

Surrender My
HEART

Caught Up in Love
Book 3

EXCERPT

LG O'CONNOR



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Caught Up in Love

Three Women. One Story.

A unique blend of contemporary romance and romantic women's fiction, the Caught Up in Love series centers around three New Jersey women from the same family: romance writer Jillian Grant; her sister, Katherine "Kitty" McNally Lynch; and Kitty's daughter, Jenny Lynch. Each woman must confront ghosts from the past to find redemption and surrender her heart for a second chance to get caught up in love.

Jillian & Raine's Story

Caught Up in RAINE (Book #1)

Rediscovering Raine (Book #1.1)

Caught Up in Rachel (Book #1.2)

Caught Up in Raine Collection (All of the above)

Jenny & Devon's Story

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Praise for the Caught Up in Love Series

Caught Up in RAINE (Book #1)

2017 IPPY AWARD-WINNER (Bronze) in Romance

"O'Connor's contemporary romance is very realistic and will tug on the heartstrings of probably more readers than she expected...Jillian and Raine have faced a lifetime's worth of secrets and heartbreaks...you'll want to cheer them on until the very end." ~**RT Book Reviews**

"The plot is driven by a May-December premise that is blown away in the sexy love scenes." ~**Library Journal**

"Urban fantasy author O'Connor (*Trinity Stones*) branches out into romantic women's fiction with a sexy tale of angst, guilt, love, and hate." ~**Publishers Weekly**

"LG O'Connor had me at "hello" with this plot. Phenomenal writing skills at work is what has made Caught Up in Raine a hard to beat Romance for 2016..." ~**HEA Romances with a Little Kick Blog**

"This story is both beautiful and haunting...I loved every second of this sexy, sweet and romantic book!!!" ~**The Romance Reviews, Top Pick, 5 stars**

Shelter My Heart (Book #2)

"A well polished, wonderfully written love story driven by believable characters whose strengths and flaws add complexity to a fairy-tale romance." ~**IndieReader, 4.5 stars**

Playlist

Thanks to some of the great musical artists who supplied an amazing soundtrack to Kitty and John's high school years and later as they embarked on a thirty-five-year journey to find forever.

Songs in order of mention (Song, Album, Year, Artist):

- Surrender** (Cheap Trick at Budokan, 1978), Cheap Trick
Hopelessly Devoted to You (Grease Soundtrack, 1978), Olivia Newton-John
Any Way You Want It (Single, 1980; Captured, 1981), Journey
Show Me the Way (Frampton Comes Alive, 1976), Peter Frampton
Simple Man (Pronounced Leh-Nerd Skin-Nerd, 1973), Lynyrd Skynyrd
Freebird (Pronounced Leh-Nerd Skin-Nerd, 1973), Lynyrd Skynyrd
Don't Fear the Reaper (Agents of Fortune, 1976), Blue Öyster Cult
Find Your Way Back (Modern Times, 1981), Jefferson Starship
Second Chance (Rock & Roll Strategy, 1988), 38 Special
MacArthur Park (Live and More, 1978), Donna Summer
Roar (Prism, 2013), Katy Perry
Cake by the Ocean (Cake by the Ocean, 2015), DNCE
I Was Made for Lovin' You (Dynasty, 1979), Kiss
I Want You to Want Me (Cheap Trick at Budokan, 1978), Cheap Trick
More Than a Feeling (Boston, 1976), Boston
Comfortably Numb (The Wall, 1979), Pink Floyd
The Flame (Lap of Luxury, 1988), Cheap Trick
You Make Me Smile, (Lucky Man, 1993), Dave Koz

Listen to Kitty & John's Playlist on Spotify:

http://spoti.fi/Kitty_John_Playlist

Present Day

Kitty

October 2016 - Memorial Hospital

BLIP. BLIP. BLIP.

In the dead of night, fighting a cocktail of controlled panic and exhaustion pulsing through my veins, I hunch in a padded chair next to John's bed, holding his hand. I take comfort from the steady beat of the heart monitor that he's alive and in there somewhere.

I say the first and most important thing that comes to mind. "I love you, Shaw. . . . I've never stopped. Come back to me. . . ." The words travel over a raw ache in my throat. Words I never thought I'd get a chance to say again. Lowering my lips to his knuckles, I kiss the nearest part of him not bandaged or hooked up to a hanging bag or monitor. "I'll be waiting."

Sitting quietly for a few minutes, I breathe in the mild scent of disinfectant that lingers in the air. My hand covers his as I listen to the opera of whirring, whooshing, and beeping that accompanies the costume of tubes snaking in and out of him.

A fluorescent light behind the bed provides the darkened room's only illumination, casting shadows over him and giving his skin a stark, translucent pallor in contrast to his short salt-and-pepper hair. With the breathing apparatus, his face carries only a glimmer of the strong, craggy-but-handsome middle-aged man he's become—the man I've loved, at times secretly, since I was seventeen.

I study him, searching for my first love, the high school football player with a bright future, and then the ex-Marine with ten more years of life behind him, and now the police detective, on the cusp of one last chance for us after thirty-five years of me choosing the best of the worst choices.

He just has to live first . . . and if he survives, I need to tell him the truth.

Before

Chapter 1

Kitty

August 2015 (15 months earlier) - Night of Aunt Vera's Memorial Service

"JILLIAN, ARE YOU sure about this?" I ask my younger sister and warily eye the O'Connor's Irish Crème de Menthe in my hand. A supersweet, minty version of Baileys, it's guaranteed to leave a hangover in its wake if consumed in quantity.

At least that's what I remember from a covert raid on my parents' liquor cabinet when I was eighteen. A flicker of remorse bubbles up as I think, even for a sliver of a second, of the significance of that night with John.

John Henshaw. He's been on my mind more than usual lately. Not a surprise, considering Vera's death and the past we both shared with her. I ignore the unwanted flush of warmth that arises with the long-ago memory.

I sigh and set the bottle on the kitchen counter. Vera's instructions were clear: have two drinks in her honor. A nod to our Irish roots. Jillian and I decided to share the wealth, each having a glass. *But of this?*

Jillian shrugs and snorts a chuckle. "I'd prefer something else, but it was Vera's favorite."

She pulls two cordial glasses from the bar cabinet in her Spring Lake beach house, the place our family has gathered for a weekend of togetherness and mutual support after Vera's passing. A place

chosen because of its proximity to the ocean.

“If you say so.” I frown at the offending bottle. Leave it to my irreverent eighty-two-year-old aunt to love something this vile. Then again, if I hadn’t overdone it at eighteen when Jillian was too young to remember our parents grounding me for stealing it, maybe I wouldn’t dread drinking it at fifty-three. The memory wasn’t all bad. No, not at all. I may have regretted stealing the alcohol, but I never regretted stealing the time to spend lying with John on that blanket under the stars.

I glance at Jillian and, for a second, glimpse a shadow of our mother’s likeness. At forty-two, Jillian has the same chestnut-brown hair, striking amber-colored eyes, and easy elegance. Something I could never hope to replicate with my wider girth. I shudder and refrain from projecting the feelings I have toward our mother onto Jillian.

Twenty-eight years after Mom’s death, I still carry her secrets and resent the hell out of her for it. Vera’s identical twin, Vivian McNally wasn’t remotely the same as her sister. A darker soul lit my mother’s amber eyes. God help me, but I loved my aunt more.

Patting my hair—the grays covered for the first time in years—I hope the ponytail I’m wearing provides a moderate defense against the sea breeze at the water’s edge. Toggled out in black from head to toe, Jillian and I look more like a pair of cat burglars preparing to break into a neighbor’s house than two women in mourning, preparing to illegally cast the remains of our beloved aunt into the ocean under the cover of darkness.

“I guess it could be worse,” I bemoan. “It could be tequila.” I have even worse memories of tequila, which involve a lot of puking. But that was in college.

“What’s wrong with tequila?” Raine asks, walking in behind Jillian and slipping his strong arms around her waist. Tall, blond and blue-eyed, he’s built like a Viking warrior who could grace the cover of a romance novel. Exactly where Jillian plans to feature him—on the cover of her next book.

She melts against him. “Hey, sweetheart. We’re just grabbing the rest of the stuff we need for Vera’s send-off.” Her eyes close for a moment as she languishes in his embrace.

I paste on a smile, secretly fearing the day he wakes up and realizes my sister is old enough to be his mother, though I hope

that's not the case. She deserves the happiness they seem to have found together. I pray it sticks and has nothing to do with Raine's resemblance to Drew, Jillian's first love who died the summer before she left for college. A resemblance eerie enough to have stolen my breath the day I met Raine at Vera's wake.

Still, Jillian's face hasn't glowed like this in years. She looks ten years younger. If Raine gives her a second chance at the love she lost, who am I to judge?

Raine points at the O'Connor's. "You're not seriously going to drink that, are you?"

"We sure are." Jillian sighs.

"'Fraid so," I chime in, unable to fake a shred of enthusiasm.

"Better you than me." He chuckles and kisses Jillian's hair. "Add a little whiskey, it'll taste better."

Jillian's eyes light up. "Good idea." She reaches for the bottle of Jameson.

I fix a disapproving stare on the whiskey. "Jillian, really?" To say I'm not a whiskey lover is an understatement, though I'm inclined to trust Raine's judgment. He should know—he bartends part-time at an Irish pub.

"Live a little, Kitty. Vera would approve. It'll cut the sweetness and keep us warm." She tucks the Jameson into our backpack along with the Irish Crème de Menthe and cordial glasses. I can't argue her point. We'll need some warmth with this evening's lower-than-average August temperature. But . . .

Live a little? Did I mention my run-in with whiskey? Though justifiable, I'm amazed I made it into adulthood without becoming an alcoholic. Jillian would be shocked, I'm sure, to see the part of me that hasn't existed in decades. Far from the teetotaler I am now. A passionate girl named Kat who had dreams with a boy from the wrong side of town.

My thoughts slip back to John, and I wrestle down a flush of shame over not inviting him to Vera's memorial service. He loved her, too. Probably as much as I did. At least Jillian had caught my neglectful misstep and invited him. Still . . . it should've been me. A point John would agree on. Damn life for being so complicated.

Raine gives Jillian one last squeeze and drops his arms. "We're going to start the movie. You taking your cell?" he asks Jillian, who turns and presses up against his muscled chest. She nods and says in

a voice all honey and silk, "We shouldn't be too long."

"Call me if you need anything." He kisses her nose and then grabs a few bottles of beer from the refrigerator before heading to the door. "Later, Kitty."

"Enjoy the movie," I reply with practiced cheer. My acceptance of Raine means a lot to Jillian. Lucky he doesn't make it difficult.

He smiles back and nods, then disappears through the doorway to join my husband, Bob, my daughter, Jenny, and Aunt Sue, who flew up from Florida.

Jillian looks bereft for only a second before she grabs another backpack and a flashlight. I help her pack Vera's silver urn inside, and then we head for the door. She snatches a dark-colored beach blanket on the way out.

The sea-scented air brushes over my face as we steal quietly across the street.

We pull off our shoes before stepping onto the beach. My toes dig into the cool sand, chilling the soles of my feet as I walk. The full moon lights our path and sparkles over the ocean like a shimmering carpet. Waves lap against the sand with an occasional crash at the water's edge while the breeze carries a briny ocean mist that covers us. I lick my lips, tasting salt on my tongue.

"How about here?" Jillian asks, placing her stuff on the ground. She shakes out the blanket, which catches an air current that keeps it aloft and flapping in the night breeze.

I lower the other backpack to the ground and grab the opposite edge of the blanket. Together, we drift it onto the sand and anchor two corners with the packs. Jillian slips out the Jameson and the O'Connor's and secures the remaining corners with the bottles.

She plops onto the rough wool, draws her knees close to her body, and wraps herself in an embrace. Not nearly as flexible or lithe as Jillian is, I ease down next to her.

A cool, gentle breeze rolls past, and I inhale the scent of the ocean. "I like him," I say.

"Huh?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I catch her glancing my way. Avoiding her gaze, I trace a finger over the wool blanket alongside my outstretched legs. "Raine. I like him. He's good for you. I'm sorry I misjudged him."

"Thanks . . ." A soft, moonlit smile touches her lips for a second

and fades. "How are you holding up?"

I trade doodling on the blanket for twisting the rings on my right hand. The "I'll be fine" I intend to say gets lodged in my throat, and a tear slides down my cheek. I'm proud of myself for holding it together this long.

Jillian scoots over, wraps her arm around my shoulders, and tucks her head next to mine. "I miss her, too. I know you were even closer to Vera than I was."

Vera. The only person left who knew the whole truth. The loneliness I feel without her guts me. If she were here, she'd know what to do next. She'd know what to do about the impending implosion of my marriage, and the letter that arrived the day she died. Things I'm not prepared or inclined to talk about with my sweet baby sister.

I nod imperceptibly, and my shoulders pull tight under her touch as I wipe my eyes. It feels odd having Jillian comfort me. I'm the one who does the comforting. That's my job. I'm her protector; she's not mine. Still, I hate that I can't be honest about why I'm crying, but my choices robbed me of honesty years ago.

"This might be a good time to break out the O'Connors." She stretches toward the bottle.

I grab her arm. "Not yet. I'm not ready for that yet." Instead, I drag the urn out of my pack and cradle it in my lap. "Vera was so proud of you, you know."

Jillian frowns. "She was just as proud of you."

Doubtful. "I wish I was brave like you," I whisper, sharing a different kind of truth. "I admire you for seizing the chance to be with Raine . . . even though we didn't make it easy."

She stares at me in the silvery light and whispers, "Kitty, why didn't you invite John to the funeral?"

I swallow and say nothing. Rather, I tighten my grip on Vera's urn and hug it closer, letting shame wash over my grief.

How can I tell her that every time I see John it's an excruciating reminder of what I did to him and what I should've done differently? How I abandoned him, not once but twice? How, when I look in his stormy blue-gray eyes, I see a reflection of the girl I used to be? How I hunger with every shred of my soul for something that I can't have and don't deserve?

"Vera knew what happened back then, didn't she? Between you

and John," Jillian says, her tone taking on a breathy quality as if a puzzle piece has just snapped into place.

Rather than answer, I press my lips firmly together.

"I saw the way he looked at you today outside the church. . . . Please, Kitty. Tell me something, anything, about you and John. I want to know," she pleads and tugs at my arm.

My breath catches. She has no idea what she's asking of me. I shake my head. "I can't."

"Why not? I don't understand what could be so bad," she huffs, changing tack and displaying her usual impatience at my refusal to answer questions about my past with John.

Everything, Kat—the girl locked inside me—wants to scream, but tepid, mild-mannered Kitty only offers, "You'll think less of me." With that, something else inside me crumbles.

She sighs and gives my arm a soothing stroke. "No. I won't. I promise."

I use the urn as a shield. Apropos. Vera was my shield in life, why not in death? "You will." My voice carries the hollow ring of certainty.

Jillian stills and her golden stare locks on mine. "Kitty . . .," she whispers, "what did you do?"

I swallow hard. My gaze drifts to the ocean shimmering in the darkness. Rather than offering an escape, it pulls the breath out of me and my tears along with it. They flow in hot, tiny rivers down my cheeks.

When I don't answer, Jillian takes me in her arms and rocks me. "It's all right." She rubs my back in slow circles. "Just tell me something simple, like how you met." Her hand drops away, and she lowers her voice. "It's obvious you both still care for each other . . . even after all these years."

A denial sits on my tongue, but it would be a lie and we both know it.

I stay silent, afraid to speak for fear that something simple will lead to something complex. It's just easier to avoid talking about my past with John. Our history is twisted with deeper secrets, and I'm not ready to shatter my sister's vision of the family she thinks she knows.

As for me and John? Not all love stories have a happy ending. Ours didn't. That's life. But most people want to examine,

reexamine, and look for that pearl of wisdom or the justification why a romance did or didn't work out. In this love story, there's a single point of failure, and that's me.

"Kitty . . . Please?"

Something about Jillian's plea cracks me open. I take stock of my vulnerable state and realize if I don't release the pressure that's building inside me I'll lose my mind. With a heavy sigh, I relent.

What harm can come of a story or two? But I'll need a drink first. A real one, and I want the good stuff. "How about a little Jamison?" I ask, letting Kat slip her bonds, careful not to resurrect too much of the long-dead girl buried inside me, but unable to keep my armor fully in place for the telling.

Jillian's eyes widen. "Sure." She unrolls the whiskey from the corner of the blanket while I retrieve the cordial glasses.

I hold them up and feel my expression slide into something less reserved. Like riding a bicycle for the first time in years, releasing Kat feels both foreign and instinctual, and unexpectedly better than hiding behind kind, nondescript Kitty. "Drink with me?"

Jillian eyes me suspiciously. "I thought you didn't drink." She'd been surprised when I'd agreed to share Vera's send-off toast.

I shrug. "I don't." *Anymore.*

She *humphs*, letting it go, and we trade. I take the bottle and crack it open while she holds the cordial glasses. I pour us each a shot.

We clink the rims, and I throw mine back in one swallow. The alcohol burns a path down my throat and into my stomach. I hate the taste but love the warming sensation.

A wave crashes at the water's edge, and a sudden spray of mist rolls through the air and gently covers us.

"Another?" I ask.

Jillian's eyebrows lift. "Really? You sure? Wow. Here I thought I'd coerced you into sharing Vera's shots."

"You were the one who said to live a little," I say matter-of-factly, and try to remember what that's like.

"That I did." She shrugs and refills our glasses.

I throw back the second shot and put my empty glass on the blanket. The alcohol hits my bloodstream immediately and does its job of easing my anxiety. My gaze settles on the ocean again, and this time the inescapable expanse doesn't suffocate me. "I can't tell you everything, Jillian, so please don't press. But I'll answer you

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question about how I met John." I glance her way. "Deal?"

Her lips part, and she tries to hide her enthusiasm. "I'll take what I can get."

We'll see how long that lasts.

After years of her asking and me refusing to answer, I almost smile at her look of stunned victory.

"So how did you meet?" she asks, then grimaces at her second shot of whiskey before dumping it onto the sand. Pity. Waste of good alcohol.

Drawing in a deep breath, I prepare to dance in the flames of my past. On a slow exhale, I begin. "We met during our junior year of high school. . . ."

Chapter 2

Kitty

October 1979 - Summit High School

"OH, NO WAY!" I say, looking at the name I was assigned on the roster for tutoring geometry. All these poor souls are on their way to Flunksville after the first marking period.

Sue squints at the clipboard on the door of the math office then casts a glance at me with a glint of jealousy in her eye. "What are you complaining about? At least John Henshaw is good-looking."

"Yeah, in a big, meatheaded sort of way, like the rest of his jock friends." I snort. "He's probably just doing it so they won't throw him off the football team." As cool as I'm trying to play it, the thought of tutoring a guy who would never look at me twice makes my palms sweat.

"You want to trade him for Shelly 'dumb-as-a-box-of-rocks' Madison?" Sue asks, wearing a hopeful smile that highlights her braces, her eyes magnified behind a pair of superthick lenses.

Sue and I are the resident chess champions at Summit High School, and also part of a small majority of students who actually work for their spending money. Hence our little tutoring gigs.

"You win, she's worse. I'll stick with him." I pivot and head for my locker. Sue trails behind me but quickly catches up.

My heart drops as Karen Stark and her blond, bubble-headed cheerleading clan of popular girls come strutting toward us in their

Jordache jeans and Candie's platform slides. Her mouth twists into a sneer when she sees me. "Hey, Checker Butt. Suck any dick lately?"

Not even close.

I surreptitiously study the hall as if it's a chessboard, looking for my knight. Finding him, I suppress a smirk. I usually cower, but this time I have an unexpected move.

My mom and Karen's mother are friends, so I don't like to make waves, but sometimes it's worth it even if it ends up in a cat fight and I'm grounded. Chances are good that won't happen. Knowledge is power, and Karen is one detention away from getting kicked off the cheerleading squad.

A small grin spreads across my face. "Nah. David Ross isn't my flavor, but I've seen he's yours." I do my best to project so people can hear me halfway down the hall.

She grinds to a halt and blanches. Not just her, but her whole crowd. Besides the obvious, what makes this particular piece of gossip juicy is that David Ross doesn't happen to be her boyfriend. That unfortunate privilege goes to Mike Ryan, our quarterback.

"What are you talking about, you pervert?" she snaps.

I shove past them, ignoring the nerves gripping my middle. "You should find a better place to give head than the school parking lot."

"Bitch!" she screams and lunges at me. I prepare for impact, but her flock grabs her by the arms and hauls her backward.

"Not now. Walk away," one of them hisses by her ear. Karen screeches, turns on her heel, and shoves her way through the flow of traffic as she and her horde stomp off with the click-clacking of molded high heels.

I wink at the hall monitor as I pass.

Checkmate.

God, that felt good. But I'm positive I'll pay for it later. Somehow.

Sue beams at me in awe. "Did you really see her blow him?"

I sniff. "Unfortunately. I forgot my lunch in Marsh's car. . . . Speaking of . . ."

Marshall's gangly frame is propped against my locker as he awkwardly tries to balance a piece of paper on top of a stack of books and write a note. Probably for me. He's a senior and my ride home most days when I'm not attending Chess Club or a tournament.

"Hey, Marsh," I say.

He fumbles with his pen as he pushes his glasses back up the bridge of his nose with his index finger. His lenses are almost as thick as Sue's, but his smile is free of braces and kind of nice. His dark hair is thick, springy, and higher on one side than the other due to an untamable cowlick. Too bad—with the exception of not being green, he looks like Gumby. He steps away, and I spin the lock. My hand trembles from the encounter with Karen.

"Hey, Kitty. I was writing you a note." He waves the paper as his books teeter precariously against his chest. He glances at Sue and flashes his geeky but endearing smile. "Hi, Sue."

She shifts on her feet, blushes, and gives him a nod.

"'Bout what?" I ask, popping open my locker and exchanging one set of books and notebooks for another.

"I've got to leave early for a dentist appointment. Can you find another way home?"

I roll my eyes. "I have legs, Marsh. I can walk. Besides, I have to meet my tutoree, or whatever the heck you call him, at 2:45 when classes end. Today is his first session."

Marsh's eyebrows lift and his mouth flattens into a line. "He?"

"That's what I said. He. Boy. Male genitalia. Need I get more specific?" I twirl the tumbler on my locker and give him a mischievous smile. "Jealous?"

He turns beet red, and before he can answer I walk away and shout over my shoulder, "See you tomorrow morning."

I'm not being mean; it's just that Marsh and I have known each other since we were in diapers. Our history makes him a little overprotective. Almost like a brother. I've even seen his pee-pee. When we were five. He may be a grade ahead, but we're still the same age. A loophole created by my mother who started me in kindergarten a year late. If my parents had the money they pretended to have, I wouldn't be bumming rides. Sometimes I think Marsh feels responsible for me in a way that's just ridiculous.

Besides, I know it's Sue he really likes; plus he's not my type. Not that I have a type. But if I do have one, I can guarantee he doesn't look anything like Gumby. And he definitely doesn't look anything like a meatheaded football player. Probably more like Shaun Cassidy from *The Hardy Boys*, or maybe even his older brother, David, during *The Partridge Family* years.

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Then again, who am I trying to kid? I've yet to have my first kiss or my first real date. As for blowing anyone? Yeah, no. Other than reading a few articles in *Cosmopolitan*, I wouldn't have a clue what do if a guy stuck his dick in my mouth. Other than gag and fight back the urge to vomit.

By the end of last period, my heart is beating faster than normal, and I have barely enough time to swing by the math office to pick up this week's lesson plan and squeeze in a quick application of lip gloss before I get to my appointed spot at the shiny mahogany table in the library. There's a plaque affixed to the corner from the wealthy Summit donor who provided it for the school. The economic divide in my high school is as maddening as it is depressing for those of us less fortunate. Especially when people assume we're rich.

Luckily, they provided name tents for the first day, since I doubt this guy even knows who I am. He hasn't so much as looked at me in the last two-plus years we've been here.

On the upside, he's not one of the mean boys on the football team. The bullies who treat people like crap and have a steady stream of the hottest popular girls—like Karen Stark and her crowd—hanging on them in and out of school. If anything, John keeps a low profile most of the time, even when he's sitting with the team during lunch. At least on the occasions I've noticed him.

Like me, he doesn't come from money. Plus, he didn't grow up here. That much I know.

I sit at my table and tap my fingers on the fine wood surface as other students find their tutors. It's 2:55 p.m. and still no John. I huff and wonder where the heck he is. Either way, I expect to be paid. That's the policy.

At almost three p.m., he strolls in with his books under his arm, wearing his varsity jacket and looking pissed off.

He scans the tables and I give him a wave. Lughead. Where the hell has he been? He nods and walks over. Dumping his books on the table, he mumbles an apology and sits. "Sorry, I'm late. . . ." He squints at a slip of paper in his hand and then my name tag. He holds up the white scrap. "This says Katherine, but your name tag says—"

"Kitty, I know. It's a nickname for Katherine."

A slow smile grows on his lips, easing his pissed off expression.

"Kitty, huh?"

I nod and keep a straight face, anticipating a snide comment of some sort to follow.

"What about Kat? Anyone ever call you Kat?" he asks, an unexpected shine glowing in his — what I now notice are — blue-gray eyes. Kind of like a stormy sky that's about to clear.

He's better-looking up close than from a distance. His face is on the rugged side, which fits his broad shoulders and hulking frame. A real guys' guy. Nothing remotely like Shaun Cassidy with his leaner physique and softer good looks. Still, John has a nice mouth and, if the upward pull of his lips is any indication, probably has a decent smile if he'd let his mouth get that far. That said, unless "intimidating" suddenly makes my list of attractive features, he's not even close to my type. But that doesn't mean he's not appealing.

"No, why?"

"It's a more grown-up version of the same feline." His eyes rake over me with a smoldering glance, then shutter just as quickly when he sees my brow pop up.

Perv. I flush anyway, wondering if he sees anything pleasing. My scoop-neck top hints at cleavage, but true cleavage requires more than my smallish B-cups offer.

Two people at the end of our table shush us.

"Is that your attempt at flattery?" I ask in a heated whisper.

He leans closer. "Maybe."

I scowl. "It won't get you a better grade." Damn, this guy's a jerk.

"Ooo . . . the kitten has claws." He winks and opens his book. "Can't blame a guy for trying. Sorry. Maybe we should start." A smile tugs at his lips again. "Kat."

Something about the cavalier way he's dubbed me with a nickname in his thick and unrefined Jersey accent gets under my skin. I want to shriek to relieve my frustration. But that will only get us tossed out of the library.

I skip further banter and cut straight to the lesson plan.

We get halfway through, and I'm happily surprised that he's approaching the work with a diligence I didn't expect. I'm impressed. He's definitely smarter than I thought he'd be. Makes me wonder why he's failing.

I drop my pen and lean forward. "I have question."

His gaze catches mine and I get a full dose of stormy blue. "Ask."

Surrender My Heart

"You're not having any issues with the concepts I'm throwing at you. Why do you need a tutor?"

He blows out a breath and runs a hand nearly twice the size of mine down his face. "I had some . . . personal crap at the beginning of the year. Failed the first exam. The coach threatened to bench me if I didn't get a tutor. Not a good idea with Rutgers courting me for a football scholarship. I need a full ride through college . . . so here I am."

His gaze hardens on mine and he folds his white-jacketed arms over his broad chest. "Contrary to popular belief, not all football players are meatheads." He pauses, his stare unwavering. My stomach goes into free fall, but I refuse to drop my gaze. I have an inkling of what he's going to say, so I hold my breath and wait.

He caves and rolls his eyes. "I heard you mention my name outside the math office."

Crap. Heat spreads like wildfire up my neck, burning my cheeks. I squeeze my eyes shut. "Oh God, I'm sorry."

He surprises me with a chuckle, so I open my eyes. He's shaking his head and there's an amused sparkle in his eyes. "At least you didn't trade me for Shelly 'dumb-as-a-box-of-rocks' Madison."

I smile back, ignoring the warmth still flaming in my cheeks, and say softly, "Really . . . I'm sorry. You're not a meathead."

"That's a relief." He drops his chewed pencil and leans forward. "You'll be happy to know that I don't think all chess players are geeks, Checker Butt." There's no malice in his tone. The opposite—he makes the vile nickname Karen gave me freshman year slide off his tongue like an affectionate caress. He looks at his watch and pushes back his chair. "Gotta go."

"Huh?" I glance at the wall clock, flustered. "You still have ten minutes."

He shakes his head and gathers his things. "Got practice. I need to gear up. See you Thursday?"

I roll my eyes. "I guess so."

He gives me a smooth smile and whispers, "Bye, Kat. See ya around."

My eyes gravitate to his denim-clad butt as he turns to go. Hot damn.

"John?" I whisper.

He turns.

L.G. O'Connor

"What position do you play?" I ask.

"Tight end, why?"

I try to suppress a grin. "No reason."

He chuckles and walks away as I stare at what I think is one of the finest tight ends I've ever seen.

Chapter 3

Kitty

Oceanfront in Spring Lake

THE SOFT LAPPING of waves pulls me back. I rub my arms and glance at Jillian. She's grinning at me.

"What?" I ask, feeling my lips pull up in a smile. Telling the story felt good. Cathartic.

"I've never seen this side of you before. I like it."

My smile falters. It's been so long since I've allowed myself to revisit the early days when I still had a solid compass on who I was and where I was headed. Meeting John complemented that piece of me. But Jillian's wrong. She has seen that side of me and the pristine part of my past, unsullied by what came afterward. Only she was too young to remember.

Jillian hugs her knees. "I'm enjoying this. Tell me more. How long did it take you guys to figure things out?"

I lean back on my hands and sigh. "We had a few fits and starts. Things started to change a couple of weeks later. . . ."

November 1979 – Summit High School

WE'RE ON OUR third week of tutoring, and I'm due to meet John in the library for our Tuesday session after my next class. He's got a test on Thursday, so I've prepared a practice exam to put him through his paces. If he passes, he should do fine.

I'm racing toward my locker when I get shoved from behind and my books go flying in every direction. I'm down on my knees with a *thump* and the air is knocked out of my lungs before I fully realize what's happened.

"Oops . . ." Karen Stark says in a silky whisper behind me, and then kicks the nearest book out of my reach. Denim-covered legs and Candie's-clad feet fill my field of vision. I try to get up but a swift kick in the ribs expels the remaining breath from my diaphragm. At least I don't hear a crack.

"Cat fight!" someone yells.

Dread grips me and I curl into a fetal position to protect my body as another foot lands a blow on my thigh. I'm surrounded in a sea of legs and the din of a jeering crowd.

Opportunistic bitch. Dave's out sick today. By the time another hall monitor hears this, I might already have the crap kicked out of me. Literally.

Someone grabs a tuft of my hair from behind and yanks hard enough to pull me to my feet. I scream as loud as I can as nails rake down my cheek, leaving a stinging trail.

I refuse to cry and do my best to pry the bitch's fingers out of my hair, but someone grabs my arms and pins them behind me. The crowd smells blood and eggs the girls on.

When the hell was five on one ever a fair fight? Assholes, all of them.

Karen steps into view and lands a punch to my stomach. Pain ripples through me and whoever has me pinned from behind shoves me to the floor. My knees hit the hard surface and I double over, again unable to breathe.

"What the *fuck* are you doing?"

My head jerks up at the sound of John's low, menacing growl. Glaring, he shoves the girls out of the way until he's shielding my body with his bulk while I stumble to my feet. His fists are clenched at his sides. The crowd goes quiet. He's the biggest guy within a twenty-foot radius. Anger rolls off him in steady waves, giving him a sexy, hero-saving-the-day sort of aura that I can't fully appreciate and still continue breathing. A function I'm already having trouble with.

Gratitude fills my heaving chest at the same time embarrassment heats a trail up my neck. I give him a sideways glance. That's enough to see he's staring at Karen and her friends with murder in his eyes.

"I don't care that you have tits. You fucking touch her again, and you'll deal with me. Understand?" He jabs his finger at Karen's friend Pam, then turns to Karen and says through gritted teeth. "Same goes for you. Now pick up her books."

Karen's nostrils flare and she presses her lips together as she glares back at him.

"Now," he bites.

Her jaw works behind her cheek. She and her friends snatch up my books.

"Give 'em to me," he snaps, his hand out.

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. And I'd be lying if I said John didn't scare me a little. Okay, make that a lot. I'm not sure I can be friends with a guy who might hit a girl. Not that we're friends, unless the increasingly friendly banter during our tutoring sessions is enough to constitute a friendship.

I stand frozen as the crowd dissipates and John stands in front of me holding my books. His eyes lock on mine and soften. He edges closer. "You okay?" he asks quietly.

The shock of what happened washes over me, and my eyes water. I clench my jaw and nod.

He flips his chin and reaches his arm out. "Come here."

I take a step toward him, and he drapes a muscled arm over my shoulder. "Let's go."

He stops for a second to scoop up a second pile of books that must be his and places them on top of mine, then he drapes his arm back around me. The weight of his body near mine makes me feel protected. My pulse has trouble regulating with each brush of his thigh next to mine as we walk, lighting up my nerve endings in a new and unfamiliar way.

"Slummin' it, Shaw?" Matt Ferguson, one of his teammates, chuckles as we pass by.

"Fuck off, Mad Dog," John says in a weary voice, and instead of leading me to my locker, he leads me to the nearest exit and out into the parking lot.

The brisk November afternoon has me shivering the moment I step outside. He sets the pile of books on the ground, slips off his varsity jacket to reveal a long-sleeved thermal V-neck shirt stretched across his chest, and drapes the jacket over my shoulders. I'm hit by the scent of leather, spice, and pine that clings to it along with warmth from his body.

"Where are we going?" I mumble. My side hurts and I ache

everywhere.

He snatches up the books and pulls me back under his arm. "My car . . . I thought you might like a minute to get yourself together," he says. His voice is nice, kind. Something I haven't heard in any of our lessons. Bored. Sarcastic. Teasing. Annoyed. Those things I've heard, but never . . . kind.

Until now.

My knees shake and I swallow hard, consumed again in total and utter mortification at what just happened inside. I don't know what comes over me, but the moment my butt hits the leather seat on the passenger side of his black Camaro, tears slide down my cheeks. I cover my face with my hands and cry.

"Hey," he whispers and wraps his arm around me again. He gently pulls me over to rest my head on his shoulder. "*Shh*. It's okay." His fingers stroke my hair as the tears continue in a steady stream. Too embarrassed to speak, I lose myself in his spicy, piney scent. It's the most amazing smell ever. The pressure behind my eyes gives me a headache, but his scent makes it bearable.

"We're missing class," I say in a shaky voice, afraid we'll get detention for ditching.

He lets out a breath. "Missing one class won't kill you . . . or me."

I stay quiet. I realize I'd rather take the punishment if it means I can sit here with his arm around me for the next forty minutes.

"Talk to me, Kat. What happened in there?" he asks, again, concern heavy in his voice. Like he really cares.

"I thought you were friends with her . . .," I say, not really knowing if he was, only that he knows her boyfriend, Mike Ryan, the quarterback on his team.

He snorts. "Her? You kidding me?" His sarcastic tone is back.

I shrug and wipe my eyes with the back of my wrist. My shoulders slump with my next exhale and I stare at my hands.

He takes my chin in his hand — it's rough but warm — and slowly turns my head to face him. His lips quirk up in a ghost of smile and his eyes take on new warmth. "Hey. I don't waste my time on assholes. God knows there are plenty of them in this school. And I don't let people beat up on . . ." His throat bobs as he swallows. "My friends."

I avert my gaze and try to ignore the butterflies riding motocross through my stomach. The corner of my mouth lifts, and I stare back at him. "So, I'm your friend?"

He smiles for the first time and nods. A real smile, not just the

hint of one. I was right. He does have a nice smile. It softens the hard edges on his face that make him look intimidating, and he looks even more appealing. To the point that I want to know what I did to make him smile so that I can do it again.

"I'd like to think so." He rubs a calloused thumb over my cheek before letting me go, and then leans across me to open the glove compartment. He pulls out a fast-food napkin and hands it to me.

I make good use of it.

"You never answered my question," he says.

Yeah, that. I sigh and sniff a half laugh. "Payback. Something from a few of weeks ago."

He raises his brow, waiting.

I cringe and rest my hand on my mouth as I guess at the shade of crimson creeping up my neck, based on the heat level above my collarbone. "I saw her giving David Ross a blow job in the parking lot, and I kind of shouted it in the hallway. . . ."

John's silent for a few seconds and then breaks into deep peals of laughter. "You're shitting me?"

I shake my head and try to suppress a smile. "It was well deserved, in my opinion. Plus, it felt pretty good to put her in her place." I rub my middle and frown. "I was wondering what took her so long to retaliate."

Concern fills his eyes and his shoulders stiffen. "Are you hurt?"

"Not unless you count my pride. I'm sure I'll have some bruises, but that's not such a big deal." I clench my teeth. "What a bitch."

He presses his back against the bucket seat, crosses his arms, and beams his appreciation. "You're a feisty little *kitten*, aren't you?"

I narrow my eyes and snap. "Don't call me that or our friendship will be extremely short-lived."

He gives me a look filled with wide-eyed innocence. "What's wrong with Kitten? It's no worse than Kitty. Personally, I like Kat the best."

"Kitten, cat, what's your preoccupation with small furry animals?" I'm not one hundred percent opposed to either nickname, but that's not the point. The intimacy of accepting a name that's solely for his use makes me feel weirdly vulnerable.

He looks at me deadpan. "Would you prefer Pussy?"

My jaw hinges open for a moment and then I laugh until I'm out of breath. I'm not sure if it's to release the tension of the last twenty minutes or if it's his delivery, but I can't stop laughing, and every time I look at him it sets me off all over again. He joins me until tears

are streaming down our faces and we're gasping for air.

I shove him. "Oh my God, I can't believe you said that to me!"

He laughs once more and wipes his eyes. "I'll stick with Kat."

Then it hits me and I glance around the interior of the Camaro. It's not brand-new, but it's in excellent condition. "I thought only seniors were allowed parking privileges."

He cocks a brow and gives me that crooked grin of his. "Called in a favor and got an exception."

"Lucky you. When did you get your license?"

"Beginning of the summer," he says, resting a palm on the steering wheel.

"Wow, you turned seventeen even earlier than me."

He shrugs. "I had to redo the eighth grade when we moved here from Bayonne. What's your excuse?" His Jersey accent thickens with the way he says Bayonne. It's not much different than a Staten Island accent. Then again, you can spit and practically hit New York from Bayonne.

"Quirky August birthday. My mother didn't enroll me in kindergarten until I turned six." I hold my pinky out to him and he gives it a questioning look.

I smile. "It's the secret handshake."

There it is again, that smile of his. He lifts his hand and wraps his large pinky around mine. "Handshake for what?"

I shake it and enjoy the warm feel of his finger against mine. "Juniors Who Should Be Seniors Club."

He chuckles and leaves his pinky to linger where it is. "How many members?"

I shift my gaze upward and scrunch my brow in contemplation before I answer. "Two."

He laughs and releases my finger to start the car. "I'm honored."

My stomach tightens. "Wait, where are we going?" I may not want to go back inside, but I'm not sure a joyride is a great alternative. Even though he's worming his way onto my list of "types," I don't really know him.

"Our first club outing."

He flips on the heat and throws the car into reverse.

"Wait!" I grab his arm. "I have to ask you a question first."

He shifts into neutral. "What?"

I'm not sure how to ask without offending him, but something he said inside sticks with me to the point of discomfort. "You wouldn't hit a girl, would you?"

His shoulders tense, and he grips the wheel tightly enough for his knuckles to bulge. "Those girls? My threat inside? That's all it was—a threat."

I lock my gaze to his. "You didn't answer my question."

He sighs and his expression softens. "Are you asking because you're afraid that's the kind of guy I am?"

I chew the inside of my mouth and think about how to respond. He definitely burns with an intensity I'm not used to, and his physical size and presence is intimidating even on a good day. I try to remember if I've ever seen him with a girl and come up empty. If he dates, he doesn't date anyone at school. I finally say, "I want confirmation that you're not."

He offers me his pinky and raises his brow. I curl my finger around his.

He tightens his hold and stares into my eyes. "I'll never hurt you, Kat. Ever. Better yet, I'll do whatever is necessary to protect you."

His words grip my heart and squeeze. I swallow, wondering what I've done to make him feel that way. "Okay," I whisper and nod my head.

"Hey," he whispers back. Something like pain flickers behind his gaze. "In case you really need me to say it: I don't hit women, and I'd hurt anyone who did. Pinky promise."

His answer and the intensity of his stare are more than enough to allow the relief I feel to take hold.

"I have an idea." He pulls our clasped pinkies to his mouth and nips mine lightly with his teeth before letting it go. A heated gleam sparkles in his stormy blue eyes, and suddenly I'm wondering what it would feel like to have his full lips on mine.

"What's that?" I ask as my brain short-circuits from the sizzle in his glance. Warmth rushes through me, wiping away any desire to do anything but go for a ride.

"I'm going to teach you how to punch that bitch back if she ever touches you again so I never have to."

I frown at him. "You said you don't hit women."

He gives me a crooked grin. "I don't. I think you missed my point."

I buckle my seat belt and we pull out of the parking lot. He flips on the radio. Cheap Trick's "Surrender" blares through the speakers.

I lean back into the bucket seat and listen to Robin Zander's vocals telling me to surrender and not give myself away. Wrapped in the comfort of John's varsity jacket, I realize that's where I'm

headed. A small piece of me is already waving a white flag.

Kitty

I END MY story there and sit silent for a moment on the beach blanket, lost in thought.

“Don’t leave me hanging! Where did he take you?” Jillian asks, her wide eyes aglow, staring at me. “Did he pass the test?”

I should’ve known the perils of telling my story to a romance novelist. I laugh softly. “You better never use any of this in your books.”

Jillian smirks. “No chance of that. I only write stories with happy endings.”

Her words unexpectedly lance my heart despite being true. My gaze drifts back out to the moonlit ocean, and I watch the hypnotic rippling water. “We ended up across town at Memorial Field on Ashland Road. He brought me out into the middle of the field and taught me how to distribute my weight and punch someone without breaking my thumb. Within about thirty minutes, I was throwing some good jabs. To this day, I can still throw a punch if I have to.”

“So I take it John could hold his own in a fight?” Jillian asks, wearing a wry smile.

I nod. “He had an older brother, Ben, who was in the Marines by the time John and I met. He taught John everything he knew. I’d only seen John in one fight during high school, and trust me, that was one too many. Most days, his size and demeanor were enough to deter anyone from picking a fight.”

Jillian hugs her knees. “Had? I’ve never heard him mention Ben.”

“Ben died overseas during one of his tours when John and I were in our twenties. Before we . . . *reconnected*. That’s probably why.”

She presses her lips together and nods, then gives me a wicked grin. “Did you ever get to punch Karen Stark?”

I smile and shake my head. “Never had the chance, no. John appointed himself as my protector and would appear at my side to walk me to class. Karen and her friends avoided me after that.”

“So . . . when did you start officially dating?” Jillian asks, resting her chin on her pulled-up knees.

I glance at her. “You sure you haven’t had enough?”

“Are you kidding me?” she says, giving me the squinty eye. “Not

even close. We haven't gotten to the good stuff yet. At least get me as far as your first kiss."

"Why do you want to know all this?" Other than morbid curiosity.

She clasps my arm and says more softly, "Because I want to know my big sister better. I feel like there's this whole part of you that I didn't know existed."

I sigh. Telling her more won't fix that part, or make me that girl again. "Well, if you want the entire story leading to that, I need to take a small detour first."

"Fine. But start with the test and work your way forward."

"Yes, ma'am," I say, and hope I'm not making a mistake.

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Hugs,

L.G.