



BOOK 1

Liv Parrish

L. Fontaine

Liv Parrish

• A Fortress Security Novel: Book 1 •

By

L. Fontaine

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other non-commercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Trademarks: This book identifies product names and services known to be trademarks, registered trademarks, or service marks of their respective holders. The author acknowledges the trademarked status in this work of fiction. The publication and use of these trademarks is not authorized, associated with, or sponsored by the trademark owners.

Proofreading: JD Proofreading

Editing and formatting: Terrie Meerschaert, Indie Editing Services

Cover Design: Prince, Central Covers

Copyright © 2023 L. Fontaine

All rights reserved.

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Author's note:](#)

To my husband,

*The MMC is not a vampire and the FMC doesn't have kinetic
training*

but maybe readers will love them anyway.

All my thanks for your unwavering love, belief and support.

Always.

Dear Reader

*The location for this novel is not specified, but you may
assume*

*the setting is a city along the east coast of the United States of
America.*

This was deliberate, because the city doesn't matter.

*Besides being a love story, obviously, this novel is about
random acts of kindness,*

no matter how big or small,

and the people brave enough to perform them

without expecting anything in return.

Those acts make a difference. They are what matters.

Enjoy.

L.

Chapter 1

~ Heath ~

Fuck, everything hurts. Two stab wounds that burn like fire at my sides; cracked ribs maybe, or maybe broken; a possible concussion if the pounding in my head is anything to go by; bruises upon bruises from being beat on for the last three days; swollen and split knuckles from fighting back; but right now, it's this rain that is going to be the death of me. Every drop stings my naked torso in a futile attempt to rinse the blood and dirt from my skin, but it's no use. All it does is cause chills to run through my body and my muscles to cramp and ache.

Do. Not. Pass. Out.

I'm in some dark alley, God only knows where, but if I had to guess, I'm not too far from the harbor if only because of the smell. It's deserted so there isn't anyone around to ask, which I should probably be grateful for. No need to get mugged while I'm in my current state, which seems highly likely judging from my surroundings. Not that I have anything on me worth stealing. Literally, no clothes save for these dirty jeans, no watch or wallet. Certainly not a phone. My eyelids drift shut as I feel myself losing the battle to remain conscious ...

There's a gentle touch at my neck and then someone's tugging on my arm, which causes me to flinch back instinctively while trying to force my eyes open, but my lids feel like they have dumbbells attached that are weighing them down and refuse to cooperate.

“Shh, it’s okay, I’m not going to hurt you, but you can’t stay here.” The voice is soft but insistent. Female. Without looking, I know I’m still in the same alley but why is there a woman here? It isn’t safe! I try again to force my eyes open, to tell her she must leave, but my brain feels sluggish like mud sliding down a hill, or a long-distance phone call with a bad connection. Fuzzy. Delayed. I sense her kneeling next to me though and then her shuddering intake of breath. “Shit, what happened to you? I’m calling an ambulance. Just stay still, okay? Everything’s going to be fine.”

No! I groan out my protest and finally manage to open my eyes ... and I see her, kneeling next to me with rain soaking her clothes, matting her hair and running down her face. Even though there is hardly any light, I note her features. She looks young, early twenties if I had to guess, with a delicate body hidden beneath tight jeans and an oversized sweatshirt that makes her look more like a teenager than a young woman. I’m stunned for a moment and then reality slaps me against the head when I notice the phone in her hand.

“No!” I manage to croak out a bit more forcefully this time which causes a dozen IED’s to go off inside my skull, and she stops what she’s doing long enough to give me a questioning look.

“You need to go to the hospital, you’re hurt.” Her voice is still soft but now tinged with annoyance at my apparent stubbornness. At least she’s not panicked or scared which I guess is a good thing because I need to reason with her, convince her to disconnect that call and forget she saw me. I don’t have time for hospitals, and I don’t want the wrong people finding out I’m here when there are so many

unanswered questions to figure out. I just need to get back to my brothers. They can help me fix this.

“It’s not as bad as it looks, I promise. Please, don’t call. I’ll be okay,” I manage to croak out racking my brain for more reassuring words but frustration at this situation as well as the pounding in my head makes it hard to concentrate. She’s still holding the phone to her ear, and I can hear a voice on the other end asking what the emergency is. “Please.”

A few seconds pass before she disconnects the call and sticks her phone in her back pocket, all while keeping her eyes on me as if she thinks I might pass out again or try something I shouldn’t. She’s right to be cautious. I still don’t understand what she’s doing here on her own, but she seems to have made up her mind that I’m not a threat to her, which I’m grateful for even as I curse her lack of care for her own safety.

“My apartment is two blocks from here. Can you walk?” she questions and I just stare at her for a moment, trying to make sense of the fact that she lives in this neighborhood, and that she’s sharing this information with me. She continues, “I know first aid; I can help with some of your injuries, stitches if you need them, but I can’t carry you. Can you walk?” Her words penetrate the fog swirling in my head, and I manage a slow nod. “Okay then.”

She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly before moving to my side, and I try not to wince when she gently hunches down with her shoulder and attempts to pull me up with her arm around my back. God, this is going to suck! I try to distract myself from the searing pain that’s burning through me by inhaling deeply, taking in her feminine scent which smells

amazing even intermingled with rain and whatever is rotting in this alley. She smells like fresh fruit, peaches and strawberries, sweetness mixed with a touch of vanilla. That's what I focus on so that I don't pass out or fall over from dizziness the moment I stand up to my full height. I wasn't wrong about her size either; she's dwarfed by my tall frame but moves carefully with me all the same, her arm still securely curled around my waist.

Progress to her building is slow and even though it's only two blocks, it feels like it takes forever to get there. At least it stopped raining at some point, but we are both soaked now, and my Good Samaritan is starting to shiver. She doesn't say anything though, just keeps her head down and guides me into her building with an apologetic smile when we reach the stairs and the last of my willpower drains away.

"Come on, it's only one flight up. We'll take it slow," she tries to reassure me. My head is killing me and I'm pretty sure I blacked out once or twice along the way, but we move at a snail's pace until we finally come to a stop at her door, and she lets go of me long enough to fish her keys out of her shoulder bag and shove it in the lock while I lean against the wall and try my best not to keel over. Then she slides her arm around me again and pushes open the door, reaching for the light switch just inside.

Her apartment is small but cozy, open plan with a postage-stamp sized kitchen in one corner, a comfortable lounge area with a sofa, coffee table and bookshelf taking up most of the space and a double bed half hidden behind one of those old-fashioned screens you see in home décor magazines. The colors throughout are muted earthy tones with turquoise- and

copper-colored accents and the overall effect is that of a warm, safe sanctuary, quiet and peaceful. She leads me over to the sofa, but I don't sit down right away which earns me yet another concerned look.

Before she can ask, I explain, "My clothes are wet, and I'm pretty sure I'm still bleeding. Do you have an old towel or something I can sit on?" I don't know what she was expecting but that obviously wasn't it. I hear a mumbled "I'll be right back" and then she disappears into what I assume is the bathroom. I take this moment to do a quick inspection of my wounds. The bleeding has eased up but I'm still a mess, and this poor woman is going to have her work cut out to get me cleaned up. This is also when I realize, I don't know her name. We made it this far without talking much, except when she asked if I was okay and not about to pass out. Names weren't a priority.

It's not that I'm trying to hide who I am or think the people I'm tangled up with will come looking for her, but when you're dealing with any form of organized crime in this city, there is always one more guy waiting in the wings, eager for an opportunity to take the place that has just been vacated. It's like a bloody game of whack-a-mole, and someone always gets hurt. People think using words like collateral damage somehow makes it okay, but I refuse to do anything that will put this woman at risk. I'm one of the good guys after all. Protecting the innocent is what we do.

She walks out of the bathroom towards me with a towel slung over her shoulder and a plastic container the size of a toolbox in her hands which she places on the coffee table beside me and then spreads the towel out on the sofa. I thank her but

before I can take a seat, she holds out a pair of gray gym shorts.

“Want to put these on? They’re clean and dry and will probably be more comfortable than those jeans. You’ll be able to move around a bit easier. I think I might be able to find you a t-shirt but it will be a tight fit.” She’s rambling and there’s a strange expression on her face even though she’s not meeting my gaze, but there’s also an unmistakable blush to her cheeks. I didn’t think she was shy before, but maybe the reality of what’s about to happen is sinking in. I study her face for a moment, looking for any signs that she’s scared or even just uncomfortable with my presence, but don’t see any. I am struck again by how young she looks, but she’s old enough to figure out that she’s going to be seeing more of me than would normally be appropriate for two people who just met, so I guess that explains the blush.

I thank her for the shorts but decline the offer of the shirt. Her apartment is warm enough that I don’t have to worry about getting cold and besides that, I’ve caught her staring at my chest a time or two and I don’t hate it. So I take the shorts and turn in the direction from where she came but big black spots immediately cloud my vision and I grab for her to stop myself from falling over. I don’t know how she braces so quickly but thank fuck she does, or we would both be on the floor. She’s standing in front of me, basically in a full body embrace, but even with the stab wounds and sore ribs I experience a jolt of pleasure at the feeling of her body pressing against mine. I’m six feet and three inches tall, almost a foot taller than her, but she fits perfectly against me. And then I feel it. Wet shirt. As in her wet shirt pressed against my naked chest. I pull away

from her slowly, just far enough that our bodies are no longer touching but I'm still holding her just above the elbows and I can still feel her breath against my skin. I hold on until I have my bearings and won't tumble over like a felled oak, and she peeks up at me, her cheeks even redder than they were before and her brown eyes wide as they fix on me. And that's when it happens, as if prompted by that brief and simple contact, an awareness of attraction prickling my skin so intense I struggle to draw in a breath and my heartrate goes haywire. All I can do is stare at her.

"Are you okay?" It's barely a whisper from her full pink lips, low and husky, causing gooseflesh to break out over my skin. I don't think she's trying to be seductive or alluring, but something about her has my inner caveman stirring with interest, wanting to make sure she's okay with my proximity before crushing her to me again. I clear my throat in an effort to get the words out.

"Yeah, all good. Just making sure I can stand on my own. You should change as well, while I put these on." I glance down at the shorts in my hand. She nods once and then steps back further, giving me space to move towards the bathroom, giving my lungs the opportunity to draw in a full breath.

It's slow going changing into the shorts because firstly, my jeans are wet and practically glued to my ass and second, stab wounds and bruised ribs hurt. Yeah, I know. Guys in my line of work and with my training are tough and can take a beating, but I'm human too. My body is feeling the strain of weeks' worth of stress and hard work, coupled with the beating that landed me in that alley and now in this apartment. After cleaning off the blood covering my torso, I pull the shorts on

and find they fit well, perfectly in fact. Whoever they belong to must have the same build as I do. I should probably ask her about the guy, as much as I hate the idea, or maybe it's just *him* I have the sudden urge to obliterate, but I don't want him coming home and getting the wrong idea about why I'm here. I should just leave because staying here is going to cause more complications than I can afford. It is strange that there is no sign of a man living here though. No toiletries in the bathroom, no *stuff* lying all over the apartment and not a flat screen in sight. After cleaning up my mess I count to ten and then step out of the bathroom, hopeful that I've given her enough time to change as well.

She's standing in the kitchen, and I notice she's wearing yoga pants, a fleecy sweater, and socks on her feet. Her hair is tied in a high ponytail to keep it out of her face but even from this distance it looks lustrous, drying into soft curls I want to run my hands through. There is not an inch of skin visible below the neck of her sweater, besides her hands, and yet I'm drawn to her anyway; the subtle curves of her body, those amazing legs hugged tightly by the stretchy material. It's the strangest thing, because it's not sexual attraction but more like *everything* attraction, as in I want to know everything about her, but again it's not a good idea. I won't be staying, and she has a life that doesn't include me. But who am I kidding. There is definitely sexual attraction, enough to make my hands itch with the need to touch and explore ...

"Ready to get started?" She calls me back to the present with a nod towards the plastic container which I guess must hold her first aid supplies.

“Sure.” Psyching myself up for what’s about to happen, I shuffle back towards the sofa.

“Sorry I don’t have any booze to offer you.” She goes on to explain when she sees my questioning look. “In the movies, whenever this kind of situation comes up, the patient always gets a shot of alcohol, to help with the pain, I guess.” She gives me an adorably apologetic look which I imagine gets her out of all sorts of trouble. I grin back at her.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll just have to show you how tough I am by not flinching, but you should probably tell me your name before we get started. I mean, I’m in your home and you’re about to perform lifesaving first aid on me, so I should know what to call you when I thank you later.” She raises an eyebrow at me, a smile now curving her lips as well.

“Lifesaving first aid, huh? It doesn’t look that bad to me, but if you’re looking for a name to curse when I stick you with my needle, it’s Liv.” Then she winks at me, and my heart does that weird arrhythmic thing again.

“Liv,” I test the name on my tongue. “Short for Olivia?”

“Nope, it’s just Liv. My mom had a thing for single syllable names.” It suits her. I like it, and I’m starting to realize I like her too, for the way she’s smiling now without any sign of nerves or shyness, for her calm energy and gentle, caring nature, for her strength and resilience. Although we should probably talk about her bringing strange men to her apartment in the middle of the night. Maybe she was expecting her man to be here? That thought bothers me more than I care to admit, and I need to know for sure, before this goes any further.

“And who should I thank for the shorts?” I wasn’t going for subtle, but her reaction surprises me, because just like that the smile disappears from her face and she looks away, inspecting the plastic container again. She starts rummaging around in it before turning her attention back to me.

“No one you need to worry about. We should get started, it’s getting late and I’m tired.” I feel like I should say something, but I have no idea what, so instead I sit down while Liv puts on a pair of surgical gloves and then kneels in front of me and starts tending to my wounds.

We don’t talk while she works, her concentration solely on what she’s doing but she’s humming softly under her breath, what sounds like an old Counting Crows song. I distract myself by studying her features while she’s close. Hair the color of dark honey, huge brown eyes flecked with gold, and pink lips that look so incredibly soft they pull my gaze like a magnet on her heart shaped face. Her hands are small and her actions confident, like she does this for a living. She’s also quick and methodical, and soon she’s working on the last wound, a gash in my side that luckily doesn’t require stitches. However, when she touches me to apply a few butterfly stitches, I go rigid and hiss out the breath I was holding between my teeth.

“Shit, sorry. I’m almost done, promise.” I almost laugh at the thought of her thinking she hurt me, because I don’t think anyone has treated me this gently since Mom used to patch me up after one of my many scrapes as a child, but admitting the truth seems like a bad idea. So, I keep quiet, clenching my jaw and staring off into space until I hear her snap off her gloves and start cleaning up.

Now comes the awkward part. I should leave, I know this, but the truth is I like it here in this small apartment with this woman who is calm and practical and knows how to stitch up knife wounds without flinching. At the very least I should tell her my name and assure her that I'm not a threat, but she hasn't asked for any details and maybe that's better, even though I worry about her being this trusting.

"Your ribs are going to be tender for a while, but they don't feel cracked or broken. The only thing I'm still concerned about is your concussion. Do you have anyone you can call to come get you, who will be able to stay with you tonight? It's important that they check up on you every few hours."

Somehow, she makes her questions sound necessary whereas mine sounded like a clear attempt to gain information on her relationship status, which I'm still not clear on.

"I live alone actually, but I can call a friend to come get me. You've done enough. I'm incredibly grateful for your help." I scoot forward on the sofa to get up, but she lays a hand on my knee, stopping me in my tracks before removing it just as quickly.

"It's late and the weather is miserable. You can stay here if you want. I don't mind, and you really do need someone to check on you. You can call your friend in the morning, unless you need to let someone know where you are now?" I search her face for any signs that she's just being polite but find only genuine concern staring back at me so I accept the invitation but decline the offer to make a call. I was only due to check in tomorrow anyway, so no need to get everyone riled up just yet. Like she said, it's late and the weather is miserable.

After a quick but delicious meal of toasted cheese sandwiches and soup, Liv helps me up and we prepare to turn in for the night. After taking turns using the bathroom, she points me to the bed and starts walking in that direction, pulling the covers back once she gets there.

“You’ll be more comfortable here. Your body needs the rest to heal so you should take the bed.” I stop in my tracks a few feet from her, hating the question for how suggestive it sounds but needing to ask anyway.

“Where are you going to sleep?” I’m not going to make assumptions, but even knowing as little as I do about her, I know she’s not going to make any moves on me, not that I would mind having her close to me in her bed. The owner of the shorts I’m wearing doesn’t seem to be an issue for her, or maybe that’s just me trying to justify staying the night when I could have just as easily made that phone call.

“I’ll take the sofa, so I’m close enough if you need me.” *If you need me ...* The words spin around in my head, but it’s my body that reacts, each nerve standing at attention, practically reaching out for her even though I know that’s not what she meant.

“No, that’s not right. You’ve already done so much for me. I’ll take the sofa. It’s comfortable. I’m sure I’ll be okay there.” But she’s shaking her head before I even finish talking.

“You’re too tall for the sofa. I’ve slept there plenty of times, so I’m good. You need the rest, so stop arguing.” I can see her getting worked up and she’s so damn cute standing up to me even though I tower over her. I can almost imagine her stomping her foot in annoyance like a preschooler, and now

I'm thinking of children with her eyes and my energy. What is this woman doing to me?

“Okay, how about this. We both sleep on the bed.” I hold up a finger when she opens her mouth to protest. “You said you’ll need to check on me during the night. This way, you don’t even have to get up. I’m pretty sure I’m going to pass out the moment my head hits the pillow, so you don’t have to worry about me trying anything, but I want you to know I would never do anything to make you uncomfortable. You just say the word and I’m out of here.” I hold my breath while she considers this for what feels like an hour but is probably a few seconds. I feel my pulse speeding up, and again I find myself wondering about the owner of the shorts. Just because she refuses to acknowledge him, doesn’t mean I should.

Maybe this isn’t such a good idea, but before I can say anything, she replies: “I suppose there’s enough space for both of us. Come on, we can both use some sleep. Let’s get you settled.” Gently taking me by the arm, she guides me to her bed and waits patiently while I get situated before pulling the covers over me.

To say the last week of my life has been a shitshow, would be a colossal understatement, but despite my injuries and exhaustion, I don’t fall asleep right away. In fact, now that we are both lying side by side in Liv’s bed, far removed from any physical threat or danger, I feel wide awake, my body and senses wired and alert. Liv has still not asked my name or anything about what happened to me, which seems strange. Women are generally nosy, right? Always asking questions, eager for the details. At least, that’s been my experience in the past. However, I get the impression she’s the exact opposite,

content to keep to herself and not get involved in other people's business, not because she doesn't care but because she's private and doesn't want the same scrutiny turned on her. Or maybe she just doesn't want the drama that's part of other people's lives. Selfishly, it makes me want to tell her every dirty detail of my life because the truth is I do want her to reciprocate, and I believe she'll be able to handle whatever I tell her. Maybe it's her calm manner, the way she didn't freak out when she found me in the alley, or the way she tended to my wounds without any fuss.

"I thought you were going to pass out right away. Is everything okay? Are you in a lot of pain?" She's lying on her side facing me, one arm tucked under the pillow under her head and the other resting above the covers. I'm lying on my back, but I turn my head to look at her. Fuck, she's beautiful; if her face was all I got to look at for the rest of my life I'd die a happy man. I could literally stay like this forever. Her face is so close to mine, completely open and without guile, just flawlessly smooth skin and the most alluring full lips. Large brown eyes study me just as closely. My mouth lifts into a smile of its own accord.

"I'm okay. The pain's not too bad. Just processing the last few days, I guess." She doesn't smile back at me, just stares at me intently as if she might get a glimpse of my secrets that way rather than outright asking for them. I don't mind, I like her attention on me, but this is dangerous, because I could easily get used to having her this close to me. I don't like complications in my life, don't have much time for them either. I have my work and my family, those related by blood and those I chose to be in my life years ago, and that has not

left much room for female companionship, not to mention any kind of relationship. There's no story of past heartbreak or betrayal, no specific reason for staying single. I just want it to mean something when I spend time with a woman, not just a fleeting connection. In short, I want *the one*, not the one of many.

I must have fallen asleep because when I open my eyes I'm alone in the bed. It's still dark outside and a quick look at the clock on the small side table tells me I've only been asleep for little over an hour. I get up as quietly as my injuries will allow and look around, finding Liv asleep on the sofa under a quilt that looks handmade and about as old as she is. Her hair is loose now, spread around her on the pillow and I find myself staring at her again. Yeah, it sounds creepy, but I know I won't get the chance to do so once she wakes up. I should have guessed when she relented so easily on the sleeping arrangements that this was her plan all along, and I find myself smiling yet again. I seem to be doing a lot of that around her, not that I'm a grump, but opportunities to be playful have been few and far between recently, especially with women. I resist the urge to snoop through the apartment to look for the answers I didn't get earlier, but stumbling around in the dark would be a bad idea. Instead, I use the bathroom and then go back to bed.

Liv woke me up a few times during the night to check on me and my concussion. Now it's early morning, the sun is only just shading the sky in purples and pinks and she's in the kitchen making breakfast, causing my mouth to water at the

smell of bacon wafting through the small apartment. I have to keep reminding myself that I'm merely a guest here, not even that if I'm honest because by rights I should be nowhere near this apartment or this woman. This is not my life but it's so easy to imagine waking up to it every morning. I must have hurt my head more than I realized, because it all seems so appealing right now.

Liv plates up our food and sets it on the counter that separates the kitchen from the living area. We don't talk while we eat but it's not uncomfortable. Quite the opposite. Once we're done, I thank her and attempt to do the dishes, but she shoos me back to the sofa while she cleans up. Afterwards, she brings her plastic container over and puts on a new pair of surgical gloves.

"I'm just going to look and make sure there are no signs of infection. You should try and get to a doctor as soon as possible though, make sure there aren't any issues I missed." I sit still, bracing for her touch. I don't say anything about going to a doctor because I'm not going to lie to her. I'll get checked out, but it won't be at some fancy doctor's office in the city. I have my resources and they are more than adequate.

"Where did you learn all this stuff? Are you studying to be a doctor or something?" I don't know why I asked. It's not like we've shared any personal information before. Hell, she still doesn't even know my name. However, before she can answer, she grazes her hand over the gash at my side and I hiss out a breath, the same as last night.

"Shit, sorry." Her expression is closed off and it feels as if she's trying to put some distance between us, not physically

because she is still kneeling in front of me, but something feels different this morning. Besides, I hate the idea that she thinks she caused me pain, so I decide to come clean.

“You didn’t hurt me, Liv. You’ve seen the wound, compared to the others. It’s just,” I huff out a breath, positive I’m going to regret admitting this, “I’m sort of ticklish.” The words pour out and her eyes shoot up to mine, wide with astonishment.

“Ticklish?” I give her a lopsided grin and a nod before responding.

“Not very manly, I know. Promise you won’t use it against me?” For a moment she looks like she’s giving this some genuine consideration. I know she’s teasing, and it looks so damn cute on her that I can’t hide my smile despite her mock serious expression.

“I don’t know about that. It is extremely valuable information. I might not have a choice.” There’s a twinkle in her eye, a mischievous look on her face and I can imagine her as a child with a sibling, threatening a tickle war, laughing hysterically. I consider for the hundredth time asking her questions about her life, finding out every little thing about her, but then she’s pulling off her gloves and reaching into her back pocket before handing me her phone. “Here, you should call your friend. People must be worried about you.” The gesture is so out of the blue that I just stare at her for a moment before reaching for the device. Our fingers touch briefly, sending bolts of current up my arm, which only serve to intensify the disappointment I feel that she suddenly seems eager for me to leave. In the blink of an eye her entire demeanor seems to change and I feel it like a punch to the gut.

“Are you sick of me already? And here I thought I was being on my best behavior.” Yeah, I know it’s a dick move to put her on the spot like that but I couldn’t help myself. She’s walking to the bathroom so I can’t see her face, but I don’t miss her brief response.

“It’s time.” Right.

She’s right, of course, but it doesn’t change the fact that I would much rather stay than face what’s waiting for me outside of these walls.

Twenty-seven minutes have passed since I made the call to Aaron to come get me. Minutes filled with anticipation and dread for the impending farewell looming before me. Now I’m back on Liv’s sofa, wearing my freshly laundered jeans and a blue sweatshirt that doesn’t belong to me but fits like it does. My thoughts keep returning to the identity of the owner, to his place in this apartment and his relationship to this woman I felt such an instant connection with. It would be easy to convince myself that I saw flashes of interest in her dark eyes when she looked at me, stolen glances when she thought I wasn’t paying attention, but maybe that’s what I wanted to see and now there’s only distance between us. Liv is hovering in the kitchen, watching the clock the same way I am. She doesn’t meet my gaze and she’s holding onto the countertop as if trying to hold herself in place or keep herself from pacing. I would give my right arm to know what she’s thinking because her expression isn’t giving anything away, but if it’s anything close to what I’m feeling ...

The buzzer by her door sounds, breaking the silence and she walks over, presses the intercom button but doesn't say anything. Aaron's voice comes over the speaker.

"Hi, I'm here for Heath." She looks over at me, and when I nod, she pushes the button to let him in. When she opens the door, all three of my brothers walk in and the space in the apartment immediately shrinks to half its size, and not just because they appear physically intimidating. We served together in the Navy, belonged to the same SEAL team, work together now and are closer than blood, so even though we aren't related, these men are as close to me as my actual siblings. Liv doesn't seem to notice though. She remains standing by the door with Aaron and Riley while Mike saunters over to me and hands me a pair of sneakers.

"Good to see you, man. You doing okay?" He's a qualified medic and even though we were all trained to handle medical emergencies in the field, Mike was always our go-to guy if anyone needed patching up. He looks me up and down as if he can see through my clothes.

"It's good to see you too. I'm fine, Liv took great care of me." He nods, accepting my words at face value before focusing his attention on Liv, but I know I'll be getting the third degree later. Aaron also turns to Liv but keeps a respectful distance.

"Thank you for what you did. I'm Aaron, this is Riley and that's Mike. You might not think it was a big deal, but you saved the life of someone who has saved our lives many times over. That's not something we take lightly, so you ever need anything, you call. One of us will always come." I see him slip a business card into her hand and then he turns to leave, as is

his way. A man of few words never described a man more accurately than it does Aaron, but he is also one of the best people I know. He's a man of his word and that means more than a hundred sentences spoken with feigned intent. Riley and Mike follow closely but I hang back so that I can have one last moment alone with Liv. She doesn't say a word and keeps her gaze to the floor until I'm standing right in front of her, my breath caught in my chest, my heart pounding behind my bruised ribs. Then she lifts her eyes to me, giant pools of chocolate brown that hide so much, and I must fight the urge to take her in my arms, to comfort her. I have no idea why she might need it, and I'm pretty sure she won't tell me if I asked, but that just makes the urge stronger and more difficult to ignore.

"Liv, I don't know how to thank you for what you've done, except to say I'm so grateful you were the one who found me in that alley." She looks away again, not saying anything. "The number Aaron gave you; you can reach me on that too. If you ever need anything ..." I trail off because there are a hundred things I want to say to her, and goodbye isn't one of them. She turns her gaze back to me, stares into my eyes as if looking for something only she knows how to find, then steps up on her toes and places a brief kiss on my cheek. Her lips are soft and warm, and sparks ignite where we make contact, but she pulls away before I can soak it in the way I desperately long to do.

"Goodbye, Heath. Take care." And that's it. All that's left for me to do is walk out of her apartment and join my brothers who are waiting to take me away from her.

§§§

We sit in Aaron's SUV, heading back into the city. No one speaks, not even Riley, the most outgoing and talkative of our group. It won't last, there are too many questions to answer, but I appreciate the reprieve. I stare out the window, watching the scenery flash by without taking anything in because I'm still in that apartment on the wrong side of town, with a woman I want to get to know better, but who kissed me on the cheek before shutting the door on any possibility of a future. I know it's too soon to feel this strongly about someone I just met, an attraction that refuses to be relegated to something as mundane as mere lust, but the fact that there seems to be no future for us makes those feelings all the more intense. The loss of something I never had, a glimpse at what I've always wanted. I also know she won't call the number Aaron gave her, and I get it. Liv was helping someone who needed it, nothing more. She remained detached because she understood that our time together would be finite. Usually that would be me, one foot out the door, so why am I so bothered by this? The simple answer? *I wanted her to feel the same pull I did.* I know there was chemistry between us, it couldn't possibly be one-sided, but getting Liv to admit it might take all my SEAL training and then some. I know it would be worth it though.

It takes us almost an hour to reach our offices due to the mid-morning traffic. Fortress Security is situated in an old warehouse and was renovated to include everything we would need to operate our private security company. Amongst other things it contains a state-of-the-art medical facility which is where I find myself now being examined by Mike. We don't talk about the last twenty-four hours, or about Liv. He just asks

me about each of my injuries, how they occurred and then proceeds to examine how they were treated, making up his own mind about her skills. Once he's done and I've changed into clean clothes, all of them my own, we walk over to his office where Riley and Aaron are waiting for us.

"He's fine," Mike begins. "There's no sign of infection and the wounds are healing as expected. The concussion doesn't seem to be that serious either, but I'll keep an eye on him." He faces me again. "You were incredibly lucky. This could have gone wrong in a dozen different ways."

"Yeah, well. You know me, Lucky's my middle name." It's not. Really, it's William.

"That's great. So, what happened?" Aaron doesn't mince words, but then again, he has the most riding on this op. Two years ago his sister Melissa disappeared and was believed to have been kidnapped by a human trafficking ring. We were all still deployed at the time, which was a mindfuck in itself, but this was the event that set us on the path of leaving the Navy and starting our own private security company. There was never any doubt that the four of us would do this together. The Navy made us a team, but our experiences made us family and that's just the way it is. Add to that the fact that Melissa was like a little sister to all of us, even though she's twenty-three years old, and the whole situation became very personal very quickly.

Fortress does all the usual stuff you'd expect from a private security company: home and business security systems, bodyguards for visiting dignitaries and celebrities, as well as cybersecurity. Then there are the services that don't make it

onto the *About Us* page on the company website, those where we team up with government organizations and federal agencies when extra boots are needed on the ground and our skills and training can be utilized. Finding Melissa is not one of those. We worked all the intel, followed every lead, did all the leg work. We managed to infiltrate the organization that appeared most likely linked to her disappearance with me going under cover as a low-level runner, someone who could blend in while still having enough access to gain more intel. And it was working. We have information now that we couldn't have gathered any other way, even though just being close to those people made my skin crawl, but things started to change just this past week. Everyone became more cautious, more watchful of what was going on around them, as if they knew something was about to go down. Nobody said a word and suddenly I was cut off from the flow of information like a tap being shut. And then, four days ago, while out on a routine run with three other guys not much higher up the food chain than I was, they jumped me, which brings us here, with new questions to answer. Was this just some random attack or was my cover blown, and if so by whom? More importantly, what are the implications for the girls currently being held captive? There were seven of them that we knew of, ranging in age from fifteen to twenty-four. Of course, none of them is Melissa, but Aaron refuses to give up hope that we will find her. Meanwhile these girls' fates become more precarious with every passing moment.

We discuss all the details at length, from everything I've learned while working in the organization to the details Riley found from his cyber sleuthing. It is true, companies in our

line of work need a solid cyber investigation department and Riley is one of the best in the business. It's all about knowing what information is needed, where to find it and being quick about it without leaving any trace or drawing attention to ourselves.

I think we are just about done when Mike speaks up. "So, are we going to talk about what happened last night?" He gives me a pointed stare and I know there is no way around this, but I'm still reluctant to share the details.

"There's not much to tell. Liv found me in the alley I was dumped in, which happened to be close to her apartment. She was going to call an ambulance, but I convinced her not to, didn't want to risk the attention. She offered to patch me up and that's it. This morning I called you guys to come get me. The end." Blank stares meet my gaze from two of the three men I call my brothers.

"Liv. Pretty name for a pretty girl." I should have known Riley would notice. He's the quintessential playboy bachelor who refuses to admit there's such a word as commitment in the English language and right now he's poking at the one nerve that's far too raw and exposed, grinning like he's just figured out some big secret.

"Don't." I don't even bother trying to keep the threat from my voice.

"And does Liv have a last name?" Riley asks, obviously choosing to ignore my warning. He will probably start looking into her the moment he sits down in front of his computer.

"I'm sure she does, but I don't know what it is. And you are not going to dig into her life. She has nothing to do with this."

“So, you think it’s a coincidence that she was in that alley right when you needed her. And she just looked at you and thought, ‘Sure, let’s take this complete stranger home, even though he looks like shit with the stab wounds and bruises.’ Come on, man. We have to look into this, just to be sure.” And yeah, I know he’s right, but a part of me still wants to protest because Liv is mine, at least the little bit I had of her. I realize how that sounds, but she’s private and I don’t want anyone digging into her life, even these men who are closest to me.

“I’ll take care of it. If I need help, I’ll let you know,” I reply. Mike looks like he wants to argue, but only shakes his head.

“Fine, you can do that tomorrow. Go home and get some rest. We’ll carry on with what we’ve got here in the meantime.” Aaron, as usual, remains quiet and watchful from his corner of the office.

§§§

Three days have passed since I left that small apartment downtown, but Liv has not been far from my thoughts once. As expected, there is little information available on her. Her apartment as well as the whole building is owned by a doctor Ren Mayfield, who runs a clinic in the space below the apartment, but there is a lease agreement for a Liv Parrish.

My Liv. She’s twenty-four years old, and originally from Texas. Her mom was a single parent, now deceased, and there’s no father mentioned on the birth certificate. It does mention it was a twin birth. She has a brother named Luke and I smile as I remember her telling me about her mom’s love of

single syllable names. Apparently, that extends to names starting with *L*. Is it too much to hope that the clothes belong to him? He joined the Marines right after graduating high school, which also happened to be two months after their mother was killed in a car accident. I'm not sure how I feel about that, leaving his only remaining family on her own when they were both so young. His twin at that. Aren't twins supposed to have some special bond that other siblings don't? Why would he leave her like that? Maybe this explains her reaction when I asked about the clothes. If they aren't close, any reminders of him might be unpleasant for her, but then why have the clothes in the first place?

School and college transcripts speak of a straight A student who excelled in math and science. Liv became a qualified paramedic, which explains her knowledge of first aid, and worked with a fire station in Austin until just over a year ago when she resigned her position and started moving around from state to state, not staying in one place for more than a few months at a time. She signed the lease with Ren three months ago and took a job at a place called Stopgap which appears to be a youth center situated close to her apartment. That's it, bare bones information, because I refuse to dig any further. If she worked as a paramedic, she would have had to undergo police clearance, which is good enough for me, even if it was years ago. There's no way she's involved in the crimes we're investigating, no matter how coincidental our meeting. Neither Liv nor Ren have social media accounts or much of an online presence at all, which is unusual but not completely unheard of. So that's it, her life at a glance, but it's not enough to satisfy my curiosity and I'm starting to worry

that it will never be enough to satisfy my craving for her. I want to see her again, fill in all the gaps and hear everything I learned in her own words. And share my story with her as well. I do need to return the sweatshirt she gave me, not that I need an excuse, but if there is even the smallest chance that she will let me into her life, I'll take it.

By the time I make it downtown it's just after six in the evening and the sun is casting an orange-red hue over the city, softening the jagged edges of the skyline. The clinic is already closed for the day and there are only a few cars parked close by. I wonder if one of them belongs to Liv, but surely, she would have used it rather than walking late at night in a bad neighborhood as she did when we met. All these concerns run through my head as I climb the stairs to her apartment after prying open the lock a five-year-old could have figured out, and I make mental notes of all the security issues in this building that will need to be addressed posthaste. Even if nothing ever comes of the time we spent together, there is no way I'm going to be comfortable with her living here unprotected.

I knock on her door while holding the sweatshirt in my free hand and it occurs to me, I should have brought her something, maybe some takeout, a handy excuse to spend more time in her company even if it is a surprise visit and she's not expecting me, but before I can give it any more thought the door opens. Only, it's not Liv standing in the doorway. It's a man. He looks to be about my age, in his early thirties, not as tall as I am and with a leaner build, and I immediately conclude that he is not the owner of the sweatshirt. It doesn't

make me feel any better about finding him here in Liv's apartment.

"Can I help you?" There is a hint of impatience to his tone, but it's overruled by his apparent curiosity.

"Is Liv home? I wanted to drop this off for her and say hello." He looks at me with blatant interest now, as if trying to work out if he should recognize me from somewhere, and then deciding he doesn't.

"No, sorry. She won't be back for a while. You can give that to me. I'll make sure she gets it." He holds out his hand and I reluctantly hand over my only remaining connection to the woman I obviously know nothing about, and now it seems I never will. I can accept her being private but being in a relationship is a deal breaker. I don't poach, ever.

"Thanks, appreciate it." I turn to leave and almost collide with a woman who managed to sneak up behind me while my attention was focused on the man in Liv's apartment. She's only slightly taller than Liv, curvy and has the most amazing red hair tied up in a ponytail on top of her head, much the same way Liv wore hers the night we met. Based on the little information I found, this must be Ren Mayfield.

"Whoops, sorry." She gives me a friendly smile before turning her focus to the man in the doorway. "Hey, Evan, when you're done talking to your friend come downstairs. I need to run something by you."

Evan. Two syllables that settle like a rock in my gut.

"Sure, I'll be down in a sec." It's clear they know each other and that she was expecting to find him here which just adds to

that heavy feeling. It doesn't matter, I need to go and put this whole episode behind me. Maybe first convince myself it's possible to do so.

"Go ahead, I won't keep you." I turn again to leave, but the woman doesn't move out of my way. I raise my head to look at her and I swear she sees my struggle as if it were projected on a movie screen. She studies me for a few seconds and then she smiles. It's warm, reassuring and makes me want to stay right here in this hallway outside an apartment I'm not welcome in. Maybe I never was, but that feels like a lie my head is trying to convince my heart is true, and my heart is not ready to accept.

"See you around, handsome." She winks before turning away. What? My mouth opens but the question doesn't come out and then it's too late because she's already heading back the way she came. The guy, Evan clears his throat to gain my attention and I look back at him.

"Don't mind her. Come on, I'll walk you out." And he does, making sure I'm all the way out the building before going back inside, not sparing me a second glance. So, I do the only thing I can, I get into my car and drive to my empty apartment where I spend my hours wondering what exactly I walked away from.

Chapter 2

~ Liv ~

A starburst of brilliant white light explodes in my head as pain sears across my cheek, dragging me back into consciousness. It takes a moment for all the puzzle pieces to connect; where I am and what's happening, partially because this was not the first blow to my head, and also there's a big hairy Russian shouting in my face, in Russian. He knows I don't speak the language, we covered this earlier, but I'm not about to remind him while he's in his current mood. Imagine for a moment all those scenes in action movies where a hostage is tied to a chair in a dark, dingy, abandoned warehouse, and you'll have some idea of what's happening here. Add to that the aforementioned Russian and you'll be correct in guessing I'm not having a fantastic day.

Shards of memory like pieces of a broken mirror come rushing back, fitting haphazardly into place. I was at Stopgap when two men showed up, wanting to talk to some of the boys hanging out, outside the building. Seeing as the center is specifically geared towards troubled youths in the area, it does sometimes attract unwanted attention from those wanting to exploit and abuse kids, like these two strange men, with their Russian accents and sleazy vibes. Who knows what motivates them? Money earned from drugs, cheap labor, human trafficking. It could be anything. Following them to find out might not have been my smartest move, though. I've always been a little impulsive and not always as aware of the dangers

around me as I should be, but I might be in real trouble right now. I've been here a few hours, judging by the dark sky visible through a row of broken windows as well as the numbness in my arms and legs, but I can't tell anything for sure at this point. Another blow and my ears start ringing. Everything in my line of sight has a black tinge to it and I can feel myself starting to lose focus. Yep, definitely real trouble.

"Tell me who sent you!" This time in heavily accented English. God, my head hurts, but if I want to get out of here, I need to stay present and aware, even if that feels like an impossible task.

Out of nowhere a memory of Heath flashes behind my closed eyelids, lying in that alley, beaten bloody and hurt, but then just as quickly morphs into him sitting on my sofa admitting to being ticklish while giving me his gorgeous smile which I refused point blank to acknowledge before he was standing at my door with his friends and then walking out of my life. Hard to believe that was almost three months ago, but I find myself thinking of him often, of his physical appearance which had me ogling him like an obsessed teenager, but more importantly because of the kind of man I'm convinced he is. I'll admit I regret the way things ended between us. Of course, that's entirely my fault, because I could see he wasn't ready to walk away and that he felt our connection as strongly as I did, but I practically pushed him out the door anyway, so overwhelmed by his presence I couldn't think straight. It's probably a good thing I wasn't home when he returned Luke's sweatshirt. I would have just said something to make the situation more awkward, like begging him to stay, or kissing him again! I can only imagine what Heath must think of me, but it doesn't

really matter. Attraction aside, there's no future for us. I came to that realization as I lay on my sofa that night, while he lay sleeping in my bed. Even though we live in the same city, we are worlds apart from each other and I've been hurt before by a man who needed me once, consumed every part of me, only to throw my love back in my face. I would have given that man everything, he didn't even have to ask, but it wasn't enough. As it turns out, women don't hold sole mandate on being fickle creatures.

I wonder what Heath's doing right now. I bet he could get me out of this without breaking a sweat, being a badass Navy SEAL and all. Yes, I saw the frog bone tattoo on his chest when I first found him in that alley and recognized it from the few times I met some of Luke's friends. Current situation aside, I'm not a complete idiot. There's no way I would have dragged a stranger to my apartment if I didn't think he was honorable, and the way Heath tried to look out for me gave me all the assurance I needed. Of course, there is zero chance of him showing up here, but that doesn't stop me from trying to concentrate on the memory of his handsome face to distract myself from my bloody wrists and ankles caused by the rope tying me to this chair, the pain radiating throughout my body from the numerous punches doled out by my Russian friend, and the throbbing in my brain which I'm worried might mean I have a concussion.

Piercing blue eyes that look straight into your soul, a nose so perfect it must have been cast from a mold and those lips! Full and wide, totally kissable when he's not smiling the kind of smile that must make women stupid with lust. Just the right amount of facial hair to make your fingers long to run over his

chiseled jaw. His skin was tanned as if he spent more time on the west coast than here, or maybe he was recently deployed to some far-off desert. Either way, it enhanced each of his features to the point where you almost needed to look away from the astounding perfection. Sandy brown hair that hung slightly over his eyes complete the vision, and that's all above the neck! Even with his injuries, his body was a work of art. Broad shoulders, ripped muscles and a sixpack that made my mouth water. God was undoubtedly showing off the day He created Heath, that's for sure, but I turned my back on him, so now some other lucky lady is enjoying the view and I'm stuck here with Mr. Hairy Russian who has been joined by a friend carrying a towel and two giant buckets of water. Oh shit!

§§§

I open my eyes on a gasp, expecting to fight for breath with my lungs on fire ... but this is not where I was before. I'm in a hospital bed, in a room that is far too bright from the sun's rays shining through the flimsy curtains, but on the upside, nothing hurts, which seems odd. The warehouse. The screaming Russian. That *did* happen. I couldn't have imagined it.

Before I can put the pieces together, Nick's voice calls out to me, "Hey Little Pain, how're you feeling? Must I call the nurse?" His Irish accent immediately soothes my nerves and I close my eyes for a moment, savoring the familiarity of his presence. I turn my head slowly to look at him and there it is, blinding pain in my head and neck, shooting down my spine and causing a tingling sensation in my fingers and toes. I

wince, then take another deep breath, exhaling slowly through my nose. He leans closer, waiting for my answer.

“Hey, you came for me. I should have known it would be you. At this rate I’m never going to be done owing you for saving my life.” It comes out in a croaky whisper, scoring my throat and causing my eyes to water which feels awful because they are sore and swollen, like the rest of my face. Nick jumps out of his seat to press the call button for the nurse, before falling back in the chair.

“Of course, I came for you. Someone had to save you from yourself, running around where you don’t belong. Fucking hell girl, what were you thinking? The fucking Russians?!” Ouch, way to kick a girl when she’s down, but he isn’t done yet. “I can’t collect on my debt if you’re dead, now, can I? Have to keep a close eye on you, seeing as you don’t have the good sense God gave a goat.” He grunts in disgust, and I sink back into my pillows like the scolded child he makes me feel.

We’ve had this discussion before, usually when he’s busy reprimanding me for not being more careful or aware of my surroundings. *Anything could happen to you, and then where would I be? Stuck with a debt I can’t collect, that’s where.* For the most part I think he’s joking. Not about the debt, that’s real enough, but the collecting part.

The night Nick and I met, I was in a particularly bad part of town making sure one of the kids from the center got home okay. My car broke down and I found myself surrounded by a group of men who didn’t quite understand the meaning of the word *no*. Things could have gone horribly for me that night if Nick hadn’t stepped in. The men obviously knew who he was,

and when he gave the order, they didn't hesitate to let me go and disappear, which I didn't think to question at the time. It was only later that I found out who my savior was, the enforcer for one of the most dangerous men in the Irish Mob. Yes, that's still a thing here. Who knew! Now I owe him for saving my virtue and my life, and occasionally he will collect by making use of my first aid skills, much like Heath did the night I found him. Only in Nick's case, there is zero chemistry, and our association is meant to be kept secret, at his insistence. Not even my closest friends Ren and Evan know about him, because Nick and I are not friends, despite my attempts to learn more about him. I think he's lonely, isolating himself because of the work he does, which makes me sad and maybe a little more forgiving of his moods than I should be, but in this instance he isn't wrong. I'm going to ignore the scolding part though.

“Aah, you're a real prince among men, Nick Reardon. You should put that on your business card. Rescuer of damsels in distress. A real prince among men.”

“No Little Pain, that's where you are mistaken. Just because I saved you from being raped, possibly murdered and now tortured, doesn't make me a good guy. The sooner you learn that lesson, the better off you'll be. Now stay still. The nurse will be here in a second to make you more comfortable.” As if summoned by his words, a nurse comes rushing in and promptly starts taking my vitals in that calm professional way that automatically puts you at ease. After that, she questions me about my pain levels and then notes everything in my chart.

“Okay, dear. Call if you need anything. The doctor will be around shortly to look at you and will prescribe something for the pain. Just hang tight.” And off she goes again. So efficient. So responsible. I should be taking notes. Instead, I turn back to Nick who’s staring out the window, seemingly lost in thought.

“Thank you for saving my life, Nick. Again.” He sighs and shakes his head slightly, keeping his eyes averted from me.

“This shouldn’t have happened. Jesus, Liv, they came after you because of me! What would have happened if I didn’t find you in time?!” He sounds genuinely upset, not something I’ve seen before. Nick prefers to act like the blunt instrument his reputation will have you believe. I have seen him angry a time or two, and annoyed. Let’s not forget that one, but not this. I don’t like it, especially because his anger is misplaced.

“That’s not true! They came by the center, harassing a few of the older boys and when they left, I followed. It had nothing to do with you.”

“They were sniffing around the center because of me. They must have figured out I’m looking out for you, so they took you and used you as bait to get to me. And for crying out loud, what were you thinking going after them on your own?!”

“That’s crazy. And also irrelevant, because you did get to me in time, and they didn’t get you. And now we know— “

“Dammit, this is not a game! And we don’t know anything more except that you are on their radar now and I’ll have to keep looking after your dumb ass. Like I don’t have enough to do. Jesus!”

“Okay, you’ve made your point. I was stupid and impulsive, but the good news is I’m not your problem. You can leave anytime you want. I won’t cause you any more trouble.” Yes, I can hear how childish that sounds, but I can’t help it. I mistakenly thought we were in this, whatever this is, together. That I could be useful somehow, but his little outburst set me straight and left no doubt as to what he really thinks. He sighs again like I’m making him tired, followed by a look of regret, or maybe that’s just wishful thinking on my part.

“Look, I’m—” That’s as far as he gets before he’s rudely interrupted, which is a shame because I’m pretty sure hell was about to freeze over.

“Liv, thank God! Who is this?!” Oh shit. Evan stands in the doorway to my room, but all his attention is focused on Nick with his bulging muscles and tattoos snaking down his arms and up his neck. To say Nick looks like a thug would be an understatement. He looks every inch the mob enforcer I’ve gotten to know over the past few months, and I can see this is not going to end well. Evan is one of my closest friends, besides Ren, and there is a reason I’ve kept my association with Nick a secret from them, besides the fact that he asked me to. They are protective of me, and they wouldn’t understand why I’d even want anything to do with Nick. Ren pushes past him with a glare and rushes to my side, choosing to ignore the tension emanating from the two men in the room.

“Oh, Liv, what happened to you? Who did this?” She doesn’t wait for an answer and turns her attention to Nick, who’s still in a silent stand-off with Evan. “What the hell happened to her?” Between Evan and Ren, they give Nick a death stare until Evan turns to me again.

“Dammit, Liv, who is this guy and why is he here? Tell me he’s not the reason you’re lying in a hospital bed looking like you went nine rounds with Mike Tyson?”

“Okay, you guys need to listen to me. Nick saved my life. Without him I would still be in that warehouse, or somewhere much worse. He’s the only reason I’m safe right now and I really need you to stop glaring at him. He is not the bad guy here.” That earns me a raised eyebrow from Nick, but he doesn’t say anything. Despite the conversation we had only moments ago and what I know about his life, he’s not going to convince me that there isn’t some good in him. He has proven it more than once. Unfortunately, Evan and Ren do not know any of this.

“Not happening. And what warehouse?” The stare-off continues with both Nick and I keeping quiet on the details, until another familiar voice draws my attention back to the door.

“Okay, everyone out! Right now!” Oh great, someone called Luke and obviously forgot to tell him this is a hospital and not one of his training exercises. I watch my brother stride into my room as if he owns it and wonder how he got here so fast from Fort Bragg, but it’s time to do something about all the tension in the room. I grab hold of my bedcovers and push them aside, swinging my legs to the floor. “Liv, I swear to God ...” He looks about ready to erupt and I smirk at him, childishly happy that I can still get a rise out of my twin, then swing my legs back up onto the bed, causing a white-hot pain to explode in my side that has me gasping for breath. Shit! His eyes swing back to me from where they were pinned to Ren, a strange expression on his face, and when he sees the pain etched on

my face, his turns to stone. “Move people!” Nick, who hasn’t moved from the chair next to my bed, finally stands up and turns to me, leaning down so that he can look me in the eye while keeping his voice low.

“Take it easy, okay? And try to stay out of trouble. I’ll talk to you soon.” Without a word to anyone else he turns to the door where Luke stops him.

“Don’t leave, I need to talk to you.” So, Nick was the one who called Luke. Huh, I didn’t know they knew each other. I’ve never mention Luke to Nick during any of our conversations, but I’m also starting to realize there’s more to Nick than I first thought. Evan steps up next and drops a kiss on my cheek before leaving as well, but not looking happy about it. Ren has him firmly by the arm though, so it’s not as if he has a choice. Another strange look passes between her and Luke before they step out of the room. It’s almost as if they know each other, but surely, she would have mentioned that to me before. Once they’ve all left, I turn my attention back to my brother, but we’re interrupted by a doctor strolling into the room.

“Miss Parrish, it’s good to see you are awake. How are you feeling this morning?” Only then does he turn towards Luke, maybe trying to decide if he should be present during this discussion.

“He’s my brother. And I’m good. Well, not good. I mean, I know I look like hell, but I’m fine. I’d very much like to go home.” I attempt to Jedi mind trick him into believing that I’m well enough to leave, but he doesn’t look happy.

“Let’s take a look, okay? It’s best not to rush these things.” After checking my injuries and making sure I’m not

concussed, he reluctantly agrees that I can leave after lunch. With that he leaves the room and I'm left facing my brother who has been observing quietly from the corner by the window.

"You didn't have to come, Luke. I'm fine." He gives an obnoxious snort before stepping closer to the bed.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now? This happens," he waives a hand over me, "and I have to hear about it from ... some guy! Why the hell didn't you call me?" He looks like one of those cartoon characters with the volcano erupting out of the top of his head and I have to bite the inside of my lip to stop the amusement showing on my face. His glare intensifies and the muscle in his jaw ticks with anger and frustration. Oh well, it was worth a try.

"Luke, it literally just happened last night. When was I supposed to call? And anyway, you are hundreds of miles away, protecting our country. I won't get in the way of that, I know how important being a Marine is to you. I'm fine, it's just a few cuts and bruises." Okay, so it's a little more serious than that, and he knows now that he's seen the evidence for himself thanks to the doctor's examination. A pained look crosses his face.

"Livvy, you are the most important person in my life. You know if I can, I will always come to you. And I need to know that you will call irrespective. Promise me!" I don't respond and he knows better. We don't have that kind of relationship, despite being twins. He heaves out a sigh before dropping into the chair Nick vacated. "You moved again." That sounds like an accusation, and I'm not in the mood for it right now.

“I’m not running anymore,” I argue, but he just gives me a disbelieving look. We’ve had this discussion before. “Or hiding. And it doesn’t matter because you still found me.”

“You’re my sister, Liv. My twin. We are all the family we have. I’ll always find you, but I had some help this time.”

“Nick.” We both know the truth, but for some reason it bothers me that they have a relationship I know nothing about.

“Yeah, Nick. We need to have a chat about that guy. There are things you need to know.”

“I didn’t realize you two were so close, but I know everything I need to about him. Now, seeing as you chased all my friends away, I need you to get me out of here. I just want to go home, Luke, please?” He doesn’t take long to consider. Since the accident that took our mom from us, we usually avoid hospitals at all costs.

“Okay, but I’m staying with you until I’m sure you’re going to be good on your own. No arguments.”

“Deal.”

About an hour later, after Luke finished my lunch because I just couldn’t bring myself to eat whatever that was, he disappears to arrange my discharge and I take the opportunity to change into the clothes Ren brought for me. When he returns, he’s followed by the same nurse from before, pushing a wheelchair. She must notice the look on my face.

“Now dear, before you object, I must let you know it is hospital policy for you to leave in this chair and seeing as you’re leaving earlier than the doctor would like, I would not

object too loudly.” She’s all sunshine and light, but I can see there is no point arguing, so I nod my head and start moving towards the wheelchair. We don’t waste any time standing around and once I’m somewhat comfortably seated, the nurse starts pushing me out of the room towards the nearest elevator while making small talk with Luke.

We are still several feet away when I notice a couple standing there, waiting for the elevator doors to open. They are tightly clinched together, kissing rather passionately for such a public area, and when they pull apart, I recognize the man who is facing her but is turned in my direction. Heath. My heart gives an unexpected lurch in my chest, causing my breath to hitch and my eyes to sting. Shit, I can’t let him see me like this. I’ll admit, the bruises on my face freaked me out a bit and the absolute last thing I want to do is share an elevator with him and the gorgeous woman who is obviously his girlfriend. Without thinking I place my hands on the wheels of the chair, effectively slowing it down and drawing Luke’s attention. The nurse brings the chair to a stop and Luke kneels next to me so that we are eye level with each other, and I know there is no way to hide my distress.

“What’s wrong? Did you forget something?” Luke’s concern threatens the last of my self-control and I stare down at my hands that are now folded in my lap to avoid making eye contact and giving my emotions away.

“No, but is there another elevator or another way off this floor?” I feel Luke’s stare boring into my cheek for a few seconds before he looks towards the elevator in front of us where Heath and his girlfriend are talking quietly. I don’t even want to consider what he’s thinking, but after a moment he

straightens and then flashes the nurse his most charming smile, before asking her if there is another way off this floor. She doesn't even seem put out by the request, as if this happens all the time.

"Sure." And just like that, without any argument, she turns us around and heads towards the visitor's area where there is another bank of elevators off to one side. Once we come to a stop, he kneels by my side once more, lowering his voice so that only I can hear his question.

"Who's the guy? And do I have to kill him or just mess him up a bit?" A snort laugh escapes and I finally look my brother in the eye. I should have known he wouldn't be fooled, but then again, he's the one person who knows what happened in Austin.

"What guy?" I try and play it off as nothing and get the obligatory eyeroll for my efforts.

"The guy at the elevator you were trying to avoid, or are we just going to pretend that didn't happen? Just so we're clear, my offer still stands."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, so no need to get physical. If anything changes, I'll let you know." Before he can think of anything else to say, the elevator doors open, and we step inside.

Luke drives us back to my apartment without making further conversation. I can tell he has something on his mind which is bubbling like a forgotten pot on the stove, but for now we are both silent. We are not your typical twin siblings. You know the ones who can communicate without talking or sense what the other is feeling or when they're in trouble. That's not us.

Even though we were close growing up, we were very different people. Luke was the extrovert who could make friends with anyone while I was the exact opposite, happy to spend time in my room reading or cooking with our mom. After her accident, it was like a switch flipped for Luke. He was so angry at what happened. We both were, but for him it seemed like a personal failure that he could not protect her from a careless driver who took her life and then somehow walked free without any repercussions. He lashed out, got into trouble and when a distant relative stepped in and suggested he consider a career in the military rather than going down his path of self-destruction, Luke left. Something about the structure and discipline, I guess. I never resented him for his decision though, but maybe he has regrets. I don't know. After a takeout dinner we settle on my sofa, and I brace for what's to come.

“I hate this, Livvy. I hate that this happened, and I wasn't here to do anything about it. I hate that Nick had to be the one to save you from that horrible situation. If he didn't show up when he did ... if something happened to you ...” He looks away, but not fast enough to hide his anguish. I honestly don't know what to say to make him feel better. As a Marine he faces horrible situations all the time, but I know he's trained to deal with them, and I have to trust and take comfort in that. I can't really offer the same in return. I also don't understand why everyone has such a negative view of Nick. Okay, that's a lie. I do understand. Being part of the Irish Mob means you do things that are illegal, violent and cruel, but that is not how I know Nick. I wouldn't go so far as to call us friends, but I trust him. He lives by his own rules, and loyalty and promises mean

something to him. In his own way, he looks out for me. Today is yet more proof of that, but I guess people who don't know any better will always see the physical appearance and not bother to look any deeper and that makes me sad for him.

Luke huffs out a breath before continuing. "I know I was a shit brother when we were younger, and I'm not around much now, but you have to know you can call me anytime and if it's possible I'll come." He pauses again, and I know we've come to the actual topic weighing on him. "I let you down, when Mom died and when things fell apart with David. He—"

"Luke, stop. That's all in the past, okay? I'm here now and I'm fine. No more hiding, and all of this will heal," I say, waving a hand down my body. "We're good. And what happened in Austin ...?" Yeah, we're not talking about that, because I can't bring myself to say David's name out loud. It just hurts too much. I sigh, feeling exhausted and a little raw. "I like it here. I've made friends and I love my job, so I think I'm going to stick around for a while. So, anytime you want to come and visit, I'll be here."

"Yeah?" He doesn't look convinced, but then again, our history always weighed heavier on his shoulders. I don't know why; I never held his actions against him. And my nomadic tendencies were just that. Mine. I don't know why I felt the need to move around so much. It's not like David was ever going to come looking for me, but after what happened, Austin stopped feeling like home and I knew subconsciously that was what I was looking for.

"I promise." By mutual unspoken agreement we end the conversation there and after making sure I took my pain

medication he packs me off to bed so that I can rest. I fall asleep almost immediately and the next morning when I wake up, he's gone.

For the next week I'm forced to take it easy at home, so the kids at the center won't get freaked out by my battered appearance, which I understand, but I hate being idle. So instead, I help Ren and Evan at the clinic where most of the patients look just as beaten up, if not worse. It breaks my heart seeing them like this, knowing they most likely feel stuck in terrible situations they have no idea how to navigate. I spend those days talking to battered women, patching up minor wounds or just keeping young children entertained while their parents are being examined. In the evenings, I spend my time in my apartment searching the net for helpful information and resources that might provide some hope for a better future.

Sleep does not come easily. I've always been a bit of an insomniac, but since this last incident it's become significantly worse. And when I do manage to fall asleep, nightmares are a frequent reminder of what I went through, if somewhat warped and distorted. Lying in bed, I try to calm my mind while taking deep breaths and relaxing my muscles, starting with my feet and working my way up ...

I'm back in the warehouse. It's dark, dank and strangely quiet except for a single light bulb hanging directly overhead and the sound of a small child calling for help from somewhere in the distance. I'm tied to the same chair as before, with my wrists and ankles bleeding from the ropes chafing my skin. Fighting against them, I struggle to free myself, even though I

know I'm just wasting precious energy. My heart is racing with panic and the need to escape so that I can get to that small voice before fleeing this terrible place. Out of nowhere, a large figure starts shouting in Russian, drowning out the child who is now crying inconsolably. I can't make out any features until he steps into the light right in front of me and I rear back as far as the chair will allow, because this man is not the Russian from the warehouse. This man is Luke, and he's holding a towel and a bucket of water ...

I jerk awake, a silent scream caught in my throat. And so it goes, night after torturous night. One week passes, and then another. All my injuries have healed so I go back to work and resume my normal routine, but it does nothing to help. Usually, I would chat with Ren for a while, but tonight I know she's on a date so it's just me and my thoughts to keep me company. I sit on my sofa, my laptop resting on my thighs, and try to find something to watch or read that might lure the sandman closer and convince him to show some mercy, but so far, no luck. For what feels like the hundredth time, my thoughts wander to Heath, and I'm bombarded by memories of him and his girlfriend at the hospital. They looked happy together so I try to draw comfort from that thought and knowing that he recovered from his ordeal and is doing well with a beautiful woman by his side. My eyes roam around my apartment, until they land on the business card Aaron gave me the day they came for Heath. Back then I tacked it to my fridge and just left it there, but now I find myself removing it before sitting at my laptop again.

Curiosity spurs me to type Fortress Security, the company name into my browser to see what comes up and it's what you would expect: a professional and modern website with an edgy, masculine design. On the *About Us* page are four thumbnail size photographs for Aaron Yeager, Michael Jennings, Riley Callahan and Heath Hayes with short biographies detailing their military careers, additional qualifications and experience. It's remarkably impressive without revealing a single personal detail. And the women who work there must count their lucky stars every night that they are able to look upon such fine men every day, because all four of them are ridiculously handsome. I wonder if they even employ any women or fear they will contaminate the work environment with their femininity. I decide to test my theory by calling the afterhours number listed. If there are female employees, they are probably support staff such as secretaries and would be responsible for recording the voicemail message on the company answering service. I know, it's a terrible thought, narrow-minded and judgmental, but it doesn't stop me from dialing the number and waiting for the voicemail to confirm my suspicions. It starts ringing and before my brain can register that this is strange considering that it's after one o'clock in the morning, someone answers. Shit, someone answered!

"Fortress Security, Riley Callahan." It's not much of a greeting but considering the hour he probably wasn't expecting any calls either. "Hello? Can I help you?" He sounds a little impatient now. I should just end the call, but I can't hang up on him so instead I start to blubber.

“Hey, Riley, I’m so sorry. This is Liv Parrish. We met a while back when Heath got hurt and you came to fetch him at my apartment.” There’s not even a moment’s hesitation before he responds.

“Liv, hey! I remember. What’s up? Are you okay?” All the impatience is gone from his tone now and concern aside, he sounds almost happy to hear from me, as if he was expecting my call, but that can’t be right. We don’t know each other, apart from our one brief meeting during which he barely acknowledged me.

“I’m fine, thank you. I’m so sorry to bother you. I was just ...”
How do I even explain this?

“It’s no bother. I was just busy wrapping up here, so your timing is perfect. What are you up to?” Okay, so it sounds like he’s in the mood to chat.

“Wow, do you always work this late?”

“Nah, we’re just in the middle of a contract that is taking up a bit more manpower than usual. Guys out in the field, others working on different assignments. You know how it is.” Odd that he would assume that, and it surprises me that he’s willing to share even that much. The work they do must be all kinds of confidential, and even though I love the mystery, I’m pretty sure sharing with me would be a big no-no.

“Oh, okay. I won’t keep you then. You must be exhausted and dying to get home.”

“No problem, I’ve got nowhere to rush off to and you haven’t told me why you called. Were you looking for Heath?” What?

“No! I mean ... no. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have called. Take care, okay?” And then I hang up, because really? How stupid can a person be? And why does the mention of Heath’s name make me so flustered? I know he’s not available, he probably hasn’t given me a second thought since returning Luke’s sweatshirt. And now Riley thinks I’m weird, or worse, a clingy female looking for attention. Ugh, I should just go to bed. Who knows, my humiliation might drag me under, and I might finally get some sleep. But I don’t. Instead, I stay on my sofa and wander down the rabbit hole that is YouTube. Until my phone vibrates with an incoming text.

Unknown: Hey, it’s Riley. You awake?

I stare blankly at my phone for a moment before answering.

Me: Hey, yes, I am

Riley: Cool, open up

The buzzer startles me out of my stupor, and I stand up to do as instructed. Besides the small photos on their website my memory of Heath’s friends is a bit hazy, but seeing Riley again brings it all back. He’s well over six feet tall with sandy blonde hair, blue eyes and a boyish smile full of mischief. Oh, and let’s not forget about the dimples. Good God, the man is gorgeous up close and in person. Strange that I didn’t notice that the last time he was in my apartment, but then again, I was trying to blend into the walls while avoiding the moment I had to say goodbye to the man I truly wanted. Riley’s smile diminishes slightly and his eyes narrow when he takes me in. I’m dressed in leggings and an oversized sweatshirt, and my hair is loose around my shoulders. I wasn’t expecting company, so this is as good as it gets, but it’s as if he sees

more than just my outward appearance. For someone who prefers not to be the center of attention, it feels disconcerting.

“Hey, Liv.” That’s all he says before stepping forward and I automatically step back to give him room to enter. Once I’ve closed the door, I turn to him, unsure of what to say but curious about the reason for his visit.

“Hey. I thought you were heading home. Do you live close by?” He gives me a look that suggests he knows I know better, and then he shakes his head.

“Why did you call earlier?” Okay, so that’s why he’s here. I open my mouth to apologize again, but he cuts me off before I can get the words out: “And don’t apologize. I don’t mind, I just want to know why and you never said. If there’s anything I can do to help.” Now I feel even worse. He was worried about me when all I was, was bored.

“It’s kind of stupid, to be honest. I couldn’t sleep and I found myself wondering about you guys and your company, and the next thing I knew ...” I shrug, managing to cut my rambling short mid ramble, hoping that he will draw the necessary conclusions without me spelling it out.

“Were you trying to get hold of Heath?” He asked this earlier. Maybe he didn’t believe me the first time? I guess I wouldn’t either if I was him, but at least now I can answer him sounding a little less frantic.

“No. That’s the thing. I never expected anyone to answer the phone. I thought it would go through to your voicemail service and I was wondering if it would be a man or a woman’s voice on the other side. I was just curious.” God, it sounds so stupid.

Riley just stares at me for a moment, holding my gaze captive, before a smirk appears on his face.

“Which one were you betting on?”

“Male, for sure.” I smile back at him, because maybe he understands. Or at least he’s choosing to have a sense of humor about the situation. We grin at each other for a few seconds before I remember my manners. “Can I offer you something to drink? Tea, coffee, hot chocolate?” His brows shoot up at that last option.

“I shouldn’t. I just stopped by to check on you and make sure you were okay, but hot chocolate sounds great.”

“Cool, give me a minute. Have a seat.” I nod towards the sofa and then walk over to my kitchen to prepare our drinks. When I turn around from my fridge with the milk in my hands, Riley is standing next to me, not close enough to make me uncomfortable but near enough that I can smell his cologne as well as the faint scent of male musk lingering from a long day’s work. I raise my eyes to his, which are staring at me intently.

“Why aren’t you sleeping?” Again, I get the feeling he understands, or at least sees more than what’s on the surface. He can obviously see it’s not a one-time-thing, but an endless string of nights lying awake with no reprieve. Whether it’s the bags under my eyes or the sallowness of my skin, he sees and now he wants answers, but there’s too much to tell this virtual stranger, or maybe not enough to put a new friend’s mind at ease. I don’t know. Is this the beginning of a new friendship or just him showing concern because that’s what he and his friends promised? An obligation he would sooner forget but is

honor bound to fulfil. Despite their reassurance that they would always be there for me, this feels too personal and is something I shy away from without thinking.

“It’s no big deal. I’ve always gotten by on little sleep. It’s just been a bit less than usual lately.” I fidget with the container of milk before putting it down on the counter and preparing the mugs, keeping my eyes averted from his probing gaze.

“Did something happen? Or did anything change that would cause this?” His voice is low and soothing, as if I might confide some dark secret if he’s patient enough.

“It’s nice of you to ask, but there’s nothing for you to worry about. I’m fine, honestly.” His eyes linger on me for a few more seconds.

“Okay then, but anytime you feel like talking, you have my number. Yeah?” and then he turns away without waiting for me to answer and saunters over to the sofa. And I feel like a giant spotlight has shifted its focus and I can breathe again. I finish making our drinks and join him on the sofa. We don’t talk for a few minutes; just wait for our drinks to cool, but I can sense Riley is thinking about something and he doesn’t keep me waiting long to find out what that is.

“I’ve been wondering about you since the day we met. Heath never said much, just that you took care of his injuries and gave him a place to stay, but nothing about who you are or why you were in that alley in the middle of the night.” There’s no questioning tone, but I know he’s expecting a response.

“That’s probably because I never told him. Neither one of us shared much about ourselves while he was here. I thought he preferred it that way.” I know I do.

“I can understand that; a woman on her own. You can’t just open up to anybody, but I think you know we’re not regular guys off the street. Something must have told you that you would be safe allowing Heath into your home.” Again, it was not phrased as a question. Riley knows what kind of man he is, and I get the impression he wants me to know too.

“I believe people call that gut instinct, but the tattoo on his chest was pretty convincing too.” I smile over at him, and he smirks back.

“You know tattoos, do you?” Instinctively I turn my head away, knowing where this is headed and unwilling to go there. Talking about Luke means talking about family, which inevitably leads to questions about my past. It’s a painful subject and not one I’m about to share with Riley, no matter how comfortable he makes me feel.

“I’ve seen a few of those around.” That’s about as vague as I can be without being downright rude. The entire subject leaves a bad taste in my mouth, not that I have anything against the military. Quite the opposite, but sometimes it feels as if I’ve lost more than I thought I would when Luke joined the Marines. As if to drive that point away, I take a sip of my hot chocolate, scalding my tongue in the process, causing me to flinch and inhale sharply. Shit!

“Easy does it. Are you okay?” His concern is kind of sweet. A girl could get used to this.

“Sure, it’s just a little hot.” And then I blush like an idiot. He smiles at me and then shifts his attention back to his own cup.

My phone which has been lying silent most of the night takes this moment to start vibrating, causing it to skid across the

smooth surface of my small coffee table. Ren's name flashes on the screen and Riley doesn't miss a beat.

"You want to get that?"

"Do you mind? I won't be long, promise." I reach for the device, intent on silencing it one way or another.

"Go for it." He relaxes back into the sofa, and I answer the call.

"Hey Re—"

"Good, you're still awake. Oh my God, Liv. You will not believe the night I had. Remind me to never go out with an accountant again. Dull as a bag of bricks. I swear I almost yawned in his face at one point. And the restaurant he chose! There was absolutely nothing on the menu that sounded remotely appealing. You would think—"

"Whoa, Ren, so you're okay?" She snorts at that.

"Sure, why wouldn't I be?"

"Okay, just checking. I have company. Do you mind if we continue this tomorrow morning?" There's a pause before she responds in slow, measured words.

"What do you mean you have company? Who's there with you?"

"I mean I've ... uh." Shit, how do I explain this? I glance over at Riley who's smiling into his mug of hot chocolate. I'm pretty sure he heard the entire conversation; the way Ren was carrying on. "I'll tell you tomorrow. Gotta go. Bye." I hang up as quickly as my finger can find the red icon on the screen and

then place my phone back on the table. “Sorry about that. I should have let it go to voicemail.”

“Hmm, voicemail seems to be your thing tonight. But it’s not a problem, she’s your girl, and that sounded like some date. You should have let her tell you the rest of it. It could have been entertaining.” Yep, he definitely heard.

“Not really. All her dates tend to be some variation of that conversation. The guy is either too boring to bother with or too overbearing to tolerate. The restaurant never serves the kind of food she likes even though she’ll eat just about anything, and if things do go further, it’s usually a huge disappointment. No spark or connection. At this point I think she’s more likely to find a unicorn than Mr. Right.” That gets a chuckle out of him.

“Does she date often?”

“She does. I don’t know where she meets all these guys.” It’s true, her work is her passion but somehow, she still manages to have a *very* active social life. Unlike some people.

“What about you?” he asks. I meet his gaze, his pale blue eyes intent on my face.

“What about me?” But I know what he’s asking.

“Do you date often?” I almost snort at that, but Ren proved it’s never an attractive sound. Funny sure, attractive never.

“No.” I heave out a sigh. “I’m kind of a homebody. I don’t go out much. Mostly it’s just work or hanging out with Ren and Evan. He works with Ren. They are both doctors and run the clinic downstairs.”

“Cool, and what do you do?” There’s genuine interest in his expression, not like he’s trying to pry out all my secrets, so I

start rambling again.

“I work at a youth center not far from here. It’s a place where kids can spend their afternoons doing their homework or just hang out. We provide tutoring and meals too. For most of them home is not exactly a safe environment so that’s what they get at StopGap.” I clamp my lips shut, because honestly, I could go on about the center for hours if left unchecked. I love my job and the kids who steal your heart as easily as breathing. They might be considered *at risk* but it’s all the more reason to give them this safe space, even if it’s temporary as the name implies.

“Wow, I’m impressed. Is that where you were coming from the night you found Heath?”

“Yes, I don’t usually work that late, so he was lucky I found him. Although, I’m sure someone else would have—”

“Don’t even say it. You know the chances were slim to none that someone else would have taken care of him the way you did.” I don’t meet his eyes this time. I know what this city is like, the dangers all around us. I’ve seen first-hand what people are capable of, especially with the young and innocent. So, I just shrug my shoulders and finish my drink. Then I turn to him again.

“It’s getting pretty late, and you probably need to be up again in a few hours.” I know that was not subtle, but I feel like I’ve shared enough for one night, even if Riley is easy to talk to and I’ve enjoyed his company.

“Yeah, I should get going, but I enjoyed hanging out with you. We should do it again some time.”

“Sure, I’d like that.” I smile, because he’s just being polite and I’m not going to make it awkward for him. He does a pretty good job of looking sincere though.

“Good night, Liv. Try to get some sleep.” I nod and walk over to the door to open it for him. “And lock up as soon as I’m out the door.” This time I give him a genuine smile.

“I will, promise.” He gives me a strange look and for a moment I think he’s going to say something else, but then he walks out, leaving me to face the rest of the night alone.

The next day starts just like every other. I’ve always been an early riser despite the lack of sleep, so once I’ve showered and dressed, I buy coffee at the little coffee shop around the corner from my apartment and then head back over to the clinic where I know an interrogation is waiting. As expected, both Ren and Evan are waiting for me, and it looks like Evan has been brought up to date.

“Okay young lady, we want details, and we want it now.” That’s Ren. No one would mistake her for the mother-hen type, but right now she’s doing a pretty decent imitation of a parent who caught her teenager sneaking into the house after curfew.

“Young lady?” It’s true, I am a few years younger than both of my friends, and they remind me of it often. I smirk at them before rolling my eyes, but Ren is tapping her foot, so I decide to get on with it. She’s not exactly known for her patience.

“Remember I told you about Heath, the guy I found in the alley a while back?” I don’t wait for them to respond. “Well, Riley is one of his friends. They also work together. He

stopped by last night and we hung out for a bit, just talking. I made him hot chocolate. That's it, nothing more to report so you can both stow your parental glares. There's nothing to get worked up about. I probably won't see him again anyway." For the life of me I cannot figure out why I'm disappointed to admit this, and of course Ren notices.

"He just stopped by, out of the blue? How is that not suspicious? And why do you look like you've lost your favorite sweater?" Ugh, so much for hoping.

"Because it wasn't out of the blue, exactly. I phoned him first. Or I should say I phoned the business number on their card, and Riley answered." I choose to ignore the sweater comment.

"Why did you call?" Jeez, why can't they let this go?

"I couldn't sleep, and I was curious about where Heath worked, so I called."

"So, you were trying to get hold of Heath?" Why does everyone keep asking me this? The memory of him kissing his girlfriend returns to taunt me and I'm officially done lying to myself that I'm okay with it. Not that I can do anything about it, but it still adds an edge to my voice when I reply.

"No! I just ... I don't know, okay? I was awake and bored and curious, so I called. Can we drop this now? You still need to tell me about your date."

"I agree with Ren," Evan responds before Ren gets the chance. "This guy showing up out of the blue is weird. Are you sure you're comfortable with that?" He had been quiet throughout the conversation, but he was obviously paying attention.

“Please, you guys, I love that you’re concerned for me but it’s not necessary. Riley is a good man, I don’t doubt that for a second, and I would tell you if he made me uncomfortable, but he doesn’t. Anyway, I doubt he’s going to make a habit of showing up here. More than likely, it was a one-time thing because I called.” Ren seems to consider this, but Evan looks like he’s willing to accept my words at face value.

“Yeah, about that. Next time, call me. I’ll be happy to keep you company.” I smile at him, because I know his offer is genuine.

“Evan, I’m not calling you in the middle of the night after you’ve spent a full day at the clinic. Brent would never forgive me.” He and his partner both live busy, active lives so yeah, that’s not happening.

“Brent will understand, and you know it. He knows how important you are to me. You and Ren.”

“Ah, Ev, we love you too, you big softie.” Ren nudges him with her shoulder before focusing her attention back on me.

“You know we’re just looking out for you, right? But we’ll back off a little if that’s what you really want.” She draws out the *really* and we both start laughing, happy to set aside the subject matter of my sleeping habits and late-night visitors.

The next few days go much the same way as they did before all the excitement with the Russian and my short stint in the hospital. I usually don’t start working until about ten in the morning, when I make sure the center is stocked with enough supplies to keep a bunch of teenagers fed for an afternoon and also have whatever they need for school projects and

homework. Once the kids start showing up, they are provided with a meal and then it's time for homework. We also provide tutoring, pretty much anything they might need, and once that's done, there's usually a bit of time left for games or just relaxing before they go home. Today there are fewer children than usual, and homework goes quickly, so we decide on a game of hoops to blow off some steam before the end of the day. Despite being an introvert, I've always enjoyed outdoor sports and usually find myself included when the time comes to pick teams. We're just about ready to start our game when a familiar face appears next to the court.

"Riley. Hey, what are you doing here?" Instinctively I brace for bad news, until I register his broad smile and the fact that he's busy removing his work boots.

"Hey, Liv. I wanted to check out this place and thought we could hang out for a bit, but a quick game of hoops sounds way more fun." He winks at me before striding onto the court barefoot in his jeans and Henley, the sleeves shoved up to his elbows. The boys take about two seconds to realize that Riley is serious about joining in before they start arguing about who's team he should join. Once that's decided with the two of us on opposite sides, the game begins in earnest. It turns out Riley is super competitive, which isn't surprising. SEALS aren't known for being happy with second best, but he's also in peak physical condition, also no surprise. So of course, my team got creamed, but everyone had a good time and by the end of the game Riley is accepted as easily as if he's been working here for years. It's amazing to watch how the boys respond to him, as if recognizing that he will be a positive influence if given half a chance. And Riley doesn't disappoint.

Everyone from the youngest to the oldest is treated with care and respect. It's not an act either, it's just who he is.

"Ready to call it a day? We wouldn't want to wear you out on your first visit," I joke, even though the man has barely worked up a sweat.

"Ha-ha, very funny. I wasn't the one looking all worn out a few minutes ago. I thought I would have to carry you off the court." We both laugh, enjoying the easy banter.

"Seriously though, thank you for coming by. It means a lot."

"Liv, you don't have to thank me. I had a blast. And I told you I wanted to hang out again. I wasn't just saying that."

And that's how it started. Once or twice a week, he stops by the center to hang out with the kids for a while and then the two of us will go grab something to eat while we talk. Mostly it's just everyday stuff, but I think that's what we both need right now, and that's okay.

Chapter 3

~ Heath ~

She's been *hanging out* with Riley. Fucking hell!

How many times had I wondered about Liv, dreamed about her, about having a relationship where we could share everything, but convinced myself it wouldn't work between us because I'm ready to make a commitment and settle down, and I thought she would be leaving soon. So, I started dating Kelsey a couple of months later, and while I enjoyed her company and felt a spark of attraction, it never felt anything close to the unabating need I felt for Liv. There was a connection with Liv which I refuse to believe was one-sided, and now my world is rocked yet again to find out she's still here and hanging out with Riley! He's my brother, I trust him with my life, but this I don't even know how I'm supposed to feel. Relief that she's still here? Absolutely. Excited at the prospect of seeing her again? You bet. Now I just need to find a way to gag the little voice in my head taunting me that she never reached out to me but chose Riley's company instead. The heat rising in from my chest and up my neck should have been an indication that I was going to fail miserably with this conversation.

"You've been hanging out?" I'm a little surprised that my voice still sounds normal, despite the tension coursing through my body. And when did it get so damn hot in here? We're sitting in my office, wrapping up a file for a client when Riley

dropped his bombshell. He doesn't even seem to notice my distress, which only ramps it up further.

"Yeah, she's cool, funny and smart. Easy to be around. We have fun together." Fuck, I can't do this, but I need to know.

"Are you sleeping with her?" His eyes shoot up from the tablet he was reading on and meet mine head-on.

"What?" He looks genuinely shocked, but my mouth seems to have a mind of its own despite me trying to keep my cool. Fuck it, that horse has bolted, the stable's on fire.

"I didn't stutter, Riley. Are you fucking her?" He actually has the nerve to look offended.

"Are you seriously asking me that? She's your girl. I would never—"

"Quit the bullshit. You'd fuck anything with a pulse if she looked halfway interested so don't act like you're offended. Just answer the damn question." Warning bells are ringing in my ears, telling me I'm going too far and might cross a line I can't come back from.

"Okay, I know this is out of the blue, but you're out of line, so I'm going to pretend you didn't just say that, and I already told you I didn't fuck her. She's a friend. I'm not too sure about you right now, though." He mumbles that under his breath, turning away as if he's done with this conversation.

"Yeah? Since when do you have female friends?" I shoot back, not ready to let this go.

"Since you seem to have your head stuck up your ass and don't know a good thing when it's right in front of you." I pause, the next barrage of words stalling on my tongue.

“I didn’t know.” A lame defense, but true all the same.

“What?”

“I didn’t know she was still here. When I looked her up, there was this pattern of only staying in a place for a few months, three or four max. I thought she left or would be leaving soon. There’d be no chance at the future I want, so I moved on.” I trail off, my need to argue losing steam.

“Okay, I get that. Look, I know what happened with Kelsey knocked you off track, but she was never the one for you, man. It was always meant to be you and Liv. Maybe now, you can do what you should have done in the first place and go after her.”

Dammit, he had to mention Kelsey. I still don’t know what I was thinking pursuing her, but it was fun for a while. At least until she dropped her bomb, blowing up everything that I thought I might want with her. She’s pregnant, with her ex’s baby. They are getting back together because it turns out she’s still in love with the guy. Christ! What the hell am I doing?

“Is she doing okay?”

“Liv? Yeah, she’s great. She’s hugely invested in her work. I think that’s what’s keeping her here, but you should call her and ask her yourself. Better still, go see her. You have a lot to talk about.”

“Yeah, I guess.” How did I get it all so wrong? All this time wasted. “Thanks for looking out for her, man. And for putting up with my shit. I shouldn’t have said—” My brother doesn’t give me a chance to apologize.

“Forget about it. We both know what I’m like. But seriously, don’t screw around with her. She’s not like the women you usually date.” I’m about to interrupt but he keeps going. “And watch out for her brother. He’s a protective SOB, not around much, but he keeps tabs.” I raise a brow at that.

“You’ve been making friends.” He smirks at this.

“Nah, haven’t met the guy, but he checks up on her often. Texts, calls, that kind of thing.”

“That’s good. I always wondered about him, and protective I can deal with.”

“You’ll have him eating out of the palm of your hand in no time.” But it isn’t him I’m worried about. All jokes aside, it’s time for me to go get my girl.

It’s early evening when I reach her apartment. I stand outside her door for a moment, trying to calm my thoughts as well as my racing heart which is pumping at a rate similar to when we used to do HALO jumps into enemy territory, and then raise my hand to knock. I pause when I hear the unmistakable sound of Morten Harket belting out his signature high notes from *Take On Me*, accompanied by a softer but no less on point female voice hitting the same notes. I drop my hand and listen while imagining Liv dancing along to the music. It makes me smile, makes my blood rush, no longer focused on the time wasted but instead on the future that is now tantalizingly within reach. Eventually, the song changes to something I don’t recognize and I raise my hand again and knock. And wait, for what feels like forever. But then the door opens and

she's there on the other side of the threshold and everything stops.

Time. Breath. Heart.

Her face is slightly flushed, from dancing perhaps, and her hair is in a ponytail that's just barely holding in place. Dressed casually in a pair of loose-fitting jeans and a t-shirt she's still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, bar none. It also doesn't go unnoticed that she's not wearing a bra, causing my jeans to tighten even as I try to maintain eye contact, because I don't want to be that guy. Now is about reconnecting with her, and not in a physical way, even though I can almost feel how soft her skin will be under my touch. God knows I've imagined it often enough. She gives a small gasp when her eyes meet mine, punching me straight in the gut.

"Heath! Hey, what are you doing here?" She cranes her neck slightly to the side as if trying to see around me, as if she expects to see someone standing behind me. I take that moment to study her more closely, unable to take my eyes off her. She looks ... different from the last time I saw her in this apartment. Not remarkably so, but a little less vibrant than the night we met. There are dark circles under her eyes, a small scar above her left eyebrow and she's lost weight which is accentuated by the loose fit of her clothes. I try to keep my voice even while cataloguing all these small changes that set alarm bells ringing in my head. There will be time to deal with that later.

"Hey, Liv. It's good to see you." I hesitate for a beat, second guessing whether this was such a good idea, just stopping by unannounced and catching her off guard. "May I come in?"

Uncertainty flashes across her face before she steps back so that I may enter her apartment. I'll admit, this is not how I thought our reunion would go. Did I think she was going to rush into my arms and declare her undying love and devotion? Of course not. Hoped would have been more accurate, dreamt even more so, but it's clear I'm in for disappointment. There's tension in the air, and she's nervous, wringing her hands and then brushing loose strands of hair behind her ears, as if trying to hide the fact that she was wringing her hands. I almost expect her to hold them behind her back when she notices me staring. Seeing her like this, a wave of protectiveness washes over me. Something is wrong. The dark circles, the weight-loss, and her nervousness. Even the night we met, as complete strangers, she didn't seem nervous but now she looks ready to bolt out the door. And this is her apartment! I need to fix this, whatever it is that's causing her stress. I move to the center of her living room but don't sit down and she follows at a distance, which I hate, but force myself to accept. For now.

"This is a surprise. I wasn't expecting company." She glances down at herself as if judging her own appearance before looking back at me again. "Would you like something to drink? I have beer."

"Sure, that would be great." She turns away and when she returns, she's holding a beer bottle in one hand and a soda in the other. I don't miss that the beer is Riley's favorite brand and try not to let that get to me, but dammit! I should have been the one spending time with her. It should have been my brand of beer in her fridge. We take a seat on her sofa and Liv has her back practically wedged into her armrest, leaving an uncomfortable space between us.

“How have you been?” Her question pulls my attention back to the present and I take a pull from my bottle while I think about how much I want to tell her. She’s looking directly at me now, the nervousness from earlier slightly less obvious, which I’m grateful for.

“I’m good. Better than the last time you saw me,” I attempt to joke but she makes a choking sound and the sip of soda she took threatens to make a reappearance. She coughs a few times before getting herself under control and averts her gaze again.

“I’m glad things are going well for you, Heath. Riley mentioned work was keeping you busy.” They talked about me. Riley didn’t mention anything. At least now I know she hasn’t forgotten about me and something about that makes me ridiculously happy. This is not impossible. Liv. A future where we are together. Sure, I’m jumping the gun here. We’ve only spent a few minutes in each other’s company and Liv hasn’t given me any indication that she feels anything for me, but I’m here in her apartment and we’re talking, and it’s only slightly awkward. Things could have gone a whole lot worse.

“That’s true, but I’ve been wanting to come by, to see you again. Riley only just mentioned to me that you were hanging out together. You weren’t trying to make me jealous, were you?” I smile, letting her know that I’m joking, but Liv stares at me in obvious confusion for a few seconds.

“Why would you be jealous? You have a girlfriend.” The seriousness of her tone catches me off guard.

“What makes you think that?” Her frown deepens and she opens her mouth to respond before closing it again. She pauses for a second before trying once more.

“Because I—” She cuts herself off and I find myself leaning closer, wanting to hear what she was going to say. “Guys like you, you’re usually with someone,” she mumbles. I consider for a moment digging further into what she means by guys like me, but it’s pretty clear that was not what she was going to say so I let it go.

“I was for a while, but it didn’t work out. She went back to her ex.” This seems to surprise her, and she meets my gaze with some reluctance.

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

“Why the strange look? Don’t you believe in second chances?” I hold my breath, completely invested in her answer, because this has as much bearing on us as it had on Kelsey and her ex.

“I guess it depends on why they broke up in the first place, but generally those reasons don’t change, so no, I suppose I don’t. But that’s just my opinion and I haven’t had that much experience so I’m probably wrong.” And then she blushes and fuck me! I just want to take her in my arms and never let her go, hold all that adorably sweet energy close to me and savor everything about her, even though she might have just confirmed that I’ve missed my chance. But my next question begs to be asked.

“You don’t date much?”

“No, I’ve kind of moved around a bit lately and just haven’t ...” She trails off, not looking at me but rather at some invisible spot on her coffee table. “Ren tries to get me to go out, but I prefer to stay home. It’s comfortable here. I don’t have to worry about impressing someone for a few hours, only

to never hear from him again. And after—" She stops again, her eyes widen as they shoot up to meet mine and now there's definite unease in her gaze. Before I can say anything, she jumps up off the sofa. "I'm sorry, I completely forgot I need to go out for a bit. It was nice of you to stop by though." It's a blatant lie and I can't stop myself from calling her on it, not ready for this time together to end.

"Hey, it's okay. We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to." I stand up as well, wanting to close the distance between us, but her rigid posture confirms I've made a tactical error that needs to be corrected without delay. "Did you know I came by here a few days after you rescued me?" I hoped that would lighten the mood, but she's still standing by the door, her arms wrapped around herself, seemingly debating whether she should just tell me to leave or not.

"Yeah, you returned the sweatshirt I gave you. Evan told me."

"That was just an excuse, Liv. I wanted to see you. I was hoping to ask you out on a date."

"I thought you were dating someone." Fuck, I hate talking to her about Kelsey. And how would she know? Riley wouldn't have told her.

"No, I only started seeing Kelsey about two months after you and I met. From the way Evan acted that day, I thought you were involved with him." The tiniest smile appears, and then she shakes her head.

"Evan is gay, and in a committed relationship with his partner."

"Yeah, Riley told me." She peaks up at me again.

“If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you sent him to spy for you.”

“No, I had no idea you were friends until recently. Believe me, if I knew I would have been here much sooner. I honestly thought you had left town by now.” The change in her demeanor is almost instantaneous. She goes from slightly less rigid than she was a moment ago, to fully alert in less than a heartbeat. Ah fuck!

“Why would you think that?” Too late I realize my mistake. I’ve admitted to knowing something I could have only found out if I had done some digging into her past, and she knows it. I try to play it off as no big deal.

“After that night I spent here, I looked you up. Nothing too invasive. Just the basics. A security precaution because of the work we do.” A few seconds pass while she thinks on this.

“I don’t understand. Were you worried I could be a threat? Because that doesn’t make sense. Our meeting was completely random and even after you left, I knew next to nothing about you. All I had was your business card.”

“Riley mentioned you looked us up, so you know the kind of work we do, right? Well, there’s other things too. Things we don’t put on our website or make public knowledge. Because of that, we don’t make assumptions, about anything. I had to be sure, Liv. And you should be grateful I was the one who did the search. Riley is our resident IT specialist. He would have had the name of your third-grade teacher and the doctor who removed your tonsils before you could blink. I promise, I only looked up the basics. The fact that you worked for AFD meant that you had already gone through background checks and that

was good enough for me.” I could have gone on, but her face suddenly drains of color and she looks like she might faint.

“Liv?” Instinct has me reaching for her, but she steps back and almost trips over her own feet, stumbling but not going down.

“Shit, are you okay?”

“Don’t touch me! I’m fine. You need to go now.” I open my mouth, but have no idea what to say, because I honestly don’t understand what’s happening. Just then, there’s a knock on her door, causing Liv to shriek before spinning around and reaching for the knob, yanking the door open. I recognize Ren standing in the hallway, her hand poised to knock again and concern clear on her face.

“Liv, are you okay? I heard you call out.” Then her eyes fall on me. “Oh, hey. Heath, right? I thought I heard another voice in here. How are you?”

“Hey, Ren. I’m good, thanks. How are you?” Her attention swerves to Liv before I’ve even finished my question.

“Hon, are you okay? You look a little ...” She looks back at me. “What’s going on here?” All the friendliness has left her voice, but Liv responds like a racehorse out the start gate.

“Nothing! Heath was just leaving.” She doesn’t look at me, keeping her eyes fixed on the door instead. Ren, on the other hand, stares at me as if my intentions are printed in hieroglyphics on my face and she’s trying to decipher them. Fuck, I need to know why Liv is so upset, but it’s obvious I’m not going to get any answers from her tonight, so I say my goodbyes and walk out of the apartment, even though I can see Ren is not ready to let me leave, but concern for her friend keeps her from stopping me.

The time spent in my car driving to my place does not lessen my concern for the situation I've inadvertently created. I know I'm not going to get any peace of mind until I get answers, so I call Riley.

"Hey, 'sup?" His usual greeting.

"Hey, man, are you busy?" It's always best to check, especially with his social life.

"Nah, just got home from the gym. What's going on?"
Deciding not to mince words, I get to the point.

"Have you ever asked Liv about Austin?" Riley doesn't hesitate.

"Only once, but she doesn't want to talk about it. Anytime conversation steers towards her past, she changes the subject. Why?"

"Don't you think that's strange?"

"Not particularly. Not everyone had the idyllic childhood you did, bro. And she's pretty private in general so I just go with it."

"My childhood wasn't idyllic." Upper middleclass parents who provided everything I needed, two siblings to keep me grounded and good friends to get me through the rough parts. Yeah okay, maybe he has a point.

"You know what I mean, man."

"And you were never tempted to find out for yourself?" With all the recourses at his fingertips I find it hard to believe he never checked.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but weren’t you the one who said you didn’t want us looking into her background? Besides, she’s a friend now. I wouldn’t do that to her. She’ll open up in her own time, or not. That’s up to her, and we have to respect that.”

“Yeah, I hear you, but it’s hard. I just came from her place now. We talked for a while, but the moment I mentioned Austin she shut down on me. Practically threw me out of her apartment. I know I fucked up, and I have no idea how to fix this so we can move forward.”

“Wow, is it snowing outside?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re coming to me for relationship advice. That is what’s happening here, right? Not Aaron, or Mike who’s married and actually knows a thing or two about having a solid relationship, but the guy who screws anything with a pulse?”
Yeah, I knew I was going to pay for that comment.

“I’m coming to you because you know her better and I was hoping you wouldn’t be a dick about it. Obviously, I was wrong.”

“Okay, okay, don’t get your boxers in a bunch. Give me a second, let me think.” I do as he asks, pacing around in my living room like a caged tiger. “You have to talk to her.” I wait a few seconds, waiting for him to continue but get nothing.

“That’s it? That’s your stellar advice?”

“Yes, be honest. Don’t give her any bullshit and do it soon. Don’t give her a chance to pull away and convince herself she needs to guard herself around you. But don’t pressure her

either. She needs to know that she can trust you.” I drop my hand to stare at my phone for a moment before raising it to my ear again.

“So, what I’m hearing is I need to talk to her soon, but I also have to give her space, but not too much. Christ! How do these things get so complicated?” He chuckles at this.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get it. And I’ll put in a good word for you too.”

“I appreciate that, but I don’t want you in the middle of this. I’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah, I know you’ll do the right thing.”

“Thanks, man. Now go take a shower. You must reek by now.” He laughs again and then hangs up, no goodbye or even a return shot. Just dead air. I know he’s right and his advice is sound. I have to stop myself from going to her right now; that would be like returning to the scene of a crime. No good will come of it. I need to plan and make sure there is no chance that she will slam the door in my face when I see her again. And I am going to see her again. This is not the end of our story. I only just found her again and this is that difficult part all couples have to go through before they can have their happy ending. I’m more convinced of that than ever before.

Thoughts of her stay with me, tormenting me, the way she looked when she opened the door to me earlier, her scent that hung around her as she sat on the sofa next to me, her eyes darting all over the room, never lingering on me for more than a few seconds at a time. Did I really make her that uncomfortable? I try to push the frustration that thought causes aside. All I want to do is take her in my arms and reassure her

that my intentions toward her are pure, honorable. God, I sound like a nineteenth century suitor planning his courtship, but something about that appeals to me. Liv deserves to be cherished, treated with respect and most of all loved unconditionally. Seeing her today reaffirmed that. I know it's soon, but when you know, you know. I knew it after that first night and did nothing about it. I'm not making that mistake a second time.

Unfortunately, there is no pause button on life, so even though I have a framework for the plan I want to set in motion, work soon consumes almost every minute of my day. Our investigations have led us to a Russian syndicate closely aligned with the organization I infiltrated. They've been operating in the city for years but use a warehouse in an old section of the waterfront to conduct their business, which gives them easy access to transport to disappear if the need arises. They have their fingers in just about every illegal pie, everything from drugs and arms to human trafficking, specifically young women and minors. True scum of the earth, and it's going to be a pleasure putting them down, but it's going to take every ounce of our skills and training. Going undercover is not going to be an option this time as none of us could pass for Russian and this syndicate is so close knit and secretive, there's no way they are going to let a stranger into their ranks. We also don't have the time to cultivate any relationships the way we would if we had the resources as we'll need to move quickly once all the pieces are in place. It may be time to call in outside help. We team up with the Feds from time to time, usually at their request not ours, but this

time we might not have a choice. Fortunately, we have options and know people who could be allies in this fight. One name immediately comes to mind, but he's been off the grid for almost a year, apparently working some deep cover case for the FBI. We served together and besides being a good friend, he is one of the few people outside of Fortress we trust implicitly. Riley started putting feelers out as soon as we realized Wyatt could be the asset we need, and we are hoping to make contact soon. Time is of the essence and the sooner we can complete this operation, the better for everyone involved, not to mention this city that has seen more than its fair share of crime, violence and despair.

It didn't take long for Wyatt to reach out. Aaron and I are sitting at a small table in the back of a dive bar so far off the beaten track you couldn't find it on a map, and there's barely enough lighting to make out who's sitting across the table from you. Only a few patrons are scattered around, practicing the fine art of not making eye contact, lest someone takes offense, and you end up paying for the mistake with your life, which seems entirely possible. The place makes me uncomfortable, edgy and, to make matters worse, Wyatt is late. I suppose it's to be expected with the precautions he needs to take before meeting us, but I would love to get this conversation out of the way so that we can leave. A waitress stops by our table to deposit our third round of watered-down beers when the man of the hour suddenly drops in the chair beside mine, still as stealthy as ever. Bastard. He nods at her, and she smiles back before walking off without saying a word. Aaron doesn't waste any time.

“You’re late.” Wyatt stares at him for a few seconds before raising his hands, showing knuckles that are swollen and the skin torn and bloody.

“I had reason,” is his only reply. Aaron sighs, shakes his head and then takes a sip of his beer before responding.

“Shit, sorry man, but this place is giving me hives, so let’s get this over with.” The waitress appears with Wyatt’s beer, places it in front of him with a wink and a smile before turning away. If nothing else the service is efficient, but the girl doesn’t look old enough to drink and her outfit would make a prostitute blush. Wyatt doesn’t seem to notice, but then again, he chose this place, and the girl seems to know him. I decide it’s better not to speculate too much on what that could mean. Best to get down to business, the reason why we’re here.

“We’ve prepared this, all the information we have on the Reznikov Syndicate, but there are some significant gaps we’re hoping you can help with.” I slide the small thumb drive across the table at him and he palms and tucks it into the pocket of his leather jacket. It looks almost as rough and worn as he does.

“Yeah, they’re a nasty bunch. Had a run-in with a couple of their guys a few weeks ago, but I have to warn you, you’re not going to get anywhere close to the inner circle. Their ranks are closed tighter than a nun’s habit. Are you working with any other agencies on this?”

“No, we contacted you first but I’m sure the Reznikovs are going to be on more than just our radar. The last thing we need is some inter-agency meltdown because everyone is doing

their own thing. But you can tell us what you know, who else is involved.”

“Yeah, it’s not always that simple. Inter-agency communication isn’t what it should be, but I’ll take a look and let you know what I find.”

Aaron doesn’t linger once we’ve arranged another meet. He has a young son waiting for him at home and even though he’s committed to Fortress, his life revolves around Jacob. I guess we’re all starting to look to the future these days, wanting to settle down and find something more important to live for than danger and violence, or maybe it’s just me. Memories of Liv kneeling before me, dressing my wounds and touching me race through my mind.

“Man, I’d love to hear the story behind that smile.” Wyatt is smirking at me as if he can guess what I’m thinking even though I didn’t say a word, and I suppose it would be easy to get the wrong idea. None of us are saints, even Mike was a raging horn dog before he met and fell in love with his wife, Kate. Aaron is the only one who’s life seems to be under complete lockdown, but that’s his choice and no one blames him for it. Life can teach you some painful lessons and sometimes it’s just easier to accept them and stay put rather than risking any more of yourself.

“Not much to tell. I met someone, but she’s not quite as enamored with me as I am with her, so I need to figure that out.”

“Enamored? Jesus, Hayes, I think you got lost in the wrong century. Tell her how you feel and then fuck her brains out. Either that will convince her to give you a chance or it will

scare her off for good. It's all up to you. At least then you'll know where you stand, and if you're any good in the sack."

"Fuck you, man. I'm awesome in the sack."

"Yeah, I'm not the one you need to convince, lover boy." We both laugh at that, glad to move away from the serious conversation from earlier, and soon we're joking around like we did back in the Navy.

"What about you? Anyone keeping your bed warm at night?"

"You're joking, right?" he scoffs at me. "Man, my situation is so dangerous I wouldn't bring my ex-mother-in-law into this life. Better to just go it alone for now. There will be time for romance later, if I make it out of this in one piece." Shit, I forgot he used to be married, but Dana couldn't hack being a military wife and things fell apart soon after his first deployment. I get it, that life is not for everyone, but it hit him hard and made him reluctant to try again. "There is this doctor though ... I wouldn't mind getting to know her better. Fiery as hell, loyal, fucking gorgeous." Huh, I did not see that coming.

"That's great, man. I hope you get your shot. Gives you something to look forward to while you're in this shitstorm."

"Damn straight."

Now we're stuck playing the waiting game. Waiting for Wyatt to gather usable intel, waiting for the Reznikov Syndicate to make a move that will give away their agenda and help us take them down, waiting for Liv to ... I don't even know what. Give me some sign that I haven't blown it completely with her? That, if I try hard enough, I could somehow win her for

myself, because that's all I want, to make her mine and have the future I've always dreamed about. And I know it will be worth it. We could be phenomenal together, but it's clear she's not ready, that there is something from her past holding her back, something she's not willing to talk about but it haunts her. And I'm powerless against this ghost. She'll have to find the strength to open up to me and allow me to stand with her, because I'm not willing to give up on her.

A week passes before we hear from Wyatt, and then it's in the form of a cryptic text from a burner phone supplying an address, nothing else. When we get there, we find an apartment building that looks like it should have been condemned years ago, and no one would mistake this for anything other than a place to hide. Being careful to keep our weapons close but concealed, we make our way to Wyatt's apartment, but when we knock on the door, it's not Wyatt who opens.

“Liv?”

Chapter 4

~ Liv ~

Oh shit!

I haven't heard a word from Nick since that day in the hospital, so his text should come as a surprise, but it doesn't. I knew he would reach out; it was just a matter of when. His text is brief, just an address and the instruction to *bring the kit*, which means someone needs medical attention. I've learnt not to make assumptions, because Nick is pretty good at dodging a fist, or a weapon. It's a familiar routine so I don't waste any time, just grab what I need, jump in my Jeep and make my way to the address provided. It's an old, rundown apartment building in a part of the city I've never been and would not venture into alone or at night, but I've been in worse places, and Nick would never deliberately put me in danger, so I make my way inside. When I reach the door to his apartment, I knock ... and knock again.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming," I hear from inside. At least I know I'm at the right place, but when the door opens, I hardly recognize the man standing before me. Nick's face is a mess, one eye swollen almost completely shut, a cut splitting the brow of the other that is going to leave one of those sexy scars, a split bottom lip and I'm pretty sure his nose is broken. He's not wearing a shirt so I can also see dark bruises forming over his ribs and sides, as if he was kicked and beaten repeatedly.

“Holy shit, Nick, what happened?!” I step into the matchbox-sized apartment, trying not to notice the state it’s in. The only furniture visible is a foldup table shoved into a corner and a stained sofa in the middle of the room, with takeout wrappers and containers strewn everywhere. There’s also a smell ...

“Doesn’t matter, just fix it.” He shuffles over to the sofa and lowers his body slowly, grimacing and groaning the entire time. His face is sheet white and there is sweat forming on his brow.

“Uh, I think we might have reached the limit of what I can do here. You could have internal injuries and if your ribs are broken you need to go to the hospital or you could puncture a lung! This looks serious, Nick.”

“Trust me, Little Pain, I’m well aware, but for now see what you can do, yeah? Going to a hospital isn’t really an option right now.” God, what is it with men and hospitals? Do they think it’s a sign of weakness or something? Deciding that now is not the time to broach that subject, I follow him to the sofa that must be older than I am but before I can drag my kit closer, there’s another knock on the door. Nick squints up at me. “Get that, will you? I called some friends to come help. They’re guys I work with, so just be cool.” I roll my eyes at him, clearly asking *when am I not cool*, as I head back to the door. I shouldn’t have been surprised. I mean, seriously? It’s like my life now includes this secret club for badass men with testosterone so potent you could stir it with a spoon.

“Liv?” Yep, at the front of the badass parade is Heath, looking at me as if I’ve just been beamed down by an alien spacecraft. Next to him are Aaron and Mike. Thank God, someone with

medical qualifications who can talk some sense into Mister Stubbornpants.

“Hey guys, funny meeting you here. Come in.” Heath stares at me for a moment before walking through the door, followed closely by Mike who makes a beeline for the sofa where Nick looks like he’s about to pass out. I remain by the door, mostly just to be out of the way, but also to make a quick exit if necessary, because I’m not sure I want to know what these guys are involved in. Heath hangs back as well, with a look that is more suspicion than surprise aimed my way, and I try very hard not to let that get to me.

“What are you doing here, Liv?” he asks in a hushed tone, the words clipped, and there is no sign of the affection he showed the last time we were together.

“Nick asked me to come, but if I knew you guys would be here as well, I wouldn’t have bothered. It’s not like he needs me if Mike is going to take care of him.” I struggle to keep the attitude out of my response, because I suddenly feel a little defensive, not sure what Heath’s insinuating. His brows drop as he looks at me with what can only be described as confusion.

“Who’s Nick?”

“What do you mean who’s Nick?” I point to Nick who is now hunched forward so that Mike can examine his face. Poor guy. That nose is definitely broken.

“That’s Wyatt, but I suppose a different name makes sense considering,” he mumbles, almost as if he’s forgotten he’s talking to me. “And how do you even know him?” Okay, I’ve

had enough of this. I have better things to do with my time than being interrogated by this guy.

“You know what? I think I’m going to let him answer all your questions seeing as he’s the one who brought us all here. I’m going home.” I move towards the sofa, but only close enough to gain Nick’s attention. “Nick, I’m heading out. It looks like you’ve got things covered here. Call if you need anything else, okay?” He barely looks at me but waves his hand in acknowledgement.

“Later, Little Pain.” And with that, I head for the door.

“I’ll walk you to your car.” Heath again, and from the look on his face there’s no point in arguing. And of course, he would offer, because our conversation was obviously not awkward enough for his liking. We make it down three flights of stairs in silence, although I can feel the weight of it bearing down on my shoulders and resting on my soul. Dramatic, I know, but I was hoping to avoid any confrontation with Heath for a while longer. The truth is, I like him, a lot, but there are things from my past I should probably deal with before starting a relationship with someone new. It’s held me back long enough, according to Luke at least. And he’s not wrong. I’ve deliberately steered clear of any romantic involvement because of David, because I wasn’t good enough or he didn’t want me enough. And he left.

“He calls you Little Pain?”

“No, he—” Then I remember who he’s referring to. Nick. Wyatt? “Yeah, that’s what he calls me.”

“Why?” His tone is strangely flat, but it still washes over me like a storm brewing.

“Uh ... Why do you call him Wyatt?”

“Because that’s his name, Wyatt Manning. We served together; I’ve known him for almost a decade.” Right. Of course, they would have history between them.

“Oh.” I guess he would know then. Thinking that makes me feel gullible and stupid, believing everything Nick told me just because he saved my life. Dammit, Wyatt. That’s going to take some getting used to. “I haven’t known him that long, just a few months actually. We kind of met under unusual circumstances, so every now and again I help him out when he needs someone with a bit of first aid knowledge, but I’m glad he has you guys as well. He’s going to need more help than I can give this time.”

“Yeah, we’ve got his back, but I was hoping to be here for you too, and not just when you need me. I’m sorry for how I acted just now. It was just unexpected, seeing you there with him, but I was serious before, Liv. I want to—”

“It’s okay, you don’t have to apologize. I understand it was a weird situation, but I should go, and you should probably get back to Ni—. Wyatt. He’s hurt pretty bad, so you need to help him first. We can talk later.” And with that, I lock myself into my car and drive off, because knowing I need to face my past and doing it are two vastly different things. Heath does seem like the persistent type though, and my phone beeps with an incoming message before I even get home. Not wanting to appear too eager, I don’t look until I’m in my apartment where I finally feel like I can breathe again.

Unknown: I know it’s late, but I want to see you tomorrow.

Text me. Heath

Me: Take care of Wyatt first. We can make plans later

Heath: Wyatt is fine. Mike's taking care of him. He'll be good as new in no time

At least that's one less thing to worry about. Wyatt Manning. Not exactly a name you would associate with the Irish Mob. I can see why he changed it, but does that mean everything I know about him is a lie? If he's involved with Heath, does that mean he's essentially working undercover? The possibilities are endless, and I must admit I'm more than a little intrigued. I've always loved reading about secret organizations, military operations, things the government doesn't want us to know. Let's just say SEAL Team Six is the coolest ever and leave it at that. Wyatt must have known I would find out who he is when his friends showed up at the apartment. Did he orchestrate it that way specifically for this reason? Does it mean he's done working for the Irish? I hope so for his sake, but it might also mean that he'll be moving on, leaving the city to find new bad guys to catch, not that we don't have plenty more here. So maybe he'll stay ...

Heath: Goodnight, Liv. Hope to hear from you soon

Right. Time to face the music, I guess. Either I keep hiding, even though I told Luke I wasn't, or I face this attraction to Heath head on and trust that lightning won't strike twice, because I don't think I'll survive another hit. I try to take comfort in knowing Heath feels it too, that we are in this together and taking a chance on him might turn out to be worth the risk. I guess there's only one way to find out.

Me: Goodnight, Heath. I'll text you tomorrow

§§§

The apartment is quiet and empty. There's no sign of Nick or his friends, but bloodstained rags lie scattered all over the carpet and on the old sofa he'd been sitting on only hours before. I call out to him, but there's no reply, just an eerie silence that seems unnatural for this part of town. There are no sirens, traffic noises, or people talking in the halls of the neighboring apartments. That's when I notice movement from the corner of my eye and turn in that direction and there stands ... David. Oh God, he's here! He's smiling at me, looking happy and oh so handsome in his fireman's uniform. I extend my arms, trying to rush towards him, but ... I can't move. My legs refuse to carry my weight and I crumple to the floor like a puppet separated from its strings. David just stares at me for a moment with pity in his eyes before he turns away. No! Please don't leave me again. I miss you so much. Why did you have to go when all I wanted to do was love you? Questions run through my mind but no sound escapes from my lips until ... the apartment is suddenly engulfed in flames ... and I start screaming.

Dreaming of David used to be a nightly occurrence, until quite recently. They would vary from those soft-focus happy dreams where we were still blissfully in love and planning our future together, to the nightmare I just woke up from, panting, my heart racing, and my clothes drenched in sweat. They bring with them a pain that is almost as crippling as the day he left me. This one was one of the worst and it leaves me feeling drained and listless to the point where I make excuses not to

meet Ren and Evan for breakfast. Instead, I keep myself locked up in my apartment and read through the brief text exchange with Heath as though it contains the answers to all my problems.

I know he is one of the good guys and that he wouldn't intentionally hurt me, but then I thought the same of David when we first met. God, we were so young, or at least at nineteen I was, and I was stupid in love with him. He was still a rookie firefighter when I started volunteering at the same fire station in Austin, while studying to become a paramedic. He was so handsome, funny and kind, and he immediately took me under his wing even though he was only a few years older, and we were both still new there. The more experienced firefighters gave him hell for it, of course but he just shrugged it off and soon we were inseparable. People warned me we were moving too fast, especially Luke, even though he wasn't around to see our relationship grow, but I suppose they had a point. David was my first love and considering that I didn't have any family close by or many friends to rely on, it could appear to outsiders that he was taking advantage of me, but I never felt that way. We were so wrapped up in each other, nothing else mattered except for the bond we were creating together, but obviously things changed. I stare around my little apartment and try to imagine what my life would have been like if there hadn't been a fire that day, or at least not *that* fire. Would we still be living in Austin? Would we even still be together? What does it mean that I can feel such a strong attraction towards Heath when it's been only little more than a year since David left?

There is a new path that lies before me now, new choices to make and even though I'm scared and wildly apprehensive, a small part of me is excited. If I'm honest, I've missed being close to someone, feeling that special connection and, yes, I've missed the physical side of being in a relationship too. The chemistry between Heath and I is not one-sided, he's made that crystal clear, but the question is whether I can put my fears behind me and accept what he's offering? I don't even know what that is exactly. Until we see each other again, it's all just speculation.

Me: Hey! I'm not working today. Want to come over for dinner?

Heath: Sounds great, I'll bring takeout. What do you like?

Me: Surprise me

Heath: That feels like a challenge

Me: Maybe ;)

Heath: Accepted! I'll see you later

There! I took the first step, and everything is fine. Yes, my heart is trying to beat its way out of my chest and my breaths are coming out a little short, as if I've just done one of Ren's crazy exercise routines, but I'm fine. I should probably clean up a bit before Heath gets here though. It's not like he hasn't seen my apartment and it's not dirty, but if I don't keep myself busy, I might just talk myself out of this evening before I've even given us a chance.

Heath knocks on my door a little after seven and when I open for him, he says a quick hello before stepping inside and then promptly turns to face me, taking me in as much as I'm doing

to him, our gazes scanning down and then back up as if we're seeing each other for the first time. He's wearing dark jeans and a grey Henley that are perfectly molded to his body. His hair is slightly damp as if he's recently taken a shower and his smell is intoxicating. Leather and sandalwood and something uniquely Heath. It's a heady combination and I have to stop myself from stepping closer to breathe him in.

"You shouldn't have gone to so much trouble. It's just takeout," I comment. Hopefully it's not too obvious that I did some primping as well, styling my hair in loose waves down my back and applying just a hint of make-up, more of a confidence boost than to cover or enhance. I'm wearing one of my favorite boho maxiskirts with a soft pink sweater that hangs slightly off one shoulder, which I hope conveys just the right amount of interest. Heath smirks at me.

"I'll take that as a compliment, but I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one. You look beautiful, Liv." He takes a quick look around the apartment. "And anyway, nothing with you will ever be *just* anything. I might be jumping the gun here, but I've had time to think about this, about what I want and I'm not here to play games." Wow, way to set the tone for the evening. I stare at him for a moment, trying to gather my thoughts and come up with something halfway intellectual to say, but come up empty. "Don't look so freaked out, okay? Tonight is about a meal and getting to know each other better. Nothing more."

I can't help but remember that he already knows a bit more about me than he should at this stage but try to let that go. I understand why he investigated me, but it still makes me feel a little uncomfortable, an invasion of my privacy. I give him a

tentative smile and then gesture to the kitchen counter where I already have plates and cutlery laid out.

“Okay then, let’s see what you brought.” He lays container after container of Chinese food out on the counter. Somehow, he managed to order all my favorites, even though I’m pretty sure that’s not the kind of information you’d find in a background check. We load up our plates, both leaving the cutlery in favor of eating with chopsticks and move over to the sofa to tuck into our meals. “You did good, Heath. This looks fantastic, thank you.” He smiles at me, his mouth already full of food, and then gives me the sexiest wink before taking his next bite. Wow, I could literally just sit here and watch him eat, the way his jaw moves while he chews and then swallows. How can that be so attractive? As if realizing that he’s the center of my attention and not the food in front of me, he stops with his chopsticks halfway to his mouth and looks over at me.

“What’s up? Why aren’t you eating? Did I forget something?” Realizing that I’ve been caught staring and have no words to offer in explanation, I shove a bit of food in my mouth and start chewing industriously, while giving him a close-lipped smile. He watches me for a moment, as if he’s worried I’m going to stop again, but after my second bite he returns to his own plate. We don’t talk while we eat, except for me offering him another beer and thanking him again for the food once we’re done. After everything is cleared away, we settle again on the sofa, this time with me tucked against his side after he pulled me from my side of the sofa, and his arm around my shoulder. His body is like a warm blanket, and it feels so damn good to just be held like this, my eyes start to sting at the

emotions bubbling beneath the surface, threatening to ruin the moment.

“So, exactly how much time did you spend cleaning today? I can see my reflection in just about every surface and it’s a little weird.” Shit, could he tell I was struggling and attempted to lighten the mood? Needing to play it off, I throw a little snark his way.

“Please, don’t flatter yourself. And anyway, my place is always clean. You must surely remember that from the time you’ve spent here, or is old age affecting your memory already?” He gives me a mock glare and all I can wonder is if everything this man does is going to attract me to him more.

“You did not just call me old. There’s only eight years between us, not exactly a huge gap. And anyway,” he grins at me, imitating my tone, “my years only make me more distinguished, not visually impaired. So, tell me, were you always a neat freak?”

“Oh no, buddy, tonight it’s my turn to get some info out of you, so I’ll be the one asking the questions.” I smirk, letting him know that I’m playing at being serious, even though I’m dying to know more about him too, but his expression changes as he turns his body more towards me so that he can look me in the eyes.

“Buddy? No, not happening. Like I said before, Liv, I know what I want, and I’ll move at whatever pace you are comfortable with to get there, but we are not going to be friends.” At my frown, he amends that statement. “At least, that’s not all we’re going to be. I haven’t been in many serious relationships, mostly because being deployed made that

difficult, so we should probably take this slow for both our sakes, but don't doubt for a second that I want that with you. As for pet names, if you want to call me something, I've always been partial to Smoochie." He bobs his brows a few times and I burst out laughing, which was probably the response he was going for, judging by the broad smile on his face. God, that smile.

"Only under extreme circumstances will the word Smoochie ever cross my lips. I'll let you know when I come up with something a little more ... dignified." We're both smiling now, drinking each other in and I can feel my face starting to heat. "You are very good at expressing what you want, but I think it's time for you to give me what I want." I try to make that sound as suggestive as I can, knowing full well that nothing is going to happen between us tonight.

"Oh yeah, and what's that?" He practically purrs, all his attention focused on my lips.

"I want you ... to tell me ... everything about yourself." He barks out a laugh.

"Everything? You realize we'll be sitting here all night, right?"

"Do you have somewhere else you need to be?"

"Not at all." His stare is so intense I might never stop blushing.

"Okay then, let's hear it."

"Where do you want me to start?"

"Well, where did you start your search into my background?" He sighs out a breath, dropping his eyes from mine and for a moment I almost consider letting him off the hook.

“Liv, I explained about that. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner and you found out the way you did, but at the time it needed to be done.”

“I know, and I’m not mad anymore, but fair is fair, right?” I’m not sure he believes me, but after a moment of trying to stare the truth out of me, he relaxes back into the sofa and starts talking.

I’ve heard it said often enough that you should not make assumptions about people you don’t yet know. Take Heath for instance. During those times that I used to wonder about him and his formative years, I always imagined they were like mine. Don’t ask me why, it’s probably just easier imagining something I know. A single parent, maybe one or two siblings that he wasn’t all that close to, a life that steered him towards the military where he could find his people. I couldn’t have been more wrong. He grew up in a close-knit family with two parents who are still together, two sisters, one older and one younger than him, whom he talks to regularly and sees as often as possible, and friends he enjoys spending time with. Those are apart from the ones he works with every day. I sit listening to him, trying not to focus too hard on all the differences between us, but it’s painfully obvious who’s the more well-rounded individual here, and it’s not me. As if sensing that my thoughts have strayed, Heath pulls me a little closer.

“Hey, tell me what you’re thinking right now?” I take a moment, inhale and then meet his eyes.

“I feel like ... you already have so much of your life figured out and I’m only just finding my way. There are things that

have held me back from going after what I want, and I don't know if I can ... I want to be with you, Heath. I want to give this an honest try, but I don't think I even know how." A gentle expression settles on his face, a soft smile curving his lips.

"Liv, listen to me. You wanting this and willing to try? That's all I need from you. Everything else we work out together, understand? If I thought for even a moment that you would not be worth the effort, I would not be here right now, but I can't stop thinking about you. I can't stop wondering what you're doing when you're not with me and I definitely can't stop wondering what it will be like when I finally get to kiss you." That gets my attention, and without thinking, my eyes drop to his lips. "Fuck baby, don't do that. You look at my lips like that and I'm going to break the promise I made to myself."

"What promise?" comes out in a breathy whisper, because his lips are now so tantalizingly close, I could reach them with mine if I just shifted ever so slightly forward. I lick mine and he groans before pulling away and closing his eyes.

"The one where I don't kiss you until you are one hundred percent on board with this relationship." I want to argue, because damn if I don't want that kiss, but he's right. I just admitted it to him a moment ago and as much as I want to convince myself I'm all in, I can't when David lurks in the dark corners of my mind, trying to steal what no longer belongs to him.

"I wish I didn't have to make you wait." It's true, because more than I want to kiss him, I want him to have what he

wants, and I can already feel my heart trying to make room for this man who only wants a chance.

“I don’t mind, baby. I’ll wait as long as it takes. In the meantime, I just want to spend as much time with you as I can.”

“I’d like that.” I snuggle back into his side and lean my head against his shoulder. If this is all we get to have right now, I’m going to soak it up for as long as possible, which turns out to be not long at all.

“At some point you need to tell me how you know Wyatt.” I don’t raise my head, but I also don’t miss that Heath isn’t quite as relaxed as he would want me to believe.

“I don’t, really. The man I know is named Nick Reardon, and I get the impression he is very different from your Wyatt.”

“Nick is a cover Wyatt had to use to get a job done, but at their core, they are the same man, a friend and someone I trust with my life.” That doesn’t surprise me. I can’t imagine Heath allowing people into his life that did not share the same values or morals.

“That’s good, I suppose, because the world he was involved in, is not exactly clean or without risk. I helped him out a few times, but I’m glad he has you too.”

“Helped him out how, exactly?”

“I think you should ask Wyatt. I don’t want to speak out of turn and I’m sure he would want to tell you himself. It’s not my place.”

“But you were involved somehow?” Tension is now radiating from his body, which is stiff and unyielding next to mine.

“Not the way you think, it’s not a relationship or anything. Usually, it’s like what you saw yesterday. He or someone he knows might need medical attention, so he would call me, and I’d help if I could.” Heath doesn’t respond right away, and I get the impression he’s searching for the right words because he’s not entirely happy right now.

“I must admit I’m not wild about you being exposed to his world. The people he’s involved with, are dangerous, even to those closest to them, but you’re right. I’ll talk to him about it, get all the facts.” I move so that I can look into his eyes again.

“Um, just so I know we’re on the same page here, you don’t intend on telling me I can’t see him again, right? I mean, Wyatt and I aren’t close friends or anything, but he’s important to me and if that’s going to be a problem for you, we should probably address that now.”

“Important to you how?” The air is now thick with unease, and I try to pull away slightly, but he doesn’t let go.

“He saved my life. The day we met, I was someplace I shouldn’t have been and got into trouble. If Wyatt hadn’t shown up, I would have been raped and possibly murdered, so if he ever needs my help, I’m going to give it to him.” A nerve ticks in Heath’s jaw, but aside from that he doesn’t move a muscle for a few moments. He does look upset though. Very upset.

“How close?” comes out in a soft growl, barely above a whisper.

“Excuse me?”

“How close did you come to being raped?”

“I’m okay, you don’t have to worry. Wyatt– “

“Liv, please, I need to know. How close?”

“They got my clothes off, but–”

“They?!” He shoots up off the sofa and then turns back so that he’s towering over me, waiting for me to reply.

“Yes, there were three of them. Two held me down while the third got my pants off, but nothing–” He’s pacing now, running his hands through his hair, swearing under his breath.

“Jesus! When was this?”

“Uh, about a week after you and I met.” The pacing stops and he spins towards me.

“Fuck, you mean I could have stopped it from happening?”

“What? No! It was completely random. I was taking one of the kids from the center home one evening and after I dropped him off, I started having car trouble. I didn’t have a choice but to pull over, and the next thing I knew three guys were there pulling me into an alley. There’s nothing you could have done.” How can he possibly feel responsible for what almost happened?

“You could have called me to come and help you instead of struggling on your own. Or I could have gone with you so you wouldn’t have been alone. Or I could have taken the kid home and you wouldn’t have been there at all. Fuck!” His voice is raised almost to shouting volume and he looks furious, and it’s starting to make me a little nervous. Without thinking I squeeze further into the sofa, pull my knees up and wrap my arms around them. Of course, he notices, and immediately his expression softens from anger to concern. Slowly, he drops to

his knees in front of me, placing his hands on his thighs, careful not to touch me. “Liv, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. I would never do anything to hurt you, please believe me?” His face is earnest and sincere, his eyes filled with regret, and it looks like he wants to reach for me but isn’t sure whether he should.

“I know.” I don’t say anything more, because the truth is I don’t know. I thought I knew, but the change in him was so sudden, so unexpected, it left me feeling the urgent need to hide, to push him away and lock myself in this apartment where I can control who comes and goes. “It’s getting kind of late. You should probably go.” This doesn’t seem to surprise him. He just sighs out a breath, resigned to the fact that this night is not going to end the way either one of us expected, and rises to his feet.

“Are you going to be okay? Should I call someone?”

“No, I’m fine. Seriously, you don’t have to worry about me. I’m just going to go to bed now.” I stand up from the sofa and start moving towards the door. He hesitates for a moment before following me.

“Goodnight, Liv. I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

“Sure, goodnight.” And with that he walks out the door, and I’m left feeling ... I don’t know. Nostalgic perhaps, for something that was within my grasp but somehow slipped away in a moment of unguarded emotion.

I take a few minutes to tidy the kitchen before washing my face, brushing my teeth and putting on my pjs. I’m just getting settled in bed when my phone lights up with a text message.

Riley: Heath told me what happened. Are you okay?

Me: I'm fine, going to bed now. Goodnight

Riley: Liar! If you want to talk, I'm here

Me: Thanks

I don't know what annoys me more, that Heath told Riley what happened, even if it was out of concern for me, or that Riley thinks he knows me so well. Of course, he's not wrong. I'm nowhere near ready to fall asleep. My thoughts are a jumble of what ifs and what nows that my brain refuses point blank to deal with. I wasn't really scared of Heath, was I? His was a momentary reaction to something he had no control over, something he feels he could have stopped if things had been different between us. And I might have just ruined any idea of us by pushing him away again. I can't stand the thought, because I want us. I want to know what it's like to be loved by a man like him. Someone strong and capable. Someone who doesn't need me for anything other than my company and only wants my love in return. I know, I'm getting way ahead of myself with words of love, but didn't he say he was serious about getting to know me at least? And I did enjoy our time together, despite the way it ended. I reach for my phone lying beside my bed and check the time to find it's almost morning again. There's also one unread message.

Heath: I want to see you again. Text me when you're ready

When I'm ready. At least he's not running for the hills after my hot then cold behavior, which is a good sign, I guess, but I don't want to rush into anything. Maybe, if we take this slow, I can have a man to love too. Who knows?

Me: Working late for the next few days. Will let you know

That's about as much as I can commit to at this moment, but hopefully it's enough reassurance that I'm still here, willing to try, willing to take a chance on us.

§§§

“You're unusually quiet this morning. What's up?” Ren stares at me over her coffee cup as if she can eyeball the words out of me. I was hoping to avoid this conversation, but maybe her input will help. She knows more about matters of the heart than I do, and dating is her favorite past time. Besides that, and more importantly, she knows me and she's the only person I can have this conversation with.

“Heath came over for dinner last night.”

“And?” There's no hiding her excitement. She's practically vibrating with expectation, turning in her seat so that she can stare at me more intently, her coffee forgotten. Great. Too bad she's going to be disappointed.

“It was nice, I had a good time, until ...” God, am I really doing this?

“Until what? Jeez, it's like pulling teeth with you! Just tell me what happened?”

“He asked me about Nick. You met him in the hospital a while back. Only, it turns out he's not who I thought he was, and Heath got so upset and then I got a little freaked out and— “

“Hold on a second, not so fast. What do you mean Nick's not who you thought he was? And what the hell did Heath do? I

swear, these guys and their badass vibes. They think they can come throw their weight around and intimidate the poor little woman. I'll kick both their asses. You know I will. I can finally put that Krav Maga class to good use. Show them where they can put their—”

“Whoa, calm down Mighty Mouse. It's not what you think. Nick is a good guy. He served with Heath in the Navy; they go way back. And I think Heath was more upset about how Nick and I met, what happened that night, and the timing of it all.” Her brow furrows.

“What's wrong with the timing?”

“Nick and I met shortly after I found Heath in that alley. I think Heath thinks he could have stopped what almost happened the night I met Nick. I don't know. It doesn't make any sense to me either.”

“But he scared you.” Not a question. I should have known she would see the truth. I don't bother denying it.

“He did. As much as I try and tell myself I know he won't hurt me physically, I couldn't shake that doubt and, in the moment, all I could do was curl into a ball and try to hide, which is pretty stupid.”

“Hey, you're not stupid. Don't let me hear you talk about yourself that way. Does he know what happened that night you landed in the hospital?” Ren and Evan are the only ones who know the details of that night, besides Nick who witnessed some of it. I shake my head and then drop it to avoid making eye contact with her. I know what's coming. “You need to tell him.” Yep, called it. “If you're even considering a relationship with Heath, you can't keep this stuff from him, Liv. That's not

fair. He needs to know why you reacted the way you did. I'm assuming you are considering a relationship with him?"

"I am. I mean I want to. Ugh, I feel like a freshman crushing on the high school quarterback. I'm so far out of my depth, it's ridiculous." I can feel the blush creeping up my cheeks, for crying out loud. It's not like I'm some wide-eyed virgin. I've experienced what it's like to be with a man I was deeply in love with, but I guess it's losing that love that made me so reluctant to trust my own feelings.

"Hon, I think a SEAL trumps a quarterback any day of the week. Nobody's going to blame you for second guessing yourself, but if you get in your own way, you're going to regret this for the rest of your life. So, if you listen to nothing else I've said, listen to this: Talk to him and then trust your instincts. It won't steer you wrong."

Chapter 5

~ Heath ~

I stare at my laptop, where no less than seven reports wait for data to be recorded for clients who pay us large sums of money to take care of their corporate security. However, the cursor has not moved in over thirty minutes, so the screen is black. I could say it's as black as my mood, but that would be a cliché, not to mention incorrect. What is the color of fear? Or the color of anxiety over how badly I screwed up with Liv? It's as if the universe knows how much she already means to me, after such a short time of knowing her, and is conspiring to put me in situations I could not possibly handle correctly. Instead, I say the wrong things, act the wrong way and now it's all gone to shit. I don't know, maybe black is the right color for hopeless self-pitying despair, and my black screen mocks me for every minute I sit here. As if on cue, Riley and Wyatt come sauntering into my office. Wyatt seems to be recovering well from the beating he took almost a week ago, his injuries not as serious as we originally feared, even though his nose was broken and will take the longest to heal.

"Hey." Riley is all smiles as he sinks into one of the plush chairs across from my desk. I only grunt at their intrusion into my thoughts. As much as I want the distraction, I'm not sure I'm going to be happy with the outcome of this visit. That would be largely due to the other man in the room. Wyatt doesn't wait for an invitation to join in.

“What crawled up your ass?” I glare up at him before responding.

“I need to talk to you.” Out of the corner of my eye I notice Riley stiffening slightly at my tone, instantly more alert.

“About?”

“Liv Parrish.” Just saying her name brings forth memories of the time we’ve spent together, and it takes supreme effort to get my mind back on the man in front of me, who has yet to take a seat.

“God, that woman. Not a self-preserving bone in her entire body. What do you want to know?” He pauses for a moment and then something strange happens to his face. It’s the look Dad used to get when my sisters went on dates, or talked about dating, or just the guys they liked. “Hang on, she’s not ... is she the woman you were telling me about in the bar that night? The one who wasn’t that into you. Shit! Did you fuck her?!” He steps closer to my desk and suddenly Riley is standing next to me as well, his hands raised in a placating gesture.

“Whoa, take it easy, guys. No need to get excited.” Wyatt drops his voice before repeating his question.

“Did you fuck her?” Déjà vu must be having a good old chuckle at my expense right now.

“Why do you care? What is your relationship to her, besides using her whenever you need someone with some first aid training?” It was my intention to provoke him. Maybe if he punched me, I would stop feeling so emotionally untethered and have something tangible to be upset about. I should have tried harder because Wyatt only continues to glare at me.

“Just answer the question, Hayes.”

“I haven’t fucked her. I want to, but it’s more than that. I want a future with her. So, I need to know, who are you to her?” He studies me for a moment, maybe looking for the right words to explain something I don’t want to know but need to for my own peace of mind.

“We met a few months ago. She got herself into a situation that could have ended very badly, but I was able to help. With my reputation on the streets, I was able to get her to safety, but it might have also drawn some unwanted attention, so I’ve been keeping an eye on her, making sure she doesn’t become a target. The first aid stuff is an excuse to keep contact, make sure she’s okay.”

“Yeah, I was wondering about that. With our SEAL training, you should easily be able to take care of most situations on your own. Now it makes sense why you used her.”

“Will you please stop saying it like that? I’ve done everything I can to keep her at arm’s length. We’re not friends, although I think she might want to be. She seems lonely sometimes, but she has no idea who I really am. I thought it would be safer for her that way.”

“Yeah, I know. Sorry man, I was being a dick. It’s all just messing with my head, the attack and almost being raped– “

“She told you about that?” erupts from Wyatt at the same time as Riley’s “What?!” fills my office and the atmosphere fills with the kind of energy that leads to men storming off to battle, blood raging against injustice.

“She didn’t go into the details, but I got the gist. Thank you for what you did. I can never—”

“You don’t have to, that’s between me and her. The work she does, the things I’ve seen her do ... she’s a good person who genuinely cares about other people and doesn’t think twice about putting herself out there. That’s rare in this city. Hell, it’s rare no matter where you go. So, I’ll continue looking out for her until she tells me she’s done, because God knows she needs someone to have her back. And I know you’re going to want to take over that role, and that’s cool, but I’ll still be doing my part too.” Riley chooses this moment to chime in.

“Aah, look at you two, making nice. You realise she’s not all that happy with you guys, right? Hell, she’s even dodging my calls and I *am* her friend. I should have known being associated with you was going to cost me at some point.” He winks at me and turns to leave my office. Wyatt remains standing, and once it’s just the two of us, he turns his attention back to me.

“I owe you an apology for my outburst earlier. I know you’ll treat Liv the way she deserves, but she’s special, you know?”

“Yeah, I know. No need to apologise. I’m glad she has you in her corner, but the kind of life we lead, there’s bound to be blowback at some point, and I don’t want her anywhere near it if I can help it, you understand?”

“I know what you’re asking Heath, but I can’t walk away. There’s a very real possibility that people I’ve dealt with in the past, will find out about her and—”

“Let me protect her then. I can get closer to her. I know the risks.”

“Exactly how close will you be able to get if she’s not ready to accept you yet?”

“You let me worry about that. Just like you, I overreacted to a conversation that completely blindsided me. I’ll explain and then I’ll make it up to her.”

“Okay then, good luck with that. I’ll catch up with you later.”
And with that, he walks out of my office, leaving me to my reports and a mood slightly less bleak than what it was before.

§§§

It seems Riley is not the only one being ghosted by Liv this week, and I’m officially done waiting around. How is a man supposed to apologise for his mistakes when the woman he needs to apologise to, doesn’t give him the opportunity? I knew my overreaction was going to cost me, but a small part of me is wondering if she’s trying to protect herself or just being stubborn in not letting me close to her. Either way, I’ve had about as much as I can take and am now camped out outside her door, waiting for her to get home from work. I know it’s extreme and not something I would usually do, but desperate times and all that. I check my phone for what feels like the hundredth time, hoping for a message or call giving me some indication of where I stand, but there’s nothing. And I didn’t call her to let her know I was coming over for fear that she might make yet another excuse not to see me.

Finally, I hear voices coming up the stairs towards me, which is unexpected, but I don’t care. I just need to see Liv and reassure myself that she’s okay. The first person I see is Ren,

followed closely by Evan carrying two pizza boxes and Liv bringing up the rear. Ren and Evan both stop when they see me, causing Liv to bump into Evan from behind which in turn causes him to stumble forward, almost losing his grip on the food.

“Whoa, careful. That was close.” I give him a friendly smile because I’m aware that I’m the interloper and getting on the wrong side of Liv’s friends is not going to score me any points with her. He gives me a suspicious glance before turning to Liv.

“Did you invite him? I don’t think we have enough pizza.” Okay, message received. I’m not welcome here. Liv stands frozen in her spot, her eyes not leaving my face. I can see her chest rise and fall under the sweater she’s wearing, and it takes every ounce of restraint in me not to rush over to her and take her in my arms. I realise in that instant that I will do literally anything to have her in my life, in my arms, and in my bed. Failure to convince her that that is where she belongs, is not an option. I step closer to her, once Evan has reluctantly moved out of the way. I can appreciate that he’s being protective, but it feels like one barrier too many and my look in his direction tells him so. To his credit, he doesn’t back off right away but instead gives Liv a questioning glance before stepping aside. It’s Ren who breaks the silence.

“You know what? I wasn’t feeling pizza to begin with, so how about you two keep the one pie and we’ll take the other. Liv, I’ll talk to you later, okay? Come on Evan, let’s give them some privacy.” God bless this woman and all her future children! I can see he wants to argue, but Ren just grabs him by the wrist and once he’s handed the one box over to me

while giving me a warning glare, she drags him back the way they came. Liv still hasn't moved from her spot, so I step closer to her, making sure to move slowly.

“Hey, it's good to see you. I've missed you.” She reacts like someone who's been poked with a cattle prod, suddenly and without warning. She moves past me to her door, making sure not to brush against me on her way, and unlocks it with quick, nervous movements. My heart sinks into my boots because it's clear I've made yet another mistake. I should not have just shown up unannounced. Whatever it is that has Liv reacting the way she is, it's not behind her yet, and I need to respect that.

I still follow her into the apartment but don't step all the way inside. Liv is already bustling around in her kitchen, gathering plates and napkins for a meal I'm not sure I'm allowed to share, even though there are two plates and a beer for me. She reminds me of a bird who managed to fly in through an open window and is now desperately looking for a way out. When she finally stops and looks over at me, it's as if she sees me for the first time, a small frown visible between her brows, so I do the only thing I can think of and prepare to leave.

“Look, it's okay, I shouldn't have rocked up here without talking to you first. I'll go, but I want you to know something before I do. I want you to know how sorry I am that I scared you. I want you to know that I would never do anything to hurt you and I want you to know I'll do anything for a chance to be in your life. I just want a chance, Liv. That's all. Please, just give me that.” I put down the box still clutched in my hands and head for the door.

“Heath, wait.” My heart jerks to a stop in my chest, halting me in my tracks. I turn slowly to face her, not sure I’m ready to hear what she has to say but compelled to do so anyway. She takes an audible breath before our eyes meet and lock. “If you had said you needed a chance, or needed me, I would have let you walk out that door. I’m sure I would regret it, but I would do it anyway because I’ve been needed before and that didn’t work out so well. It’s not what I want.” My heart sets off galloping in my chest, even as I try to hold myself back from hoping that this might be our moment, but I have to be sure.

“What do you want, Liv?” I hold my breath as she walks slowly towards me, coming to a stop when she’s right in front of me.

“I want you to stay. I want to give you your chance, and I want to take one too.”

Fuck, yes!

“I swear to you, you won’t regret it.” She’s standing so close to me; I can feel the heat from her body and breathe in her sweet scent as if it was coating my skin instead of hers. And then, as if in a dream, she is in my arms and my mouth covers hers in a kiss so tender, yet filled with need and want and desire, all the things I cannot yet name as well as those I dare not mention. She might have come to me, but I won’t fool myself into believing that the issues that torment us have just melted away. It doesn’t matter though, I will be the one to hold her, stand beside her, and fight the demons that steal her peace, not because she needs me to, but because there is no place I’d rather be, no other pursuit more important.

My body ignites into a roaring inferno as the kiss continues. I have one arm wrapped tightly around her waist, holding her body flush against mine, while my other hand cups the nape of her neck, keeping her firmly locked in place while I devour her mouth, and for a moment I consider picking her up and laying her down on the bed that has been taunting me from behind it's screen every time I've been in this apartment. As if sensing where my thoughts are heading, my body responds with a surge of adrenaline, tightening my grip even more. In response to this Liv moans softly into my mouth, while her hands continue to alternate between threading through my hair and cupping my face, but I have to be sure this is what she wants. I've made too many mistakes with this woman to rush things now that I'm so close to having what I want most. So, I pull my lips away from hers by an inch, draw in a ragged breath and try to focus on her beautiful face.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but maybe we should slow down a little. I don't want to rush this; I want you too badly, but we don't have to do this right now."

"I want you too," is only a whisper from her lips, but I feel it in every cell in my body, "and I don't want to wait, Heath. I've been hiding for a long time; from the things I want and the feelings that come with a real connection. I don't want to do that anymore. I want you to take me to bed and show me how much you want me." Fuck, I know there's a warning behind those words, but denying her is as impossible as touching the moon with my feet planted on Earth. Not that I feel like I'm being held fast by gravity right now. There is nothing holding me in place ... except her. I don't hesitate, just pick her up and carry her over to the bed and lay her down on the covers. Then

I follow, covering her beautiful soft body with my undeniably hard one. We're both still fully clothed and my hands itch to rid her of every thread that lies between us, but I want to savour every second, every moment. I'm surrounded by her deliciously sweet scent and she's panting slightly, her face flushed and her eyes shining as they take me in. She licks her lips and I feel it across my entire body, a whisper of a caress that spurs me into action. I shift my weight to the side so that I'm lying next to her and then lift the hem of her sweater, slowly exposing her toned stomach and firm round breasts covered by a lacy pink bra, until I can pull it over her head and toss it to the floor next to the bed. Her skin is flawlessly pale, silky soft and so smooth it defies reason. I need to touch it, taste it, claim *her*. I shift back on top of her, ready to start my feast but Liv tugs at my shirt, pulling it free from where it's tucked into my slacks and slides her hands underneath, stroking up and down my back with her nails before bringing her hands to my front.

"Heath, take this off. I want to see you." The way she breathes my name causes yet another wave of lust to crash through me and before I can attempt anything else, I first take her mouth in another blistering kiss, licking my way inside until I'm drunk from the taste of her. She moans into my mouth, a low hungry sound, while her hands continue to stroke over my stomach and up to my chest, lighting up every nerve in their path. Never has a woman's touch had such an effect on me, driving me on like an out-of-control freight train, mindless to everything except her. I kiss down her neck, inhaling deeply as I go and she moans again, tugging more frantically at my shirt. I manage to lift my head even as every instinct urges me to

move further down her body and she takes this moment to make another breathless plea, “Please Heath, I need to feel you.” I can’t deny her. God, I’d sign over my firstborn if she asked me to. Open a vein, seal it in blood. Done and dusted. Not a second thought.

With a monumental force of will, I raise myself off the bed and start unbuttoning my shirt. Her eyes lock onto my fingers as if she can will me to move faster with her stare, and as I reveal more of my skin, she licks her lips in anticipation, causing my dick to harden even more and the tip to weep with my own need for her. When I reach for the button of my slacks, she mirrors my movements and as much as I wanted the honor of removing her clothes, I don’t have the strength to make her stop. I need to be back on that bed. I stare for a moment as she shoves her jeans down her thighs, leaving only lacy pink panties to hide what I want most, and then her eyes are back on me, or at least the part of me about to burst through my zipper. Again, she licks her lips and seconds later my slacks, boxer briefs, socks and shoes are scattered in various directions across her floor, my dick is covered and I’m stalking towards her bed, ready to stake my claim. I lower myself over her once more, her thighs parting to allow me between her legs and I swear I can smell her arousal mixed with her scent that already drives me wild. Her hands come up and rest on either side of my head, fingers threading through my hair and pulling me down into another searing kiss. I love that, her taking what she wants from me, wanting it as much as I do. I slide a hand down her body, pause for a moment over her panties and stroke the delicate lace over her mound, before slipping a finger underneath and feeling how ready she is for

me, how wet, how wanting. I slide my finger inside and her moan grows louder as she arches up into my touch, pulling on my hair while deepening our kiss, sucking on my tongue, revelling in me as much as I'm revelling in her. The last of my restraint snaps at the same time as the lace covering Liv splits at the seams.

“Fuck, I wanted to take it slow, but you just had to be so fucking sexy,” I growl, removing my hand so that I can grab my cock and push inside her body. Liv arches up again, meeting my thrust with her entire body and then locks her feet in the hollow of my back, her arms wrapped around my shoulders and her thighs hugging my waist. And I feel like I'm drowning in her heat and my breath can only come from her lungs. We kiss as I thrust into her, my tongue and my cock working her up to a climax that threatens to destroy us both, each stroke more desperate than the one before. My hand, that had been anchored to her hip holding her to me, now slides between our bodies and finds her clit just in time to shove us both over the edge of rapture, still tied together. Now tied forever, because I'm never letting her go.

Dawn creeps quietly over the foot of the bed, casting the room in a soft glow. We lie facing each other, our bodies a few inches apart, the covers only pulled as far as our waists and I'm gently caressing her nipples with the tips of my fingers, circling them, stroking them until they're firm peaks beneath my touch. There's a lazy, sated smile on Liv's face that is causing all kinds of stirring beneath the sheet and I can't help the smirk forming on my own lips. Her voice is low and slightly raspy when she asks: “Are you enjoying yourself?”

“Hmm, immensely.” A blush starts in her cheeks, spreading down her neck and then further down her body. So gorgeous, so responsive. No matter what I do, her body can’t seem to help reacting.

“You don’t think I would mind?” Her eyes drop to my hand before meeting mine again, letting me know what she’s referring to.

“Why would you mind me playing with what’s mine?” You can call me a caveman, I don’t even care. She’s all that matters and she’s all mine.

“Yours.” It’s a purr of agreement, contentment, trust.

“Hmm. These gorgeous tits, this amazing body, that beautiful smile, it’s all mine now.” Her smile grows wider, and she opens her arms to me.

Chapter 6

~ Liv ~

I made the decision to go after what I want, and I won't regret it. I can't regret it, not now while I'm lying in his arms, warm, protected, and blissed out from his touch. I know that this could all go up in flames, end in devastating heartache, but what other choice was there? To live alone and in fear of being hurt again for the rest of my life? How is that any better than the possible worst-case scenario of giving my heart to this man?

On some level I understand that what David did to me was not my fault, but I was so young at the time, in every way that mattered, not just in love. Even though my family was small, our love for each other was never tested. It was always a given like the sun rising in the morning, but then Mom died so suddenly, and Luke left, and I was alone. Once David and I began dating, he became my everything until the accident happened ...

It was the kind of devastation you only ever see on the news, the building completely engulfed in fire, flames reaching into the sky and black smoke visible from miles away. David's crew had been fighting for hours and was finally starting to make some headway when he and two others were sent inside the structure. I still don't know exactly what happened, but a beam fell on him, trapping him in the flames and debris. I think, if it was just the burn scars, we might have been okay.

David was never vain or particular about his appearance and neither am I. Our connection went so much deeper than just the physical, but the injury sustained to his back landed him in a wheelchair and that was always his line in the sand. He would not be a burden to anyone, especially the people he loved. Stupidly I thought this excluded me. How could it not? We were engaged! We had promised our lives to each other, but of course I was wrong, and he left, and I was alone again. I left Austin shortly afterwards, unable to face the memories of our life together, or the broken promise of a future I would never have, and drifted from town to town, working in restaurants or diners before moving on to the next state. I avoided attachments at all costs, and even went so far as to dodge Luke's attempts to check up on me as they were laced with misplaced guilt I had no idea how to assuage. It worked well enough until I ended up here. I have no idea what makes this city different from all the others. Maybe it was just time for a change. Or maybe it was Ren and Evan inviting me into their little circle and finding work at Stopgap. Being around those kids showed me how important it is to have someone looking out for you. Either way, it was time to settle down and maybe now, taking this chance might not feel like such a big risk.

Heath stayed long enough to have coffee, before rushing off to his place to get ready for the day. He also made sure to kiss me goodbye in such a way that I can still feel his lips on mine even now, hours later. I'm at Stopgap, preparing to help a small group of middle schoolers with their homework when Wyatt comes strolling in as if he owns the place. These men!

“Hey, Little Pain, how’s it going? Uh, wait. No need to answer that question. If your smile gets any wider, you’ll be able to lick your own ear.” He flips a strand of my hair over my shoulder and then flicks my ear, leaving me stunned for a moment. In the short time that I’ve known Wyatt, he has never visited the center and he has definitely never initiated physical contact beyond what was necessary in that moment.

“Eew, thanks for that visual. What are you doing here?” I take a tiny step back, hoping he won’t notice my attempt at creating a little distance, but his eyes narrow slightly.

“You don’t sound happy to see me.” Strangely he doesn’t look like he’s teasing me, but like this really bothers him.

“It’s not that. I just found out you’ve been leading a double life and I wasn’t sure you wanted me involved in either of them, so I’m a little surprised to see you, that’s all.” He drops his head, sighs and then raises his eyes to mine again.

“I’m sorry, Liv. I couldn’t tell you. You were already putting yourself in enough danger without getting more involved with me. I had to keep you at a distance.” *I had to keep you at a distance.* Right. Best to keep me in my place, easy and uncomplicated.

“So, the accent’s fake? Pity, I think that was my favorite thing about you.” That gets me a smile.

“You liked that, did you? Thought it was sexy? Was I your sexy Sean Connery? All double-oh-saving-your-ass sexy?” His brows dance on his forehead as I burst out laughing and as much as I’d like to, I can’t stay mad at him. He was doing what he thought was best, trying to protect me.

“Please stop saying sexy. And I believe Sean Connery is Scottish. Besides, Daniel Craig is the best 007. Anyway, you don’t have to worry about me. Last time I saw you, you were the one who needed help, so what’s up with that? Have you stopped working for the mob?” He looks away again.

“It’s complicated. That’s not exactly the kind of life you can just walk away from, especially if your reason for being there in the first place was being undercover, but I’m trying to do what I can to get out without causing too many waves. The guys from Fortress are helping, so it should be okay.”

“Right,” I reply, because there’s not really much more to say about that, but he cocks a brow at me, obviously confused by my tone.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing! It’s just that I’m still a little thrown by the whole Nick/Wyatt thing. And then there’s the connection between you and Heath. I don’t know, it’s just strange how different parts of my life are suddenly overlapping.”

“Look, the Nick/Wyatt thing doesn’t have to be a big deal. Being Nick was a necessary evil, but now you know, so no more secrets, okay? And I’ll still be keeping an eye on you just in case people I’ve been involved with in the past get the idea that they can come after you. Heath has already read me the riot act, so there won’t be any more callouts for you to come and help me at odd hours.” He says this with a smile, like it’s supposed to make me happy or something. It doesn’t. I liked helping him. I like knowing I make a difference, even in the smallest way, but it looks like the decision has already been made for me.

“Okay. Well, I need to get done here before the kids arrive. Take care, Wyatt.” I start to turn away from him, but he grabs hold of my arm and gently turns me back to him.

“Hey, this isn’t goodbye. I get the feeling I’ve put my foot in it, but I don’t know how.”

“No, it’s fine. I just—” A group of boys come rushing into the room, and then screech to a halt when they spot Wyatt. “Come in guys, take a seat. We’ll get started in a moment.” I turn back to Wyatt. “I need to get to work. We can talk later.” I can see he’s not ready to walk out yet, but I don’t give him the choice to stay, preferring to focus on the children who do need my help, rather than the man who doesn’t. And in that moment, I feel more like a child myself than the actual children I’m meant to help, but what can you do?

So, here’s something I didn’t know before; men talk to their male friends the same way women do to theirs. I mean about relationships, not that Wyatt and I had a relationship as such, and maybe it’s more because he was worried about getting into trouble with Heath. I don’t know. What I do know is that he must have talked to Heath shortly after his visit to Stopgap because I received this message about an hour later.

Heath: Hey! I miss you. Everything going okay at work?

Not transparent at all.

Me: All good. Just in the middle of a tutoring session. Chat later

I try not to think too much on what Wyatt said for the rest of the day. I mean, I should probably be happy that I won’t have to go out in the middle of the night to help him or that I won’t

be in any danger. Maybe it's because this is all still so new, being with Heath and having him interfere in my life in this way. That's all I can think of. I know we'll have to talk about it, and I'm not looking forward to that conversation, but best to get it out in the open now before it becomes a bigger problem that could have been avoided.

The light is still on in the clinic when I get home after work, so I decide to go in and have a chat with Ren. She's busy restocking cabinets with cleaning supplies so I dump my things in a corner and start helping.

"Hey, you, how are things going here?" She turns to me with a smile, but there's a weariness in her eyes I'm not sure is all work related. For as outgoing as she is, she's also immensely private, maybe even more so than I am, and getting her to confide in me took every ounce of patience I had. It was worth it though and solidified our friendship.

"You know how it is, same old same old. The better question is how are things with you? Last time I saw you there was a gorgeous man at your apartment who looked like he wanted to consume you like his last meal. How did that go?" I can feel myself blush and Ren's smile grows wider. "Ah, that good, huh? God, I'm so jealous. I haven't had a good o—"

"Ren! I don't need to know that. Things went ... well, I think."

"You think? How can you not know? I mean, he looks like the kind of guy who knows his way around the female form and can show you a trick or two. You did have an orgasm, right?"

"Ren! Seriously, I'm not telling you that."

"Why not? I would tell you if the situation was reversed."

“I know! But this is me, and I’d prefer to keep the details private if you don’t mind.”

“Ugh, you’re no fun. Fine then, keep your secrets. Is he coming over tonight?”

“I don’t know, we didn’t make any plans.” She’s about to reply when something catches her eye over my shoulder, and she looks up towards the door.

“Hey, Heath, good to see you again. How are you?” She doesn’t even try to hide her smirk and I fight the urge to dig her in the ribs to make her stop before she says something truly embarrassing.

“Hi, Ren. I’m good, thanks. I was just about to go upstairs when I heard you two chatting. Nearly set my ears on fire.” Oh shit! “And if you must know, I know quite a few tricks. I’d be happy to give Liv a demonstration.” He winks at me, and she starts fanning herself with the stock list clutched in her hand.

“Damn. I knew you’d be worth the trouble. Liv, go. Make him show you all his tricks, and then come tell me about them later.” Heath laughs at this, while I try to find a way to sink through the floor. He walks over to me, holds out his hand and helps me into a standing position before pulling me into his arms.

“Hi. I really like this blush on you. Might have to find ways to keep it there.” Another wink, then he leads me out the clinic and up the stairs to my apartment.

§§§

It's finally the weekend, and after spending the night, Heath went out early this morning to get pastries and coffee for breakfast. It was then that I realized that I slept through the night, or at least during the hours that Heath was not showing me his many tricks, and I'm already addicted to his company, attention and affection. Now we sit on my sofa, enjoying the coffee and feeding each other bits of chocolate croissant, smiling like a pair of Cheshire cats. Heath gives me one of his lingering stares, causing my blood to rush through my veins, expectation running high at what he might say or do next. He leans in for a kiss, sweeping his tongue deep into my mouth, and moans at what I can only guess is the taste of chocolate lingering there. When he finally pulls back, his eyes are dark with lust.

"I could stay here forever," he murmurs softly and I melt deeper into my sofa.

"You're welcome to." I'm not even joking.

"Yeah? You won't kick me out when I start leaving my laundry all over the place or wet towels on the floor?"

"Well, now that you mention it, those wet towels would be a deal breaker. A girl has to put her foot down somewhere, right?" He laughs at this.

"Don't worry, my mom taught me well. A wet towel shall not get in the way of true love."

"True love, huh? And here I thought we were just in it for the sex."

"Oh, look who's got jokes!" But he's not laughing. In fact, he looks quite serious except for the two raised brows and a

mischievous glint in his eyes. “This reminds me. We know I’m ticklish, but we never established whether you are.” Oh crap! From the look on his face, he clearly thinks now is the time to answer that question. I try to backtrack, while scooting to the furthest end of the sofa.

“No, no jokes. Our love is the truest love of all the true loves. Nothing will ever come between us.” I bat my eyelashes at him for extra emphasis and now he’s outright laughing at me.

“Beautiful girl, you have no idea how happy that makes me, but the fact remains there are things about you I still don’t know.” And with that he launches himself at me, pinning me down on the sofa and digging his hands into my sides. I shriek and start kicking wildly, trying desperately to roll him off me, but I’m helpless with laughter, not to mention his weight on top of me. Eventually I do manage to get my hands free and we’re tickling each other, rolling around, squirming and laughing, gasping for breath.

“Uncle! Oh God, please stop, I’m going to pee my pants,” I call out. He stops immediately and studies my face, probably to gage if I’m telling the truth or trying to get the upper hand. Luckily, what he sees must convince him because he moves away slowly, letting out a deep sigh.

“Well, that was fun. We should do it again some time.” Damn, he barely looks winded while I struggle to catch my breath.

“Ha, you only enjoyed it because you could overpower me. I hardly got to tickle you at all.”

“That’s not true, you got a few good attempts, but if you want to do some strength training, I’d be happy to help. We have an

excellent gym at work. You should stop by sometime and check it out—”

“Whoa, easy there. Don’t get carried away. I was just saying you’re bigger and stronger than I am, so it’s never going to be a fair fight.” I realize immediately that those might have been the wrong choice of words.

“Baby, I don’t want to fight. I just think a woman should be able to defend herself. We were having fun now, but if you were ever in a situation where you needed to defend yourself and you couldn’t, I would see that as a huge failure on my part for not doing everything I could to keep you safe, especially in those times when I’m not there with you.” I suddenly feel very uncomfortable with where this is heading, and it reminds me of my conversation with Wyatt.

“I need to ask you something, and I want you to be completely honest with me.” I wait for him to nod his head in agreement, while noting his reluctance to do so. “Are you here with me because you think I need to be protected? I know Wyatt is worried because of the people he knows, but is that the same for you too?” I hold my breath, all at once aware of how important his answer is to me, and the impact it could have on our future.

“Liv, what I feel for you started long before I knew about you and Wyatt. That first night I spent in this apartment, when you took a chance and took care of me the way you did, I knew there was something between us. And no, this has nothing to do with gratitude either. It’s because of the kind of person you are. Everything about you draws me to you, makes me want to know you better and keep you close. I won’t lie to you; I hate

the idea that you might be in any kind of danger. When I think about what happened when you and Wyatt met, what could have happened, I ... I feel almost paralyzed with fear that I could lose you when I've only just found you and I know it might sound selfish and unfair to you, but I've spoken to Wyatt about it. I want him to be more careful with you, and if that means you get to see less of him, then that is what needs to happen for now. I'm sorry Liv, but I'm not willing to take any chances with your safety. That's my deal breaker."

I don't want to argue. Heath's answer was more than I could have asked for and I cannot throw his honesty back in his face by responding on impulse. If I thought he was trying to be controlling or manipulative, I wouldn't even bother to consider what he said, but I don't think he is. He sees first-hand what violence and cruelty people are capable of and that must surely taint his outlook.

"Thank you for being honest, I appreciate it."

"But ...?" I take a deep breath before answering.

"The last relationship I was in, was also with a man who wanted to protect me above all else. He was a firefighter, and he was injured while doing his job. Severe burns and a back injury confined him to a wheelchair. We were engaged at the time, but he ended our relationship by leaving me. He made that decision and no matter what I did, how much I begged him to stay, he still left." I can see that this shocks Heath, but he doesn't say anything. "I know it's not fair to draw comparisons, but the thing is you're the one who places himself in danger daily. You are the one who could get hurt, or die, or just walk away." I watch him carefully for his reaction.

I realize I've given him an out, that he could decide right now that we're not that serious after all and that he was done messing around, but I should have known better.

“Hey, listen to me, okay? I will not leave. I can't imagine what that must have been like for you, and I know we don't know each other well enough for you to trust me on this yet, but I'm giving you my word anyway. I am not the type of guy who leaves when things get tough. If we're committed to each other, then this is my place, next to you. And yours is next to me. And just so we're clear, I am committed to you, to this relationship. I'm not much for playing games or wasting time when I know what I want. I'm not going to push you, but I want you to know how I feel.”

It's a sweet sentiment and I can see he believes what he says. I want to believe him too. I want more than anything to want this, but maybe I'm the hypocrite who faulted him for his needs while ignoring my own. Isn't it human nature to seek companionship and comfort from another? A basic need that inevitably draws us into the arms of someone we find compatible, even if it's temporary, until that need is met. I don't want this to be temporary, and I don't think Heath does either, but wants are fickle things too. Wants and needs. They swirl around in my head like dirty dishwater after you've pulled the plug. My thoughts are just as murky. Maybe I'm not ready for this. Since the moment David left me, I've been untethered, my future ripped away so cruelly by the one person I thought I would have my forever with. I floated aimlessly until I ended up here. There were no relationships along the way, no meaningless hook-ups either. So, there was no reason for self-examination, until now. Maybe I'm making

too much of this *thing* with Heath and should rather just live in the moment, enjoying it for what it is rather than trying to define it. One can't avoid heartbreak forever, after all. Every relationship has a beginning and an end, some just end sooner than others, or on better terms.

“Do you still love him?” His question pulls me from my rambling thoughts. I was expecting it, even though I can see it's the last thing Heath wanted to say, and I admire him more for saying it.

“No, not in the way you think. He was my first ... everything, but it broke me a little that he could throw what we had away so easily just because he didn't want to be a burden on me. I never saw him that way, but then again not much time had passed between the accident and him leaving, so who knows? We were both young and people change. Maybe I would have grown to resent him, but he never gave us the chance to figure it out.” Heath stares at me for a moment as if dissecting my words.

“For what it's worth, I don't think you would ever see anyone as a burden, especially someone who's been hurt or needs you. You care too much. I also want you to know it's okay if you still care about him. I don't want to replace him; I just want to be with you in whatever capacity you'll have me.” Instead of answering, I crawl into his lap and wrap my arms around his neck, placing my head on his shoulder and breathing him in.

Chapter 7

~ Heath ~

For the rest of the morning, we both try to get back to that playful mood fueled by chocolate and tickles, sexy smiles and lingering touches ... but it's different now. I have a deeper understanding of where Liv is coming from, and that understanding comes with the somber knowledge that her life before us was filled with heartbreak and disappointment. My initial search into her background alluded to some of this, but there was so much more I didn't know about. She seems more settled now though, with work she enjoys and friends she can count on, but I want to make it better for her, and while I can't do anything about her past, I can do plenty to make her future something to look forward to.

I try to come up with something we can do that requires us to remain clothed, because keeping her naked under me for an entire day is far too tempting but does little to reassure her that I'm going to remain true to my word. The fact that she doesn't own a TV eliminates the obvious choices of a movie or binge-watching a series.

"Why don't you own a TV?" She considers this for a moment, as if it never occurred to her to have one.

"I actually prefer reading, and if there is something I want to watch I use my laptop. A TV would have been hard to lug around while I was travelling and it's one less thing to get stolen, so there's that." She shrugs like it's no big deal that she

could fit everything she owns into her car, so I pull her back onto my lap and hold her tightly in my arms with my face in her neck. It might be my new favorite thing to do, maybe because she did it first, but moved back to her side of the sofa once we started fooling around again. “What are you doing?” she whispers but doesn’t pull away and there’s a slight giggle in her voice.

“Nothing, just want to hold you for a minute. Do you mind?” She circles her arms around my neck and then tightens her hold. I take that as consent, and we just sit like that for a few minutes while I try to sort through all the thoughts and urges coursing through me.

I want to protect her, keep her safe and above all else, make her happy. I know she’s not into material things, but I want to give her everything she could ever want or need. In the back of my mind a voice whispers that I need to give her a reason to stay here, because while she fears being left behind, it hasn’t escaped my notice that she could easily up and leave at any time too. I hate that thought.

The answer to what we should do for the rest of the day comes in the form of a text from Mike.

MJ: Kate’s making chili. 6PM. Bring Liv and beer

It’s the perfect solution. Liv will get to spend time with my friends, whom she’s already met, so she won’t be uncomfortable. It will be a relaxed atmosphere and a major bonus, she’ll get to meet Kate, Mike’s wife, who’s awesome. I run the idea by Liv, who seems hesitant to accept at first, but then promptly boots me out of her apartment because she has to *prepare*. As much as I try to explain that it’s just a casual

dinner, she insists, mumbling something about manners and arriving empty handed and the next thing I know, I'm standing outside her apartment, which is probably for the best seeing as I need to shower, change, and pick up the beer. When she opens her door to me a couple of hours later, she's dressed in a bohemian-style skirt with a cute sweater, a style she seems to favor and which looks great on her, and her hair is hanging in soft curls down her back, but it's the smell wafting out from her small kitchen that has my mouth watering in an instant. Chocolate.

"Oh shit, woman. What did you do?" A confused look crosses her face as she steps back to allow me room to step inside.

"Uh, I baked some brownies to take for dessert. Why?" I turn slowly and take her in for a moment.

"God, can you be any more perfect? I can't believe you baked for me."

"Well, it's not just for you. A dozen is enough, right?" I can't stop the smile spreading across my face, not that I'd want to, and she responds with a smile equally wide and dazzling.

"I'm thinking it will never be enough." Of course, I'm not referring to the brownies, because her caring to do this for my friends means more than she'll ever know, more than I can express, so instead I take her in my arms and kiss her. It starts out tender and as gentle as I can manage while overwhelmed with wonder at the woman in my arms, but soon I have one hand fisted in her hair while the other is wrapped tightly around her waist and I'm devouring her mouth like the world's sweetest brownie. It's Liv who pulls away first, her eyes shining with lust, cheeks flushed and lips tender from my

feasting. So incredibly beautiful, it makes my heart beat to a strange new rhythm.

Possessive, protective, mine, mine, mine.

“We should probably get going. I don’t want to be late.” So damn sweet.

“Baby, it’s a casual dinner. Just friends hanging out. You’ve got to relax and just enjoy it.”

“That’s easy for you to say, they’re your friends. I’m just the girl who’s ... I don’t even know what you told them.” This seems to bother her, so I tighten my arms around her again.

“Liv, I told you before I’m not playing games here. That’s not my style. And the fact that I’m taking you to this dinner should tell you that we are together now. I’m not big on labels either, but there is one I take seriously and that’s exclusive. My friends know that about me and now you do too. If there is any other reassurance you need from me, all you have to do is ask, okay? But I really hope you don’t need to, otherwise I’ve obviously not been clear enough.” She gives me a quick nod, her eyes slightly wider than they were a moment ago. “Okay then, let’s go so we’re not late.” I wink to let her know I’m teasing her, and once we’ve grabbed the brownies and a gallon of ice-cream, we head over to Mike’s.

Turns out, we are the last to arrive which immediately puts Liv on edge again. This becomes clear when we get out of my truck outside Mike’s house where three other vehicles are already parked and Liv refuses to let go of the door handle so that we can walk up to the porch. I lay my hand over hers and pry her fingers free.

“Come on baby, you’ll have fun. I promise. And nobody cares if we’re the last to arrive.” She holds on for another beat, her eyes searching mine, and then relinquishes her grip, taking my hand instead. I don’t mind one little bit, and together we walk up to the front door, which is promptly thrown open by Riley standing in the doorway.

“Hey, look who it is! Liv, it’s good to see you, girl.” He scoops her up into a bearhug and practically swings her into the house, but she’s laughing, so I try to get a grip on the sudden urge to wipe my best friend off the face of the earth. Once she has her feet back on the ground, he glances at me and then smirks his cocky smirk indicating that he knows exactly what I was thinking. Turning his attention back to Liv, he calls out, “Come and meet the women folk,” and sets off towards the noise coming from the kitchen. She pauses, holding out her hand to me, and my heart picks up that strange rhythm again as we move to follow him.

Mike introduces Liv to Kate, and you can practically hear the click of a bond being formed. I’m not even surprised; Kate is an amazing woman, caring and outgoing, and Liv is ... everything. You can stick a fork in me, I’m done. Done with the single life, done looking for that one person I always knew was out there and I just had to find her. Just done, and I couldn’t be happier. I was always a little jealous of what Mike and Kate had, because I know it’s rare, and precious, and some people never find it.

Riley introduces us to his flavor of the week, Natasha. She’s pretty with a sorority girl vibe and energy for days, and I can see her keeping him on his toes. They seem like a good fit, both living in the moment, neither thinking of the future nor

settling down. Wyatt watches our interactions with keen interest but doesn't engage. I'm a little surprised he showed up. He's always been a bit of a loner, preferring to stay in the background, even when he isn't neck deep in some undercover assignment. I couldn't help but notice the awkward greeting he and Liv exchanged and make a mental note to ask her about it later. And last but certainly not least is Aaron. He doesn't date. Period. Instead, he devotes all his time to his son who happens to be here with him tonight. Jacob's a cool kid, but I think he misses not having a maternal figure in his life, not that he would admit it. He's as serious and withdrawn as his father, which is kind of sad for an eleven-year-old. My mind wanders to what Liv's childhood must have been like with a single parent, but I don't get far as the sound of her laughter brings me back to the present. Mike is busy telling her how he and Kate met and she's taking it all in with avid interest.

"She walked into the room and BAM!"

"Love at first sight?" Liv's eyes sparkle, thoroughly engrossed in the story.

"No, BAM, she shot me," Mike emphasizes with relish and I smirk, because we've all heard this story before, numerous times, but it's always fun watching someone new hear it for the first time. And Liv's expression doesn't disappoint.

"Wait, what?!"

"Well, you see, we weren't technically supposed to be there, and we might have had our weapons drawn at the time, so it was perfectly justified." And of course, Kate is a police officer, so there's that.

"Wow, that's not a meet cute you hear every day."

“I guess not, but it works for us.” Mike takes Kate in his arms and kisses her, earning him a look of such adoration from his wife, you can practically see the little hearts in her eyes and bluebirds flying above their heads.

Dinner is delicious and Liv’s brownies are phenomenal! Once we’ve all chipped in to clear the table and get the kitchen sorted, us guys move to the living room while the women sit chatting around the dining room table. Our conversation inevitably turns to work where progress on our joint investigation has been slow and frustrating, particularly for Wyatt who has not been able to make any headway since his attack. His need to lay low and not attract any attention from the Irish, is impeding his movements even though the Irish and Russian mafia hardly ever mix. People still talk.

“It’s as if they’ve dropped off the face of the earth. If it weren’t for Liv and those fucking Russians targeting her youth center, we might never ...” I know Wyatt’s still talking because I can see his lips moving, but the rushing sound in my ears is doing an excellent job of drowning out his words.

“What do you mean Liv and the Russians?” Don’t lose your shit now, Hayes. Don’t do it. This is too important. I thought I did a decent job keeping my voice steady, but then again maybe not.

“Ah fuck, she didn’t mention that to you, did she?” His chin drops to his chest, and he shakes his head.

“Tell me what happened, Wyatt.” It comes out as a growl, in a voice I hardly recognize, and he must sense I’m on the edge, because he looks me square in the eye before he starts talking.

“It started a few months ago. A couple of guys who we assumed and are now confirmed as part of the Reznikov crew were harassing some of the older boys at Stopgap. Liv saw an opportunity to follow them and see where they’re operating from, but she landed up in an old warehouse near the harbor.”

“Jesus Christ! Why would she go there on her own? Please tell me you got her out of there before they saw her?” Wyatt drops his head again, letting out an audible *fuck*. “Wyatt, what the fuck happened?” Mike turns his head towards the door that leads to their dining room, before turning back and giving me a warning glare, but I’m past caring who hears me. Wyatt, however, drops his voice before answering.

“They found her, tied her up and beat her. Then they waterboarded her. It only lasted a couple of minutes—”

“A couple of minutes! Are you fucking kidding me?” A red haze threatens to take over my vision and my hands start to shake, the one holding my beer almost white from the pressure being placed on the bottle. Preferable to being wrapped around Wyatt’s neck.

“Heath, I swear I got her out as fast as I could. Took her straight to the hospital. They checked her out, kept her overnight, and then sent her home. She’s fine.”

“Don’t. You have no right to make that assessment. Do you know she has trouble sleeping? You think something like that happens and she’s just going to magically get over it and be okay?” I’m pacing now, unable to contain the rage flooding my system and I know there’s only one thing that’s going to calm me down. I need to see her, hold her in my arms and

reassure myself that she's safe and well. "I want you to stay away from her, you hear me?"

"Come on, man. I've been looking out for her. Making sure—"

"No! Stay. Away." And with that, I storm out the room to go and find my girl.

My panic spikes when I find she's not in the dining room with Kate and Natasha. Did she hear us talking and decide to leave? I can't imagine her doing that but then I was about to rip one of my closest friends' head off a moment ago. My search leads me to the den where she's perched on the edge of her seat on an old sofa next to Jacob, playing a video game. They're chatting quietly while they play and I instantly feel the storm that was raging inside me, blow itself out. I just watch them for a few minutes, see how comfortable she is with the kid who doesn't really talk to anyone besides his dad and him seeming a little more relaxed in her company too. Jacob is the first to notice me in the doorway.

"Hey, Uncle Heath." I give him a smile before turning my attention to the woman sitting next to him. She peers over her shoulder at me and smiles.

"Hey, Uncle Heath." She smirks at me and then winks. I cross my arms over my chest while giving her a mock glare.

"Are you implying I'm old by any chance? I'm pretty sure we covered this already." Her face turns all innocent, the smile gone from her lips but her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"Only compared to some." Jacob coughs out a laugh before averting his eyes just as Liv hops up off the sofa. "You guys hang out for a bit. I'm going to grab us some sodas." She

places her hand on my bicep for the briefest moment as she passes me, as if she knows I crave her touch or need reassurance, but doesn't want to appear too affectionate in front of the kid. I take a seat on the sofa and glance over at him.

"You doing okay?"

"Sure." He fiddles with his game controller for a few seconds before asking, "Is Liv your girlfriend?"

"Yeah, she is." As juvenile as it sounds, I like the sound of that.

"Cool, she seems nice. She tutors kids for work." He seems genuinely impressed by this, rather than just making an offhand remark.

"That's right, she does."

"I'm failing math. Dad said he would find someone to help me, but he hasn't yet."

"He's been extremely busy lately, but he'll get to it." Jacob sighs, like he's heard this before.

"Yeah, I know."

"Well, if your dad says it's okay and Liv's available maybe we can hook you up, see how it goes." This seems to perk him up a bit, or maybe I've just been played.

"Cool."

It's close to midnight by the time we get back to Liv's apartment. The drive, for the most part, was quiet, but not uncomfortable even though I couldn't get my mind to stop

racing with everything Wyatt told me. How do you even start a conversation with the woman you're sure you've fallen in love with, in order to get the words from her mouth, the reassurance that she really is okay? I have no idea, but the uncertainty is eating me up inside.

"I had a good time tonight," she murmurs before she steps up on her toes to wrap her arms around my neck and plant a soft kiss on my cheek. "Everything okay? You've been quiet since we left Mike's." Another kiss, this time on the other cheek. Fuck, she's killing me with her tenderness and concern, everything I should be showing her, but I also feel dangerously close to losing my shit with all the things I need to ask her. I need to get myself under control, for both our sakes.

"Yeah, all good. I was just itching to get you alone so I can have my wicked way with you." I bounce my brows a few times and she gives me one of her gorgeous smiles that soothes the rage in my chest.

"Well now, I think I could be accommodating." This time I kiss her, but it's no chaste kiss on the cheek. I take her mouth with all the hunger and emotion that's been building throughout the evening. I lift her in my arms and her legs automatically wrap around my hips. Then we're next to her bed, stripping off our clothes before I pull her down on top of me on the covers. She looks down at me, her eyes soft and her smile like a secret she's been dying to share. It settles in my chest, expanding until there is nothing else but her and me on this bed, in this apartment. Nothing else but *us*.

She starts to move then, rocking her hips slowly, rubbing her pussy over my shaft, teasing me with her soft, wet heat and

tantalizing moans, never breaking eye contact, until my restraint is obliterated, and I grab onto her hips while I drive myself up into her beautiful body with all the ferocity of a thunderstorm. She cries out while simultaneously gripping me tighter, the stranglehold on my cock pushing me closer to that place where nothing else matters. But it's too soon. I can feel Liv is just as close to that edge and while I would happily fling her over, I'm not ready to follow her yet. I slide my hands to her back and pull her to me so that her breasts are right in front of my mouth. So pretty, the alabaster soft skin stretched over firm flesh that bounces as I move inside her, dusky nipples peaked hard and ready for my mouth. I lock my lips around one, suck hard and then nip with my teeth causing her pussy to drench me in her lube while gripping me even tighter. The sounds of our bodies moving together and my mauling her breast seems to spur her on and soon I can feel her body quaking with the impending orgasm about to tear through her. I flip us over so that I'm on top of her, our eyes still locked, and breaths rushed and ragged.

“Fuck baby, I'll never grow tired of having you like this, under me and helpless with desire, staring up at me like I hung the fucking moon. Like I'm your god and all you can do is devote your body and soul to me. Worship me, baby. Give me everything.” And with that, she comes, in shuddering waves that pass from her body into mine in the most primal of exchanges. And this time I do follow her over that edge, jerking my hips and pumping wildly into her until all I can see is stars and all I can feel is my own soul melding with hers, giving to her as she gave to me.

It takes us a few minutes to come back to ourselves. We don't speak, I'm not sure I'm capable of stringing any useful words together and Liv only holds onto me tightly, stroking one hand through my hair and the other down my back as if she's worried this was all a dream and I might disappear if she takes her hands off me. We stay like that until biology demands that I untangle myself from her to go to the bathroom and fetch a warm damp cloth to clean her up with, but once that's done, I lie down next to her again, pulling her close to me and inhaling our combined scent into my lungs. She still smells as delicious as ever but combined with our sex she's as intoxicating as any drug, and I know I'll never get enough.

The apartment is dark, dawn still a few hours away, but something has woken me from a dead sleep. I consider getting up to investigate, but before I can make up my mind, Liv stirs next to me. She's mumbling in her sleep, and it doesn't take me long to figure out that these are not sighs of contentment but sounds of distress. I reach over and gently touch her shoulder, making sure not to get too close and scare her, but whatever torment has her in its grasp is not letting go and soon she's crying out while tears creep down her face.

"Liv, baby, you have to wake up. Come on, sweetheart, open those pretty eyes of yours. Let me see you." I croon softly into her ear, no longer worried about the space between us, only wanting to wake her from this nightmare, and eventually it works. Her body jack-knives off the bed, her hands up in a defensive gesture, until her eyes lock with mine and she throws herself into my arms. Her body shudders and shakes while tears collect on the skin of my neck and shoulder, and

it's tearing me apart that I can't do anything other than to hold her like this. So, I hold on tighter, offering my strength and comfort while accepting her trust in return. I lay us down again with her curled up tightly against me, while I run the fingers of one hand through her hair and my other hand strokes up and down her back. I don't sleep for the rest of the night.

Dawn finally breaks, cold and overcast, so I decide to make us breakfast rather than going out to buy something. Liv is still sleeping, and while I suspect she's going to need some space today, I'm not ready to leave her yet. So, I move around her kitchen as quietly as possible while trying to keep a handle on my thoughts that keep straying to the conversation with Wyatt last night. First, I need to apologize to him. I know he would never willingly put anyone in danger, least of all someone he cares about. And I get the impression he cares more for Liv than he's willing to admit, even to himself. Not in a way that worries me but makes me relieved to have him on our side. He's a good man, as well trained as my brothers and I, and, despite the people he associates with, he has a moral compass that doesn't waiver, which makes him an invaluable undercover agent. So yeah, I need to apologize. I also need to hear the full story of what happened that day in the warehouse, because I can't shake the feeling that there is pertinent information we are not looking at, that could end up costing us.

My thoughts are interrupted by the sound of Liv's phone beeping from an incoming text on the coffee table where she left it last night. I consider for a moment leaving it, letting her sleep, but I still don't know enough about her to know what

she would do, what she would think is important enough to respond to right away. In the short time that we've been together I've explored every inch of her gorgeous body, but the rest of her, the truly important parts require me to be just as thorough. So, I collect the phone, noting the message prompt says it's a text from Luke. Her brother. I let my breath out in a long exhale and make my way to the bed, because it doesn't matter what kind of relationship she has with him, family comes first.

Liv glares at her phone once she's read the text, which shouldn't look so damn cute, because if I had to guess she's pretty pissed right now. Her eyes go a little squinty, her nose wrinkles, and her lips are moving as if she's swearing under her breath. I almost feel sorry for the guy, but then I remember Riley's warning and decide to hold back on the sympathies.

"Everything okay over there?" I call out from the kitchen, wanting to give her a little privacy to deal with the text, but not be too far away in case she needs me. She doesn't look up at me right away, but when she does, it's as if she forgot I was here and she's surprised to find me in her home.

"He's spying on me! I can't believe he's still pulling this crap." What the hell? She starts jabbing at her phone as if trying to inflict pain and then puts it to her ear. "Seriously? You bugged my place? What else? My phone? My car? You promised you'd stop after the last time, Luke." The last time? She's pacing now, running her free hand through her hair while her brother responds to her accusations. "I don't care. If you had asked, I would have told you everything, but this is too far. And I told you I wasn't going anywhere." The pacing stops and an expression I can't place crosses over her face.

“Wyatt knows?” Huh, what the hell does he have to do with this? And how do they even know each other? “Of course, you would, but you still had no right! There’s no need for you to come here. I’ve told you I’m fine, but I have to go now. I’ll talk to you later.” And with that, she ends the call and sinks down on her sofa. I give her moment before joining her.

“That sounded . . . interesting. Are you okay?” She doesn’t look at me, just continues to stare at the phone still in her hands.

“That was Luke, my brother, but I guess you already knew that.” Something about her tone puts me on edge and I can see where this is going, but there’s no way I’m allowing her to compare what I did to what her brother has done.

“Yes, I knew, and I’ve explained to you why I had to do it. I can see you’re upset about all this, but I’m also willing to bet Luke did what he did because he’s worried about you.”

“Please don’t defend him! Do you know why he sent me that text? Because of you. Because you’ve been spending nights here and he wanted to know what’s going on. Like he has the right to question me. Oh, by the way, he’s looked into you, and Fortress. He even approves, like I needed to know that.” I bite into my cheek to keep from smiling, because that’s cool, but I doubt Liv’s going to agree.

“How does he know Wyatt?” I try to hide the depth of my curiosity by keeping my tone light, but Liv still looks like a volcano about to erupt.

“Who knows. I thought it might be shared military connections or something, but I have no idea.” She pauses for a moment, before blurting out, “I want to hire Fortress.”

“Excuse me?”

“To debug my apartment. You guys do that, right? Knowing my brother, the bugs he used will be pretty techie, so I need professionals to remove them.”

“Techie?” There’s no hiding the amusement in my voice, even though I should probably try, but she’s so damn cute all fired up like this and for once her anger isn’t aimed at me.

“Whatever, you know what I mean. Can you do it?”

“Sure, we can do it. I’ll set something up for tomorrow.”

“Great, but you’ll have to give me the friends and family discount though. Not sure I could afford you otherwise,” she mumbles under her breath, like I would consider charging her anything. Hoping to get her to let go of some of her anger, I try to tease her a little.

“And which would you be? Friend or family.”

“Uh ...”

“Because I know what I want.”

“Heath ...”

“Don’t worry, I’m not pushing you into anything. You know where I stand.” It’s clear to me now that she’s still holding back, not willing to trust my intentions, which I’ll admit is frustrating. If there’s one thing I struggle with, it’s patience when going after what I want, but that’s exactly what I’m going to need to win Liv’s trust. “I’ll let you know tomorrow morning when we can come and do a sweep.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.” And just like that, our Sunday is blown to hell. We eat the breakfast I made in silence, after one

or two uncomfortable attempts at conversation that prove fruitless. I don't want to leave things like this. I don't want to leave at all, but once the plates are cleared and Liv is done with the dishes it appears that's the only option I'm given. She makes some excuse about chores that need to be done before the new week starts and I take that as my not-so-subtle hint to go home. So, I leave.

§§§

Mondays at Fortress are usually frenetic, but I still manage to wrangle Riley into my office first thing in the morning.

“How much do you know about Luke Parrish?”

“Liv's brother? Not much. She says he's a Marine stationed at Fort Bragg. They don't see each other much but talk on the phone semi-regularly. Why?”

“He's got her apartment bugged. She wants us to remove them.” I still don't know if I agree with the plan, even though I understand the reason behind it.

“Shit, seriously?”

“Yep.”

“That's kind of an asshole move.” This surprises me. Riley being our tech wizard, one would think he'd be all for a well-placed bug.

“You think?”

“Don't you?”

“He’s worried about her, and it turns out he has reason to be so no, I don’t.”

“Look, I get that you’re upset and concerned about what Wyatt told you, but we can handle whatever comes her way. And with the two of you together, that makes her even safer than she was before.”

“Yeah, I hear you, but she’s being stubborn, and I get the impression their relationship is a little strained. Anyway, I need you to coordinate with her to go and do a sweep. And let me know what you find.”

“Sure. Is she going to question me why you’re not doing it?”

“If she does, just tell her it’s your specialty. Which is true. I’ll check in with her later, answer any questions she might have.”

“Okay, it’s your call. I’ll set up an appointment for this morning.”

“Thanks, man.” He turns away but stops when I ask, “Did you know?” I don’t have to say anything else, he knows exactly what I’m referring to.

“No, she never told me.” He walks out without saying anything else.

The day passes in a flurry of progress reports on current business, as well as new enquiries streaming in. It seems everyone and their grandmother needs a security specialist these days. I’m not complaining, it’s what keeps the doors open and the lights on, but it’s not what I’m looking for. There has been no new intel on the Reznikovs or any of the other players in the human trafficking scene and it’s making me itchy, because I know it’s happening. People are in danger and

we're sitting on our hands, waiting for the other shoe to drop. More importantly, Melissa's life is in the balance.

Lunchtime comes and goes without any sign of Riley. Surely, he must be back by now? I head over to his office and sure enough, he's hunched over his desk analyzing two listening devices.

"There were two of them?" He looks up from his work, squinting slightly.

"Yeah, as well as a camera mounted outside her door in the hallway. I'm busy tracking the feed to see where it leads."

"Or we could just go to the source. Luke told Liv he looked us up, so a phone call shouldn't be completely unexpected."

Riley mulls this over for a moment.

"I guess, but you should check with Liv first. You know she's squirrely about the things she considers private. Best to just be open and tell her exactly what you plan to do."

"Yeah, I know. How was she this morning?" He quirks a brow at me, and I instantly regret the question. "Our weekend ended on a bit of an awkward note yesterday ..."

"She didn't say anything about that. We talked about Mike and Kate, and about Natasha. Just superficial relationship stuff."

"It might seem superficial to you, but there's a big difference between what Mike and Kate have, and what you have with Natasha. I don't want Liv drawing comparisons and coming to the wrong conclusions."

"So, I'll say it again. Talk. To. Her. Make sure you're both on the same page. And while you're doing that, tell her you want to talk to Luke. You should probably do that sooner rather than

later, because I don't like the look of this stuff. The listening devices are high tech, custom made. If Luke planted them, he might be more than just a Marine looking out for his sister."

"You think someone else is spying on her?"

"I don't know, which is why I'm tracking the feed. It's what we'd do for any other client. Didn't think you'd want to start making exceptions now."

"Okay, I hear you. Keep me updated on what you find." He doesn't respond, just goes back to work, leaving me to mine.

§§§

It's been an exhausting day, but the idea of going home to my apartment holds zero appeal. Instead, I pick up some Chinese and make my way through the evening traffic to Liv's. I had hoped that she would reach out to me during the day, but she didn't, and I'm done waiting. I don't know how to make it more clear to her that I'm serious about her, but she's obviously not getting it, so we'll just have to go over it again. As many times as it takes for her to believe me and trust what I'm saying. I know with her history it will take time. I expected that and am ready and willing to put in the work. What I did not expect, is for Wyatt to open the door when I finally make it to her apartment. My heart stalls in my chest and my body turns ice cold, the bag of take-out in my hand suddenly too heavy a burden.

"Here, enjoy." I shove it into his chest and then turn away before he has a chance to say hello, or see the expression on my face, which must be pathetic.

“Whoa dude, wait up.” He reaches for me, but I jerk away and start walking back the way I came, until I hear Liv’s voice.

“Heath? Where are you going? Dinner is almost ready. Aren’t we going to talk about the devices Riley found? You didn’t respond to any of my messages.” I turn back to face her.

“I didn’t receive any messages, Liv. I just wanted to see you, but—”

“I sent you a couple of messages, Heath. Please check? And come inside. We should talk.” She steps back into the apartment, not waiting to see if I’ll follow, so I take a moment to check my phone and sure enough, three texts sit unread in my inbox.

Liv: Hey, missed you last night. Riley just left. Thanks again for making the arrangements. Let me know what you find

Liv: Any news? Tried to get hold of Luke, but no answer

Liv: Want to come over for dinner? Wyatt is stopping by. Said he had some info to share

Fuck! How did I miss them? She’s been on my mind the entire day and the one thing I wanted from her, some form of contact, went completely unnoticed. My shoulders slump and my feet feel like lead as I shuffle into her apartment. Liv’s in the kitchen, stirring something on the stove while Wyatt sits on the sofa, but his attention immediately turns to me when I enter the room.

“Everything okay?” He keeps his voice low so that only I can hear him, and I do the same.

“No.” I don’t bother lying, but I don’t elaborate either. Instead, I make my way over to the kitchen where the Chinese food sits on the counter. Liv looks up at me, and then over to the food I brought.

“You didn’t have to bring anything, I wanted to cook for you.” There’s no display of emotion from her, nothing in her voice or gestures to indicate that she’s upset, but I know better. I can sense her distress from where I’m standing and hate that she’s thrown those walls up between us. Even more so that it’s my fault.

“I’m sorry, Liv. I didn’t see your messages. I swear, if I did, I would have responded to you right away. I don’t know how I missed them.”

“It’s okay,” she says with a shrug, trying to play it off. “It happens. Why don’t you take a seat? I’m almost done here, then we can eat.” I want to say something more, because she’s letting me off the hook when I would have blown a fuse if the situations were reversed. She’s being gracious, but I can see she’s hiding her feelings from me, and I hate that I caused this. However, I don’t want to get into it in front of Wyatt, so I nod at her and then take a seat on the sofa. Wyatt obviously feels the tension and as usual has no idea what a filter is.

“Fuck, this is uncomfortable. Who the hell doesn’t have a flatscreen in their home these days? Isn’t it a minimum requirement or something?” I huff out a laugh, because above all else we are still friends. This man has put his life on the line for me more than once and he’s now looking out for my girl too, so I owe him for that at least. He carries on talking though, as if nothing’s wrong. “Look, I’m not here to cramp

your style, okay? I have some news for Liv about the crew that's been harassing the kids at her center and once I've told her, I'm out of here. The night's all yours."

"Nah, you should stay. If nothing else, there's plenty of food." He chuckles at this.

"I noticed. You got something against a home cooked meal?"

"Don't be a wise ass. I didn't get her texts, or I would have been here sooner."

"Figured, but we should probably wrap this up, so you guys can get on with it." He cranes his neck to look past me and calls to Liv who's humming as she moves around her kitchen: "Little Pain, come here for a sec, will you?" She appears next to the sofa a moment later.

"I'm just about to dish, just a few more minutes."

"Nah, I'm not staying, and this won't take long. The Russians that were hanging around your kids, they're part of the crew we're investigating, the Reznikovs. So, I'm thinking when they found you, they figured you were spying for one of the competitors trying to make a name for themselves, too small to be a threat which might explain why they haven't been looking for you at the center. It doesn't really look like they've been looking for you at all, so ..."

"So, what? You think there's no more threat just because nothing has happened yet? I don't like this, man. It just means there's more unknowns we need to uncover and keep track of."

"I think if they were planning to, they would have made a move by now. They're not even hanging around the kids anymore, almost like they've moved on to something else."

“Not likely. We don’t know anything for sure at this point and I’m sure as hell not taking any chances with Liv’s safety.”

“Nobody said you should, but I think at this juncture I should take a step back. You don’t need me hanging around anyway.” He gives me a significant look, meant to convey that he’s doing as I asked, but it’s Liv who finally speaks up for the first time since this conversation started.

“Whoa, what exactly do you mean take a step back? This is the second time you’ve implied that I won’t be seeing you again. Do I have any say in this or are you guys just making all the decisions now?”

“Baby, don’t get upset. We’re—”

“Don’t call me baby, and don’t patronize me either. Wyatt was doing important work before and occasionally he needed my help. I liked that, feeling useful. What I don’t like is you deciding what you think is good for me without checking with me first. That is not how this relationship is going to go and yes, this is a conversation we should be having in private but seeing as we’re all here now I’m taking the opportunity to tell you what I want. So, Wyatt, I know we’re not close friends or anything, but I’d be very upset if you just disappeared out of my life. Please try not to do that?”

Damn, this woman is going to be bad for my heart, and I almost feel sorry for Wyatt. How can anyone resist such an earnest plea, coupled with those big brown puppy dog eyes?

“Baby, he’s not going to disappear, okay? As for you being friends, I think that would be great. God knows he needs some positive influences in his life.” Wyatt’s head swivels back to me and I can see he’s trying to decide if I’m being full of shit

or not, but I just smirk at him. “Come on, man, how are you going to say no to that face.” It’s not a question, and I don’t wait for him to answer either. “Come on, time for you to get going. Take the Chinese, we’ve got plenty of food here.” We get up off the sofa and I grab the bag of food and hand it to him, not giving him the opportunity to argue. He chuckles while grabbing hold of the bag before turning to Liv again.

“Thanks for everything, Liv. We’ll talk soon, okay? Shout if you need anything.” She gives him a quick hug in response before stepping back and I walk him to the door.

“We’re not done discussing all of this, but I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“Sure, have fun.” He bobs his brows a few times before walking out the door and once I’ve closed and locked up behind him, I turn back to my girl.

“Hey.”

“Hey.” She smiles at me, but it’s not the full smile I was hoping for.

“Are you still mad at me?”

“I wasn’t mad, a little upset maybe. And worried. You sent Riley to do the sweep and I didn’t hear a word from you for the entire day. I didn’t know what to think and I missed you.” As much as I hate the first part of that sentence, I absolutely love the second.

“I’m sorry, baby. It was a busy day, but that’s no excuse. It was never my intention to ghost you or make you worry. Forgive me?” She smiles and wraps her arms around my waist in a tight hug.

“Nothing to forgive.” And then she gives me her lips and I accept them for the gift they are. Food forgotten, I carry her to her bed and unwrap her while praying that it will always be this easy between us but knowing that it won’t.

Chapter 8

~ Liv ~

This isn't love. I know that. I mean, it can't be. I don't believe in love at first sight, even though I can't deny the attraction I felt for Heath when we first met. Despite the unusual circumstances, there was a connection, one we both felt, but true feelings develop over time, right? We are still getting to know each other, and I haven't exactly made it easy for him, but I want to do better. I want to give us a chance, see where it leads and trust him with my heart and not just my body. It's early morning and sounds of the city waking up rise to insert themselves into the little cocoon where only we exist. Heath is spooning me, his warm body curled around mine, an arm around my waist and one of his legs shoved between mine. From his breathing I can tell he's awake.

"I'm glad you're here," I whisper into the quiet room. His only response is to hold me tighter and press his face into my hair, inhaling deeply. I like that he doesn't say anything, that he can communicate so much with just the tightening of his arms around me. If I'm honest, there is a lot I like about Heath, more every time I think about it, and I find myself thinking about him almost constantly. Yesterday was a strange day. When Riley showed up to do the sweep, I didn't think much of it, but then there was the radio silence from Heath and I was back to second-guessing our relationship all over again, something I hate. At least we managed to end the night on a high that has me smiling now, just happy to be in this moment

with him. When his phone beeps a few minutes later, he reaches over to my bedside table to check the message and sighs.

“I really don’t want to get out of this bed right now.” My smile fades slightly, but this was unavoidable. “What do you have planned for the day, baby?” I like that too, that he’s interested enough to ask about my day, and not just the parts that include him.

“I’ll be at the center for most of the day, so just the usual.” He tenses slightly at that, and I wonder if he’s also thinking about our conversation last night with Wyatt. I don’t want him to worry, because I have been more vigilant since the attack, not taking unnecessary risks, not doing much of anything at all. So maybe what happened scared me more than I care to admit, but Heath has enough on his plate, and I don’t want to add to that. “I’ll be careful, promise.” He hugs me with his whole body this time, then moves us so that I’m on my back with him hovering over me. His eyes move over my face, lingers on my lips before stopping to stare directly into mine.

“I appreciate that, because if anything happens to you ... If you need anything, call, or text. I swear yesterday was an anomaly. If you need me, I’ll answer.” I stroke my hand over his cheek, roughened by a day’s worth of stubble, hoping to give him the assurance he seems to need.

“I know. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. And afterwards, I can cook dinner again and we can actually eat it this time.”

“Hey, we ate your food, just not at dinner time.” I meet his smirk with a laugh of my own.

“True, but probably not great for our digestion. Do you have any favorite meals? Something special you’d like me to make?”

“Baby, everything you do for me is special. I’ll love every meal you cook for me.” Wow, this man. It’s going to be oh so easy to fall for him, I can tell.

He leaves shortly after that, insisting that I stay in bed and that he will go back to his own place to shower and get ready for his day, but he’s not even out the door when there’s a knock. I jump up, wrap a sheet around me and rush over to fling the door wide.

“Jesus Liv, put some clothes on!” Shit, Luke! Without thinking, I shut the door in his face, race to my closet and yank on a pair of yoga pants and an old t-shirt, then rush back to the door. When I open it, Luke looks like a thunder cloud ready to unleash biblical torrents of rain, so I immediately try to placate him.

“Hey, uh ... I wasn’t expecting you, but it’s good to see you. You look great.” Well, so much for playing it cool, but Luke isn’t exactly giving off feel good vibes right now, more like we’re about to have a huge argument.

“Clearly.” He stomps into the apartment.

“I tried to reach you yesterday. You could have just responded to my calls and texts. There was no need to come all the way here.”

“Not what it looks like to me. Was that the guy? The one spending nights here like he’s paying rent.” Right, like he doesn’t know.

“You didn’t see him on your way in? You must have just missed each other.”

“I saw him Liv, and now I’m asking you, who is he?”

“Calm down, okay? His name is Heath Hayes and he’s a good man. I like him and I don’t want you scaring him away, so please just calm down. Also, you said you already looked him up, so you should know who he is.” He grunts at this, not looking pleased or calm at all.

“I wanted to hear it from you, to make sure things are the way you said. So, why did you call? And text. What’s wrong?” I stare at him, my mouth literally hanging open, but he’s scanning my apartment as if he might find someone else hiding in a corner.

“Are you kidding me? You tell me you bugged my apartment, and you didn’t think there would be a follow-up conversation? Fortress swept the place, just so you know. They found all your devices.”

“I know, which is why I didn’t tell you about them sooner. I was worried about you. After seeing you in that hospital bed and just knowing you won’t reach out to me if something happens to you. Fuck, Liv! I couldn’t sleep for days worrying about you, but I couldn’t stay. God knows I wanted to, but now at least I know you have someone else looking out for you.”

“Besides Wyatt, you mean. And you knew who he was all along. Nick. Wyatt. You knew and you never did tell me how you two know each other.” He looks around the apartment again and now I’m sure it’s so that he doesn’t have to face me. Okay then. “And speaking of staying, how did you get here so

fast? You're supposed to be half a day's drive away, yet you pop up at the drop of a hat when something unexpected comes up." He gives me a mocking look I remember well from our teenage years when he used to think he was so much smarter than me. I hated that look. Still do.

"You know there's these things called airplanes, right? Pretty nifty for getting you from point A to point B in a hurry. You should check it out some time." I don't even bother responding to the snark. He's not going to give me any more information, and I'm not in the mood to argue anymore.

"Fine, but bugging my place was a serious invasion of my privacy. What if I was ... I don't know, having orgies or something?" He outright laughs at that.

"Jesus, do you even know what an orgy is?" He doesn't stop laughing, so I narrow my eyes at him.

"I know plenty, thank you very much." He smirks at me now, not remotely convinced.

"Livvy, you are my sister and I love you. I also worry like crazy about you being alone in this city. What I do not worry about, is you having orgies." Well, at least that's something, but we're both smiling now.

"Whatever. It's way too early in the morning to be talking about such things anyway. Why are you here so early?"

"Hey, you're the one who brought it up. And I can't stay long. Have other places to be but wanted to check on you as well, so you're my first stop."

"Ah, look at you trying to make me feel special. Come on, I'll make coffee while you tell me what you can." It wasn't much,

but I expected that. He knew Wyatt was investigating various Russian families operating in the city, involved with human trafficking amongst other things and wanted to make sure I didn't get mixed up in anything, at least not more than I already was. He was planning on removing the bugs when he found out about Fortress but seemed happy that we saved him the trouble. Luckily there wasn't any further probing into my relationship with Heath. He already knows more than enough. After breakfast and my fruitless attempts to find out more about where he's going and what he's up to, he leaves. One thing's for sure, my brother might have been a United States Marine at some time in the past, but he's definitely not anymore. I'm going to have to find out more about that.

With nothing better to do, I clean the kitchen, take a shower and get ready for work. The neighborhood where the center is located does not see much traffic and unfamiliar vehicles tend to stand out, like the one I'm looking at as I make my way inside the building. For one thing, it's far too new and well looked after to belong here, and for another it's a big, black sedan with windows tinted so dark, you can't see a single thing inside. It immediately sets me on edge and panic scratches at the back of my brain, urging me to run and hide. Which is ridiculous. I'm a grown-up, with grown-up responsibilities. And besides this creepy feeling telling me something's wrong, I have no proof to act on. At this moment there is no threat, just my imagination running wild. Trying to be as inconspicuous as possible, I take a quick photograph of the number plate, just in case. For a moment I consider sending it to Heath, but he's got more important things to take care of than my paranoia. I decide to hold on to the pic for a

day or two and if I don't see the car again, I can just delete it. With that sorted I throw myself into the work I love and completely forget about the car.

After mentally checking my list of favorite dishes I could make, I settle on lasagna for dinner because who doesn't like lasagna? If Heath doesn't want to tell me what his favorite meals are, I'll just have to get creative to find out. When he finally arrives, we almost have a repeat of last night, the part where we forgot about the food because he was devouring me instead, but somehow, I find the strength to hold him off until after the meal because making lasagna from scratch is no joke and I didn't want the food to go to waste. Not that it would, but still. We talk about our work, and I also tell him about Luke's visit. He tells me that they're done with the recording devices and that there's nothing to worry about. That seems odd. I knew who planted them and why, and now they've been removed so why would I worry? Heath doesn't give me a chance to question him further though.

"You've kept me from your gorgeous body long enough, baby. Come to bed with me. The only talking I want to do now is to whisper dirty things in your ear." The look in his eyes is primal and hungry and it sets my body alight with want. I can't imagine denying him, and when he picks me up and carries me to bed, something he seems to enjoy doing, I hold on to him, alternating between kissing and licking his neck. "Fuck, I love your lips on me. Can't wait to return the favor, but first we have to do something about all these clothes you're wearing."

With a sexy smirk, he sets about removing each item slowly, as if prolonging it will make our eventual skin-to-skin contact

that much more pleasurable. I've barely crawled on top of the bedcovers, then he's lowering his gloriously naked body on top of me and kissing me with a fervor that takes my breath away. From my lips he moves down my neck to my breasts, sucking hard on each nipple, biting and licking them until everything between my neck and my knees feel like it's on fire for him. I arch up towards him, offering my breasts as sacrifice to his hunger and my fingers tangle in his hair, holding him to me as an anchor for my pleasure. He circles his hips in slow, seductive movements, grinding his cock against me, a delicious torment designed to drive me out of my mind.

"Heath, please. I need you. Please ... please ... Heath ... please..." I alternate between begging and chanting his name, rocking my body to the rhythm of his sensual torture, desperate for more friction, more contact, more *him*. It might have been the words, or maybe it was the movement of my body against his, but his resolve to continue snaps and he drives into me with a grunt and a chant of his own.

"Fuck, baby ... so fucking good ... fuck." Our movements lose some of their rhythm as his thrusts become wilder, driven by instinct and need, chasing the ultimate pleasure. And oh God, the orgasm that surges through me can't be described as anything else but that. The ultimate pleasure.

§§§

The rest of the week follows much the same pattern, work during the day and then dinner with Heath, after which we explore each other's bodies late into the night and again before

dawn, before he leaves to go back to his own apartment to prepare for a new day.

“Do you still live with your parents?” I watch him as he gets dressed, but at my question he freezes, then turns to face me with a mixture of amusement and confusion on his face.

“God, no. My parents live in San Diego. Why do you ask?”

“It’s just, you’ve never invited me to your place before. For all I know, you live in a cave somewhere, or worse, someone’s basement.” Of course, that would never be the case, not for a man like Heath, but somehow the thought that there are things he chooses not to share with me has taken hold, leaving me feeling needy and insecure. Ugh!

“I’m not hiding anything from you, if that’s what you’re thinking. It’s a bachelor pad, the place where I eat, sleep, and shower. I didn’t think you’d be interested in seeing it.”

“Heath, it’s your home so of course I’d want to see it, if you want to show it to me.”

“Baby, you’re my home now. My place isn’t even a distant second.” Aand, I’m melting again. God, I’m such a girl sometimes. Ren would be so disappointed. “But I can see this means something to you, so how about you come to my place tonight and I’ll cook dinner for a change?”

“You cook?” He chuckles at my obvious excitement.

“Bachelor, remember? And I’ve made you breakfast a few times. I know my way around a kitchen.” Amongst other things, I’m tempted so say out loud, but he’s already running late.

“So, you’re saying I’m getting bacon, eggs, and French toast for dinner.”

“Hey, brinner is one of the best meals ever invented. Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.”

“I can’t wait.” Because who doesn’t like breakfast for dinner.

§§§

Heath sent me a text with his address and when I get there, I discover it’s exactly as he described it, an apartment uptown, all open plan with huge leather couches in the lounge area, one of them placed just so in front of the biggest flatscreen I’ve ever seen. There’s also a gorgeous fireplace that has clearly never been used, a modern kitchen and two bedrooms, of which only the master is furnished. The floors are a dark wood throughout, the walls a masculine grey and the furnishings are either black or some shade of blue. There’s no artwork on the walls or any other decorative elements, only a few photographs of family and friends in pewter frames in his bedroom. Overall, the apartment is ... nice, a little cold maybe, but the one redeeming feature is the floor-to-ceiling window with a spectacular view of the city. I’m drawn to it instantly.

“So, what do you think?” He stands behind me, his arms circling around my waist, pulling me into his chest. He’s still in his business suit, his hair slightly disheveled and his tie askew, but our reflection in the glass casts a perfect image of the man I ... God, what am I thinking? The man I’m crazy about. That’s true enough.

“This view is fantastic.” He chuckles softly into my ear.

“That bad, huh? I tried to warn you. As for the view, nothing beats what I see every time I look at you, Liv. I’m glad you’re here, I should have invited you sooner, but maybe now you see why I love coming to you instead. This place has never been my home. You are my warmth; you bring color to my life and music to my soul.” He lifts my chin so that I’m forced to meet his eyes in the window’s reflection. “I’m in love with you, Liv Parrish and the little that I have, I lay at your feet.” My heart stutters and then takes off at a frantic gallop so loud I’m sure he must be able to hear it. He turns me slowly so that I’m facing him, cups my face in his palms and kisses me until I forget that I didn’t say the words back to him.

We eat our dinner at the marble kitchen counter, perched on bar stools that are surprisingly comfortable considering they look like fashion accessories rather than furniture. Heath’s brinner is delicious, a frittata filled with fresh veggies and extra bacon on the side and conversation flows easily while we enjoy our meal. It’s almost as if the exchange by the window didn’t happen and who knows, maybe I did imagine it because reality could never be that perfect ... *I’m in love with you and the little that I have, I lay at your feet* ... He wasn’t just referring to material possessions either. He has made no secret of the fact that he’s all in with our relationship, so all I have to do is accept it, accept him. Sitting here, I’m finding it easier to see what he sees, and it doesn’t scare me as much as it used to. Maybe this is what it took, seeing what our lives looked like separately and comparing it to what we have when we are together.

Once we've cleaned the kitchen, he leads me over to the couch where he pulls me down on his lap and holds me close to his chest. Neither of us speak for a few minutes, savoring the closeness and comfort we draw from each other. Heath took a quick shower before he started cooking, and his clean smell fills the air so that I'm completely surrounded by him. If there is a more perfect place on earth, I'm not interested in finding it.

"Baby, I love having you in my arms." I don't respond, just moan softly into his neck which causes him to grow hard beneath me. "There's nothing I want more than to drag you to my bed right this second, but I want to talk a bit first." I lift my head so that I can meet his eyes, but I'm unable to read his expression. It's a mixture of tenderness, concern and something darker ... I force myself to keep still, keep my voice steady.

"Is something wrong?" God, I should have known. Everything was just too perfect, wasn't it?

"I want you to tell me what happened between our first meeting and the next time I came to see you at your apartment." His voice is so gentle, you might think it's merely a request, but I know better. Why would he bring this up now? Was all of this just an act to get me to open up to him? Pretty words and good food to make me more agreeable. And dammit, it worked too. He must see on my face that I'm ready to bolt because he tightens his arms around me, which only adds to my sudden panic. Breathing becomes more difficult as I start pushing against his chest.

“Heath, please let me go.” He does so immediately, and I jump up off his lap and start pacing before turning to the door, taking a few steps in that direction as if on autopilot and then stop and look back at him now standing next to the couch.

“Was this your plan all along? To bring me here so that you can question me? And why does it matter?”

“Baby, listen to me. It matters. You were attacked, twice! You have trouble sleeping and when you do eventually fall asleep, you have nightmares that make me want to punch someone, but I’m not asking this for me. You need to talk about it, because that’s the only way you can move past it.”

“It sounds like you’ve done a fair amount of talking about me already. You just can’t stop yourself, can you? Digging into my life like it’s your right to do so. But I have moved past it! I can’t control my dreams, Heath. Believe me, if I could ...” I let out a frustrated breath, my hands clenched into fists by my side. “I want you to tell me something.” He tenses where he stands but nods his head in agreement. “Am I just another assignment to you? Someone who needs to be rescued because I’m not dealing with my issues quickly enough. Or is it because I helped you so now you feel you need to return the favor?”

“What? No! I’m in love with you, Liv. Those aren’t words I throw around to make a point. I love you!” And I can see he means it, but ...

“But you think I need to be protected. I’m the helpless little woman who needs a man to take care of her.”

“I never said that, but you know what? There are worse things in this world, and I’ll tell you a secret. Men like us, we want

that, we want to be needed. You think Wyatt is any different? Or Riley? That night you called Fortress, you needed something. I know you won't admit it, but it's true and you know it. You couldn't sleep, so you reached out and Riley came running because he knew it too. Don't you see, Liv? We want to be needed, and it's not a bad thing. I know your ex hurt you, more than you'll probably ever tell me, but I'm not David. I will never do that to you, because I don't just want you, I need you too. Now it's up to you to decide what you're going to do with that." I'm stunned silent, my mind refusing to take everything in, even though I know I must. I might not get the chance again. Could I really have gotten it so wrong? And am I willing to let Heath go because of how David treated me? "I'm scared." It's barely a sound from my lips but hangs like a heavy fog in the air.

"Baby, I know. You've been on your own for so long, dragging that broken heart behind you like an anchor, but don't you think it's time to cut yourself free? Try something different and take a chance on someone new?"

"I don't know how to do that. I ..."

"I could help, if you'll let me. I want to help, Liv. All you have to do is say yes." But I don't say anything, at least not right away. I walk over to the window and stare out at the city below, people rushing around, living their best lives. Maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm the only one who's stuck between wanting and needing.

"I don't think I'd ever been so scared in my entire life," I confess, my voice low. I sense Heath behind me, tension now radiating from him in waves, but this time he doesn't touch

me, and I take another deep breath before continuing. “The entire incident only lasted a few minutes, but sometimes, when it’s quiet, I can still hear them, the disgusting things they said before they grabbed me, and their hands while they were holding me down ... I couldn’t believe it was happening. I screamed and struggled, tried to fight them off but they were so much stronger, just holding me on the ground like it was nothing, and nobody seemed to notice what was happening until Wyatt. I thought he was some kind of avenging angel, appearing out of nowhere. By then I couldn’t hear much of what was going on because of fear or adrenaline, I don’t know, but he must have said something to them because they just let me go and ran off ... There wasn’t anything physically wrong with me besides a few scrapes and bruises, so he brought me home and that was it. Sorted out my car and it was like nothing ever happened. Later, he would say I owed him for saving my life and he would call me to help when he needed some first aid, but now I’m thinking he never needed me at all. It was always just me ...”

A sob lodges in my throat and in the space of a heartbeat Heath takes me in his arms and holds me close against his body. The next sob bursts free and the floodgates open wide, but all I can manage is to hold on to the man who’s shown me his strength time and again and who’s now allowing me to take some of that strength for myself. He picks me up and carries me back to the couch where he sits with me on his lap. He doesn’t say anything, or rush me to stop crying, just rocks gently with me in his arms, crooning softly in my ear. Mom’s quilt could not have been more comforting right now, so I give myself a few minutes to soak it in, Heath’s love which he’s

giving so freely and all I have to do is accept it. Once the tears and hiccups have subsided, I try to pull back and he loosens his hold with some reluctance but doesn't let go. "Let me up for a minute? I need to use the bathroom and see if I can put myself back together again." I try for a reassuring smile but judging from the look on Heath's face, I've clearly missed my mark.

"Liv, no matter what you think you look like, you are perfect to me, but I'll give you a little space. Shout if there's anything you need or want." He winks at me, and this time my smile is less forced as a flurry of hope settles in my chest. *All I have to do is accept it.* Everything might be okay. I could continue to open up and Heath will still be there to hold me together when the dust settles.

The bathroom is exactly as I expected, immaculately clean and modern and not a single decorative feature in sight. Everything is purely functional. The mirror also doesn't hold any surprises. My eyes are red and puffy, and my nose feels wet and gross. Perfect indeed. An overwhelming urge to hide keeps me rooted in front of the vanity, but I can hear Heath moving around in his kitchen, so I wash my hands and face before joining him.

"Hey, there you are. Feeling better?" He's standing by the fridge, picking from what looks like a bowl of grapes, but his eyes scan over my face as if trying to read my thoughts.

"Yes, thank you." Stopping at the kitchen counter, I stare back at him, hoping to find some clue as to how to proceed. "I—"

"How about we sit and talk some more." Shit, not what I was hoping for, but I suppose if we're going to pick at all my

wounds, we might as well get it all done in one go. Lead the way, Doctor Hayes. I give him a nod and he strides towards me and takes my hand in his before planting a soft kiss on my lips. It's a chaste kiss, meant to reassure rather than entice, but still sends a shiver down my spine. Heath pulls back slowly, smiles, winks, and then walks us to the couch. This time I sit next to him rather than on his lap, but we both turn so we're facing each other, which brings our bodies closer together.

"This is nice, but I feel like we should be braiding each other's hair, or painting our toenails," I joke, and he chuckles before giving me a devilish look.

"What, no naked pillow fight?" We both laugh at that, even as I feel the energy charge around us.

"Not exactly conducive to serious conversation." His gaze softens as he takes both my hands in his.

"Who said it has to be serious?" I shrug, meeting his eyes. No more hiding.

"I don't know, it just seems like that kind of night, I guess."

"Baby, it wasn't my intention to ruin our night, but you have to admit that conversation needed to happen, right? I promise, I won't push anymore tonight. Only fun topics from here on out." I huff out a laugh.

"Ah no, I see what you did there, and tomorrow we'll just be doing this all over again. If you have anything else you want to know, ask. I don't mind, promise." He studies me for a moment, as if trying to determine if I'm truly okay with this.

"Okay, if you're sure, because there is something I've been wondering about." Here it comes. "How did you know I was

dating someone? Riley wouldn't have said anything, and you seemed so sure, but then you gave some vague reply when I asked you about it." Oh God, this is not going to lead anywhere good.

"Um, I actually saw you once, with a woman. It was at Bay General and ... uh"

"Yeah, Kelsey is a doctor there. What were you doing there?"

"I spent a night there, after the whole Russian thing. Wyatt said he mentioned it to you." Heath doesn't respond right away, but his chest heaves from the increased rate of his breathing and his hands clench a little tighter around mine. A muscle in his jaw ticks a few times before he manages to speak.

"Yeah, he told me about that. Fuck, Liv, I wish I had known. Just thinking about you going through that all alone makes me crazy." He doesn't do anything to hide this from me.

"No, there's no need for that. Luke came to get me, and he stayed with me for the night and—" Again Heath's hands tighten.

"He only stayed one night?!" His jaw is clenched, so the words are just above a whisper, but he's also sitting right in front of me, so the sudden anger is hard to miss.

"Well, yes. He had a job to get back to and I was fine. There—
“

"What the fuck, Liv! You were beaten, tortured, and he left you after just one night?!"

"Will you stop interrupting me? I told you I was fine. The doctor said it was okay for me to go home. He wouldn't have

done that if there was anything to worry about.” I stop talking now because Heath looks ready to explode. He opens his mouth, shuts his eyes as if trying to organize his thoughts, opens his eyes again, and takes another breath.

“Can I ask you something without you getting upset?” says the man who looks like the top of his head is about to blow off.

“I can’t promise that, no. Just ask your question.”

“Are you close with your brother?” Okay, I wasn’t expecting that.

“Sure, he’s my twin. You know that already.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t answer my question. After high school, he left you on your own to join the military. It was right after your mom— “

“Yes, I know when it was Heath, but he had to go. He needed to live his life, start thinking about his future. I wasn’t going to stop him from doing that.”

“I get that, baby, but he’s your only family. And what about what you needed?”

“Don’t. This is not the same thing.” I can see where he was going with this.

“No? So, you have no reservations about me or my feelings for you. You trust one hundred percent that I will always be here for you. That I love you and want forever with you.” God yes, how can I not?! My feelings might be a little more complicated, but if I’m honest trusting Heath was never the problem. Just be honest ...

“Look, I get it, okay? I’ve been disappointed by people close to me in the past, who hasn’t? I believe you when you say you love me and I lo—” We both freeze in place. “I mean, we should take this— “

“Don’t you dare run from me. I know you’re scared, but don’t you see? You feel it too!” His eyes are alight with emotion, dancing across my face like a featherlight touch and his lips ...

“You shouldn’t look so smug right now, mister. It’s not a good look for you.” A total lie, and his smile grows wider. Dammit, how am I supposed to resist that damn cocky smile? Without warning, he jumps up off the couch, pulling me with him.

“You’re right, we’ve done enough talking. It’s naked pillow fight time.” With that he scoops me up into his arms and carries me to his bed, where we stay until the dawn light breaks through his curtains, letting us know that an exciting new chapter in our relationship is about to begin.

Chapter 9

~ Heath ~

She loves me!

The Russian Mafia has been active in the United States since the late eighties, forming ties with our own American Mafia and Colombian drug cartels, extending their reach to Los Angeles while dominating up and down the Eastern Seaboard. Illegal activities include extortion, racketeering, illegal gambling, firearm offenses, narcotics trafficking, wire fraud, with murder-for-hire at the top of the list, all the way down to cigarette trafficking at the bottom. But it's kidnapping and human trafficking that has grown to unimaginable numbers. The organization I managed to infiltrate was more like a middleman, bringing buyers and sellers together. Real scum of the earth, the whole fucking lot of them. And one of these people laid their hands on Liv, hurt her badly enough that she needed to go to the hospital, and I wasn't there! These thoughts rip me to pieces. I can't concentrate on the one for the pure blinding rage that it causes, and I can't stop thinking of the other because ... she loves me! It might have been barely an admission at all, but it was there and I'm taking it. Loving her, protecting her, it's what I was put on this earth to do and now that I've found her and claimed her, nothing will stop me. Definitely not the Russian mob.

But now is the time to focus on work, because precious time is being wasted and more people are getting hurt, not just the one I care about. Since the night I was attacked and Liv found me in that alley, I have not seen or heard a single shred of chatter from the organization. It's as if they went to ground, dropped off the face of the earth, or just ceased to exist. None of these are good things. What they do out in the open can easily be replicated in the dark, where they will be more difficult to find and expose, and if they ceased to exist, a new organization is sure to take its place which will be just as difficult to infiltrate, if not more so. A case of the devil you know, I suppose. Turns out, I didn't know nearly enough, but someone certainly thought they knew me. I figured my cover was blown, but if that's not the case, there's a chance I might be able to find a way back in. If the attack was just to get me out of the way and not because I'd been found out, I might still be able to salvage some of the hard work done to get to where I was in the organization. I have no problem admitting to myself that going back there is the last thing I want to do. Not only because I was surrounded by truly vile human beings, but it would also take me away from Liv, just when we are starting to make headway in our relationship. God, I still can't believe it.

Aaron strides into my office, pulling me from my thoughts, and takes a seat in the chair across from me.

“Wyatt thinks he's got something. He's on his way here now.”

“Yeah? Fucking finally, we can do with some good news for a change. Feels like all we're doing is spinning our wheels lately.” Aaron only grunts in response and before I can think

of anything else to say, Mike and Riley join us in our little huddle.

“We got something?” Riley looks about ready to come out of his skin. Secretly, I’ve always suspected he had a thing for Melissa, but we were constantly on deployments, and she was too young for him to do anything about it, but Riley became a different person after she disappeared. He was always the outgoing, fun-loving type, but since her disappearance those acts became more a means of escape rather than for enjoyment. Of course, this could all be my imagination, but I don’t think so.

“We’ll know as soon as Wy— “

“Good, you’re all here.” The man of the moment enters the room, and we all go quiet. “I’ve got news. The Feds are planning a raid on the Reznikov compound in two days’ time, and they’ve extended an invitation for you to join in, with the understanding that you are there to support, not take over or follow your own agenda. They don’t know about your connection to Melissa,” is directed at Aaron, who just glares back at him before motioning with a wave of his hand for Wyatt to continue. “So if you guys decide to go off-book, it’s my ass in a sling. There’s a briefing this afternoon which you’ll need to attend. All the details will be provided then.”

As it turns out, it’s all the details, and then some. The Feds did their homework on this one and it’s well after nine o’clock before we’re finally done. I told Liv I wouldn’t be coming over, worried that I might not be able to give her the attention she deserves after sitting through a briefing that would most likely have me worked up and frustrated at the delay in putting

the plans into action, but I regret that now. After everything we learned today, I really need to be with her, to soak up her warmth and care. I know she'll more than likely still be awake, might even be worried about me because I told her we were preparing for an important operation, but couldn't go into any details. The truth is, I want to tell her everything, I'm so tempted to open my mouth and let it all come pouring out because I know she can handle it and more importantly, she would want to share my burdens as much as I want to share hers. Decision made, I make a U-turn and drive to where my heart longs to be.

She opens the door wearing one of my t-shirts I must have left behind. It hangs slightly off one shoulder and catches her just above mid-thigh, so while I can see no bra straps and legs for days, my body is reacting to what else might or might not be under the shirt. Her hair is up in a ponytail and her face is free of any make-up and she looks so fucking gorgeous smiling up at me that I don't waste a second before rushing to her, picking her up and carrying her to her bed. She gives a soft laugh before whispering in my ear, "I was hoping you would change your mind." That's when my hands register no panties separating me from her and all thoughts of telling her anything other than how much I want her, evaporate from my mind. It's just her, want, need, possession, protection, repeat. She must sense I'm at the end of reason, just barely hanging on so that I don't throw her down and rip her apart with my body because she molds her own to mine so perfectly it's almost agonizing, and when we do eventually make it to the bed, the t-shirt disappears instantly. Under threat of death, I could not tell you how she made it onto the bed, but the next thing I know, my

jeans and briefs are pushed down to my thighs and I'm thrusting into her like a man possessed, bewitched by her siren song, flinging my ship against her wild shore. I lose myself in her, letting go of everything else, the messed-up world we live in, this city that has become so dangerous that actual mobsters are as common as Starbucks, the operation in two days' time that will pit us against the worst of those, all of it. Except her. Liv. She keeps me tethered to the only reality I'm interested in, this bed, this apartment, only her.

Morning brings with it a thunderstorm of epic proportions, waking me from a dead sleep. Liv looks like she's been awake for a while, and she meets my gaze with an apologetic smile.

"Sorry, I was going to get up and make us some breakfast, but these things scare the crap out of me." She nods her head towards the window where the sky is being lit up by streaks of white light. I circle my arms tightly around her waist and pull her against me. Her body is warm and soft, aligning perfectly with mine despite a serious case of morning wood threatening the peace.

"Hmm, no need to apologize, baby. Waking up like this is way better." I shove my face in her neck and inhale her sweet scent that is laced with sweat and sex, as intoxicating as the most expensive perfume. God, I don't think I'll ever get enough of her. The smallest gesture or sound, like her soft hum of agreement, is everything I need. We spend a few minutes like that in each other's arms, before I have to get up to prepare for the day and she goes into her kitchen to make coffee. I didn't give Liv any details of the briefing last night, we hardly talked

at all, but I don't want her to be blindsided by any unexpected news either.

“So, that briefing yesterday was pretty intense,” I start, while dressing in the clothes I wore yesterday. I should bring some stuff to keep here. Considering the number of times I spend the night, it makes sense. We haven't discussed moving in together, but it's the next logical step, right? Or would Liv think it's too soon?

“I figured as much from the look on your face when I opened the door, and what happened after.” Her voice pulls me from my thoughts, and I look over to find her smiling back at me. Fuck, this is so bad. How am I going to keep my head in the game when my heart keeps pulling me here, to her?

“Yeah, I'm not going to apologize for last night. It was incredible.”

“Good, I don't want you to. As for your work, I understand there are going to be things you can't tell me, and that's okay, but just know that I'm here and when you can share, I'll listen.” I continue to stare at her for a few seconds before going to her and taking her in my arms.

“I don't know how I got to be so lucky but fuck if I won't do everything in my power to keep you right here. And when I do have to leave, I'll do it all again just so that I can come back to you.” I hold her closer, hoping she'll hear the truth in my words and never feel the need to question them.

§§§

Fortress is a hive of activity. The raid on the Reznikov compound is happening tomorrow night and forecasts predict that the current weather conditions are not going to improve, so the appropriate gear and equipment must be prepared. And the weapons. You can't bring a knife to a gunfight, and there are going to be a lot of guns. Luckily, the intel provided is extensive. It seems the FBI managed what we couldn't; to plant an agent within the syndicate who could blend in so seamlessly, his true identity has still not been discovered by the Russians. Even within the bureau his identity is top secret and only known to a select few. After tomorrow, he'll most likely be reassigned to another field office in a different state, or if things don't go according to plan, be given a new identity and a new life. I don't even want to imagine what that would be like, especially now that I'm so close to having the life I always wanted. Does he have that? A family, a woman he can't imagine living without? I say a silent prayer for the man and then go about my day, preparing while overseeing a handful of other projects currently on the go. By the end of the day, I feel simultaneously exhausted yet energized. Everything is set for tomorrow and all that's left to do is to go home and get a good night's sleep. I've never had trouble falling asleep before a mission, but this feels different. There's more at stake than just the successful takedown of a criminal organization. When it's all said and done, there will be someone waiting for me to come home, not that my family didn't do the same while I was in the Navy, but again, this feels different. I don't even consider going to my apartment, there's no point. As long as my woman is waiting for me, she will be my home.

Morning comes far too soon, and looks even more dreary than yesterday, but right now it doesn't matter because I'm buried deep inside Liv, taking my pleasure from her soft body embracing me with every thrust. I have to leave soon, but for the life of me I cannot pull myself away from her. We did talk a bit earlier, I told her as much as I could about what would happen today and tried to reassure her that we are as prepared as we've ever been, for every eventuality. She listened intently, nodded at the appropriate moments and when I was done, crawled into my lap, straddling my legs, and attacked my mouth with such passion, she took my breath away. We were still in her bed so of course that kiss led us here, to the most intense fuck of my life. She cries out my name when she comes and I follow her over the edge, surrendering all thought to the sensations of her trembling body clutching mine, her heat milking my cock. We stay locked together for a few minutes, her hand stroking over the tattoo on my chest and me running mine down her back, grazing her ass before moving back up again. Over and over until I'm hard once more.

"Baby, if I don't leave this bed right now, I never will." I squeeze her ass and give her one last kiss before rolling off the bed so I can get cleaned up and head to my apartment. I won't see her again before tonight and might not even get an opportunity to talk to her during the day, so the kiss is filled with all the passion and love I feel for her. And then I leave.

The day passes like a storm cloud creeping across the sky, ominous and heavy with expectation. At least I don't have to worry about Liv sitting alone, waiting for news. Kate invited her to hang out at their place after work, so I know she'll be okay, but I'm done sitting around and I know my brothers

feels the same way. The Reznikov compound is situated just over a hundred miles outside the city and consists of a mansion confirmed to be the family home, living quarters for various syndicate members as well as an office building and several storage warehouses. Fifteen acres of land, twelve buildings in total, close to one hundred people including twelve women being held against their will.

The FBI established a mobile command center on a nearby farm and seeing all the agents involved in one place is a stark reminder of the scale and work that went into this operation. We've been split up into smaller teams with clearly defined objectives, so all that remains is the signal to get this show on the road. The sun set hours ago, and the rain has still not let up, so the ground is a soggy mess of mud and trampled grass while the air feels cold and damp against our skin. Riley stands next to me, fiddling with his night vision goggles while humming an Aerosmith song under his breath, something he must have picked up from Liv, and Mike and Aaron stand a few feet away talking softly. I don't even want to imagine what's going through Aaron's head right now. Obviously, he's as focused as any other person here, but the outcome of this operation must be weighing heavily on his shoulders. If Melissa is one of the women being held here, I can only hope that we can find her the help she'll need to overcome this horrific experience.

We receive the signal to execute, and things happen pretty quickly from there. The perimeter of the compound is breached at several key points simultaneously and then we are on the move, making our way to our objectives spread out on the property. Somehow Wyatt managed to swing it so that

Mike, Riley, Aaron and I are on the same team, and given the objective to secure the office building. Not our first choice, but we have no problem slotting in where we're needed so we proceed to our objective, which happens to be a smaller building situated close to the mansion. Clearing the building goes quickly as there aren't any people around this time of the night, but we also need to make sure that no one will be able to come back before the Feds can sweep the computers and files for data or take away what they need to analyze later. Aaron and I make our way to the last office at the end of the hall on the second floor just as a message comes through our comms that the FBI's undercover agent is in the building and to proceed with caution. We confirm our position and move forward, but just as we're about to reach for the door, it swings open and we come face to face with ... Holy fuck, Melissa! Wait, Melissa? She's dressed in all black, her hair tucked under a black beanie and her face devoid of make-up, but it's definitely her. There's a backpack slung over her shoulders and a weapon in a holster at her hip, but otherwise she could be any young woman instead of an FBI informant. Holy. Fuck!

"Great, you made it. Let's go." And with that she pushes past us and heads down the hall we just cleared. Stunned, I don't move for several seconds, and I can hear Aaron next to me, swearing under his breath, repeatedly. "Let's go guys. Time's a wasting. Crisden is going to have my ass if this goes tits up now," she continues, referring to Special Agent in Charge Marcus Crisden, the man calling all the shots on this op.

This seems to shake Aaron out of his shock, and he swings around and marches after her, grabs her by the arm and carries on walking. From where I stand, I hear him growl: "If you

think for one second there's not going to be a discussion later, you are in for a huge surprise." Well, so much for a happy reunion between brother and sister. Hell, I would have even preferred a tearful one, but this is not going to go down well. Aaron is practically running out the building, dragging Melissa behind him and I have to sprint to catch up with them. Around us, everything seems to be going exactly according to plan. Various agents are corralling syndicate members, taking them into custody and escorting them to the designated location from where they will be transported to God knows where. At some point Mike and Riley caught up to us as well. Riley appears strangely pale, an angry scowl painted across his face, and I almost feel sorry for Melissa. Almost. The deception, hiding all of this from her brother for two years is one thing, but it affected all of us.

SAC Crisden, who must have been notified of our approach, is waiting for us at the command center and is obviously well trained in reading a room because he picks up on the vibe the moment we step inside. Aaron opens his mouth, no doubt ready to lay into the senior agent for withholding Melissa's involvement from him, but Crisden cuts him off.

"Gentlemen, let me remind you this is my party, and you are only slightly more important than uninvited guests. Please don't make me regret extending that invitation? Things went so well tonight; I might even agree to do it again some time. Ah, and now for the guest of honor, Special Agent Yeager." Agent Yeager? Sure enough, he's now turned his attention to Melissa and is staring at her like a proud parent, or a mentor with his protégé. Another growl erupts from behind Aaron's clenched jaw, and he looks like he's trying to eviscerate the

man with his stare alone, but he doesn't move any closer.

“Now, if you'll excuse us, we have a briefing to get to. Thank you for the assist.” And with that he leads Melissa away and we are dismissed and left to figure out what just happened on our own.

Chapter 10

~ Liv ~

In my apartment, in my bed, his body is wrapped around me in a sensual embrace, twisting the sheets around our limbs, tying us together. I roll my body against his as I hold him tighter to me, breathing him in while he whispers words of devotion in my ear, his lips caressing there before moving down my cheek, down my neck, down, down, down. I run my fingers through his silky hair, relishing the feel of it against my thighs while anticipation rushes through me. Then, from far away, the shouting starts, angry words I'm unable to make out, but drawing closer until the voice is so close whoever it is, must be in the apartment with us. Heath lifts his head from between my thighs, his look of confusion changing to accusation as realization sets in. You did this! You brought him here! But I didn't. I watch helplessly as Riley comes into view and continues screaming at me while grabbing Heath by the arm and dragging him from the bed. "You did this, you stupid girl! I'm taking him away now, but in the end, you'll be the one who leaves. It will be you who ends up all alone. It will be you ..."

"Baby, it's okay. I'm here. Shhh, it's okay." Heath. I sense him before I'm fully awake and as always, it calms me immediately knowing he's close. I fell asleep in Kate's spare bedroom once we received word that the raid had been a success, but that the guys would not be able to leave there

right away. Now the bed dips from the weight of his body as he lowers himself down next to me and pulls me into his arms.

“Are you okay? I was worried,” I mumble while snuggling closer.

“I know, baby. I’m fine, we’re all fine.” I can feel the tension in the way he holds me but won’t call him on it. I can’t even imagine what his night must have been like. If he decides to open up about some of the details, I’ll listen but I doubt he will or that there’s much he’ll be able to say.

“What time is it? We should probably go so that Mike and Kate— “

“Nope, we’re staying right here. I’m too tired to drive and you need your sleep. We can leave in the morning. Riley is going to hold the fort at work so there’s no need for us to rush and Aaron probably won’t be in at all.”

“Is he okay? Oh God, did they find Melissa?!”

“Baby, I’m exhausted. Let’s sleep, okay? I’ll tell you everything later.” The words are uttered on a long yawn and barely out of his mouth when I hear his breathing even out and know he’s fallen asleep, but now I’m wide awake with questions swarming around in my head like demented bees. At least I know Heath and his friends are safe, which is the important part, but I also know how important Melissa’s safety was to the outcome of this operation.

Morning breaks with clear skies but a distinct chill in the air, and we’re now sitting at the kitchen counter while Kate makes us pancakes for breakfast. Mike and Heath have yet to say anything about last night and from the looks they’ve

exchanged thus far, they have no intention of opening up anytime soon. I get the impression Kate's been through this before, because she doesn't ask any questions or push for conversation, just chats with me about this and that while the men sit silently watching our every move. Maybe it's their way of reassuring themselves that the danger has been dealt with, at least for now. Who knows how long it will be until the next operation or crisis? This is their life after all.

We're just about to sit down to eat when the front door bangs open and then slams shut again. Mike and Heath don't even flinch, as if this is completely expected and maybe it is because a few seconds later Aaron walks in and the atmosphere in the room changes immediately. It's filled with expectation, not the good kind but the kind where it feels highly likely that something terrible is about to happen.

Heath opens his mouth, but before he can utter a word, Aaron holds up a finger indicating he must wait. There is another sound as the front door opens and closes more quietly this time, and then a young woman walks into the room. She looks to be about my age, with jet black hair similar to Aaron's, eyes so grey they appear to be almost silver and delicate features strung so taught, as if she's bracing for an attack. This must be—

“Melissa! Oh my God, I can't believe you're here! The guys wouldn't say anything. Are you okay? Come here!” Kate rushes to her and they embrace like long lost friends. Or sisters, and I suddenly feel like an outsider in this small group. Aaron still stands frozen in place and Heath and Mike stand beside him as if preparing to hold him back, which seems a little strange, so I edge towards the kitchen which is the

furthest away from all the excitement as I can get. Of course, Heath doesn't miss my little shuffle and before I can make another move, he's next to me with his arm around my waist, pulling me into his side.

"Come, let me introduce you." He steps towards the two women who are still holding each other tightly, dragging me along so that I have no choice but to move with him. "Hey Melissa, it's good to see you again. I want you to meet someone, but Kate will need to let you go first." He waits a few seconds before chuckling softly and then taking Kate gently by the arm. "Come on, give the rest of us a chance to say hello." Kate reluctantly steps back but doesn't go far and when she glances my way, I see tears in her eyes even though I know she must be ecstatic right now. She flashes me a quick smile and goes to stand next to Mike, and then Heath's pulling me in front of him to face Melissa. "Say hello to Liv, the love of my life." His arm wraps around me from behind, circling my chest and pulling me tightly against him. "Baby, this is Melissa, Aaron's sister." Even without the introduction it's clear they are related, sharing so many of the same features. We smile at each other before she looks up at him.

"Love of your life, huh? You mean to tell me you guys are finally settling down? Next thing I'm going to hear Riley's gotten married." I think she meant that to sound light-hearted and maybe she could have gotten away with it, but something in her eyes tell me this would not make her happy. In fact, the way she's hunched forward ever so slightly, and her arms are wrapped around her waist, tells me Riley getting married would be very bad indeed. At least for Melissa. As if to cover her reaction, she focuses her attention on me. "Hey Liv, it's

great to meet you. And well done. You caught the best one of the lot.” She winks at me just as I hear Mike piping up from his position next to Kate.

“Hey, I heard that. I think we established years ago I’m the best. More skills, undeniably better looking, an all-round catch.” Kate doesn’t hesitate, just pinches him in the ribs and then responds with a laugh.

“Of course, you are, but you’re also married now so no longer eligible for the title.” Mike seems to think about this for a moment.

“You say that like being married is some kind of handicap, and I know you don’t believe that.” His cocky self-assured grin is almost blinding, but not enough to distract us from the dark cloud in the room, Aaron. He has not spoken a word since entering the house and the tension emanating from him is palpable. Melissa seems to be making a point of not meeting his glare, choosing to question me instead.

“So, you must tell me all about how you guys met. Knowing Heath, it’s probably going to be pretty intense and wildly romantic.” I turn to face him, cocking an eyebrow in question.

“Wildly romantic? That’s not quite how I remember it,” I tease. His response comes without any hesitation.

“Hey, I was on my best behavior that night. That has to count for something.”

“Sure, but you were also pretty banged up and covered in blood.” Melissa’s eyes widen.

“Wow, that sounds pretty intense though. Definitely a story I need to hear.” But Aaron must have reached the end of his

patience because he finally speaks up.

“Later. First you get to explain to us what the hell you’ve been doing for the past two years and why we found you in the middle of a Russian compound last night, not as a captive but as a fucking informant?! Oh, I’m sorry, I meant special agent. We don’t want to miss anything important, do we?”

Oh shit. Heath mentioned to me once that Melissa’s disappearance was the main reason he, Aaron, Mike and Riley left the Navy. Back then it was the sole purpose for starting Fortress, so that they could use their resources to find her and also to stop the same thing from happening to others. At the time I’m sure they would have considered it worth the sacrifice, but to find out that it wasn’t necessary, at least not in Melissa’s case ... Would Heath regret his decision to leave the SEALs? Would he consider going back? Is that even a possibility? As if sensing my rising panic, Heath tightens his hold on my waist and dips his head so that he can whisper in my ear.

“I’m right here, not going anywhere without you. We just need to hear them out, let them get this off their chests.” I turn my head so that I can give him a quick kiss on his cheek, needing that connection with him, and he smiles as he stares into my eyes. “I love you, baby, and I’m not letting you go.” I smile back at him, so close to saying those words back. Soon. I’ll do it soon.

“Aaron, you have to listen to me, okay? There wasn’t time to try and track you down and explain what was happening. You know how it is. Timing was crucial. There was an opportunity for me to work myself into the syndicate and if I didn’t take it

right then, we would have lost it and who knows when we would get another. I swear I tried to get a message to you to let you know I was safe, but—”

“Yeah? Well, you should have tried harder. And don’t even start with being safe! That whole situation was anything but safe. Guns, drugs, murder and kidnapping—”

“I know, Aaron. I was there, but I had the FBI watching my back. I had people I could call—”

“That’s just great. Fanfuckingtastic. I left my people, but as long as you had yours, no problem” It’s clear this is a sore point, not that he left the Navy for her, but that she couldn’t find a way to contact him, despite the resources at her disposal.

“Nobody asked you to leave the Navy, that’s all on you.”

“I thought you had been kidnapped! You could have been dead for all we knew. Mom and Dad were going crazy because apparently you couldn’t be bothered to let them know anything either,” he all but shouts, his control obliterated.

“Oh please! When did they ever care what we did? They weren’t exactly parents of the year when we were growing up. Why would that change now?” Aaron sighs out a breath, seeming to lose all the steam for his argument, his shoulders sagging with the weight of everything that lies between them, a past they are unable to escape. In that moment my heart breaks for him and his sister, because some of this feels achingly familiar. “I’m sorry, okay?” Melissa looks around the room, as if wanting to include everyone in her apology. “For everything I’ve cost you, for what you’ve given up in order to be here. I’m truly sorry.” Nobody responds. You could hear a

pin drop as everyone seems to collectively hold their breath waiting for Aaron to either accept the apology or continue an argument that might be pointless at this stage. I mean, could you go back to the teams once you've left? You've got to give Aaron credit though; he knows how to hold onto his anger and doesn't budge. It's Melissa who steps up to him until they are toe to toe, slips her arms around his waist and hugs him until he finally relents and circles his arms around her too. She whispers something in his ear, and he hugs her a little tighter before letting go. I sneak a glance at Kate who's wiping at her eyes, and when she catches me, she smiles, trying to hide the emotions running down her cheeks. I smile back at her just as three distinct message tones cut through the room. Aaron, Mike and Heath grab for their phones almost simultaneously and when they look at each other after reading their texts, it's as if a silent communication takes place which only they could understand.

“God, I hate it when you guys do this. What's going on now?”
Kate's exasperated tone makes it clear this happens often.

“Honey, something's come up. We need to go and meet with Crisden.”

“The Feds?” Kate couldn't sound less impressed, and Mike doesn't look so happy either when he responds.

“Yeah. Mel, do you know what this is about?”

“I have an idea, yes. Come on, let's go get this over with.”
And just like that everyone except Kate and I stream out the door leaving us once again to wait and worry.

Hours later, I'm at work when Wyatt stops by. It takes a while for us to have some privacy as the boys are just as fond of him as they are of Riley. Positive male role models are in short supply, and I'm thrilled that they've taken a liking to these men who have become such an important part of my life.

"I'm leaving." Okay, so I didn't see that coming. I stare at Wyatt for a few seconds, my mouth hanging open as I try to come up with something intelligent to say other than *huh?* He doesn't appear to notice that he's caught me completely by surprise and continues as if this is just any old conversation. "I was never supposed to get involved in the Reznikov investigation and would have been gone already if it wasn't for that. I have a new assignment waiting for me, but I wanted to say goodbye to you first."

Damn, why now? Everything was just starting to come together, but I try to ignore the stinging sensation in my eyes and nose so that I can face my friend.

"When are you leaving?"

"Tonight. Things are already happening and I ... I'm sorry, Little Pain. I know this is sudden but—"

"No, it's fine. No need to worry about me. And at least I won't have to deal with being called a pain anymore." Not my best effort, but to hell with it. I'm going to miss him.

"Ah, now you know I only called you that because I care." He tries to smile, but I think this is hard for him too. At least, I hope it might be.

“Sure, because there were absolutely no other options to go with.” I smile now so he knows I’m not upset.

“Of course not. Anything too friendly and you’d think I wanted you for myself. I knew there was a guy out there waiting for you and I definitely wasn’t him. Heath is a good man, one of the best, so you hang onto him, okay?”

“Wow, how did we get from you leaving to my love life?”

“Because I know you. You believe you’re better off alone, or at least you used to. Heath looks good on you, so don’t mess it up. He won’t hurt you. You just need to accept it.”

“Okay, okay. Jeez, hour’s up doctor. Time to go.”

“You’re chasing me away now? Nice! So much for considering your feelings. I’ll just leave then. See you never.” He turns away but I grab him by the arm, pulling him back to me which is when I notice the smile on his face.

“Come here, you.” I don’t even think about it, just give him a hug, hoping that I can somehow convey just how grateful I am for his friendship, for everything he’s done for me since we met.

“That’s more like it.” He holds me tightly to him, before letting go and stepping back. “You take care of yourself, okay?”

“You too, Wyatt. Drop me a message every once in a while, okay? Let me know you’re still alive.” He doesn’t reply to that, just winks at me and then walks away.

The rest of the day drags and when the time comes, I’m genuinely happy to be done so that I can go home, which isn’t normal for me, but then the last few days have been anything

but normal. I find Heath already busy in the kitchen preparing what looks like a curry, which smells amazing.

“Hey, baby, I’ve been waiting for you to get home.” He gives me a sexy smile, which drops when he rounds the counter to meet me by the door. “Hey, what’s wrong? Anything happen at work?”

“No, work is fine. Wyatt came to see me this afternoon. To say goodbye. It was just unexpected, that’s all.” Heath doesn’t say anything, just takes me in his arms and gives me his special brand of comfort, warmth, and safety.

“I’m sorry, baby. He told us today as well. It’s all last minute and hush-hush, but he’ll be okay. You don’t have to worry about him.”

“I know, I’m just being silly, but it feels like I’m losing someone I’ve known for years rather than just a few months. And we weren’t even that close.”

“Hey, it’s not silly. You care about people, so when they leave, you feel that just as strongly as you would a close friend. It’s not a bad thing. And besides that, the bond you guys have formed under unusual circumstances, which makes it different and no less important.” He holds me tighter for a moment before letting go. “Come, dinner’s almost ready. Have a seat for a few minutes while I finish up.” He leads me to the sofa and gently pushes down on my shoulder until I’m sitting down before walking back to the kitchen.

“The food smells amazing. You’re spoiling me. I might never let you go.”

“Don’t you know that’s the plan? The last thing I want is to be away from you. You’re stuck with me now.” And I don’t mind one little bit.

The meal is delicious. Afterwards I clean up the kitchen while Heath plays around on his phone and when I’m done, I take a seat next to him on the sofa, feeling relaxed and content.

“I meant to ask you; how did your meeting go this morning?” He stops playing with the phone, reaches to place it on the coffee table and then turns his attention to me.

“It wasn’t so much a meeting as an update for everyone involved in the operation and the raid. Our involvement was kind of limited, so we didn’t get much of the information besides what was pertinent to the raid itself, but it seems they didn’t quite get everyone they hoped to. The head of the syndicate’s oldest son, Sergei Reznikov got away somehow, but that’s the Feds’ problem. We got Melissa back, and the syndicate itself has been shut down, or at least crippled to such an extent, it will take Sergei years to rebuild.”

“That must still be concerning, though. Aren’t they worried he might retaliate?”

“We don’t see how, unless he gets help from some other group, but like I said that’s the Feds’ problem now. Obviously if they ask for help, we won’t say no, but we no longer have a direct interest in the matter.”

“Speaking of, how is Melissa doing? Things felt a little tense this morning between her and Aaron. I imagine they still have a lot to work out.”

“Absolutely, but she seems okay. It was a surprise to find out she’d become an agent in the years we were in the Navy. She infiltrated the syndicate as an accountant, obviously all orchestrated by the FBI, and became one of Sergei’s confidants, seeing as he was the money guy and they worked closely together. The Feds are trying to establish whether her cover is still intact and if there’s a chance he might reach out to her. Aaron is not thrilled, but she’s as serious about her work as we are about ours, so that’s going to be something for them to hash out. In the meantime, there’s something I wanted to discuss with you. You remember Aaron’s son Jacob?” At my nod, he continues: “Well, it seems he’s having some trouble with his math work at school, and we were thinking, if you’re up for it, you could maybe tutor him?” I smile at this, happy that there is something I can do to help.

“Of course! You can let Aaron know I’m happy to help whenever. It would probably be easier for him if I went there, rather than carting Jacob all over the city.”

“I’ll see what he says, but thanks, baby. It will be one less thing for him to worry about while all this other stuff is going on.”

“Anytime, and Jacob’s a cool kid. It will be fun.”

“You think hanging out and trying to teach someone math is fun?”

“It can be. If you look at it as this giant obstacle in your way, that’s what it’s going to be. You’re not even going to try because you’ve already convinced yourself you don’t understand and it’s going to be hard. I just have to show Jacob

that it's merely a pebble and not a rock. Obviously, he's going to have to do the work, but the mindset is half the battle."

"You're amazing, you know that?" His adoration is almost palpable. I can't believe I ever doubted his feelings for me.

"I think someone told me once, a long time ago. You're welcome to say it again if you want. I don't mind." I smirk at him. He sits quietly for a moment, and then he's on top of me, tickling my sides while shoving his face in my neck. When we finally come up for air, he looks at me with an intensity I haven't seen from him before.

"You are amazing, Liv and I love you so fucking much. If I said it every day for the rest of my life it still wouldn't express how deep this feeling goes." And I feel it, the moment to say the words back to him. I take a deep breath, open my mouth and ... his phone rings. "Hold that thought," he says as he leans over to pick it up from the coffee table. I try to wriggle my way out from under him to give him some space, but he just tightens his grip with his free hand on my hip and hangs on. After the shortest conversation consisting of monosyllable answers, he confirms that that was Aaron and that we're going over to his place tomorrow night for dinner and a tutoring session.

§§§

I'm not sure what I expected from Aaron's home. Maybe some high-end apartment like Heath's in the city, but I should have known better. For one, it's an actual double story house in the suburbs, a family home with a wraparound porch, white picket

fence, the works. There's even a bike on a kickstand next to the driveway and a hoop fixed over the garage. If I had to guess, I'd say he must have chosen it for the school district, because it was definitely not for the commute to Fortress. And for another, Aaron and Heath couldn't be more different if they tried. Besides their careers in the Navy, they would appear to have nothing in common, but that's probably why their friendship works so well. Each of Heath's friends brings something different to the mix and their bond is as tight as any I've witnessed, and now I get to be a part of that. Before, it was just Ren and Evan, and they are still my closest friends. They've accepted Heath with open arms, although it did take Evan a bit longer to warm up to him, and we've even shared a couple of meals together since Heath has started spending more time at my place than at his own. This feels different though. Maybe because Aaron is the unofficial leader of this pack and his acceptance of me feels more significant. I don't know. I could just be blowing this out of proportion because I want to belong here, with these people.

It's early evening now. Jacob and I spent just over an hour going through some exercises, for me to assess him and see what he's struggling with and decided now would be a good time to take a break and go shoot some hoops outside while there's still enough light out. The guys are sitting in the farm style kitchen chatting while they wait for the takeout they ordered to arrive and apparently Melissa will be joining us later as well. She's currently staying in one of Aaron's spare bedrooms, but I doubt that arrangement will last long. Just thinking about sharing a place with Luke makes me cringe, but maybe they're different. God, I hope they're different.

Anyway, it doesn't take me long to realize Jacob's confidence shooting hoops far exceed his confidence when doing math and I'm about to tease him about this when there is suddenly a screeching of tires in the driveway. I check that Jacob is out of harm's way and then prepare to lay into the delivery guy for driving so recklessly in a residential area, but ... it's not the delivery guy. Or Melissa returning from yet another briefing with her boss. Or anyone else who's not Russian and carrying what looks like a machine gun and a black hood. Before I can even process these details of the thug rushing towards me, he punches me in the gut so hard all the breath in my body leaves in a loud *oof*, slips the hood over my head and carries me towards the van blocking the driveway. One solid knock to the head and everything goes black.

Chapter 11

~ Heath ~

I can't breathe.

Fuck, I can't breathe! How did this happen? One minute everything was fine, Liv and Jacob were taking some time out after spending the afternoon in a tutoring session and then— I don't even know. Ten little words succeeded in ripping my world apart more effectively than any IED.

You took something of mine.

I took something of yours.

A note! A fucking note left to taunt me. I turn to Melissa, unable to keep my warring emotions from the glare directed at her.

“Start talking, Melissa.” She visibly shrinks back, then straightens her spine before looking me in the eye.

“It's not what you think.”

“I don't know what to think! Sergei Reznikov thinks you're his. Obviously, there is more to this than we know, and you're wasting time. So. Start. Talking.”

Aaron steps up next to her and places an arm around her shoulders, a protective stance to go with his own warning glare, directed at me.

“Easy man, this is a shock to all of us. Let’s just take a breath and sort this out,” he tries to placate, but I’m not in the mood.

I want to argue. I want to punch something, hard. I feel like screaming out my frustrations. I need Liv back in my arms. It’s all too much. Years of training and facing down the literal scum of the earth does not prepare you for this feeling.

Hopeless frustration. Dread. Fear. God, if they hurt her.

Blinding rage. Melissa takes a cautious step forward, and then another, until she’s standing right in front of me. She’s braver than I gave her credit for.

“I swear, I had no idea he would do this. His father employed me as an accountant for their business, but I reported to Sergei on a day-to-day basis. He made it clear pretty early on that he was interested in a relationship with me, but I never encouraged him. I swear, Heath, there was never anything— “

“So, how do we get from that to this? Why would he go to such extreme measures so soon after the raid? Why would he take the risk?”

“He became obsessive, his behavior erratic, but I avoided him as much as I could. It became more difficult when he had me move to the compound. According to him it was safer for me there and Crisden pushed for me to do it as well. According to him, the more access I had, and the more people saw me around, the less my presence would be questioned.”

Aaron lets out a soft growl at the mention of the special agent in charge.

“That fucker. I knew he had something to do with this.” His jaw as well as both fists are tightly clenched and if I had to guess, he’s just as close to punching someone as I am.

“So, what now?” I question. “Do you have any idea where Sergei might be? Or where he would have taken Liv?” She seems to consider this for a moment, or maybe it’s the answer that follows, because it’s definitely not something anyone wants to hear about the person keeping their loved one from them.

“I think he’s still here, in the city. He’s one of those perverse kinds of people who want to see everything, be a part of everything that’s going on. Women being raped, men being tortured, if he wasn’t doing the raping or torturing, he wanted to see it happen. Despite being a businessman to his core, he’s a mean, vindictive monster.”

“Fuck, Melissa, how the hell could you be part of this?” There is so much pain and frustration in Aaron’s eyes, but the concern for his sister overrules everything else. Unfortunately, she doesn’t see it.

“Don’t you dare judge me, Aaron! I had a job to do just like you. There was literally no-one else. With the time restrictions and requirements it had to be me. I did what needed to be done.”

“Okay, calm down. I think we’re losing sight of what’s important right now. We need to get Liv back. The arguments can wait till later.” I’d almost forgotten that Riley showed up shortly after Aaron called him and Melissa, but he manages to insert himself between us now, forcing me back slightly while turning his attention to Melissa. “Emmie, we need to know where to start looking. A specific location, anything. You know better than anyone where they used to operate, all their

little hidey-holes. I need you to think, okay? If you need to go somewhere quiet for a moment, go ahead.”

I open my mouth to protest, but he throws me a warning glare. Then Mike is next to me, taking me by the shoulder and leading me into the kitchen where Jacob is watching while Kate makes him a snack. His eyes meet mine and then immediately look away. I know that look but seeing it on an eleven-year-old boy who is as blameless in this situation as only a child can be, tears me wide open.

“Hey Jacob, can we talk for a minute?” He steals a look at Kate who gives him a reassuring smile before nodding at me. We take a seat at the kitchen table and once Kate and Mike leave, I focus my attention on him. “Hey bud, are you doing okay? There’s been a lot going on here lately.” He stares at me for a moment, as if trying to decipher if I’m being sincere or not, before he answers.

“This is my fault. I was the one who wanted to play outside. I challenged Liv to a game of hoops even though I could see she was tired.”

“Hey, listen to me, okay? None of this is your fault. None of it. There are bad people in this world who do bad things. You know this, I know your dad has told you. One of those bad people took Liv. That’s not on you, and we’re going to get her back. I promise.” He meets my gaze now, his stare direct and unflinching.

“Dad says you shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep.”
Fuck, this kid. He’s already been through so much in his life. I meet his eyes.

“He’s right, so I’ll say it again. We will get her back.”

When I return to the lounge, I see we've been joined by Crisden and two of his agents who were part of the raid on the Reznikov compound. They are hunched over a map spread out on the coffee table and are looking at various locations where Sergei might be keeping Liv. Melissa also tried to contact the Russian, but when it became clear that she intended to offer herself up in exchange for Liv, Aaron shut her down faster than you can say Russian scumbag. That led to an intense argument between the siblings that only ended when Crisden bellowed at them to stop acting like children, which in turn led to an argument between him and Aaron, each maintaining that he was in charge of this search-and-rescue mission. All of this while my heart tried to beat its way out of my chest, because we are wasting time. I feel paralyzed by fear, worst case scenarios racing through my head one after the other in an endless loop. What if we don't find her in time? What if that sick bastard hurts her ... or worse? What if ... What if ... What if. Fuck! From the corner of my eye, I see Melissa checking her phone. Her face pales and her hand clutching the device starts to shake and I know, I just know whatever is going to happen next, is going to change everything.

"Guys." Her voice is shaky, her breaths coming fast and at first no one pays her any attention. "Guys!" Crisden and Aaron stop mid-argument, and everyone turns to her, the room shrinking to the size of a 5'2" woman holding my fate in her hands. She raises her phone as if wanting to pass it off to whoever is closest. Aaron steps towards her, his posture rigid and his expression tight and in a matter of seconds the phone is in his hands, opened to a text with a video attached. I step closer, my blood stalling in my veins as the hair all over my

body begin to stand on end. On a deep inhale, I turn my eyes to the screen.

Sergei: You know what I want, my little raven. Come to me and I'll let her go

The message is short and to the point, there's no misunderstanding the threat if we don't comply, but it's the video that causes the breath in my lungs to solidify into a boulder with sharp edges piercing my flesh and threatening to crush me under its weight. Liv. Her hands are tied together and suspended above her head from a rafter in what looks like a warehouse, and she's stripped down to her underwear! I can't make out any injuries on her exposed flesh but that doesn't stop the anguished growl tearing out of my throat. The tension in the room is palpable, every inch of the space thick with its sticky presence. It feels like hours pass before I can raise my eyes to Aaron's, but it's Riley who was reading over his other shoulder who breaks the silence.

"Emmie, what's the deal with this guy? Was there something between you two, or anything he could have interpreted as you being interested in him?" What the fuck?! Is he really questioning her relationship status right now? But before I can object, Melissa does it for me.

"I don't think that's relevant, do you? We need to figure out how we're going to get Liv back."

"It's relevant because we need to know how far he will go to get to you. Do you know where that is?" He nods to the phone still clutched in Aaron's hand. As expected, she doesn't acknowledge the part of his sentence I suspect he's most interested in.

“It’s one of their warehouses down by the harbor. It’s easily accessible but they will see us coming. We’ll– “

“Whoa, back up,” Aaron barks at her. “Us? We? If you think you’re going to just hand yourself over to this asshole, you’ve got another thing coming. We’ll get Liv out of there without putting you in danger in the process. That’s not happening.” He’s practically bristling with rage and any other woman would think twice about confronting or antagonizing him, but Melissa has changed in the past two years and stepping back is obviously not part of her repertoire.

“Aaron, I never said anything about handing myself over, but using me to draw him out is the smart move. He’s not even trying to hide because he knows we will come to him. He chose that warehouse for a reason and he knows I’ll come too. That makes him reckless and stupid, so we have to capitalize, but we don’t have much time. Marcus, can we get some agents together and get the ball rolling?”

“We should keep the team small. A stealth attack. In and out like a duck mating.” All eyes turn to Riley who shrugs before adding: “Hey, it’s a good analogy–”

“You do know ducks have dicks shaped like corkscrews, right? That does not sound like it’s going to lead anywhere stealthy, and it doesn’t matter. Sergei knows we’re coming. The amount of people won’t matter. We need a team, backup for when things go sideways.”

“Jeez, Emmie, thanks for the vote of confidence. It’s not like we don’t do this for a living or anything. Maybe you’ve been hanging round the Feds too long.” Any other time and I would have found this amusing. Riley has a way of getting under

Melissa's skin like no one I've ever met before, but now is not the time for this. As if reading my thoughts, Aaron steps forward, effectively cutting off any response from Melissa, which would have inevitably escalated the argument and my blood pressure.

"Enough, you two. We can use our own people. The Feds don't need to get involved." Crisden opens his mouth to argue, but Aaron cuts him off. "Sergei made this personal, so we'll deal with it. Once we've got Liv back, you can have Sergei."

"You seem to forget, Special Agent Yeager is a federal agent. As such, she cannot get involved in this *personal* operation. Make no mistake, she will be suspended. Permanently."

Turning to her, Crisden pauses for a moment as if considering his words. "You have a very promising career with the Bureau. You can go far, make a name for yourself. Do you really want to risk your future for this? Let your brother and his men take care of it. They have the means and the manpower. They can bring Sergei in just as easily as we could."

"Do you honestly believe I could walk away from this? He took Liv because of me. There's no way he's not expecting me to be there and our best chance of getting her back is for me to go. Bait, distraction, call me what you want to, but the one thing you'll definitely be calling me is part of this team and if that's a problem for the Bureau, then that's something we're all just going to have to live with." Riley looks like he wants to cheer, or high five her. Aaron seems to be biting his tongue against all the arguments why this is a bad idea while trying to hide his pride in his little sister and it hits me once again what we're risking here.

“Melissa, are you sure about this? Nobody’s going to judge– “

“Are you serious right now? It’s your girlfriend being held by that maniac. You of all people should be onboard with this,” she fires back.

“We’re not risking one life to get back another, Melissa. That’s not how this works.”

“You guys risk yourself all the time.”

“That’s different, and you know it.”

“All I know is we’re wasting time.” She turns to Aaron again.

“Are we doing this or what?” And just like that, the decision is made. Less than a half an hour later a dozen of Fortress’s men are around Aarons’ dining room table and a plan is devised to get Liv back.

Based on what Melissa was able to tell us about Sergei, along with our own surveillance, the plan is pretty straight forward. Mike, Melissa, and I will announce our arrival, playing into the idea of an exchange. An arranged time and place. We’re not expecting this to win us any favor with the mobster, but if he lets his guard down for even a moment, it could give us the opportunity to get everyone out safely. Aaron and Riley will lead two teams to secure the surrounding buildings beforehand, and once Liv and Melissa are safe, they will move in and take down the Russians. I can see Aaron struggling with the idea of sending Melissa in without him, but we have to assume that Sergei knows they are related and also, the part I’m struggling with, Liv might need medical attention right away and having Mike there will allow for that. Please God, don’t let her be hurt.

It's close to midnight when we pull up to the warehouse, just over twenty-four hours since the note and the text that tore my life apart. There is not a star in sight and a cloudy mantle shrouds the moon, casting only the barest amount of light over the harbor.

As predicted, we are met at our SUV by five men, who immediately disarm us, zip tie our wrists, pull black hoods over our heads and then separate us. Two of the men lead me in the opposite direction of the warehouse, and once we've shuffled a couple hundred feet, the beating starts, sadly also predicted. Similar noises some distance off to my right confirm that Mike is being subjected to the same treatment, which means Melissa is being taken to Sergei by the last man in our greeting party. The plan is to allow some time for her to contact him, for him to believe he has the upper hand and is getting what he wants and then for us to move in, get the women and get out. This means that, even though Mike and I can break the ties around our wrists without thinking twice, we have to remain docile and take the licks. I'll admit, these guys know how to throw a punch, especially the one going to town on my ribs which I can feel even though I'm wearing protective gear underneath my shirt. I take a few solid hits to my abdomen as well as to the head before two of our team are suddenly by my side, taking them down. I snap the tie with a quick twist of my wrists, remove the hood covering my face and check on the two Russians currently being restrained. Once they are secured, we make our way back to the warehouse, where our surveillance team confirms that Sergei's full attention is currently focused on Melissa, who has three men surrounding her. There are also another eight positioned

at various points inside the warehouse, alert and heavily armed. We have four snipers positioned around the exterior of the building, ready to pick off their targets, another twelve men on the ground and Aaron on comms coordinating our movements from a mobile unit two miles south of the warehouse. However, as yet we have been unable to get eyes on Liv. Reports from our team confirm she is in the building, in a section to the rear of the warehouse, furthest away from any doors or windows, but no one has been able to get visual confirmation of her current condition. She must be freaked out with what's happening around her, but is she hurt? Fuck, if they've hurt her, I'll end them and love doing it. Nothing will stop—

“Heath! What’s going on, man? Talk to me.” Aaron’s voice in my ear jolts me back to the present.

“I’m here. All good. We’re ready to breach on your word.”

“Keep it together. She’ll be back in your arms in no time. Remember, this is what we do.” I don’t need the pep talk and it’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him so, but I also realize that he has just as much to lose. With their parents no longer involved in their lives, Melissa is his only family, besides Jacob. There’s a lot at stake here. With that sobering thought, we receive the signal and take the warehouse.

They were expecting the attack. Sergei isn’t an idiot and is annoyingly familiar with his surroundings, specifically the points where he could be vulnerable to a sniper bullet or stealth attack. He has positioned himself in such a way that there is no clear shot of him without risking Melissa’s life as well, which means our snipers are now tasked with taking out

the men surrounding him while we focus on the outliers. The object is to avoid a firefight, not only because innocent lives are at stake, but because we don't want to draw attention from the occupants of the surrounding buildings, some of whom might be aligned with the Russians. Word of the raid has undoubtedly spread amongst the criminal community, and we have to assume that there might still be those willing to help Sergei. The fact that he has men in this warehouse standing with him, speaks to that fact.

Things progress quickly and, for the most part, according to plan. Until tonight, I've not had the pleasure of seeing Melissa in action, but damn! The girl has moves. Her hood had been removed at some point before we entered the warehouse, probably for Sergei to confirm that she was in fact his *little raven*. Realizing that he was using her as a shield, she managed to snap her tie and then used the kind of fighting skills I've only seen in military trained operatives to take the man down. One thing's for sure, if she does decide to leave the FBI, we would be lucky to have her. Anyway, with Sergei secured and most of his men immobilized, I make my way to the rear of the building, ready to get my woman and get the hell out of here.

I find Liv in a cordoned off section of the warehouse, still in the same position as on the video, strung up from the beam keeping her balancing on her toes and her muscles straining. But worse than that, she's still dressed in only her underwear. Considering the amount of time that's passed and the temperature inside the warehouse, there's a very real possibility that she's hypothermic. Her eyes are closed, even though she must have heard all the commotion going on

around her. I rush to her side, the need to be close to her, make sure she's okay and reassure her more powerful than a tsunami obliterating everything in its path, even though I find it impossible to speak. I can see no visible signs that she's been hurt, but the tears streaming down her deathly pale face tell me she's aware of my presence and knows that her ordeal is finally over. I reach for her, gently lifting her so that she's no longer straining her arms while trying to keep her balance.

"Hey, Smoochie." It's more a breath than a whisper from her lips, tinged blue and chapped from the cold, the words choked with her tears. "You came for me," she continues, all but ripping out my heart with her watery smile. So fucking brave. I don't miss the fact that she used the nickname I teased her about a million years ago, the one she claimed she'd only use under extreme circumstances. I guess this situation qualifies. Finally, the vice grip around my throat unlocks enough for me to take a full breath into my lungs.

"Of course, I came for you, baby. I'll have you out of here in no time, you hear? Just hang on a little bit longer. Stay with me, okay?" My lame attempt at encouragement goes unnoticed, and no one can deny how bad this looks. She's barely conscious and will need urgent medical attention, a hospital stay, definitely, but first I need to get her out of these chains secured around her wrists. Fuck! "I need some help over here!" Her body jerks against mine as if I've startled her. "Sorry, baby, I'm so fucking sorry."

She doesn't reply, only shivers in my arms, her body limp against mine. "Mike!" I can hear how frantic I sound, the sheer panic in my voice. What's going on? Why aren't they coming to help? I'm just about to turn my head so that I can shout

again, when Mike appears next to me with another teammate carrying a tool bag. Thank Christ!

“Hey, sweetheart, just hang in there, okay? We’ll have you out of here soon.” Mike’s reassurance seems to fall on deaf ears because Liv doesn’t respond, or maybe they were meant for me because my brothers have never failed me, and they won’t now either, not with something this important. Someone who means more to me than I could ever believe possible. He pulls a blanket from the tool bag and hands it over while Tucker grabs the metal cutters for the chains. “Heath, wrap this around her and warm her up. This should only take a minute.”

True to his word, I feel the exact moment Liv’s arms are cut free from the chain as she sags into me. Never has a weight been more welcome, even though she’s hardly any weight at all. I pick her up and hold her to my chest the way you would a small child. Her only response is a small gasp before she turns her face into my shirt, and I can feel she’s crying again. Tucker makes quick work of cutting through the shackles that had her wrists bound together and then her arms are around my neck, her face pushing tight against my skin, breathing me in.

“I’m sorry, I can’t stop crying. I’ve never been so scared in my life. They were waiting for you. They had so many guns and they wanted Melissa. Oh God, is she okay?” Fuck, this woman is going to bring me to my knees, but at least she’s talking, or rambling, but she’s coherent and thinking clearly despite everything that’s happened.

“Melissa is fine, and we had bigger guns. You should know that by now, baby. The good guys always have the bigger

guns.” Mike smirks at me, obviously enjoying the joke if not the inuendo.

“Come on, you two. We need to get Liv to the hospital. Get this mess cleaned up.” Of course, he’s referring to the warehouse and the men that have been captured, but Liv must have misunderstood.

“There’s no need, I already feel better. I’m just so grateful that you came for me. Heath, I need to tell you—”

“Shhh, it’s okay, baby. There’s plenty of time, but we need to get you checked out, okay? Will you do that for me?” For a moment she looks like she might argue, but then she smiles up at me, the most incredibly beautiful smile, even though her lips are still so pale and painfully chapped.

I smile back down at her before looking up and ... running towards us is one of Sergei’s thugs, an AK slung over his shoulder and the muzzle aimed in our direction. His shout for vengeance blends with those from my team members warning us to get down, take cover. A confusion of sound and movement. No, not now. I’ve only just got her back in my arms. This fucker is not taking her from me. I love her, she’s mine. I twist to the side and drop to the ground so that I can cover her with my body, but before I can complete the movement there is a sharp pain, a fire exploding inside my head and then nothing.

Chapter 12

~ Liv ~

The sky is dark even though it's midmorning. It's overcast, raining and cold. The ground we're standing on is muddy, clinging to our shoes which are sinking into the soft, sodden earth. The pastor's voice drones on at the outer edges of my consciousness, his words indecipherable but his voice strangely soothing, if not as comforting as I would hope. But there is no comfort now. Everyone standing at this gravesite cared about Heath, and that's what's important, not our damp clothes or dirty shoes or frayed comfort.

At some point Heath mentioned to his parents that he didn't want to be buried in their family plot in San Diego, but rather here where he had made a new home for himself. They respected his wishes, even though that must have been difficult, and made the trip here as soon as they were notified of his death. I don't know how much they've been told about his final hours, but both his parents and sisters have treated me as if I was a part of the family since the moment we met, despite the crushing guilt resting on my shoulders. On some level I understand that I'm not responsible for his death. He knew more than most about the evils that lurk in our society, but still ... twisted circumstances forever laced with regret. It should have been me ... in the grand scheme of things, I was the expendable one, hardly a part of his life long enough to make an impact, or so I thought. He sacrificed himself to save my life. What does one say in the face of a love like that? And

of course, I loved him too. I wanted to tell him, say the words so that he didn't doubt me, but like I said, twisted circumstances ... Now we stand huddled together, his family and friends, men and women he served with dressed in full dress uniform out of respect for a fellow hero, and me. The woman he loved. The woman who couldn't say the words back because ... God, I hate this.

Wyatt, who flew in on the redeye to attend the funeral, stands next to me, sharing my umbrella in exchange for his quiet strength. I've missed him. He looks ragged, tired, and stressed, his cheeks covered in scruff and his hair long past needing a trim. His eyes are hooded and his skin tight with his own grief, even though I know he's trying to hide it from me. Always so strong. So protective. I know I won't be able to ask him any questions about where he's been or what he's doing, so I try not to give it too much thought, but not having any answers feels worse than knowing the truth. Then again, what do I know. I only had the briefest glimpse of what his life must be like, and it threatens to destroy me even now, having known Heath and losing him so suddenly. At this gravesite, I want to beg for a second chance, a cosmic do-over and really, who would it hurt? Having such a good man back in the world. Who could it possibly hurt?! But I don't do it. I don't beg. I don't make a scene. I stand there quietly until it's time for the pastor to say his final prayer and then people start to leave, making their way to Mike and Kate's house where a small wake is being held. And after that? After that they will resume their lives and maybe occasionally think about the man who showed me what being loved unconditionally looked like.

Aaron and Riley remain standing beside me and Wyatt, along with Melissa, Ren, and Evan. In the days since my rescue, one of them have been by my side constantly. I felt too broken to object, too numb to feel smothered or annoyed, and even now, their presence feels like the pastor's voice. There's no comfort to be had, not yet. And maybe I should tell them. Maybe I should say it's okay, so that they can go back to their lives, take comfort from each other while they mourn their own loss. That would be the right thing to do, but I don't do that either. Instead, Melissa takes me by the hand, and we leave this mournful place, making our way to Mike's house, where there's a fire roaring in the fireplace of their cheerful home and you could be forgiven for thinking that Heath was merely late to the get-together, instead of lost to us forever.

§§§

Time passes in a vacuum, or maybe it's just me stuck in this void where sound doesn't register and words have no meaning. Light penetrates, if only to signify the change from day to night, the passing of time, the absence of love, comfort and warmth. In the time we spent together, it never occurred to me to appreciate how warm Heath was, physically. He was like my own personal heating blanket and never seemed to mind that I more often than not resembled a popsicle, always cold hands and cold feet that I would shove between his in an effort to warm them up. It feels like that's all I'll ever be now, cold hands and cold feet, everything in between frozen.

Heath's family returned to San Diego a few days after the funeral, something I only noticed in the vaguest sense even

though I tried my best to be present. It didn't work. Entire conversations wafted by me and even though I was sitting right there, I couldn't tell you a single detail about what was said. I do remember promising to keep in touch, as one does in these situations of forced politeness, but vow to myself to keep the promise anyway. They might need it more than I do, and that's okay. I went back to work shortly after that, the need to focus on something other than my own pain almost suffocating me. Stopgap might be the only thing holding me together at this point. Not that Ren, Evan and Heath's friends haven't been supportive, but that's what they still feel like to me sometimes, Heath's friends. Riley and I still hang out, and Kate and I have gotten closer too, but the urge to pack up and leave this city feels overwhelming some days. The thing is, where would I go? Death and sadness are a fact of life. Pain and loss are as much a part of living as eating and breathing, and there is no escaping it. At least here I have support, friends I can count on, and maybe more importantly, children who count on me. Wyatt has also remained a fixture in our lives, not returning to the work he was doing before Heath ... I think Aaron is trying to recruit him for Fortress, to make him a permanent part of the team. I hope he does because Wyatt needs that stability and the support of his friends.

I've decided to move, rather than leaving the city altogether. Memories can be a blessing and a curse, but I'm not ready to leave mine behind. Not that I could, but anyway. I found an apartment and today is moving day. The sun is out, and the sky is clear, as if Mother Nature is giving her seal of approval, and I'm all packed and ready. There isn't much, mostly just my clothes and personal items, my laptop and the books I've

collected over the years. Three boxes, an old backpack and a battered old suitcase contain all of my possessions. Maybe this time I'll make more of an effort with my personal space. *You are my warmth; you bring color to my life and music to my soul.* God, I miss him. It's almost paralyzing to think I have to do this alone, that I can't share everything with him. Maybe I'm making a mistake. We were so happy in that tiny apartment above the clinic, made so many memories, that walking away feels wrong, almost like a betrayal. I should go back. Ren would let me have it back if I asked. But no, I've already put down a deposit and this feels like a step I need to take.

I grab the first box and the backpack from my Jeep and make my way inside the building. This apartment block has an elevator, so there won't be any more climbing stairs, unless I want to use the fire escape. I step inside and press the button for the fifth floor as the night Heath and I met comes rushing back and I actually bend over under the weight of the memory, my eyes filling with tears. Even with his injuries, covered in blood and bruises, I knew in that way that elderly couples sometimes tell you they knew when they first met their love. I knew he was the one and yet I wasted so much time! I knew it and yet I never told him! A small ding from the elevator breaks through my anguish, alerting me that I've reached my floor and I get off while rummaging blindly through my shoulder bag for the keys the landlord gave me. I make my way to my new apartment, still choking back the tears that always seem so close to the surface these days, almost dropping the box in the process.

“Hey, I'm Daniel. Let me give you a hand with that.”

~ ***The End*** ~

Author's note:

Please don't hate me?!

I love romance, I honestly do. There is nothing like being swept away by a good book that allows you to feel so keenly what two people experience when falling in love. The highs and lows, laughter and tears before the universe magically offers up that perfect HEA, but with this duet I wanted to try something different because the truth is that not everyone gets to ride off into the sunset with the person they want. People say and do the wrong things. They make mistakes that take them on a road best avoided and I wanted to explore that.

Risky? Definitely. Rewarding? I guess you will be the judge of that. And yes, I want you to leave an honest review, because that is what sparked my fascination with this outcome in the first place. I love reading reviews and I usually allow myself to be swayed one way or the other when choosing a new book to read, especially by an author I'm not familiar with. So I understand their worth, but they also illustrate so clearly that for all the thousands of books published, there are thousands more opinions on what was read and why the book stood out from all the others. Reading is meant to be an escape, a break from our stresses and responsibilities, a window into someone else's life but maybe a connection can be forged through shared heartbreak just as easily as through shared joy.

I know this book isn't going to be for everyone, but I've also tried to soften the blow by writing the second book in this duet which will overlap slightly to give context. Even though it will revolve around Ren, Liv will make several appearances and

you will be able to see for yourself that she's doing okay and is the strong woman I always envisioned. If nothing else, you will see there is still a need for kindness in this world and that those acts, no matter how small, still mean something.

Thank you so much for reading Heath and Liv's story. I truly hope you enjoyed it as much as I loved writing it. It was a challenge and I had to push myself out of my comfort zone, but that's how we grow, right? And it definitely wouldn't have happened without the love and support of my husband, who never stopped believing in me, even when I had some serious doubts about what I was doing.

Thank you, Jani B. I could not ask for a more supportive friend and am so lucky to have you on my side. I really am going to try not to make you cry again, but no promises. We both know what lies ahead.

Last but definitely not least, a huge thank you to Terrie Meerschaert for editing my work and making it look better than it actually is. I am so grateful for all your effort and encouragement. Your support means more than you know.

I post about my work on Facebook and Instagram, so if you want to keep up to date, I'd love that so much. The links below:

<https://www.facebook.com/authorlfontaine>

<https://www.instagram.com/lfontainewriting>

Or you can reach out to me at l.fontainebooks@gmail.com

Take care until next time!