for B. She sheltered her face in my bosom and it pissed him off more. He grabbed her from me, making her scream. I grabbed her jacket, determined I was getting her away from him.

He walked over and sat in his favorite recliner, watching me. “You think you’re goin’ somewhere?”

“I want you to leave, Bobby. Go stay at your house until you can get yourself straight. I can’t live like this anymore.”

He began laughing loudly. “Do you seriously think you’re going to get rid of me and move your pretty boyfriend right in?”

“No! I’ve never even considered that! I swear.”

B was reaching her arms out and crying loudly. I didn’t know what to do. “Bobby, please let me take her. She’s scared.”

He pulled her closer to him and

she screamed harder. He made her look at him. "Tell daddy how much you love him." Tears streamed down her face and I was so upset for her. She didn't understand and he'd never acted so violently around her. It was when I knew he'd finally lost it. Bobby couldn't take it anymore. Whether or not I was admitting it, Brooks was back in my life and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't deny my love for him.

"Give her to me."

He rolled his eyes and finally let her jump into my arms. I kissed her lightly on the head and ran my fingers through her soft light curls. "Shh, Mama has you."

I walked her into the kitchen to

get her settled down and heard something being thrown against the wall in the other room. Then I heard the door slam, and I took a deep breath, preparing for what was coming. "It's going to be okay, sweet girl."

I hated the idea of doing it, but I pulled my phone out of my pocket and called the police. Bobby was outside, so I walked over and locked all the doors, including the deadbolt. Me and B went into her room and I started packing her a bag. Until I knew that Bobby couldn't come near us, I was taking my daughter and staying in a hotel.

About ten minutes after I called, I heard a car pulling in the driveway and looked out to see that it was the police.

Bobby must have gotten scared, because he tried to come in the house. I opened the window and called out to the officer. "He attacked me."

The officer pulled out his stick and started walking toward Bobby. I hated that he was doing this to us, but wasn't going to live with someone that beat on me whenever his life wasn't perfect. I wasn't a punching bag and I certainly wasn't one of those women that sit around and take it over and over again.

The officer got Bobby seated on the porch steps and I finally opened the front door. At that same time, Bobby got up and came running after me. I slammed the screen door in his face, stopping him



from coming forward. The officer didn't waste any time handcuffing him, and forcing him into the back of his car. "Ma'am, I need to know what you want me to do here. He's your husband, and because this is a domestic dispute, it's up to you."

I looked down at B and then back at the officer, while keeping my composure. "I'm pressing charges for assault."

I let him inside to take my statement. The whole time I felt sorry for Bobby, as if all of this *was* my fault for loving Brooks after I said that I wanted to stay in my marriage. Now I was sitting there not only breaking his heart more, but also giving him a criminal

record to add.

I walked the officer out and saw Brooks' truck coming up the driveway. When I turned to look at the police car, I saw him watching as my knight in shining armor hopped out and approached me.

It was that pivotal moment where I knew my life was about to change again and as much as it hurt, I knew it was going to be a long and painful journey.

## Chapter 34

Brooks didn't wait for the officer to pull all the way down the driveway before walking me inside of my house. Once the door was shut, he grabbed both of my shoulders and forced me to look at

him. One glance at my face told him all he needed to know and that was before I noticed the hand-marks on my arm. “How long has he been doing this to you? Is this because of me?” Brooks looked pained, as if he’d caused me to get beat up by my husband.

I sat down on the couch and started to cry. “No. It’s not you. It happened before. That’s why we separated. He got help and I didn’t let him come back until after he had his accident. Things were better for a long time, but now he’s so jealous and I don’t know how to make him believe that there’s nothing going on between us. He thinks I’ve been sleeping with you.”

Brooks did that thing where he

clenched his jaw. B ran over and wrapped her arms around his legs. He picked her up, looking at how she'd been crying too. "Has he ever touched her?"

I shook my head. "No. Never. I don't know that he would. Bobby only takes out his anger on me."

He pointed at me, with the most serious look on his face. "He won't lay a damn hand on you again, Kat. I can guarantee you that."

"You can't get involved, Brooks. It makes things worse."

He kneeled down in front of me. With B on his lap, he looked right into my eyes. "Don't you get it? I'm already involved. You might be married to him

on paper, but that doesn't make you his."

I cried harder, scared of what was going to happen next. "He said if I ran to you he'd hurt me."

Brooks stood up. "Pack a bag for each of you. You're coming with me tonight and we'll figure out what to do next in the morning."

I refused to stand up. "I can't do that. This is my mess."

"She's my daughter, Kat. I might not have been around her that much, but she's my responsibility. I will kill him if he tries to hurt either one of you again."

I finally stood up, pleading with him. "That's exactly why I don't want you helping. I can't let you put yourself on the line for me. I've done enough

harm to you. My marriage problems are something I have to deal with on my own. I shouldn't have even called you."

"But you did. You called me, because you knew I'd show up." Brooks was getting mad at me. "Pack a damn bag now. I'm not leaving here without you. Bobby knows a lot of people in this town. He'll be released in a few hours and where do you think he'll come looking first. Is this the first time you've had him arrested?"

I started crying harder. "Yes."

"Then he's going to be more pissed." He looked at B. "Tell Mama that she needs to listen to me."

She looked at me with a straight face. "Yisten, Mama."

I laughed through my sorrow and finally got up. Ten minutes later we were locking the doors and packing up his truck with our bags. Once we got B's car seat fastened we were on our way to somewhere that we would be safe, until I could get a protective order and go home again.

It was obvious that I'd also have to contact my lawyer and talk to him about the best way to proceed with my marriage, or ending it.

I was done trying to work things out with Bobby. He would never trust me with Brooks and I wasn't willing to give him up, whether we stayed friends forever or became something more. He'd always be my daughter's father and

there was nothing that Bobby could do about it.

Since Brooks had to report to work the next morning, he took us to a hotel near the army base. He helped me get everything inside and found cartoons on the television for B. One thing that I liked was that it wasn't a flea infested dump. It was a well-known chain of hotels that even had room service, so we didn't have to leave our room, if we didn't want to. It also had an indoor pool and a gym that I knew I wouldn't be able to use with B in tow.

Brooks and B sat on the opposite side talking about a cartoon, while I went into the bathroom to wash my face. I looked like Hell and was more than



embarrassed to have been around Brooks all afternoon without looking at myself once. I tried to fix my hair, but it was a rat's nest. When I grabbed my brush and ran it through the back of my head, I hit a tender area and cringed. My fingers felt around and the wetness in a small area let me know that my head had been busted open.

“Brooks, can you come in here for a minute?”

He came in and saw me standing there holding my head. “What’s wrong?”

I looked right at him and reconsidered telling him, since I knew he’d go off the deep end over it. After realizing that I needed first aide and didn’t want to go to the hospital, I was

out of other options. “Look at my head and tell me how bad it is.”

I felt his hands touching me and separating my hair. Under his breath, so our daughter couldn't hear him, he asked, “Did he do this to you?”

I looked at him in the mirror and closed my eyes when I saw how concerned he was. “Yes.”

Brooks grabbed a washrag and wet the tip of it. He dabbed it at my head, to clean the wound and get a better look. “You’re goin’ to need at least one stitch. I can run on base and get a kit if you’d rather me do it here.”

I turned around and looked into his eyes. “I’m so sorry I got you into this.”

He tightened his face and shook his head. “Just stop with the apologies. We’ve both got shit that we wish we could take back. I don’t care what you’ve done. All I care about is giving our daughter a good life. Whether we’re together or not, we’re still a team. We’re always going to be a team, from now on. Do you understand?”

I leaned against the sink and smiled, knowing he wasn’t going to let me argue about it, not that I was even going to. “I hear you loud and clear.”

“Good. I’m going to run over to the base. I’ll be back in a half hour to get that head of yours cleaned up. Do you need me to pick up anything? How about milk for B? Will she need anything

special?”

I walked out and found her lying on her stomach on the bed. Her feet were in the air and she was staring directly at the television. “Hey, sweetie. Do you want something to eat? Are you hungry?”

She was too preoccupied with her show. I turned to see Brooks standing near the door. “Can you find her a can of fruit or something like that at your commissary?”

He smiled. “Does she like bananas and apples? We’ve got plenty of them.”

“Yeah. She loves them.”

“I’ll get some milk and fruit and bring it back with me. Sit tight. I’ll be back soon.”

I ran toward the door and caught him in the hallway. “Brooks, wait!”

He turned around.

“Thanks for this.”

“I’ll be back. Take a nice bath and get that wound cleaned. I don’t want any bacteria in it when I stitch it up.”

I watched him walk over to the elevator. He looked so handsome in his fatigues, but aside from his appearance, I felt like I was completely safe. Being with Brooks was like medicine for the soul. B was a very lucky little girl to have a hero for her father.

When I went back into the room, I found her sound sleep. Her one hand was still propping up her face a bit, so I flipped her around on a pillow and

covered her up, after removing her shoes and socks.

I turned on the water in the tub and let it fill up before I could climb in. When I started removing my clothes, I looked in the mirror to find more bruises from where I had been trying to fight my way free from Bobby's hold. I stared at my naked body and felt disgusted with myself. Someone my age should still be beautiful with great skin, not hiding from her husband in a hotel with bruises all over her body.

I felt so ashamed and mad at myself for being naïve and marrying Bobby. Sure, there was a part of me that loved the Bobby that cherished me and my daughter, but I hated the one that had

left these marks on my body. He frightened me in a place where I should have been able to feel the safest.

When I climbed into the hot water, and got myself situated, it was like I could feel every bone in my body aching. My head hurt and it wasn't just back where the small gash was. Stress and frustration were getting the best of me and I knew for my daughter's sake that I needed to get myself calmed down.

I put a warm rag over my face and closed my eyes. The cartoon channel was still on in the other room and I could hear the sound effects when something exciting would happen. It made me think about B's smile and how happy she always was. Then it reminded

me of the fear that I'd seen in her eyes just hours before.

My cries this time were out of guilt. I felt like a failure to myself and my child. I'd been stupid for thinking that Bobby had changed and even more idiotic for assuming that he'd be okay with me being around Brooks.

The water had started to get cold, but the tears kept coming. When I heard the door open, it startled me. First, I was on high alert from what had happened to me and secondly, my daughter was in the bed asleep. I sat up in the tub, covering my appendages with a rag and my hands. Brooks peeked in the doorway. "It's just me."

He didn't move though. Instead,



he stood there looking at me. “Do you mind?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I don’t mind at all. It’s nothing I haven’t seen before.”

Feeling embarrassed, I tossed the wet rag at him. “Go away, you perv!”

He laughed and walked away.

I climbed out of the tub and realized that my clothes were in the other room. After wrapping a towel around my body, I walked in to find him lying on the bed with B. He had his arm propped up and was watching her sleep. On the floor were a couple of bags, one with his name printed on it. “Did you rob the base?”

He turned around, noticing I was

naked first, and answering me second. “I needed to be able to change in the morning before my shift.”

That’s when it hit me. “You’re staying?”

Brooks sat up, watching me kneeling on the floor rummaging through my suitcase for clothes to wear to bed. Since I’d been in such a hurry, I’d forgotten to pack pajamas. He laughed at me and unzipped his bag, tossing me an army t-shirt. “Here, just put this on. I don’t sleep with it on anyway.”

The idea of wearing his shirt gave me chills. I could literally picture myself smelling it when he wasn’t looking. “Thanks.”

I stood up and looked around the

room for a place to change, realizing I had to go in the bathroom. It was hard to keep reminding myself that Brooks and I were just friends. No matter how attracted we were to one another, our relationship was platonic.

I walked into the bathroom and changed, then came back out to sit on the bed across from him. “So, are you sure you know how to stitch?”

“Yeah, I learned it in basic. I need you to get under the light and let me look at it. I may need to clip a piece of hair to be able to get a clean stitch.” He reached in his bag and pulled out a bottle of whisky. “You’re probably going to want to drink this.”

“Seriously? I’ll get drunk.”

He laughed. "I'll keep you from stripping and handing out your number to strangers. Just take a few swigs and lay on your stomach."

The alcohol burned going down, but I did as he said. He was gentle, not that it helped. It hurt bad and there were several times that I wanted to scream out like a baby.

When it was all said and done, he cleaned the area again and kissed me on the forehead. "All fixed."

I turned around and smiled. "Thanks."

Assuming he would get up and move to the other bed, I sat there looking at him. When he kept staring, I felt my body getting flushed. "Bobby knew you

were still in love with me, didn't he?"

That loud thumping was happening again in my chest. My ears began ringing and I swear there were stars circling around my eyes. I was alone with Brooks in a hotel room. The last time we'd been in this same position, we made our daughter. I swallowed the lump in my throat and stared into his eyes when I answered. "Yeah, he did."

## Chapter 35

Brooks didn't move. He just sat there staring, as if he assumed I would lie about it. "Kat, you really told him you loved me?"

I shrugged. "It was never a secret. He knew it when he met me. He

was the person that held me when I cried about you. He was there for me when I had B, knowing that I didn't love him. He asked me to marry him and said that he knew I wasn't over you. After some time I came to love Bobby, but he'll never be you. I thought I learned that after the Branch fiasco, but obviously I can't learn from my mistakes, because here I am married to another man that I'm trying to convince myself to fall in love with."

I looked down at the bedding, afraid of what was coming next. In some ways I wanted to close my eyes and fall into Brooks' arms. On the other hand, I knew I'd be committing adultery. I didn't want to be that kind of person and it hurt

me so much knowing that everything I ever wanted was sitting a mere inches away and I couldn't have it.

“I'm not the saint you picture me to be, Kat. I've seen and done things that I'm not proud of. Living in another country was hard. Sometimes I needed the comfort of a woman. It never meant much to me, but sometimes it helped with my sleep problems. You keep punishing yourself for the things you've done, but I don't see those things are all that bad. You ran from the family because you thought you tore us all apart. Don't you see that it wasn't you? It was me. I did it. I was the one that took you to my bed that night. It was selfish, and could have been done the

right way, years before. I wanted to hurt Branch. I wanted to shove your love for me right in his face, because after all that time, I was tired of him having what should have been mine all along. I knew that being with you would ruin your engagement and I went for it out of spite.”

I could feel my bottom lip shaking. He was right. For so long I’d blamed myself for not being honest. I’d always loved Brooks and feeling like he didn’t want me made me settle for Branch. I did love him, albeit it didn’t compare to my deep connection for Brooks. “I supposed this all could have been avoided if we knew how to communicate with each other.”



Brooks let out an air-filled laugh. “Yeah. Probably.”

He reached for my hand and I let him take it. When he brought it up to his own lips, he held it there like he was smelling my skin. “Brooks, what do you want to happen now? I mean, once I figure out how to get a separation and file for divorce, which I am sure I’m doing, what do you want to happen? Can we be best friends again, after all this time?” I started thinking about him being with other women. It was as if I were being stabbed in my heart.

Brooks scooted his body close to mine and reached his arm around me. He looked directly at me. “Kat, I can’t be your friend. I’m sorry, but I can’t be that

person anymore.”

I had to look away, because the tears were already starting to drip out from my eyes. He grabbed my chin and made me look at him again. “What are you crying for?”

“I don’t know. I guess I keep feeling like even after everything we’ve been through, we could run off and live happily ever after. It’s stupid, I know. I thought that after the past few days we’d never want to let each other go again.”

The smirk on Brooks’ face made me feel like he was going to make fun of me. “I don’t want to be your friend, because I need more than that. Open your eyes woman. I want to be your everything. I always have.”

I wrapped my arms around him and cried against his chest. “Why didn’t you just say that? I thought you didn’t want anything to do with me.”

“Jesus. I’m alone in a hotel with you and our daughter. Can you name one other place in the world I’d rather be?” he kissed my head and kept his face there. “I’ll wait as long as it takes to get things sorted out with Bobby. As of right now, whose name is on the birth certificate as B’s father?”

“You.”

He seemed shocked. “That’s good to know.”

“I told you that I never kept it a secret from anyone here. “

B sat up in the bed and look

around. Her hair was sticking up in the back and I could tell she was confused about her surroundings. She looked from me to Brooks and put her bottom lip out. “Mama.”

I held out my arms, but didn’t adjust how close I was to Brooks. Bobby was going to fight to be a part of her life. I got that. It was time for B to know who her real father was. She climbed up on my lap and looked at him. He leaned in and kissed her on the head. She smiled, but kept leaning on me. “B do you know who this is?”

She nodded.

“Do you know his name?”

“Books.”

We both laughed. “Sweetie,

Brooks is your daddy.”

B was confused. Her face curled up like she was about to cry. “No. He not.”

Brooks wasn’t giving up. He held his arms out for her. “Come here, kiddo. Let me show you something.”

I followed them into the bathroom and saw him stand her on the vanity. Brooks pointed to his face in the mirror and then to hers. He looked at her and pointed to his eyes and then her eyes. She stood there, looking at their twin reflections in the mirror. He pulled me next to them. “Mommy, Daddy, and B.”

She laughed at us, pointed to herself, and said “B”, then to me.

“Mama.” She looked back at Brooks and seemed confused. Then she got close up to the mirror and poked at her eyes. B scrunched her face and pointed towards Brooks’ eyes like he’d showed her. “Mine.”

She knew something was similar, but didn’t understand how it all tied together. Brooks reached his arms out and she climbed back into them. “You’re mine, little bug. I’m your daddy.”

“Daddy?” She still seemed confused. He smiled and looked at me. “It’s going to take her a while to get used to it.”

I was hopeful and knew he was right. If there was some instant way to get her to understand we would have

already done it. “She needs to know the truth, though.”

B rested her head against Brooks’ chest. “How about we take it day by day and let B figure it out herself? I’m not going anywhere, Kat. We’re going to raise her together, whether you want to stay friends or get married. It’s up to you.”

I wrapped my arms around him and B. “I don’t deserve this.”

“You’re getting it anyway, so shut up be happy. You’re going to have a lot of bad days coming your way. No matter what, I’ll be there.”

Since it was nearing dinnertime, Brooks insisted that we order room service and lay around watching movies.

I'd brought B enough of her little toys to keep her occupied. Brooks had brought along his iPad and was streaming one of her favorite cartoons. He liked hanging out with her and I appreciated it. She wasn't going to understand what was happening with Bobby and I knew she'd miss him. With him being arrested, I didn't know if a judge would even consider letting him see her. When I thought about Bobby's love for her, it hurt me. He may not have respected me, but he would have done anything for her. Just because I didn't want anything to do with him, didn't mean I wouldn't let him visit B. He'd been her only father.

The sun started to go down and it was about that time when my cell phone



started ringing. I knew immediately that it would be about Bobby. Brooks looked right at me. “Just answer it, Kat. He can’t hurt you.”

I accepted the call. “Hello?”

“Really, Katy? This is how you’re going to fuckin’ be? I’m tellin’ you right now, you better be home when I get there.”

I took a deep breath. “It’s my house and you’re not welcome there anymore. I want you out, Bobby. I’ve taken pictures of what you did to me this time, and I even had to get a stitch in my head. I’m done with you hurting me for things I didn’t do.”

“Don’t even go there. You’re with him right now, aren’t ya?”

“That’s none of your business. I want a divorce, and I’m not changing my mind. I never should have given you a second chance. I should have known you wouldn’t change.”

“Bitch, I ain’t givin’ you a divorce, and I sure as hell ain’t lettin’ you take that little girl from me.”

“You don’t have a choice, Bobby. She’s not yours. If I want to keep her from you I can, and you know it’s true. She’s got her daddy’s name on that birth certificate. Now, if I were you, I’d think long and hard about what you say to me from here on out. I’d like to eventually be able to come to a visitation agreement with you, provided that you go back to anger management

and get help. If you try to harm me, in any way, my offer is off the table. I'll make sure you never see her again."

"This ain't over!" The line went dead.

I felt like I was dizzy, and Brooks grabbed both of my hands to calm me down. "Come here." He pulled me into a hug. "You're safe, Kat. I've got you."

I reached my arms behind his back and clung to him for support. "Please don't ever let go."

I could tell from Bobby's voice that he wasn't going to be happy with walking away. Not only did I fear for my safety, but I also worried that he was going to do whatever it took to come

between me and my relationship with Brooks.

My phone didn't ring again, and after a couple of hours passed, I was still in Brooks' arms, holding onto the only man that could protect me. B had come over and climbed beside us, so Brooks could read her a story. He changed his voice for different characters and she got a kick out of it. "Again."

He'd start again, reading the story, as if it were the very first time, all the while holding me with his bad arm, because I'd begged him to not let go.

Brooks got up to stretch, and B began jumping on the bed. "Don't do that. You're going to hurt yourself, bug.

How about we go for a ride and let Mama get some rest?”

She shook her head. “Bye byes.”

I was thinking that they’d be going in a car, but he sat her down in a wheeled chair at the desk and started running her from one end of the room to the other. She laughed and begged for him to continue. He walked over and kissed my forehead. “Take a nap. I’m going to tire her out and hit the snack machine. I’ll bring you up a soda.”

I smiled, knowing that B was in the best of hands. As soon as they left, I picked up my phone and called Sarah.

“Katy, tell me that you’re not shackled up with Brooks when Bobby is sitting in a jail cell that you put him in.”

“He beat me again, Sarah. This time I needed stitches. He accused me of things that I wasn’t even doing. He threatened Brooks life and then mine. I know you and Dave love Bobby, but I can’t live like that anymore. Since I know he called you two to get him out, I just wanted you to know the real story. I’m not shackled up either. I’m in a safe place with my little girl, and until I speak to a lawyer I won’t be back at my house. If you could ride by there in the morning, I would appreciate it.”

“Katy, marriage is full of ups and downs. You can get through this. Bobby’s jealous of the love you share with Brooks. It ain’t fair for you to keep running around with him.”

“He’s the father of my child, the only man that I’ve ever loved with my whole heart. I didn’t leave Bobby because of Brooks. I left Bobby because I can’t be physically and verbally abused anymore. I won’t let my daughter grow up in that kind of environment. Whether Brooks is around or not, has nothing to do with my decision.”

“If you leave Bobby I don’t know if we can continue bein’ friends. People in this town talk, Katy. They know you’re havin’ an affair.”

“I’M NOT!” I screamed. “What is wrong with you people? I’ve never even kissed Brooks. This is ridiculous.”

“I’ll check on your house and call you tomorrow. Maybe by then you’ll

have come to your senses.”

She hung up, leaving me sitting there with my mouth open. Bobby could be the sweetest man, but they didn't know him like I did. If they wanted to believe him then they weren't really my friends to begin with.

I turned off my phone and decided that the best thing for me was to get some rest. The only problem was, I couldn't calm down. So I lay there, staring at the ceiling, thinking of what I was going to do next. I was positive about one thing. No matter what I had to do, or who I had to fight, I wasn't losing Brooks this time around.

## Chapter 36

I heard them coming back into



the room and opened my eyes to see B holding all sorts of snacks in her little hands. She was giggling and Brooks couldn't stop laughing himself. "Hey Mama. We're back."

I sat up in the bed and smiled. "I see that. Did you get everything they had?"

"We didn't know which one you'd want." B climbed up on the bed and watched as Brooks scattered the bags of chips and packages of candy.

I covered my mouth and began laughing. "We'll never be able to eat all of this, and she'll never go to sleep."

He grabbed her and started tickling her until she screamed. When he stopped she reached for his hands and

put them up to her belly. “Again.”

He tickled her again as I opened up a peanut butter cup and popped it into my mouth. I hadn’t had one in so long and it was like a burst of heaven awakening my taste buds. “This is so good.”

“Two matching cups, but you only get one.” He opened up his mouth and as I fed him a bite, I was taken back by a memory of when we were seniors in high school.

Of course, I was with Branch at the time and my relationship with Brooks was slowly fading into nothing. He was beginning to see lots of girls and staying away from us as much as possible. On this particular day, being

Halloween, I decided to dress up to go to school. I knew I'd get in trouble if I showed off too much skin, so after finding a short black skirt and black top, I attached a tail and a pair of mouse ears and then added a few whiskers on my face. When we got into the car to head to school, Branch told me that I looked embarrassing and that he didn't want to walk around with me to my classes. Brooks remained quiet in the backseat, never saying a word until we'd reached school. As Branch found his sport friends and walked away, I stood around waiting for Brooks. "I think you look cute, Kat."

"Thanks."

"You know how Branch is." We

began walking and I didn't reply to his comment.

Brooks proceeded to walk me to my locker and wait as I exchanged my books. "You know, we could go out and trick or treat tonight if you want."

"We're too old."

"Never! We could put on masks and nobody would even know."

I'd always loved Halloween and the fun that it brought being able to get dressed up and act silly for one night out of the year. "Branch would just get mad."

"Who gives a shit about what Branch thinks? Kat, you used to be fun. What happened to you?"

At the time, I took it offensively

and left him standing there in the hallway. I don't remember much of the rest of the day, but later on, when I went to my locker, I found a note and a package of peanut butter cups inside. One had been eaten. The letter said.

*Two peanut butter cups, but you're only allowed one.*

I never understood what it meant until I'd taken a bite just then. When my face looked serious, Brooks stopped chewing. "What's wrong?"

"Do you remember when we were in school and you left the peanut butter cups for me?"

"One cup," he corrected.

"Was that note some cryptic way of you telling me to choose you?"

He started chewing again and lifting B over his head. “Maybe.”

I pushed him lightly. “Why couldn’t you just say it to me, instead of leaving me messages that made no sense?”

Brooks laughed. “Because I wanted you to choose on your own, not because I persuaded it. Little hints along the way couldn’t hurt. Not that it ever helped anyway. You were too damn stubborn to think that what you were doing was wrong, or who I should say.”

“Brooks! Cut it out.”

We both began to laugh as I got up and walked into the bathroom. I’d been wearing Brooks’ shirt, but still had on a pair of shorts and a bra. I

considered taking them off so I could sleep comfortably, but I didn't want Brooks to get the wrong idea. I looked into the mirror anyway, making sure I looked halfway decent. "Jesus woman, you're lucky he doesn't go running the other direction." I knew there was little I could do to change how I looked, so I decided to not let it bother me.

When I opened the door to go out, he was standing on the other side. His one arm was up, leaning against the frame. "I think you're beautiful."

I was flabbergasted. "I think all that sugar is going to your head."

He moved his arm and let me walk by him without saying anything else. B was already up on the bed,

watching something on television. She was sucking on her two fingers, which usually meant she was tired. I grabbed her cup and filled it with milk from the mini refrigerator. She didn't sit up as I handed it to her. After taking two sips, she set it beside her and put her fingers back in her mouth. I covered her up and kissed her lightly on the cheek. "Love you, B."

She smiled and closed her eyes as I started rubbing her soft face. Brooks walked behind me and climbed on the other bed. I didn't turn to look at him, because I wanted B to go to bed without being distracted by anything else.

It took her a few minutes, but thankfully she fell right to sleep.



When I turned to look at Brooks, he was under the covers and I could tell his shirt was off. The blankets were up to his shoulders, but enough skin was exposed to show that he'd removed it.

I looked down at the large shirt I had on and then back to him. Since he'd seen me naked before, I couldn't understand why I felt so nervous. He must have sensed the weird vibe too. "What's wrong?" he whispered.

I shrugged. "Shut up."

"Kat, get comfortable and get in bed. I'm not going to make fun of you, if that's what you think."

I scrunched up my face. "It's not that."

I let my shorts drop to the floor

and then unfastened and removed my bra without taking off the shirt. Brooks watched me the whole time, laughing at how I was doing it. “Since when did you get shy?”

“Would you stop?”

I climbed under the covers next to my daughter and turned to face Brooks in the other bed. He did the same thing, facing me and cuddling with his pillow. When he started laughing again, I tossed a pillow at him.

“Sorry, I saw this going a little differently.”

“I’m not sleeping with you, Brooks. I just left my husband.”

“I never asked you, did I?”

I felt like he was rejecting me

and even if I was determined not to be with him, I still needed to feel wanted. I started to roll over to ignore him. “Whatever.”

“Look at me, woman.”

I turned once more, giving him an irritated look when I did. “What?”

He sat up and swung his feet forward off the bed. The first thing I noticed shocked the hell out of me. On his body, right where his rib cage started on the left side, was a tattoo. It wasn’t just an armed forces tattoo, an American flag or something tribal. It was a very large letter K.

He caught me staring and smiled as he looked down at it and grazed it with his hand. “Oh, this. I should

probably explain. I guess I got it so long ago that I forgot you've never seen it."

"When?" I sat up and faced him, completely in shock that he'd put that on his body. My heart was pounding wildly and I felt like I was shaking, even though I knew I was sitting still. "Is that... Did you..."

I stuttered through my words, shocked in disbelief.

"Kat, my heart belongs to you. It's not a secret. I got this done when I first went to Afghanistan. We'd just shared that night in the hotel room, and even though you'd left me I still loved you the same. I guess some people would call me stupid, but I just knew you were the one. I was going to put it

over my heart. Instead, I put it here,” he pointed to his side where the large K sat, “Because the moment you walked out of my life I felt like I couldn’t breathe.”

I put my hand over my mouth so he couldn’t see it wide open in shock. “I don’t know what to say.”

He looked down at it again and touched his skin. Then he looked over at B. “Now, looking at what we made that night melts my heart even more.”

I looked down at the carpet, unable to hide my emotions from him. With B asleep we were all alone, back in a hotel room, like the night we’d been together the last time. “Brooks-” His name lingered on my lips.

“Come here.”

I shook my head, knowing that being with him would be considered adultery. It was like a force field was sitting between Brooks and me and I wasn't allowed to pass through it. "I can't."

He reached over and placed his hand on my leg. "Close your eyes."

I did what he said and felt him taking my hand. He pulled me slowly from one bed toward the other. When I opened my eyes I was standing right in front of him. His breath was on mine and feeling it gave me chills. "I can't do this, Brooks. It's wrong."

He took a hold of the t-shirt and pulled me closer. Our lips were touching and I was falling hard for the man that

I'd dreamed of being with him for as long as I could remember. "I'm not stealing from him, when you were never his to begin with. You didn't belong to Branch and you sure as hell don't belong to Bobby. A piece of paper isn't love. Close your eyes and tell me you don't feel it again? Tell me that you haven't thought of that night we spent together every single day since it happened? If you don't want this, then back up and go to sleep."

His lips brushed over mine as he spoke and I was losing control over myself and my emotions. He wasn't playing fair and resisting him, after losing him and then thinking he was dead, was making my decision

impossible to fight. "I'm scared."

Brooks stood up and looked down at me. His army shirt was being lifted up and my arms wouldn't let me fight him. They raised as if he was controlling my body. I felt it pull over my head and the cold air hitting my nipples. I was standing there in only a pair of underwear as he was backing us up onto the bed. Brooks didn't look down at my body, nor did he try to kiss me. We got under the covers and he pulled me against his warm chest. My desire for him was making it hard to focus on what was really happening.

Brooks wasn't trying to sleep with me. He didn't want to push me into something I wasn't ready for. All he



desired was to be close to me. He wanted to hold me and never let me go.

Just like he'd done our whole lives, Brooks was protecting me. His love had gotten me through the most horrible of times and it was with that love that I was able to never give up hope that we'd be together again someday. I closed my eyes and rested my head on his bare chest. He stroked my hair and kissed the top of my head. "Don't be scared, Kat. If you fall, I'll catch you. I always have and I always will. Except, this time I'm never going to let you go."

## Chapter 37

While I lay there in his arms, I played with his dog tags, memorizing the

numbers and the way the indentation of the stamping felt against my fingertips. Whether it was wrong or right, I knew I was where I was supposed to be.

Brooks kept running his hands over my back as we lay there quietly. I wanted to go to sleep, but couldn't imagine it happening while being so close to him after all of the time that had passed. The obvious heat growing between my legs was a perfect indication of how starved I was for his affections. Even my body wanted to make up for all of the time that we'd been apart. In our room, hidden away from the rest of the world, nothing else existed. The three of us were all that mattered to me.

When I looked up into Brooks' eyes, I knew he was having the same intense feelings. He licked his lips and looked down at mine. It was so sinful yet seemingly appropriate, all at the same time. This was Brooks, not some strange man that I was running around with. He was the father of my child and the owner of my heart. "I love you." It came out as a whisper, but only because I didn't want to wake up B.

Brooks sat up a little, causing me to fall off of him. He cupped my face into his hands and looked deeply into my eyes. "You were worth the wait." Our lips connected and immediately there was a fire that ignited throughout my body. The power of one kiss not only

overwhelmed me, but it made me feel as if we were levitating up above the bed.

His hand began to caress my skin, in places that were beyond the friend zone. I didn't care. My rationalizing of what was right and wrong had been put to the side, because I was kissing this beautiful half-naked man, with enough years of pent up emotions that nothing was going to interfere. We'd had time and an ocean against us. Family and friends had alienated our bond, albeit being in this very moment made all of their attempts seem insignificant.

Brooks grabbed my backside and lifted me to be straddling him. I sat up, no longer ashamed for him to see my

naked breasts. Not that he even paid them any attention. His eyes were fixed on mine as our lips continued making contact, hosting our blending tongues. Each kiss was deeper and hotter.

I knew I wanted this man, and every inch of his smoking hot physique. Knowing that his heart was all mine aided my desire.

We stopping kissing, to catch our breaths and decide how far we were willing to take things. I'd told him earlier that it couldn't happen, but knew there was no way I could stop myself. "Uh-oh."

I turned to follow Brooks gaze and saw B standing on the edge of the bed with her fingers in her mouth. She

didn't say anything and I wasn't sure if she could even know what I was doing was wrong. Nonetheless, I pulled the sheet to cover my chest and held my arms out for her. She climbed into the bed and Brooks moved over for her to get between us. B looked from me to Brooks, and then she did something that shocked the both of us. Instead of finding comfort against my bosom, like any child in an unfamiliar place would naturally do, she turned and buried her little body into Brooks' chest. He kissed the top of her head and held his face there. I knew why, and when he lifted up, I could see that I was right.

Brooks was crying. He knew he didn't need to hide his feelings from me.

I could feel the burning sensation in my own eyes, sharing in the beauty of his daughter turning to him for comfort. She may not have even known what she was doing, but it still meant everything to him.

As he held her there, I lay watching them together. I'd never sat back and considered what it was like for Brooks, having been so excited to come home to me and finding that I had a life without him. The thought made me feel atrocious about what I'd done. Where I thought I was settling for the best I could do, he was still planning a life with me.

The misery that he must have endured seeing that I was married with a child was awful to imagine. It explained

why he was so cold that day at the base. He couldn't let his true emotions show because I'd devastated him yet again. I knew I didn't deserve him, but I also knew that he'd never desert me.

I slid closer to B and wrapped an arm around the both of them. Brooks, while having B in his opposite arm, intertwined our fingers with his opposite hand. He laid them over B's belly on top of the covers and we kept looking directly into each other's glossed over eyes. B was already falling back asleep. We could have climbed onto the other bed and finished what was happening between us, except it was no longer necessary. Both of us had everything we wanted in the bed we were already



occupying. I'd never felt so whole in my life. "This feels so right," he whispered through his own tears. "I never thought I'd have this."

I squeezed his hand. "Me either."

Knowing that we were both content only made it easier for me to fall asleep. We were all three on the one queen sized bed, cuddled together and only proving true to our already strong bond.

When I woke a few hours later, B had kicked herself sideways. Her head was in my ribs and her feet were pressed against Brooks' hard abs. He was awake, staring at me, with a grin on his face. Sometime, while sleeping, our hands had come apart and he was using

his to motion to me that we needed to move her, or ourselves.

I slid off the bed and replaced where I was with a pillow. Brooks did the same after adjusting the covers so she couldn't kick them off easily.

We climbed into the other bed. He pulled me close, bringing my back to rest against his chest. He leaned his chin against my shoulder and kissed it before becoming completely still. I placed my arms over top of his that were holding me tight and closed my eyes again. Just as I was falling back asleep, I heard him whisper something that woke me right back up. "I love you so much, Kat."

I couldn't lay there, being so close to him, having his fingertips almost

touching my tingling nipples and do nothing. I was done fighting a losing battle with wrong and right. I wanted Brooks, because in so many ways, I'd always only been his. With morals pushed aside, I lifted his wrapped arms up a few inches to glide across my nipples. The pure awareness that it sent between my legs was immediate. I was burning for him and I couldn't hold back any longer. I needed to dive in and be devoured by his love. My ass adjusted and I could feel his eagerness pressing on the back of my butt. Brooks knew it too. He knew that I wasn't going to sleep until I was satiated by anything and everything that he had to offer.

When we were finally facing

each other, prepared to keep going, he closed in for another kiss. "Make love to me, Brooks."

He seemed conflicted. "You said we couldn't."

I ran my hand over his lips and he opened them to allow me to lean in and kiss him, dragging my tongue over his teeth. "Don't you want me?" I whispered.

"Don't be stupid, Kat. You don't know how hard it is for me to hold back from what I really want. I just can't have you walking out on me like before. There's too much at stake here. If waiting will help you stick to your decision, it's worth it to me."

It hurt that he thought I was going

to walk away again. He'd been right about it being different this time. I wasn't being fickle. I knew exactly who and what I wanted.

This time I was all in. I didn't have regrets. What I did have was a daughter and the chance for us to be a real family. "All I want is us, forever. I won't be changing my mind or abandoning you. If you think we should wait, I'll respect your decision, but we're here, naked in this room. You love me and I love you. I've made a ton of mistakes, but there's one thing that I've done right in my life, and that's loving you. Brooks, look at me and tell me that you think I'm going to let go again. Look over at that little girl who

loves you after knowing you for only a few days and tell me that I'd be so heartless as to take her away from you."

He seemed like he felt sorry for assuming my intentions weren't true. "Point taken. You can't blame me for being scared, Kat. I've lost you so many times and I know that if it happened again this time it would end me. I couldn't live with knowing that you and B were out there and I couldn't be with you. That's why I want everything to be right this time."

I deserved to get the cold shoulder. I definitely deserved to suffer for hurting him again and again. Sometimes I felt like the most wretched person to exist. How he could be lying

next to me was still a mystery.

Yet, there he was, holding me and offering me a forever that I'd wanted for as long as I could remember. "I'll wait for you, Brooks, just like you waited for me."

He smiled, as if it was some sort of mock. "Yeah, I'm not real sure waiting is the best decision." His change of attitude was apparent when he rubbed his stiff erection against my leg. "I figure I've got two choices. I can go in the bathroom and take care of this myself, like I've gotten pretty used to doing, or I can be with the woman that I've waited almost three years to be with again."

"Seems like a really *hard* decision." I purposely stressed the word

hard.

Brooks laughed. “Yeah.” He took my hand and ran it over his boxer briefs. “What do you think?”

When he let go of my hand, I didn’t stop touching him. In fact, I reached inside of the elastic band and ran my fingers over his super smooth erection. “I think that if you don’t make love to me, I’m going to have to beg.” I started massaging him, watching his eyes close. “Do you think about that night as much as I do? I want to feel it again; that connection that took us to places neither of us knew existed.”

He opened his beautiful blue eyes, and like a switch went off in his brain, knew exactly what was going to



happen. I felt his lips on mine, before he pulled away and teased me with his tongue. "If I told you how much I've thought about you, I may scare you away. It's borderline stalking."

I kissed him and backed away again. His boxer briefs were being slowly pushed down. I needed to free him before he could change his mind. For me, there was no going back. It didn't matter if it had been one day or one year. I wanted to be with Brooks and nothing could stop me from finally having it.

Brooks slid off the bed and removed his underwear. He looked behind him, making sure our daughter was still fast asleep and climbed back

into the bed with me. He pulled down the covers and kissed the elastic of my underwear. I felt his fingers lifting it and tracing the skin where my legs met my sex. His face was at my waist as he watched himself sliding my panties to the side. His fingers rubbed over the skin and he looked up at me to see my reaction to his touch. I was on fire for him already, so when he blew on it, my body reacted, overcompensating for it having been so long since we'd been together.

When he started removing them off of my legs, I lifted my ass and helped. I wanted to be completely naked, giving myself to this man, knowing that we were going to be together for the rest

of our lives. With life being so fragile, I was tired of taking the easy road out. I had to fight for what I wanted and seize the day, knowing that whatever came next we would go through it together.

As my underwear were being removed from my ankles, Brooks looked right between my legs. He ran the whole palm of his hand over the lips of my pussy and then brought his eyes up to meet mine. The first thing I noticed is that they were glossed over again. “Kat, promise me that this is forever. Tell me that when I wake up in the morning, you’re still going to be in my arms. Assure me that this time is different.”

I leaned forward, closing the space between us. “I’m never leaving

you again. Wherever you go, I'm going to be by your side. I want this, Brooks. It's all I've ever wanted. We're a family, and nobody can ever take that away from us."

Our lips met as he brought his body to be even with mine. I felt his fingers sliding inside of me and was confident that there was no turning back. Brooks climbed on top of me and stopped kissing me while he spoke. "The first time's going to be fast, but after that, I'll be able to go all night."

Hearing him say that only fueled me for what was to come. "We have forever, so time isn't going to be a problem."

## Chapter 38

I felt myself going back to the memories of the night that I'd made love to Brooks in the hotel room the first time. I remembered how my senses were heightened, and each time he kissed me how the hair stood up on the back of my neck.

He gave me chills back then and even more this time around. My body trembled as he entered me. I could feel him going deeper, his dog tags hitting me as he moved. I couldn't stop staring at his tattoo, symbolizing his undying love for me.

He kept looking into my eyes, and I stared back into his. He wasn't just a beautiful man. Age had provided him with facial hair and creases that seemed

to accentuate his face even more. When he kissed me, his stubble was apparent and I liked the way it felt when he rubbed his face over the sensitive areas of my skin.

Brooks sat us up in the bed, wrapping my legs around him. Our naked bodies were set like a pretzel, our arms holding one another. The room wasn't spinning, but it felt like we were. I remembered every inch of this man as if I'd been with him every day. My eyes closed as I felt him kissing my collarbone and then up to my earlobe. His kiss was eager, filled with such intensity and raw emotion poured out of him. Our love radiated through us, while our bodies rocked together. Sweat made

our skin glisten and soft moans only heightened the passion between us.

I leaned back and ran my hands over both of Brooks' strong biceps, being gentle to not reinjure his bad arm. Not that it mattered, because Brooks wasn't paying his injury any attention. He picked me back up and brought my lips to his for a kiss. I pulled back, teasing him and then finally giving him what he wanted. He filled me and lifted my body as we worked toward the common goal of pleasure. Everything was in slow motion; the way we moved, touched and connected.

When we fell down on the bed our hands were intertwined. He held them above our heads as he continued

making love to me, bringing me to the brink of ecstasy again and again. When Brooks finally let go, he lingered over top of me.

We were both out of breath, panting from what we'd just experienced. He rolled us over and held me in his arms, tightly. While he played with my hair, I ran my fingers through the patch of hair on his chest. It wasn't much, but enough that I noticed it. I traced the K overtop of his ribs while he spoke to me.

“No regrets, Kat.”

“No regrets.”

I'm not really sure how long we lay there in each other's arms. Brooks seemed content and I wasn't about to



move the toned muscles that were holding me tight. He rubbed my back until I heard soft snores and knew he'd fallen asleep.

I got up to use the bathroom and stared at myself in the mirror. I stood there naked, looking at my body. To me I wasn't anything out of the ordinary. I'd always been slender, and I guess my breasts were a nice average size. My hair was naturally two-toned brown. I appeared to be just a plain mother looking type.

Brooks saw something completely different. It probably didn't matter what I looked like to him. His love for me was based on knowing me for our whole lives. I knew that was the

truth, because I had that same love for him. Of course, it never hurt that he was so gorgeous, even more so since he'd become a man.

I touched my bruised cheek and felt like it had happened so long ago, instead of just a day. A lot had happened already and all I wanted to do was put that part of my life behind me.

When I looked at the bruises that were fading on my arm, I saw one on my stomach. I went to touch it and started thinking about something entirely more important.

My ovulation cycle.

I'd been tracking it, preparing for the right time to try and get pregnant again. I rushed out into the room and

grabbed my purse. My heart was beating out of my chest as I sat there staring at the calendar. Two days were circled and this happened to be the first one.

For the second time in my life I'd had unprotected sex in a hotel room with Brooks, and it was very possible that he'd gotten me pregnant again.

Then I really started to panic. I ran back into the bathroom and shut the door.

Brooks would be ecstatic, but I'd have to explain being unfaithful to my husband, and it would cause problems with me getting a divorce. He could argue that we'd had sex while B was with us, even though we made sure not to wake her.

Brooks opened the door to the bathroom. He'd put his underwear back on. "You alright? You better not be in here crying, thinking of a way to escape."

He crossed his arms over his chest, and I could see the scars on the underside of his arm.

He cleared his throat when I didn't answer.

"I told you, I'm not going anywhere. I came in here to get cleaned up, that's all."

He pulled me close and kissed me softly. "I know you better than you know yourself. What is it, Kat?"

I handed him my little pocket calendar. He looked confused and then I

watched his face change. He started laughing and looked up at me. “Are you kidding me?” He ran his hand through his hair. “Again?”

I held my hands in the air. “So I’m thinking that if we stay together, we may need a school bus to cart all the kids in.”

He laughed again and pulled me close. “Don’t freak out yet, Kat. It’s not like it is a definite. You’ve got enough to worry about.” I took comfort in his arms. “I refuse to wear a rubber with you. I never have and I never will.”

When I realized what he was saying, I was shocked that I hadn’t thought about it before. “Jesus, what if I got pregnant back then?”

He put his hands up, like he was under arrest. “Hold up. In my defense both times I went into your room it wasn’t to have sex with you. You begged me for it.”

In my defense, I was extremely emotional, and I thought *he* was my boyfriend. “I didn’t know it was you!”

He cornered me and got closer. “You wanted it to be me, Kat. Deep down you had to question why it was different.”

“How do you know it was?”

He laughed. “Because there ain’t no way my brother can make you cum like I can.”

As shocked as I was at his statement, I knew it was true. Even as a

teenager, I remember those particular nights in my bedroom out of all the other nights with Branch.

“Am I right?”

I smiled and he already knew the answer. “Yes. You’re right. Although, I didn’t think it was you. I just thought he was being sensitive of my feelings.”

“Did you ever pretend he was me?”

“Stop, Brooks. Being with Branch was a mistake. He cost us a lot, and I don’t want to think about a single second I wasted on him.”

He grabbed my hand and kissed it softly. “I’m kidding with you. We were kids, Kat. Do you know how scared I was to face you the morning

after I'd been in your room? I thought for sure you'd mention it to Branch and he'd come and try to kick my ass."

I laughed. "I did mention it. Both times I thanked him for being so good to me. He seemed weird but never said a thing. When I think about it, I see how awful that was."

Brooks couldn't stop laughing. "What a loser. He had his head so far up his own ass that he didn't know you were making love to me across the hall."

I put both of my hands into his. "Can we go back to worrying that I've been impregnated for the second time in a hotel room? How could I have let something so important slip from my mind?"



Brooks kissed my forehead. “We were preoccupied, making up for lost time. And no, we’re not going to worry about that. We’re going to keep making love and when you get pregnant, I’ll be able to experience everything I missed the first time.”

“Brooks, I need to get a divorce first. Don’t you think we’re rushing? We can’t just forget about everything else.”

“I’ve waited to be with you for over twenty years. This isn’t rushing.”

He was being silly, and I was too tired to appreciate it as humor. He led me to the bed and pulled me into his chest again. “Kat, everything is going to be fine. Who gets pregnant two times after one time being together? It’s pretty

impossible.”

I rolled my eyes, wondering if he'd been playing with himself when we learned about the female cycle in high school. I knew he had taken it, because we sat together in class. “Whatever.”

He started tickling me, sending me in a crazy frenzy trying to free myself. “You’re a worry wart.”

When he stopped we were left staring at each other again. He leaned down and kissed my nose. “My girl.”

“We need to go slow, Brooks, not for us, but for the sake of everyone around us that won’t understand.”

“We have a kid together. She’s almost two. I think they can figure it out. Besides, I really don’t give a shit what

people think or say. All I care about is being with you and B. The rest of the people can kiss my white ass.”

A giggle escaped me. “It is pretty white.”

“You’ve been looking?”

I slapped him lightly. “I missed you so much.”

He stopped playing around and traced my lips with his fingers. I closed my eyes and memorized the way it felt when he touched me that way. “I missed you too, Kat. You’ll never have to miss me again, because we’re never going to be apart again. I promise.”

Brooks reached beside the bed and grabbed his army shirt. He put it over my head and pulled it down over

my naked breasts. “Thank you.”

“Never thank me for taking care of you. I was put on this earth to do it and you know it, too.”

Some of the things he said left me speechless. He’d meant every word. Brooks lived to take care of me. It was finally time that I let him.

A little later, as we were both starting to fall asleep, he let out an air-filled laugh. “You know, if you’re pregnant after one time, then I have super sperm. I bet we could make a fortune selling it on the black market like they do kidneys. Can you imagine how rich we’d be?”

“You’d have a million kids.”

“Yeah, well there is that. I guess

it's a bad idea, huh?"

I rested my head on his chest and laughed. "I'm glad I don't love you for your brains."

"No, you love me for my white ass, apparently."

I was giddy with emotion, but glad that he knew how to make me laugh in the midst of chaos. Brooks was my hero. Unlike what I'd said to him, I knew he was smart and witty. It was another reason why I loved him so much.

Another was his perfect white ass.

## Chapter 39

I figured B would be the one waking us up in the morning, but Brooks' alarm went off at exactly five. He

jumped out of bed and started putting his uniform on. "I've got to go into work. Will you be okay here until I get back?"

I wasn't fully awake. "Are we staying here another night?"

"You're not going home. Listen, when I get back, I'll go with you to the courthouse to file for the protective order. We can see about getting an attorney if you want to get a jump on it."

Although Brooks was speaking in a whisper, we both turned to see two little blue eyes looking at us from the other bed. "Me go bye bye's?"

Brooks sat down on the bed with her. "I have to go to work, bug, but I'll be back later and we can play."

"We can pay?"

Brooks made an excited face.  
“Maybe we can go swimming.”

“In da pool?” She looked ecstatic.

“Yeah, baby, in the pool.” He lifted her up and kissed her cheek. “I love you.”

I got up and grabbed a diaper, knowing she'd need to be cleaned up. While I started changing her, Brooks got his boots on. He grabbed his phone and leaned in to kiss me. “If you need anything, you call. I'm right down the road. I love you.”

We kissed twice before he pulled away. “Love you, too.”

He reached the door and came back in, kissing me one more time. “That

was just in case you plan on leaving me again. Just know, I will come hunt you down. I have government resources this time.”

I pushed him to get going. “Will you stop it? You’re stuck with us now.”

“See you girls later.”

Once he was gone, I gave all of my attention to my little girl. “Did you sleep well?”

“Me go bye byes?” she asked sadly.

“We can’t go bye byes, B. We have to wait for Br -- daddy to come back.”

She looked confused and I knew she wouldn’t understand if I tried to explain it. Then I started thinking of



Bobby. I reached for my phone and turned it back on.

It started buzzing with messages, both voice and text.

Knowing they'd be terrible to listen to, I took her to give her a bath.

After filling the tub with a little water, I sat B down and let her splash around. She enjoyed playing and after I'd washed her body, I let her enjoy her tub time.

Once she'd splashed most of the water onto the floor, I wrapped her in a towel and took her out to the bedroom area to get dressed. B was a good girl and she was content playing by herself on most days. Unlike my daughter, I was already feeling like I was suffocating

being held up in a room. It was a shame that I couldn't go home and feel safe there.

Moments after B was changed, I pulled out an apple and banana and started cutting them up with a knife Brooks had brought with him in his bag. I also found a miniature box of cereal that he'd probably had in his room. Since B loved to munch on it, I opened it up and spread it all out for her to eat.

She was quiet, watching cartoons and filling her cheeks with fruit and cereal.

I sat on the bed next to her and opened up my phone.

Figuring the text messages were easiest, I started with them.

Thirteen messages in total filled my inbox, all from Bobby.

**Answer your phone!**

**I'm on my way to the house, you better be there.**

**Have my daughter ready.**

**You better not be shacked up with that soldier!**

**Katy, answer the phone. I'm at the house and you haven't been here.**

**Just talked to Sarah. If I've got to go to that base and drag your ass out of there, I will.**

**You've got thirty minutes to return my calls or I'm coming after you.**

**You better hope you're dead in a ditch somewhere, you little whore.**

**You're going to pay for this, bitch. Tell your boyfriend to watch his fucking back.**

**You're dead!**

**He's dead!**

**I'm going to make sure you never see your daughter again. I'll make sure you're claimed unfit.**

**You will pay for this, bitch!**

I covered my mouth and felt my heart beating heavily. I wasn't just scared for my life; I was worried about Brooks too.

Knowing that there were voice messages, I took a deep breath and started listening to them.

“Katy, it's me, Bobby, your fuckin' husband that you had locked up. I

have every right to put you in your place. You're mine! You hear me? I own you. When I get home, you're goin' to be real sorry you did somethin' so stupid."

"Pick up the phone, bitch!"

"You think you're slick don't ya? You think I can't find you? Tell your boyfriend to take you far away, because if I can find you, you're both goin' to pay for this."

I erased the messages with shaky hands and looked over at B, who sat there so innocently as if nothing terrible was happening. Truth be told, I didn't know what to do. Confessing to Brooks would only make him want to go after Bobby. I couldn't have them harming each other. My marriage was most

definitely over. I just needed to get in to see a lawyer without being discovered.

After calling to the front desk, I was brought a phone book in which I started sorting through. There had to be a lawyer that could help in a desperate situation.

I'd made three calls with no luck getting a same day appointment. When my phone started to ring, I jumped off the bed before realizing it was Brooks. "Hello?"

"Hey, I'm just calling to check on my girls."

I considered not telling him what was going on, but knew how that always turned out. Besides, Brooks wasn't just my lover, he was my partner, my best

friend. "I listened to my messages."

"I imagine he's pissed about now. He knows you're with me and he ain't going to lay a hand on you ever again."

"Pretty much."

"Listen, I have a plan to keep you both safe. I'm meeting with my commanding officer in an hour to see if I can take a few days off. I'm due, so it shouldn't be an issue. Considering the circumstances, I doubt he'll have a problem. He's got a family, so he knows how important you are to me."

He was making me nervous. "Am I going to like your plan?"

"Do you trust me?"

"With my life." I did and I knew

whatever he had in mind would be for the best.

“Kat, I’m going to keep you safe. I need to go. Stay inside until I get back. I love you.”

“That will never get old.”

“It better not. I’ve been practicing it in front of a mirror since I was twelve.”

When we hung up I had a smile on my face.

I went from playing with B, coloring, and watching cartoons, to looking for more lawyers that could take me on right away. My urgency was more important every single time I looked into her little blue eyes. Her safety was everything.



I finally found one that would see me at four that evening. Brooks would be back and take me. Since I needed to get out of the room for some fresh air, I decided to take the phone book down to the front desk. We climbed in the elevator and I let her push the down button. She got a kick out of thinking she was big girl.

The elevator doors opened and I saw him right away. Bobby was standing there with Dave arguing with the concierge. “I know she’s here. I tracked her by her phone. Now tell me what room she’s in. She’s got a baby with her and a soldier friend.”

The woman was very kind, considering his tone. “I’m sorry sir,

there's no one here by the name you're referring to, and even if there was, I can't give out personal information."

"I ain't leavin' here until you give me a damn room number. This is my wife we're talkin' about."

I hit the up button and tried to move out of the way before he turned to see who was coming out of the elevator. Our eyes met and he came running toward us. I held on tight to B and pushed the close button. Sheer relief came over me when I felt us moving up. The only problem was that I didn't know if he'd be waiting for me. I hit the emergency stop button and frantically pulled my phone out of my pocket. The service was crappy, but I had one bar.

I dialed Brooks back, hoping he wasn't meeting with his boss.

“Sergeant Valentine.”

“Brooks, he's here at the hotel. B and I are in the elevator. I hit the emergency stop button. He's going to hurt me. You've got to call the police. Tell them he's going to hurt me.”

“I'm coming.”

“No! I don't want you hurt. Please, stay there.”

“Kat, I'm coming and you're not going to stop me. Whatever you do, don't let that elevator start moving. You hang tight. I'll be there in less than five minutes.”

“I'm calling the police.” After I'd hung up on Brooks I dialed the

police. B was starting to cry because she knew I was upset about something.

“9-1-1 what is your emergency?”

“I need the police. My husband, who beat me up yesterday, got out of jail and came after me again. I’m at the Hartfield Hotel on Weston Street. Please hurry. I’m stuck in an elevator and he’s waiting for it to open. Please, I have a little girl with me.”

The operator assured me that help was on the way. Once I hung up, I never took my eyes off of the control panel. If we started moving, I was going to hit the stop button again.

It was difficult trying to calm B and knowing she was upset because of how I was acting. “I’m so sorry, baby.

Daddy's coming to rescue us. He's going to keep us safe."

My phone started ringing again. "Brooks? Do you see him?"

"They already called the cops on Bobby. Him and his friend left right before I came in. I'm pretty sure he saw me, though. I saw a trucks brake lights as I pulled in. Listen, they're going to start the elevator again. Hang tight and we'll get you out of there."

It took them a few minutes. Once we started moving, the doors opened and I was greeted by Brooks. He wasn't alone. Another soldier in fatigues was speaking to the woman at the front desk and a police officer. "We're going to make a statement and get some papers

drawn up. Are you alright with that?"

I nodded and let him lead me toward the officers.

"Kat, this is my commanding officer, Ferris."

I smiled, feeling stupid for having him know my business. It didn't help that I had a lingering bruise on my cheek.

"It's great to meet you, ma'am." He turned his attention to B. "You must be little Brooklyn. You sure do look like your daddy."

I smiled when I saw the look on Brooks' face. He held out his arms and she went right to him, laying her head on him as if she knew he'd lay down and die for her. "You need to go give a

statement to the officer. I'm going to go up and get our things. I'll meet you down here in a few minutes."

I smiled and started walking toward the police officer. The man turned around and had already written a bunch of information down.

It took longer than I thought, but after him being arrested and then coming after me in public, the officer assured me that I'd have a protective order against Bobby within the next seventy-two hours. I knew I wasn't out of immediate danger, but it did give me a little relief.

When I met Brooks back in the lobby, he was standing there holding B while talking to his boss. Our things were at his feet. I walked up and B

leaned in for me to take her. “What now?”

“We go back to the base. I’ve got to fill out some forms and then we’re going on a road trip.”

“A road trip?”

“Yeah. I’ll explain later.” He stopped right before we got outside. “Give me your phone.”

I handed it to him and watched him break it in half. “The thing about cell phones is that they can be traced by anyone. Bobby had an app on his phone that told him where you were. The second you turned your phone back on, all he had to do was follow the damn arrow.”

I felt like an idiot.



The moment we stepped onto the base, I knew we'd be safe. Brooks held my hand and walked me inside of a building. We waited for him to fill out papers, and then the two men led us to a vehicle. We climbed in and were driving to the other side of the base. I saw Brooks' truck and knew we were where he lived.

Once out, his boss started to pull away. I stopped him before he could go. "Thank you, sir."

"It was my pleasure, ma'am."

I followed Brooks inside and watched him filling his bag with more clothes. We were in a room with two twin beds, but it was on a floor that probably housed several of the same

type. “So where are we going? Am I not allowed to know? Is there something you aren’t telling me?”

He walked over to B and picked her up. “We’re going to my parents, and before you say anything you need to understand that your safety is the most important thing to me. I’ve got seven days before I need to report back, so I can promise you that it’s not forever.”

All I heard was where we were going. The room started to spin, and I felt like I was going to throw up. How was I ever going to be able to face them, especially once they met B?

## Chapter 40

I couldn’t remember the last time that I was so angry with Brooks. It was

obvious that he knew it too. We hadn't said one word to each other until we hit North Carolina. "I'm getting hungry. Do you want to stop and eat soon?"

I kept looking out the window. "I feel like I'm going to puke. Just get something for you and B."

B had fallen asleep and I knew she'd probably sleep for a good few hours before she needed to get out and move around. It was starting to get dark out and I knew the silence was killing Brooks. He reached over and put his hand on my knee, but I refused to look at him. "Kat, you can't be mad at me forever, you know."

"Yes, I can." I shoved his hand away.

“You’re being a baby. We were going to let my parents visit next week anyway. Stop acting like you don’t love me anymore, because I know it’s not true.”

Brooks had made the plans without telling me, because he knew I wouldn’t go for it. What he wasn’t considering was how upset I already was. I felt like I was running away, because my life was in danger. That wasn’t something that was easy to deal with. Then he wanted to take me to a home where I knew I wasn’t wanted. “I can’t believe you’re making me do this.”

Brooks pulled over the truck and put it in park. “Look at me.”

“No!” I kept staring out the

window.

He put his hand on my thigh and started moving it up. “Kat, look at me.”

I turned and gave him an irritated look. “What?”

“They miss you. Hell, they miss us. I left too, you know? This isn’t easy for me, but they deserve to know that little girl in the backseat. They weren’t in the dark about my feelings, Kat. They knew how I felt and they probably knew how you felt. We were kids, who wore our feelings on our sleeves. I’m betting they weren’t as surprised as you think that we ended up in bed, several times. After all, it is where you belonged anyway.”

I hated when he had a point. “I’m

still mad.”

He touched my nose. “No you’re not. You’re scared, but you’re not mad.”

We started driving again, except I wasn’t done with what I wanted to say to him. “I don’t think I like that you know what I’m thinking. A girl’s got a right to some private thoughts.”

“Get used to it. It’s never going to change.”

I decided to give up on being angry. It wasn’t going to get me anywhere when he apparently knew me better than I knew myself. “I think we should stop for the night and drive the rest of the way in the morning. We didn’t sleep good last night and could both use the rest before we see your parents.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea. I mean, when we go to hotels, you get pregnant. It’s scary.” He started laughing at himself immediately.

I hit him on the leg. “I should have never said anything to you.”

“You know it’s funny.”

“What’s going to be funny is when I don’t get my period in two weeks. Then I’m going to watch you crying.”

He looked at me. “I won’t be crying out of fear, beautiful. They’ll be tears of joy for me.” Then he added. “So, are we stopping at a hotel, or are you scared?”

I covered my face with my hands, remembering what it was like to

grow up crushing on Brooks and dealing with his sense of humor. It also brought me peace knowing that we'd gotten back everything that I thought was gone forever, even the sarcasm. Every second spent with him was as if no time had passed. "I'm not scared of you."

"You should be. I'll steal your heart and you'll never get it back," he promised.

"I gave it to you years ago, and I don't want it back." I replied.

Brooks reached over and grabbed my hand. He pulled it up to his lips and held it there. "No matter what happens when we get there tomorrow, we're a team. If something bad is said, which I don't see happening, we'll leave



together, as a family. I promise.”

“I just don’t want to see the look of disappointment on their faces. I’m already feeling that about myself. Being reminded of it only makes things worse.”

“I guarantee that when we walk in there, and they take a look at that princess in the back seat, everything will change. Look at how she’s affected me.”

In a few short days I felt like everything in my life had changed. Not only had Brooks come back into my life, but he wanted me. I couldn’t have felt more complete knowing how happy he was to be a father, and how he’d somehow forgiven me. “I hope you’re right.”

A few minutes later, we were

pulling into a restaurant that happened to have a hotel right across the street. Brooks ran across to make sure they had vacancies, while I took B inside to change her diaper and get us a table. By the time he came back, we were seated and I was looking at a menu. “I got us a room. Since you’re scared of getting knocked up, I took a room with one twin bed. We can all share, right?”

I cocked my eyebrow and looked at him, knowing he was full of shit. “You can sleep on the floor, I suppose.”

“I’m just playing. I got a honeymoon suite with a vibrating bed. Bug’s going to love it.”

I shook my head and kept looking at the menu, while he played peek-a-boo

with B.

After we ate, Brooks drove us across the street and we headed inside to our room. Low and behold, it was a standard room in a regular hotel. Neither of the two beds vibrated, as I'd been told. Brooks tossed his things down and went into the bathroom. I heard the shower come on and knew he was getting in. Since the lady at the restaurant was kind enough to fill B's sippy cup. She'd have enough to last her through the night. I got her little toys set up on the bed and watched as she pretended with them.

Brooks came out of the shower glistening with water, only wrapped in a towel. I couldn't stop noticing the tattoo,

and smiling from ear to ear every time I saw it.

He'd catch me and shake his head, having gotten it years ago and been used to it. I didn't know if I'd ever get used to him branding my initial on his skin. He sat down on the bed next to me, looking for his boxer briefs. Considering that we weren't alone, he turned around, and pulled them up. Once he turned back around, he was decent enough to lean over and see what she was doing. "Hey, bug. What are you doing over here?"

"Pincess." She handed him a little princess doll.

"Where's her prince?"

B looked around and finally spotted the prince. She handed it to

Brooks. He moved them all around and then made them kiss. B started to giggle loudly, so he did it again. She laughed so hard that she fell back onto the bed. He reached up and kissed her tiny nose. "You may look like Daddy, but you act like Mama."

He turned to look over at me and she jumped into his arms. I could tell she'd hurt his bad arm from the way he made a face, but he didn't move her off of it. He endured the pain to hold her. B touched his nose back. "Nose."

Brooks touched her nose. "B."

When she went to do it to him again, she paused. I climbed up behind her and whispered, "Who is that?"

She smiled. "Daddy."

I could see the world light up in Brooks' eyes as he heard her say it for the first time. To be honest, I was quite shocked that she'd understood already. Though their resemblance was uncanny, it was difficult to explain who someone was to a child. I still didn't know if she understood that he was literally the person that helped create her, but it was a start.

After he practically made her repeat it twenty times, they both settled into bed next to one another. I almost wished that I had my phone so I could snap pictures of them. As I sat there watching the two of them looking at a book together, I wanted to cry. Those two people were my entire reason for

living. I'd never thought we'd be a family, and here we were making it happen.

It took her a while to fall asleep, and when she did, he came over and climbed under the covers with me. I felt those strong arms reaching around me and closed my eyes. "Are you excited about tomorrow?"

I turned and looked at him. "Seriously? My stomach is all knotted up."

For a short time he sat there watching me looking at him. I wasn't sure if he was thinking of something encouraging to say or considering leaving it be until morning. "Do you have anyone that can run by and check on

things at your house?”

“Yeah.” I was glad he mentioned it. “I can call my old boss at the diner I waitressed at. She never really liked Bobby much, so he won’t be able to influence her into thinking I’m a piece of shit.”

“A waitress sounds like a hot job for you. Woman, what else are you hiding from me?”

I giggled. “I wasn’t an exotic dancer if that’s what you’re thinking. There’s no way dirty men are going to see me naked.”

“I’d pay an arm and a leg to see you dance naked.” He raised his eyebrows a few times in a row.

I rolled my eyes. “If I could



dance, I'd do it for free, but we both know I have two left feet."

"Well, we're in luck, because I have two right feet."

I shoved him away, but he came right back. "How about we get some rest?"

"How about you take off that Army shirt and we have a repeat of last night first?"

I could have said no and possibly been able to fall asleep quickly. The thing was, I'd just gotten Brooks back and after one night all I could think about was doing it again. I sat up and lifted the soft cotton shirt over my head. Brooks put his hands behind his head and watched me remove my

underwear.

“This is never going to get old.”

I climbed on top of him and grabbed his dog tags, pulling him forward until our lips were touching. “Tell me you love me and I’ll give you that dance.”

“I love you, beautiful. Now, stand up and show me what you’ve got.”

He was going to be sorry for asking.

## Chapter 41

“Kat, wake up.”

I peeked open my eyes and noticed that it was still dark. It explained the whisper, since he wouldn’t have wanted to wake up B. “Go away. I’m sleeping. It’s not even morning,” I

whispered back.

“I have an idea that might make you feel better. Come on, wake up. The sun will be up soon. Don’t you want to know what it is?”

He wasn’t going to let up until I heard him out. “Fine, talk.”

I half opened my eyes and tried to listen, while dozing off from the very beginning. Apparently the military teaches soldiers to be able to go with little sleep. I didn’t like what they’d done to him, since this was most likely going to be a habit.

“You’re all upset over me not knowing about Brooklyn. You think that they’re going to flip out on you or something. I think I have a solution.

What if we told them that I knew the whole time? I haven't been home and they suspect there are a lot of reasons why I'm keeping my distance. It would only make sense that part of it was because of the baby. If we told them that you didn't want Branch to know, they'll believe us."

I yawned and looked right at him. "Brooks, the only problem with your story is the part where I run off and get married to a stranger. How are we going to even begin to explain that?"

"We won't tell them that either. They don't need to know. Look, we all make mistakes. Last week I felt like my whole life was worthless. I thought you'd moved on and started a family

with someone else. I wanted to bury myself ten feet in the ground and never look back. I don't care about the details of when or who. All I care about is us. Wouldn't it be nice to have a family to visit on the holidays? It's better for them to know her when she's small. That way she'll never remember a time when they weren't a part of her life."

I shrugged. "Of course, it would be wonderful, but I think you're assuming that they'll forgive me. I hurt them, Brooks. Just because you've forgiven me doesn't mean they will."

"Kat, I love you and I love B. I don't care if it's been four days or four years. Nothing is going to change for me. Don't you get it? You've given me

everything and you still think that you're this horrible person. You've always been a part of my family and you know it. Family forgives."

"I *am* a horrible person." He needed to stop forgiving me for everything. "Brooks, I ran away from everything, had a child that you never knew about, and let another man, who beat me on occasion, raise her. What part of that is forgivable?"

He put his hand over my lips. "All of it. It's true, but you also assumed that we were through. Then you thought I died. If something ever did happen to me, I'd want you to find happiness. Besides, after seeing you for five minutes, I knew you were still in love

with me. After that, I didn't care so much. Granted, I was pretty pissed that first night." I thought about him coming home, probably showing up with flowers, and there I was hugging and kissing on my child and another man. I imagined the bomb that caused his heart to explode into pieces. Then, to make matters worse, I called the police because his truck kept appearing.

The whole time, I'd never considered it could have been him, because out of stupidity I'd assumed he'd died.

"I could spend the rest of my life apologizing to you and it will never be enough." I hated myself for what I'd done. Bobby had been a mistake from

the beginning. I can't believe that I'd let myself fall for him and considered having his child. The thought made me cringe. "What if we don't work out? What then?"

"First of all, I've already forgiven you, at least for the Brooklyn part. Now, me being a guy, I can see where you'd think that Bobby was a good catch. He seems nice on the outside and, given your circumstance, I can understand how him offering to take care of you was a good idea. What I don't understand is how you could let someone physically hurt you more than once. That is what bothers me. It's the only thing that I can't let go of, especially since I've spent my whole



life looking out for you.”

“I’m weak. Losing you broke me. Knowing what we could have been shattered my soul. Once I knew I’d made a horrible mistake, I just ran. I didn’t stop driving until I was sure that I wouldn’t be found. Facing any of you would have been impossible. I thought I had things under control, but I started getting sick and then I discovered I was pregnant. I know my decisions were prompted by desperation. I’ll admit to that. I’ll also admit that after time, I developed feelings for Bobby; feelings that may or may not have blinded me from a lot of things. The problem with falling for someone else was that I knew I was letting you go. When I thought

you'd died, I snapped. I think a part of me died with you that day, even though you obviously weren't dead. I gave up hoping and settled for what I already had. Was it a mistake? Probably. At the time, I didn't have many options."

"Not until I showed up," he added.

He reached for my hand and intertwined our fingers. They fit perfectly together, as if they were made to be connected.

I squeezed his hand and looked up at him again. "When I found out you were alive, I didn't even tell him. I ran right to you. I had to see you, to touch you and know that it was real. You can't imagine what I went through. I was

miserable. It was hard to even take care of B. My heart hurt for her never being able to know you. I couldn't let go, because I wanted to believe that someday we'd be together. I'll always run to you, Brooks. It's why I know that this time is different. Our time apart taught me that my life is nothing unless you're in it. B needs her real father, not a replacement. She needs to grow up understanding what real love feels like. I will do anything to make what I did up to you and prove that no matter where I was, or who I was doing it with, I never gave anyone my whole heart. I fell in love with you when we were children and it's never gone away."

He laughed and looked right at

me. "Me too."

I shook my head and smiled. "No, I think I even remember the exact moment. We were all three in the tub together. I guess we were around five. I'd asked my mother if she'd stop making me take baths with you two, because Branch made fun of me all of the time. Remember he used to point at me and laugh because I was different?"

Brooks smiled and pulled me closer against his chest. We both looked over to make sure B was still sleeping. "Yeah, I remember. He only picked on you, because he liked you."

"Don't take up for him." I slapped him lightly on the chest. "Anyway, this one time he said I was

ugly. It made me cry. You pushed him against the faucet and it cut his back. He got out crying and ran and told on you. Then you looked right at me, as innocent as it probably was, and told me-" He cut me off before I could finish.

"You're pretty to me. That's what I said, wasn't it?"

I couldn't believe he remembered it after all of the years that had passed. "Yes."

"Well, you were always pretty, until you hit puberty. Then you became beautiful."

His words took my breath away. I looked right at him and saw him smiling and I began to cry. "I don't deserve you."

He ran his hand through my hair as he spoke. “You know, Kat, I told my Mom once that I was in love with you. I think we were around ten and we’d all three been up in the tree house playing. You had those Barbie’s up there and Branch kept throwing them out and making you climb down and get them. About the third time he did it, I grabbed his arm and yanked it until he cried. I remember him running to tell on me and when Mom asked me why I did it, I looked right up at her and said ‘because I love her’. I think my mom always knew that it had never gone away. She even suspected something the night of our first kiss, or maybe my brother ran in and tattled about what we were doing. She

kept giving me an evil eye all night, silently accusing me of something. Maybe I just felt like we'd done something naughty. At any rate, she knew how I felt about you. So did my dad. He pulled me aside when you started dating Branch. He told me that there were plenty of other girls out there for me. He didn't get that I didn't want any other girls. It's the reason I started bringing random girls home. Part of it was because I thought you'd get jealous and want me instead of Branch. The other part was because they both pulled me aside and asked me if I was okay with you being with him. I couldn't admit that I wasn't. Mom made a huge deal trying to keep me occupied while you were

doing your own things and making out with Branch. Finally, I knew they wouldn't stop until I showed them that I didn't care. It wasn't always an act. Some of those girls were fun." He started laughing, knowing he'd gotten to me.

"I guess I deserve that."

"Stop. Kat, no matter who I was with, in my eyes, they were always you. Besides, I wasn't innocent. I lost my virginity to a girl who didn't even know it was me. You could hate me forever for that one alone, but I went and did it twice, because I couldn't say no to you. I couldn't go and get Branch, when I knew I could be what you wanted. I used to dream that halfway into it you'd say you



knew it was me the whole time. I was pretty messed up.”

“You know, the first time, it was only my second time. It’s probably why Branch didn’t even understand what I was talking about. I wasn’t running around sleeping with your brother. It took me a long time to do that. Maybe I always knew that it wasn’t right.”

“Damn, if I’d have known that I probably would have told you, seeing as I know I was better. I watched a lot of porn while you were out with my brother. You can learn so much if you turn the volume down and fast forward through the story part.”

“Eww, don’t tell me that.”

He laughed. “You should see the

collection we had overseas. It gets real lonely.”

I decided to nix the conversation before I learned even more that I didn’t want to know.

“I wish we could go back.”

“Don’t,” he said as he kissed the top of my head. “We’re here now. All of that bullshit that we’ve gone through has only made what we have stronger. I’m not living in the past, Katy. It’s time to move forward. I’ll be by your side if you want to divorce Bobby. If you’re not ready...”

“Not ready? It should have never happened. I think everyone is forgetting that I didn’t marry him because I wanted to. I married him because I was out of

options. Bobby was good to me for the most part, but I will definitely be divorcing him, the sooner the better.”

“Just checking. So, about the plan. Will you go along with it?”

I placed my hands on his chest and leaned my chin on them. “I’ll do whatever you want me to, Brooks.”

He raised his brows. “Don’t tell me that. I’ll start making lists.”

I reached down under the covers, first touching his thigh and then what was waiting in between. He got ready to say something else, when we heard someone climbing off the bed next to us. Brooks noticed her first. He held out his arms for her to climb up and join us. “There’s my girl. Come up here. Let’s

get Mama.”

She jumped up, already fueled with energy. I removed my hand and pulled the covers up over my body, so she wouldn't see that we weren't dressed. Brooks offering to tell his parents that he knew about B would definitely make me feel better. Then all I'd have to feel guilty for was leaving Branch at the alter after sleeping with Brooks.

They were still going to hate me anyway.

The most important thing was B's safety. As long as we had a home to sleep in until I could figure things out, nothing else mattered. Even if they hated me, they'd love her.

## Chapter 42

Pulling up in front of the house that I'd grown up in was bittersweet. My parent's house next door was for sale again. Brooks got out and stretched before getting B out of the little back bench seat. Our eyes met before we walked up the sidewalk and he came around to take my hand. "We're in this together, Kat."

I was scared to death to see these people and even more concerned about life in general. With so much on my plate I worried if visiting them was even a good idea.

Brooks knocked on the door, and when I heard footsteps coming I began to freak out. I started to back up, but he

grabbed my hand and pulled me back at his side.

The door opened and all eyes were on me. I couldn't see what was happening, because Danica was already hugging me. "Katy, oh my God. I can't believe it's really you." The tears were a given, and feeling her holding me made my worries all seem to begin to fade away.

Then I heard her gasp. I turned to see her looking at B. She was clinging to the strings of Brooks' army hoodie and hiding her face.

Danica looked from me and then back to Brooks. He broke the silence. "Mom, I think you should let us in."

She backed up, while staring at

our daughter. Once we got into the foyer, B turned and started looking around. That's when she knew, without a doubt, that the child was a Valentine. "I'd like you to meet my daughter, Brooklyn."

The woman broke down, covering her mouth as she began to bawl. Brooks walked up and hugged his mother for the first time. When she pulled away, she just kept looking at her, crying. B swatted at her face. "No cry."

Danica smiled and dried her eyes. "Hi. I'm your grandma, Brooklyn."

"We call her B, so she doesn't get confused when she hears my name," Brooks explained.

Then Danica turned to me. I was a babbling mess, trying to manage the

feelings of betraying them and also the lies that we were about to tell. “I’m so sorry,” was all I could come up with.

Then Walt walked into the room. He was looking down at his camera. “Sorry, I just needed to replace the batteries.” He looked up and saw us standing there, two women in tears, a son with a big smile, and a child completely confused.

“Hey, Dad. Long time no see.”

Brooks took my hand as he watched his dad look at B and then turn to me. Before he could ask, Brooks cleared his throat. “Look, we know we have a lot of explaining to do. Can we get settled for a while first? B needs a fresh diaper and I know she’s probably



starving.”

Danica took over, going into complete parent mode. “I’ve already made a turkey, and Dad got those sweet rolls you both love.”

Brooks stopped her. “Mom. Breathe. I know it’s a lot to take in, but we’ll be here for a week, so how about we take a breather, go unpack and meet you in the dining room?”

She nodded. “Okay.”

B wanted to get down. She wriggled her way out of his arms and Brooks finally let her stand. She looked up at Danica and started swinging her body from side to side.

Danica bent down to her eye level. “Do you want something to

drink?”

“Chocate mulk.” I laughed when I heard her respond.

Danica smiled while tears still ran down her cheeks. “Well, okay. Let’s go see if we can find some of that.” She looked up at me. “Is it okay? I can change her, if it helps?”

I handed her the bag. “Sure. Thank you.”

Walt walked over to me. It took him a second, but then he pulled me into his arms. “Welcome home, Katy.”

I clung to him, finally realizing that I never should have left. We were a family, after all, and we could have worked through things. “I missed you,” was all I could say. “I missed you so

much.”

I was crying so hard that Walt couldn't let go of me. Brooks finally came up and patted me on the back. “Let's go up and get settled.”

I pulled away from Walt, feeling a little embarrassed. Then I saw the tears in his own eyes. “We really missed you. Both of you.”

Brooks shook his dad's hand. “I'm sorry it's been so long, Dad. We just needed time.”

I felt his hand grabbing mine as we walked up the stairs. When we got to the hallway he stood there for a second. “Yours or mine?”

I shrugged. “Yours?”

We went into his room, which

was exactly how he'd left it. I sat down on his bed and watched him kneel in front of me. "How are you doing?"

"They don't hate me."

He placed his hands on my knees. "I know you're freaking out. Close your eyes and breathe, Kat."

I did as he said and my breathing finally calmed.

"Is it better?"

I nodded. He stood up. "We should probably put B in your room. I bet Dad even has some of those things in the attic so she won't fall out of bed."

"How can you be so calm about this?" It was driving me crazy.

"Because they can't change anything. We're here and B's here. It is

what it is. It's also the same reason that I came after you that first night. I couldn't change what's happened, but I sure as hell could change the future."

"You told me that we'd never be together."

He laughed and shook his head. "I said that so you'd push me away. If you were happy then I wasn't going to ruin it for you."

"You're unbelievable."

"I'd like to think I'm generous."

"Not fighting for me is stupid, plain and simple."

"It's a good thing I didn't have to. You came to your senses faster than I thought you would."

He leaned in and kissed me, so

softly that it instantly became more. We went from sitting in front of each other, to him lying on top of me on his bed. My hands were under his shirt running up his warm skin. I wanted him to make all of my worries go away. Finally he pulled away, and laughed. “We need to go downstairs.”

I grabbed him between the legs. “Are you sure?”

Brooks stood up and readjusted himself, so his erection wasn't as noticeable. I couldn't stop staring at it and licking my lips. He pointed at me. “Stop it. You can have your way with me later. Right now we need to go downstairs and clear the air. You're clearly stalling.”

I rolled my eyes and held out my arms for him to pull me to a standing position. When I got up next to him, he brushed my lips with his thumb. I closed my eyes and whispered, “I love you, Brooks.”

He kissed me one more time, passionately. “Not as much as I love you, Kat.”

We changed our clothes since it was no longer chilly outside, and headed downstairs. Walt and Danica were sitting at the table with B. She was propped up with old phone books eating some cut up turkey. They both smiled when we came in. “Grab the mayonnaise when you walk by the refrigerator, will ya?” Walt acted as if no time had

passed. I smiled and grabbed it, while Brooks sat down next to B. It was a little awkward sitting there in silence as they thought about what to ask us first.

I knew they'd have one burning question and I was fully prepared to answer it. Rather than have them nervous about asking, I decided to just blurt it out. "She's Brooks' daughter. When I found out I was pregnant I had them check on the date of conception several times. I wasn't with Branch at all the whole month of December. Brooklyn was born September 11<sup>th</sup>, if you need to check on the math."

Not only did I shock both Danica and Walt, but Brooks put his hand on my knee and gave me a crazy look. "Now



that you know, can we talk about something else?”

For a few seconds the room felt extremely tiny. I felt like the biggest idiot. “Sorry. I know you were going to ask and I also know that Brooks and Branch have identical DNA. Anyone would want to know.”

Danica reached over and smiled. “Katy, we weren’t going to ask.”

I was confused. I’d been engaged to Branch and was claiming that one night with Brooks had gotten me pregnant. Anyone would question that. “I don’t understand. You’d just believe me?”

Walt cut in. “We assumed Branch told you. When he proposed to

you, we told him to tell you.”

“Tell her what?” Now Brooks wanted to know.

“Branch can’t have kids. He was born with a tumor on his testicle and they had to go in and cut out part of the tube that sends the semen into the penis. He’s sterile.”

My mouth dropped. “He knew I wanted children,” I mumbled.

Brooks started laughing uncontrollably. “That bastard. I can’t believe the levels he stooped to keep us apart. You’re telling us that he knew he couldn’t have kids?”

“That’s exactly what we’re telling you, son,” Walt stated.

Brooks grabbed two rolls and

dropped one on the plate in front of me. “This day just keeps getting better.”

I kicked him with my foot under the table, as if we were kids again. He was acting inappropriate and he knew it.

“Sorry, we were just worried that you’d think we were lying to keep Branch from B.”

Walt folded his hands. “I’m feeling a bit disturbed myself, Katy. It seems there’s a lot of things that Branch did that we weren’t aware of. If we would have known, we never would have let you accept his proposal.”

Danica cut in. “Of course not. Katy, we knew how Brooks felt about you. I never could understand what made you pick Branch. I mean, I love both of

my sons, but they're very different. I should have said something back then, I suppose."

I placed both of my hands palms down on the dining room table. "Brooks and I have decided that we're not going to dwell on what's already been done. We can't change any of it." I looked at Brooks. Aside from his shoving half of a sandwich into his mouth all at one time, he was still smiling. "We just want to move forward, with our daughter and our future."

B started laughing from across the table. I turned to see the culprit and noticed Brooks showing her his mouth full of food. I hit him with my elbow. He crunched his body up and started

coughing and laughing at the same time. B laughed more.

“I can see that some things haven’t changed.” Danica laughed too.

I took a deep breath and look around the table. “How about we start over?”

“Katy, you’re home. As much as I would have loved to be a part of your life for the past two and half years, I understand why you felt like you had to leave. I’m not going to lie. That morning you left was a day I don’t like thinking about, but aside from sending everyone home with their gifts, it wasn’t so bad. Walt and I were worried what would happen when you finally saw Brooks again. My mother used to tell me that

absence makes the heart grow fonder. You two grew up in the same house. It wasn't hard to believe at all."

"I didn't want to hurt anyone. I left because I couldn't bear to see your faces. I thought you'd hate me."

"We were angry that we let it go as far as it did. Branch hasn't always been forthcoming, but he made it a point to shove everything about the two of you in his brother's face. We accept blame for allowing it to happen. The fact that you two found each other again, just proves that it's right."

Brooks grabbed my leg and squeezed it. I looked at him and saw him winking. "She thinks you were going to make her sleep in the tree house."

“We might make you sleep there, but not Katy, and certainly not little Brooklyn, who’s obviously named after her father.” I could see the love in Danica’s eyes and knew that she’d forgiven me. For the time being, I felt happy.

Sure, I wanted to kick the crap out of Branch and his faulty balls, but I had an idea that Brooks was going to handle that for me.

I looked over at my beautiful little girl and finally felt like she’d have the family that I always wanted for her. I could see her coming to visit and celebrating the holidays being spoiled like crazy.

Just knowing that made me feel

blessed. I had Brooks to thank for it all. We may have been running from our problems at home, but I'd never felt safer than how I felt at that very moment.

## Chapter 43

We spent the entire afternoon catching up. Danica wouldn't let B get two feet from her. She changed, fed and played with her. Walt took a dozen pictures, making sure to get some of the three of us. I knew they'd be our first family photos together, deeming them priceless.

They wanted to know all about my time away, in which Brooks filled in the blanks with his cleaned up version, that didn't include my marriage or the fact that I'd kept him from knowing he



had a child. By dinner time, they were done with the questions and only wanted to know when they could come visit. The good thing was that I owned my house. I'd had it built from part of my inheritance money. Once I got my legal issues settled, they could come and visit and have plenty of room.

When it got late, after dinner, Brooks and Walt went up into the attic to get the rails for the bed. Walt said that he knew for sure they still had some around.

Danica and I took B up and gave her a bath. It was cool, seeing her in the same tub that I'd gotten my baths in. I belonged there, with this family, even without Brooks in my life. He'd brought

me home and I felt complete for the first time since I'd lost my parents. I'd finally found my purpose. Seeing Danica, loving on B, as if she'd known her forever and loved her the same made everything make sense.

“She’s so beautiful, Katy.”

I crossed my arms and stood in the doorway watching her washing her granddaughter. “She looks like her daddy. Of course she’s beautiful.”

“I’ll have to get out the baby pictures, so you can show her. It’s uncanny, really. When I saw her I knew she was his.” I couldn’t remember seeing her so happy. My little miracle had that kind of effect on people.

“I just wish Brooks could have

been home when she was born. He's missed so much being away."

Danica sat back on the tile floor. "Don't let that get to you. I think you both needed the time apart. I don't mean that like you're assuming. What I mean is that you needed the time to figure out your feelings. Between the two of us, I think you probably always knew. You've favored Brooks since the three of you were babies."

I laughed. "I never really thought about it. When we were kids we all three loved each other. It was so innocent back then."

"Honey, we all grow up. We make mistakes and we learn from them. I wish that you all didn't have to hurt each

other so much, but everyone's happy now. Even Branch seems content with his life."

"He won't be happy to know I'm here. I'm sure I'm the last person he and Melissa ever want to see again." Not that I wanted to see him. I was going to shove my foot as far up his ass as it would go, if I ever did.

"Katy, it's none of my business, but maybe it would do you all some good to work things out."

I shrugged, not feeling like talking about seeing Branch, at all. "I don't know. I can't make a decision like that without Brooks."

I knew she was disappointed, wanting her whole family together again,

especially since knowing about B.

She removed B from the tub and wrapped her in a towel. The guys were in the bedroom, putting up the rails that had been covered in plastic. We pulled it off, while Danica helped her get pajamas on. I reached in her bag and got out her favorite book. “B, do you want Mama or Daddy to read it?”

“Daddy and Mama.”

We looked at each other and laughed. More than her asking us both to do it together, she’d once again called Brooks “Daddy”, which I knew melted his heart.

Danica and Walt both gave her kisses before leaving us to be alone. I turned all of my attention to my two B’s,

watching them interacting together and loving every minute of it. Even after she'd fallen sleep, we lay there, all three of us together, in the quiet room, until Brooks sat up and reached for me to join him.

We found his parents downstairs in the family room, drinking wine. They had two glasses for us, and I was too embarrassed to tell them that I really didn't drink. Brooks sat down with his arm around my back. I knew, as long as we were together, we could get through anything.

“We've been talking while you were putting B down. Listen, I know you'll both have a hard time with it, but we want to have your brother and

Melissa over before you leave. We're a family, all of us. So much time has passed and we never know when something could happen." Danica's words cut like a knife through me. I knew we had to face Branch and even Melissa. We didn't have to be best friends, but at least be cordial so that Danica and Walt could finally feel like they had their family back. Throughout the day I'd seen how much they missed us. With Branch and Melissa still living at least an hour away, they were lonely. Now, with a new granddaughter, they wanted a fresh start.

"Okay."

Brooks turned and looked at me like he was in disbelief. "Wait, did you

just say okay?”

“Yeah. We can handle Branch and even my ex best-friend Melissa. Some more of this wine might be necessary though.”

Everyone laughed.

We talked more about where we were living and if they could come and visit. I wasn't sure if things would calm down by Christmas, so Brooks and I promised to visit for the holidays. His schedule, being that he was injured was questionable. Based on the fact that my house was paid for, and Brooks made good money, I wouldn't need to work. Any reason to stay home with B was a good one for me.

While sitting with his parents we



were planning our future without them knowing that we hadn't done it already. Brooks never stopped touching me. No matter what he was doing or how he was sitting, his hand was always somewhere on me. I took comfort in knowing that if I fell he'd always catch me. I didn't know how, but I was falling more in love in with the man by the minute.

When it got late, we said our goodnights and headed up to go to sleep. Brooks checked on B before meeting me in his bedroom across the hall. After a little too many glasses of wine, I was feeling like I could conquer the world, and an erotic dance.

I don't even know why he'd packed them, but his fatigues were

packed snugly in his bag. I pulled out the jacket and grabbed the boots, before hiding in his closet to undress.

Brooks came into the room looking around for me. He must have thought I was in the bathroom, because once he was down to his underwear, he started climbing into bed, as if he knew something was about to happen.

I pushed open the double closet doors, wearing only his camo jacket and his extra-large boots. The jacket, which was left hanging open, was giant on me, but from the look on his face, he could have cared less. I trotted my way toward the bed, assuming that my strut was sexy. Brooks put his hands behind his head and had a huge smile on his face. About

four feet from the bed, I tripped over my own feet and went face first into the mattress.

My knee was skinned and I was completely embarrassed, yet too drunk to care. I sat there, with my breast hanging out, laughing hysterically.

Brooks slid off the bed, silently making fun of me, while he checked my knee. "Are you alright?"

"I feel like an idiot. This was supposed to be sexy."

He touched his jacket and looked at the rest of my body that was supposed to be hidden. "Trust me, Kat, you're extremely sexy. Maybe next time you can go without the boots." He pulled them off of me one at a time and helped me

back up. I felt his hands reaching in and tugging off the jacket. When it fell onto the floor, I was standing there, completely naked in his arms.

“You really think I’m sexy?”

He kissed me slowly, taking his time to answer. “I can’t wait to get you in the pool tomorrow.”

I thought about the pool and it being dark outside. Mix that with half a bottle of wine and a very lightweight drinker, and my idea was probably outrageous. “How about we go swimming right now?”

He bit down on his lip and smiled. “Don’t tempt me with your nakedness, woman. I’m weak when it comes to you.”

“You make me happy.” The room was starting to spin and I was giggling even when things weren’t funny.

He grabbed my hand and pulled me onto the bed. “We can swim tomorrow.”

I sat back up. “Can we make love now?”

He laughed more and I felt like he was making fun of me. He touched my thigh and ran his hand up between my legs. “You want to make love with my parents downstairs and our daughter across the hall?”

“Is this a trick question?”

Brooks walked his fingers from my belly button to one of my breast. He flicked the tip, causing me to jump. “Can

you be quiet?”

I snickered. “Probably not.”

He was laughing too, but only had to cover my loud mouth so I didn’t wake up B. With his face against my ear he whispered, “If you can be really quiet, I’ll make love with you. Can you be quiet, beautiful?”

I nodded.

Brooks placed kisses on my skin as he slid down between my legs. I hadn’t expected it, but there he was playing with my sex and peering right at me. “Close your eyes.”

I let my head fall to the pillow and felt his warm tongue penetrating me. Every one of my senses came alive as I pictured in my head what his tongue was

doing to me. Each stroke of his slippery muscle sent chills from my toes to my nipples. When fingers came into play, I lost control.

It felt too good.

I couldn't take it.

I screamed out loudly, filling the whole house with my tremendous orgasm.

When I realized what I'd done, I shot up in the bed and looked right at Brooks. My hand covered my mouth as he shook his head and wiped off his face. "You suck at keeping quiet."

"I couldn't help it," I whispered, knowing his parents had heard us. I pulled the covers over my head. "I'm never going downstairs."

He rubbed me between my legs. “You’re going to have to put a sock in your mouth, because I’m not even half way finished.”

I kicked the covers off my feet and looked right at him as he climbed on top of me. If this was my last moments without being able to look them in the eyes, at least we could make it worth it. “I’ll be quiet this time.”

He kissed my lips and the scent of me lingered on them. “I don’t care how loud you get. Do you have any idea how long I’ve wanted to do this in my bedroom with you?”

I slapped his back. “You’re funny.”

“You’re mine, Kat. You’re



finally all mine.”

And I was, utterly and completely his. My mind, body and soul belonged to this man.

## Chapter 44

Though it was a bit embarrassing, I managed to go downstairs for breakfast the next morning when they called up the stairs that it was ready. It was also a must when we found that B was already out of bed and had been changed from her pajamas that were folded on top of her pillow. Brooks walked around in his underwear, as if he still lived there, while I rummaged through my old dresser drawers to find a real pair of pajama pants.

He didn't have to force me to put on one of his army shirts. I got a kick out of wearing them around, knowing that they were his. Brooks put on a pair of shorts before walking downstairs, pulling me behind him.

Two adults were at the table smiling when we walked into the room. B saw us, but she was too busy shoveling food into her mouth to say anything. We both headed for the coffee pot and I watched as Brooks poured me a cup and made them both the same. Cream and one sugar was the perfect blend. He handed me mine and winked. "Just how you like it."

I took a sip before walking over to the table and sitting down.

“Did you two sleep well?”

Brooks sat his cup down and started filling his plate with food that had been set out on the table. He didn't look up at either of them when he replied. “Go ahead and ask the burning question. I'm sure you all heard Kat. Apparently we need to watch giving her wine, because she takes all of her clothes off and hides in my closet.”

They started to laugh.

“Oh, it gets better. She put on my boots and jacket and thought that she was going to be sexy. After two steps she fell down face first. After that, we slept pretty good, right Kat?”

Even though he'd told them about my embarrassing attempt at being sexy, it

had eluded them from thinking that what they heard was us having sex. They weren't stupid and obviously we were plenty old enough, but I still didn't want them thinking that we'd disrespect them, even if that's sort of what we did, or what I did.

I smiled and covered my face with my coffee. "I'm okay, if anyone is concerned."

After that they seemed to not even care about the loud moaning coming from Brooks' room. Instead, they wanted to let us know that they'd already gone ahead and contacted Branch.

"So I sent Branch and email this morning asking them to come to dinner Friday night. I'm waiting to hear back,

but they both get off early during the week, since they live on the other side of the bridge, but work over here. The traffic gets so bad on the weekends that sometimes they get stuck in it for hours. I let them know that there is plenty of room for them to stay the night and go home on Saturday.” Walt seemed excited, as did Danica, me not so much.

Brooks, who was busy sticking his tongue through a hole in a pancake to make B laugh, didn’t even act like he heard his father talking. He was too amused with teaching our child everything she shouldn’t do at the table.

“Brooks Michael, don’t teach her that!” I had to laugh when Danica brought out the middle name, like we

were kids and he was in for it.

“I’ve decided that since I’m a parent now I can make my own rules. If B wants to play with her food she can, as long as she still eats it.”

I rolled my eyes and started making my plate.

“So, we were talking last night, and Mom and I want to know if the two of you have any plans yet? Are you going to finally get married?”

They thought we were already living together, and I guess at this point we sort of were. We’d been together every night since I’d left Bobby and I planned on him moving in with me when we got back, as long as the protective order was issued and I could feel safe

taking B there. The last thing I wanted was Brooks walking around with military issued weapons. That didn't sit well with having a toddler running around.

“We're not in a hurry to do it.” Brooks began. “I mean, I've been gone a long time. We've just found each other again. We're happy the way things are, and when the time is right, I suppose we'll get that piece of paper. For now I've got everything I want already.”

The Valentines weren't old fashioned, but they knew me. They knew I'd always wanted a big wedding.

Thankfully they never mentioned it.

After breakfast, Danica and Walt

asked us if they could take B to meet a couple of their friends. I was nervous about her going somewhere, since we didn't live near a big city, but knew they'd take care of her.

As soon as they left, Brooks had ideas to occupy ourselves. "Get your suit on and meet me out back."

"It's ten in the morning. You want to go swimming now?"

"We're home alone and there's a pool outside. If you don't feel like changing then take off your clothes and come as you are. The choice is yours."

I flashed him a dirty look. "We have neighbors."

"Actually, my beautiful lady, there's nobody living in your old house.



Dad told me last night. Since the pool is on that side, you're out of excuses." He pulled me close, removing the distance between us. While his lips teased mine, he reached his hand down the front of my pants and started rubbing me between my legs. Immediately, I closed my eyes, becoming a victim to my own self need.

From the way he was taunting me with his perfect lips, I didn't want to move from that exact spot. I lifted my arm and ran my fingers through his hair. He closed his eyes and I pulled him into another kiss. When I backed away, he opened them once again, with a motive that was apparent in his gaze. I bit down on my lip and started tugging us back against the wall. Once my body came to

a halt, I started ripping down his shorts. Brooks said nothing when I dropped to my knees and freed his erection. He leaned against the wall as I began pleasing him, right in the middle of the kitchen. I looked up, seeing him trying to watch me, but failing when he couldn't keep his eyes open.

The faster I glided my lips over his smooth shaft, the more noises escaped his lips.

I wanted to please him; to be able to satisfy him like I'd never done before. He needed to know that I was willing to do anything, sexually and otherwise to make up for everything that I'd put him through.

He was getting close, and it was

apparent from the way his body was reacting to what I was doing. Brooks took a chunk of my hair in one of his hands and pulled me off of him. “Hold up, Kat. Let’s go upstairs.”

I stood up and flipped us around, pressing Brooks against the wall. “I have a better idea.” I pulled him along by his hand until we were standing outside at the bottom of the ladder that led to the tree house. Brooks smacked my butt, letting me know it was okay to climb up. He followed behind me, one step at a time, until we climbed inside.

Like I’d remembered, the tree house was the exact way we’d all left it.

Brooks spun me around, taking little time to re-familiarize himself with

our surroundings. His lips were on mine while his hands were quickly undressing me. With little fueling me except for desire, I unbuttoned his shorts and let them fall to the floor. His boxer briefs needed a few tugs before they fell to his ankles. I knew we weren't, but I felt like a kid again, sneaking off for alone time with my heartthrob boyfriend.

Brooks was far from being a kid. He'd changed into a handsome grown man that knew his way around my body, as if I'd been made for only him. At the same time, we sank down to the floor, sitting straddled together. His hands held my ass, pulling me right up into his lap. I could feel him, ready and in position to enter me. My breathing was heavy and I

was getting carried away in the moment.

It was hot, like the small room was on fire. Sweat poured down our bodies, making them glisten as the sunlight shone through the small windows. I licked Brooks' neck, tasting salt on his skin. He lifted me again, teasing me with his erection and knowing that at any time he could have whatever he wanted.

He pushed me back far enough to savor one of my breasts. His eyes were on mine as he sucked my nipple hard, sending thrills to every part of my body. I lifted myself wanting to feel the motions of what it would be like once he was inside of me. My body grinded against his and I could feel his

fingernails digging into the skin on my ass cheeks. "Please, Brooks."

"Please, what? Tell me, Kat. I want to hear you say it."

"I want you so bad," I cried out.

He reached his fingers down and slid them inside me. I felt his thumb playing with my clitoris and bucked when the friction became evident. "I can't get enough of this pussy. Tell me it's mine. Say it, Kat."

It was so dirty, saying something like that out loud. I secretly wondered if he'd heard it on a porno flick and wanted to experience it himself. Imagining that got me hotter, picturing myself turning him on even more than he already was. I bit down on my lip and

closed my eyes as the words started coming out of my mouth. "This pussy is yours, Brooks. I'm yours."

He rubbed harder, causing me to cry out again, this time because my whole entire body was going into a euphoric frenzy. Even after I'd started to gain composure, he rubbed it again, causing me to buck my body against his. "Oh yeah, that's it."

Then he lifted me. When he sat me down, I could feel it sliding inside of me, filling me completely. I bit down on his shoulder while feeling him stretching me. I pushed off of him and rocked myself up and down, watching it gliding in and out. Brooks took hold of my ass, making the friction more apparent. Our

lips met for a kiss that took my breath away.

He slowed down his pace, finally coming to a stop. “Stand up and turn around.”

I stood up, almost having to hold onto him after losing my footing. My knees were already weak, and he wasn't close to being done. Brooks turned me around so that I was facing the window. He lifted my hands up above my head and placed them on the top of it. In a yard behind ours, a man was mowing the lawn. I watched him walking back and forth while Brooks started to massage my skin. He took his fingers and slid them between my legs, spreading me open. My legs separated and when I



looked down, I could see him crouching to be able to exactly place himself where he needed to get.

He entered me again, this time pressing my naked breasts against the tiny framed out plastic windows. They immediately started to fog where my hot, sweaty skin made contact. My nipples slid up and down with each one of his thrusts. I cried out again, getting off on knowing that at any second that neighbor could see everything I owned.

Brooks reached around and held onto my nipple, pinching it. I put my forehead against the plastic and closed my eyes, feeling him going in and out. His body continued smacking against my ass with each thrust, creating a loud

sound each time. I felt him biting on my shoulder and dragging his teeth over my skin. My nipples tingled and a hot fire ignited between my legs. My natural muscles tightened and he could feel it too. “That’s it, Kat. Smother me with that pussy.”

I screamed, so loud that I knew if that mower wasn’t running, I would have had an audience. Brooks went into a spasm like bout of movement. He cried out and then held me still. I let my hand fall down to my sides while his lips left tiny kisses on the back of my neck. Our skin was soaked in sweat and it glistened on his chest when I turned around to face him. His dog tags were stuck against it sideways and I pulled

them away, allowing them to hang loose.

He found my lips and shoved his against them rather forcefully. Then he picked me up and just as quick as he turned me around, he was filling me again. I wrapped my legs around his waist and held onto his neck. We were going at it like wild animals, sweating off years of regret. Our sex was incredible and being with him made everything else that was bad in my life just disappear.

Finally, when he could barely stand up straight, he let me down. His head fell into my neck and I ran my hand through his soaked hair. "God, I love you."

I closed my eyes as the words

repeated in my mind. “I love you, too.”

## Chapter 45

Our week home just kept getting better, at least until Friday, when we had to bury the hatchet with Branch and Melissa. Brooks was so happy between having me back, and falling in love with his daughter, that nothing could get him down. From what I could tell, he was practically dying to let Branch meet Brooklyn. For me, it was more in spite. After everything I'd learned about him trying to keep us apart, I wanted Branch to reap in the relationship that Brooks and I had found. No matter how long we'd been apart, he'd failed at what he'd set out to do.

Then there was the fact that he'd

known he couldn't ever have children and had neglected to tell me. I wanted to grab his balls and pull them off of his body.

Brooks noticed how anxious I was about ten minutes before they showed up. We'd been so busy, catching up, falling more in love, and being parents that Branch wasn't a priority. My other big concern was seeing Melissa. I'd trusted her and wanted to know when she fell in love with Branch. I wasn't jealous. I could have cared less who Branch ended up with, but I still felt betrayed. She'd hit on Brooks and even planned to sleep with him. Being that he and Branch were identical, I wondered how long she'd wanted him too.

“Kat, how long are you going to sit there? That bathing suit isn’t going to put itself on, and if I have to stare at you in that towel for much longer, we’re going to have a bigger and much harder problem.” He pointed to his genitals as he walked over and kissed my head. “Look, I know you’re nervous. It’s one night and then they’ll be gone.”

“Am I allowed to hurt him?”

He laughed, while grabbing the top to my two-piece and started putting it on me. “For the sake of my parents, let’s try to be on our best behavior. When they go to leave tomorrow, you can run out and do whatever you want to both of them. I’ll cover you.”

I gave him a serious, but amused

look. “I don’t know what I’d do without you. In one week you’ve changed my whole life. How is this even possible?”

He adjusted the cups and put both hands on either of my shoulders. “You weren’t the only one who was miserable. If you’d seen the things that I’ve seen, you wouldn’t want to live in the past either. Kat, we have a daughter now. I’m trying not to lose my man-card here, but I want us to work. When we go home, we’re together. We’ll have a lot to deal with, but we’ll do it as a team. People aren’t going to understand. They’re not going to like that you’re kicking your husband out and moving me in, but that’s exactly what’s going to happen. I’m not letting either of you out

of my sight. The moment he laid a hand on you was when I lost respect for him. My daughter will not go anywhere near him and he can thank himself for that.”

Brooks was so serious, and I respected his decision. After all, he was her father. As much as I wanted to feel bad for Bobby, I knew he'd made his own choices and burned bridges. No judge in the world would give him visitation of a child that wasn't his, especially now that he had a record.

“It's still hard to believe.”

Brooks got on his knees and waited for me to step into my bottoms. “No, it's not. Tell me this - when I came back the first time for the wedding, how long did it take you to realize that you



were with the wrong brother?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “You know the answer.”

“Humor me, woman.”

“I supposed I knew it even before I saw you. I remember standing there watching for you to get out of a cab in your fatigues. My heart was racing and I couldn’t calm myself down. Then when I saw you for the first time, it was like the whole room disappeared except for me and you. Fighting those feelings was impossible for me. I knew I was making a mistake, but I couldn’t figure a way out of it.”

Brooks stood back up and pulled me against him. “I was on the airplane with this old couple. They kept thanking

me for risking my life for my country. About halfway through the old lady asked if I was married. I sat there with two strangers, who told them all about the girl I'd loved my whole life, and how she was marrying my twin brother." He shook his head and laughed. "I was so messed up in my head that day. I'd thought about what I wanted to say to you a million times. It was shocking when that old woman, who'd been married for more than half her life, told me I had to stop the wedding. She said I'd never forgive myself if I didn't tell you how I really felt. When I got out of the cab and saw you standing there, I knew I was going after you. Something inside of me snapped. There was no way

I could let you go through with it without telling you everything. I didn't do it to get you into my bed. That part happened on its own. Obviously, in making love to you that night, we made the most beautiful little girl. I could tell you that we're together because of her, but it would be a lie. I wanted you back the minute I saw you on the army base, I just needed to be mad first. I felt so betrayed and hurt. For my whole life I'd thought Branch was keeping us apart. Then I found out you were married to someone else."

I wrapped my arms around his neck. "Can I be honest about something?"

He nodded.

“I could lie and tell you that I would have been faithful in my marriage, to be honorable. The thing is, the second I knew you were alive was when I knew for certain that I was fighting a losing battle with my heart. If you’d have come on to me in those first five seconds, with my husband standing right there, I don’t think I could have pushed you away. I felt like it was a miracle; like you’d come back from the dead to save me from myself.”

Brooks and I both shared a moment of silence. We hadn’t meant for things to get deep, but there we were so caught up in each other. When the doorbell rang, we realized we’d been talking much longer than we anticipated.

I pulled the cover-up over my head and held Brooks' hand as we headed downstairs.

B was coming at us, running full-force. Brooks picked her up and spun her around. My stomach was in knots knowing that I hadn't laid eyes on Branch since I'd left him at the altar. I almost wanted to smile knowing that I'd paid him back and not even known it was happening.

We sat down on the couch to wait for them to walk in the room. I could hear them being greeted by Walt and Danica. Brooks put his arm around me and leaned in for a kiss. I don't know what made me do it, but I climbed on his lap and kissed him like we were back in

the tree house. He had to push me off, and when he did, I was all smiles. I saw his lips forming his own half amused smile. "You're being bad."

I couldn't answer, because I saw them coming toward us.

Branch was still wearing his sunglasses, while Melissa clung to his arm as if he was dragging her. Brooks stood up, leaving me shielded behind him on the couch. He stuck out his hand for Branch. I was afraid to look at how he reacted and I was petrified to look him in the eye. There was also a fear that Brooks would just walk up and punch him.

Then B came running out from around the corner and everyone looked

at her. She froze when she saw her father and then another man that looked just like him. That's when I looked at Branch for the first time. He pulled off his glasses and stared at my beautiful daughter. "You've got to be kidding me?" He looked at his brother and then back to B.

"Her name is Brooklyn, after her father." Okay, in my defense, I felt like it was necessary to immediately shove the fact that I'd had a child with Brooks, in his face.

Branch looked down and scratched his head. When he looked back at me, he held out his arms. "I think we're here to make amends, Katy."

I didn't move from beside

Brooks. If he thought for one second I was going to hug him, he was dead wrong.

Then I looked at Melissa, who'd said nothing. Just knowing that she'd spent the past two years trying to be the perfect future daughter-in-law made me want to laugh. She'd never be me, no matter how sweet she acted, or how much they visited. Brooks shrugged as his parents came into the room. B went running toward Danica. "Mom mom, yook."

She pointed to her father's twin.

Danica scooped her up. "B, this is your uncle. His name is Branch. Can you say Branch?"

"Banch."



Branch laughed, and then he did something that I would have never expected. He held his arms out for her. “Hey, little cutie. Come here and say hi.”

She peeked over Danica’s shoulder to look at Brooks. He smiled and motioned that it was okay. I watched her, being taken into Branch’s arms. He hugged her with more love and affection than I’d ever seen him have. Brooks put his arm around me and kissed me on the top of the head. His brother, who was still in awe over her, finally looked our way. “She’s beautiful.”

I felt guilty, after he’d said that. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but Branch was different. He seemed so sincere.

Melissa, started talking to B and I began to relax. Brooks was right about living in the past. We weren't going to make progress if we didn't move forward, so I walked over toward them and smiled. "It's been a long time, Mel."

She hugged me and I slowly let my arms reach around her back. "I missed you so much, Katy."

I pulled away and tried to be as nice as I could be. "I missed you, too. Obviously a lot has happened."

Branch handed B back to Brooks. She still seemed confused.

It was my turn to hug Branch. I was okay with it until he smiled and held his arms out, as if he expected it. I backed up until I felt Brooks' body

touching my back and then I reached out my hand. “It’s nice to see you, Branch.”

“I don’t get a hug?”

I crossed my arms over my chest.

“I’m not ready for that yet.”

He let out an air-filled laugh.

“It’s okay. I guess we all need to warm up to each other.”

“Yeah, something like that.”

Brooks pinched me on my back.

“Don’t mind her. She’s gotten bitter in her old age. I think it has something to do with motherhood.”

“Am I the only one here that thinks this is completely insane?” I was losing my cool while Brooks cracked jokes.

Branch laughed. “It’s only weird

if we make it that way, Katy. Look, we've all moved on now and clearly it's for the best. Whatever you have against me needs to be worked out. We were a family before, and we're even more of a family now. Look, Mel and I are getting married. You've got a kid that I don't think any of us knew about. You're obviously with my brother now. We wouldn't have come today if we knew it was going to make you so mad. If it makes you happy, we can leave."

I looked around the room at the family that I'd just started to get back. As much as I wanted to resent him, I had to bite my tongue. These people were all I had left and I needed them now more than ever. I had to forget about being

with Branch and start over, only remembering the times when we were growing up. The damage had already been done to everyone in the room. Out of all the times that I regretted what I'd done, I started realizing that closure was the only way to find forgiveness. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I did. I'm sorry for lying about my feelings. I'm sorry for hurting everyone in this room, especially Brooks. All of this could have been avoided if none of you ever loved me." I felt so lost, so hurt that I knew I had to get out of there. With no regard for what anyone had to say to my confession, I went running upstairs.

I heard them talking, deciding on whether Branch and Melissa should stay

or go. I also heard them arguing about who was going to come calm me down. When I heard the bedroom door opening, I turned to see the last person I expected to be standing there.

## Chapter 46

“Branch?”

He walked in and sat at the foot of the bed. “Brooks is probably going to beat my ass for what I’m about to say to you, but I think it’s time you and I got some things out in the open.”

I pulled my legs up to my chest and sat there looking at him. Though they were the same, there were also many differences in the two of them since the last time we’d all been together. Branch was clean cut and thin, while Brooks

was muscular and probably had a good twenty pounds on his brother. “Fine. Say what’s on your mind. I know you’re dying to.”

Branch shook his head. “Some things never change, do they, Katy?”

I felt like I needed to defend myself. “What do you mean by that?”

I could tell he was getting annoyed with me and I didn’t care. “I mean your attitude when it comes to you being in the wrong.”

“You just reminded me of why we aren’t together. You think the whole world revolves around you, like you should be worshipped,” I said sarcastically.

“We aren’t together because you

fucked my brother the night before we were to be married, or have you forgotten that? I'm sure you haven't, because judging from my calculations that would have been the night you conceived that pretty little girl downstairs. I still can't believe it. I can't believe that you ran away and had his child without telling anyone. How could you do that? Did you do it to get back at me? You did, didn't you? You wanted me to pay so badly that you cost my parents years without their only grandchild. Tell me I'm wrong. Give me some other reason why you couldn't come home?"

I sat up straight and let my legs relax. "Don't you dare act like you're



innocent.” I knew I was raising my voice and that everyone was probably downstairs listening. “All of this is your fault, Branch. You kept us apart. You lied to me to make me think he never loved me. How could you do that to me? Why?”

He slammed his hands down on the bed. “Because I wanted you for myself, that’s why. No matter what we were doing, he was always your favorite. I hated how you looked at him. We were supposed to be the same. You think I didn’t notice the way he always defended you? He promised me that we’d never fight, but yet he had to sneak behind my back when it came to you.”

He was acting like a jealous

child. “Are you talking about our first kiss?”

“You’re damn right I am. He had to have more, even after we’d made a pact.”

“We were twelve you big idiot. How can you look at yourself in the mirror, knowing that you’re an adult and you act like a child?”

“Don’t judge me, Katy. Go judge Mr. Perfect downstairs that at any time could have stopped you the night you were together. He could have pushed you away and told you he felt nothing. He was in the wrong. It’s like you’re blind when it comes to him. I don’t even get why.”

I pointed toward him. “Don’t you

dare turn this around. He's the victim and you hate that. You can't stand that you did all of this. You can't stand that after all of it, he still got me. Let me just tell you something. I don't care how long we were together, or what you did to try to make me happy. You could never be him, Branch. No matter how much you tried. You're too different. You care about yourself, while he puts himself last."

He turned and looked right at me. "You're right. That's why I did what I did. It's why I told you he didn't want you and it's why I told him to back off. I knew he'd listen, because he always cared about everyone else. Once I had you I knew he wouldn't want my sloppy

seconds.”

I moved forward on the bed, almost getting up in his face. “That’s where you’re wrong, Branch. I bet you didn’t know he lost his virginity to me in that room right across the hall. You see, on the anniversary of when my parents died, I thought it was you that would come into my room and comfort me. I thought it was you holding me because that’s what a boyfriend was supposed to do. Little did I know that it was Brooks. He made love to me only days after our first time together, and then on the same day the next year. Both times it wasn’t like anything I’d ever felt before.” That statement was better than any kick in the balls.

I watched the color leave his face and knew that I'd hit a nerve. "What? You knew?"

I shook my head. "No. I didn't know at first. We were together twice and he never told me. I can't blame him. Though, at first, I wanted to kill him."

Branch covered his face with both hands. "God, I can't believe this."

"I couldn't believe it either. More than that, I couldn't believe that the man I was planning on marrying had conned me into loving him. Did you really think that I'd be happy and that Brooks would never tell me the truth?"

He turned to me, like he was the one betrayed. "He gave me his word that I could have you."

“He told me no that night.” It was partly the truth, but I was actually starting to feel bad. “That night at the hotel, you were so drunk. You said some horrible things and Brooks just wanted me to feel better. He found me on the roof crying, and everything happened so fast. I know you could never understand and that you’ll probably hate me forever, but I’ve never felt something so powerful as when I’m close to him. It doesn’t matter how long we’re apart, or what’s standing in our way, it’s always there. Branch, I’m so sorry that I hurt you. I left because I couldn’t face you that next morning. I couldn’t look you in the eyes and tell you that I was in love with your brother. I felt so ashamed.” I

swallowed the lump forming in my throat before I could continue. “The thing is, you knew it all along. You’d been keeping us apart because you knew what we had, didn’t you? Do you have any idea what I’ve gone through because of all of this? I ran away from the only family I have left. I had a child that I couldn’t tell anyone about, because I thought they all hated me, including your brother. I moved to a town with nothing but the clothes in my suitcase. You could have prevented all of this. Brooks didn’t have to miss the birth of his daughter.”

“How did you know she was his?”

“I did the math and the doctors gave me a three day window of when I

conceived. Then we learned you were sterile, which by the way, thanks for that. Another lie that you went along with to get me to marry you.”

Finally he cut in. “Okay. I get the damn point. I was a shitty brother and a lying boyfriend. It doesn’t change that fact that you were only with me because you thought he didn’t want you. I was your fucking consolation prize, so yeah, I lied. I didn’t want either of you to be happy, so I did what I had to do. I gave you everything you wanted and you still ran to him. All you had to do was be faithful for one night and you couldn’t. You had to be with him. Let me know something, Katy. Would you have still married me if I hadn’t caught you with



him?”

I shook my head, knowing the answer before he finished the sentence. “No. I think I knew I wasn’t going to marry you the moment he walked through the door.” Then I really felt bad. “Branch, if you ever loved me, in any way, you’d know that I wasn’t with Brooks because I wanted to hurt you. I was with Brooks because I couldn’t stop myself. Every bone in my body calls for him. When he touches me it’s electric. We both loved you and it was the only reason that I walked away from you and from him.”

Branch started to get choked up and my anger was already gone, but was now placed with remorse. I hurt for him,

feeling betrayed by his own flesh and blood. I put my hand on his and he looked up at me. “I did love you, Katy. It wasn’t the right kind of love, but it was real. I can’t live like this anymore. I’ve got a good life and Melissa’s a great woman. I love her, and I know we’ll be happy. She’s okay with having to adopt and I don’t keep secrets from her. Except for one.”

I looked at him and felt confused. “One?”

“For so long I’ve told her that I hated you. I wanted you to be miserable and poor. Then I saw your daughter and I realized what I’d taken from you. You don’t have to remind me what I did. Knowing that I can’t have children has

been difficult for me to come to grips with. Seeing that Brooks had a child is when it really hit me. You're right, Katy. I kept you apart and it's my fault you ran away from Brooks. I'm sorry he wasn't there for you. I'm sorry none of us were, because family is supposed to stick together, no matter what. It's time I admit it out loud." He took a deep breath and wiped the tears off of his face. "I want you to be happy with my brother, because he's loved you for as long as I can remember and I'm sorry for keeping you apart. I suppose I deserved to hear about him sneaking in your room. He always was your hero."

I let out a laugh. "He still is." I couldn't tell Branch that we were

running from my abusive ex. “I thought he’d hate me for keeping my pregnancy from him, but he didn’t.”

Branch reached over and put his hand on my ankle. At first, I felt strange having him touch me. Sure, I’d slept with him for years, but something had changed. I no longer felt any kind of connection to Branch, and I knew why. Branch had been right. I’d been settling for him, when all the while Brooks was who I was supposed to be with. “Can we please be a family again? I’d really like to get to know my niece, and Melissa misses you. She thinks you hate her.”

“Did you sleep with her before or after I was gone?”

He put his hand out when he stood up. I let him help me off the bed and we started to walk out of the room. He laughed. “Yeah, we probably shouldn’t talk about that, seeing as you slept with my brother and all. When I took Melissa to bed is irrelevant.”

“Fine.”

I took two steps and saw Brooks sitting on the couch with his parents. He smiled when he saw us and I smiled back. Melissa was on the floor playing with B. “It’s good to be home, Branch.”

And it really was, good to be home. I was getting my life back; the one I’d never thought I’d see again. I could see my future in the horizon and Brooks was a huge part of it.

## Chapter 47

It took a few hours for everyone to relax. Melissa and Branch turned all of their attention to B while I helped out in the kitchen. Brooks and Walt ran out to get her a swimming ring for the pool and a new bathing suit. We were also running low on diapers. It was funny to me knowing that two grown men were shopping for a little girl.

While I sat watching B's new uncle and soon to be aunt swoon over her, Danica handed me some vegetables to cut up. "You know, I've never seen Branch around a small child before. It's quite entertaining. Although I always knew Brooks would be a good father. He's always been nurturing, caring about

others and ignoring his own needs.”

“Trust me when I say, Brooks dropped everything to be with us. There hasn’t been a second that he’s not working where he hasn’t been with us. It’s wonderful.”

“Keep telling yourself that when it’s years down the road,” she teased.

I handed her what I’d cut up and she tossed it all in a bowl. “Nah. I think we’re different. I’ve already loved him for more than twenty years. Now that we’re finally together, I don’t see myself loving him any less. I hope you’re okay with that. I mean, after everything that’s happened, I want to be honest.”

She dried her hands and hugged

me. “Katy, I’m thrilled to have you home. Thank you for your honesty. Without that there’s nothing to go on. You can always trust me with anything. You know that?”

I nodded my head but felt terrible because I was keeping secrets that could make them all hate me. I had to give it to Brooks for going along with it. He had nothing to worry about, but hiding my asshole husband wasn’t exactly a normal kind of favor.

I looked out into the family room and decided to break the ice with Melissa. If we could just have a normal conversation everything would be easier.

She saw me coming and stood up



as I approached. Right away she hugged me. “I really did miss you, Katy. You know on the way here I tried to call you. I wanted to talk things out so it would be so weird at first.”

I thought about the phone that I’d purposely thrown away. “I lost my phone before we came. I haven’t replaced it yet.”

“Oh, that explains why you didn’t answer my messages.”

“Sorry about that.”

We sat down on the couch, while Branch lifted B up and pretended she was an airplane. He was making all sorts of sounds as they flew around the room.

“It’s okay. I guess you have a lot

of questions. Branch said you wanted to know how long we'd been together." She looked down at the carpet and I could tell she was ashamed of the answer. For some reason I didn't care anymore. It was good that Branch had someone, because he was never going to have me.

"You know what? It doesn't even matter. You're getting married and things are the way they are. It's nice to know that you two had each other."

I could tell she started to relax more. "I love him, Katy. I really do."

"Mel, I have a child with Brooks. It doesn't bother me that you're with Branch. It's sort of weird, but I get it."

She hugged me again. “You should probably not listen to your messages, because I may have gone into detail explaining everything.”

I laughed and became curious as to what was said, thinking that maybe Brooks and I could listen to the messages together in bed later. He liked to be entertained.

“Yeah, I will erase them,” I lied.

It was a good thing that Brooks and Walt came back when they did, because I’d already run out of things to talk about with Melissa. Every day B was becoming more attached to her father. She saw him walking in and went running for him. “Daddy.”

I liked that she called Brooks

‘Daddy’ and Bobby had always been ‘Dada’. I wondered if she considered them to be two different things. No matter what, I was grateful that her real father was already recognized for his part in making her. I knew that as time passed there would never be a question about him not being around. She’d never know a time when he wasn’t everything to her.

Thinking about that reminded me of my father. I remembered being little and waiting at the window for him to pull in the driveway. I always knew that when dinner was cooking, he was on his way home. When I got a little older, I’d watch him pull up and run into the kitchen to make him something to drink.

He'd always come in with a smile, no matter how crappy his day had been. At dinner we'd talk about our day, and though mine was filled with fun and games, he'd made his job sound so interesting that even I wanted to do it.

Brooks caught me staring off into the distance and started waving. I finally came back to reality and laughed at myself. "Sorry. I was thinking about my dad."

He walked over and kissed me. Out of the corner of my eyes I saw Branch watching us. I grabbed Brooks' hand as he started to walk away. "How's your arm, babe?"

I never called him babe and he'd caught on immediately. He pulled me

close. “My arm’s fine, babe.”

Judging from the smirk on his face, I’d say he was amused. He kissed me and walked back over to where B was waiting for him. She was going into the bag, trying to pull out her new swim suit. When she succeeded, she swung it around and started jumping. “Put it on. Put it on.”

Brooks scooped her up. “Let’s go get pretty and show everyone that Daddy knows how to shop.”

I laughed out loud watching them go around the corner until I heard him climbing the stairs.

While waiting for them to come back down, I started carrying everything out to the pool patio. The sun was

shining and it was the perfect evening for a cook out. Branch carried all of the meat out to the grill, and although I pretended not to notice, I caught him looking at me again. It was uncomfortable, but not enough to bring up at the dinner table.

Brooks came out with our daughter in his arms. She had on a little red bikini with ruffles on the bottoms and his giant sunglasses over her eyes. With one hand on her hip, she walked up to her Grandmother, who'd just walked outside, and tapped on her leg. "Yook at me. I pwetty."

Danica acted extremely excited, getting a reaction out of our sweet girl. She giggled and went running back to her

father so he could scoop her back up. They walked over to me and I knew he was proud of himself. “What do you think? Is she not the cutest kid ever?”

How could I deny him the truth. “She is. You did good.”

He spun her around. “B, let’s go out and learn how to swim.”

We’d been swimming a few times already over the summer and B did well. She knew how to kick and hold her breath under water, but she still used a little ring, more for her own confidence. I knew Brooks would have her swimming like a fish in no time at all. He was determined to go about teaching her everything possible.

I watched them going up to the



pool. He was blowing up her float and took it out of his mouth to let her try to blow it. What touched me the most was watching him take that slimy mouth piece and put it up to his lips without even wiping it.

I knew it was the smallest of things, but it showed me that his love for her was unconditional. She belonged to him and somehow, already, she knew it.

Brooks pulled off the glasses and her flip-flops and hopped into the pool before holding out his arms for her. She jumped right to him, letting out a scream when her body hit the cool water. I crossed my arms over my chest and smiled, feeling like life couldn't be more perfect.

In a week's time, everything had changed. I'd been given another chance, and even though it felt surreal, I knew it was really happening.

Danica came up and startled me when she put her hand on my shoulder. "Sorry." She waited for me to catch my breath before she continued. "I didn't mean to scare you. I just wanted to tell you that Brooks promised Dad that you'd be back for Christmas. I know it's going to be the best holiday and if it's okay, I'd like to spoil my granddaughter with anything her little heart desires, starting with a special piece of jewelry. If it's okay with you, of course."

I turned to Danica and smiled. "I try not to spoil her, but I think it's time

she discovers what it's like to have grandparents. I'm sure she will love whatever you get her. First we need to celebrate her birthday. I'd like you to come down to the house and stay when we have her party."

She hugged me immediately. "Thank you, Katy. Thank you for being a good mother and allowing my son to be a part of his daughter's life. I know you kept things from us, but I'm just so glad that he knew. I can imagine it helped him knowing that he had something to come home to when he was in Afghanistan."

Immediately I turned away, avoiding the look of shame on my face. This woman didn't even realize how off she was. Not only had I hid it from

Brooks, up until almost two weeks ago, but I'd married another man. "I'd never keep something like that from him. He knew, but he also knew he couldn't come home to me. We spoke through letters often and when he finally came home, we were able to reconnect right away."

ALL LIES.

I hated myself.

She grabbed my hands and made me look at her. "I'm just glad that we know now. The past doesn't matter as long as we can all move forward. This family means everything to me." She started crying. "You don't understand how hard this has been for me, and for Walt. Katy, one day you were all here

and then next you were gone. I didn't know if you were okay, or if you were hurt. Every time I watched the news I prayed that you weren't involved. For the first couple of months I didn't even sleep. We worried and worried. Then Brooks stopped talking to everyone. We knew he was halfway around the world and there was nothing we could do about it. I'd gotten to the point where even seeing Branch was hard, because he reminded me so much of the both of you. When Brooks came home and he reached out to us, it filled some of the void, but it wasn't until you came walking through that door that I finally felt at peace again. Whether you marry Brooks or not is irrelevant. You're like a daughter to me

and you always have been. Nothing can ever change that. No matter how you think I'll feel, remember that a parent doesn't give up on their children. No matter what they do, even to each other, we love them. I will never give up on you. I love you all so much."

I hugged her tight and felt tears streaming down my cheeks. When I looked in the direction of the pool, I saw Brooks smile at me. He was happier than I'd ever seen him.

All baggage aside, I'd found my happy ending and it was like a dream come true.

The only thing left to do was get that divorce.

Chapter 48

Believe it or not, I'd made it through the entire night without wanting to commit a violent act on Melissa or Branch. It was probably due to my being so infatuated with my own new relationship to even care about them. Every moment I spent watching Brooks and our daughter bonding made my heart bigger. She was so drawn to him, as if her little brain just knew exactly who he was. A month ago she would have been asking for Bobby. Since Brooks came into her life, she'd never once mentioned him or looked out a window for his vehicle. After his last episode I was grateful.

It was a blessing, knowing that the next few months were going to be

difficult. I'd spent some time using the family computer to look up divorce laws in South Carolina. They were pretty much the same as everywhere. I'd have to be separated for a certain amount of time before I could lawfully file for a divorce. In the meantime, I'd just have to keep that life a secret from this wonderful family that had opened their arms and let me back into their lives.

While sitting up in bed waiting for Brooks to come and join me, I thought about them finding out the truth. I knew that in time they would forgive me, but it would also come with me losing their trust. I didn't want to be dishonest to them, but it sure beat telling them all of the wrong decisions that I'd made



throughout the way.

Brooks came in and pulled off his shirt. I spotted his tattoo and saw him smiling at me doing it. “If I would have known that you’d be so into it, I would have sent pictures with my letters.” He climbed on the bed and rested his head on my thigh. “What are you in here thinking about?”

I unfolded my hands and looked down at them. “I don’t know. Life, I guess. It’s just hard to believe that I’m here, with you, in your bed. It’s surreal, you know? Us being together and everyone being okay with it?”

He grabbed one of my hands and folded our fingers together, before sitting them on his chest. “To be honest with

you, even if they had a problem it wouldn't change us. We'd still be together, Kat."

He was right. I wouldn't have cared what anyone thought, because after getting him back, I knew I couldn't possibly begin to let him go. Not again.

"I love how you just know what you want, Brooks. I want you to know that I looked up what I need to do to get a divorce. It should be easy, since we don't have children or belongings together. Bobby can walk away with his home and business, while I keep my house and all of my money."

"He doesn't have access to those accounts?"

"No. I put them in Brooklyn's

name as soon as she was born. Only she and I will be able to draw money out of them. Bobby doesn't even know how much I have left. He thinks I used almost all of it on the house."

Brooks looked surprised. "How much did they leave you?"

I let out a laugh, seeing as it was so easy to tell Brooks anything he wanted to know. "Eight-hundred fifty four thousand-two hundred thirty dollars and fourteen cents was how much I got when I was able to finally access the account. I memorized the amount because, at the time, I was so hard up and needed it. The house cost me three hundred grand. I gave my friends that helped me twenty five grand and I

bought everything new for inside the home too.”

Brooks sat up and stared at me. “You have half a million dollars hidden from your husband and he never knew?”

I flashed him a guilty look. “Yeah. I wanted Brooklyn to have the best life. I knew that after I built the house, I wouldn’t have to work to afford a mortgage. I could be home with her, where I wanted to be.”

“I can see where he wouldn’t even ask. Look, you know I don’t care about that money. Your parent’s house and the life insurance was for you anyway. That money isn’t for me or for your husband. I just have one question for you.”

“Anything.”

“When can I move in, because me living on the base isn’t exactly going to work for me when my girls have that nice big house and I can’t be with them.”

“I told you already that you’re going to live with me. I thought you knew that I meant now.”

He sat up and got right in my face. “I’m teasing you. Do you really think I’d spend one night without the two of you? I’ve literally been to Hell. I’m in this for the long haul, woman. There’s pretty much nothing you can do about it, either. I hate to break it to you, but you’re stuck with this forever.” He motioned to his body.

I giggled. “I’m pretty sure I can

live with that.”

He pulled me on top of him. “You sure I’m what you want? I mean, there’s no going back this time. We’re either in it together, or it can’t happen.” His face was conflicted. “I can’t lose you again, Kat, not now that I finally have you.”

“You won’t,” I assured him. “We’re in this together.”

He flipped over. I could smell the chlorine from the pool on his skin. “I’m going to go get a shower. It’s late, so nobody would notice if we were in there together.”

I’d always been semi-modest with both Branch and Bobby. Neither of them gave me that self confidence that

every woman looks for. Sure, both told me I was beautiful, but I never felt like it meant enough.

“I’d love to get a shower with you.” Brooks knew me inside and out, and for that reason, making decisions such as showering, was easy.

He pulled us off of the bed, and started leading me into the hall bathroom. The hallway was dark and we could see the dim light from underneath Branch’s room, letting us know they were still up. Once inside of the bathroom, Brooks shoved me against the wall, pinning my hands above my head. “I think it’s time to pay back my brother for all the nights I knew you two were together. What do you say? Do you feel

like expressing yourself a little louder than usual?”

Those baby blues were showing the seriousness of what he wanted from me. Brooks wasn't just wanting to get in the shower. He wanted Branch and Melissa to hear every detail of it.

I bit down on my lip and mimicked his wicked-evil grin. Loudly, without even agreeing to it, I moaned my answer. “Oh, yes. Give it to me, Brooks.” So what if we were being juvenile. I missed my old life and being in that house made me feel like a teenager again.

Being bad shouldn't have felt so good, but there I was ripping off my clothes and watching Brooks doing the



same. He leaned over and turned on the water, while I watched his ass and licked over my own lips.

For a second I remembered back to years before, when I thought Brooks and Branch were both equally defined. Brooks appeared to have spent a lot of time working on his physique. Though he wasn't big and bulky, his muscles were all defined, making him even more desirable to me.

When he turned around, he caught me staring. I got a once over look and a big ornery smile. "You were just eyeing me up, weren't you?"

I put my hands up. "Guilty. Maybe you should punish me." I put one leg up on the tub and faced my back to

him speaking loudly. “Maybe you should spank me.”

Honestly, knowing my history, I didn’t think he would really spank me. His hand came across my ass causing me to let out a loud yelp. The sting of it was lingering as I felt his hand rubbing it back out. He leaned over and whispered in my ear. “Sorry. I always wanted to do that. Don’t be mad.”

I smacked him on the shoulder, still whispering. “Jerk. That hurt.” I rubbed my sore butt cheek. “Okay, I probably should have said I was playing around. I’m not mad at all, but you do know that you’re going to kiss every inch of that cheek until the burn goes away, and then you’re going to wash me, until

you're ready to burst from the buildup."

His lips brushed over my face. "It will be my pleasure, but when I'm done, I'm taking you back to bed and fucking you all night long."

Hearing him saying that word always gave me goose bumps. It was dirty and bad, albeit I wanted to experience both with him.

It's exactly what happened, too. Brooks helped me into the shower and got behind me. He ran his wet hands up over my sensitive skin. The burn had already gone away, but I wasn't about to share that with him, not when it felt so nice to be touched.

I leaned my head against the shower wall, when I felt him kissing me

there, repeatedly. He sat down on his ass and began kissing the back of my thighs where my ass met my legs. I got goose bumps again and my legs began to shake. He played with my hole, running a finger full of soap over the opening. My legs were forced apart, where he first washed and massaged me and then played with it with his mouth. I felt him sucking on my most sensitive skin and all I could think about was that I'd been missing out on so much. I'd never been with a man; one that was more about pleasing me than himself.

By the time the shower was complete, every inch of my body was on fire. I needed him to satisfy my hunger and he knew it.

After wrapping me in a towel and one around his waist, he led me out of the bathroom. Branch came walking out of the bedroom in a pair of boxers. His scrawny build made me almost laugh, compared to his brother's glistening wet skin.

“Hey, can you guys keep it down? Mel's got a headache.”

Brooks being Brooks, turned and looked directly at his brother. “You may want to shove some paper in her ears, because we're just getting started, bro.” He pulled me into his room and shut the door, like we were kids doing mischievous things.

“I can't believe you said that,” I said as my towel was being pulled off.

“It wasn’t a lie, beautiful. Knowing it’s bothering him makes me want to go at it all night. I don’t think either of you thought about how thin these walls are. I could hear everything and Branch knew it. It’s time he gets paid back.”

I looked down at his arm. “How’s it feeling?”

He shrugged. “It’s manageable, why?”

I put my arms around his neck and jumped. He caught me and with ease my legs wrapped around him. “Because I also have reasons for wanting to piss him off.”

In reality, our lovemaking, or whatever he was calling it, only lasted

about forty minutes. We were exhausted and knew B would be up as soon as the sun came up.

We'd proven our point, which was what we'd set out to do. It didn't matter if we'd finished anyway, because when Brooks went out to use the bathroom, he came back with a very awake little girl.

I didn't know whether we'd woken her, not that it mattered. Her bottom lip sticking out showed me that she was scared and it was good her daddy had heard her. He brought her in and put her right in the center of the bed. Since he had boxer-briefs on, and I was still in my birthday suit, I got up and put on underwear and a t-shirt.

In the time it took me to do that, she was already cuddled up against her father, sound asleep. Brooks was watching me, but smiling at her at the same time.

Our time apart hadn't made him bitter. It had made him love harder. *We* had his eternal devotion.

I cuddled up next to them and closed my eyes, knowing that this was as close to heaven as I'd ever been. It was what I had dreamed of my whole life.

## Chapter 49

For some reason being mischievous had paid off. I woke in a better mood about Branch and Melissa. In fact, after meeting her downstairs at the coffee pot, we started cooking



breakfast for everyone.

“So, did you ever listen to my messages I left? I know you better than to think you’d actually delete them without listening.”

I laughed. “I didn’t.”

She took a sip of her coffee. “I was thinking that maybe you should listen to them. I spoke from my heart and I feel like if we’re ever going to get back to being friends, and hopefully sisters, that we shouldn’t have anything holding us back.

She handed me the portable landline phone. “Here, just listen to them.”

I rolled my eyes. “Do I have to?”

“Yes,” she insisted.

I sat at the kitchen table and started dialing the number to retrieve my messages. The last thing I wanted to hear, after I'd already made peace with things, was a whole spiel of reasons why I should forgive them.

When I finally figured out how to do it, I was confused when it said that I had no new messages. Bobby would have probably called several times since he'd been served papers.

I hung up and dialed again, thinking it gave me the wrong box, but got the same results. I hung up and looked at Melissa. "That's funny. Are you sure you dialed the right number?"

"Danica gave it to me. You talked on the voicemail. I'm sure."

“Well, there’s no messages.”

“Does Brooks have your passcode? Maybe he listened to them.”

Brooks didn’t have my passcode, but Bobby did. My eyes flashed fear and there was no way I could hide it.

“What’s wrong, Katy?”

“Nothing. Can you watch breakfast for a second? I’m just going to go ask Brooks if he listened to my messages. I’ll be right back.”

I hated waking him, but a message from Melissa talking about them coming to see us would tell Bobby where we were. He’d know I wasn’t home and I was petrified that he’d do something to my beautiful new house, knowing that nobody would be there to

call the cops.

Brooks was in my old room with B. She was trying to put on her bathing suit. “Hey, you going swimming already?”

Brooks laughed. “She woke me up asking to jump in the pool. You know me, I give her anything she wants.”

“I need to talk to you about something. I’m kind of freaking out, right now.”

He touched my arm. “What is it?”

I explained the situation, that didn’t seem to bother him in the least. Still, I felt like he needed to know for when we went home. Bobby wasn’t just going to be pissed off when he got those

protective order papers. He was going to lash out and since my phone was out of commission, he was going to find whatever means possible to cause me physical and emotional duress.

“What are we going to do if we go home and he’s trashed the inside of the house? I won’t be able to prove it’s him. His fingerprints are all over the place.” I started to cry and Brooks put both arms around my back, holding me and offering comfort.

“Kat, he can’t hurt us. He’s there and we’re here. When we leave tomorrow night, we’ll worry about it. If he’s done something, we can figure out what to do when we’re there. Please don’t let him ruin our last day together.

Mom and Dad want to see us smiling today, like we don't have a care in the world. Focus on Branch and Melissa. Talk about their wedding like you're excited for them. Do whatever it takes to keep your mind off of that asshole, okay?"

"Asshole." B giggled, like she knew it was a bad word.

"Daddy's sorry. Don't say that. It's bad!"

"Asshole."

I covered my face with my hands. "Oh my God. What else?"

"Asshole." She giggled.

Brooks looked to me for guidance on the situation. Seeing him smiling was making it hard to be serious.

“Don’t laugh at her. If we make a big deal about it, she’ll keep saying it. Let’s just go downstairs and ignore her.”

He picked her up. “Let’s go eat breakfast. Are you hungry, bug?”

“Asshole, Daddy.”

Brooks pushed me along, trying his best to ignore our potty mouth daughter. “For what it’s worth, she learned it from you.”

He then laughed as we walked down the stairs. “Yeah. Live and learn.”

Thank God, by the time we made it to the kitchen, she’d lost interest. Melissa snapped a look of worry at me and I smiled at her, as if everything was right with the world. I couldn’t let anyone see that inside I was scared out

of my mind.

Our trip to be with the family again was a great reprieve, but as we neared the end I knew it was just a pause on what was to come. Assuming everything would be unicorns and sunshine wouldn't have been realistic. I had a very angry husband out there that knew wherever I was, I was with Brooks. It didn't matter to Bobby if I was in love, he was the father of my child, or even that I was happy. All that mattered to Bobby was that I wasn't with him.

I'd seen and read so many stories regarding abused women. In my opinion, things hadn't gotten so bad that I feared for my life. I'd been slapped around and



threatened, but never beaten to the fear of losing my life, like other women. Still, knowing that he was willing to hurt me was enough to scare me for what might come.

Given the right circumstance, and if he'd been drinking, seeing me with Brooks could put Bobby over the edge. There was a chance that when I got home he was going to stalk and wait for Brooks to leave so he could hurt me and hurt him. I feared that in Bobby's eyes, if he couldn't have me, neither could Brooks.

I kept a smile on my face while in the kitchen with my family and pretended to be overjoyed with being home. I was overjoyed, but at the same

time, I was scared; scared of them not knowing the truth and how dangerous it could be, and scared of what would happen if they ever did find out.

Needless to say, I had a lump in my throat for the whole time we ate breakfast and even as we cleaned it up. It was a blessing that Brooks was too infatuated by B to notice that I was falling apart inside. He was usually the first person to be able to read what went on in my head.

After breakfast was cleaned up, I retreated to our room to change into my bathing suit. Since I knew everyone in the house was downstairs, I took a few minutes to calm down before I was face to face with Brooks. After giving myself

a pep-talk in my head, I walked downstairs determined to make our last day full of happy memories. After all, we were all reunited, even if there was still things to be worked out, we were on the right track.

Climbing in the pool and being greeted by my beautiful daughter and her equally handsome father was like instant comfort. My fake smile was replaced with real ones and I felt like life couldn't get any better. I'd never felt so in love and happy to be where I was at.

Brooks pulled me into his arms with our daughter and floated us around together. B kept laughing when we kissed and telling us to do it again. She didn't say the curse word again either,

which was always a great thing.

Melissa and Branch were poolside, discussing some wedding plans with Walt about the hall they wanted to hold the reception in. One thing I noticed was that they were holding hands and neither of them were paying any attention to me, Brooks or even B.

They'd moved on together and I was at peace with that, as long as they were happy. I didn't even care if they were secretly in love with each other when I'd been engaged to Branch. All I cared about was moving forward. Finally, my life had meaning and I'd do whatever I had to do to protect it.

We swam for a long time, only

getting out when our skin looked like prunes. B sat in her red bikini, with her daddy's sunglasses on, sipping a large glass of iced tea. She looked like a little grown-up, while being the cutest thing I'd ever seen. It didn't help that Brooks told her she was beautiful every two seconds.

After burgers and my most favorite broccoli salad with bacon, we all got back in the pool. Branch and Melissa joined us, especially giving their attention to B. She laughed and giggled, somehow realizing the difference between her daddy and her uncle.

When we were children, the other kids would ask me how I could tell

them apart. I could never explain it, but somehow knew it. B didn't have to search her heart to know it though. Aside from the dog tags, Brooks' skin was tanned, from being outside, while Branch was paler from working in an office. Besides, even though Branch clearly had fallen in love with his niece, his eyes didn't sparkle when she walked into the room, like her daddy's did.

Danica got up from her lounge and asked everyone if we wanted more tea. She hurried into the house to get another pitcher, while we all kept playing around and enjoying the perfect day.

She came back outside a few minutes later without the pitcher. I didn't

notice her face until she addressed me. “Katy, can you come inside for a second?”

I walked inside after putting a towel around my wet body. “What is it?”

“There’s someone in the other room that’s asking for you. He said he has something for you. I had my hands full when I answered the door, so I didn’t ask his name.”

“Is it a delivery? Maybe Brooks ordered me something.” I heard her going back outside as I made my way into the family room.

I didn’t understand who could be visiting, but figured I needed to see. I hadn’t told anyone I was home, nor did I have many friends other than Brooks and

Branch growing up.

For a moment I thought Danica was playing a joke on me, like she used to do to cheer me up. She'd been so happy having us back that I wouldn't have put it past her.

I didn't make it out of the kitchen before he started walking in the room toward me.

Staring at me, in the only home I'd ever felt safe in, was Bobby. I could tell from one glance that he hadn't showered in days. His hair was a mess and his facial hair was looking more like a beard. I immediately began to tremble, looking behind me to make sure that nobody was coming. "Bobby, what are you doing here? How did you find me?"



He laughed and right away I could tell he'd been drinking. I didn't know how much or for how long, but it was obvious in the way he held himself up. "Does it matter? I'm here and I ain't leavin' until you're with me."

I shook my head and crossed my arms over my chest. "No. I'm not going anywhere. I'm here with my family."

"Yeah, I seen you and lover boy through the window. Do you really think I'm just goin' to let you be happy after you ruined my life?" He leaned up against the counter and I walked to the other side to put distance between us. Every few seconds I looked out the door hoping Brooks was coming after me.

My eyes focused on Bobby.

“Leave!”

“You’re comin’ with me, Katy. I drove all damn night to get here. Get your shit and come on.”

I started crying. “Bobby, please don’t do this. They are my family. You know they’re all I had growing up. Please, I’m begging you to go. They don’t know about you. They can’t. I promise, I’ll sit down and talk to you when we get home tomorrow night. Please, don’t do this here.”

He began laughing loudly. “You didn’t tell them about me?” More laughs were followed by the most horrifying eyes. “I’m your fuckin’ husband, you two-timing bitch. If you’re here, I have every right to be.” He started coming

toward me and I ran around the island to get away from him. He laughed at me again, picked up an apple out a bowl and threw it at me. I ducked and it smashed against a cabinet above my head. “You’ve got two seconds to get your ass in my truck, or I’m goin’ out there and fillin’ in your little family about us.”

I was sobbing, trying desperately to get up the courage to scream for help. I took a glance outside and saw my daughter being thrown up in the air and coming back down in her daddy’s arms. I knew she was safe and if something bad happened to me, she’d be loved and taken care of.

Then I turned back to Bobby, knowing I had to get him out of the

house. "I'll go get my things."

He grabbed my arm as I walked by and I cringed at the idea of him hurting me in front of them. I kept my eyes closed as the tears poured out of them. "You really think I'd let you go get your things without me? Darlin' you're not goin' anywhere, unless I'm with you."

I jerk my arm away from him. "Fine, come on. I don't want them seeing me, so let's hurry."

I ran up the stairs and heard him following me. When we walked into Brooks' room, I realized what Bobby must have been thinking. I started putting my things in my bag, refusing to look at him.

I heard the mattress moving and knew he was sitting down on the bed. Out of the corner of my eye I watched him feeling the sheets with the palm of his hand. "So this is where you've been fuckin' him?"

I turned to say something, anything to get him to shut up, and saw the knife being opened up. He traced the blade with his fingers.

At that very moment I feared for what was coming. I honestly thought he was going to stab me to death while my whole family was outside having fun. Flashes of Brooks finding me bleeding out ran through my head.

"Please don't hurt me, Bobby. Please don't take me away from B."

“Like you took her from me?” he snapped.

“Please, it’s not the same.” I felt terrible that he was hurting, but also knew that this could have been avoided. He’d been the one that made me leave. I was willing to try to be friends with him. I would have done the right thing.

“You took everything from me.” He stabbed the bed, going through the sheets and mattress. My body jumped when it made contact and he continuing cutting long marks in it. When he pulled the knife away, a half-assed K was carved into the bed. I covered my face with my hands and trembled as he pointed it right at my face. “Get your shit and let’s go.” He’d obviously seen

Brooks' tattoo. I wondered how long he'd been watching us in the backyard before he'd decided to knock on the door.

I stood up with my bag and started walking, as he followed behind me. I didn't know if the knife was close, and I wasn't going to look back to see. All I knew was that I had to get out of the house and get Bobby as far away from Brooks and B as I could.

No matter what this crazy man did to me, I wanted them safe. If it was my last dying wish, I knew I'd get it, because Brooks would kill Bobby before he let him anywhere near our beautiful daughter.

Chapter 50

I wanted to make a scene on the front lawn, so that Brooks or anyone would come to my rescue. He was going to be so mad when he realized what was happening. More than I was afraid of Bobby, I was scared of what Brooks was going to do to him. He'd spent his entire life protecting and loving me. I could hardly imagine him taking Bobby's new destructed plan to hurt me, lightly. Brooks was going to hurt Bobby and I feared that it would cost him his position in the military.

Bobby shoved me against the truck. I got my footing and looked right at him, not showing him how scared I was. The more I feared him, the more he'd push me. I had to be strong, even



when inside I was falling apart.

“Get in.”

“Please don’t do this. I have a protective order against you. Coming here is breaking the law and making me go with you is even worse. Think about what you’re doing. They’ll never let you see her. Please don’t do this.”

He got up against me, pressing his face against my cheek. I heard my luggage get thrown into the cab while he spoke. “You think I give two shits about your protective order? I could care less about a fuckin’ piece of paper. Get in the truck, Katy, or I’ll put you in there.”

I kept watching the door, hoping to see the other half of my heart come running out to save me. Bobby caught me

and put his hands around my throat. “There’s nothin’ he can do to stop me, either. This is between you and me.”

“What are you planning?” The tears streamed down my face. “Are you going to kill me, lock me away in a dungeon? You can’t keep me from them unless you plan on killing me.”

I was petrified of him, but more about what he was going to do to me. The only advantage I had was the fact that he’d been drinking and probably not sleeping. His ability to think fast would be off and I had to use it against him.

“This is the last time I’m goin’ to tell you. Get in the truck and shut the hell up.”

The truck seat was filled with the

scent of spilled bourbon and as I went to climb in, a bottle fell into the street, shattering on the concrete. Bobby took off as soon as I'd shut the door. Out of the mirror, I watched the house getting smaller and further away from me. I closed my eyes and let the tears fall, imagining something terrible happening to me. I'd never been so scared of Bobby, but he'd hunted me down and pulled me away from happiness. "What are you going to do to me? Are you going to hurt me now? Are you planning on killing me?"

He laughed and took a sip from another bottle of liquor. The stench of him was horrible. He reeked and I had to cover my nose with my hand to keep

from getting sick. My body was still wet from being in the pool and I didn't have any shoes on. If I tried to jump out, he'd just come back and get me again. I didn't have a phone, or any means of signaling anyone for help.

I kept watching the mirror, thinking I'd see Brooks running out into the middle of the street. We turned the corner and I knew it was too late. Even if he came in to check on me, I was already gone.

Soon he would have to explain to the family about who Bobby was and why my life was probably in danger. "How did you find me? I never told you their address."

"That was easy. I listened to

your messages from that girl Melissa. Once I knew where you were, I looked up the Valentine's address. There ain't that many Danica Valentines around, Katy. Did you think you could hide from me? I'll find you, no matter where you go. There ain't no way I'm lettin' my wife shack up with some other man without her bein' taught a lesson. When I'm done with you, he'll never want you again."

I cried harder and leaned my head against the window. Bobby reached over and touched my leg. I pulled away quickly, not wanting his hands on me. "Don't touch me!"

The back of his hand made contact with my face. "Talk to me like

that again and you'll be sorry."

I'd had enough already. "I hate you. Anything I ever felt for you is gone."

He grabbed my shoulder and the truck started swerving around the road. "What did you say?"

I shoved him off of me and watched as he steadied the vehicle. "I said I hate you. You're never going to see my daughter, Bobby. There's no way Brooks will let you near her. Everything that's happening to you is because of your actions. You did this to yourself."

"You can't keep her from me. I'll take your ass to court. I'll prove you to be unfit. I have the whole damn town on my side. How do you plan on winning

when I grew up with the damn judge's kids? It's my word against yours. All they're goin' to see is my cheating wife trying to move her lover in. Mark my word, I'll be in her life. You think that you can just replace me? I've done everything for you, you ungrateful little bitch."

His punch hit my arm instead of my face. I covered the spot with my hand as the pain throbbed. My sobs were loud, but nobody could hear them. I kept closing my eyes and feeling comfort in knowing that my baby was safe from this monster. "What happened to you? I don't even know you. What happened to the man that cared about people?"

"What happened? Are you

kiddin' me? You happened. I gave you my heart and you ripped it apart; you and that soldier. You're my wife, Katy. You said those vows to me."

"You married me as my friend. I didn't love you and you knew it. I tried, but I can't help it that you're not Brooks. You'll never be him, Bobby, and you know it."

He slapped me again, but this time I held up my hands, blocking him from making contact with my face. The sting from the first blow was still lingering, but I wasn't concerned about it. What I was concerned about was his determination to hurt me. The more he tried, the more angry I became.

This man was trying to take away



my happiness. After everything I'd gone through; all of the pain that I'd suffered in my life, he was trying to hurt me more.

Something inside of me snapped. No longer was I going to sit there and take it. It was up to me to save myself and my future. I was going to have to make a desperate move, fueled by my fear of losing everything.

While he took one glance back at the road, I took the bottle of bourbon on the seat between us and slammed it into the side of his face. His head hit the window as the bottle shattered, knocking him unconscious. I tried to reach for the steering wheel and get my foot up to the brake, but we were already heading straight into oncoming traffic. I closed

my eyes and turned the wheel hard to avoid hitting the cars. That's when the truck lost control.

Maybe I should have considered that he wouldn't just stop the car, or that hitting him would cause him to lose control of the moving vehicle. At that moment all I cared about was hurting him.

I wanted him to feel what it was like to have someone take out their anger on his face. I wanted him to hurt, like he'd repeatedly hurt me.

I suppose if I was buckled into my seat belt it would have been easier to withstand injuries. I remember the vehicle flipping three times before landing upside down. Traffic stopped on

both sides of the road and I could hear the people calling in asking if we were alright. My body was tangled up against the ceiling, while Bobby hung unconscious in his seat belt. I tried to scoot myself away from him, but I couldn't move.

I remember screaming when the intense pain hit me. That was when I realized that I wasn't just tangled up against the ceiling of a rolled truck. The pain in my back was the worst that I could ever describe. "Help me! Please, someone," I cried out.

"Bobby." I reached for him and got no response. "Bobby, wake up." I kept trying to reach him, to shake him awake. Blood ran down from his face

where I'd hit him, but moving my arms was impossible.

He was dangling above me and I couldn't do anything to help either of us. I didn't know what to do, so I kept screaming his name. "Bobby, wake up. Please wake up. Just hold on. Help is coming."

I wanted out of this situation. More than anything I wanted to see my baby. I needed to be home and safe in Brooks' arm.

Bobby stirred, getting my attention. He grumbled something under his breath and passed out again. "No, no, no. Bobby wake up. Please, hang on. Help is coming."

As much as I hated him, I felt

horrible for making this happen to us. Sure, I wanted him to suffer, but not like this.

He wouldn't wake up, and I could hear people outside of the vehicle telling us both to hold on. Sirens were in the distance, and I knew they were coming for us.

I closed my eyes and thought about my family; not just Brooks or B. I thought about all of them and the possibility of earlier being the last time I ever saw any of them.

I was immediately overwhelmed with emotions. I didn't want to die. After so much pain and suffering, after feeling like I'd never be happy, I had a beautiful daughter and a chance to be with

Brooks. Though poetic, I couldn't die yet. I had to fight for myself and that future that I could almost taste.

While I waited for help to reach in and pull me out, my ears began to ring. Then I lost the feeling in the tips of my fingers, followed by my vision becoming blurred. I felt my hearing fading. Then everything turned to black.

## Chapter 51

My eyes were heavy and I felt like I was ready to open them, though the voice talking had my attention.

“Katy, please wake up.” I heard sniffles and recognized the voice. “I feel like this is all my fault. If I'd just been honest with you, you wouldn't be here like this.” More sniffles. “They need

you. He needs you. I've never seen him like this. They had to sedate him, Katy. He's losing it, blaming himself for not following you. It's like he's dying without you." Then I heard sobs. I opened my eyes, but saw that Branch's hands were covering his face. "Just come back to us. I get it now. I see what I was never able to let myself see before. You were never meant to be my wife, because you were supposed to be my sister. You've always been his, even when you weren't together. I'll take whatever I can get as long as you wake up and come back to us. Brooks needs you. We all do."

I reached my hand over and touched his elbow. He looked over and

seemed shocked to see me looking at him. “Still here.”

He stood up and ran out of the room without saying anything to me. I couldn't move to see if anyone else was around, and it scared me.

At first, I had no idea how I'd gotten to the hospital. I remembered being in the pool with B and Brooks.

Then it hit me. The moments played out in my mind, all rushing back at the same time. Danica came in with B in her arms. Walt followed behind her. I could tell that she'd been crying. It was impossible to smile, or even say much, so I accepted her hand when she reached to touch mine. “You had us so worried.”

B was freaking out as she tried to



get to me. “B.” My throat felt like I’d eaten sand. “Drink.”

Walt ran out the door and came back in a few seconds later with a nurse. She asked the family to stand back while she checked out my vitals. “I’ll have the doctor come in and examine her and then I’ll be able to get her something to drink. Hang tight, Mrs. Parsons. The doctor’s coming.”

My eyes must have popped out of the back of my head. She’d said my married name. Danica was still fighting with B to stay calm, while I tried to think of reason to explain why I’d lied to their faces.

I could feel tears falling down my face as I silently cried to myself,

knowing that I'd let them down again.

The doctor came in, checking my sight, asking me questions, poking at my body, and finally ordering that the nurses get me more comfortable. I was relieved when he did the examination of my feet and I was able to feel both of them as well as my legs. The last thing I remembered was losing feeling in them.

What made me feel even better was when the nurse came in with a cup of ice water and stuck the straw in my mouth. Immediately the dry pain went away, and I opened my mouth and was able to speak. "Thank you."

"How are you feeling? Do you have any pain in your neck?" The nurse removed the soft collar that was

apparently keeping me from moving my head.

“It’s stiff.”

“Good. The x-rays didn’t show any damage.” She started moving the bed to recline my body and when she got to a certain point it became excruciating.

“Ouch! It hurts.”

She took my legs and put a pillow under my knees. “This should help. How’s that feel?”

I noticed the immediate relief. “It’s better.”

“You dislocated your hip and injured the muscles around it. It’s been reset, but the pain is going to last for a while.” She handed me the wand that was hooked to my bed. “This controls

the television and a button to call for a nurse. If you need anything or experience any pain at all, just hit it and we'll be right in."

As she walked out, I noticed that Danica and Branch had stepped outside of the door. As happy as I was to see their faces, I noticed that B was gone. When I tried to sit up it hurt too much, so I sank down in the bed. Then of course, I had to think of what to say to them. There was only one thing on my mind. "Where's Brooks?"

"Walt just went to get him. They gave him something to calm him down and it put him to sleep."

"What happened to him?"

Danica came up to the bed and

touched my hand. “I’m not going to ask you anything right now about it, but once you’re out of here I’m going to expect answers. As for Brooks, well let’s just say that when he found out you were gone he thought you were hiding again. He went inside without asking me if I’d seen you.”

“By the time he did ask, that man had already taken you from the house. Brooks hopped in his truck and went after you. He arrived at the scene of the accident before we could catch up. You can imagine how it was for him, seeing the vehicle and the shape it was in. They’d already taken you by ambulance and were still working on your husband.”

I cringed when I heard her call Bobby my husband.

“Brooks rode in the ambulance with Bobby. He’d come to and was threatening you when they were loading him inside of it. The paramedic heard everything, thank the Lord, but it didn’t make what Brooks did okay. Apparently he went at him in transport several times, while Bobby continued threatening you and even B. The paramedic had to keep coming between them.”

“I’ve never seen my son act violently, albeit no one had ever threatened his family before. Once they arrived at the hospital, they subdued Brooks and took Bobby to a room.”

“We arrived a few minutes later when Brooks and the paramedic were telling their story to the police officer doing the report. Luckily, Bobby’s blood alcohol level was well over the limit and you’d been abducted. Taking that into account, and the fact that Brooks is an active duty officer, they weren’t going to look into it any further.”

“I don’t understand why he’d need medicine.”

“Katy, Brooks had a panic attack. He was having chest pains and felt like he couldn’t breathe, just like you used to have. They gave him something to calm down and it made him tired. He’s been in the waiting room sleeping for the past four hours.”

“Is he okay?”

Branch came walking up to the bed. “He will be when he sees that you’re alright.”

“That doctor didn’t even say what was wrong. Why were you so upset earlier?”

“They were worried about swelling on the brain. Apparently if you don’t wake up after a certain amount of time, it’s more likely that you’d have swelling. They told Mom that your head looks clear, aside from having this syndrome that makes you pick the wrong men and run away from your family.”

I rolled my eyes and Branch started laughing. “Very funny.”

He lifted my hand and kissed it.



“You had us all scared. Just so you know, we could have taken him down. You didn’t have to leave the house. One scream and we would have kicked his ass.”

I saw Danica standing there and felt so ashamed. “I didn’t want anyone to know about him. I just wanted to forget about him myself.”

“We know what he did to you, Katy. Brooks told us everything. We know that man hit you.”

I started crying, feeling like I was the stupidest person on the planet. “I know you won’t understand, but he used to be my friend. He helped me when I thought I was all alone. He knew how I felt about Brooks and said it didn’t

matter, but when I couldn't love him, he changed."

Danica came up beside Branch. "Katy, we'll talk about it later. Right now we need you to recover. Your body is all beaten up and you're going to be in a lot of pain."

I saw Branch start backing up away from the bed and I knew he was there before I even saw him. Danica stopped talking and smiled as she backed up as well. Then I saw him, holding B with one arm as they approached the bed. "There she is, bug. Just like you said. Tell Mama hi."

"Hi, Mama."

"Hi, baby."

Brooks reached down and

grabbed my hand. He immediately had tears in his eyes. “Don’t you ever do that to us again. My heart can’t take it.”

I began to cry again. “I’m so sorry. I just wanted to get him away. I didn’t mean to cause the accident.”

“What do you mean? Bobby was intoxicated; way over the legal limit. He shouldn’t have even been conscious.”

“I hit him in the face with the bottle of bourbon. He was hurting me and threatening me, saying he was going to take B away. I just wanted him to let me go. I wanted it to stop.”

“You stopped it alright, and almost died doing it. You weren’t even wearing a seatbelt,” Branch added.

“I’ve got this, bro. Why don’t

you take Mom for a walk and give us a minute?” Brooks looked at me the whole time he spoke and I didn’t like the look he had on his face.

Branch and his mother left the room. When the door shut, Brooks pulled up a chair and let B down. He handed her a small bag of crackers and she was spinning around shoving them in her mouth.

“You know I’m mad, right?”

I shrugged and could feel the muscles in my body aching. “I had my reasons, Brooks. I didn’t want him in your parent’s house.”

He closed his eyes like my explanation pained him or something. “Kat, I got out of that pool and B jumped

back in. I had to retrieve her before I could get a towel and come inside to look for you. I don't know what I was thinking, but I never assumed that Bobby had driven all that way to kidnap you."

"I'm sorry," I cried. "I didn't know what to do. All I could think of was getting him away from you and B. I knew she was safe, no matter what happened to me."

"Listen to yourself. What about me, Kat? Did you ever consider how you being gone would affect me? Do you even think that being without you again would kill me? We're a team, remember? No more lies or secrets. You promised."

I shook my head. "I did what I

had to do, whether you believe me or not. I wanted you to save me, but I didn't have time to think about it. I had to get him away from our family.”

“He could have killed you, Kat. Tell me something. Did those marks on your face and arms come from him, or the accident?”

I cried more, knowing he was right. I should have called for help. I could have stalled him until Brooks came into the house. I should have done a lot of things different, especially the decision to marry him in the first place. “Please don't hate me.”

He squeezed my hand and looked right into my eyes. Tears ran down his cheeks. “Have you ever felt so happy

that you're almost wondering when something bad is going to happen?"

I knew exactly how that felt, so I nodded.

"Then you know what it was like to pull up to that accident and know that I could have prevented it."

"It wasn't your fault."

Brooks looked at B and then back to me. "It doesn't even matter anymore. He won't be bothering you again."

"Did he get arrested? Is he going to jail?"

"He didn't make it, Kat. He passed on during surgery."

I felt like my heart stopped beating. The room began to spin and my

monitor starting beeping rapidly, setting off an alarm.

This couldn't be happening to me. Brooks had to be joking. There was no way that Bobby was gone. There was no way that I'd killed him.

This couldn't be happening to me.

I was trying to get free, not end someone's life.

How was I ever going to live with knowing that I'd caused that accident? I'd caused Bobby to become the man that he was and I'd been the reason that he was lying in a body bag with no future.

Chapter 52

Suddenly my prognosis seemed



irrelevant. I needed to know if I'd killed Bobby; if I'd killed my own husband who'd only put himself in the dire situation because of me. Just weeks ago we were seemingly happy, even moving forward with our feelings and our family. Being with Brooks had changed everything. It had destroyed a man's life and cost him his existence. All I could do was sob, not for the husband who'd become violent or possessive, but for me, the wife, that had caused his plummet and then eventual demise. I felt like my own devil, as if trying to justify what I'd done would only make that fact truer. I wanted to close my eyes and take it all back. I knew there could have been better choices that weren't made out of

desperation.

I could have been more understanding of his feelings instead of selfishly diving into something with Brooks and basically throwing it all in his face. I should have understood that his anger was out of being so completely crushed as a result of those decisions.

It was all my fault.

My guilt overwhelmed me, sending me to a place that I didn't want to be; a place where I'd begun to regret falling right into Brooks' arms. No matter what he said to me, or anyone for that matter, they couldn't know how conflicted I was inside.

Especially not Brooks.

He tried to talk to me, to comfort

me and be my protector. I knew I was shutting down, giving up on whatever it was that we were creating together, but I couldn't stop it. I was in shock.

That evening when everyone else went home to rest, Brooks sat by my bed holding my hand. He was crying silently to himself, perhaps knowing what I was already thinking. Our happy time together had come to an abrupt halt. "Kat, please say something to me. I don't understand why you're doing this. He put your life in danger. You did what you thought you had to do."

"I ended his life."

"The accident ended his life."

"I caused the accident. I killed him."

"His drinking killed him, Kat."

I shook my head. "No. He used to tell me that all he ever wanted was for me to be happy. He didn't mean it like this, Brooks. I ruin everything I touch. I always have."

"That's your pain medicine talking."

I raised my hand as far as it would go considering I was hooked up to monitors and one was in the process of taking my blood pressure. "No. I'm a very selfish person that went after what I wanted, not even considering how drastic the consequences would be. I can't do this right now, Brooks."

I couldn't lay helpless in a bed and know that Bobby was downstairs in

the morgue. My hitting him on the head with that bottle kept playing out in my mind. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop it.

"If we don't talk now, it's going to have to be over the phone. I've got to fly back to Fort Jackson first thing in the morning to report back for duty. Mom's going to take care of you and B until I can fly back next weekend." I was too hurt to even understand the amount of pain that Brooks was going through, having to leave us both and report for duty. Inside, deep in that hidden place everyone hides their feelings, I knew him leaving was hurting me. More than anything I wanted him by my side, albeit I didn't deserve it. I no longer deserved

to have everything I wanted, not when being with Brooks hurt so many other people. I looked right at him, feeling like I was stabbing myself in my own heart. "So you'll call?"

Brooks was devastated. He reached for my hand and I closed my eyes. I could feel my lips quivering. "Kat, we'll get through this. I promise. Don't you dare give up on us. I know what you're thinking. Don't do it. Please don't push me away."

I had to turn my head away from him so he couldn't see me falling apart. "I'm so sorry, Brooks. Please don't look at me like that."

He stood up and finally I couldn't keep my eyes away. "I love you

with everything I have in me. I know what it's like feeling like you caused someone's death. I can see it all over your face. They train us to handle those situations, so when you're ready to talk about it, rationally, you pick up that phone and I'll be there." He leaned in and kissed my lips, then put his mouth close to my ear. "I will never give up on you."

Brooks left the room, not because he had to right away, but because he couldn't stand looking at me and not feeling what he feared was going to happen.

Nobody hated me more than I hated myself. I looked around the empty room and felt as if it was where I was

supposed to be.

Alone.

Brooks loving me was his weakness. He couldn't see the truth, because he was blinded by that love. I caused pain, no matter where I went or who I was around.

That night was difficult, but the next few days were even harder. Brooks called me every morning, then at lunch and one last time before he went to bed.

His voice soothed me, even if it were only a temporary fix. Danica brought B to the hospital each day until I was finally released on Wednesday. My hip was still in a bit of pain, but manageable with medication. Walt had rearranged the furniture so that I could



maneuver a temporary wheelchair around on the first floor.

It was good to be out of the hospital, but I had other things clouding my mind. Since I was Bobby's wife, it was up to me to take care of his body, transporting it home and arranging a funeral.

I didn't know where to begin.

Finally, after making calls to his family, I was left staring at the phone, knowing I had to call Sarah and Dave. My stomach was in knots and I broke down.

Danica came running in, with B following close behind her. "What's wrong? Does something hurt?"

Aside from a bunch of bruises,

the only thing that was wrong with me was that I'd dislocated my hip. I still had a killer headache and my body felt like it had been thrown into a cement maker. That aside, I wasn't incapable. "No. I'm okay. I just need to get home. I have to be there to do all of this in person."

I could tell she was conflicted with what she should say. It was understandable that Danica didn't want me leaving, on account of B. She wanted to be with her as much as she could and us being a few states away was hard on everyone.

"Danica, please. I need to get home."

She grabbed the phone and started dialing before she would say

what she was doing. “Hey, it’s me. Remember what we discussed last night? Yeah. I’ll call you when we get there. Love you too.”

She hung up and handed me the phone. “Call Brooks and tell him we’ll be home late tonight.”

I didn’t know what to say.

As much as I longed to see Brooks, I knew there were things that needed to be dealt with that didn’t involve him. I needed to worry about burying Bobby before I could begin to figure out anything else.

Still, I waited for her to walk out of the room before I dialed his number.

“Sergeant Valentine.”

“Hey, it’s me.”

“Are you okay?”

Hearing his voice instantly made me emotional. More than anything I wished that I could take everything back. I wanted to rewind the last four years of my life and choose Brooks from the beginning. Life would have all been so simple if I'd just made the right choices in the first place.

“Yeah. I'm fine.”

“Katy, please tell me you're not calling to give me bad news. I'm having a terrible time being here when you're both there. I can't take much more this week.”

“I'm not. I'm calling because I'm coming home. Your mom is going to drive us and stay with me. She wanted

me to call and tell you that we'll be home late tonight."

"She wanted you to call? So you weren't going to?"

"I didn't say that."

"Yeah. You didn't. So, do you want me to head over to your place when I get off?"

My throat was burning with the things that I wanted to say to him, but couldn't. I couldn't keep him from seeing B, even if I was conflicted about my life. I'd never do that to him. "Yes. There's a hidden key attached to a magnet underneath the fender to the riding mower. It's in the shed. That key opens the front and kitchen door. I have no idea what's there to eat, but help

yourself. We'll call when we get close."

"I can't wait to see you. We're going to get through this, Kat."

I was shaking so badly, hiding my sobs by covering the phone so he couldn't hear me. "Okay." It was all I could manage to get out.

"Don't you dare give up on us. I know what you're doing."

"I'm not doing anything," I said defensively.

"You're pushing me away because you think it's the right thing to do. You think you caused all of this to happen. Katy, you didn't make him put that bottle to his mouth. You didn't make him raise his hand to a woman. He did all of that himself. I know you feel

guilty, but he could have chosen other paths. He didn't have to viciously hunt you down and you know it. If he found my parents address, he very well could have gotten their phone number. Please, Kat, just think about it. We all know you'd never hurt someone intentionally. You did what you had to do to get free. You said it yourself."

"He's dead because of me. Nothing you say will change that. Now, I've got to come home and face all of the people that loved him. They never believed he did those things to me, so they'll never understand that this was an accident."

"He was drunk. It was confirmed through blood tests. Those people can

say whatever they want, but they can't deny the damn truth." He was getting angry with me and I didn't know what to say to comfort him.

He didn't run away and become rescued by Sarah and Dave. As much as they'd done for me, I couldn't stand imagining telling them that their very best friend was gone. The ache in my heart was excruciating to bear.

Brooks got quiet on the phone. I knew it was because he was frustrated. I was more frustrated with myself.

"I love you, so much," he whispered.

I should have been prepared to hear it. He never said goodbye without those words. I should have been able to



handle it without breaking down. “I love you, too.” It would never be a lie. No matter what happened, I’d never love another man. That was the only thing I was completely positive about.

“I’ll be there waiting for you tonight. We’ll get through this together. I promise.”

I smiled through my tears, knowing he was making me a promise.

We hung up and I closed my eyes. I could still see Brooks and I together in my future, but there was this big wall blocking me from being able to have it and I didn’t know how to break it down.

## Chapter 53

I had to give credit to Danica.

She drove us, all the way through to South Carolina, only stopping for bathroom breaks. We were starving and I was exhausted. I'd fought so hard to stay awake to be able to occupy B and keep Danica company.

I wanted to close my eyes and drift away from anything but thinking about my life. No matter what I looked at, or what song was playing on the radio, I thought of Brooks and Bobby and how my whirlwind affair had cost me so much pain.

What hurt the most was knowing that I could have prevented it.

When we pulled up at the house, and I saw a strange vehicle, I knew Brooks was there waiting for us. He was

going to want to talk to me again and I wasn't prepared for it.

I still had calls to make and a company to meet in the morning that I was paying to transport Bobby's body home. His family, who was extremely saddened by the news, had no idea that we'd been having problems and I worried that when they found out, it would change things.

I had to keep the peace.

It was difficult for me to get in and out of the car by myself, while still feeling pain. I should have known he'd be there to open the door for me. Seeing him standing there made my body immediately warm. His eyes were on mine as were his lips. I closed my eyes

and savored the way it felt. “I missed you.”

I let my lips linger against his until we heard B. “Daddy. Me get out.”

Brooks left me standing there so he could pull B out of the back. “There’s Daddy’s, bug. Did you miss me?”

Once she was freed, he let her climb out on her own. Her hand found his and then his other was on my back as I hobbled along.

Danica grabbed her bag and followed us into the house.

I don’t know why I expected it to be as I’d left it. Brooks squeezed my hand when he heard me gasp. “I’ve been cleaning since I got here. I didn’t want you to see it like this.”

My beautiful, brand new home looked like it had been vandalized. Plates were broken, cabinet doors had been pulled off the hinges. Brooks helped me into the living room and the television screen had a huge crack in it. I could see where he'd picked up, but even noticed the curtains were ripped away from the walls.

I ventured further inside of my house, until I reached my bedroom door. Brooks put his hand over the doorknob. "Kat, let's get you settled first."

"What is it? What did he do?" I was already crying, feeling like all of the love I'd put into my home was wasted.

"You need to remember that this

is just a house. Everything in here can be replaced.”

I looked right at him, angrily staring him down until he released the knob. “The fumes are still bad.”

I opened the door and was taken aback by the smell of gasoline.

Everything had been shoved off of my dresser and someone had removed the sheets and blankets from my bed. A large black burn mark was in the center along with a dark mark from where the flames had charred the ceiling.

He’d set our bed on fire.

I couldn’t believe it.

My mouth hung open as I took another mental picture of the room.

“What has he done?”

“I already bagged the bedding and the fire extinguisher. I’m assuming this was all some sick message, considering he’d been prepared to put the fire out before it got out of hand. Like I said before, we can replace all of this. I can buy us a new bed tomorrow. With a couple cans of paint and some fresh carpet we can get the smell out of here and you’ll never even be able to tell it ever happened.”

I shook my head and finally looked at Brooks. “Don’t you get it? This is all my fault. Everything! He did all of this because of what I did to him - what we did to him.”

Brooks touched my shoulder and I pulled away. “Please, Kat, you’re not

thinking clearly.”

“My husband is dead because I broke his damn heart. We did this to him. It didn’t have to be like this, Brooks. Stop acting like we’re just going to be happy and move forward. There is no moving forward. I’ll never forgive myself. I can’t even begin to think about it.”

He just stood there, as if I’d said nothing. I sighed, knowing I was breaking his heart too. Why couldn’t he understand that I felt responsible? Why couldn’t he see that I’d let my actions destroy a good man? All he wanted to do was take care of me and B. I practically ripped her out of his arms and had fallen right back into bed with Brooks again.



This uncontrolled roller coaster was a death-trap waiting to happen.

He reached for me again,  
pleading with his eyes.

I looked away.

“Kat, don’t make me leave.  
Please talk to me.”

I closed my eyes when I spoke to keep from losing it more. “I won’t ask you to leave. Your mother and our daughter are here.”

When I opened my eyes he nodded, but looked down. “You just need time. That’s what this is, right? We’ll get through this?”

“Maybe. It’s too much right now, Brooks. I’m not trying to hurt you and this isn’t about our love. There will

never be anyone but you. I know that. I need to sort things in my head before I can do anything.”

He nodded again. “So what am I supposed to do? Do I come here every day and pretend that it’s okay to not be able to touch you? Do I avoid eye contact, because looking at you is like shards of glass being driven into my eyes? I’ve waited for you, Kat. I’ve been so God damn patient. If I could take the pain away from you I would. I do anything to keep you from hurting, but I can’t accept that we can’t be together. I won’t let you push me away this time. Do you hear me?”

He grabbed both of my arms. “Look at me, Kat. Look me in the eyes

and swear to me that we're going to get through this."

I closed my eyes and opened them slowly, feeling warm tears falling down my cheeks, one after the other. "What if we don't?"

He shook me, not violently, but more as if he were trying to wake me from a sleep. "Don't do this, again."

"Brooks, what if I can't move forward? Look at my house. A man is dead. Our love is like poison and everyone around us ends up getting hurt. How much more has to happen before you see that?"

His reddened eyes looked away, like looking at me made it all so much worse. Then, without another word, he

left the room.

I heard the front door slam and a vehicle starting. It was obvious that I'd hurt him. I wasn't trying to hurt anyone. That was the point. I couldn't be responsible for what happened when Brooks and I were together. It wasn't fair.

I fell down on the floor and began sobbing. My house was a disaster and I couldn't even call the police to report it, because the person responsible had already met his fate. Everything was out of control and I felt like I was being sucked into a vicious black-hole with no way to escape.

Danica gave me a little while alone before she came in to help me up

off the floor. Maybe she knew I didn't want her opinions. It was especially hard for her considering that she treated me like I was her daughter. Picking sides wasn't ever something she could do with a good conscience.

“What am I going to do?”

She helped me up and got me standing. When I went out into the living room, she helped me get seated comfortably on the couch and propped up my feet. “About what, Katy? If it's about this house, we'll clean it up. If you're asking about Brooks, that's something you need to decide. Just keep in mind that he can only handle so much rejection. Maybe instead of shutting him out, you should let him be there for you.

Brooks knows you, probably better than you know yourself, right now. No matter what you're going through, he'll understand, as long as you don't push him away."

"Bobby's dead because of me," I said in a whisper.

"That man is dead because he made poor choices."

I shook my head, unable to accept that she knew anything about the situation. "You don't understand. All he ever wanted was for me to love him. I tried, and for a while I thought I did. Obviously, it wasn't anything like I feel for Brooks, but it was becoming something to build off of. The moment I found out Brooks was alive --"

“Alive? Katy, you thought he was dead?”

I nodded and started to sob, covering my face with both of my hands. “His letters stopped. I called Melissa and hung up before they could tell me that he’d just been injured. I didn’t know they were sending him home. I didn’t have a clue that he was coming home to be with me.”

She put her hand on my shoulder and started rubbing it. “My God, I can’t imagine what that must have been like for you.”

“I felt like I couldn’t breathe. If it wasn’t for Bobby, I’d still be lying in my bed, without the will to go on. He understood how much I loved Brooks

and still wanted to be with me. Granted, it was the reason that he started drinking and eventually hitting me.”

“What? He hit you?”

I nodded and cried harder.

“Brooks came here to be with me, and when he pulled up at the house and saw that I was with another man and had a child, he gave up on me. I never knew he’d been here. I swear to you that I didn’t know.”

“I believe you, but I need to know how you found out?”

“I got a letter a few weeks ago that must have been lost in the mail. It was postdated from February and explained how he was coming home to start a life with me. I didn’t tell anyone



about it. I just got in my car and drove to the base. There was no way I could go without knowing. I had to see it for myself. Brooks walked out of that building and I felt like I could breathe again. Not only was he alive, but he'd been living so close to me. What he didn't know was that Brooklyn was his child. He told me that he wanted nothing to do with me and then I confessed."

"You should have seen the look on his face when he told me to leave. It hurt so much knowing that I'd hurt him again. I hated myself for not telling him about B. When I left, I went to pick her up from the babysitter. When I got home, Brooks was sitting at the kitchen table with Bobby. After that, everything

started becoming the mess that led to all this. Bobby started hitting me again and Brooks wasn't going to sit around letting it happen. He hid me from Bobby at a hotel near the base.

That was the first time that we spent the night together. We should have waited, but after so long apart and sharing the excitement of our daughter, things happened. It was his idea to bring us home to you and Walt. He thought we'd be safe while waiting for Bobby to be served papers ordering him stay away from us.

I was so caught up in being with Brooks, finally after so long that I went along with everything he said. It was his idea to tell you he knew the whole time.

It was his idea to lie about being married. He just wanted our family back together, and for what it was worth, it meant everything to me too. I'm so sorry. I know you must hate me for doing this to the family, again. I promise that I won't keep B from you. I'd never do that."

"Stop." She closed her eyes and kept her hand on my shoulder. "Just stop and let me take this all in."

"All you have to know is that this is my fault. I agreed to marry Bobby and he expected me to change. I ruined his life and now I've ruined mine."

"That wasn't fair to either of you, Katy. He should have known that he couldn't change things. You can't help who you fall in love with. Nobody

expects you to be a saint. I'm angry with your approach, but I do understand how you felt like it was the only way. Our situation is difficult. You being in love with my sons and also considering you my own daughter, it was always a potion for disaster, but we let you all figure it out amongst yourselves. Bobby couldn't expect you to change something that you've felt your entire life."

I smiled, knowing that she was right. I'd loved Brooks Valentine my whole life. The idea that he'd just walked out of my house so upset was killing me. "I think when he thought I'd lost Brooks forever, Bobby thought he had a chance. Shit, I even told him he did. We were trying to have another

baby.”

“Katy, you were doing what you thought was right. Whether it was a miracle or miscommunication, Brooks was suddenly back in your life. Anyone in your situation would have been compulsive with their decision making. You felt like you’d gotten a second chance after experiencing all of the emotions of losing someone.”

I cried harder, feeling like nothing that I’d done was the right decision. “Being with Brooks is so easy. I know it’s stupid, but it’s almost like we share a heart.”

“Or a soul? Maybe that’s possible. We’ll never know. Look, life isn’t always wonderful. There are ugly

parts. You know that more than anyone. What you do with those ugly parts is what makes you the woman you are. I can't tell you what to do, but you need to imagine your life without Bobby and your life without Brooks. If what Bobby wanted was for you to be happy, then somewhere in your heart you'll be able to forgive yourself."

Brooks had offered me similar advice a while back.

I couldn't talk anymore and after my confession I fully expected Danica to catch the next flight out. Instead, while I cried and B slept, she began cleaning my house.

My heart was so heavy, and right in the middle of all the pain was the man

that I was pushing away.

## Chapter 54

I should have known that I wouldn't get much rest. Aside from having to sleep on the couch, since my bed had been destroyed, I tossed and turned thinking about Brooks and everything else.

I could hear the sounds of the critters and insects outside and nothing else. I stared at the ceiling for a while, and even got down on the floor and started picking up things that were still out of place.

Danica was sound asleep in B's room with her and I didn't want to wake either of them by turning on the television.

I attempted to count sheep, think about where I walked, where I needed to go in the morning, but nothing was letting me go to sleep.

Finally, around two in the morning, I couldn't stand it anymore. I had to hear his voice. I knew that because of how he'd left, I was too messed up to be able to rest.

I was surprised when he answered fully alert. "Kat, is that you?"

I started crying immediately. "Yes. It's me."

"Please don't cry."

"I can't sleep. All I keep thinking about is being without you. I feel so sick over it. My head is all over the place. I feel like everything is my fault, but I also



know that there's no possible way I could ever give up on us. I just feel so lost, Brooks."

I wondered if he was rolling his eyes at my latest attempts at feeling sorry for myself.

"Babe, I'm not going anywhere. I promised you that no matter what happened I'd stick around and I meant it. You've got a lot going on, but in time you're going to see the big picture. You're going to know without a doubt that we should be together. I know I get hardheaded about you. It's only because I've waited so long to start our life together. Now we've got a little girl to raise. As much as I hate that you've got baggage, it doesn't mean I'll give up.

Nobody is going to come my way and take your place. You have my heart, Kat. You always have. Please calm down. I hate it when you're so upset."

He wasn't helping me to stop crying. Instead, I was sobbing harder. "I know I love you and I know I'm supposed to be with you. That's never been my problem."

"Yeah, I know. I feel the same way."

I missed him already. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"Do you want to see me?" I hated that he even had to ask.

"Of course."

The side door frightened me, especially since I wasn't able to get up

quick enough to see what was happening. I heard footsteps and looked up quickly to see who was coming through the doorway. Then I heard his voice, both on the phone and in the kitchen. “How about now?”

I smiled through my sniffles. “I thought you left?”

We both hung up our phones at the same time.

“I did. I drove around for a while and then came back, seeing as I had a feeling you were going to need me. I can see now that I was right.” He crossed his arms and stood there looking at me. It didn’t even bother me that he always knew what I was thinking. It comforted me and made me feel like I

was never alone.

He didn't come over and sit on the couch. Instead, he leaned on the doorframe separating the kitchen and living room.

“What if I didn't call?”

He shrugged. “I've slept in worse places than a truck. I would have gotten up and drove in to work. I wasn't leaving you three girls here alone. Since you obviously needed some space, I gave it to you.”

“Your mom was nice. We talked for a bit. I told her about Bobby. I may have left out a few details, but she knows everything there is to know. I can't tell whether she hates me or not. I think I already hate myself enough for the

both of us.”

“She doesn’t hate you. Didn’t she tell you that you were her daughter, just a few days ago?”

“That was before she knew I was a lying, married, awful person.”

“Do you hear yourself?”

“It’s true.”

“You lied because I asked you to. I told you to keep it from them, because I thought it would be easier. I didn’t know Bobby would show up, and if I had, we could have been prepared.”

Even though I still had pent up guilt, I had to focus on one mess at a time. I looked right at him, feeling upset at how we’d left things. “Will you come sit with me?”

“Will you let me?” He was seriously asking me, because I’d led him to believe that we couldn’t be together.

“I’ll always let you. Stop asking such stupid questions. You never have to ask me.”

He sighed and walked over, sitting down and kicking off his boots, before turning his attention to me. “Come here.” He put his arm around me and pulled me down against his chest. It wasn’t sexual or even romantic. Brooks wanted me to know that he was there for me. He was protecting me like he always had before. “Try to get some rest.”

I laced my hand inside of one of his. “Please don’t go anywhere,

Brooks.”

“You are on top of me. I don’t see how I could sneak out without you noticing.”

“Will you tell me a story that I’ve never heard?” I kept my eyes opened, but listened to his heart beating in his chest.

“Let’s see. Can it be about anything?”

I nodded again and played with his fingers that were laced with my own.

“Before I left for boot camp, I asked Branch if he planned on marrying you someday. I don’t know why I did it. I guess maybe I just needed that push to tell me that I was doing the right thing by leaving. At any rate, he told me that as

long as I wanted you, he'd have you. Do you believe that cock sucker said that?"

I laughed. "Yeah. I do."

"Anyway, that's not the best part of the story. While he thought he'd damaged my ego, I laughed, thinking about the two times that I'd been with you and nobody knew about. Then I said the first thing that popped into my head. I asked him if he was alright with knowing that when you were with him, if it bothered him that you pretended it was me." He started laughing. "You don't have to tell me if you ever did that, but it made me feel better saying it to him."

"I'm sure it pissed him off."

"Yeah. It didn't matter. I left and he got to be with you. He got to live with



you and spend countless hours in your presence, while I was so far away from everyone.”

I felt so sorry for Brooks, especially knowing that I’d never been truly happy with Branch. I knew that now. “How did you get through it?”

“I thought of you. I drew pictures of you and wrote you letters that I never sent. I hooked up with a few cadets, but they weren’t anything spectacular. To be honest, I stayed busy most of the time. It wasn’t until I was in bed thinking of you that it got hard.”

I looked right into his eyes and swallowed the lump in my throat. Sure, I heard the part where he’d hooked up with other woman. He had every right to,

because I was involved with his brother.

“It broke my heart when you left. I felt like I was being punished.”

“My brother fooled us both. Don’t let it get to you. We’re together now, Kat.”

“Please be patient with me, Brooks. I know I said I couldn’t move forward, but I also can’t lose you. I just feel like I ended his life. I feel responsible and I’ve got to work that out on my own. You understand don’t you?”

“You hurt me earlier. I keep letting myself fall harder for you each time. The thing is, when I do that and you push me away, it hurts worse.” He shook his head. “All I can tell you is that no matter how many times I’ve tried to not

love you, it's never happened. So you can push me away. You can tell me you don't want to be with me, but I'm not going anywhere. I'll stalk you if I have to."

I giggled. "I told you where I hide the house key. You've been invited in."

"Good because I was planning on having a copy made in the morning."

"Promise?"

He looked right at me and smiled. "Yes, I promise."

It was the reassurance that I needed. Things certainly weren't worked out for either of us, but at least we knew that neither of us was giving up.

I closed my eyes, feeling comfortable against his body. Falling asleep was easy, even after he started to snore.

His alarm on his phone woke us both up and I realized that we'd slept the entire time. Brooks slid off the couch and covered me back up with a blanket. He kissed my forehead. "I need to go to work."

I grabbed his hand as he started to walk away. "Will you be back later?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You've got a hard day ahead of you. Are you sure that's what you want?"

I nodded.

He let out an air-filled laugh and scratched his head. "Woman, you're so

confusing.”

“Please?”

He leaned over and kissed me again. “I’ll see you later. I love you. Give B a kiss and tell her I’ll be here after work.”

“I don’t know what I’d do without you in my life. No matter what happens, you’re always there to protect me. Sometimes I think my parents made you that way, like they somehow connected us so I’d never be alone.”

“I hate to break it to you, but I loved you way before they died and I promise that they didn’t put any spells on me. It happened because I wanted it to. There’s no other reason that I want to be there for you. No one makes me do it. I

do it because it makes me happy. It makes me feel close to you, even when you're not paying attention.”

He winked at me before walking out of the room.

I watched him go out the door before I closed my eyes again. Brooks hadn't left me like I'd thought. He'd come back just in case I needed him, in which I did. I would always need him and knowing that made me more determined to get through whatever was happening with me.

## Chapter 55

B woke me up a few hours after Brooks had gone to work. She came running up to the couch and started poking at my face. “Mama, get up.”

I sat up before I remembered that my body was still in a bit of pain. The first thing I noticed was that my head was pounding. I scooted my feet to the floor and grabbed the sides of the couch to pull myself up. B watched and waited for me to go into the kitchen.

I had no idea that Danica would be sitting in there already waiting for me. “Good morning, Katy.”

I smiled and looked down at the floor, unable to hold my emotions in at all. “Good morning.”

“Did Brooks get off to work okay?”

She knew he’d been there the whole time and had probably heard our entire conversation. “Yeah. He said he’d

be back when he gets off.”

I put my coffee cup under the instant maker and pushed the button before I could turn and look at her. She came over and waited for me to be finished making it before she carried it over to the table. After making B some oatmeal, she joined me back at the table. “I was wondering if you’d like us to come along today when you visit your friends?”

I shrugged and traced the outside edge of the coffee cup. “I don’t know. The truth is I don’t even think we’re friends anymore. Sarah made it clear that she wants nothing to do with someone that runs away from her marriage. They weren’t even on my side when he used



to hit me. I'd just assume to not contact them after all this is over."

"I'll keep B here and get some more cleaning done."

I reached for her hand. "Danica, you don't have to do that. I'll call a company to come out and clean and then another to start doing repairs."

"If you fill out a police report your insurance would cover the damage."

I smiled and thought of Bobby. "No. This was his way of punishing me. I don't want to put a claim in so soon after moving in. It will only hurt my premiums. I'll deal with it. Mostly it's cosmetic. We can fix the walls and replace the carpet. I can buy new

furniture and curtains.”

Danica squeezed my hand. “I hate that this has happened to you.”

I looked over at B, who had no idea what was happening. Not only had she never mentioned or looked for Bobby, but even after hearing other people talk about him, she seemed unfazed. “I’m just glad she’s too young to know what’s going on. He was good to her, even when he wasn’t to me. He really loved her.” I started to tear up. “It really breaks my heart.”

She scooted her chair closer to me and pulled me into her arms. I couldn’t stand crying in front of my daughter and lately she’d seen too much of it. I grabbed the remote off the table

and turned on the small kitchen television for her to be occupied with. When she saw the cartoons it was as if she were alone in the room.

“You’re going to get through this, Katy. I’ll stay here as long as you want me to.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to. I know I’ve only brought you disappointment. I could never expect you to forgive me.”

“I’m no saint. None of us are, I suppose. I won’t abandon you just because you made some poor choices. We’re family, you know that.”

I closed my eyes, imagining my life without them in it. I’d gone for too long feeling like I had nobody. All the

while, they'd been there waiting for me to come home. "Thank you. I appreciate that. Sometimes I just wish I had my parents here with me, especially when I slept with Brooks the night before the wedding. I felt so awful and so in love at the same time. The conflict that I was having with myself sent me over the edge. I had to run, because I couldn't face any of you. Besides, I knew Brooks was leaving and there wasn't anything I could do about it."

Danica looked away, which I thought was weird. "I miss your parents, too. I think about them every day."

"I guess things happen for a reason. They picked the right people to raise me at least."

Danica started to cry and I felt sad that bringing up my parents hurt her so much. They'd been friends for so long.

Finally she calmed down and since it was getting late in the morning, I needed to get moving. I had a lot of things to do to make arrangements for Bobby's service. After crutching my way into my half-charred bedroom, I closed the door and got situated on the bed with the phone in my hand. I called church first, hoping they would be able to do a memorial without a bunch of drama.

When all was agreed upon and I received way too many condolences, I called to order flowers and double

checked with the funeral home that Bobby's body was being delivered the next day. His family had little money and his life insurance would only pay for a regular funeral. I wanted it to be special, as sort of a final plea for his forgiveness, so I paid for it to be as beautiful as possible. I ordered him a nice headstone that stated 'Loving Father'. It was difficult, knowing that I'd been the reason for his death, and yet I was planning to have him put into the ground. I felt evil, as if everyone around me would accuse me of wanting him dead.

As much as I wished things would have been different, I never wanted to hurt him like I had. Not only

had I ripped apart his heart, but I'd also caused his death. I felt wretched inside, like I wasn't worth the love that I was receiving.

They couldn't understand what it felt like knowing that I'd swung that bottle at his head and knocked him unconscious. They weren't hearing the sound I heard when it made contact with his jaw. They didn't see his eyes when he barely opened them moments later.

Over and over it was all I saw and I couldn't get it out of my head.

Then there was Brooks; committed to us no matter what I decided, or how long it took me to come to grips with my actions.

Having so much on my mind did

nothing for the pounding headache I'd woken up with and I knew I couldn't drive anywhere without it being complicated.

I was going to have to ask Danica to take me and I didn't want to, so I dialed Sarah's number and took a deep breath, knowing I was taking the cowardly approach to telling them that their best friend was gone.

"Hello?"

"Sarah, it's me, Katy. I've got some bad news."

She started crying immediately. "Bobby's cousin saw Dave last night at the gas station. We heard about the accident."

"I wanted to come tell you in



person, but I can't get around easily. I'm so sorry, Sarah. I know you both loved him very much."

The line got quiet and I didn't hear her sniffles anymore. "And what about you, Katy? Did you ever love that man at all? What was he in Washington, D.C. for in the first place?"

I stared at the charred ceiling and started to cry. "He was furious with me for serving him papers. Sarah, you might not believe this, but he was going to hurt me again."

"Bullshit!" I'd never heard her use profanity, which could only mean she was irate with me. "That man loved you more than his own life. How dare you sit there on that pedestal and act like

he wasn't a fine person. He gave you everything and he died because of it. I hope you're happy with yourself, when you're walking around town with your soldier boyfriend. Just know that when you feel like people are talking about you, they will be."

"Sarah, I've never lied to you. I swear."

"Save it. I don't want any more of your excuses. You don't know how hard it's been to live with knowing that I brought you into our lives. You ruin everything you touch, Katy. I should have left you at that store and kept driving."

I was crying so hard that Danica had come running to the room. The

phone was still in my hand, but the line had gone dead. Sarah, my only friend that I'd relied on since arriving in town, not only hated me, but wished she'd never met me.

Danica held me and let me cry. She didn't ask questions, or try to talk to me. There wasn't a way that I could even express my feelings any other way. I felt like I wanted to die myself. I'd taken away a man that my town considered the ideal person. They'd never know what he was like behind closed doors. They'd never understand that I'd tried to be good to him, even after so much pain.

Finally, she climbed off of the box spring and walked out of the room,

closing the door behind her.

When the phone started ringing, I jumped. Thinking it was Sarah or maybe even Dave, calling me to give me another bout of verbal torture, I answered as calm as possible. “Hello?”

“You’re crying? What’s wrong?” Hearing his voice made me cry harder. There he was calling me at that exact moment where I felt so helpless.

“I just got off the phone with Sarah.”

“That bad?”

“Well, they all loved him. They could never believe the things that I said he did, and of course, I got blamed for everything that happened, including him coming to D.C. and losing his life. She

even said that the whole town was going to hate me and I needed to prepare myself for it.” I started to sob so loudly that I couldn’t hear him talking.

“Kat, listen to me. You’ve got to calm down.”

Finally, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. “Sorry.”

“We’re going to get through these next couple of days. Mom and I will be by your side the whole time. I don’t give a shit what those people think of you. I know the real Katy; the one that cares about other people and leaves her life and everything behind because she’s disappointed them. I know the girl that lost her parents and somehow grew up to be an amazing mother. And last but

never least, I know the woman that loves someone with her whole heart, no matter how far away they might be. Please, try to calm down. I'll be there around four. I've got to stop and do something first."

"Brooks?"

"Yeah?"

I sniffled and tried to think of what to say to him, because thank you was never going to be enough. "I don't deserve you."

"Yes, you do. Go take a hot bath. Close your eyes and think about B's smile. Think about how happy she is when you walk into the room. Think of things that make you happy. Just try to relax."

"I'll think about you, Brooks."

He laughed and I knew he was smiling. “Without clothes. That always seems to change my mood.”

I snickered through another wave of tears. “I’ll try that.”

“That’s my girl. I’ll see you in a bit.”

I held the phone up to my chest and was able to finally calm down. It was obvious that I was fighting a losing battle with my heart. I was going to have to stop disputing it, because more than ever, I needed Brooks. I just had to figure out how to get past the demons in my head that was torturing the part of me that needed closure.

That was a battle that I wasn’t sure how to overcome.

## Chapter 56

Since I'd decided to do everything over the phone and not leave my house, I was determined to get things as cleaned up as I could.

Bobby's family and friends were going to handle everything at the church being that I was no longer a welcome part of the congregation. I'd like to think that it didn't hurt me, but it would have been a lie. Not only was I hurting, but I was sad for my daughter, whether she even remembered all of them or not. I hated that people were only judged from the outside. Though I may not have been the best to Bobby, I did try to make him happy. When the abuse began, I did everything for him.



I had to keep reminding myself that Bobby's alcohol addiction wasn't directly due to Brooks. For a while there he'd even thought Brooks was dead. I don't know how much more someone could be out of the picture than that.

Danica was a blessing to have around, always keeping B occupied in and outside, while I hobbled around, trying to put my house back in order. She'd done most of the scrubbing and picking up the little pieces, so I wouldn't have to.

I didn't even realize how late it was until I heard a vehicle coming down the driveway. It was too difficult to make my way over to the window, so I sat there in my chair waiting for him to

come inside.

I knew it was Brooks, because he never let me down. I just didn't know he'd been coming with gifts.

He walked through the door with both hands full of bags. "Hey. Now, before you freak out I just want to say that I did my best picking out something you'd like. If it's no good, we'll take it all back and pick out something else."

He sat the bags down on the coffee table and leaned over to kiss me. "You didn't have to buy me anything."

He started walking back outside, but turned around to answer. "If I'm going to be living here, then I need to pitch in." He winked before walking outside and I was left sitting there,

speechless.

I started pulling things out of the bags, realizing that he'd gone to a store and bought things to replace what had been damaged. The first thing I noticed was how close to the originals he'd gotten. Danica must have been sending him pictures all day long and never telling me.

I started opening the packages that contained new curtains, when he came walking back in with more bags. "I can't believe you did all this. Did you take off early?"

"No. I ordered it all on the computer and it was ready when I got off. Mom suggested it."

I laughed, thinking about Danica

and her love for shopping. “This is pretty amazing. I can’t believe you did this.”

Brooks sat the next couple of bags down next to me. He ran the back of his hand over my cheek. “I’d do anything to see you smile, Kat. Put your feet up and start opening packages. I’ve got to go back outside and help my buddies with something.”

“Your buddies?”

I had no idea what he was talking about. B and Danica were outside. I could hear them playing near the swing set.

Then I saw the door swing open and two men in fatigues holding one end of a mattress. They nodded when they

saw me sitting down and I smiled politely.

In came Brooks with one other guy helping him. The moment I saw him my heart rate increased. The butterflies in my stomach were getting stronger as he made his way with the mattress to our bedroom. I was in awe over him, and the things that he did for me and for us.

In a matter of minutes, they were then carrying the large full-sized throw rug out of the house and bringing in another still wrapped in plastic. I sat there, listening to them talking while moving things around. I knew what they were doing, but I couldn't believe it. It was just outrageous.

I waited until he saw his friends

out before getting up and making my way into the bedroom. Brooks came over and picked me up, carefully laying me on the new mattress. “So, how does it feel? The internet said it’s the most sold bed in America. The rug is even softer than the one we had to throw away. It matches all the new bedding. Mom picked them out based on what you had before.”

I closed my eyes and let my body sink down in the memory foam. It was the utmost comfortable thing I’d ever laid on. I leaned up on my elbow and looked at him. “It’s great, but there’s just one problem.”

He looked concerned, as if he was going to have to return it. “What?”

Too soft? I know some people like a bed to be firm.”

“No. It’s too comfortable. I don’t see how you’re ever going to get any action, when I fall asleep as soon as my back hits the bed.”

Brooks began to laugh at my comment. He pulled me close against him and looked down at my lips. “Am I allowed to kiss you or are we still waiting?”

I closed my eyes and prepared for his lips to make contact with mine. “Waiting only prolongs the inevitable.”

He kissed me slowly, brushing our lips together and then pulled away. “I don’t think I have to worry about you falling asleep on me. I know ways to

keep you alert and ready.” Just as he ran his hands down between my legs, I heard the door open and shut and our daughter’s voice.

We both sat up and prepared for her presence. Danica let her climb up to hug Brooks. “Hey, Daddy will be outside in just a second. I need to talk to Mommy about something first. Go on with Mom mom and I’ll meet you there.”

She hopped down and went running back outside. Danica smiled at him as if she knew a secret that I didn’t. I felt overwhelmed for a second, thinking that he was getting ready to, of all times, ask me to marry him.

I pulled away and must have gotten a shocked look on my face.



“What’s wrong with you?”

I put my hands up in front of me.

“Don’t you dare do it. I need time, Brooks. I can’t just spit on a grave that hasn’t even been dug yet.”

I watched his face change, and as he realized what I’d been thinking, I discovered that my assumption had been way off.

I felt so stupid.

He shook his head. “Look, now I get that you’re worried I’m going to push you, but I won’t push for that. Kat, I will wedge myself so far into your life that you won’t be able to get rid of me, but I wasn’t going to ask you what you think I was. In fact, I wasn’t going to ask you anything.”

“Sorry.” I was completely embarrassed. “What was it?”

“While you were in the hospital I had my appointment with the medical board. It seems that my injuries are more severe than I thought. They’re going to have to do surgery, and they’re not real sure that he can fix the damage.”

I looked down at the scars on his arm; the scars that saved that young child. My finger traced over them. “What does that mean?”

“Well, depending on a few factors, I may not be able to stay on active duty. I know I can’t pass a normal physical evaluation. Without feeling in my hand and arm, I can’t operate the machinery that I was trained to use.”

“You said it didn’t bother you.”

He began to laugh. “It doesn’t. For the most part, I can’t feel much of anything. I just assumed that it was alright. But I can tell that sometimes I lose the feeling and control over it.”

I put my hand over my mouth. “Jesus, you picked me up before. You just carried a mattress. What were you thinking?”

He shrugged again and reached over to touch my lips. “I was thinking that I’d waited my whole life to be with you and hold a child that we shared together. When the opportunity was in front of me, I couldn’t refuse it.”

I felt terrible and couldn’t look at him in the face. “So, it’s our fault you

may not be able to work?”

He pulled me back toward him and my body fell over his. “Even if it was, I wouldn’t be mad. I’ve got plans for us, Kat, and they don’t involve the military. Getting out wouldn’t be that bad. I could get a job and we’d be fine.”

“I still can’t believe that you want to be with me. So much has happened. If you were smart, you would have forgotten about me a long time ago.”

He patted me on the back. “We’re a family. I’ve doubted myself for many reasons in my life, but deciding to love you was never something I ever considered giving up. That probably makes me a fool. I really don’t care what

anyone thinks about it. We can be something beautiful together and that's all I need to know."

I lightly smacked his chest. "Stop doing that."

"What?" He acted like he didn't know.

"Making me love you even more."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Then he went right into another topic. "I've got some paint outside. I'm going to need to paint the ceiling before we can get the sheets on the bed. I bought you the nice thick ones like we had growing up."

I rolled over, slowly, taking my time so I didn't hurt too much. "I guess

I'll just lay here and watch."

He sat up and kissed me on my nose. "Sounds good to me." Brooks stood up and before walking out of the room, he turned around and looked at me. "So, did you get everything taken care of today?"

I leaned up on both elbows. "For the most part. The church is basically taking over and everyone pretty much made it clear that I wasn't going to be welcome. They all think I'm a terrible person. I know you don't see it, but maybe they're all right. How else could I feel so happy to start over with you, in the midst of a tragedy?"

Brooks walked over to the bed and kneeled in front of me. "Kat, you're

human and you're coping. If I wasn't here life would be different, but I can't let what's happened come between us. I won't. Only you and Bobby know what happened in that truck. You can blame yourself for the rest of your life, if that will help you cope. The fact is that, he forced you into that vehicle, after breaking a protective order and hunting you down, with every intention of harming you, or maybe even worse. Wake up and see what I see, because nowhere does it say that defending yourself can be construed as murder. You were trying to survive in a dire situation, one where your life felt threatened. If they can't understand that, then screw them. They weren't your real

friends anyway.”

He patted on my leg before standing up and walking out of the room.

After I knew he'd gone outside, I looked down at the mattress and the new rug. He was going to have to cover the whole room in plastic while he repaired the black mark from the flames. It was a good thing that ceiling paint was easy to come by.

Brooks entered the room with a bunch of trash bags that he started spreading out over the floor, and once I got up, the bed as well. He opened a can of primer and held it and a paintbrush as he climbed onto the bed. “I need to seal the spot. I checked earlier and it didn't go through. He must have put out the



flames as soon as they started to get high. One coat of this primer and couple coats of the paint should do the trick. If you hate it, I'll rip out the drywall and replace the whole area."

"You know how to do all that?"

"Do you think I just wear this uniform and walk around all day looking sexy?" he kept preparing while he spoke.

I laughed at him. "Of course not. I just didn't think they taught you stuff like this."

"Woman, you've got a lot to learn about the things I know." He bent down and touched the tip of the wet brush to my nose.

I reached over and ran my hands

up his camouflage t-shirt. "I'm a more hands on kind of learner."

He sat the paint can down on the nightstand and hovered over my body. "Let's get started then."

Even though I was aware of everything going on in my life, taking a reprieve from it all was exactly what I needed.

## Chapter 57

The funeral service for Bobby didn't take place until five days later, being that his body had to be transported and then prepared. They assured me that we'd be able to have an open casket and that his head injury wouldn't be noticeable.

My worry increased as the days

got closer, and while my house was finally getting back to looking new again, I felt like my life was a spinning tornado.

Danica continued offering her support and spending every second with her granddaughter. I'd managed to make progress getting around better on my own and insisted on attending the service by myself.

Although Brooks had been staying at my house, and even sleeping next to me in my new bed, we weren't exactly talking about our future. He knew I needed time to sort my problems out before I could focus on our relationship.

So I did what every person does on the day of a funeral. I put on a little

eye makeup, wore a black dress and grabbed my sunglasses.

My anxiety was through the roof as I pulled into the tiny parking lot at the church and found that it was already full of cars.

Then I spotted Dave, standing outside talking to his father-in-law, the pastor. Both of them stared as I turned off the vehicle and started to climb out.

It took me a good bit to make my way to where they stood. Although I was mobile, my hip still hurt when I went from sitting to walking.

When I got within four feet from Dave, he put his hand up motioning me to stop. “Hold up a minute. Where do you think you’re goin’, Katy?”

“Inside. Where else would I go?”

He shook his head. “Yeah, I don’t think that’s a good idea. Do everyone a favor and just go home. We’re all here to remember our friend, not sit in the same room with the person that ended his life.”

I knew they felt that way, but hearing him say it in front of the pastor, and him saying nothing in my defense, made it all even more bitter. “I have every right to be in there. He was my husband and I loved him.”

“You loved him?” Dave spit on the ground in front of me. “You loved him so much that you had him arrested for a crime he wasn’t capable of doin’.

You know that man never laid a hand on you, but yet you had him arrested for it, didn't ya?"

"You think I inflicted those bruises all of those times on myself?"

"It don't even matter what I think you're capable of. If that weren't bad enough, you took your daughter and ran off with your lover, so he couldn't even see her. All he wanted to do was work things out with you."

"No, he wanted to hurt me worse." I was crying, and begging for him to listen to me. I didn't make up being beat on and I sure as hell wouldn't have left town if I didn't feel like I was in danger.

"Katy, do us all a favor and

spare us the drama. Sarah's so upset because she brought you into Bobby's life. She doesn't need to see you here."

"Please, Dave. Please, just let me pay my respects. I have every right to say goodbye to him. You couldn't be more wrong about me. I swear, I would never want this for anyone, especially Bobby."

He looked back at his father-in-law, who took a step toward me. He placed his hand on my shoulder. "Bobby told me things during our sessions. He had his own demons, but I've got to be respectful of my daughter. How about we meet later and you can say your goodbye's then?"

I heard a voice behind me and I

didn't have to turn around to see who it was. "How about you get off that high horse and let the girl through? Isn't this the Lord's home where everyone is welcome?"

Dave started to haul ass toward Brooks. I grabbed the back of his jacket and held him back, while Brooks crossed his arms over his chest, not afraid of what was coming. "Get your boyfriend out of here, Katy. My best friend is dead because of you. Leave now, before someone gets hurt."

Brooks was wearing his Army dress uniform and I'd never known him to look more handsome. At the same time, I was caught in the middle of a war in the church parking lot. While holding



onto the back of Dave, I knew I had to do something before our scene became the most remembered moment of my husband's funeral. "Dave, please. We'll go. Please just stop this."

He shoved me with his shoulder as he walked by me and I watched Brooks explode in front of me. He charged full-force at Dave and I watched them both fall to the ground.

I reach down and grabbed Brooks' arm before he could pound it against Dave's face. "Please stop. You need to leave, Brooks. Please, just go."

He shoved Dave to the ground before standing up and dusting off his clothes. "I came here for support, because I knew they were going to treat

you like shit.”

I touched his hand with mine. “I can handle them without you interfering. Just go before it gets worse.”

He pulled his hand away from me and I saw anger in his eyes. “You know what, I’m sick of trying.”

I wanted to run after him, but had to worry about Dave before I could do anything else. I turned to face him. “I’m going in that church and I’m saying goodbye to my husband. You can spit on me and call me names, but I’m still going. Whatever you think of me, whatever you want to tell people, you’ll never begin to understand how much his death had devastated me. You think I don’t know that he was once a good

man? I'm sorry he's gone, but I never lied about anything, not to him and certainly not to the police."

I pushed him as I walked by and dared him to put another hand on me. I was going to say goodbye to Bobby and there wasn't a damn person on the planet that was going to stop me.

I don't know what I expected, walking in there and seeing a made up version of him lying in that casket. Immediately I was in tears. People moved out of my way and I could hear their whispers. At one point I even heard the word whore. I focused my eyes on Bobby and touched his cold hands. It was hard to see through my glossy eyes. "I just came here to say I'm sorry. I'm so

sorry for everything, Bobby. Please, you've got to forgive me. I never meant to hurt you. I'll never be able to forgive myself for taking your life away. I wish you never met me, so that you could still be here with your friends and family."

I sniffled and tried to gain my composure enough to finish. "I know we had some really bad times, but I'm going to remember the good ones. When I think of you, I'm going to see you smiling when you saw B being born. I'm going to think of that first time you held her and how I saw you cry. I'll remember the love you had for her, and for me. I promise to never forget what you gave up to be my friend and how hard you worked to be a better person. For what

it's worth, they were the reasons that I loved you. I know it means nothing now, but I did love you. I'm so sorry I couldn't give you more. Please, Bobby, wherever you are, please forgive me. I. Am. So. Sorry.”

I don't know why I expected someone to put their hand on my back to comfort me. As I turned around, I saw all of their eyes on me. His family turned their heads like I was someone they couldn't stand to look at. In just days they'd all formed their own opinions about me and my life.

I walked down the aisle slowly, since I couldn't go any faster. I'd been at low points in my life, but nothing like this. When I opened the door to the

outside, I didn't look back. The further I got away from that church, the more I was able to breathe again.

For a while I sat in my car, consumed with guilt and regret. I could have made better decisions and knowing that was eating me from the inside out.

When I pulled up at the house I noticed that Brooks wasn't there. My heart ached for the way he'd left me at the church. I'd pissed him off when he was trying to support me. Yet again, I'd screwed up.

Walking into the house and seeing the look on Danica's face made it all even worse. I placed my purse and keys down and looked around for B.

“Brooks took her out for a bit.”

“Do you know where? Maybe I can change and meet them.”

Danica patted the seat next to her on the couch. “Katy, I think you need to sit down. I’ve got some things I need to say to you.”

I walked slowly, as if I was a young child, preparing to be scorned. I’d hurt her son and she wasn’t going to sit around watching history repeat itself.

I started crying even before she could say anything. I felt her hand grabbing mine and I looked up at her face. She was crying. “Katy, you can’t keep doing this.”

“Doing what? I’m trying to put my life together and everything keeps getting so messed up. Everything I touch

gets misconstrued and turns to shit. I should have just ended my life years ago when everything went awry. I could have saved all of you so much frustration and pain.”

“Stop it, Katy. Don’t you ever say that to me or anyone else. Something like that solves nothing. Do you honestly think that Brooks would be better if you were gone forever? How did you feel when you thought he’d died?”

I cried harder. “I felt empty, like I couldn’t go on.”

She grabbed my chin and forced me to look at her. “Don’t you ever let me hear you say that again. You’re a mother and like a daughter to me. My sons both care deeply for you and so does Walt.



No matter what this world thinks, or how you feel about yourself, you are loved. You always have been and you always will be.”

“I’m sorry. I feel like nothing I do is ever good enough. I make the worst decisions and ruin people’s lives.”

“Everyone makes mistakes. We’re human.”

I shook my head. “You’ve been perfect for my whole life. That’s easy for you to say.”

She took a deep breath and started crying herself. Brooks and B came walking in the door as she spoke. “You couldn’t be more wrong, Katy. That’s why I think it’s time you knew the truth.” She looked up at Brooks. “It’s

time I told you both the truth, because I can't sit here and watch you two fall apart, when you've got a real chance at happiness."

I had no idea what she was talking about and from the look on Brooks' face, neither did he. He crouched down and whispered in B's ear. She went running into her bedroom.

Our eyes met and I felt his pain. I felt every emotion that I'd made him feel and it was as if I was being stabbed in the heart. I smiled and he looked away. "Look, Mom, I appreciate you trying to help, but if it's all the same, I'm just going to head back to the barracks for the night."

I didn't have a chance to argue.

“No, Brooks. You’re going to come sit down next to Katy and listen to what I have to say.”

When he didn’t move, she stood up and pointed to the couch. “Now.”

Even as a grown man, I watched him sit quickly, knowing his place.

Whatever it was that she was going to say must have been important, but for the life of me, I couldn’t even imagine her having any kind of secret.

Then she started speaking and from the first sentence, I knew, nothing was ever going to be the same.

## Chapter 58

Who made up the saying that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger? I’d like to punch that person in

the face.

“Katy, I know why your mother went to visit your father that day.”

Danica started her confession with one sentence and it had enough of an impact to make Brooks put his head down and me to hold my breath.

“Do you honestly think this is going to solve anything that’s going on now? Don’t hurt her more with the past, Mom. Whatever it is, just leave it be.”

I grabbed his arm. “No. I wanted to know since it happened. Please. Tell me why she was there.”

Danica covered her face with her hands and began to sob. She finally looked up at me with tear filled eyes. “I just want you to know that no matter

what, I do love you like you're my daughter. I've never done it out of guilt."

I was so confused. "What are you talking about?"

"We didn't know she was there. She told your dad that she had a PTA meeting at the school. We wanted to tell her, in fact that's why I was there."

I threw my hands up in the air. "What are you talking about? Where were you? Who were you with? I'm so lost."

Brooks grabbed my hand. "I think I know what you're going to say. Mom, please don't do this to Katy. Don't do this to our family."

Again, I was so confused.

"Your father has known since the

night before they died. I told him first. We had decided to separate and I walked next door to tell your father.”

Then, as my mind started to wander, it was all coming together.

Danica cried harder. “Katy, I loved your father. I wanted to be with him, and I had ended things with Walt thinking that he wanted to be with me too.”

I felt Brooks slipping his hand inside of mine. We didn’t look at each other though, because of the shock of what Danica was saying to us. “Please don’t tell me that you were having an affair with my father. He wouldn’t. He loved my mom. I know he did.”

I was beginning to freak out.

“I saw you kiss him and you told me that I was mistaken. I believed you. That’s what I saw wasn’t it?” Brooks was getting agitated and he was taking it out on my poor hand. When he noticed what he was doing, he loosened his grip, but didn’t let go. “You lied right to my face.”

“You both need to understand that we’d all been friends for so long. It just happened and we couldn’t stop it. I tried to stop, I swear I did.”

I was crying, but it was more in anger, because I felt so betrayed. “So she caught you? Is that what happened?”

“Yes,” she sobbed. “We’d been having a heated argument and I followed your dad into his bedroom. We could

hear you three in the tree house and thought we were alone. He rejected me, Katy. You're father told me he couldn't do it. He said he wouldn't ever leave your mother."

"Then how did she catch you? She caught you talking about it?"

I looked over at Danica, but she was too busy crying to answer.

"Mom, answer us. What did you do?"

She shook her head. "I was so hurt. I'd ended my marriage for him and he wouldn't leave her. So, out of desperateness, I threw myself at him, begging for one last night together." She was quiet for a second. "And he didn't resist."



I pictured my mother, always so kind and loving, walking in on her one true love and her best friend. The bile rose to my mouth imagining it in my mind. I pulled away from Brooks and started to walk to the bathroom, on account of not being able to run.

“How could you do something like that? She trusted you. Dad trusted you.”

“Brooks, don’t walk away. You need to hear everything.”

B came into the bathroom with a doll in her hand. “Mama, boosh hair.”

While sitting on the floor, feeling nauseous, I brushed her baby doll’s hair. When I was finished she touched my cheek where a tear was in the process of

falling. “No cry.” Then she ran out of the room.

Brooks was standing at the door, still in his military dress attire. He’d removed his hat, or whatever those barrette looking things were, and stared at me. “I can’t listen to her.”

“I know what you mean, but I need to know the whole story. This doesn’t just involve you or my dad. It involves all of us, even Branch.”

“I just had to bury Bobby, and now she’s making things worse. I can’t do it, Brooks. Find out what she has to say and then make her go. Buy her a ticket and send her home.”

He crossed his arms. “Kat, this time I’m asking. I need you.”

Brooks never needed me and hearing him ask made everything that I was going through seem irrelevant. I started to stand and he helped me, lifting me the rest of the way. For a moment he looked into my eyes and wiped away my tears. “No matter what she has to say, however it affects us, it won’t change anything for me. If you want space, I’ll give it to you. If we can’t move forward, I’ll accept it.”

I couldn’t give him an answer, because it would have required me to speak and I was too emotional to do it without breaking down.

We held hands as we walked back into the room and sat down across from the woman that was doing a great

job tearing our family completely apart.

“Why was my mother in that building, Danica? I need to know.”

“After she walked in on us we didn’t exactly have the words to explain. She put on a pretty face and told me to leave, without saying anything else. I think that hurt me more than anything; the fact that she refused to look at me. I felt so ashamed and regretted everything immediately. I don’t know what they talked about, or how she managed to get through the night without anyone knowing. I went home and made dinner, just waiting for her to confront me. I even called you boys in early that night, in fear of having to leave and spend the night away from the house. Your father

was a mess. I'd broken his heart and he wasn't willing to accept that we were through. The thing is, I never stopped loving him. I just got so caught up in the affair."

I felt like cringing as she spoke, but instead I squeezed Brooks hand as his mother broke his heart.

"The next morning he left for work and finally was able to call. He said that you were all going to be moving and the house was going to be up for sale within the week. He told me that I was a mistake and that he'd spend the rest of his life making his mistake up to your mother."

She put her head down and cried harder. "That's the last time I heard from

your father, but not the last time I heard from your mother.”

Danica looked right at me. “Katy, that morning she drove you all to school, and none of you probably caught on that anything was wrong. She was going to meet your father so that they could talk.”

“How do you know that? Because I know she wouldn’t have called to tell you that.”

“The school called me first, letting me know that I had to come get the boys. They asked if you’d be coming home with me, too. As angry as she was at me, I knew you were her first priority, so I called her. When she answered I could tell that it was bad. She didn’t get

on the line and start cussing me out, or accusing me of ruining your family. She was calm, almost like she knew what was happening and that they weren't going to make it. I'll never forget the words she said to me." She paused and looked right at me. "Take care of Katy, Dani. Keep her safe and love her forever. Make sure Brooks never takes her for granted."

I was crying so hard that Brooks was literally holding my body still. I could hear Danica's sobs, but I refused to open my eyes. It hurt too much to think about. I felt his arms wrapping around my back and him kissing the top of my head. "Shh."

I couldn't control my emotions as

the pain ripped through me over and over again. I was playing it all out in my head. It was as if I could see her driving to see my father, hoping that they could somehow work through it to keep our family together. I could see her overlooking that betrayal to give one final wish for her only child. After Danica had deceived her and tried to tear them apart, she still wanted her to care for me, because she knew I'd be loved. How could someone, who knew they were dying, swallow their pride and be that brave? My mother wasn't just beautiful, she was my hero, and she died with the man that was willing to do anything to keep us all together. I wanted to be mad, but it was so poetic at the



same time. If I ever had to choose a way to die, in that desperate of situations, I'd want to be with Brooks, because knowing he was at my side would make it all somehow easier.

When I finally opened my eyes and looked in her direction, I was ready to find out why, out of all the times she could have told us, what she was telling us now. "Why now?"

Danica looked at me like I should have already known why. "Don't you get it, Katy? You can't move forward with Brooks because you think you were responsible for Bobby's death. How do you think I felt, raising the daughter of the couple that I killed?"

Then it all made sense.

Everything.

Every single time she'd forgiven me. Every time she looked into my eyes and told me she loved me. Every moment that she spent trying to fix my wounds and comfort me when I was sad.

IT ALL MADE SENSE.

What was even more enlightening, for me, was that I could finally see the point that she was hopelessly trying to get me to see.

“Katy, you’ve got one life; one chance to make things right. It’s taken me a long time to accept the things that I can’t change. I’ve got to live with myself every day. I’ve got to look in the mirror and face those demons, but I do it, because I have you and the rest of our

family. You see, out of something tragic, I learned to be better to myself and to the people around me. I worked things out with Walt and I've never loved anyone like I love him now. Seeing you making the same mistakes I made is killing me. I don't want you walking away from something you were always meant to have. Even your mother knew it. You two have been in love your whole lives. I've never seen something so beautiful in all of my life. I'm so sorry for what I've done. I don't expect you to ever forgive me, but please don't give up on each other. I know your parents are looking out for you. They brought you two back together. I have to believe that."

She stood up and walked out of

the room while Brooks and I pulled apart and looked at each other, both completely in shock.

## Chapter 59

I didn't know what to say to him, and it was obvious that he was also at a complete loss for words. As he used his thumbs to wipe away my tears, his head rested against mine. What else could he do? He was in shock.

We both were.

Our parents had been having an affair, and it had cost my innocent mother her life. For years we'd all lived under the same roof with no clue that it had ever happened.

That wasn't what was bothering me. What was making it hard for me to

understand was the fact that Danica's confession had opened my eyes to what I was doing with my own life. I was dwelling on the things that I couldn't change and taking for granted what was right in front of me.

Whether or not I could forgive Danica wasn't the issue. There was something way more important that I needed to tend to; someone that I'd relied on my whole life, but never really let myself believe that it could really exist. Considering my past, and all the pain that came with it, imagining rainbows and sunshine never happened for me. Sure, I knew I loved Brooks, and I also knew he was all I wanted, but I guess I just never had faith that I'd have

the chance at it. I'd been living in the now for so long, protecting myself from more long-term heartache. Instead of imagining a forever, I'd thought about when it would all fall apart again.

My eyes were finally open.

Without speaking, I pulled Brooks into my bedroom and sat him down on the bed. "Wait here."

He watched me walk out, but never argued or asked where I was going. I peeked into B's room and saw her lying with her grandmother. Danica needed her. As upset and shocked as I was, I also knew that she had honored my mother's last wish. She'd taken care of me and given me the best life that I could have. She let me make my own

decisions, and even though they were wrong, I was able to learn it for myself. She'd forgiven me for all of my flaws and accepted the fact that I'd kept my daughter from her for two years. I knew everything wasn't going to go back to the way it was over night. Since me and Brooks still needed to sleep on how to react to what we'd just discovered, I took comfort in knowing she wasn't alone. She was with the one person in the world that was too young to understand what was occurring. Danica was with the one person on the planet that loved her unconditionally.

I knew B was in good hands, so I went back into my room and locked the door.

Brooks was still sitting there with his hands on his knees. He was looking down at the floor, most likely wondering how he was going to be able to look at his mother the same way again.

I got down on the floor and wedged myself in between his legs. He looked into my eyes and I wiped away his tears. His cheeks were warm and a darker shade of pink from being emotional, yet he was still so handsome. When he got upset, his eyes were an even brighter shade of blue.

“I’m so sorry about my mom, Kat. If I would have known-”

I cut him off by putting my finger up to his lips. “Shh, don’t talk about it.



Just listen to what I have to say.”

I knew my eyes were glossy, and I was about to pour my heart out and pray that I could fix what I'd broken. “Do you know that there's not one single day in my life that I can remember where I didn't love you?”

He folded his hands together and I watched his saddened face change. He wasn't smiling, but I definitely had his attention. “Tell me something I don't know,” he teased.

“I'm tired of fighting with you. I'm sick of all of it.” I waited to see if I was confusing him. When his eyes began to squint, I knew he was thinking. “What your Mom told us may be unbelievable, but I get why she did it. For the first time

I understand what she's been trying to get through my hard head. It's like I'm seeing clearly, finally." He held up his arms, like I made no sense at all. "Brooks, if you don't move all of your shit into this house soon, I'm going to go crazy. There's no reason you're still going to the base to change. B and I need you here. We can't be a family unless you're here with us, all of the time. Your mom was right. I can't change my past, and I shouldn't ruin my future; our future. If it's still okay, I'm ready to fall completely into this with you. I've been ready my whole life, but I was just too scared of losing you. I'm not scared anymore, Brooks. I'm not afraid of what tomorrow might bring, because I know

you're going to be there. I know you'll protect me and love me like you've done our whole lives. God, I've wasted so much time. Are you even listening to me? Do you still want this?" He was silent. "Say something?"

He stared at me, never responding.

Then he fell back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling, while I sat there, crouched down on the floor. All of the sudden I heard him laughing.

No, he wasn't just laughing, he was losing his mind, carrying on with himself so loudly that I knew his mother could hear him. I climbed on the bed, wondering if he was literally going insane. When I went to shake him, he

grabbed my arm before I could make contact. Then he was quiet.

I looked at him, concerned and wondering if I'd been right to assume he was going crazy. That's when I saw the tears running down the sides of his face. "Are you okay? Is it the affair? Do you want to talk about it?" I hadn't considered that he needed time. I'd been selfish again and not put him first.

He sat up and peered into my eyes, so serious with intent. "I can't be mad about something that we had no control over. I've never been one to live in the past, not when I knew you were always my future."

The room started to spin as my heart rate picked up and I felt as if I

were starting to float. “Come again?” I wanted to hear it one more time.

“I said that you are my future and I’ve always known it, well felt is a better word.”

I felt it too, every single time a flash of him came into my mind. I felt it when he walked into the room, or when he touched me. It was always there. I kissed him with more emotion that we’d ever shared between us. It was as if years of pain, and loss were being wiped clean from our memories. Love radiated between us and it wasn’t like our first kiss, or the first time I remembered being with him. This was something so much more powerful. It was forever finally opening its door for

us to enter into.

Our slow and paced kisses turned into hunger. I needed to feel him against my skin and I wasn't going to wait another second for it to happen. I'd stopped thinking about what other people thought of me, or how I'd played a part in Bobby losing his life. I wasn't thinking about Danica and my father, or the pain that my mother felt. All I could feel was Brooks and the moment that we were having together. Our movements were in sync and, without even undressing, it felt as if we were already making love.

Brooks turned me around and unzipped the back of my dress. I could feel his knuckles getting close to my

panty line before his hand went back up to assist with pulling it down, so that it could come all the way off of me. I turned around and stood there, in only a pair of underwear and admired the way he looked at me.

He didn't make me feel uncomfortable, but instead desired. I could see him playing out his next move in his mind as he pulled me close. We kissed again and I pulled back teasing him with my wet lips. One button at a time, I started taking off his dress coat. He shimmied out of it and I lifted the white t-shirt up over his head. Both of his hands were on my breasts, cupping them, while he kissed the skin between them.

I used my hands to unbutton his pants and sank down off the bed to remove them. Brooks shoved his boxer briefs down to his knees and I pulled them off the rest of the way.

I looked right at him as I let my own underwear fall down to my feet. He leaned up on his elbows and motioned with his head for me to get on the bed.

I climbed on top of him, straddling his legs. He reached up and pulled my hair to fall over my breasts. "Tell me you're mine."

I leaned down to touch our lips together. "I belong to you, I always have and I always will." I reached lower and traced the K tattoo under his left ribs. "And you belong to me."



Brooks ran his hands on both sides of my arms and started pulling my body into a moving pace. My hands moved over the skin on his chest and I watched as his nipples responded to my palms crossing over them. My body leaned forward and I licked over one of them. He responded by gasping and digging his hand into my hair, pulling me into another kiss. His eagerness was apparent, both in his erection and the way he was affecting me.

Our bodies were converging, moving together in a harmonic rhythm. Heated sensations radiated from each kiss to the wet sex between my legs. Brooks reached down and touched me, there where he knew he'd have me very

soon.

His tender stroking over my bud caused my body to react. I bucked and did my best not to call out and wake up Danica and B.

Our crusade for mutual stimulation was just beginning and I was fully prepared to go for as long he wanted it. I reached for his shaft, taking it into my hand and began to stroke it. His soft skin felt prodigious against my palm as I continued to massage him and carry him to the brink of release.

His body arched and I watched him closing his eyes and fighting the urge to let go.

Brooks was never selfish. He flipped us over, teasing me with his

tongue, and focusing on my mouth instead of the package between his legs. “Don’t make me stop, Brooks. We have all night.”

He corrected me, “No, Kat, we have forever.”

He was right, not that it was going to stop me from savoring him at that very moment.

I sank down between his legs and took him into my hand. Brooks leaned up on his arm and played with my hair. Seeing him lick his own lips made me crazy. I got butterflies knowing I was turning him on. When my lips took over and my mouth found a good stride, I watched as the man I loved completely let go. He held me tight, forcing me to

pause until he regained composure.

Then with one swift adjustment, he was on top of me, kissing my lips, my neck and the skin between my breasts. He sucked on my nipple, pulling it with his teeth and then repeating the same process to the other. I bit down on my lip and savored each stroke of his tongue over my sensitive skin. I felt his lips dragging over my belly button and then finally circling over my clit.

My sex was throbbing, begging for him to keep going until he brought me to a euphoric orgasm. I wanted to be consumed by ecstasy and celebrate our future with a night full of magnificent love making.

After satiating my cravings for

my own release, Brooks finally positioned himself on top of me. I didn't care that I wasn't in control, especially when he grabbed my legs and wrapped them around his waist. I had no problem clinging to him and never letting go.

His pace was driven by our desire and the new hope of what was ahead for us.

I'd finally made peace with my past and it was clear that we could have it all if I gave myself to him in every way. Loving Brooks didn't just come with incredible sex, or intense feelings, it came with the anticipation of discovering the most powerful love that many people never get to experience.

We came together, while kissing

and holding hands. My legs stayed wrapped around him and he collapsed on top of me, trying to catch his breath. He took my hand and brought it up to his lips. “I’ll move my clothes in tomorrow.”

An enormous smile filled my face. I’d found my happy place and I never wanted to leave it.

Right before falling asleep, I heard Brooks laughing again.

I opened my eyes and looked at him. “What’s so funny?”

He kissed me before answering. “I was just thinking how you said I wouldn’t get any action on this bed.”

I smiled and reached down between his legs. “We’re just getting

started.”

## Chapter 60

September 11<sup>th</sup> 2013

“I can’t believe it’s been twelve years,” I said to Brooks as we stood there looking down at my parent’s headstones. B was running around Branch and Melissa with a small bouquet of yellow roses. Since it was also her birthday, I’d bought her a fancy yellow dress that accented her skin and eyes.

Brooks took my hand and squeezed it. “They’d be proud of you.”

“I know they’re watching over us. In my heart, I know they gave us B. Her being born on the same date they left me can’t just be a coincidence.”

“It’s fate,” I heard Danica say as her and Walt approached us. “It has to be.”

It took both Brooks and myself a while before we could look Danica in the eye. Branch was more forgiving, claiming he just wanted the family to get along for his upcoming wedding.

Walt was the one who convinced us to bury it in the past. Nothing we could do would ever bring my parents back, and Danica would have to live with what she and my dad did for the rest of her life. For me, I thought of Walt. If he was able to forgive her and still love her anyway, I should have been able to as well. After all, my parents loved her, even if that love was



misconstrued to becoming something sexual between friends. It wasn't my business.

We all had skeletons in our closets and it wasn't right to judge.

Brooks had other issues with his mother, mostly because she hid the truth from me for so long. Just like when we were kids, he was still protecting me.

Branch came up behind us and put his arms on mine and Brooks' shoulders. "I think it's time we go back to the house and have sour beef and dumplings. The past two years Mom refused to make them, because you weren't there, Katy. We had some craptastic chicken instead."

"In my defense, it was an award

winning recipe,” Danica added.

Brooks changed the subject before his mom could get offended. He looked at me and grabbed both of my hands pulling me toward him. "I need to go get B's cake and pick up a surprise. Are you good with riding Mel back to house in our car? Branch is going to drive me." He was up to something and I knew that he knew I was on to him. Since it was B's birthday, and the first official birthday for the family to celebrate it, they were going all out.

Danica had ordered a cake from a fancy treats shops in the heart of the city and they'd decorated the entire back yard in balloons, including some floating in the pool. B hadn't seen it yet, but I

knew she'd be so thrilled.

Brooks and I had made progress with our relationship in the two months that followed Bobby's death. Since the day that Danica had made her confession, my eyes were finally open and I was able to look forward instead of behind.

It took us a month to speak to Danica directly. We needed time to sort out our feelings, and with my entire church congregation shunning me, it was difficult for me to have even more to worry about.

Brooks received bad news after failing his medical testing. Due to the injury that he obtained overseas, he couldn't pass the simple tests that

required him to use his injured hand.

Although he was saddened, he never took it out on us. Instead he started looking for other job opportunities, knowing that he'd be released from the military.

I think it was hard for him, albeit since we were together, and he had B, he was too preoccupied to let it show.

His commanding officer had us over for dinner the last night he had to report for duty, and that was the end of it.

Since we weren't hard up for money, I'd suggested that he take some time off to make up for what we'd lost. Every day was a blessing being with them together. We went to parks, took

day trips and finally started visiting the family again.

It was expected that our visit back would be on the anniversary of my parent's death. With all of the new knowledge so fresh in our minds, we were all trying to let it go, even Branch. I don't know why, but he'd taken the news the hardest.

Brooks told him one night, and that following weekend he and Melissa had come to visit us. As reluctant as I was about it, them being with us for that weekend changed everything.

We renewed our friendships and even Brooks enjoyed being around his brother. For the first time I truly felt like I could be friends with Branch.

Melissa asked me to be her maid of honor.

I'm not going to lie and say that it wasn't a shocker, but given the fact that we were all going to be a family, it just made sense to accept.

Me committing to their union also helped to rebuild our broken relationships. She'd made it a point to make sure I knew that her and Branch never even talked about being together until after I was gone. He was her crying shoulder and she was his. When I thought about all the pain I'd caused him, it made me happy knowing he wasn't alone.

Our weekend together was another reminder of how precious life

and family were to us. I'd spent so much time running away to realize what I'd always had.

I'm not really sure how the twins made peace with their mother, and it wasn't my place to judge or have an opinion. I was happy if they were.

Since their visit, Mel and I had been talking about wedding plans at least a few days a week. They'd picked out a beautiful location to exchange their vows. It was located near Towson in Maryland, which was a short drive from their parent's house. The historic building was classified as a castle on a quaint piece of property. Even I was surprised with how excited I was for them. It said a lot about how happy I was

with Brooks and our family.

“Earth to Kat.” I looked up to see Brooks standing in front of me. “Do I get a kiss goodbye, or are you going to stand there in your weird trance?”

I felt embarrassed. “Sorry.”

He kissed me goodbye, but it wasn’t exactly appropriate. Brooks grabbed the back of my head and stuck his tongue in my mouth.

Branch started making gagging sounds. “Can we go before I puke?”

I pulled away from Brooks and wiped off my wet lips, while he laughed and walked toward his brother.

I watched as he crouched down and called B over. She went running into his chest. “Daddy, I go.”



“Daddy’s got get you a surprise. Go home with Mama and I’ll see you there. Okay?”

B stuck out her bottom lip. “No. I go with Daddy.”

He kissed her on the head and stood up, looking toward me for help. I walked over and coaxed her away by promising to stop for a treat, which meant chicken nuggets.

After we’d finally made it home, and gotten my child her treat that she barely ate, I stood around the kitchen with Walt, Mel and Danica.

“So, what’s this surprise? I know you all must know it?” In the back of my mind I swore he was going to propose, but unlike Branch, Brooks knew I

wanted to wear my mother's rings. Plus, I wasn't ready to drive to the courthouse, just yet, while the ink was still wet on Bobby's death certificate. My heart still ached for him, because aside from all the bad, was someone that offered me hope when I felt like I had nothing.

It wasn't like Brooks and I were in a hurry. We both knew it was going to happen eventually. Being married to him was going to be wonderful, albeit I knew that even without the certificate we were already committed to being together for the long haul.

Mel giggled. "Just wait and see."

"It is something shiny?" I had to keep guessing until they broke down and told me.

Mel put her finger up to her chin like she was thinking. “I suppose some parts are very shiny.”

“Is it big?”

Danica laughed and answered. “It’s huge.”

So I was getting something huge and shiny. How could it not be a ring? “Will I like it?”

“You may pass out,” Walt replied.

Had Brooks really gone out and got me a huge diamond ring? I’d love it because it was from him, but it made no sense. Sure, he’d saved almost all of his money for his entire time he was in the military. His credit was perfect and he’d have the means to purchase something

extravagant without breaking the bank.

“I know what it is.”

They all laughed.

“Katy, just let him show it you before you say something about it. Even if you do know what it is, or think you do, just be surprised for Brooks. This means a lot to him.” Mel was so serious when she said it. I wasn’t sure how to take it.

“I’d never act ungrateful if that’s what you’re implying.”

She shook her head. “Just wait. They’ll be back soon. Branch just sent me a message.”

I sat down at the counter waiting for my surprise to arrive. B was taking a nap and Danica didn’t need help with the

food prep, so I was left to sit there with my roaming imagination of how everything was going to play out.

Brooks was sentimental, so he'd want to propose on a special day. This day was the most important day of my life. I'd lost my parents and then had our daughter. There would never be a day filled with so much meaning.

Exactly seventeen minutes later I heard the guys coming in the door. I couldn't help but notice the way Brooks' arms flexed while he was carrying the cake. I got butterflies imagining us being alone later. He sat it down and I noticed Branch had a big smile on his face. He tapped me on the shoulder. "Katy, Katy, Katy. You're about to shit your shorts."

Danica threw a dish rag toward him and he caught it. “Cut it out. You aren’t kids anymore. Let your brother have his moment for once.”

I turned my chair and saw him approaching me. Thinking he’d get down on his knee, I started breathing heavily and preparing myself for the big reveal. Instead, he stood there and extended his hand for me to take it. “Come with me.”

I was so confused. “Where are we going?”

“Close your eyes.”

I did as he said and felt the blindfold going on my head. He made it tight, so I couldn’t see what he was doing. Then he began leading me outside. I could hear the family

following him and giggling. “Seriously, what are you doing? Why can’t you show me inside?”

He kept pulling me along with both hands, so I couldn’t lift off the blindfold. From the amount of steps we took I realized that we were almost to the street. “I have some surprises for you. The first one is that I wanted to tell you that I got a job. It’s a good one, Kat. I won’t ever have to travel and I’ll be home for dinner every night.”

It was wonderful news. I smiled and went to take off the blindfold, but he put his hand on either side of my face and turned me to face something instead. “The next surprise you may not like, but I want you to hear me out before you say

anything. I've spent a lot of time and money on it, but if you don't like it, for any reason, I won't get angry. Branch said he'd take it off of our hands."

"Is it a car? Did you buy me a new car?"

He spun me around, so I had no idea what direction we were facing. Then we began walking again. Abruptly we stopped and I felt him loosening the blindfold. I was standing in front of a door, but it wasn't their door. I recognized it immediately and turned to look into the eyes of Brooks.

He smiled and opened it for me to walk in. I looked back to see the family standing there waiting for my response.



The house was empty, but it was exactly how I remembered it. The previous owners hadn't changed anything.

Beautiful memories of my parents came flashing back, especially when he took me into the kitchen and up the stairs. "Where are we going? Did you ask the realtor if you could see this place? I don't understand."

He kept pulling me along. "We're almost there. Keep walking."

We got to what used to be my bedroom. The door was closed and he turned to face me and smiled before opening it.

This room was different. Butterflies were painted on all of the

walls and in wooden block letters the name Brooklyn was spelled out. It was full of furniture, including a beautiful fluffy rug that matched the walls and a princess bed that any little girl would love to have. He put his arms on my shoulders.

“Kat, my job is here and so is our family. You don’t have to run anymore, so I thought if it’s okay with you, our daughter could grow up in the house that your parents built to raise you in. We can take old memories and make new ones with our own children. I know I took a huge leap, but I know you and I-”

I didn’t let him finish talking. His gift was better than any ring or proposal.

My lips were on his and I was overwhelmed by so many emotions.

He finally pulled away and looked right at me. “So, it’s okay that I already bought it?”

I nodded. “Yes, it’s very okay. It’s the most beautiful present, aside from B, of course.”

He shrugged and laughed. “Of course.”

I looked around the room and walked up to the pink four-poster canopy bed. “It’s beautiful.”

“This room was all Mom and Dad. They hired someone to come in and make it perfect. Do you think she’ll like it?”

“She won’t want to ever go

home.” Then I realized that we now had two houses.”

He saw the realization on my face. “We can talk about it later.”

I shook my head. “No. We’ll sell it. I don’t even care how much I get for it. There’s not another house in the world that could mean what this one does to me. I don’t even know what to say right now.” I walked down the hall and he followed me, stopping when I was in the middle of what used to be my parent’s room. It was so empty, but I could see what everyone else couldn’t. I could see their bed and my mom in her nightgown, with a book in her hand. I could see my dad with the stubble on his face, teasing her until she looked at him.

I closed my eyes and pictured a miniature version of myself climbing in between them and feeling like I was in the safest place on earth.

Brooks wrapped his arms around me and tucked his head inside of my neck. "I think they're happy we're here, Kat. They're watching us, you know. I think they always have been." He spun me around so we were facing each other. "I never told anyone this, but there were so many times that I could have died, that I should have died. I swear someone was keeping me safe while I was out there. Now I know for sure that it was them. I think they brought us back together."

His words were beautiful and I

knew he meant them. I wrapped my arms around him and pressed our lips together. As we pulled away I was smiling and crying all at the same time. “Thank you for waiting your whole life for me.”

He wiped my tears with his thumbs. “Maybe in our next life you won’t make me wait so long,” he teased.

“Let’s enjoy this one first.”

The room filled with people, even a little girl in a wrinkled dress. As I turned to look at them, Brooks dropped down to his knee. “There’s just one more thing, Kat.” He held a velvet box in his hand and opened it.

There it was.

My mother’s engagement ring

from my father. I put my hands over my face, unable to respond to everything he was offering me.

“I’d very much like it if you had my name. What do you say, Kat? You think you might want to be my wife?”

I dropped to my knees and let him put the ring on my finger. The perfect fit only reminded me how it was always meant to be mine. I placed small kisses over his face, tasting the tears that were now falling down his cheeks. “Yes,” I whispered. “Of course.”

B came up and wanted to be in on our hug, as well as the rest of the family that stood there silently, waiting for us to have our private moment together. It was so beautiful and Brooks

had been right. They'd been with us all along, watching us making mistakes and finally finding our way back into each other's arms.

## Epilogue

February 14<sup>th</sup> 2014

“Mama, I want to get my dress on now.” B was holding her little white dress about three inches from my face. Since my eyes were still trying to adjust from being woken up, I backed up more on the bed and looked at the



clock. When I noticed that it read five, and glanced at the window that proved it was in fact still dark outside, I threw my hands over my face as I spoke.

“B, it’s not time to wake up yet, sweetie. How about you hop in bed with me for a while, at least until the sun comes up?”

When the bed didn’t move I sat up and looked for

her. Still standing in the same place, B was steady staring at me.

“What’s wrong?”

“I want Daddy.” She put her hands on her hips, allowing the dress to touch the hardwood floor.

“Honey, Daddy is next door, remember?”

“I want to go there!”

I sat all the way up in bed and looked across the

room at my wedding dress that was hanging up. As much as I thought it wasn't necessary, Brooks was adamant about sticking to traditions. He's spent the night at his parents with strict orders not to see me until we were standing at the arbor that he and his father built in the back yard.

Since moving back to my childhood house, and selling the one in South Carolina,

we'd taken down the small fence that once separated the yards. Brooklyn liked being able to run from our house to her grandmother's every morning.

“Mama, please. I want my Daddy.”

“B, it's night time.”

She started crying, whining and flailing her arms around, as if her whole existence depended on seeing

her father at that very moment. I rolled my eyes, realizing that she'd probably go back to sleep if she were with him. After grabbing my cell phone off of the bedside table, I dialed his number. He answered on the first ring, sounding extremely alert.

“Hey, babe. Don't you dare beg me to come over there. You know the rules.”

“I'm calling on behalf of

your daughter. She's up and insisting on being with you."

"I'm in the kitchen. If you promise to stay in bed, I'll come get her."

"I hate that you wake up before the sun rises."

He laughed on the other end of the phone. I could hear the sound of his parent's door as it opened and shut. "Do you miss me yet?"

I looked over at B, who

was still waiting for a reply as to when she could go be with Brooks. “He’s coming.”

She ran for the door, dragging the dress behind her. I hadn’t noticed it before, but she’d already put on her dress shoes and they loudly clanked against the hard floor as she moved.

“She’s on her way down to you.”

I heard the back door

open and close and then heard his voice, both on the phone and muffled from downstairs. “Stay put until you hear me leave.”

“The answer is yes.”

“To which question?”

“Both. I will stay put, but also that I missed you. I hate knowing you’re that close and I can’t see you. How much harm can one kiss do?”

“I don’t want to find out.



In a few hours you'll be my wife, and then you can spend forever kissing me. Just so you know, I'll expect morning breath kisses, coffee kisses, and every other kind of kiss that you find gross. Now's the time to back out, Kat. When you say forever today, you better mean it."

I laughed, knowing he was joking. There was nothing in my life that I'd been more

sure of than wanting to be his wife. “I’m ready to take the plunge. How about we just call the official right now, get him over here, and have them marry us so we can go back to bed for the rest of the day?”

“You didn’t sleep either?”

I shrugged, even though he couldn’t see me. When I heard heavier feet walking up the stairs I got excited. His

voice didn't startle me as I noticed the line had gone dead and he was talking from outside of the bedroom. "I couldn't get comfortable."

"Me either. Listen, its a couple more hours. Get all dolled up for me and meet me out back. I can't wait to see you, Kat. You're going to look so perfect."

"I'm going to look fat. You better say a prayer that

this dress still fits me. I haven't tried it on for two weeks, and I swear I've gained ten more pounds."

"Being four months pregnant will do that, but just to be clear, you're not fat. You're beautiful." His statement gave me butterflies. "Imagine if you would have gotten pregnant over the summer. Then you'd be huge," he teased.

I laughed and let my head drop back down on my pillow. “Are you just going to stand at the door all morning torturing me?”

He tapped twice before he spoke. “I came up to tell you that I love you. I’ll see you in bit.”

I heard him going back down the stairs before waiting for my reply. I suppose Brooks didn’t need to hear it

back. He'd always known it, even when I couldn't admit to myself.

Once I heard the kitchen door shut, I cuddled up with Brooks' pillows and felt comfortable. Before I fell asleep I thought about my future with Brooks and our children. It was hard not to smile, even if it was for my own benefit. I had more than I could dream of and through

the enduring pain that I'd put myself and the people around me through, somehow we'd found our way back to each other.

Sure, I had regrets, especially the ones concerning Bobby. Even at his worst, I hated that he was gone.

One thing that offered me peace was finding an old life insurance policy and leaving it all to his parents,

including his business. They still weren't speaking to me, and I didn't expect them to ever be able to, but at least they knew that I wasn't heartless.

On his headstone I'd added "Loving Father" and even donated a bench in his name courtesy of the church that had basically shunned me.

People could hate and judge me forever, but it would



never bring Bobby back. Indirectly I knew his death was my fault. I'd accepted that I couldn't change what had happened, but I could strive to be a better mother and wife. I could feel my eyes welling up with tears as I thought about him.

Then my mind went to Brooks.

I was overwhelmed by fulfillment.

Being with him wasn't about having a heated affair, or betraying my friends and family. It was about accepting that he would be the only man to ever have my heart.

**Part 2 told by: Brooks**  
Cold feet.

It was something I'd never have with Katy. She was mine and the piece of paper making it legal wasn't going to change anything.

I'd been wondering how I was going to sneak into the house without seeing her, but B made it the perfect excuse. Before we headed back to my parents, I tucked a card underneath of the package of peanut butter cups on the countertop.

She'd get a kick out of the card considering it was sentimental. Being that it was both our wedding day and

Valentine's day, a particular special day for someone that carried the name, I was more than excited to give it to her.

When Katy opened my card, she'd probably cry. The poor woman had been a babbling mess with her pregnancy hormones.

I smiled thinking back to the day we found out. On the first day of her missed period, I drove to the store and bought

the test, while she and B waited at home for me. I always got a kick out of seeing my daughter standing at the window, watching for me to pull in the driveway.

They'd met me at the door and the three of us rushed into the bathroom, as if it were a tornado headed for the house.

Three minutes later we celebrated.

Our lives had changed for the better, especially since we'd moved back home. Katy smiled everyday, making me feel like I was doing my job, keeping her happy and safe.

As far as our daughter, well let's just say that she was spoiled beyond belief and had become both of my parent's reasons for breathing.

Bug wasn't just my daughter. Seeing what Katy

and I brought into the world, and knowing that she helped bring us back together, made me the happiest man on the planet.

My brother was in the kitchen when we both walked inside. B spotted him and ran up to him, smacking into his legs. “Good morning, pretty girl. Uncle Branch has something for you.”

He leaned down and

handed her a stuffed bear holding a heart. When he squeezed it, it said ‘I love you’.

B hugged it and brought it to show me. “Daddy, look.”

“I see it. Go say thank you.”

She hugged Branch and ran into the living room before we could tell her nobody else was awake, and being that it was such a special day, I



didn't care if she woke up the whole house.

While waiting for her to come back, Branch cleared his throat and got my attention. "I guess it's not necessary to ask if you're ready for today."

I raised my eyebrows and let out an air-filled laugh. "Yeah, I've been ready for this my whole life."

My brother looked down at his cup of coffee as he

replied. “I shouldn’t have been such a dick to you when we were kids.”

I leaned across the counter and looked my brother in the eyes. “None of it matters anymore. She’s mine forever, man.”

Branch shook his head and laughed. “She always was.”

I don’t know why hearing him saying that got to

me the way it did, but I felt myself getting choked up. Far be it from me to show my brother that he'd affected me, I quickly turned and refilled my cup. "You got that right." Inside though, I felt like Branch was finally able to accept that nothing could keep her from me, not time, not distance, and certainly not him.

The room filled with

voices and for the next couple of hours things were chaotic. Melissa and my mother headed next door to be with Kat, while I got everything ready, including myself.

Just like I'd promised her, I was standing there at the arbor waiting. Since it was winter, and the weather was unpredictable in D.C., we took precautions and rented a tent with heaters. One giant tent

filled our two yards and I had to admit that it was quite toasty when the plastic doors were closed.

The moment I saw her walking out of our back door, my knees started to get weak. She took a few steps and wrapped her arm inside of my father's. Even with her face covered by a tiny sheer veil I could already tell she was stunning. Bug came running

up the aisle, instead of walking. When she realized that she'd forgotten to throw out the flowers, she went back and tossed them going in both directions. The tiny crowd of neighbors and friends laughed, but then gave all of their attention to Katy.

Halfway to me my lips began to quiver and my palms were getting sweaty. I wiped them on the side of my pants

and hoped that nobody noticed.

The moment she was within reach, I had her hands in mine. The officiator knew us, and as the guests laughed, he shooed my dad to sit down and not to worry about the whole giving her away speech. I felt it necessary to address it, so I turned to the standing people. “She doesn’t need to be given away, since she’s

always been mine.” I winked at them before turning my attention back to my beautiful bride.

She pulled one hand away and lifted the veil. That’s when I saw her crying. Her hands were shaking as much as mine, but I didn’t move my eyes away from hers. I mouthed the words, ‘I love you’, while the official started speaking.



Honestly, I don't even know what he was saying, because I was completely captivated by her beauty. We stood there, in some sort of trance as if nobody else existed.

Finally, I felt someone touch my arm. "Are you ready to exchange your vows?" Neither of us had noticed the person trying to get our attention.

I smiled and answered,  
“Yes. Yes, we are.”

We'd discussed me  
going first, but Kat spoke  
before I could say anything.  
“This morning I woke up to a  
Valentine, from my  
Valentine.”

Everyone attending  
laughed and she waited for  
them to finish. “I had written  
down my vows and polished  
them a dozen times, but after I

read what Brooks wrote to me in this card, I knew my vows could never come close. So, I'm going to read it to everyone and let you all see the real man I'm marrying today.”

She waved to Melissa and I watched as she approached us with the card in her hand.

Since I'd poured out my heart to her, I felt a little

overwhelmed.

Kat opened it up and looked down, clearing her voice before she began.

“The outside says, ‘To my wife on our first Valentine’s Day as a married couple.’ Then Brooks wrote his message on the inside.”

“Dear Mrs. Valentine, my beautiful bride, mother of my children, my soul-mate and my very best friend,

I've loved you for my whole life and perhaps even in lives before this one. There was no amount of time, distance, or even person that could ever change the way I feel about you. I've literally waited my entire life for this day. It's easy to say that I've never felt more complete than when you're in my arms. Every time I look at our little girl, or feel our son moving

around in your belly my heart melts, because it's just another anchor of our love for each other. You're mine forever, Kat. You don't need a ceremony to know that. No matter where life takes us, I'll be by your side, and when the good Lord comes at our last breath, I know we'll find each other again, because you are who I will always choose for that other peanut butter cup. I

hope now you can finally know without a single doubt that I will hold you when you're sad, love you when you feel lonely, and protect you when you feel scared. I guess I don't have to ask you to be my Mrs. Valentine, because you already are and will be for every single moment of every single day, for as long as we both are breathing. Love, your husband, Mr. Valentine."

I wasn't really sure how much the crowd could understand through Katy's sobbing, but as I turned to look at them, most were shoving tissues over their faces. To avoid losing it completely, I looked back to Kat. Even as a babbling mess, she was still gorgeous.

“There's nothing that I can say to you that you don't already know, Brooks. I've



already given myself to you in every way. You give me comfort and support and your love is more than I could ever deserve. I'm in awe of you, and I thank God every day for giving us this life. I love you so much.”

She couldn't say anymore, and she didn't need to. We could have stood there staring at each other all day. We were already married in

my eyes.

I glanced at the guests and flashed a half-smile.

“How about we make this official and get to the celebrating?”

“It gives me great pleasure to announce the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Brooks Valentine.” The officiator leaned in for only us to hear. “Go ahead and kiss her now, Brooks.”

My lips were on Kat's before he finished his sentence. She was mine in the eyes of the whole world and I let her know exactly how happy I was about it in our embrace. At first people clapped. Then some whistled. Then my brother started making pervert remarks. When our kiss ended, half of the guests had gotten up and were already in line on the

other side of the heated tent.

I wiped away her tears.  
“You’re my wife.”

She smiled and leaned  
her cheek against mine. “I  
know.”

Bug came up and  
wrapped her arms around my  
legs. I acknowledged her by  
rubbing her head.

We couldn’t stand there  
for the whole day, so I  
grabbed Kat’s hand as we

turned to face everyone,  
knowing that after they'd all  
gone home and went about  
their lives, we'd have forever  
to spend together. Knowing  
that *made* me the happiest  
man in the world.