

STARLIGHT

EVIE MCGLYNN

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DOWN THE SHORE BOOK 2

EVIE MCGLYNN

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CONTENTS

[Content Warning and Author Note](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Evie McGlynn](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

SYNOPSIS

Liam

I joined Doctors Without Borders to help save lives and almost lost my own. The only reason I'm alive is because of Marco D'Angelo. My journey to full recovery isn't smooth, but I'm determined to get stronger and continue to help others in need. When an opportunity arises to help Marco and his team, I grab it with both hands. I'd like to grab Marco with both hands, but he's put up a wall between us that seems insurmountable. I'm not sure if I'll break through his wall or break my own heart.

Marco

I left the Navy SEALs to start my life with the man I loved. But he was taken from me in the most brutal way imaginable. Now it's strictly hookups for me. I am not going through that pain ever again. Liam is a complication I can't afford. He smart and sassy. He challenges me at every turn and manages to make me smile when no else has been able to. And even though I push him away, I can't seem to walk away.

*To the men and women, past and present, who have served in
the armed forces:*

*Your sacrifices are not forgotten. We see you and appreciate
you.*

CONTENT WARNING AND AUTHOR NOTE

There is a brief description of a completed suicide. There are some scenes of violence. There are depictions of the effects of child sex-trafficking in the book, but no on-page harm to children occurs.

This book highlights PTSD and veteran suicide. On average 16.8 veterans die by suicide every day. These are grim statistics that need to be changed. If you or someone you know, veteran or not, is contemplating suicide, please dial 988 for help.

Resources: <https://www.veteranscrisisline.net/>

<https://www.va.gov/>

Starlight also touches upon the very real and terrible issue of child sex trafficking. Healthcare workers like Liam are trained to spot trafficking victims. If you suspect someone is a victim of trafficking call the National Human Trafficking Hotline: 1-888-373-7888.

Resources: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/how-do-i-report-suspected-incidence-human-trafficking>

<https://www.state.gov/domestic-trafficking-hotlines/>

<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/otip/victim-assistance/national-human-trafficking-hotline>

And a softness came from the starlight and filled me full to the
bone.

William Butler Yeats

PROLOGUE

Liam

I was going to die. The pain tearing through my body was unbearable. My voice was hoarse from screaming. The militants who'd taken me, thinking I was a doctor, couldn't care less about my pain now that they considered me useless to them.

The nurse part of me dispassionately cataloged my injuries: several cracked or broken ribs, a possible orbital fracture, and internal bleeding from what was likely a ruptured spleen. The son and brother part of me wept for my mother and Sean because I would never see them again. After losing my father, they would lose me and probably never get closure because they would never find my body.

I was dragged along the ground, nearly vomiting from the agony. The militants finally dropped me in the middle of a field. I opened my eyes and saw millions of stars above me. I was always filled with wonder at how many stars I could see out here as compared to my home in New Jersey. Tears tracked down my temples at the thought of never going to the beach again. Of never watching the sunrise over the Atlantic on a clear summer morning. Of never smelling the salt air mixed with the aromas from the boardwalk eateries.

One of the men came to stand over me, blocking my view of the stars. The pistol in his hand was aimed at my head. I closed my eyes and waited for the sound of the shot. I wondered if I would hear it...or if there would be nothing but silence before I was dead.

A moment later, I heard a soft *pop* and the sound of a body falling beside me. Shouts from the other two men were quickly silenced the same way. I opened my eyes. The stars were visible again and everything was deathly quiet. I turned my head and was greeted by the man with the pistol staring at me with dead eyes, a neat hole in the center of his forehead.

Footsteps moved quickly toward me, and I wanted to get away, but I couldn't. My body refused to listen. Was I still

going to die?

A pair of booted feet came into view before a man knelt beside me. He was huge. I couldn't see his face in the faint light, but I could tell he had dark hair cut very short—like a soldier. When he spoke, his voice was deep and commanding. “Liam O’Neil?”

He knew my name. Oh God, he was American, and he knew my name. “Yes,” I choked out, emotion and pain clogging my throat.

“I’m Marco D’Angelo. We’ve come to bring you home.”

Marco

Fuck. They'd beaten the shit out of Liam. The left side of his face looked swollen, even in the faint light of the half-moon. His breathing was labored, and he was clearly in a lot of pain. I remembered how sweet he'd looked in his picture on Sean's desk. Seeing him like this twisted me up inside. I heard my other teammates come up behind me.

"Jesus," Andrea whispered.

"Fucking assholes," Dante added.

My pilot, Pete, came in on my comms, "Hey, Chief, we're running out of time before their buddies figure out they're not coming back."

"Roger that," I said. I leaned closer to Liam. "Hey, we have to get you out of here. Can you walk?"

Liam tried to laugh as he shook his head but ended up coughing. Dark-red blood stained his lips. *Shit, fuck, damn, hell.* Internal injuries. "Okay. Do you have any neck or spine injuries?"

Liam shook his head. "Ribs," he rasped. "Left side. Ruptured spleen."

We needed to get him out of here fast. "I'm gonna pick you up now. I'll try to be as gentle as I can, but it's gonna hurt." He nodded and closed his eyes. I was already on his left side, so I slid my arms underneath him and pulled him close. He grunted and bit his lip so he wouldn't cry out. "Let's go." On the comms, I said, "On our way."

Andrea and Dante flanked me as we hurried toward the stealth helicopter I'd borrowed from an old friend in Cyprus. Yeah, I know. Who the hell had friends who owned stealth helicopters? That would be me.

Pete already had the blades going when we got there. Andrea and Dante got in ahead of me so they could take Liam. Once I was in, I slid the door closed, and Pete pulled us up. I

sat next to Pete in the cockpit. “We’re going to have to go to Beirut. He’s got internal bleeding.” Pete didn’t look happy, but he nodded.

We were well up before we saw a group of militants swarm the area where Liam had been. Andrea shouldered her sniper rifle in case they decided to fire on us. But we were too far away by the time they figured out where we were. I was kind of disappointed we didn’t get to kill more of them. Maybe that made me a bad person.

Lucky for us, my friend also had contacts in Beirut, and through him, we were able to get permission to land at the military hospital. I texted Tony to update him. I was sure Liam’s mother and his brother, Sean, were losing their minds. I would be if it was my brother.

I looked back at Liam. Andrea and Dante had strapped him to a backboard to make him more stable and easier to carry. It looked like he was unconscious, which was really for the best. Busted ribs hurt like a bitch. It wasn’t like you could stop breathing to ease the pain.

The trauma team was waiting for us at the hospital. They’d heard Liam was here with Doctors Without Borders, so they gave him the VIP treatment. They triaged him right on the helipad and got him into surgery immediately. That worried me because it meant he was in bad shape. I wanted to go back to that camp and kill the rest of those motherfuckers. Liam was just trying to help people, and they tried to kill him.

I stayed at the hospital while the rest of the team went back with the helicopter. I didn’t think Liam should be alone when he woke up, especially considering what he’d been through. I must have dozed off while waiting because I woke to a hand gently shaking my shoulder. A woman I recognized from the trauma team stood beside me. I blinked and rubbed my eyes. “How is he?” I asked.

The woman smiled at me. “Mr. D’Angelo, I’m Dr. Karam,” she said in heavily accented English. “Your friend is out of surgery and in recovery. He has three cracked ribs, and we repaired his ruptured spleen. Thankfully, there were no

broken bones in his face. He came through very well, despite his injuries. We expect he will make a full recovery in time.”

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. “That's good. That's real good.”

They put Liam in a private room and brought me a comfortable chair to sleep in and keep watch. I didn't think there was any danger for him in a military hospital, but I still didn't want to leave him alone.

Someone on the hospital staff brought me some Ka'ak—cheese-filled flatbread—and coffee. I was just finishing my coffee when Liam cried out in pain. He started speaking, and at first, I couldn't understand him. Then I realized he wasn't speaking English. He was speaking French. “Je ne suis pas médecin. Je suis infirmière.” *I'm not a doctor. I'm a nurse.* Shit. Those assholes took him thinking he was a doctor and were going to kill him because he was a nurse.

I must have made some kind of noise because Liam's head turned in my direction. “Who's there?” he croaked, his eyes wide with terror. “Where am I?”

I got up and went over to him. “Hey,” I said quietly. “You're okay. You're in a hospital. You're safe.”

Liam stared at me blankly before recognition slowly dawned and a sweet smile lit his battered face. “You're Marco. You saved me.”

He tried to reach for me but was too weak, so I took his hand in mine. “I'm glad we got there in time.”

“Thank you,” he said, his lids drooping as the drugs pulled him under again. “My starlight savior.”

1

THREE MONTHS LATER

Marco

“Oof.” Sean came at me with another punch-kick combination. He got me square in the chest and knocked the wind out of me. Damn, the man was fast. I had to laugh at myself. I had four inches and at least thirty pounds on the guy, and he could still kick my ass in tae kwon do. But then again, he hadn’t gotten his second-degree senior black belt by collecting bottle caps.

Sean backed up and put his hands down. “Are you okay? I didn’t mean to hit you so hard.”

I rubbed my hand over my chest. “Yeah, I’m good.”

He looked at his smartwatch and winced. “Shit, I have to go shower. I have to meet with a vendor this morning.” He removed his padded gloves and foot covers, and I did the same. “Thanks for sparring with me,” he said as he put away the gear. “I haven’t had a good sparring partner in ages.”

“No problem,” I replied. “It’s good to get the workout in.” Sean O’Neil was the owner of the Moonlight Inn. He was also dating our family friend, Jeremy Fitzgerald, a world-famous concert pianist. On top of all that, Sean was the older brother of Liam O’Neil, the man my team had rescued from Syrian militants. The man I couldn’t stop thinking about.

After we got Liam back home, I’d made myself scarce. Everything about him was too compelling. Those pale-green eyes that shone with flecks of blue and gold. His messy dark hair that stood out against his creamy fair skin. The sweet smile he gave me the day we boarded the plane to bring him back home.

God, that smile. I didn’t see it again for a while, first because I ran away from him like a coward and then because he took a turn for the worse. A week and a half after we got him home, Liam developed pneumonia due to his cracked ribs and had to go into the hospital for two weeks.

I’d finally pulled my head out of my ass and gone to see him in the hospital. The way his eyes had lit up when he saw

me made me feel like a dick for essentially ghosting him. Not that we were dating or anything. I just felt responsible for him because he'd been in such a bad way when we rescued him. That was what I kept telling myself.

As Sean and I left the small gym attached to his hotel, I asked, "How's Jeremy doing?"

Sean's face lit up. "He's good. His concerts have all gone well—standing ovations every time. He has a concert in Montreal tonight, and then he flies to Paris tomorrow." His mouth turned down in a frown. "I was supposed to fly out to meet him this week, but I don't want to leave Liam when he might need me."

I raised a brow. I had a feeling I knew what Liam would think of that. "I'm thinking you're being a little overprotective."

He gave me a sad smile. "Maybe. I almost lost him once. I don't want to take any chances."

I nodded. "I hear you." I still thought Liam was stronger than Sean gave him credit for, but I wouldn't win that argument. I clapped him on the shoulder. "Thanks for the workout. Next time, I'll teach you some Krav Maga."

Sean grinned. "Ooh, I get to take advantage of the SEAL training. It's a deal."

The drive to my house in Belmar, one town away from Spring Lake, where the hotel was, took less than ten minutes. I jumped in the shower to wash off the sweat from my workout with Sean. It was a good distraction for a while, but it wasn't long before memories crept in again. Anniversaries sucked.

I dressed in jeans, a black Henley, and my black leather jacket. I laced up my black combat boots and grabbed my keys and wallet from the kitchen counter. Today was a good day to take the bike, so I headed into my garage, opening the outer door with the fob on my keyring. My black-and-chrome Harley Sportster sat patiently waiting for me next to my 1965 red Mustang convertible. I'd take the convertible out another day. I needed the freedom of the bike today. I put on my

helmet, backed the bike out of the garage, past the late-model Dodge Charger in my driveway, and closed the garage door behind me.

The veteran's cemetery was about an hour and a half north, up the Garden State Parkway and over on I280. It was a beautiful fall day and traffic was light. Since it was a weekday, there weren't many people in the cemetery. I knew my way around the place pretty well after three years of Christmases, birthdays, Memorial Days, Veterans Days, and today—the anniversary of the day my lover took his own life.

The area around his grave was neat and tidy—a service I paid for. His shitty family certainly wouldn't. They hadn't even come to the funeral. I was the one who'd gotten his flag, not his parents. I knelt in front of the headstone and traced the letters of his name with my fingers.

*Terrence Sanders, CPO, US Navy, May 24, 1988-October 22, 2019.
Beloved Fiancé.*

I took a quarter out of my jacket pocket and put it on top of the headstone. “Hey, Terry. It's been three years.” I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “You should see the house I bought in Belmar. It's a few blocks from the ocean. I used the money you left me for a down payment. It's a great little house. Nice big windows, a big backyard, and a two-car garage.” I let out a short laugh. “Speaking of the garage, I finally bought that 1965 Mustang convertible I've wanted forever. It's sweet. Candy-apple red, four-speed, black leather interior. And it's fast. You would've loved it.”

My vision blurred as I rested my head against the cold marble of the headstone. “I miss you so much, baby. There's so much I wanted to share with you.” I felt the tears slide down my cheeks. “We were supposed to be forever, damn it. You promised.” I gave myself a few more minutes to let go, glad no one was around to see.

I finally wiped my face and stood. I brushed the top of his headstone one more time. “I'll see you on Veterans Day, baby.”

The ride home found me thinking about Liam. His PTSD kicked in hard after he recovered from his pneumonia and got off all the pain meds. His family had thought about sending him to an inpatient psych unit. I'd told Jeremy it was a bad idea to put a kidnapping survivor in a locked ward. Jeremy got information from his therapist about an outpatient program, so Liam went there instead.

I'd gone back and forth between wanting to hold his hand through the whole thing and wanting to get as far away from him as possible. I couldn't deal with the possibility that he might go downhill like Terry had.

It turned out, however, that Liam O'Neil was made of sterner stuff. He'd graduated from his program and was doing really well, by all accounts. I'd called him a few times to check in and let him know he could talk to me if his PTSD kicked up again. Because the truth was, you could have all the therapy in the world, and sometimes those little demons still popped up.

But that was as deep as I could let myself get with him. Liam was the kind of guy who could burrow into my heart without me noticing. I couldn't let that happen. Not again. Never again.

Liam

Tom Kincaid, the medical director for the Visiting Nurses Association, VNA for short, smiled at me. He was a handsome man, probably in his late forties, with dark hair that had just a touch of gray at the temples. A total silver fox. “Your resume is quite impressive, Mr. O’Neil. I have to ask, though, why do you want to work here? The salary won’t match what you could get in other places.”

I nodded. “I know. But the mission of the VNA is close to my heart, and right now, I’m not worried about making a lot of money. I just want to get back to working.”

He smiled broadly. “Well, we’d certainly benefit from your experience and dedication. Working for Doctors Without Borders is no joke.”

My stomach twisted. “No, it’s not.” I cleared my throat. “I want to tell you about the three-month gap in my work history.”

Tom steeped his fingers. “Okay.”

I knew I didn’t have to tell him about my PTSD diagnosis, but I thought he needed to know, just in case. I steeled myself and began. “While working in the refugee camp, I was kidnapped by militants who thought I was a doctor.” He made a sound of distress, but I barreled through. “When they figured out I was a nurse, they beat me. They were going to shoot me,

but I was rescued at the last minute.” I took a deep breath to steady myself. “Not surprisingly, I developed PTSD.”

Tom shook his head. “I would be surprised if you hadn’t. So the three months was recovery?”

I nodded. “First from the beating, including pneumonia from having cracked ribs. The PTSD showed up after all the pain meds wore off.”

Tom leaned forward in his chair. “How do you feel now?”

“Good,” I replied. “I just wanted you to know in case I get triggered and can’t get myself together.”

“Does that happen often?”

I shook my head. “My prescriber and I finally hit on the right medication, and I have a good therapist who’s confident I can do this. This is me covering all my bases.”

“Duly noted,” Tom said. “When can you start?”

I was really excited when I got home. I was still living at my mother’s house because I hadn’t been able to work until now. I hoped to be able to get my own place in a few months after I was settled in the job at the VNA. Maybe I could take on some private practice work on the side when I felt up to it. When I got home, my mother’s boyfriend’s car was in the driveway, and I hoped I wouldn’t walk in on anything I would need brain bleach to erase.

I shook my head. My mother had a boyfriend. Dr. Robert Martin. He had examined me when I first came home from Lebanon. It was still strange to see him here with my mother, even though they’d been dating for two months.

My father’s sudden death from a massive stroke eight years ago sometimes seemed like yesterday. Maybe it was because it happened right in front of me. I’d spent the time from his collapse until the paramedics arrived administering CPR, to no avail. Later, the doctors had told us there was nothing anyone could have done. I’d been in my second year of my bachelor’s in nursing and had almost quit after that. My mother, a nurse herself, had a long talk with me about the realities of nursing. She’d told me I had to decide whether I

would let the losses I would inevitably experience outweigh the many people I could help.

Needless to say, I took her words to heart—maybe a bit too deeply. They drove me to go on for my master’s in nursing. They also inspired me to take a one-year contract with Doctors Without Borders. We all know how that turned out.

I shook off the memories and went inside. I didn’t see my mother or Robert when I walked into the house, but I heard their voices coming from the back deck. Mom had the sliding screen door open to let in the mild fall breeze.

As I got closer, I heard my name. Then I heard Mom say, “I tried to tell Sean that Liam’s doing better, but he’s as stubborn as his father. Liam getting hurt like that scared him, and he won’t hear anything about leaving. I know he misses Jeremy something fierce. He was supposed to meet him in Paris this week, but he won’t leave his brother.”

I closed my eyes and clenched my jaw. I knew Sean was hiding something from me. Every time I’d asked him about Jeremy, he’d gotten this fake smile and told me everything was fine. “Damn it,” I muttered.

I opened the screen door and stepped onto the deck. Mom smiled and stood to give me a hug. “How did it go?” she asked.

I couldn’t help my grin. “I start Monday.” Mom made a happy sound and squeezed me tight. “That’s wonderful. I’m so proud of you.”

Robert rose, and Mom let me go so he could shake my hand. “That’s great news,” he said. “You’ve come a long way since I first saw you in July.”

We all sat, and I looked over at my mother. “Mom, I heard you say Sean gave up going to Paris to stay here with me. Is that true?”

Mom glanced over at Robert and sighed. “Aye. He was supposed to meet him at different places throughout his tour, but he won’t hear of leaving you.”

I huffed out a frustrated breath. “I keep telling him I’m fine.”

“I know, lad,” Mom said, her brogue more pronounced due to her frustration. “He’s like your da in that. Stubborn as a donkey.”

I shook my head. “I wish I knew how to get through to him.”

Mom shrugged. “I think you’d have to tie him up and put him on the plane yourself.”

I snorted as I imagined myself trying to wrestle my taller, more muscular brother onto an airplane. I smirked. Marco could do it. An idea hit me all at once. “Marco,” I murmured.

“What about him?” Mom asked.

I rose and pulled out my cell phone. “I have an idea, but I need to make a phone call first.”

“I don’t think Marco will be allowed to carry him onto the plane either.”

I chuckled. “That’s not what I had in mind. I’ll let you know if my idea works.”

I went to my room for some privacy before hitting Marco’s number. It rang a few times before he picked up. “Hey, Liam. What’s up?”

Marco’s voice sounded subdued, almost sad. “Are you okay?” I asked.

“Just a rough day,” he replied. “It’s all good.”

“Okay.” I wasn’t sure I believed him, but I wouldn’t push it. “I was wondering if you could help me with something.”

“What’s that?”

“Sean was supposed to meet Jeremy in Paris this week, but he’s being an overprotective pain in the ass, and he won’t go.” I paused my rant. “I know Tony’s company takes care of Jeremy’s security and travel while he’s on tour. Do you think he could help me arrange to get Sean to Paris?”

Marco snorted. “The TSA doesn’t approve of kidnapping.”

I rolled my eyes. “Ha-ha. You sound like my mother.” I picked up a picture of Sean and me from my dresser. “I just wondered if Tony could get the plane tickets. I would pay him back after I start my job.”

Marco made a sound of derision. “First of all, Tony isn’t going to take your money, especially if it’s to help Jeremy. Second, you got a job?”

A thrill of excitement ran up my spine at how pleased Marco sounded. “Yes. I had the interview this afternoon, and they offered me the job on the spot.”

“That’s great,” he said enthusiastically. “Where at?”

“The VNA clinic in Asbury,” I replied. “They have an LGBTQ+ health center, and I’ll be working there. It’s part-time, at least for now, because I wanted to ease my way back into it, you know?”

“I hear you,” he said. “It’s always good to know your limits.”

His tone was strange, almost heavy, like he knew what it was like. I rolled my eyes at myself. Of course he knew what it was like. He’d been a SEAL. I was sure he’d seen a lot during his time in the service. “I’m doing my best,” I said.

“Yeah, you are,” he said. “Does Sean know about the job?”

“Not yet,” I replied. “I didn’t want to say anything to him until I knew I actually had the job. He would just start worrying and asking me if I was sure I was ready, and it would have messed with my head during the interview.”

“I get it.” He was quiet for a moment. “Sean’s scared. He won’t say that, but I see it. He doesn’t know what to do with it, so he wants to wrap you in bubble wrap to keep you safe from everything. You’re gonna have to be straight with him.”

It was my turn to snort. “I’ve never been straight a day in my life.”

The line went completely quiet for a second before Marco burst out laughing. “You’re something else, Liam. I’m glad

you've kept your sense of humor.”

“Me too,” I said quietly.

Marco cleared his throat. “Is it okay for me to give Tony your number? That way you two can work things out without going through me.”

The pang of disappointment took me by surprise. “Sure. And thank you for your help.”

“No problem, Liam. I'll talk to you soon.”

After I hung up, I stared at my phone screen until it faded to black. Shit. I had a crush on Marco.

Marco

I stared at my phone. Had Liam been flirting with me? My head fell back and I closed my eyes. “Fuuuuck.” The man was going to be the death of me. “No,” I said aloud. This was not happening on the anniversary of Terry’s death. Liam was gorgeous and sweet and nothing like my usual hookups. He also didn’t strike me as a one-and-done kind of guy. Liam was more like a cuddle-on-the-couch-in-front-of-the-fire kind of guy. I was not going there with anyone ever again.

I went over to the mantel above my stone fireplace and picked up the picture of Terry and me. We had just finished a successful mission in Afghanistan and were grinning like idiots. His buzzed blond hair was bleached nearly white by the sun and his bright-blue eyes glowed with humor and happiness. Less than six months later, he was in a military hospital fighting for his life, and our world was turned upside down.

We were ambushed while following bad intel. I was wounded, but my lieutenant and I managed to keep the enemy off us until reinforcements arrived. There’d been seven of us on that mission. Five survived. One of the guys ended up in a wheelchair. Another lost a leg because it was either a tourniquet or bleeding out. Terry took a bullet in the gut that hit his liver. He almost bled out too, but the helicopter got us to the field hospital in time. The bullet also shattered one of

Terry's vertebrae. It took three surgeries and months in rehab to get him back on his feet.

Rehab only got Terry walking again. He wasn't fit enough to be a SEAL anymore and was medically discharged back to the States. But Terry had nowhere to go. His parents threw him out at sixteen because he was gay, so I asked my parents to take him in until I could get out. I had been close to the end of my time to re-up, so I took the honorable discharge and headed home.

Things weren't easy at first. Terry didn't really know my family—only what I'd told him and from when he'd sit in on our rare video chats. He wasn't used to a big family loving on him like mine did. We were the stereotypical loud Italian family, complete with seven kids, five grandkids, and counting. My parents' house was always full, even though only our youngest sister, Gianna, had still lived there when she wasn't at school working on her doctorate. Terry hadn't known how to handle it all, at first. But if my mother knew anything, it was how to love on a hurting child. He'd had no choice but to fall under her spell.

I'd hoped that after I got home, things would be better, and for a while, they were. They were so good that I asked Terry to marry me and he said yes. He continued his rehab locally and got more mobility back. Tony hired me to do personal security work for his company. Once he was able to, Terry also started working there.

The trouble came when Tony got a contract to do personnel extractions for a corporation that did business overseas. By then, he had hired a few more ex-military, and we formed an extraction team, which I trained. Terry insisted he was fit enough to be part of the team, and I couldn't tell him no. I should have.

Our first assignment came about two months after Tony took the contract. One of their overseas executives had been kidnapped for ransom and we were sent to get him out. The operation was going well until the idiot we were trying to rescue decided to try to "help."

Instead of helping, the asshole got in the way and almost got himself killed. Terry got him out of harm's way but got slammed into a wall for his trouble. I watched helplessly as the man I loved fell to the ground like a fucking rag doll. His scream of pain still haunted my nightmares. My team had barely gotten out intact. They had to keep me away from our subject because I wanted to put a bullet in that motherfucker's brain.

Terry had to get surgery to repair the damage from his reinjury. His surgeon had been beside himself. Angry that Terry had risked his ability to walk for what he called "some GI Joe bullshit." Terry had been in the hospital for three weeks and rehab for another two months.

Things just got worse from there. Terry couldn't go on extraction missions anymore. He even had trouble doing personal security because he couldn't stand for long periods. My brother, Michael, the computer genius, tried to get Terry to help him with the cyber security end of things. Terry had always been good with computers, and I thought it would be a positive alternative for him.

It hadn't been enough. When Terry's parents threw him out, he'd vowed to prove to them he was a "real man"—whatever the fuck that meant. His whole identity had been tied up in being a SEAL. I'd tried to get him to go to therapy to help him deal with the loss, but he wouldn't. He'd kept saying he was fine and would get through it. Instead, he started drinking. Little by little, the man I knew and loved had disappeared, replaced by a bitter, raged-filled monster.

That last day was burned in my memory. Terry had started drinking early, even though he was supposed to be working remotely with Michael. When Michael called him out on it, Terry called him vile names and ended their video call by throwing his laptop against the wall. I only found this out after Michael called to tell me he couldn't work with Terry anymore. He was too volatile.

When I went home to try to talk to him about it, Terry blew up at me. He screamed at me, calling me all sorts of names for letting my brothers push me around. I tried to get

him to calm down, to tell me what was really bothering him. He told me I should have let him die in the field. Then, at least, he could have died a hero. Instead, he thought of himself as a useless cripple.

I'd told Terry I couldn't let him die because I loved him. That was when he hit me. We were both shocked because in all the years we'd been together, neither of us had ever laid a hand on the other. Terry had started crying. I'd let him pull me into his arms and hold me while telling me he was sorry. I'd held him tight and told him I loved him, but he had to get help for both our sakes. He promised he would. He'd said, "I'll fix it, baby. I promise."

We made love that night for the first time in months. And while I was asleep, he drove his car to Sandy Hook, walked onto the beach, drank a fifth of vodka, and shot himself in the head.

The note he'd left on my nightstand said:

This is the only way I know how to fix it. I'm sorry. I love you.

I put the picture back and shook my head. Time to stop thinking about Liam as anything more than a friend. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and hit Tony's number. He answered on the first ring. "Hey, Marco. What's up? You want some company today?"

"Nah, I'm good. I just got back from the cemetery."

There was a moment of silence on the other end. I knew what was coming. "The fuck, dude? I told you I would go with you so you didn't have to do it alone."

I closed my eyes. I loved my brother, but he didn't know when to let things go. "And I told you I was good to do it alone." When he started to protest, I interrupted him. "It's my time with Terry. It's all I have left. Let it go."

Tony huffed out a sigh. "Fine. But stop by the house later. Ma worries."

“Yeah, yeah. I will.” I went to my refrigerator to get a bottle of water. “We still on for the Gage event tomorrow night?”

“Yep. Michael’s been working overtime on this one,” he said.

“I know. I talked to him last night.”

Tony was quiet for a bit. Then he asked. “Did you need me for something?”

“Yeah,” I replied with a sigh. “Liam called and asked me to talk to you about getting Sean on a plane to Paris.”

Tony barked a laugh. “I assume you don’t mean drugging him and carrying him onto the plane.”

I had to laugh. Poor Sean. “Nah. Liam thinks he can convince Sean to go, but he wants your help to make it happen.”

“I can do that,” Tony said.

I blew out a soft breath. “I figured I’d give you Liam’s number and you two can work it out without going through me.”

Tony hummed thoughtfully, and his tone was skeptical. “You sure about that? He’s pretty cute.”

I practically choked on my answer. “Yeah, I’m sure. I can’t go there, Tony. Liam’s not a friends-with-benefits kind of guy.”

Tony sighed. “It’s been three years.”

“I know,” I ground out. “And I don’t ever want to feel that kind of pain again.” Tony made a sound of protest, but I rolled right over it. “Tell me more about the Gage event. Michael said he was picking up some chatter from one of those radical pro-life groups.”

Gage New Horizons was a biotech company, and one of its divisions did stem cell research. Of course that sent some pro-life groups over the edge, despite all the good that came out of the research.

“Yeah,” Tony acknowledged. “He hasn’t been able to get enough to get the police involved, but he still thinks there’s a credible threat.”

“Are we sweeping for explosives?”

“Yep,” he replied. “I’ve got some bomb-sniffing dogs coming in tomorrow early afternoon.”

“Do you really think it’s that bad?” I asked.

“Michael’s worried,” he said as if that explained everything. It kinda did.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Michael doesn’t get worried for no reason.” I made some quick calculations. “I want the whole extraction team inside the ballroom. The hotel is in Times Square, so there’s no way we can control access one hundred percent. I need my best people watching who comes and goes.”

“You got it,” Tony replied.

I nodded even though he couldn’t see me. “Okay. The event starts at seven. I want everyone there by five to sweep one last time and then wait for the cars to come in. Who’s covering personal security for the CEO?”

“Khamil and Rory.”

“Good.” I checked my phone for the time. “I’m meeting a couple of guys from my unit for an early dinner, so I gotta go. I’ll text you Liam’s number.”

Tony huffed a sigh. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” *Liar.*

Liam

Tony was a travel god. When he called me yesterday, we'd hashed out a vague plan to get Sean a plane ticket to Paris. Tony told me he'd handle the travel plans. All I had to do was get Sean to the airport at the right time. A few hours later, he had acquired a first-class ticket on a flight leaving JFK airport at nine the following evening and a limo ride from Charles de Gaulle airport to Jeremy's hotel in the heart of Paris. He couldn't provide a driver on this end because all his people were on a big job in Manhattan. That was fine. I didn't mind driving, even though it would be rush hour on the Belt Parkway. Maybe I'd wander into Manhattan afterward. I hadn't been there in a while.

The next step was getting Caitlin and Miguel on board. Caitlin was the general manager of the Moonlight Inn, the hotel Sean and I owned but Sean ran. Miguel was the new assistant manager. Both of them were quite capable of running the hotel while Sean was away. I texted Caitlin and asked to meet with her and Miguel in her office the next morning.

We met while Sean was busy taking a delivery. After I laid out my plan, Caitlin's eyes lit up with delight. "Liam, this is such a great idea. He needs a break. I think he feels like he has to run everything, or it won't go right."

"I'm absolutely shocked by this," I deadpanned. Miguel snickered and Caitlin laughed out loud. "So, do you two think

you're up for the challenge?"

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "We had this all planned out back in the summer when he planned to join Jeremy for parts of his tour."

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak right away. My brother had given up so much to take care of me. Now it was my turn to take care of him. "Okay, we're all set then." I stood and pulled out my phone to check the time. "I'll give him an hour to get settled before I go see him. I'll text you if he says he can't leave the hotel on such short notice."

"We'll be ready," Caitlin said.

As it turned out, Sean didn't give me too much trouble. After some yelling and some tears, he gave in. Now I was driving him to the airport in rush hour traffic because he had to be there three hours early.

"I forgot how much you like to drive," Sean said as I finally eased onto the Belt Parkway.

"I do," I agreed. "But not in bumper-to-bumper traffic. The Belt Parkway sucks."

"Truth," he replied with a smile. He looked around my eight-year-old Honda Civic and asked, "So, whatever happened to you getting that Dodge Charger you wanted?"

I gave a one-shoulder shrug. "I still want one. I even have money saved for a down payment. But I need to have a job to get a car loan."

Sean shook his head. "You know there's money sitting there for you from Moonlight. It's yours by right as part owner."

I sighed softly. This was an old argument. "I don't feel right taking it since I'm not doing anything to earn it. I know Sam left half of it to me to keep me around, but that's not my life. It's yours. I'd rather just sign my half over to you and let it be yours in truth."

To my surprise, Sean didn't argue with me like usual. "Let me give it some thought while I'm away. It might be the best

move for both of us.” He turned a little in his seat to face me. I had to keep my eyes on the slow-moving traffic, but I could see he looked serious when he spoke. “If we do this, though, you’re not just going to sign it over to me. I’m going to buy you out.” I opened my mouth to argue, but he shook his head sharply. “No, Liam, listen to me. Mr. Whitaker left the hotel to both of us. Whatever he originally intended doesn’t really matter. It’s half yours, and you have a right to benefit from that.”

I felt a lump form in my throat. I swore I won the sibling lottery. I’d known other families who fell on each other like hyenas on a sick gazelle when money was involved. But here was my brother, willing to give me half the worth of his beloved hotel because it was the right thing to do. I took a moment before I replied. “All right. We’ll talk about it when you get back.” Sean smiled like I’d just given him the best Christmas present ever. I loved my brother.

I decided to park the car and hang out with Sean until he had to go through security. I figured that would give the traffic time to calm down a little bit. I also decided to make the trip into Manhattan instead of going straight home. I hadn’t been out on an adventure since I’d gotten back, and I missed it. Not that Manhattan was all that much of an adventure. Sean and I had spent plenty of time in the City going to concerts and the theater and even one memorable New Year’s Eve freezing our asses off, waiting for the ball to drop in Times Square. I figured I would find a nice spot to have a drink and do some people-watching before I headed back to Jersey.

Sean got his bags checked pretty quickly. There were definite benefits to traveling first class. I walked with him to security, where he gave me a big hug. “Thanks for knocking some sense into me. And tell Tony and Marco thank you for me.”

“I will,” I said. “Give Jeremy a hug for me. I’ll see you in a couple of weeks.”

Traffic had eased up a bit by the time I got out of the airport, but it still took me an hour to get into Manhattan. I decided to go to the Marriott Marquis in Times Square because

they had a mellow bar with huge windows overlooking Times Square. I splurged and paid for valet parking instead of spending more time looking for a parking space. Once I'd gotten my seat by the windows and ordered my drink and some food, I sent a quick text to Tony.

Me: Thanks for all your help. I got Sean to the airport on time and made sure he went through security.

Tony: Excellent! Are you back home already?

Me: Not yet. I decided to drive into the City since I was up here anyway. I'm having a drink at the Marriott and looking out at the lights in Times Square.

Tony: No way! That's where our job is tonight. We're up in one of their fancy ballrooms.

Me: Small world. Well, stay safe. And tell Marco I said hi.

Tony: Will do.

I thought about texting Marco, but I decided against it. He'd seemed strained when I talked to him yesterday, and besides, he was doing bodyguard stuff, no doubt. I thought about my revelation yesterday. Did I really have a crush on the man?

Admittedly, my libido had been virtually nonexistent for months, even before I'd been kidnapped. Frankly, it was a surprise to find myself attracted to anyone. But then again, there was a lot to like. The man was the very definition of tall, dark, and handsome. And all those delicious muscles.

I sighed. Yeah, he was a physically attractive man, but there was so much more to him. I had memories of him gently holding me in his arms as he carried me to safety. And every time I'd woken up in the hospital in Beirut, he'd been there. I remembered, to my everlasting embarrassment, calling him my starlight savior. I blamed the drugs. Sometimes he'd be

asleep when I woke up, and I'd find myself just watching him, wondering why he would give up a comfortable bed to sit with a complete stranger.

Of course all of this begged the question: was this some kind of hero worship? I didn't think so because my interactions with him since we'd returned home had been limited to phone conversations in which he asked about my PTSD symptoms and would sometimes talk about his own and how he dealt with them.

No, what I was feeling was definitely attraction. I just didn't know what to do about it. I didn't even know if Marco was gay, bi, or anything else on the rainbow. It occurred to me that I had only seen him in person twice since I'd gotten home. I supposed that was a pretty good indicator of his interest level beyond checking up on my well-being.

I rolled my eyes at myself. Sean would be laughing his ass off at me right now. I used to do this all the time in high school. I got the server's attention and ordered the most decadent dessert on the menu because that was the best way to deal with high school-like angst. I had too much going on in my life to worry about whether or not Marco liked me.

Marco

For fuck's sake. I hated events like this. There were so many people coming and going that it was hard as hell to keep track of who belonged and who didn't. I texted yet another picture of a server to Michael, who kept up a running commentary in my earpiece. The hotel had refused to give us more than the names of the employees working the event, citing employee privacy.

I got it. I really did. Stephen Gage wasn't a government official or foreign dignitary, so they couldn't justify letting us do background checks on the staff. So instead, we were sending Michael pictures that he matched to names via facial-recognition software. So far, nothing unusual had come up. Nothing was connecting any of them to radical pro-life groups.

Michael's frustration was clear in his voice. "We've been at this for two hours. I'm not finding anything. I know there's something planned, but all these people are clean."

"You think they'll slip someone in when we've relaxed our guard?"

"That's my guess," Michael said glumly.

I scanned the room yet again, putting eyes on Stephen Gage. He was standing at his table talking to a couple of his researchers, a man who looked to be in his thirties and an older woman, likely in her late sixties.

I'd done some reading on Gage's company and seen that they were looking at using stem cells to repair spinal cord injuries. I thought about my buddy, Craig, who'd ended up in a wheelchair from the same ambush that injured Terry. He was doing okay now. He'd even started learning adaptive skiing. But I knew he'd give anything to be able to walk again. If Gage could do that, so many people could have their lives completely turned around.

"Maybe they decided to abort when they saw all the security," I said to Michael.

He hummed. "That's not what I'm seeing. They planned for heavy security. I'm missing something."

"I doubt it," I countered. "You never miss anything."

"Shit!" he exclaimed.

"What?"

"Twins!"

"Um, what?"

"Twins," he repeated emphatically. "One of the servers has an identical twin brother."

My phone vibrated with a text from Michael. I opened it to see a picture of a young man, probably early twenties, blond hair, blue eyes. He looked like the all-American boy next door. In my earpiece, I heard Michael say, "That's Eric Schultz, the server." A second text came through with another picture. The man was almost identical. There were only slight differences, mostly in their expressions. "That's his brother, Carl Schultz."

I heard the clatter of Michael's fingers flying over the keyboard of his computer. "Carl Schultz broke away from his family and joined an ultra-conservative so-called Christian sect called The Righteous Salvation Church. Every racist, sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic belief you can imagine is embraced by this congregation."

"Great," I muttered. "Text that to everyone so they know what to look for."

“Will do.” A few seconds later, I saw all my people pull out their cell phones.

“It looks like Eric blocked his brother on all social media after Carl called him a whole bunch of homophobic slurs when he came out as bi,” Michael continued.

My eyes swept the room, looking for the man in question. “So you’re not thinking they’ve joined forces to get past security.”

“No, I think it’s worse,” Michael said grimly. “The church advocates violence to bring God’s kingdom down to Earth.”

“Well, shit. You think he might take out his own brother?” My stomach twisted. I might get pissed at my brothers from time to time, but never in a million years would I consider seriously hurting any of them. I made my way across the room toward Gage. Khamil and Rory were off to the side a bit, closer to the buffet tables, also keeping an eye on the CEO because he asked us not to hover over him.

Michael blew out a breath. “I really hope not, but these religious cults are good at brainwashing their followers.”

I didn’t get a chance to answer. There was a shout and the sound of dishes breaking. Two men were having a fistfight in the middle of the dining room, not far from Gage. They were both blond. One wore the hotel uniform, while the other was in a white T-shirt and boxers. I assumed the brother in the uniform was Carl and the guy in his underwear was the real server, Eric. “Shit. The brother just showed up. Gotta go.” I switched my comms to broadcast to everyone. “It’s the brother. Khamil and Rory grab them both. Everyone else, hold your positions. I’ve got Gage.”

Khamil and Rory headed toward the two men, and I picked up the pace to guard Gage. Before we could get to our positions, another server tackled Eric. Carl tore himself away and ran toward the CEO. I broke into a full-on sprint to intercept. His hand moved, and I saw light glint off steel. “Knife!” I shouted. Gage and his companions froze in fear. Carl shoved the older woman aside, causing her to hit her head on the table as she fell to the floor. I got to Gage just in time to

deflect Carl's knife strike. I clenched my teeth against burning pain as the blade sliced through the jacket and shirt sleeve of my left arm. "Motherfucker! I like this suit!"

The man's eyes were wide with fury as he raised his knife to strike at me again. But I was ready this time. I blocked Carl's attack with my injured arm while slamming the fist of my right hand into his face and grabbing the wrist of his weapon hand with my left. His head snapped back, but I grabbed his shoulder, rammed my knee into his gut, and pushed his right arm back so the knife was now behind him. While Carl was doubled over trying to breathe, I yanked his right arm forward, curled my right hand over his closed fist, and pushed it inward until he was forced to open his hand. I tore the knife from him and swept his legs out from under him, throwing him hard onto the floor. I pulled my sidearm out of my shoulder holster and pointed it at his head. "Move one inch, asshole, and I'll blow your fucking head off."

"He's doing the devil's work!" Carl raged. "You're in league with Lucifer!"

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Lu and I go way back. We get beers every Sunday while everyone else goes to church."

I heard a deep chuckle behind me. I didn't turn around when I said, "Hey, Dante."

"Hey, Chief," he replied. "Tony sent me to relieve you so you can take care of that." He pointed at the blood dripping down my left hand.

I growled low in my throat. "Fucker ruined my suit."

Dante shook his head and stepped forward to take a guard position over Carl, his own sidearm out.

I heard Tony in my earpiece. "Stop bitching about your suit and take care of that, damn it."

"Aye, aye, boss man," I snarked. "Is NYPD on the way?"

"Yeah," Tony replied. "They're on the way up now. EMS might be a little longer."

I grunted as I slipped off my jacket. Now that the adrenaline rush was gone, I was starting to feel the pain from my injury.

“I wish we still had a medic,” I complained.

“We’ll find somebody,” Tony said. “It just has to be the right person. You know that.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Liam

There seemed to be an awful lot of police in the hotel's valet parking area. I wondered if something had happened in the hotel. As I was about to hand my ticket to the valet, I overheard a police officer say that EMS would be at least another twenty minutes because of an accident on 7th Ave.

Before giving it too much thought, I went over to the officer, whose nameplate read Giordano. He was a middle-aged man with olive skin and dark hair turning gray. "I might be able to help," I said.

He looked me up and down with a furrowed brow. "You a doctor or something?"

I shook my head. "Not a doctor. I'm a nurse practitioner. I also worked as an EMT while I was in nursing school. My medical bag is in my car. I could at least make sure everyone is stable while they're waiting for EMS to show up."

He took a moment to think about it, then nodded. He whistled and waved over one of the valets. "Yo! How fast can you get to this guy's car and back?"

The valet had that deer-in-the-headlights look on his face. "I don't know. Maybe five minutes?"

I handed him my ticket. "I need my medical bag out of the trunk. It's under a blanket." I pulled out my wallet and held up

a twenty. “See if you can make it faster than five minutes.”

The valet’s eyes lit up. “You got it.” He was off like a shot.

Officer Giordano chuckled. “I like you. What’s your name?”

“Liam O’Neil,” I replied.

“You do this a lot?” he asked.

I shrugged. “I spent a year working for Doctors Without Borders. I’m used to doing things on the fly.”

He seemed impressed. “I’ll bet.”

The valet was back with my bag in three minutes. I handed him the twenty, and the cop handed him another one. Officer Giordano gestured for me to follow him inside. I put the strap of my heavy medical bag over my shoulder and hurried to catch up.

Once we were in the elevator, I asked, “What’s the situation?”

Officer Giordano crossed his arms over his chest. “There was an incident in one of the ballrooms. We got one guy with a knife wound, two possible concussions, and the perp’s crying that he has a broken wrist.”

My stomach dropped to my feet. Tony had said his team was working an event in one of the ballrooms. Before I could ask any more questions, the elevator doors opened. Officer Giordano led me down the hallway, and I saw exactly where we were headed, judging by the three police officers standing outside the door.

He walked me to the doorway and told the officers standing there, “This is Liam O’Neil. He’s gonna help with the injuries until EMS gets here.”

One of the officers nodded and said, “Lieutenant Harris is inside interviewing the victims. The suspect is under guard but not handcuffed because he’s whining that his wrist is broken.”

Giordano rolled his eyes. “Maybe he shouldn’t attack someone with a knife when an ex-Navy SEAL is around.”

My chest tightened and I had trouble drawing a breath. I swallowed hard. “I should probably go in,” I croaked.

Officer Giordano opened the door for me and followed as I stepped into barely controlled chaos. Chairs had been toppled. There were broken dishes and food on the floor. Elegantly dressed men and women were clustered in groups, talking quietly. I heard at least one person crying. Several tables had been moved from the center of the room, and a makeshift infirmary had been set up. Two people lay on the floor—a twenty-something man with blond hair and one hell of a black eye and an older woman with graying hair and a sizable lump on the side of her head. Was the blond guy in his underwear? Another twenty-something blond man sat in a chair flanked by two police officers. I looked between the two blonds. Were they twins?

Standing in the middle of it all was Marco D’Angelo, arms crossed over his chest, a bloody towel wrapped around his left upper arm, talking to a man I assumed was Lieutenant Harris. I breathed a sigh of relief, and the tightness in my chest eased. He was okay.

Marco wore a white dress shirt, and the rolled-up sleeves revealed muscular forearms. His black tie was undone and draped on either side of his open collar, emphasizing his broad chest. I’d forgotten how tall he was. He had a good four inches on the police lieutenant. I’d also forgotten how big he was with all those yummy muscles. I wondered if everything about him was big.

Giordano’s touch on my arm startled me out of my lusty reverie. “I have to introduce you to my lieutenant so he knows what’s going on.” I nodded and followed him toward the two men. Marco saw us first. The only change in his expression was a slight furrow of his brow as he tracked our progress across the room.

Lieutenant Harris noted Marco’s shifted attention and followed his gaze to Giordano and me. His eyes flicked down to note my black medical bag before he met my gaze. “Who’s this, Officer Giordano?”

“Lieutenant,” Giordano began, “this is Liam O’Neil. He’s a nurse practitioner. He was downstairs getting his car when he heard we had a medical emergency up here and offered his services.”

Lt. Harris held out his hand to shake, and I took it. “Nice to meet you, Mr. O’Neil. I hope you don’t mind if I ask for some credentials.”

“Of course not,” I replied. I put my bag down and pulled my wallet from my jeans pocket. I handed the lieutenant the wallet-sized copy of my APN license and my driver’s license.

The lieutenant looked over my documents carefully before handing them back to me. “Looks good. What are you doing up here on a Tuesday night?”

“I dropped my brother off at JFK and decided to head into the City instead of going straight home. I haven’t been here in a while,” I replied.

“Well, welcome back,” the lieutenant said with a smile. He gestured to Marco. “You might want to check out this guy first. That cut looks pretty deep.”

I turned toward Marco for the first time. “Hey, Marco.”

“Hey, Liam.” His eyes searched my face. “You good?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

Lieutenant Harris looked between the two of us. “You two know each other?”

“Marco got me out of a rough spot a few months ago,” I said. “Plus, his company sometimes does security for my brother’s hotel.”

I didn’t listen for the lieutenant’s reply as I reached for Marco’s injured arm. The towel was wrapped around his upper arm, just above the elbow, and it was saturated right over the area of the injury.

Marco put his hand gently over mine to stop me. “I’m good for now. You should check on Emily.” He gestured with his chin toward the man sitting in the chair. “That asshole

knocked her over, and she hit her head on the table pretty badly going down.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “I’m pretty sure that’s going to need stitches, judging by how much you’re bleeding.” I saw the stubborn set of his jaw, so I huffed a breath and shook my head. “Can you at least get a fresh towel until I get back to you?”

“I’ve got one right here,” I heard Tony say from behind me.

I turned to face the other man. “Hey, Tony.”

“Hey, Liam. Didn’t think I’d see you up here.”

I shrugged. “I heard there was a medical emergency up here, and I had my bag in my car.”

Tony squeezed my shoulder. “I appreciate you showing up. Thank you.”

“Anytime,” I said. And I meant it. I could never repay Tony and Marco for saving my life. “I’m happy I can help.” I glanced over at the prone woman. “Do you think they could bring blankets for the people on the floor?”

“Sure thing,” Tony replied. “I’ll take care of that now.”

“Thank you.” I took one last look at Marco rewrapping his wound, then went to evaluate the other injured. This night had certainly taken a turn for the bizarre.

Liam

Thankfully, Emily didn't have a concussion, but she complained that her neck hurt, so I told her to stay on the floor until the paramedics arrived.

Eric, the man in his underwear, most likely did have a concussion. According to him, his twin brother, Carl, hit him on the back of the head hard enough to knock him out. Then Carl stole his uniform, tied him up, and stuck him in a utility closet. I gave him a cold pack for his eye and told him to stay where he was until EMS came to take him to the hospital.

Carl, the evil twin—who knew that was actually a thing?—did not, in fact, have a broken wrist, despite his insistence otherwise. I thought he might have some tendon or ligament damage from his wrist being hyperextended, but that couldn't be determined without an MRI.

When I finally got back to Marco, Tony was giving him shit for not letting me stitch him up right away. Lt. Harris had moved on to talk to some of the other guests, so at least Marco was free now. I put my hand on Tony's shoulder and said, "I'll take it from here."

Tony turned and smiled at me. "Good. Don't let him give you a hard time." He walked away, muttering under his breath about He-Man Navy SEAL assholes.

I snickered. I met Marco's gaze, and he smirked. "He's a mother hen."

I shrugged. "He's your brother. He worries."

"I guess you would know about that."

I set my bag down so I could look at his wound. "Yes, I would. As much as he can be a pain in the ass, I love Sean for how he took care of me after I got back."

I pulled on a pair of latex gloves and carefully removed the bloody towel from around his arm. The blade had cut into the back of his arm just above the elbow. His shirt sleeve was soaked with blood where he'd rolled it up.

"Do you want me to stitch this up here, or do you want to go to the hospital?" I asked.

Marco shook his head vehemently. "Jesus Christ, no. I fucking hate hospitals. Just sew me back together and send me home."

"All right then." I took a step back and bit my lip. "So... I'm going to need you to take off your shirt—or at least the left side—so I can get to the wound properly."

There was that smirk again. Why did the man have to be so sexy? The way my cock perked up and took notice was completely inappropriate for the situation. He slowly unbuttoned his shirt before carefully slipping the left sleeve off his arm. My eyes were riveted. First, on his beautifully muscled chest and abdomen. Then, on the ink. On his upper left arm was a large bone-frog tattoo with two sets of initials underneath a date nearly five years ago. On his chest, just above his heart, was a much smaller bone-frog tattoo with the initials T.S. inked just beneath it. No date. I saw part of another tattoo on his back. It looked like an eagle clutching something in its talons.

I didn't know what the eagle was for, but I knew what the bone frog meant. It was a tattoo exclusive to the Navy SEALs, gotten to honor a fallen comrade. Well, shit. He'd lost three people in combat, and it seemed like one of them was someone he'd loved.

My throat constricted, and I swallowed hard. I met his gaze and gave him what was probably a pretty lame smile. I cleared my throat. "I'll need a small table you can rest your arm on."

He looked around and said, "How about one of those server stands with an empty tray over it?"

"That works," I said.

We got it set up and sanitized, and then I went to work. I numbed the area around the wound, even though Marco grumbled about it, then irrigated it. I was halfway done suturing when the paramedics finally arrived.

I saw the lead paramedic talking to Lieutenant Harris, and then she looked over at me. She didn't seem thrilled that I was stitching someone up in the middle of a hotel ballroom. Eh, I'd worked in far worse places.

The paramedic marched over and looked me up and down. "Mr. O'Neil."

I nodded, briefly looking up from my work. "That's me."

She let out an exasperated breath. "Lieutenant Harris said you're a nurse practitioner. Do you have your credentials on you?"

I tied off another suture and looked up at her. "I already showed them to Lieutenant Harris. I assume he knows what he's looking at."

She looked like she was going to say something else, but Marco interrupted her. "Listen, ma'am," he said in his deep, commanding voice. "Liam triaged all the injured here and made sure they were all stable. I asked him to stitch me up because I didn't want to go to the hospital. Maybe you should get a status report from *Mr. O'Neil* instead of giving him shit for doing his job."

I was impressed by the way he'd told her to fuck off without actually saying the words.

Her jaw clenched, but she must have seen the wisdom in Marco's words because she asked, "What have we got?"

I rattled off everything I'd noted when I examined the other three people and then got back to work on Marco's arm. When it was finally done, he had twenty stitches. I put on an antibiotic ointment and covered it with a gauze bandage.

I hated the idea of him putting on that bloody shirt again, so I asked, "Do you have another shirt here that you could wear?"

"Tony'll find me something," he said.

I nodded. "Okay." I packed up my supplies and put the medical waste in a bag to dispose of later. Marco stood and took his shirt completely off. My mouth went dry. My eyes took in his muscular chest and torso. The man had an honest-to-God six-pack. My gaze traveled from the hair on his chest down to the happy trail that disappeared under the waistband of his dress pants.

Marco cleared his throat, and my eyes shot up to meet his amused gaze. My face heated, and I was sure I was blushing to the roots of my hair. Damned fair Irish complexion.

I awkwardly jerked my thumb toward the exit. "I should probably get out of everyone's way. I'll see you around sometime. I guess."

"Liam."

My name in his deep voice sent a shiver down my spine and heat directly to my groin. I swallowed and cleared my throat. "Yeah?" I asked hoarsely.

"Thank you. You stepped up when you didn't have to."

The warmth of Marco's praise washed over me. "I'm happy I could help. It's the least I could do, given everything you've done for me."

Marco looked like he was going to object, but before he could say anything, Tony came over and tossed him a shirt. "You're attracting a crowd," his older brother grumbled.

I turned around, and sure enough, most of the women and a few of the men were staring at Marco. The man in question

snorted and carefully pulled on the black T-shirt. I silently mourned the loss of the lovely display of manly beauty.

Tony put his hand on my shoulder. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

I wondered what he wanted. I didn’t think I’d messed up anything. “Sure,” I said. I grabbed my bag and told Marco, “Make sure you go to a doctor to have that checked out.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mumbled.

I shook my head and followed Tony to the exit. “He’s not going to a doctor, is he?”

Tony barked a laugh. “He won’t want to, but I’ll make him. If I have to, I’ll get my mother to tell him.”

I laughed. “Bringing out the big guns.”

“I have to with that stubborn asshole,” he retorted.

Once we were out in the hallway, Tony turned to me and said, “I wanted to thank you again for helping out tonight. It made everything easier when EMS arrived, even though the lead paramedic was bitching about it. Also, Marco is a major pain in the ass about going to the hospital, so you saved me from having to listen to him complain about it forever.”

I shook my head. “Tony, your people saved my life. I can’t ever do enough to repay you for that.”

Tony smiled. “That’s our job. We all love what we do. But that’s not why I wanted to talk to you.” He glanced around the hallway before he continued, “We need a medic on some of our operations. Most of those are ones that, you know, fly under the radar.”

I nodded, wondering if he was going where I thought he was. “Okay.” I held his gaze and waited for him to continue.

“So, like I said, we usually need a medic for those operations because the people we rescue need medical attention or one of our people gets hurt. It’s easier if we don’t have to go to a hospital, in certain circumstances, because they ask a lot of questions we really don’t want to answer.”

“You mean when there are bullet wounds,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“Are you asking me to come on as a medic for you?”

Tony nodded. “It would be on a case-by-case basis. We usually only need one for the off-the-record operations. And the pay is very good.”

I bit my lip. “I’ll have to think about it. Tonight was fine because it wasn’t at all stressful. I’m starting a part-time job at the VNA in Asbury on Monday. Let me see how that goes, and I’ll let you know.”

Tony smiled. “Fair enough.” He held out his hand. “I think you’d make an excellent addition to our team.”

I shook his hand and said, “Thanks. That means a lot to me.”

As I drove home to New Jersey, my thoughts were filled with the two D’Angelo brothers for two entirely different reasons.

Marco

I was sitting with Tony in the Manhattan office of Angel Security, the business he'd started ten years ago after giving up on being a police officer. It'd been rough at the beginning when it was just him, Michael—who'd still been in college—and two part-time drivers. They'd had a small, shared office in a shitty part of town. After they helped Jeremy get rid of his cyber-stalker, the business exploded because Jeremy sang their praises to whoever would listen. Now, they had a suite in Midtown Manhattan, not far from Times Square. At the moment, though, I was ready to throw my brother out of his fifteenth-story window.

“Damn it, Tony,” I growled. “Why would you do that?”

My asshole older brother rolled his eyes. “Because he's good. He walked into that mess at the Marriott and didn't blink an eye. He stayed cool and calm, even when the lead paramedic gave him shit. He even got you to sit still long enough to get stitched up.” Tony glared at me. “I'm not going to pass up adding a good team member because you get a boner when you see him.”

I was saved from having to reply—or punch my brother in the face—by a knock on his heavy wooden office door. Tony called, “Come in.”

His administrative assistant, Liz, popped her head in. “Your one o’clock interview is here, Mr. D’Angelo.”

“Interview?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he replied. “It’s why I asked you to come up. Not to bitch at me about your cute nurse.”

I ground my teeth. “He’s not *my* anything.”

Tony gave me the side-eye. “You keep telling yourself that.” To Liz, whose eyes had been ping-ponging between us, he said, “Send him in.”

I sat in one of the chairs across from his desk and folded my arms across my chest. “Why do you need me here?”

The door opened and in walked one of my SEAL teammates. “Gabe!” I shot out of my chair and grabbed him in a bear hug. “It’s good to see you, man. When did you get back?”

Gabriel Warner held me tight. “Last week. I decided not to re-up. It was time.”

I knew things had been rough for him after our failed mission. Gabe had been close with one of the guys who’d been killed. He hadn’t been on the mission with us, and he’d been pissed that we’d been given bad intelligence. He’d almost gotten himself thrown in the brig for getting in our commander’s face.

“I guess you decided to take me up on my offer,” I said.

Gabriel squeezed me once more before letting me go. “Hell yeah. I’ll take any opportunity to work with you again, Chief.”

I glanced over at Tony, who was grinning like an idiot. “You already hired him, didn’t you?”

“Of course,” he told me. “I’m not gonna pass up having another SEAL on my team.” My brother shrugged. “He said he was in your platoon, and you told him to look us up if he decided to opt out. I trust your judgment.”

“Thanks, bro,” I said quietly.

Tony sat at his desk again and brought out a bunch of papers. He slid them across the desk toward Gabe, who took a seat next to me. “Here’s all the paperwork I told you about on the phone. You can take it home and look it over before you sign it.”

I frowned in confusion. “I thought Michael had all that stuff online.”

Gabriel grunted. “Yeah, well, I’m staying with my sister right now and my nephew spilled his juice on my laptop. Fried it. Now it’s an expensive paperweight.”

I frowned over at my brother. He waved me off. “Michael’s already on it.” He looked at Gabe and said, “He should have a laptop set up for you in a couple of days. If you bring your old one in, he should be able to salvage what’s on the hard drive.”

Gabriel looked stunned. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Actually, we do,” Tony replied. “Everyone on the team needs to have a secure laptop.”

Gabe nodded slowly. “Yeah, okay. I get it.”

Tony stood. “Now get out of here, you two, and go catch up. I’ll call you when your laptop is ready.”

I looked over at Gabe. “You hungry?”

He shrugged. “I could eat.”

I stood and headed for the door. “I know this great place around the corner. The burgers are huge.”

The pub wasn’t too crowded since the lunch rush was over. Gabe and I got a lot of stares as we walked in, probably because we were both pretty big guys. That and Gabe still had his high and tight military haircut. Mine was short, but not military short anymore. After the server took our order, I leaned back in my chair and asked, “So, what really happened?”

Gabriel sighed. “It wasn’t the same after you and Terry were gone. And I think the commander never forgave me for blaming him for the screw-up that killed Benji. I did my duty.

I finished the missions I was given and never left a man behind.” He shook his head. “But my heart wasn’t in it anymore. I didn’t one hundred percent trust Commander Grayson, and he knew it. I think he was happy to see me go.”

I shook my head. “Man, that sucks. I’m sorry it turned out that way. I know how much you loved it.”

He shrugged. “Not as much as you did. Or Terry.” A shadow crossed his face, and he reached across the table and squeezed my hand. “I’m real sorry about Terry. I wish I had been here for you.”

I covered his hand with my own. “Thanks,” I said through a lump in my throat. “He was never the same after his injury. He couldn’t handle not being a SEAL anymore. I tried to get him into other work, but it was all or nothing with him.” I swallowed hard and my eyes burned. “In the end, I wasn’t enough for him to want to stay.”

We both sat back when the server came over with our beers. Gabriel took a big swig and then looked at me. “I was in BUD/S with Terry. I think he told you that.” I nodded. “We all had that fire in our gut, but Terry was next level. He was intense. There was no way he was going to fail.”

“Yeah,” I said. “It was one of the things I loved about him. He put his all into everything he did.”

“Yeah,” Gabriel agreed. “But during Hell Week, he was even more over the top than usual. You know what it’s like—five and a half days with only four hours of sleep. He went on and on about how he was going to show his parents what kind of man he was. He was almost out of his mind with how determined he was to prove himself to them.” Gabe shook his head. “I don’t know why he cared so much. From what I could tell, they were useless pieces of shit.”

“They were,” I agreed. “They didn’t even come to his funeral. But they sure as hell had their hands out when they found out he made me the beneficiary of his life insurance policy.”

Gabe made a sound of derision. "I'll just bet. I assume they left empty-handed."

I snorted. "Yeah. And with an earful of what I thought about them. Then I sicced my brother, Santino, on them. He's a lawyer. They didn't dare come after me again."

Our food arrived, and we dug into the big juicy burgers. We were both quiet while we ate, but I could tell Gabe had something else he wanted to say to me. Finally, I said, "Spit it out, Gabe."

My friend smirked at me. "You always did know when people had something to say."

"It comes from having six siblings," I replied.

He took another drink from his beer. "Terry loved you. More than almost anything else in the world, he loved you and wanted to make you happy."

"It seems like there's a 'but' in there somewhere," I said.

Gabe blew out a breath. "He loved being a SEAL most of all. He couldn't imagine his life without it. He and I got talking when you were on an op without him. He was worried about what would happen to you as a couple if you decided to retire."

I felt a sick twist in my gut. I pushed my plate away, my appetite gone. "He never told me any of this," I said gruffly.

"I know." Gabriel shook his head. "I told him he should say something to you, but he wasn't very good at talking about stuff like that."

"To me," I muttered.

"Nah, man, it wasn't like that." He leaned forward in his chair. "I'm pretty sure Terry only told me all that because he was drunk and worried about you being on an op without him. I just think he could never let go of his parents' definition of what a man should be."

I scrubbed my face with my hands. "Why are you telling me all this?"

“Because I get the impression that you blame yourself for what happened. For what he did. And you shouldn’t. I don’t think there was anything you could have done to change it.”

Tears stung the backs of my eyes. “Fuck. That shit messed me up more than anything that happened when we were deployed.”

Something like pain clouded his eyes for a moment. “The people you love are the ones who hurt you the most.”

“Ain’t that the truth.” I tapped my phone. “That’s why Grindr is my friend.”

Gabe looked surprised. “I never took you for a hookup kind of guy. You always said you wanted what your parents had.”

“Yeah, well, things change.”

9

THREE WEEKS LATER

Liam

I handed my patient a bag with several pamphlets and a box of condoms, along with a negative blood test and a prescription for PrEP. He was only eighteen and pretty new to the wonders of gay sex. I was impressed by how proactive he was at such a young age. He smiled shyly at me. “Thanks, Liam.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied. “And don’t forget to make an appointment for a month from now so we can see how you’re doing on the medication.”

He ducked his head. “Okay.”

I went to my small office to finish my notes on his case and give myself a break before my next patient. Working at the VNA had turned out to be good for me. I liked working with an underserved population. Even more so, I liked working with LGBTQ+ youth and young adults who needed a helping hand and an understanding ear. I recognized that I’d had the privilege of growing up in a household where I was accepted for who I was. A lot of the people who came to see me weren’t so lucky.

The kids who came through the VNA were often in precarious living situations. I suspected some of them were unhoused but wouldn’t admit it. Those were the ones who were most at risk of being trafficked. My mind drifted back to the conversation I’d had with Tony the night Marco was injured. Although he never said it outright, I was sure his organization helped rescue people from situations like human trafficking. I pulled out my phone and typed a quick text.

Me: Hey, Tony. It’s Liam. I was wondering if we could meet to talk more about your offer.

The reply came back right away.

Tony: Absolutely. I’m down in Belmar helping Marco with a home repair project. We can meet tonight if you’re available.

Me: Sure. I get off work at 5.

Tony: Great. Text me when you're done, and we'll meet somewhere for dinner.

Me: Sounds good.

I slipped my phone into my lab coat pocket just as a knock sounded at my door. "Come in." The receptionist opened the door and then closed it behind her. She looked upset.

"What's wrong, Gloria?" I asked.

"Your next patient is here." She bit her lip. "He looks like he's been beaten. He doesn't speak English well and doesn't want to tell me what happened. He says he's eighteen, but he looks younger."

My stomach twisted, "Okay. Could you tell what his native language was?"

"It sounded like French," she replied. "I think he might be Haitian."

I nodded. There was a sizable Haitian population in Asbury Park. "All right. I'll go see if I can talk to him. What room is he in?"

"He's in room two. Do you speak French?"

I nodded. "I had to learn it to work for Doctors Without Borders."

I followed Gloria out of my office and headed to exam room two. My patient was sitting on the exam table with his head bowed and his hands clasped tightly together. He was a slender young man, bordering on too thin, with dark-brown skin and closely cropped hair. He was dressed in a short-sleeved T-shirt and faded blue jeans and didn't appear to have a coat. Definitely not warm enough for the cold mid-November temperatures. There were bruises on both his arms and chafing on his wrists from what looked like rope. What I could see of the left side of his face looked swollen.

Gloria was right. He may have told her he was eighteen, but he looked closer to fourteen or fifteen. I picked up the clipboard with the little bit of information Gloria was able to get from him and said, “Bonjour, Jean-Pierre. Je m’appelle, Liam O’Neil. Parles-tu anglais?” *Hello, Jean-Pierre. My name is Liam O’Neil. Do you speak English?*

Jean-Pierre looked up at me with wide, dark eyes. “Bonjour, Monsieur O’Neil,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper. “I speak English a little bit.”

I nodded. “Très bien.” *Very good.* I winced inwardly when I got a good look at his face. His left eye was swollen shut and his bottom lip was split. I grabbed the thermometer from the nearby counter and held the device in front of his forehead. 102.2, yikes! He covered his mouth as he let out a wet cough. Crap. I took my stethoscope from around my neck and put it in my ears. “Je vais écouter ton coeur.” *I am going to listen to your heart.* His heart rate was rapid. When I listened to his lungs, I could hear the crackling sounds that indicated he probably had pneumonia or at least bronchitis.

I sighed softly and put my stethoscope back around my neck. “Tu es très malade.” *You are very sick.* “Quel âge as-tu, vraiment?” *How old are you, really?*

“Quinze ans,” he said quietly, his eyes downcast. *Fifteen.*

Jesus Christ, I thought. I lightly touched his face. Now came the hard part. Still speaking French, I asked him who had hurt him. He looked frightened when he answered in English, “Gerard. Bad man.”

I asked him about his parents, and he told me they lived in Jersey City, which was about an hour north of us. He told me he ran away after they found out he was gay. They were going to send him back to Haiti to someone who would cure him of his deviance. Gerard had found him sleeping in the PATH station and told Jean-Pierre he could find him work. Gerard had bought Jean-Pierre some food and something to drink, and the next thing he knew, he’d woken up tied to a bed in a room he didn’t recognize. Gerard had brought in men one after the other to violate him until Jean-Pierre passed out from the pain.

He'd only been allowed to leave the room to use the bathroom and shower.

I wanted to scream. This poor child. He'd fallen into the hands of a trafficker because his parents were too rigid and ignorant to accept him as he was.

I asked Jean-Pierre how he got away, and he told me that one of the older kids heard him coughing and snuck him out of the house they were being held in. He'd found the clinic with the help of an older Haitian man who'd walked with him right to the door. Thank goodness for good people.

Jean-Pierre was weeping silently by the time he finished speaking. I wanted to hug him and promise everything would be all right, that he was safe now, but I couldn't do either of those things. First, I had to find a safe place for him to go. I didn't know his immigration status, which could cause problems for him and his family. I also knew that since he was a minor, I had to call the police. I wasn't sure how he would react to that.

I found a blanket and draped it over Jean-Pierre's shoulders. Then I sent a text to Tony.

Me: How much do you know about human-trafficking laws in NJ?

Tony: What happened? Do you have someone there?

Me: I can't say much. I'm worried though.

Tony: Ok. Hang tight. We were on the way to Home Depot. We'll divert to your location.

Me: Ok. Thank you.

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Je peux t'aider." *I can help you.* I explained that I would have to call the police, but he would be safe because the police would protect him from Gerard.

Jean-Pierre shook his head vehemently. “No.” He paused, trying to find the words in English. “Gerard has my papers. He said I would get...deported without them.”

This one I knew the answer to. “There’s a record of your immigration status. If you have a green card, you’ll be okay.” He frowned and tilted his head like he didn’t understand, so I explained it as best I could in French.

A shout from the waiting area startled both of us. Jean-Pierre’s eyes went wide with terror. “Il ne doit pas me trouver,” he gasped. *He must not find me.*

“Shit.” I wasn’t sure why, but my first thought was to contact Tony and Marco.

Me: We might have a problem here. I think my patient’s trafficker is in the building.

Tony: Get someplace safe. We’re almost there.

I slipped my phone into my pocket. It was a nice sentiment, but there was no way I was leaving Gloria alone to face this asshole. I urged Jean-Pierre off the exam table and quickly guided him down the hallway to my office. I opened the door and ushered him inside. “Reste ici,” I said. *Stay here.*

I locked the door behind me and hurried up to the waiting area. The man, who I assumed was Gerard, was leaning over Gloria’s desk, shouting at her. Poor Gloria had pushed her chair back as far as it would go. She was pale and shaking. If there had been any patients in the waiting room, they were long gone. Gerard was a big guy, a little taller than me and muscular enough to look intimidating. I felt a surge of rage against everything Gerard was.

I walked up to the man and shoved him away from Gloria’s desk. “Get out,” I said.

“The fuck I am!” Gerard shouted. “I’m not leaving here without my son!”

I looked him up and down. Gerard was a blond, blue-eyed white man. I met his furious gaze. “Your son?” I asked flatly.

“There’s no one here who resembles you.”

His lip rose in a sneer. “He’s adopted.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You can’t have him.”

“What?” he asked incredulously.

“You heard me,” I insisted. “You. Can’t. Have. Him.”

“You little shit,” he growled. He took a swing at me, which I ducked easily. I may have stopped taking tae kwon do in high school, but I still remembered how to defend myself. He tried to hit me again, but I blocked him with my forearm. Huh, my reflexes were still pretty fast. Good to know. But I knew if the guy got a solid hit on me, he would probably knock me out. Maybe I should have stayed in tae kwon do after all. “Gloria, call 911.”

“I already did,” she replied.

To my surprise, Gerard laughed. “The cops aren’t going to do anything. Half of them come to me for services. Save yourself some trouble.”

I clenched my jaw. “No.” I really hoped he was exaggerating.

Gerard shoved me with both hands, hard enough for me to stumble and almost fall. He came after me, but a large hand grabbed his arm and yanked him back before he could get to me.

I heard Marco D’Angelo’s deep voice. “You don’t want to do that.”

Gerard whirled around, ready to strike out at the person who’d thwarted him—until he got a good look at Marco. Gerard was big, but Marco was a mountain. Solid. Strong. Immovable.

“Who the fuck are you?” Gerard spat.

Marco smiled. It was not a nice smile. “You don’t want to know who I am, trust me.” He looked at me and asked, “You all right?”

I nodded. “I’m good.”

Tony walked in and took a look around. “Everyone okay?”

“Yeah,” Marco said.

“The police are on the way,” Tony said.

Right on cue, I heard the wail of several sirens heading in our direction. I pulled my keys out of my pocket and turned to Gloria, who stared wide-eyed at Marco. “Gloria, would you please go sit with Jean-Pierre for a while?”

Gloria nodded and took the keys. “Sure.” She hurried down the hallway, away from the impending chaos.

I noticed Gerard didn’t look so sure of himself now that the police were actually on their way. He struggled to get out of Marco’s grip. “Let me go!”

“Not gonna happen,” Marco said calmly. He tilted his head toward the door and said to me, “You should probably go out there and meet the police so they know what’s going on and don’t come in here with guns drawn.”

My mouth went dry at his statement. “Yeah. I’ll go do that.”

Marco

The only reason I didn't lay this rapist motherfucker out was I wanted *him* to go to jail, not me. When he put his hands on Liam, I saw red. I should have known Liam wouldn't sit hiding, waiting to be rescued. He had a protective streak a mile wide. It made me want to kiss him and kick his ass at the same time.

The shithead tried to pull out of my grip. When I wouldn't let go, he took a swing at me. I grabbed the fist aimed at me in one hand and twisted him around until I had his arm jacked up behind his back, making him yell out in pain. I pulled him close to my chest and leaned in to speak into his ear. "Listen up, asshole. One more move, and I'll make it so you can never use this arm again."

I glanced over at Tony. "How's he doing out there?"

Tony went closer to the window. "He's talking to a police officer now. There's two cars out there. The other cop is on his radio. Liam seems to know the woman he's talking to." Tony stepped away from the window. "They're coming in now."

A moment later, Liam opened the door for the police officer, who stepped inside and scanned the room with her sharp gaze. The officer was a tall Black woman who looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties. Her name plate read Johnson.

Officer Johnson's gaze fell on the man I held, and her eyes hardened. "Well, look who we have here," she said flatly. "Why am I not surprised you're involved in this, Gerard?"

"I didn't do anything," Gerard objected. "This guy attacked me!"

Officer Johnson switched her attention to me. "And who might you be?"

"Marco D'Angelo, ma'am," I replied.

“Can you tell me how you came to be holding our friend here so closely?”

Tony snorted, and I shot him a glare. I looked back at Officer Johnson. “I observed Gerard here attacking Mr. O’Neil. I took exception to that.”

Officer Johnson’s lip twitched like she was fighting a smile. “That matches what Mr. O’Neil told me.”

“What about what I tell you?” Gerard shouted. He struggled against my hold again. “Let me go!”

Officer Johnson shook her head. “He’s gonna hold on to you until Officer Kane comes in to take over while I interview the young man in the back.”

Gerard went pale. “You can’t believe anything he says. The kid’s a liar.”

Liam frowned, and it looked like he was going to say something, but I caught his eye and shook my head ever so slightly. Let Gerard dig his own grave.

Officer Kane walked in before Gerard could say anything else. Kane was a big Black man, almost as big as me, and wore a don’t-fuck-with-me expression like nobody’s business. He spotted me holding Gerard and smirked. “I see you came up against somebody you couldn’t intimidate, huh, Gerard.”

“Screw you, Kane,” Gerard sneered.

Officer Kane tsked and shook his head. Turning to Liam, he asked, “Is this the man who attacked you?”

Liam nodded. “Yes.”

“Do you want to press charges?”

“Yes,” Liam replied.

Officer Kane gave me an up-nod, and I let go of Gerard’s arm. The asshole made a big show of rubbing his shoulder and wincing in pain. Kane was unimpressed. He read Gerard his rights and put him in handcuffs. Gerard bitched the whole time and kept saying they were making a mistake, didn’t they know who he was, blah, blah, blah.

Liam rolled his eyes and Officer Johnson shook her head as they watched the scene. Two more police cars pulled up as Kane walked Gerard to his vehicle. Officer Johnson's radio went off, and she walked away to answer it. Liam came over to us with a wry smile. "Thank you for coming to my rescue again."

"You seemed to be holding your own," I said.

He shook his head. "He's got thirty pounds on me, at least. The only reason I'm still standing is because I moved faster than he did." He chuckled. "I used to spar with Sean before I quit tae kwon do. He was already a black belt, and I was just a lowly green belt. I had to move fast and learn to block so he didn't kick my ass."

I had to laugh. I'd been on the receiving end of Sean's tae kwon do skills, so I knew what Liam was talking about. My mouth chose that moment to override my brain, and I said, "If you want to learn some self-defense, I can teach you a few things that are quick and dirty. They'll get you out of a tough spot pretty quickly." *What. The. Fuck?*

Liam's eyes went wide. "Really? That would be great."

I glanced over at Tony, who was grinning like an idiot. Asshole. I wanted to take it back, but the look of pleasure on Liam's face did me in. There was nothing for it now. "Yeah, sure," I said. "We can use the gym at your brother's hotel."

Officer Johnson came over and said, "The detective from SVU is on his way. I need to interview the boy to get his statement." She looked around. "Didn't you say there was a receptionist here?"

"Yes," Liam replied. "Gloria. I sent her to my office to sit with Jean-Pierre while we cleared up the mess with Gerard."

Officer Johnson turned to Tony and me. "Would you gentlemen mind waiting a little while? Another officer will be in to take your statement."

"No problem," Tony said.

Johnson gestured for Liam to show the way, saying, "You can interpret for me until our Haitian officer gets here."

Two more officers came in and took Tony's and my statements. By the time we were done, the Haitian officer and a social worker had arrived. This was followed by an ambulance because Liam was ninety-nine percent sure the kid had pneumonia.

When the EMTs wheeled Jean-Pierre out on a gurney, I saw how thin the boy was. His bruised and battered face was tear-streaked, and he looked terrified. The Haitian officer, a middle-aged Black woman, held his hand and spoke softly to him in French as they entered the waiting area.

Liam followed behind the gurney, talking to one of the paramedics who had come with the ambulance. Watching him work reminded me of the night in New York. Just like then, he was calm and professional. He was confident without being arrogant. And damn, he was pretty.

I clenched my jaw and turned away. Tony, who was just getting off a phone call, smirked at me. "Shut up," I growled.

He raised his hands in fake innocence. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to." I blew out a breath. "You're right. He would be good for the team."

"I know," he said smugly. "Listen," he continued, "I just talked to Michael. He thinks somebody in the PD is blocking action on reports regarding Gerard's house. He got into the call logs and saw some calls, but there's no response record."

Before I could say anything, Liam walked outside with the gurney, and I saw him speak to Jean-Pierre before they loaded him into the ambulance. The boy took hold of Liam's hand and said something that caused Liam to nod and smile. He stood outside the clinic for a long time after the ambulance was gone. I rolled my eyes. "For fuck's sake. Where's his damn coat?"

"In his office," Gloria said from behind me. "I'll get it."

I watched her walk away and asked Tony, "Did you know she was still here?"

He shook his head. "Nope."

Gloria came back a minute later with a heavy leather jacket that I supposed belonged to Liam. I held out my hand. "I'll take it to him." My brother snorted a laugh, and I flipped him off.

Liam was staring off into the distance when I walked up to him and draped his jacket over his shoulders. He started when I touched him. "Sorry for startling you," I said. "You looked cold."

Liam smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Thanks." He shivered and pulled the jacket closer around his body.

"Christ," I muttered. I pulled the jacket off his shoulders and said, "Lose the lab coat." Liam looked bemused but obeyed. I took the lab coat from him, slung it over my shoulder, and held up his jacket. "Put it on so you don't freeze to death."

His lips twitched into a smile. "It's technically not cold enough for that to happen."

I raised an eyebrow and continued to hold the jacket up. He shook his head, chuckling as he slipped his arms into the soft leather garment. I should have let it go at that, but of course, I didn't. I turned him around and zipped it to cover up the thin, pale-blue dress shirt he wore. "Now, why are you standing out here in the cold?"

There was pain in Liam's expression when he answered. "It's right here. Right in my own backyard. Somewhere in this city is a house full of boys being raped on a daily basis." His eyes filled with tears. "I feel so helpless. What will happen to them? What will happen to the boy who helped Jean-Pierre escape?" His voice fell to a whisper as his tears traced twin paths down his cheeks. "What if they kill him?"

God, this man. He cared so much. I pulled a tissue out of the inner pocket of my jacket and carefully wiped his tears. I put my hands on his shoulders and said, "Tony and I managed to get enough information from listening to the police talk to put Michael on this. We have the address. My team will do the rest."

“What about the police?” Liam asked.

I thought about what I could and couldn't tell him. I didn't usually talk about why we operated the way we did, but if Tony wanted Liam on the team, then he should know. “Michael thinks Gerard has at least one person in the police department who's been diverting calls about the house for months. The calls have come in from concerned citizens, but no action has been taken. If we don't move quickly, the boys will be gone, and we won't know how to find them.”

“Oh.” He sighed softly. “I guess Gerard wasn't exaggerating.”

I shrugged. “He probably was. But he definitely has some friends on the force.”

Liam shook his head when more tears fell. He wiped his face again. “I guess I'm not a good candidate for your team if I can't hold myself together.”

I put a finger under his chin. “Look at me,” I said. When he raised his eyes to meet mine, our gazes held for a second. Warmth spread down my chest, and I had to fight not to reach out and pull him to me. I cleared my throat and went on. “You're perfect for our team because you care so much. We all do this because we see injustice and want to step in where our justice system falls short or fails entirely.”

Liam clenched his jaw and his gaze sharpened. “I want to help. What do I do to get on your team?”

Inwardly, I groaned. This was going to be all kinds of trouble for me. Outwardly, I put my arm around his shoulders and said, “Let's go talk to Tony.”

Liam

After my boss showed up and shoed us out of the clinic, Tony and Marco took me to their favorite Italian restaurant in Asbury Park. Oh, and I got to ride in Marco's late-model, all-black Dodge Charger. Ugh, I wanted one so bad.

It was early for dinner, not even five o'clock, so there weren't many people in the restaurant. Before we got to our table, a portly man with a balding head ringed with snow-white hair came hurrying out from the kitchen to greet us. He embraced Tony and Marco like long-lost brothers, speaking to them in rapid Italian. And that was when I discovered that the D'Angelo brothers spoke Italian.

After a few minutes, Tony introduced me to the man. "Sal, this is Liam O'Neil. He and his brother own Moonlight Inn. Liam, this is Sal Valeri."

I held out my hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Valeri."

"Such a nice boy," he said as he vigorously shook my hand. "I saw your brother's interview over the summer. He did a good job." He steered us all to a table in the corner of the restaurant. "Come, sit. Eat."

After more Italian to Marco and Tony, Sal hurried back to the kitchen. Tony shook his head. "He's a friend of my father's. They came to the US together when they were teenagers. Our families have always gotten together at holidays, birthdays, anniversaries. You name it, and we celebrate it together."

"That's really nice," I said. "Although I had no idea you two could speak Italian."

Marco shrugged. "Pop wanted us all to be able to speak it, so he made sure we all spoke Italian at home."

I smiled wistfully. "I kind of wish my parents had done that with Irish. I would love to be able to speak it."

A server brought out a basket of piping-hot garlic bread that smelled amazing. That reminded us to look at the menu so we could order. After we ordered, I looked over at Tony and said, “I want to join your team. What do I need to do?”

Tony grinned broadly. He glanced briefly at Marco and then said, “You just need to be willing to go out with us at night. Most of what we would need you for are cases like the one here in Asbury. Often, the victims need medical attention as soon as possible. We had a medic for a while, but he moved to California.”

I felt a nervous twinge in my gut. “Would I have to learn how to use a gun?”

Marco frowned deeply. “Fuck no.”

Tony glared at his brother. “No. But it would be in everyone’s best interest for you to learn self-defense.”

I looked at Marco. “Will you be able to teach me?”

“Yeah,” he said gruffly.

My heart sped up. I would get to spend some time up close and personal with Marco. The way he was frowning, though, made me think he wasn’t sure it was a good idea. He confused me. He’d fussed over me in the clinic parking lot, but now he was grumpy and distant.

I tried to ignore it, hoping whatever it was would resolve itself. I said to Tony, “I’d rather Sean didn’t know about this. He worries about me so much already. I think this would set him off like a rocket.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah, I get it. I won’t say anything.”

Marco made this low sort of grunting sound. I glanced over at Tony, who rolled his eyes. “Don’t mind him,” he said. “He’s just being a pain in the ass tonight.”

Marco clenched his jaw. “I’m not being a pain in the ass.” He turned his dark-eyed gaze on me. “I’m worried the work will trigger your PTSD.”

I blinked at him, and a spark of anger lit in me. “I just had big, dumb, and ugly in my face swinging at me, and it didn’t

trigger my PTSD. Maybe you should let me decide what I can and can't handle."

Both men stared at me, speechless. I looked straight at Marco. "Before, you said I was perfect for the team. Now, you're worried about my PTSD. If you don't want me on the team, just say so. Don't try to use my diagnosis against me."

Marco had the grace to look embarrassed. He closed his eyes and rubbed his hand over his face. "I'm sorry. That was a shitty thing for me to do."

"Yes, it was," I replied. "Thank you for your apology." I swallowed my hurt and disappointment. I held Marco's gaze. "It's pretty clear you don't want me on the team, despite what you said in the clinic parking lot. I don't go where I'm not wanted." I shifted my attention to Tony. "Thank you for your offer, but I don't want to cause problems between brothers."

I carefully set my napkin on my empty plate. "I should probably just go." I didn't want to stay. I couldn't stay and pretend that I didn't want to cry. I rose, put on my jacket, and pulled my phone out of the pocket. "I'll just get a rideshare to the clinic to pick up my car." I turned and walked out of the restaurant without looking back.

Marco

Tony smacked the back of my head. “Goddamn it, Marco. Get your head out of your ass.”

I barely felt my brother’s little love tap as I watched Liam’s retreating form. I hated the hurt look that had crossed Liam’s face before he’d shuttered his expression. I had literally told him one thing and then said the exact opposite less than an hour later. Christ, when had I become that guy?

“Fix this,” Tony growled. “We need him.”

“Yeah,” I said. “We really do.” I got up and grabbed my jacket. I headed for the door, hoping Liam hadn’t been picked up yet. When I stepped onto the sidewalk, there was no sign of him. “Damn it,” I ground out.

As I turned to go back into the restaurant, I spotted Liam’s lithe figure walking toward Main Street. He must have decided to walk the four blocks to the clinic. His hands were shoved in his pockets, his head was bowed, and his shoulders were slumped in defeat. I cursed myself for being a complete asshole and sprinted to catch up to him.

Even on a chilly November afternoon, plenty of people were out walking, going into the shops and restaurants that lined both sides of Cookman Ave. I had to creatively dodge a few people to avoid losing sight of Liam. I caught up to him as he passed a large retail building and turned onto Main Street. “Liam, wait up.”

His head whipped around, and he stopped in his tracks. He stared at me in surprise, seemingly frozen in place. “Marco?” Then his eyes narrowed. “What do you want?”

What I thought was, *I want you on your knees with my cock in your pretty mouth.* What I said was, “Just a couple of minutes of your time.”

He crossed his arms. “Okay.”

I ran my fingers through my hair. As I was about to speak, a group of people came around the corner, causing Liam to back up against the large windows of the building to get out of their way. I followed him so we wouldn't get separated. I shoved my hands in my jacket pockets so I wouldn't grab hold of him like I wanted to. "I know I keep giving you mixed messages. But it's not that I don't think you belong on our team. You do. You're competent and cool under pressure."

Liam threw up his hands. "Then what is the problem?"

I pressed my lips together. I couldn't tell him the real problem—that I wanted to fuck him but worried about him falling for me—he'd think I was an egotistical asshole. So I went with my other truth. "I'm having a hard time because I remember what it was like when we found you in Syria. I guess I feel responsible for you, and I worry about something happening to you."

Liam's head fell forward and his arms dropped to his sides. He sighed. "I get it. I really do. And I imagine you saw the worst of it because I was unconscious for three days." He looked up at me, and there was that sweet smile again, the one that had captivated me the first time I saw it in that picture on his brother's desk. "But I need to do this." He stopped and shook his head. "I don't mean this specifically. What I said before stands—I don't go where I'm not wanted."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he put up his hand to stop me. "Let me finish." I crossed my arms and frowned at him. His lip twitched. "You're kinda cute when you get all frowny like that."

"I am *not* cute," I growled.

He rolled his eyes. "Okay, He-Man. *Anyway*, what I meant is that I have always wanted to help people who really need it. People who have nowhere else to go. That's why I took that contract with Doctors Without Borders. It's why I work for the VNA. It's why I want to help your team."

He shivered when a chill breeze came around the corner. The temperature was dropping as the sun set behind the buildings to our left. I wanted to pull him close to keep him

warm, but I didn't. Instead, I put my arm around his shoulders and steered him back toward the restaurant. "Come on, Mother Teresa. Let's go tell Tony you're in."

Liam

I knocked quietly on Miguel's office door. "Come in," he called out. My brother's assistant manager was busily typing on his laptop when I entered. He looked up and smiled. "Hey, Liam. What's up?"

I sat in the chair in front of his desk. "Sean asked me to check in with you since Caitlin is off today."

Miguel rolled his eyes and smiled fondly. "He worries too much."

"I know," I replied. My brother had decided to extend his two weeks in Europe with Jeremy by another ten days. I figured he was probably feeling guilty for being away for so long.

"The new part-time assistant manager is working out well," Miguel said. "On top of that, it's the middle of November, so we don't have that many guests right now." He clicked a few keys on his laptop. "We'll have an almost full house for Thanksgiving week. Joanna has a spectacular meal planned for Thanksgiving Day."

I nodded. "Sounds good. Do you need anything from me?"

He leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "Actually, yes."

I narrowed my eyes. "Why do I think you're up to something?"

"Not at all," he said. "I was just thinking you need a night out."

I crossed my arms. "Is that so?"

"Yes." He grinned. "My bestie is featuring in the drag show at Paradise on Friday night. I want to bring as many people as I can to cheer him on."

I thought about it and checked my body's response. No tension, no locking up. I looked over at Miguel. "I can give

you a conditional yes. So far, I haven't had any problems with crowded places. I'll let you know if that changes."

"Fair enough," Miguel said. He looked me over when I rose to leave. "Going to work out?"

I nodded. "Marco is going to teach me some self-defense. He thinks it will help me feel more confident."

Miguel hummed his appreciation. "That man can teach me anything he wants."

I felt my cheeks heat. "Yeah, he's...something."

"Uh-huh." He smirked. "Are you using the hotel gym?"

"Yes." I checked my smartwatch. "I'm meeting him there in ten minutes."

"Well," he said casually, "I may have to stop by to make sure you both have what you need. You know, as a courtesy."

I snorted. "Yeah, okay. I'll see you later. Text me the time you want to meet up on Friday."

When I got to the hotel gym, Marco was already there warming up with some stretches that showed me how bendy he was for a man his size. I stood still for a moment, watching his large, muscular body move with the grace of a dancer. I let out a quiet sigh. He really was beautiful. And hot. His black workout pants molded to his very fine ass. His tight black T-shirt accentuated the muscles of his back as he moved.

I probably should have felt guilty for perving on him, but I didn't. At least not until he turned around and caught me eye-fucking him. My eyes drifted to the front of his workout pants of their own accord. Yep, he was proportional. I shuddered as heat pooled in my groin.

Marco put his hands on his hips. "Like what you see?"

I felt the heat rise to my cheeks. But in for a penny, as the saying goes. I grinned at him. "I'm not blind."

He let out a soft laugh and shook his head. "Come on. Let's get started."

Marco had me stretch before he brought out a large pad with straps. He slid his forearm through the straps and held it in front of his chest. “Okay,” he began. “I know you’ve had some tae kwon do training. Do you remember how to do a palm-heel strike?” I nodded. “Good. Hit the pad as hard as you can.”

It had been years since I’d done any kind of sparring—outside of dodging Gerard’s punches at the clinic. Luckily, my muscle memory kicked in pretty quickly, and I soon got into a rhythm. After about fifteen minutes, he moved on to teaching me a kick designed to disable an attacker so I could run away.

By the time Marco was satisfied, I was a pathetic, sweaty mess. When we stopped for a water break, I narrowed my eyes at him. “Is this payback for ogling you?”

He snorted and choked on his water. After he wiped his face, he glared at me. “Who says ogle anymore?”

Marco looked so offended that I had to laugh. “My mother?”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “It’s not payback for anything. Repetition will make it second nature.”

“I know,” I sighed. “I was just messing with you.”

Marco’s smile looked almost fond, which surprised me. Usually, his expressions were closed off or impatient. It prompted me to be brave. “So what happened last night? Were you able to rescue the rest of the boys?”

“In a manner of speaking,” he replied. “We figured they’d try to relocate the kids before the cops could move in, so we disabled their van and called in a tip to the detective who took your statement. All the boys got rescued and four more scumbags are in jail.”

I was so excited that I threw my arms around his neck. “That’s wonderful! Thank you so much!”

Marco’s arms came around me automatically, and for just a moment, everything stopped. For just a moment, he pulled me closer, and I could feel the long length of his semi-hard cock against my thigh. His nostrils flared and his pupils dilated. I

thought he was finally going to kiss me. Then he gently put his hands on my waist and stepped back. I dropped my hands back to my sides and also took a step back. Clearing my throat, I asked, "So what's next?"

With a slight shake of his head, Marco answered, "Now we put your skills to practical use. I'm going to put you through some attack scenarios and then show you how to get out of them and get away."

And that was what he did. For the next half hour, Marco created different attack or capture scenarios and taught me how to get out of them using a few simple moves. Every time he switched up his attack, he checked in with me to ensure I wasn't triggered by the close-combat training.

He grabbed me from behind, put me in a chokehold, shoved me against a wall, and put his hand on my throat. And that was when I discovered a kink I didn't know I had.

The moment his thick fingers encircled my throat, my dick became a steel spike. Shit. I stared up at him wide-eyed. He was right against me, pinning me to the wall, so he had to notice. I swallowed hard and struggled mightily to keep my hips from grinding into his.

Marco stepped even closer, the heat of his big body enveloping me. "You should be careful who you let touch you like this," he said, his voice low and gruff.

My brain short-circuited. "I haven't...I never..." My words dried up, and I just stared into the molten depths of his warm brown eyes.

He hummed low in his throat, and I felt his thumb lightly caress the fluttering pulse in my neck. "Good. It's always best to be safe when you...experiment with new things."

I was pretty sure my answer came out as a squeak. "I don't do much...experimenting at the moment."

His brows rose in surprise. "Yeah?" He stared at me for a little longer before shifting his stance. The moment was broken. "Let me show you how to get out of this kind of hold."

Marco

The bass beat of the music coming from Paradise nightclub vibrated through the chilly night air. Somewhere in that club, Liam was dancing with some man, moving his lithe body in time with the beat. I only knew this because he'd mentioned he was going with Miguel when we were scheduling our next practice session.

It had taken every ounce of self-control I had not to give him what he wanted when I had my fingers around his throat in the gym. I was losing the battle between what I wanted and what was right. My better self told me to leave him be. He was soft-hearted, and I could hurt him. My baser self told me to go for it. He was a grown man, and as long as I was upfront with him, he should be able to handle himself. My baser side was winning.

I went to the door, paid the cover charge, and walked into the noise. The dance floor was a sea of writhing bodies. The drag queens were all on stage, dancing and pumping up the crowd. I scanned the room, looking for Liam's familiar dark head.

I finally found him toward the edge of the crowd, dancing with Miguel and a few other people I didn't know. Liam wore a long-sleeve jade-green button-down with black skinny jeans. The shirt accentuated his gorgeous pale-green eyes. Those jeans made me want to grab his sweet little ass with both hands and have him wrap his legs around my waist. He was no twink, but I could still easily hold him against a wall and fuck him.

Liam hadn't seen me yet, so I moved until I was in his line of sight. I saw the second he clocked me. His eyes widened and his gaze heated as it traveled up my body. I wasn't dressed fancy—just dark blue jeans, a black T-shirt, and motorcycle boots—but Liam seemed to like what he saw.

Miguel must have caught Liam's expression because he whirled around to see what he was looking at. He looked

surprised to see me and then strangely delighted. “Marco!” he shouted over the music. “We were just talking about you.”

I smirked and gave a blushing Liam the once-over. “Oh yeah?” I stepped closer until I was in Liam’s personal space. “What about me?”

Miguel leaned over to me and whisper-shouted, “He wants to climb you like a tree.”

Liam groaned and dropped his face into his hands. I took hold of his wrists and gently pulled his hands away from his face. “Is that right?”

Despite his obvious embarrassment, he met my gaze boldly, red cheeks and all. He swallowed hard and nodded. “Yeah.”

I let go of his wrists and slid my hands down to his hips. I pulled him close and leaned in so he could hear me. “What if I told you I want to pin you against a wall with your legs wrapped around my waist, my hands on your ass, and my cock so far up inside you that you’d taste me for days?”

Liam took in a stuttering breath. “Shit. Yes. That. I want that.”

And I was done waiting. I’d give Liam a chance to turn me down once I laid out my rules. If he went for it, I’d have to believe he understood my boundaries and could handle them. “Then let’s get out of here.”

Liam told Miguel he was leaving and then went to get his leather jacket from a nearby chair. I took hold of his elbow so I wouldn’t lose him in the crowd of dancers. Outside, the mid-November cold was biting, and I rubbed my arms to warm them up.

“Where’s your jacket?” Liam asked.

“I left it in my car because I didn’t want to carry it around inside,” I replied.

He shook his head. “I’d offer you my jacket, but I don’t think it would fit.”

I shook my head with a chuckle. “Hardly. But my car’s just around the corner.” I pulled out my phone and opened the remote start app. With a few clicks, I entered my passcode and started my car so there would be some heat when we got there.

When we got to my car, Liam practically purred. “I love Chargers.” He ran a hand over my car with something akin to reverence. “I wanted one of these. I saved money for a down payment, thinking I’d get one after I got back from Lebanon.” He lifted his shoulder in a slight shrug. “Things didn’t turn out exactly how I planned. I’ll have to wait until I’m working full-time again.”

His words reminded me of everything he’d been through. I really didn’t want to hurt him. I unlocked my car and we got inside, where it was much warmer. Before we buckled up, I turned to face Liam. “Listen, before we go any further, I want to make sure you understand where I’m coming from.”

Liam’s brow furrowed in confusion. “Coming from about what?”

I wagged my finger between the two of us. “About this. Us.” I blew out a frustrated breath. This was harder than I’d thought it would be. “This can only be sex. I don’t do relationships. I just wanted to make that clear before we started anything.”

Liam’s frown deepened. “Wait. Are you saying if we fuck, we can’t be friends?”

I blinked. “What? No. I just mean, I don’t do the boyfriend thing.”

Liam snorted. “The *boyfriend thing*? So what you’re saying is you just want to be fuck buddies.”

I glared at him. “When did you get such a filthy mouth?”

He laughed at me. “Have you met my brother? He and my father were in construction. And you should talk,” he added. “You could turn the air blue when you get going.”

He wasn’t wrong. “I guess I’m just not used to you cursing,” I said.

Liam's brows rose. "Wait. Do you think I'm some starry-eyed virgin or something? I can assure you, I'm not. I had to go on hiatus while I was in Lebanon, and I wasn't feeling up to much of anything for a while after I got back. But trust me, I'm a twenty-eight-year-old gay man who is well-acquainted with casual sex."

Okay, so I may have underestimated Liam. "I apologize," I said. "I think that was me being overprotective again."

"Well, you'll just have to make it up to me," he said with a wry grin.

I leaned closer to him. "Oh yeah? How do you want me to make it up to you?"

"Kiss me."

Heat flared in my gut. Liam was turning out to be a lot different than I'd expected. I moved my seat as far back as it would go and reclined the back. "Come and get it."

The growl that came from Liam as he climbed over the console and straddled my lap went straight to my dick. He braced his hands on either side of my head and gave me a mischievous grin. "Pucker up, sunshine."

I snorted a laugh. "Nobody calls me sunshine."

He leaned in closer. "Maybe they should, Mr. Grumpy Pants."

I wrapped an arm around his waist and threaded the fingers of my free hand through his silky hair. "I'll show you grumpy," I said as I pulled him into a bone-melting kiss. Liam groaned into my mouth as he opened for me. Our tongues tangled and our hips ground together. This was not the sweet, hesitant kiss I had expected from him. This was a kiss from a man who knew what he wanted and took it.

My hips thrust up to meet his as our hard cocks aligned. Liam let out a filthy moan as he started a hard grind into me. Christ, I was already close, and I hadn't even gotten his pants off.

A flash of headlights startled us both back to reality. We were parked on the street where anyone could walk by and see us—including the cops. The last thing I needed was some cop to bust me for public indecency. I put my hands on Liam’s hips to hold him still. “Are you okay with going to my place?”

Liam nodded. “Yeah.”

“Did you drive here?”

He shook his head. “We took a rideshare.”

I patted his ass. “Get back in your seat. We’ll continue this at my place.”

The drive to my house seemed to take forever, especially since Liam kept running his hand up my leg and brushing it over my hard cock. I finally grabbed his wrist and said, “Knock it off, or you’re gonna get a spanking.”

The little shit had the nerve to smirk at me. “Is that supposed to be a threat?”

“I don’t make threats,” I growled. “I make promises.”

“Can’t wait,” he murmured.

I suppressed a groan and shifted in my seat to adjust my hard cock.

Marco

I took Liam into my house through the garage. He stopped dead and stared at my Mustang. “A 1965 Mustang convertible,” he breathed. “Candy-apple red. Black top. Black leather interior.” He looked at me in wide-eyed wonder. “You have to let me ride in it sometime with the top down.”

I smiled at his enthusiasm. “Sure. When the weather gets warmer.”

Liam let out a gusty sigh. “Yeah, it’s a bit too cold, being November and all. Weather is so inconvenient.”

He eyed my Harley before giving me a sexy smile. “Nice bike. I’d love to see you ride.”

I grabbed him around the waist. “You’re the one who’s gonna be riding tonight.” I pulled him toward me and wedged my thigh between his legs.

Liam wrapped his arms around my neck and started grinding on my leg. “I can’t wait to ride that fat cock of yours.”

“Let’s go then.” I grabbed his ass with both hands and hoisted him up so he could wrap his legs around my waist. I made the trip from my garage through my dimly lit kitchen and upstairs to my bedroom in record time, all while Liam writhed against me, kissing my neck and trying to get under my T-shirt.

I flipped on the light, shut my door, and pinned him against it with his legs still wrapped around my waist. He had my T-shirt bunched up in his hands and was trying to pull it up. “Behave,” I said.

“Where’s the fun in that?” he retorted.

I stepped back from the door and unhooked his legs from my waist. “All right, brat, feet on the floor.” He protested but did as he was told.

He looked up at me and smirked. “Should I call you Daddy?”

“Christ, no,” I said. I put my hand lightly around his throat. “But I am going to find something for you to do with that smart mouth of yours.”

A soft moan escaped his lips when I squeezed his throat just a little bit harder. I reached down and palmed his hard cock. I leaned in close to his ear. “You like that, huh?”

He nodded and rasped out, “Yeah.”

I took a step back and let go of his throat. “Show me how much. Get on your knees and suck my dick.”

He pouted and said, “I was promised wall sex.”

I had to laugh. Liam was too much. I put my fingers under his chin. “You’ll get your wall sex.” I ran my thumb over his full bottom lip. “But first, I’m gonna fuck that sassy mouth.”

Liam looked up at me through his lashes and slowly sucked my thumb into his mouth. My dick went so hard it tried to push through my zipper. “Jesus,” I murmured. I put my hand on his shoulder, pressing hard enough to let him know what I wanted.

Liam dropped to his knees readily, but I put my finger under his chin again to look into his eyes. “Anytime you want to stop, we stop. Okay?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Good.” I pulled off my T-shirt. “Now take out my dick and suck me.”

He ran his hands over my bare abdomen with an appreciative hum. “I thought you’d never ask.”

He unbuttoned my jeans and slowly pulled down the zipper, his eyes dancing with delight when he realized I wasn’t wearing any underwear. “Commando, huh?” He reached into my pants and drew out my aching cock. “Hello, gorgeous,” he said, and I realized he was talking to my dick.

I threw my head back and laughed. “You’re something else.”

He looked up at me and winked. “Who said sex has to be all serious business?” Before I could answer, he licked a stripe up the underside of my cock before wrapping his tongue around the head.

I groaned, tangling my fingers in his messy hair and tugging gently. “Open up.” He opened his mouth and enveloped my cock in his wet heat. I rocked my hips forward slowly at first, making sure he was okay. He reached out and put his hands on the backs of my thighs, urging me closer. I took that as permission to move faster and go deeper.

Liam swallowed me down, and I nearly came when I felt his throat tighten around my cock. “Holy shit, you’re good at this.” I tightened my grip on his hair and pistoned my hips, making his eyes water. I pulled out to give him a chance to catch his breath before sliding back in. When he hummed around my shaft, I almost lost it. I decided enough was enough. I wanted inside his sweet little ass.

I pulled out of his mouth and hoisted him to his feet. “Strip, turn around, and put your hands on the wall.”

Liam smirked up at me. “You going to do a cavity search, Officer?”

I pulled him close and palmed his ass, running my thumb down his jeans-covered crease. I growled in his ear, “With my dick. Now, get undressed.”

While he was doing that, I went to my nightstand and got supplies. I took a minute to remove my boots, socks, and jeans. By the time I was done, Liam was completely naked and standing with his legs spread and his hands on the wall. “Jesus,” I muttered under my breath. Liam was gorgeous. His body was sleek and lightly muscled. His pale skin was pristine except for the scar left behind from his surgery and a caduceus tattoo on his left shoulder blade. I wanted to devour him.

I picked up the condom and lube and stalked over to him. I dropped the condom at his feet and said, “I’m going to get you

ready for me. Are you still okay with that?”

He turned his head to look over his shoulder. “Yes. All the yeses.” He popped his eyebrows. “And wall sex?”

I lightly smacked his ass. “And wall sex, brat.” Liam snickered and turned his head back to face the wall.

I opened the lube and poured a generous amount on my fingers. He shivered a little when I circled his rim with the cool liquid. He moaned when I breached his hole with my finger all the way to the first knuckle. He thrust his ass back, trying to take more. “Easy,” I said. “We’ll get there.”

“More,” he breathed. “Please, Marco.”

I added more lube and then pushed two fingers into him, spreading them to open him up for me. I wasn’t small, and I didn’t want to hurt him. I added a third finger, and he cried out, pushing back against me hard. I needed to get inside him before I exploded. I pulled my fingers out of his body. “Are you ready for me?”

“Yes,” he gasped. “Want you so bad.”

I straightened and pulled him close. “You ready to ride this cock?”

Liam nodded and turned in my arms. “I’m ready.”

I stepped back to suit up and slick more lube over the condom and then walked forward until his back was against the wall. He put his arms around my neck, and I lifted his thighs so he could wrap them around my waist. I held my cock against his entrance, and he slowly slid down.

Liam squeezed his eyes shut and groaned. “Oh God, that’s good. You’re so big.”

I thrust into him until he was fully seated on my dick. Grabbing a handful of his hair, I kissed him hard and deep. “Ride me,” I growled.

Liam put his hands on my shoulders and undulated his hips. Holy shit. Who knew he could move like that? I held his hips and let him grind until it got to be too much and I had to

pin him against the wall and drive into him, hard and fast. He was so good, so tight. I was going to blow any second.

I shifted slightly, and Liam's eyes rolled back in his head. "Close," he gasped.

"Jack yourself," I ground out.

He slipped one hand between us and circled his cock, pumping in time with my thrusts. I'd had enough of the wall. I turned us around and walked over to my bed. He let go of me and lay back on the edge of the mattress. I draped his legs over my shoulders, grabbed his hips, and rocked into him, ramping up my pace, making sure to peg his prostate with each thrust.

Liam's body stiffened as he let out a strangled cry. The muscles in his ass clamped down on my cock so hard that I saw stars as ropes of cum shot over his abdomen and chest. I fucked him through his orgasm before mine crashed over me with the force of a tidal wave.

I stood there for a minute, breathing heavily, willing my legs not to buckle. What the fuck? I couldn't remember the last time sex had been that good. I held the base of the condom and carefully pulled out of his body.

Liam winced and slowly dropped his legs to the floor while I tossed the condom into the wastebasket by my bed. He threw his arm across his face as he tried to catch his breath. "Holy shit," he finally said. "Navy SEALs are the way to go."

I couldn't help the laugh that burst out of me. I held out my hand. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up." He took my hand and I pulled him to his feet. Steering him toward my ensuite, I said, "Bathroom's this way."

I got Liam a washcloth and left him to clean himself up and do his business in private. I pulled on a pair of sleep pants, collected his clothes, and laid them neatly on my bed while waiting for him to finish.

When he walked out of the bathroom all sex-mussed, his body bearing the marks from my fingers, my inner caveman grunted in approval. He saw his clothes on the bed and smiled. "Thanks." He got dressed and pulled out his phone. After a

few clicks, he said, “My ride will be here in ten minutes.” He put on his jacket. “I’ll just wait outside.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to stand out in the cold. Wait by the front door. I’ll lock up after you go.”

He nodded. “Thanks.” He gave me a small smile. “I’ll see you at the gym at two.”

“Yep. I’ll be there.”

I watched him leave my room and listened as he went downstairs. While brushing my teeth, I heard the front door open and close and a car pull away from the house. After going downstairs to lock the door and turn off the lights, I stood in the middle of my living room feeling...disappointed? I couldn’t figure out why. Liam had done exactly as I’d wanted. Why the fuck was I suddenly all mopey? I shook my head. I just needed sleep. That was all.

Liam

“Spill, O’Neil,” Miguel said.

I smirked at my new friend over a cup of delicious coffee. We were sitting in the breakfast area of Moonlight Inn, enjoying a late-morning meal before he had to start work. Sean and Jeremy were set to return to the US later in the evening, and Sean wanted me to get him an update on the preparations for the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. “What do you want to know?”

Miguel narrowed his eyes. “Everything. That man is a whole lot of deliciousness in a six-foot-four package. He looked ready to eat you alive last night.” He leaned forward and said quietly, “At least tell me if he’s proportional.”

I was pretty sure my smile was filthy. “Most definitely.” I shifted in my seat as I recalled how well Marco wielded his very proportional cock. “The man knows what he’s doing.”

“Oooh,” he said with delight. “You’re going to feel that for a couple of days, aren’t you?”

I took another sip of my coffee. “Yep.”

“So, are you going to see him again?” he asked.

I checked my phone for the time. “In about four hours.”

His brows rose. “Aren’t you sore?”

I nearly spit out my coffee. “Not for sex. He’s teaching me self-defense.”

“I meant see him again, like for a date or something,” Miguel retorted with exasperation.

I shook my head. “He doesn’t date.” My mouth twisted in a mocking smile. “He doesn’t do the ‘boyfriend thing.’”

“The boyfriend thing,” he repeated. “So, what? Was that just one and done?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. He seemed like he might want to do it again, as long as I don’t get attached.”

Miguel shook his head. “I swear I sometimes don’t understand men.”

I laughed. “You are one.”

“Yeah, and I don’t understand myself half the time,” he said wryly.

I tilted my head. “What’s that all about?”

“Nothing,” he said with a sigh and a shake of his head. “Just the same sad story of the gay boy crushing on the straight boy.”

“You mean Zach, the bartender?”

His mouth dropped open. “How did you know? Am I that obvious?”

“No,” I replied with a shake of my head. “But I have eyes. He’s hot. And I may have caught you staring the other night.”

He groaned. “Thankfully, the guy is oblivious.” He looked me up and down. “I still don’t get Marco though. I mean, you’re gorgeous and a good man. All heroic and shit.”

I threw my head back and laughed. “I wouldn’t go that far.” I shook my head. “I don’t think Marco is trying to be an asshole. I got the impression that he lost someone he loved. Maybe he’s not over it.”

Miguel rolled his eyes. “What is it with people trying to hold on to their exes?”

I thought about the bone-frog tattoo over Marco’s heart and the picture and flag case I’d seen on the mantel in his dimly lit living room. “I don’t mean a breakup,” I corrected. “I think the guy died.”

“Oh.” Miguel blew out a breath. “Well, that sucks. I can see why he wouldn’t want to get attached.”

“To be honest, I don’t either,” I said. “I’m just getting my feet under me. I’m in no position to start a serious relationship.”

“I get it,” he said with a sigh. “I think I’m just projecting my neediness onto you.” He finished his coffee and stood. “I have to get to my office. The hotel is now officially full for the week of Thanksgiving. I’m going to see if some of the college students who worked over the summer want to make a little extra money over the holiday.”

“If you’re shorthanded, I’m happy to help when I’m not working at the VNA,” I said.

He smiled. “Thank you. I’ll let you know.”

I grabbed a protein bar from the breakfast counter and made my way to Sean’s office. I really loved the look and feel of the office. It was true to its Victorian roots without being dark and somber. The large south-facing window had a lot to do with that. I smiled when I sat behind the desk and saw the picture of Mr. Whitaker, Sean, and me on the desk. It was taken about a year before the old man died. I opened Sean’s laptop, entered his password, and got to work.

An hour later, I’d checked all the accounts Sean wanted me to and had gotten all the payroll information uploaded. I also checked the budget he’d set for the Thanksgiving meal against the purchases already made and the projected attendance. I’d just decided to go check on Sean’s cottage to see if it was all set for his return when my phone rang. I looked at the screen and was surprised to see Marco’s name there. I felt my stomach twist. Was he calling to cancel our lesson? I blew out a breath. Only one way to find out.

“Hey, Marco, what’s up?”

“There’s been a change of plans,” he began. “Can we meet earlier?”

He sounded stressed. “Sure. Is everything okay?”

There was a pause before he answered. “Tony got a call today. I’d rather talk about it in person. How soon can you get to the gym?”

“I’m already at the hotel,” I replied. “If you want, we can meet in Sean’s office. There’s more privacy.”

“Sounds good,” he said. “Be there in ten.” Then he hung up.

I blew out a breath. Okay. Even though Marco didn’t say it, I knew that was a call to one of those “off-the-books” missions Tony had talked about when he vetted me. I did a mental inventory of my medical bag, trying to remember if I needed anything. I would have to check it before we went wherever we were going.

Marco got to the hotel in less than ten minutes. His expression was grim when he walked in the door, closing and locking it behind him. I leaned against the desk, guessing this wouldn’t be a cozy sit-down conversation. “Where are we headed?” I asked.

Marco’s frown softened to an almost smile. “You picked that up pretty quickly.”

I shrugged. “You had your ‘mission voice’ on.”

“My mission voice?” he asked flatly.

“Yeah,” I replied. I tapped my temple. “I’ll always remember how your mission voice sounds.”

To my surprise, a little bit of pink tinged his cheeks. He cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. So, Tony got a call from a guy trying to track down his fourteen-year-old sister. She went missing two weeks ago.”

“Shit,” I said.

“Exactly. Anyway, he was able to ping her phone to a cell tower just outside of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, before the phone was turned off or destroyed.” Marco clenched his jaw, and I almost felt sorry for whoever was responsible for the girl’s disappearance. But not really.

“How did he know to reach out to Tony?” I asked.

“He didn’t,” Marco replied. “Michael, my younger brother, has some kind of computer program that monitors”—he waved his hand in a circle over his head—“the internet somehow. He picked up that this guy had a missing sister and was worried she’d been taken by traffickers. Michael reached

out to the guy, and they pooled their information. Apparently, the guy is a computer geek like Michael, so they worked together to find her.”

“Where did they find her?” I asked. A surge of excitement coursed through me. This was real. We were going to rescue someone.

“In a small town about thirty minutes northwest of Harrisburg,” Marco replied. “Her captor has a big farmhouse. They think there are at least two other girls there.”

I closed my eyes, nausea roiling my gut. “Damn it.”

“Yeah, that’s about the size of it,” Marco said.

I straightened and pulled myself together. “When do we leave?”

A smile finally broke through his somber expression. He put his arm around my shoulders. “Come on. We’ll get your bag from your car and head to my place. We’re leaving in an hour.”

Marco

We stopped by Liam's place so he could change into dark clothes and restock his medical bag. Then we headed to my house to wait for the rest of the team. While we were in my living room, Liam spotted the picture of Terry and me next to the flag case on the mantel. He looked at them for a long time and then lightly brushed his finger over the nameplate on the case.

I expected him to ask me about it, but he didn't say a word. He also mentioned nothing about the spectacular sex we'd had the night before. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I should have been relieved, but that wasn't what I felt. It was more of an uneasy feeling like something was missing or out of place. He approached me after a while and said, "Your house is really nice." A blush tinged his cheeks. "I didn't get to see much of it last night."

"Thanks," I replied. "I've had it for about a year. It still needs some work, but I like it."

He opened his mouth to say something, but a loud knock on the front door interrupted him. Before I could answer it, the door swung open and Dante walked in, followed closely by Pete and Andrea. When the three of them saw Liam, they went over to him, exclaiming how good he looked and how happy they were to see him. Seeing Liam's bemused expression reminded me that I hadn't told him the rest of his rescue team would be there. They'd all been at the Gage event as well, but given the circumstances, they'd been too busy to chat with Liam then.

I put my hand on Liam's shoulder and said, "Andrea, Dante, and Pete were part of your rescue team."

Liam's eyes widened, and he put his hand over his mouth. "Oh my God. I can't thank you enough for what you did. Is it...can I hug you?"

I've never seen three hardened military types turn to mush faster. "Sure you can, darlin'," Andrea said in her soft Southern accent. She pulled him into a tight hug, her eyes shiny. "I'm so glad you're all right." Pete and Dante each got their turn as well. I even saw Dante surreptitiously wipe his eyes afterward.

Gabe and Michael walked in during the middle of the hugging. Gabe put his hands on his hips and said, "What did I miss, and how come I'm not getting hugs?"

Everyone laughed, and Pete made a big production of hugging Gabe. Gabe playfully shoved him away and said, "No way. I want to hug the cute hottie."

Liam's face turned bright red, and I...felt some kind of way about what Gabe had said. I stepped into the middle of the group and said, "All right, you miscreants. Take a seat so we can go over the mission parameters."

Gabe held up two large bags with the Wawa logo. "Michael and I brought lunch. I figured we could talk and eat."

I rolled my eyes. "You always want to eat."

"You got that right," Gabe said with a grin. "Eating and fucking. The two best things in life."

Liam looked a little shell-shocked, and I figured he felt out of his depth with this crew. "Let me introduce you all to Liam and tell you what his role will be."

Everyone found a seat, either on the large sectional sofa or one of the two recliners. Michael brought out tray tables and drinks from my kitchen. Once they were settled, I went over to Liam, who was perched on the edge of the sofa, looking nervous. I put my hand on his shoulder. "As most of you know, this is Liam O'Neil." I turned my attention to Gabe. "Gabe, Liam was working for Doctors Without Borders when he was taken by Syrian militants." I indicated the rest of the team. "Our team located and extracted him, terminating three of his kidnapers with extreme prejudice."

"Hooyah!" Gabe shouted. "So you're a doctor?" he asked Liam.

Liam shook his head. “Nurse practitioner.”

I squeezed Liam’s shoulder. “Liam has agreed to come on as our medic.”

“That’s great,” Dante said. “You did a good job at the Gage event.”

Liam smiled. “Thank you.”

“Okay,” I began, trying to get us back on track. “Michael worked with Deshawn Bradley to help him locate his missing fourteen-year-old sister, Kayla. She apparently met some guy online who told her he was sixteen. Two weeks ago, she said she wanted to meet up with him and Deshawn wouldn’t let her, so she snuck out one night. She hasn’t been seen since.”

“Fuck,” Pete growled.

“I should tell you that Deshawn is raising his two younger sisters. Their mom died from cancer two years ago, and their dad was killed in a car accident when Kayla was four. The older of the two girls, Samara, is nineteen and going to college at U Penn in Philadelphia.”

“Smart girl,” Andrea commented.

“Yes,” Michael said. “She’s studying to be a doctor.”

“So I’m assuming we’re here because Michael found the sister,” Dante said.

Michael nodded. “Correct. Deshawn is also a computer programmer, and one of my bots found his searches for his sister. I reached out to him, and we pooled our knowledge.”

Michael looked back at me, so I picked up the story. “We found evidence that Kayla is being held in a house belonging to a man named Ephraim Little, about thirty minutes northwest of Harrisburg. We’re meeting Deshawn at his place in Harrisburg, and we’ll recon from there.” I clenched my jaw. “We think there might be at least two other girls there. The sick fuck has been uploading videos of different men...” I stopped because I couldn’t even say the words.

“Yeah, we get it,” Gabe said. He looked pissed.

I blew out a breath. “Let’s all finish our lunch and get on the road.”

While everyone was eating, Michael connected his laptop to my TV and pulled up a satellite view of the area where Kayla was being held. He then showed them the drone images Deshawn had gotten.

The team worked together to find a place to stage our rescue operation. Andrea was delighted to spot a deer stand close enough that she could set up her sniper rifle and provide cover. The heavily wooded area around the house also had a dirt road running through it. It was close enough for us to conceal our vehicles and approach the target on foot. Our objective was a large old farmhouse that had seen better days. It was set well back from the main road, close to the trees, which was good for our target but also good for us.

I noticed Liam looked a little lost. It wasn’t surprising, considering this wouldn’t be his part of the rescue operation. Since I trusted my team to put the op together, I tapped Liam on the shoulder and gestured for him to follow me into the kitchen. He picked up his empty wrappers and some of the other trash on the coffee table and followed.

“How are you doing?” I asked as he tossed his trash.

Liam shrugged. “I’m fine.” He tilted his head toward the living room. “All that out there is a little above my pay grade.”

I shook my head. “That’s not your part of the mission. They’re tactical. You’re support. We’ll need you when it’s all over to patch people up.”

He huffed out a laugh. “Hopefully, not too many. And try to avoid getting bullet holes in you. I’m not a doctor. I’m a nurse.”

Liam sucked in a sharp breath, and his eyes started tracking back and forth. It took me a second to remember where I’d heard him say that before. He had said it in the hospital in Beirut. In French. Shit. “Liam, you’re having a flashback,” I said calmly. I carefully took his hand in mine. “Liam, take a nice slow breath in.” I put his hand on my chest.

“Breathe with me.” I took a slow breath in and breathed out even more slowly. It took him a minute, but he finally started following my lead. “Good. Now tell me five things you can see.”

Liam took another stuttering breath and started to look around my kitchen. “Clock on the wall. Stainless steel sink. Dark-blue tile on the wall behind the faucet. Pictures on the refrigerator.” His eyes met mine, and he gave me a quirky half-smile. “Hot ex-Navy SEAL.”

I chuckled and kissed his forehead. “You good now?”

He took his hand off my chest. “Yeah. Thank you. I haven’t had a flashback in a while.” His brow furrowed in concern. “Is that going to disqualify me from going today?”

I shook my head. “There isn’t a person out there, with the exception of Michael, who hasn’t had a flashback or ten. It happens. You came out of it quickly. I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

“You too?” he asked.

My eyes drifted to the picture of Terry stuck on my refrigerator with a Mickey Mouse magnet. “Yeah. Me too.”

Gabe poked his head around the doorway. “We’re all set, Chief. Ready to roll?”

I looked down at Liam, who nodded. “Yep. We’re ready.”

Liam

Marco was sexy even when he was driving. But he was just sexy, no matter what. I pressed my fingers to my forehead where he'd kissed me. It had been a strangely tender gesture from a man who insisted he didn't want any commitments.

To be fair, I thought I understood why. It was pretty obvious from the picture on Marco's mantel that he had been deeply in love with Terrence. The man had only died three years ago. I'm sure it took a lot longer to get over the death of someone you loved so much. Hell, it took my mother eight years to finally start dating after my father died.

I shook my head. The flashback I'd had in Marco's kitchen was a reminder that I was still in the early stages of my PTSD recovery. I needed to focus on that, not on a sexy, unavailable ex-Navy SEAL. I watched the road signs go by for a bit, noting that we were passing by King of Prussia, PA. That meant we were about an hour and a half from Harrisburg.

Marco glanced over at me and asked, "You okay?"

I nodded. "I'm good. I do have some questions though."

I saw his body tense. I wondered if he thought I was going to ask about Terrence. "I'll answer as best I can," he said quietly.

"Fair enough," I replied. "I noticed Pete, Dante, and Gabe call you Chief, but Andrea calls you Sarge."

Marco rolled his eyes and huffed a short laugh. "Dante and Gabe were both SEALs. Gabe was in my unit. Pete was a Navy pilot. My rank before I opted out was Senior Chief Petty Officer. That's why they call me Chief. Andrea was an Army sniper. She calls me Sarge to fuck with me."

"Oh," I said. "I guess that's a thing with the different branches?"

He shrugged. "Pretty much. Everybody likes to think their branch is the best." He smirked. "We all know the Navy is the

best.”

I laughed. “Of course it is.”

The banter seemed to ease his mind. “Any more questions?”

I pursed my lips. “I guess I’m wondering why the brother, Deshawn, didn’t go to the police when his sister went missing.”

“He did,” Marco replied. He clenched his jaw. “But because she left home voluntarily, they considered her a runaway. They were...less than helpful. He even went to the police department in the town where we located her. They told him he was crazy, that Ephraim Little was a fine, upstanding citizen. Deshawn left before they could arrest him.”

I sat up straight. “Arrest him? What for?”

Marco’s nostrils flared. “Let’s just say it’s a small town in the middle-of-nowhere Pennsylvania, and they’re not very...welcoming of people who don’t look like them.”

I let my head fall back against my headrest. “Ugh. Every time I think we’ve moved forward, I discover it just isn’t so.”

“It is better than it was,” he commented.

“I suppose,” I muttered. “But what do we do once we rescue these girls? We have no idea who the other two are or where they belong. What if they require hospitalization?”

Marco held up his hand. “Slow down, Liam. Remember, we’ve done this before. We have contacts that will help us get what we need when we need it. The girls, however many there are, will get the help they need, and we’ll get them home—if home is the safest place for them to be.”

I just sighed because I already knew that sometimes family members sold their young relatives to traffickers. “Okay. Different question,” I said. “Why aren’t we using your brother’s fancy black SUVs with the tinted windows?”

Marco laughed. “Could you imagine rolling up into some one-horse town with four Cadillac Escalades?”

I deflated. “Fair point.”

“But don’t be fooled by the fact that Pete’s pickup looks like it’s seen better days. Underneath the hood of that baby is a monster engine that’s as quiet as a mouse. All the cars we take on these operations are well-equipped for the job.”

“I’m guessing Michael’s Explorer has all sorts of tech that didn’t come standard in 2015.”

“You’re right about that,” Marco said.

“And that’s where I’ll be while your team enters the house?”

“That’s right. You, Michael, and Deshawn.”

I nodded. “Okay. Good.”

For the rest of the trip, we talked about everything but the mission. Favorite foods, favorite bands, favorite cars. We talked about me buying a Charger, and he offered to go with me when I went to buy it.

“It’ll be a while,” I said. “I just started working again.”

He nodded. “Just let me know.”

Just as we entered the city limits of Harrisburg, Marco cleared his throat. “Listen,” he began, “I don’t talk about my personal life much with my team if you know what I mean.”

I had a feeling I knew where he was going. “So you’d prefer I didn’t mention how spectacular you are in the bedroom?”

He shook his head and laughed. “Something like that. You’re something else, Liam.”

“That’s what I hear.”

We got to the Bradley residence a little after three in the afternoon. It was a modest brick ranch-style house in a quiet neighborhood. Two cars were parked under the carport at the end of the house. Marco and I waited in his car until the other three vehicles carrying the rest of their team arrived. Pete and Andrea pulled up in Pete’s dark-gray Ford F250. Gabe and

Dante were close behind in a black Chevy Blazer. Michael arrived last in his dark-blue Ford Explorer.

Marco got out of the car, and I followed close behind him. Nervous excitement ran through me. I felt like we were in one of those action movies. Marco headed for the front door and Michael hurried to join us. “Go easy on him,” Michael said. “He’s young and scared for his sister.”

“I know,” Marco replied gruffly.

“So just...be nice,” Michael urged.

Marco stopped walking. “What the fuck, Michael? I’m running an op, not a babysitting service.”

“I know, I know,” his brother said. “It’s just that Deshawn isn’t used to military types, and you can be kind of scary.”

I snickered, and Marco leveled a glare at me. “He’s not wrong. You get all growly and frowny, and us civilians are all looking around wondering what we did wrong.”

We heard chuckles behind us and turned to find the rest of the team listening avidly to the conversation.

Marco crossed his arms over his broad chest. “Are you done now?”

“Yes, Chief,” Dante, Pete, and Gabe said in unison.

“Sure, Sarge,” Andrea added.

Marco rolled his eyes and muttered something about a bunch of assholes. “If you’re all done with your commentary, I’m going to knock on the door now.”

Before he could knock, the door was opened by a young Black man wearing jeans and a D&D T-shirt. He was tall, maybe six foot two, with a rangy build like a runner. He looked to be in his early to mid-twenties. His eyes widened when he saw all the people standing on his small front porch. He searched the faces until his gaze landed on Michael. He let out a sigh of relief. “You’re here.”

Michael stepped forward and held out his hand. “Hey, Deshawn. It’s good to finally meet you in person.” Deshawn

shook his hand while still looking at the rest of the team. After Michael made the introductions, Deshawn stepped back and invited us into the house.

The small entryway opened into the living room, where we were greeted by the sight of a young Black woman wearing jeans and a University of Pennsylvania hoodie. She stood in front of the fireplace with her arms folded across her chest and a scowl on her face that would rival Marco's. I had to assume this was Deshawn's sister, Samara. She gestured to our group and said, "What is this? The A-Team?"

I snorted, leaned close to Marco, and whispered, "That would make you Hannibal."

Marco rolled his eyes at me and stepped forward. "Ms. Bradley, I'm Marco D'Angelo. I'll be leading the team that's going to rescue your sister."

She folded her lips together for a moment before she said, "It's nice to meet you, Mr. D'Angelo." She turned a death glare on her brother. "What would have been nicer is if my brother had told me my baby sister was missing."

The last part ended in a quiet sob. I heard Marco mutter, "Shit." The rest of the team looked supremely uncomfortable.

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. All these big, bad soldier types couldn't handle a few tears. I moved closer to Samara. "Hey, Samara," I said as I held out my hand. "I'm Liam O'Neil. I'm the medic on this operation."

She took my hand and asked, "Are you a doctor?"

I shook my head. "Nurse practitioner." I looked around at the team, all shifting uncomfortably while Samara and I talked, and asked, "Is there a place we can talk?"

Samara nodded and gestured for me to follow her into the small kitchen. We sat at the kitchen table, and I said, "I understand why you're angry with your brother. I'm guessing he was trying to protect you."

She clenched her fists on the table. "But she's my sister too. He shouldn't have kept this from me."

I sighed softly. “I know. I have an overprotective older brother too. They think it’s their job to keep any and all harm from you. But life isn’t like that.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not.”

I tilted my head toward the living room, where I could hear the murmur of voices. “Those people out there are really good at what they do. Marco’s team rescued me from Syrian militants who were going to kill me. This is what they do. They’ll get your sister back.”

Her head bobbed in a nod. “I want to help,” she said quietly. “I want to be there.”

“Well,” I began. “I don’t have the final say in that, but I can ask. You’re pre-med, right?”

“Yes. I’m in my junior year.” She saw my surprise and added, “I graduated from high school a year early.”

“Oh, okay. So you should have the basics down.”

“Yes,” she replied. “I volunteer at a clinic in Philly twice a week.”

“All right. I’ll talk to Marco about it and see what he says.”

Marco

We managed to get all our vehicles hidden in the forest behind Ephraim Little's property with no problems. We drove in without headlights because we all had night-vision goggles. It helped that the crescent moon wasn't due to rise until after midnight, and there were no street lights on the roads around the house. The forest area was state hunting land and the house was right up against the woods. We were only a quarter mile from our target, so it wouldn't take long to get there through the forest. The deer stand Andrea was going to use was less than five hundred feet from the house. The setup couldn't have been more perfect.

Once the vehicles were parked, Michael transformed the back of his Explorer into a command center. He'd had the third row of seats removed and had turned the middle two seats into swivel chairs so they could be turned around to face the cargo area. He'd installed battery packs along the sides of the cargo area for any electronics he needed to plug in. He even had fold-out tables to set his laptop on. Since there was one on either side, Deshawn was able to set up his laptop as well.

I still wasn't sure how it had happened, but Liam talked me into letting Deshawn's sister, Samara, come along. He'd assured me she would be an asset because she was pre-med and could assist him with anyone who was injured and that having another woman along would be a good idea because the girls might be afraid of a bunch of big guys in military gear. I had to admit he could be right about that.

While Michael and Deshawn finished setting up, the rest of us got our gear out of the hidden compartments we each had in our vehicles. By the time I had my tactical vest on and my weapons holstered, Michael called out, "We're in." He and Deshawn had hacked into the wireless security cameras in Ephraim Little's house.

"What have we got?" I asked.

“One sec,” Michael replied. I heard the tapping of the keyboard and saw Michael point to something on Deshawn’s screen. He finally looked back up at me. “Ephraim is in the kitchen putting dishes in the dishwasher. It looks like he has some fresh scratches on his face.”

“I’ll bet that’s from Kayla,” Deshawn murmured.

Michael continued, “The house doesn’t have much in the way of furniture downstairs.” There was more clicking. “Okay, upstairs is a long hallway with all the bedrooms. There are three rooms that have doors with padlocks on them.”

There was a round of cursing from my team. Gabe growled, “Can we go kill this motherfucker now?”

As much as I would have liked to help Ephraim Little meet his maker, we had to be careful. We couldn’t leave a string of corpses wherever we went. “Non-lethal force unless there’s no other choice.” There was more grumbling from my team. We rechecked our gear and started to head toward the house.

“Hold up,” Michael said urgently. “There’s someone at the front door.”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Of course there was. We had hoped to get in before the “customers” started showing up. I turned to Andrea, who had just finished fastening her ghillie suit and had her rifle slung over her shoulder and a tripod in one hand. “Does the deer stand give you line of sight on the front of the house?”

She nodded. “Let me get over there before you move in.”

“Roger that,” I said. I watched her take off through the trees, marveling, once again, at how silently she moved. “Michael, comms check?”

My brother nodded. We all heard our earpieces crackle to life and did a round of checks. “Andrea, do you have eyes on the front door?”

“Affirmative,” she replied.

“Two more cars just pulled up,” Michael said.

“Fuck.” I did a quick revamp of my plan. “Okay. Well, it’s nice of Mr. Little to let us in the front door. You got that camera, Michael?”

“Yep.”

“Andrea, on my signal, scare them away.”

“Roger that.”

I headed out of the tree cover with Gabe, Dante, and Pete following. We approached the house diagonally from the rear and stopped before we rounded the corner to the front porch. “Now,” I said in my comms. We heard the *pop* of suppressed rounds and the shouts of surprise and fear coming from the two men who had just gotten out of their cars. Andrea kept firing until they got back in their cars and drove away.

“Good work,” I said. “We’re going in the front door.”

“I’ve got you covered,” she replied

“The police might come to visit,” Gabe said.

I shook my head. “We’re all good. I called in a friend who has connections with the Pennsylvania state troopers. He’ll intercept any calls out.”

“Roger that, Chief.”

I motioned for them to follow me around the corner to the front of the house. I heard shouting coming from inside. No doubt it was Ephraim on the phone with one of the men who’d been scared off. I held up my fist, signaling my team to stop and wait. “Masks,” I murmured.

We all pulled down the black ski masks we wore on missions like this. Michael would wipe any video evidence, and we would all just turn into concerned citizens helping a friend find his sister if the state troopers arrived before we left.

I motioned forward again, and we stormed the front door, pushing through before Ephraim or his customer could stop us. We all drew our side arms, and I shouted, “Hands up and don’t move!”

The john froze in his tracks and raised his shaking hands up high. Ephraim, who was standing behind a half-wall in the kitchen, leaned down to reach for something. I raised my weapon and pointed it right at his head. “One more move, and I won’t have a problem putting a bullet right between your eyes, you rapist piece of shit.”

Ephraim Little raised his hands in the air, his face ghostly white. He looked to be in his mid to late-fifties, with graying hair and watery blue eyes. He was a pretty big guy and looked like he probably worked with his hands. “Who are you?” he asked, his voice shaking.

“None of your business,” I spat. “Now come out of there, nice and slow.” Gabe moved to stand behind me, just to my left. Pete and Dante pulled out zip ties and quickly tied the john to a wooden chair that was part of a dinette set.

Ephraim kept his hands up while he came around the half-wall. When he was about five feet away, I put my hand up to stop him. “Hand over the keys to the padlocks.”

He had the balls ask, “What padlocks?”

I lowered my gun so it was aimed at his crotch. “I don’t have to shoot to kill, asshole.” His eyes widened and his face got even paler. When he reached for his pocket, I growled, “Slowly.” Gabe strode over and took the keys from him once he got them out of his pocket.

Dante grabbed hold of him as soon as we were done and roughly sat him in another of the wooden chairs. Once both men were securely tied, Pete pulled a pair of hoods from a pouch on his belt and put one over each man’s head. When we were sure both men couldn’t identify us, we all pulled our ski masks off.

I pointed at Pete and Dante. “Sweep the house. Make sure there’s no one else here besides the girls.”

The two men nodded wordlessly and began their search. Marco tapped his earpiece. “Team two, stand ready. All hands. Bring your electronics too. Treetop, they’ll need an escort.”

He heard Andrea's snort of laughter. "Sure thing, Sarge. I'll just need to take off my ghillie suit first."

"Roger that."

"You can't do this!" Ephraim shouted from under his hood.

"What exactly can't I do?" I asked.

"You can't invade a man's home like this."

Gabe and I looked at each other in disbelief. "You mean like you can't pretend you're a sixteen-year-old boy on the internet and lure a fourteen-year-old girl out to meet you and then kidnap her?"

The man twisted his wrists, trying to get out of his bonds. "Is this about that little n—"

Gabe grabbed the back of Ephraim's neck, shoved his gun under the man's chin, and growled, "You do not want to finish that sentence, you absolute piece of garbage."

Dante, who had just returned to the room, said, "Man, you must have a death wish to talk like that." He turned to me. "All clear."

I tapped my earpiece again. "Team two is a go."

I went to the front porch to wait for the rest of the team. It didn't take them long. Before I let them into the house, I briefed them. "I haven't unlocked the rooms yet. Liam, Samara, and Andrea are going with me to do that. Michael and Deshawn, I want you to get into his computer and pull up all the incriminating evidence you can find."

"But my sister," Deshawn protested.

"You can see her once she's been checked out. She might not want her big brother to see her right away."

Deshawn's eyes widened. "Yeah. Okay. I get it."

Liam lifted a large tote bag. "I brought extra clothes and bags to put evidence in."

"You did?" I asked. "How did you know to do that?"

“I did forensic exams for the sexual assault response team before I joined Doctors Without Borders,” he replied.

“How did I not know this?” I asked.

Liam shrugged. “Everything happened pretty quickly.” He tilted his head toward Samara. “She reminded me about taking the clothes as evidence.”

Once again, I was grateful Liam was on our team. “While we’re inside, try not to use anyone’s name. We’ll be out of here before law enforcement finally shows up. We’ll get the girls to the hospital in Harrisburg, but we’re leaving the scumbags for the state troopers to handle.”

I motioned for them to follow me into the house. Pete showed Michael and Deshawn where the computer was and I led Liam, Samara, and Andrea upstairs. Before I unlocked the rooms, I gathered them around. “We just want to make sure they’re stable enough to travel. We need to get out of here as soon as possible.”

“Why not just wait for the police to get here?” Samara asked.

“Because, technically, we’re not supposed to be here. We’re supposed to let the police do their job.”

Samara snorted in derision. “Yeah, they did a great job.”

I shrugged. “Like I said...” I took a breath. “You all ready?” All three nodded. One by one, I unlocked the padlocks on the doors.

Liam

I thought I was ready for what I'd see when Marco opened the padlocked doors. I had seen many horrific things during my time at the refugee camp. I thought I knew what I was in for. I was wrong.

Maybe it was because we were in the United States, not a war zone. Maybe it was because it was so close to home. I really didn't know. But when the doors opened and I saw those terrified, nearly naked girls handcuffed to filthy beds, I almost lost it. I wanted to go back downstairs with Marco's gun and kill Ephraim Little myself.

Marco had taken pictures of the hallway and all the locked doors. He then took pictures after he opened each door. I guessed it was to add to the damning evidence against Ephraim. All the girls whimpered in fear when they saw Marco's huge body in the doorway. Luckily, the keys to the handcuffs were on the same keyring as the padlock keys, so we were able to free them and offer reassurance that none of us would hurt them. Marco went downstairs after he was sure we had everything we needed.

Kayla burst into tears when she saw her big sister standing in the doorway, so I left them to it, assured Samara would call on me if she needed my help. I went into the next room, where a blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl huddled in the corner of her bed, staring at me with terrified eyes. She wore a pale-pink negligee and looked maybe twelve or thirteen. I knelt beside the bed and gestured for Andrea to do the same.

I spoke quietly so I wouldn't scare her. "Hi there. I'm Liam, and this is Andrea. We're here to help you and take you away from here. Would you like that?"

The girl nodded vigorously.

"What's your name, sweetheart?" Andrea asked.

"Trisha," she said quietly. "You sound like my mama." Her eyes filled with tears. "I want my mama."

Andrea took the young girl's hand in hers. "I know you do, baby girl, and we're gonna get you back to her as soon as we can." She tilted her head toward me. "Liam is a nurse. He's gonna check you out first to make sure you're okay."

I pulled on a pair of latex gloves and took my stethoscope out of my bag. "How old are you, Trisha?"

"Twelve."

I pressed my lips together to keep myself from letting out the string of curse words sitting on the tip of my tongue. "Okay, Trisha. I'm going to listen to your heart and lungs and then check your arms and legs for injuries. I might have to look at your belly, but I won't touch anywhere else."

"Okay," she said quietly.

Before I began, I said to Andrea, "Would you please go check on the girl in the next room? Tell her I'll be there as soon as I'm done here."

"I'm here," a soft voice said from the doorway.

I looked over to see a too-thin girl who looked maybe fourteen or fifteen. She had light-brown skin and long black hair that would have been beautifully luxurious under better circumstances. Now it was a tangled mess. She wore a barely-there black negligee. She stood uncertainly in the doorway, her dark-brown eyes darting from me to Andrea, no doubt trying to judge whether or not we were trustworthy.

Andrea waved her in. "Come on in, darlin'. I'm Andrea, and this is Liam. Liam is a nurse, and he's just checking out Trisha to make sure she's okay to travel."

"I'm Lily," the girl said. "What do you mean to travel? Are you getting us out of here?"

"We sure are," Andrea said.

"Where are you taking us?" Lily asked.

"To a hospital in Harrisburg," I replied. "On the way there, we'll call your parents to meet us there."

Her eyes filled with tears. “Really?” She put her hand over her mouth. “I thought...” Her tears fell and she crumpled in on herself. “I thought I was going to die here.”

Andrea got up and took the distraught girl in her arms. “I know, honey. We’re so glad we found you.”

I did a quick visual scan of Lily. “Andrea, are you trained in field assessment?”

“I sure am,” she replied.

“Okay. I have a feeling we’ll have to hurry things up, so could you do an assessment and let me know if she needs anything more than bandages for those wrist abrasions?”

“You got it.” She grabbed a set of clothes and a paper bag and took Lily to a chair in the corner of the room while I returned to assessing Trisha.

I had just finished bandaging Trisha’s wrists when Marco poked his head in. “Five minutes. Wrap it up.” Then he was gone.

I helped Trisha up and gave her the clothes we’d brought for her to change into—drawstring sweatpants and a long-sleeved sweatshirt that was way too big for her. I took the negligee she had been wearing, put it in a paper bag, and wrote her name on it. Andrea bandaged Lily’s wrists and gave her clothes to change into.

Samara came in with Kayla, whose left eye was swollen, and said, “I just need an ice pack for her face. That asshole hit her.”

“That’s because I scratched his ugly face,” Kayla said rather proudly. I didn’t even try to hide my smile. Kayla was already wearing the too-big sweatpants-sweatshirt combo and Samara carried a paper bag.

I pulled out a disposable icepack and handed it to Samara. After I put away the rest of my equipment and bagged the medical waste, I said, “Let’s go.” Andrea handed me the bag with Lily’s name on it as we headed down the hallway.

Deshawn was waiting at the bottom of the stairs. When Kayla saw her big brother, she cried out and threw herself into his arms, sobbing. There wasn't a dry eye in the room. The girls warily eyed the two bound and hooded men in the corner of the room. The man I assumed to be Ephraim Little was muttering under his breath and pulling at the zip ties binding his wrists and ankles to a wooden chair. The other man was eerily still. I wondered if he was in shock. I mentally shrugged. Served him right.

Michael approached us and quietly got the parents' names and phone numbers from Trisha and Lily, promising to call them as soon as we were on the road.

Marco looked at our little group and frowned. "No shoes."

It took me a second to realize what he was saying. Then I smacked myself on the forehead. I'd forgotten to bring shoes for the girls. "We'll just have to carry them," I said.

Trisha let me carry her, Andrea took Lily, and Deshawn carried his sister. As we left the house, I was surprised at how quiet a group of very large men could be. We all made our way as quickly as we could through the trees and back to the vehicles. The air had turned bitter, and Trisha was shivering in my arms by the time I got her into the SUV that would take her to the hospital. Luckily, there were blankets ready for the girls to wrap themselves in.

As Marco and I headed toward his car, I happened to look up when we hit a break in the trees. Because there were no street or city lights for miles, I could see so many stars. "Wow," I breathed. "I really miss being able to see the stars."

Marco stopped walking to look up. "Yeah, that's a lot more than we can see where we live."

"It's one of the few things I miss about being in Lebanon."

Marco huffed. "I'll bet you can find a place to stargaze in New Jersey."

I shrugged. "Probably."

We had just pulled back onto the main road when we heard the sirens heralding the arrival of the state police, thanks to an

“anonymous” tip and the pictures Marco took. I leaned my head back on the headrest and closed my eyes. I must have made some kind of noise because Marco asked, “Are you okay?”

I opened one eye and said, “As okay as I can be given what we just witnessed.”

Marco shook his head. “It never really gets any easier.”

“I sure hope not.”

Liam

After we got the girls to the hospital, Marco's contact from the Pennsylvania state troopers took over, and we all headed back home. Part of me wished I could stay to see the girls reunited with their families. The rest of me was exhausted. I didn't even realize how much tension I'd been holding in my body until I could suddenly relax. Somewhere along the Pennsylvania Turnpike, I fell asleep and didn't wake up until Marco gently nudged me when we got back to my car, which was still in Moonlight Inn's parking lot.

I rubbed my eyes. "Sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep."

He gave me a gentle smile. "It's all good. That was your first op. It takes a lot out of you when you're not used to it."

I rolled my neck and shoulders. "I didn't realize how tense I was until it was all over."

Marco squeezed my shoulder. "You did good tonight. You kept everybody calm and got the job done quickly. Thank you."

My chest warmed at the compliment. "You're welcome. I was happy to be there." I unbuckled my seatbelt and opened the door. "Oh, hey," I said before I got out of the car. "When do you want to reschedule for training?"

He checked the clock on the dashboard. Almost midnight. "I think tomorrow's out. We both need sleep."

"Yeah, and Sean and Jeremy are back. They stayed at Jeremy's apartment tonight, but they're coming here tomorrow to see Mom and me. And Sean mentioned something about looking for a house to rent."

"Sounds like you have a busy day tomorrow. I'll call you Monday, and we can set something up."

"Sounds good," I said. I grabbed my medical bag out of the backseat and then closed the door. I gave an awkward wave goodbye and headed to my car. I'd had to keep

reminding myself that Marco was just a friend with benefits and didn't want me to kiss him goodnight. I sighed and wondered if I was making a mistake hooking up with him. I shook my head. That ship had sailed. I wasn't going to stop now.

The weeks following that first rescue mission took on a rhythm of their own. I worked at the VNA three or four days a week, did self-defense training twice a week, and went out with Miguel on Friday nights. And at least once a week, I had incredibly hot sex with Marco.

The man was bossy as hell in the bedroom—and I loved it. I wasn't sure when I'd developed that particular kink, but I wasn't complaining.

Something else that started to happen was that I got back into playing music. Despite having a piano and guitar at my mother's place, I hadn't touched either since I'd returned from the Middle East. Every time I'd tried, I just couldn't. It had made me sad because music had always been such a big part of my life. When I had talked to my therapist about it, she'd suggested that the creative part of me was still shut down from my experience in the Middle East. Marco had kept telling me to give it time and that it would come back when I was ready.

On Thanksgiving Day, that all changed. Our family decided to have Thanksgiving dinner at the hotel restaurant along with the guests and the workers serving that day. There were two sittings: the first from one to three-thirty and the other from four-thirty to seven. We went to the second sitting. It was just Mom, Sean, Jeremy, and me. Mom's boyfriend, Robert, came later for dessert.

Toward the end of the evening, when there were just a few groups left in the dining room and the pianist had left for the evening, Sean said to me, "Why don't you play us something? I haven't heard you play the piano in ages."

I stared wide-eyed at my brother, who was sitting next to Jeremy Fitzgerald, the most sought-after concert pianist in the world, and asked, “Did you hit your head or something?”

Jeremy snorted a laugh and my mother just shook her head. “I’m serious,” Sean said. “I’ve been telling Jeremy how good you are since we met.”

I gestured at Jeremy. “I am *not* people-will-pay-thousands-of-dollars-to-hear-me play good.”

“That’s only for fundraisers,” Jeremy murmured.

I narrowed my eyes at Jeremy. “That’s not helping.”

“Come on, Liam,” Sean cajoled. “Just one song. Play something by Billy Joel. You like him. You used to play his music all the time.”

I rolled my eyes. “Fine. But I’m *not* playing ‘Piano Man.’” I pointed at my brother. “And you’re singing with me.”

“Wait, what?” he sputtered.

“If you’re putting me on the spot, you get to join me there,” I retorted.

Sean grumbled the whole way over to the piano. “What are you going to play?” he asked.

“‘Just the Way You Are,’” I replied. “I thought about playing ‘Scenes from an Italian Restaurant,’ but I don’t remember the whole thing.”

I closed my eyes when I sat on the piano bench in front of the glossy ebony Steinway concert grand. I remembered when Mr. Whitaker bought it five years ago to bribe me into coming to the hotel more often. I really had loved the old guy, even if he had been a bit pushy. The fact that he’d left his hotel to Sean and me still caught me by surprise sometimes.

I waited for a moment, trying to recall the music I wanted to play. My fingers trembled when I ran them over the keys before finally giving in to the familiar feel. The first notes were hesitant until I relaxed and let myself remember.

When I started singing, Sean joined me, bringing me back to the times we would sing together when we were younger. Even though Sean was four years older than me, he'd never made me feel like he didn't want me around. I'd gotten into shows and musicals because he had done it first. And he always told me how proud he was of me, bragging to anyone who would listen about how talented I was. So here I was, playing the piano in front of a premier concert pianist because my big brother asked me to.

I glanced up at Sean, who was standing in the curve of the piano, and saw him looking straight at Jeremy as he sang. His expression was so full of love that it brought tears to my eyes. I wanted that someday. I wanted someone to love, who loved me back the way Jeremy so obviously loved Sean.

My thoughts drifted to Marco, and I shook my head. I was barking up the wrong tree with that one. He was never going to love me like that. I needed to keep reminding myself of that and let what we had be what it was—a casual no-strings hookup.

There was enthusiastic applause when we finished, and Jeremy came up and pulled Sean into his arms. I smiled because it was really good to see my brother so happy. I almost pulled out my phone to call Marco, to tell him I'd finally been able to play the piano. I stopped myself in time. That was something you shared with a boyfriend, not a fuck buddy.

I was about to return to my seat to escape the lovefest when Sean grabbed me and dragged me into a group hug. He kissed the side of my head and said, "It's so good to see you back to your old self."

I smiled. "I'm getting there."

Jeremy stepped away and said, "You are very good."

I felt myself blushing. "Thank you."

"Told you," Sean said triumphantly. He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. "So, what do you have going on this weekend?"

“Nothing tomorrow,” I replied. “The VNA is closed. Saturday, I have self-defense training with Marco.”

“What’s up with that?” Sean asked. “I’ve been meaning to ask. I mean, why do you need self-defense?”

I looked him in the eye and gave him the answer Marco and I had decided on. “I’m a gay man in a country where a good number of people still think it’s okay to beat the crap out of me. Marco said it would help me feel empowered.”

Sean crossed his arms. “I could teach you self-defense.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you actually pouting right now? And, no, you can’t teach me self-defense. You worry too much about hurting me.”

My brother glowered at me. “Marco hurts you?”

I threw up my hands. “No! The man is an expert in close-quarters hand-to-hand combat. He knows how to make it seem real without hurting me.”

Jeremy put his hand on Sean’s shoulder. “Sean, it’s okay. Marco would never hurt Liam.”

Not physically, at least, I thought. “I’m fine. It’s good for me. You worry too much.”

Sean huffed a dissatisfied breath. “Yeah, all right. I get it.”

In an effort to divert the conversation from Marco and self-defense training, I said, “Tell me more about your house hunting. Where are you looking?”

Sean launched into a rant about rental prices and locations while Jeremy smiled indulgently. I let out a sigh of relief. Sean would lose his mind if he knew the real reason I was learning self-defense.

Liam

The dining room in the Moonlight Inn was festively decorated for the upcoming holidays. There was a beautifully decorated Christmas tree in one corner and a menorah on a small table covered with a white linen tablecloth. I was once again seated at the piano, this time playing Christmas carols.

It was Saturday morning, and I was supposed to have had a training session with Marco that would have likely ended in sex at his place. Unfortunately, his team got called overseas to rescue some corporate big-wig from kidnappers. The corporation had their own medic, so they didn't need me. I sighed. I could have stayed home, but I hadn't wanted to hang around my mother's house alone, so here I was.

I was halfway through "Silent Night" when I heard footsteps behind me. I looked around to see Miguel standing there. "Hey," I said. "How are you doing?"

He tilted his head curiously. "I'm fine," he replied, drawing out the word. "Aren't you supposed to be grappling with tall, dark, and broody today?"

I chuckled. "I was, but he's away for security business."

"Well, that sucks."

Before he could say anything more, we heard a squeal and the sound of little feet heading our way. A little boy with a mop of dark curly hair and bright-blue eyes came racing into the dining room from the bar area. He looked to be about three years old. His eyes lit up with delight when he saw the Christmas tree. But to my surprise, he made a beeline for the piano.

He squealed with excitement, said, "No!" and started pounding on the keys.

Miguel's eyes widened in alarm, and he gently picked up the little guy. "Hey, little one, you need to be nice to the piano."

The boy leaned down from Miguel's arms, trying to reach the keys. "I want no!"

There was the sound of running footsteps and a man's voice called out, "Cody!"

We turned to see Zach, one of the hotel's part-time bartenders, hurrying across the dining room toward us. "Sorry about that," he said. "He got away from me while I was on the phone with Caitlin."

I was startled by the little boy's resemblance to Zach. Miguel and I stared at each other. Neither of us had known Zach had a son. Cody stopped his quest to reach the piano. He snuggled more deeply into Miguel's arms and said, "Unca Zach." Then he pointed at the piano. "No!"

Zach held out his hands. "Yeah, little man, I know it's a piano."

"Oooh," Miguel and I said together.

"We thought he was just saying no," Miguel said.

Zach smiled and shook his head. "Yeah, he can't quite get the rest of the word yet. I have a keyboard in my apartment, and he loves to play it."

"So he's your nephew?" Miguel asked. "Because he looks a lot like you."

"I get that a lot," Zach said ruefully. "He's my sister's son. I watched him for her overnight last night, and she was supposed to pick him up this morning." He huffed a frustrated breath. "She didn't show up this morning, and she's not answering her phone." His jaw clenched. "I told her I had to work the lunch shift today." He pulled his cell out of his pocket to check the time. "Caitlin said she could watch him because she's awesome like that. She said it will give Maya something to think about besides when Santa is coming." He pocketed his phone and reached for his nephew. "Come on, Cody. We're going to see Maya."

To our surprise, Cody snuggled into Miguel. He reached up and patted my friend's face and said, "Pretty." And it was true. Miguel was pretty. He wore just enough eyeliner and

mascara to make his large dark eyes stand out. I thought I also saw a touch of lip gloss.

Miguel's cheeks went pink. "Aww, thank you, little man. That's sweet."

I glanced over at Zach, wondering how he was taking this, and saw a slight blush on his cheeks as well. Interesting.

Miguel shifted so he was closer to Zach. "All right, Cody, Uncle Zach has to go to work. You can come back and visit me again. Okay?"

Cody's bottom lip popped out in a trembling pout. "No!"

"Oh, don't do that," Miguel pleaded. "I'm a sucker for a pouty lip."

Zach chuckled and gently took his nephew from Miguel's arms. "That pout is a deadly weapon." He smiled at us. "Thanks for corralling him for me."

"No problem," I said. Zach cast one more look at us before he turned to leave, and I swore his gaze lingered on Miguel for a moment longer.

After he was gone, I said to Miguel, "I'm not so sure he's as straight as you think he is."

Miguel scoffed and sighed. "I should be so lucky." He patted my shoulder. "I have to get back to work. I'll talk to you later."

"Sure," I said as I sat on the piano bench again. My phone vibrated with a call before I could resume playing. To my surprise, I saw it was my brother's boyfriend, Jeremy, calling.

"Hey, Jeremy, what's up?"

"Where are you?" he asked without preamble.

I frowned. He sounded anxious. "I'm in the dining room at Moonlight. Is something wrong?"

"That's great," he said, relief in his voice. "Nothing is wrong. I just need to ask you for a favor. I'll be over in a minute."

He hung up before I could reply. I knew he was staying with Sean this week, and since my brother's cottage was on the grounds of the hotel, it would probably take only a minute for Jeremy to get here. I did wonder why he couldn't just ask me over the phone.

Sure enough, Jeremy walked into the dining room a short time later. I stood to give him a hug. "So what's the emergency?"

Jeremy smiled and shook his head. "No emergency." He blew out a breath. "I guess I'm just a little nervous."

"About what?"

He pulled on his bottom lip with his teeth. "So you know I'm going to premiere my new piano concerto with the Queer Urban Orchestra this month, right?"

I nodded. "Yes, I'm really looking forward to hearing it. Did something change with the concert? I know it was put together kind of last minute."

He shook his head. "No. It's all still set for the same date and time." He took a deep breath and continued. "I'm going to propose to Sean at the end of the concerto."

My eyes went wide, and I hugged him again. "Oh my God. That's great. Sean will be so happy."

"I hope so," Jeremy said.

"I know so," I retorted. "So what do you need me to do?"

"I'd like as many of his friends as we can gather to be there. I know it's a tough time of year and the concert is three days before Christmas, but I'd like to try."

I nodded. "I can do that. You might need to get me some names and phone numbers, but I can make the calls for you. Do you have a block of tickets saved?"

"Yes," he said. "I have twenty-five seats set aside."

"Excellent. We can make this happen."

Half an hour later, Jeremy and I had a solid plan to get the word out, and luckily, my brother hadn't walked in to interrupt

us. I decided to go home after that because the lunch crowd was coming in and I didn't feel like taking requests.

My phone vibrated with another call as I walked to my car. *What was up with this day?* When I saw it was Tony, my heart rate kicked up. He rarely called me, especially when Marco was out of town. "Tony? What's up?"

"Marco got hurt."

My chest constricted. "How bad?" I asked, my voice hoarse with worry.

"Bad enough," Tony ground out. "He was grazed by a bullet and then one of the motherfuckers pushed him down a flight of stairs."

I was having trouble breathing. "Where is he now?"

"They're on a chartered plane back to the States," he replied. "They're scheduled to land at Newark in another four hours. I'm going to meet them at the airport."

"*What?*" I exclaimed. "Why isn't he in a hospital?"

"Because he's a He-Man Navy SEAL asshole, that's why," Tony growled. "You know what he's like when it comes to hospitals."

I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, trying to keep myself from screaming. It wasn't Tony's fault Marco was a stubborn pain in the ass. "What are his injuries?" I finally asked.

"Aside from the bullet wound, he has a concussion, a sprained ankle, and bruising all up his left side."

I rolled my shoulders and straightened. "What do you need me to do?"

I heard Tony sigh with relief. "Can you meet us at his house? He's going to need someone to watch over him for at least twenty-four hours. And I know he will try to walk on that ankle before he should. I'd prefer to have someone who won't take his shit watch over him."

“Oh, I can definitely do that,” I replied. “But I don’t have a key.”

“My parents have a couple of extra keys to his place,” Tony said. “I’ll call them and tell them you’ll be by to pick one up.”

“Sure thing. Just text me the address.”

After I hung up with Tony, I sat in my car for a few minutes, trying to calm down. Marco was fine. He was alive. Just hurt. And I was going to make sure he did everything he was supposed to do, even if I had to handcuff him to his bed. And then, of course, my brain went there because I apparently couldn’t help myself. “Idiot,” I murmured to myself.

Marco

Tony's SUV went over yet another bump in the road, and I gritted my teeth against the pain. I must have made some noise anyway because Michael smoothed his hand over my forehead and said, "We're almost there."

My whole body was lit up with pain, and I couldn't decide which was worse, the bullet wound or the headache. When we passed by a particularly bright pair of headlights, I concluded the headache was worse. "Tony, if you don't want me to puke in your nice car, you need to quit hitting those bumps."

"I'm working on it," Tony said.

Speaking of cars. "Hey, who has my Charger?"

"Gabe is right behind us with your precious car," Tony sighed.

The way he said it made me think I'd already asked him that question more than once. I said quietly to Michael, "I asked him that already, didn't I?"

"Yeah," he replied. "Try to relax. We'll have you home in a few minutes."

"No hospital," I said.

"No hospital," Michael repeated.

I knew my brothers didn't understand my hatred of hospitals. The last time I was admitted to one was after the ambush that ended Terry's career. I was laid up, and they wouldn't tell me anything about his injuries because I wasn't related to him. I almost got myself thrown in the brig because I lost my shit at a doctor. Finally, Gabe got me enough information to let me know that Terry was going to make it. Then all I wanted to do was get out of that damn bed so I could go see the man I loved. Now, every time I went into a hospital, I got an itch under my skin and couldn't wait to leave—with one notable exception.

The car finally came to a stop and Tony turned off the engine. He turned around in his seat and said, "Wait there until Gabe comes around to help you out of the car."

I tried to scoff and say I could get myself out of the car, but just making the noise set my head throbbing and my ears ringing. "Yeah, okay," I murmured.

The door next to me opened and Michael unbuckled my seatbelt. Gabe was right there, easing his arm around me as I moved my leg to step out of the car. My legs wobbled when my feet hit the ground and my ankle tried to give out on me. Gabe tightened his hold on me. "Easy there, Chief. I've got you." I hated feeling so helpless, but I couldn't get my body to move the way I wanted it to.

Tony came over to my other side and the three of us slowly made our way to my front door. The door opened before we got there, and I swore I saw Liam standing there waiting for us. But that couldn't be right. "I must be seeing things," I muttered.

"What do you mean?" Tony asked.

"I thought I saw Liam standing in the doorway." I looked up. "Yep, still there."

Tony made a sound of exasperation. "He *is* there. I asked him to come over to keep an eye on you since your dumb ass won't go to a hospital."

"Oh." I felt...happy? Relieved? I wasn't sure. Liam being here seemed to settle something in me.

Liam came out onto the porch and held open the storm door for us. As we passed by, he said, "I turned down the covers on his bed. If you get him into sleep pants and a T-shirt, I'll bring up ibuprofen and an ice pack for his ankle."

I thought about saying something about not needing sleep pants around him, but then I stumbled on a step and the pain drove everything else out of my mind. By the time Tony and Gabe got me to my bedroom, I was a sweaty mess and my entire body was screaming in pain.

Tony and Gabe were surprisingly gentle about getting my clothes and boots off. I really wanted a shower, but I could hardly sit up, never mind stand in the shower. By the time they got me situated on the bed, I could barely keep my eyes open. Someone turned off the overhead light and turned on the lamp on my nightstand instead, and I sighed with relief. I heard the low murmur of voices and focused on the lighter cadence of Liam's. His voice was calm and steady. Just hearing him soothed something in me.

The voices went away, and I felt a cool hand on my forehead. I opened my eyes to see Liam smiling down at me. "How's your head?" he asked.

"Hurts," I croaked.

"I'll bet it does." He moved his hand and replaced it with a cool, wet cloth. The relief was instantaneous. "I'm going to check the wound on your arm, okay?"

"The medic stitched it up already," I said as he gently removed the bandage from my right upper arm.

"I know," Liam replied. "I'm just checking to see how it looks."

"Okay."

I heard him mutter something that did not sound complimentary. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Sloppy work," he grouched. "Jesus. Did they do it with their eyes closed?"

I grunted. "Guy was an asshole. Asked if I had HIV because I'm gay."

It sounded like he growled. "Dickhead. Maybe I can fix it a little," he said.

"S'okay," I slurred. "I'm a mess anyway."

I felt his lips press against my cheek. "You're not a mess. You're fine just the way you are."

I didn't know why, but his words made me want to cry. He put on a new bandage and then went to the other side of the

bed to put a pillow under the lower part of my left leg. A cold weight settled around my swollen ankle. I shivered. “Cold.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m sorry.” He draped the comforter from the bottom of the bed over me, leaving just my ankle sticking out. “I’ll leave that on for twenty minutes, then take it off and let you sleep. I’ll come check on you every couple of hours to make sure you’re okay.”

“You’re staying here tonight?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah. That’s good. Really good.” My eyes drifted shut.

I didn’t remember falling asleep, but I remembered waking to the feel of Liam’s hand on my forehead and of him fixing the blankets so I wasn’t cold. At one point, my dreams turned into nightmares of Terry getting hurt on our last mission, of him screaming in pain and lying cold in a pool of his own blood.

I tried to get up, but Liam was there again, soothing me with a hand on my chest. He lifted my hand and put it on his own chest so I could follow his breathing. I felt his fingers running through my short hair, easing the pain in my head. I even thought I heard him singing softly, some song I remembered hearing when I was a child.

When I’d finally calmed down, he moved to get off the bed. I grabbed his hand and said, “Stay.”

I couldn’t see his face in the dark room, but I felt his hesitation. “Are you sure?”

“Please,” was all I could say.

“Okay,” he whispered. He got under the covers on my right side and moved close to me. “Is this okay?”

“Yeah. It’s good.”

When I woke again, Liam was gone. I thought for a second that I was alone in the house, but then I heard music from downstairs and the smell of bacon drifted up through the heating vents. I took stock of my body. My head still hurt, but it wasn’t nearly as bad as the night before. My ankle throbbed,

and I could tell it was still swollen. I winced when I went to move my right arm, reminded of the bullet graze there.

I smiled when I recalled how upset Liam had been because the medic had done a bad job sewing me up. It didn't bother me much. I had enough scars on my body that one more wouldn't matter.

Footsteps sounded on the hardwood floor of my hallway before Liam came into my bedroom. He wore a red T-shirt and black sleep pants with red-nosed reindeer all over them. I chuckled. "Nice pajamas."

"They're festive," he said with a grin. He came over to the bed and got me to sit up, putting two pillows behind my back. After he adjusted the pillow under my ankle, he went to the nightstand and picked up a small penlight. "I'm just going to test your pupils to see how reactive they are, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," I replied.

He first had me track the movement of the penlight in front of my face, and then he flashed the light in my eyes. "Jesus, now I'm blind."

He patted my cheek. "Poor baby. I'll get you a guide dog."

"Ha-ha," I groused. "I have to piss," I said, turning to get off the bed.

Liam put a hand on my shoulder. "Hold on, let me help."

I felt a flash of irritation. "You gonna hold my dick for me?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I mean, I will if you really want me to. I *was* just going to help you get to the bathroom. I figured you could use the sink to hold yourself up after that."

I couldn't help it. I grabbed a fistful of his T-shirt and pulled him in for a kiss. He went stiff with surprise at first, but then he melted into my body, sliding his hands onto my shoulders. When I finally pulled away, I said, "That mouth of yours is trouble."

"Uh-huh," he replied with a mischievous grin. "I haven't heard you complaining about how I use my mouth."

I shook my head. “Nope. No complaints.”

Liam helping me to the bathroom took longer than I expected and hurt a lot more too. I had to give him credit. I easily had fifty pounds on the guy, but he held his own. He left me to do my business, which absolutely had to include brushing my teeth. When I came out, breakfast awaited me on a tray table next to my bed. Scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, and orange juice. A second tray table with an identical breakfast and one of my kitchen chairs was set up across from it.

Once Liam got me settled back on the bed, he looked at me uncertainly. “Is it okay that I brought my breakfast up here?”

“Of course,” I responded. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Well, we don’t do sleepovers,” he began, his cheeks flushing. “So we don’t do breakfast together.”

I sighed softly. I felt bad that he thought I wouldn’t want him around. That shit was my own fault. “You just spent the night taking care of me, and judging by those panda eyes you’re rocking, you didn’t get much sleep. I would have to be the world’s biggest asshole to make you eat by yourself.”

He smirked. “Not the world’s biggest asshole. We reserve that title for certain politicians who shall remain orange.”

I started to laugh, then winced when my head protested. “Ouch.”

“Sorry,” he said, looking apologetic.

We chatted while we ate. I noticed he avoided asking about the mission that got me injured, which I appreciated since I wasn’t ready to talk about how much I’d screwed up. There was a long silence where he looked over at me while worrying his bottom lip with his teeth. “What’s up?” I asked.

“I have a question,” he began. When I nodded encouragingly, he went on. “You keep saying how much you hate hospitals. But when I was in Beirut, every time I woke up, you were there. Why?”

And wasn’t that the million-dollar question? I answered as truthfully as I could. “After everything you went through, I

didn't want you to wake up in a strange place alone.”

“Oh,” he said quietly. His eyes were a little shiny. “Thank you. It meant a lot to me.”

Me too.

Liam

I ended up staying at Marco's place for two more days. First, he was still unsteady even after a good night's sleep. Second, my mother's boyfriend, Robert, got one of his doctor friends to open his orthopedic office on Monday morning so he could look at Marco's ankle. I knew if I didn't get Marco in to get X-rays soon, he wouldn't go. He'd just walk around on a possibly busted-up, swollen ankle until it hurt so much he'd have no choice but to go to the ER.

To my surprise, Marco didn't give me a hard time about taking him to the doctor. I guessed it was just hospitals that were the problem. Helping him hobble down the stairs at his house was a bit harrowing, given our significant height and weight differences, but we made it without incident. He even let me drive his Charger.

The doctor was really nice. He had a son in the Marines, which was why he'd agreed to see Marco on his day off. Fortunately, it was just a sprain, no fractures or breaks. The doctor gave Marco an elastic ankle brace to help reduce the swelling and set him up with a pair of crutches so he could get around without putting weight on the ankle. He gave Marco a series of exercises to stretch and strengthen his ankle after the swelling was down.

When we got back to his house, Marco decided he wanted to watch a movie in his living room. I felt out of place after getting him set up on the couch. He really didn't need me anymore. His concussion had mostly resolved, and he could get around just fine now that he had a set of crutches. "So I guess I'll get out of your hair now."

He looked at me, surprise etched in his features. "What? Why?"

I felt awkward answering. "I don't want to overstay my welcome."

Marco rolled his eyes and then winced. “You worked all weekend. Come sit and watch a movie with me. I’ll order takeout for lunch from that Chinese place you like.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Okay.”

Marco ordered the food and then put on a popular action movie. I crinkled my brows and stared at him. “Don’t you get enough action in real life?”

He shrugged. “I like to make fun of how unrealistic most of this shit is.”

Marco was sitting sideways on the couch so he could prop up his ankle. I kicked off my shoes and sat at the other end, snuggled against a big throw pillow. The couch was a soft gray tweed and super comfortable. In fact, the whole living room had this understated, comfortable vibe. I would have loved to get the fireplace going, but I didn’t want Marco to try to make that happen on his sprained ankle.

I’d never laughed so much watching an action movie. Marco would roll his eyes, wince in pain, and then point out all the ways the hero would have gotten himself killed in real life. But he did it in such a deadpan way that I was cracking up through the whole thing.

After the movie ended, I gathered the remnants of our takeout lunch and brought them into the kitchen. When I got back to the living room, Marco grabbed my wrist. I glanced down at his face. I knew that look. I let my gaze drift lower and smirked. Sure enough, his semi-hard cock was trying to tent his sweatpants. “Is there something you need?”

He pulled me closer so he could wrap an arm around my waist. “Yeah. A good fuck. Think you can help me out?”

I hesitated. “As much as I love the idea of riding you, you’re still getting over a concussion. It’s not a good idea to do things that will increase your heart rate and elevate your blood pressure. On top of that, you have a sprained ankle.”

“I’ll take it easy and let you do all the work,” he said with a grin.

“That’s not how that works. You’d have a massive headache afterward.”

“Totally worth it,” Marco said

I shook my head. But I couldn’t deny that my cock thickened at the thought of riding him. “We really should wait.”

He pulled me closer. “Come on, Nurse Liam. My dick hurts, and I need you to make it better.”

I laughed and then closed my eyes and sighed. I knew I was going to give in. “As long as you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. I’ll deal with the headache.”

“Supplies?”

Marco pointed to the drawer in the coffee table. “I stocked up after the last time we didn’t make it upstairs.”

I snickered because that had been totally my fault. I opened the drawer in question and found an unopened bottle of lube and a small box of condoms. As soon as I turned around, Marco had his hands on the button of my jeans. “In a hurry?” I teased.

“I’ve been watching that ass all morning,” he growled.

I moved his hands. “I’ve got it. Get your own pants down.”

By the time I got my jeans and briefs off, Marco had shoved his sweatpants down to the middle of his thighs and pulled his T-shirt off. His impressive cock was standing full and erect, already leaking precum. I knelt beside the couch and took it in my mouth, swirling my tongue around the head. Marco groaned and put his hand on the back of my head, tightening his fingers in my hair. That turned me on so much that I swallowed him deeper. He lifted his hips, urging me to take more of him, and I was very happy to comply.

I pulled off when Marco’s cock got harder. I wanted him inside me when he came. I stood and picked up the box of condoms. Marco watched me with hooded eyes as I took out a condom, pulled it out of the wrapper, and rolled it over his hard dick. “I want to watch you prep yourself,” he rasped.

I grinned. "Fine by me." I pulled off my shirt and straddled him so my ass was in his sight. I opened the bottle of lube and poured a generous amount on two fingers. Leaning forward, I brought my lubed fingers to my puckered hole and pushed both in, groaning at the stretch and burn.

"That's right," Marco ground out. "Stretch that tight hole for my cock."

I spread my fingers and pushed in deeper. Marco shifted behind me and there was the click of the lube cap. "Fuck yes," I hissed as he slid his thick finger in beside my two. I pushed back against his finger while driving mine as deep as they would go.

Finally, Marco grabbed hold of my hip. "Enough," he growled. "I want you on my dick."

We pulled our fingers out, and I turned to face him. Taking the lube bottle from where he'd dropped it on the couch, I poured some on his covered cock. I held his rigid length while I eased myself down on him. I couldn't help the moan that escaped as he filled me. I gasped in surprise when Marco took hold of my hips and thrust up the rest of the way.

"God, yes," I cried out.

Marco wrapped his fingers lightly around my throat. "Ride my cock."

The sound I made probably would have embarrassed me at any other time. But at that moment, I couldn't care less. My cock was so hard it hurt. I put my hands on his chest and started to roll my hips. The hand on my throat didn't move. Marco's grip never got any tighter, though I occasionally felt his fingers move in a light caress. I rose and fell, shifting until his cock dragged across my prostate. I almost came hands-free. "Close," I gasped.

Marco shifted his hands to my hips, guiding my movements and thrusting into me hard and deep. I wanted to tell him to be careful of his ankle, but I couldn't speak. The pleasure was too intense. My eyes rolled back when Marco

took hold of my cock. I timed my thrusts into his grip with the tempo of his into me.

I felt the orgasm coil low in my groin, then spread up my spine and down my thighs. “Coming,” I choked out. I threw my head back as pleasure coursed through me in waves. Marco’s hand tightened on my hips as he drove into me with a growl and his body went rigid with his own climax. As his cock throbbed deep inside me, I wondered what it would feel like to have his cum fill me instead of the condom. I quickly pushed the thought away. That was not what we were about.

I bowed my head and tried to catch my breath. I chuckled when I saw the mess I’d made on Marco’s stomach and chest. “I guess I’d better get a washcloth to clean you up.”

“Not yet,” he said. He turned his head and winced. “Fuck, that hurts.”

With a sigh, I gingerly lifted myself off him. I grabbed my boxers and pulled them on, then carefully took off the condom. When I went to pull up his sweatpants, he grumbled, “I’ll get it.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “Yes, Chief,” I murmured. “Stay still for a few minutes. I’ll be right back.”

He grunted a response and closed his eyes.

I felt guilty for giving in to him. I should have been stronger. But it was so hard for me to resist any chance to be close to him. I shook my head. I could beat myself up later. I ran upstairs to his bathroom and grabbed a couple of washcloths and a hand towel. I went to my medical bag for painkillers and an ice pack for his ankle before snagging a throw from a chair in the corner of the bedroom and hurrying back downstairs.

Marco had managed to pull up his sweatpants, but his eyes were still closed and the crease between his brows told me he was in pain. I ran one of the washcloths under warm water in the kitchen and returned to clean off the mess I’d made on him. I dried him with the hand towel and placed the throw over him so he wouldn’t be cold.

I went back to the kitchen and ran the second washcloth under cold water. I brought that and a glass of water back to the living room with the painkillers. I set everything down on the coffee table and asked quietly, "Can you sit up?"

"Why?" he asked plaintively.

"I want to give you some painkillers and help you get your T-shirt on."

"I don't need any drugs messing with my head," he complained.

I sighed. "It's just acetaminophen. You're not allowed to have the good stuff."

"Fine," he grumped. He slowly pushed himself up to a sitting position. I handed him the water and the pills. After he took them, I took the glass from him and handed him his T-shirt.

He put on his shirt and was about to lie back down when I stopped him. "Hold up a second."

"What?" he asked with a frown.

"You are so cranky," I observed. He just glared at me. "Scoot over just a little," I said.

"Why?"

I rolled my eyes. "Just do it. Please?"

"Fine." He moved more toward the center of the sofa.

I picked up the small throw pillow he'd been lying on and sat in the corner of the couch. I leaned forward to get the cold washcloth off the coffee table, put the pillow on my lap, and patted it. "Come lie down."

Marco hesitated for a second, then said, "Okay."

Once he was lying with his head on my lap, I draped the washcloth over his forehead. "Close your eyes and just rest."

He murmured something I didn't catch. I started gently running my fingers through his thick, short hair. Pretty soon, his breathing evened out and he fell asleep. Watching his

peaceful face, I knew I was in trouble with this man. I also knew I wasn't going to do anything to change it.

Marco

Because I was on medical leave since my ankle was still a mess, Tony had me drive Liam, Sean, and their family and friends up to the concert venue where Jeremy would be debuting his piano concerto and then proposing to Sean. The venue was a small church in the Chelsea section of Manhattan and the home of the Queer Urban Orchestra.

I had been looking forward to the evening. I was proud of Jeremy and how far he'd come since the accident. I teared up a little when he announced that he'd named his concerto *Moonlight Journey* in honor of how he and Sean met. I almost fell over when he called out his ex for exposing his addiction to the musical community and talked about his suicide attempt. He told them all flat-out that he didn't care if they believed him because the people that mattered to him did. I puffed up like he was my brother by blood.

But then he locked eyes with Sean and said, "It's about how I learned that I could love and be loved for who I am, not for what I can do." He held out his hand to Sean, who rose and hugged the stuffing out of him.

I felt my heart rate speed up because I knew what was coming. Jeremy dropped to one knee and said, "Sean, I've run out of fancy words. All I can say is I love you more than I've ever loved anyone. Will you marry me?"

I didn't hear anything after that. My ears were ringing like I'd been inside an explosion. I had no idea watching Jeremy propose to Sean would hit me so hard. The memory of me proposing to Terry hit me like a Mac truck. For the rest of the night, I felt like I was crawling out of my skin.

Of course, Jeremy had rented out an entire restaurant nearby to celebrate their engagement, and I had to stay for the whole thing. I started out sitting at a table with Tony, Michael, and my sister, Gianna. My three oldest siblings couldn't make it because they all had kids and it was three days before

Christmas. My parents said they would host a family party for Jeremy after the new year.

About an hour in, I got up to stand at the bar. Not that I could drink—I was driving everyone home. I just kept the bartender company. After a while, even that wasn't working, and I started to feel like I was going to throw up.

I was about to take a walk when I felt a hand on my arm. I looked down to see Liam standing beside me, a slight frown marring his pretty face. He looked gorgeous in his crimson shirt and black suit jacket and pants. "What's up?" I asked, my voice gruff.

"You look like you're having a rough time." He shifted uncomfortably and pulled on his bottom lip with his teeth. "Were you and Terrence engaged?"

I was stunned speechless for a second because I never expected Liam to mention Terry. Even Tony hadn't mentioned anything tonight. "Yeah," I finally answered hoarsely. "How did you know?"

There was a loud burst of laughter from one of the tables nearby. Liam took hold of my arm and walked me toward the coat check. "Let's take a walk. It's not too cold, and you look like you're about to jump out of your skin."

We got our coats, and I was surprised no one came running after us, asking where we were going. It was closing in on midnight, so the streets were quiet—well, as quiet as New York City streets can get. The air was crisp and cold enough to see our breath as we walked. I walked slower than usual because I was trying to take it easy on my ankle.

Liam must have noticed because he guided us to a bench near a streetlight and sat before patting the seat next to him. "Come on, I know your ankle is still healing. Besides, it's easier to talk this way." I grumbled something incoherent when I sat, and he just snickered and said, "Okay, Mr. Grumpy Pants."

I nudged his shoulder. "Remember what happened the last time you called me that?"

He nudged me back. “Yes, some of the best sex in my life. But that’s not what this is about.” He took hold of my hand. “I know you’re struggling tonight, so this is Friend-Liam trying to help.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Okay, Friend-Liam, I appreciate it.” I didn’t say anything immediately, partly because I was processing how good it felt to have Liam holding my hand. It brought me back to when he sat with my head in his lap after my concussion. I tried to pull my thoughts together. “I guess I didn’t expect it to be this hard. It’s been three years since he died.”

He squeezed my hand. “Grief is a bitch. And it’s not linear.”

I cocked my head to the side. “What do you mean?”

He pursed his lips thoughtfully before he answered. “My therapist described it like this: imagine you have a box. Inside the box is a ball, and there’s a button on the side of the box. When you first lose someone, the ball is huge, almost filling the entire box. It hits the button constantly, and it *hurts*.” He paused, his brow creased and his eyes closed as if he too was remembering some past grief. He finally blew out a breath and went on. “Over time, the ball gets smaller and hits the button less often.” He shook his head. “But every time the ball does hit the button, it still hurts.”

“Well, shit,” I said, surprised to find my voice choked with tears. “Everybody keeps telling me it’s been three years. I should be over it by now. I need to move on.”

Liam shook his head. “It doesn’t work that way. I think people are uncomfortable with grief and death, and they want people to be happy again so they can be comfortable.”

“Yeah, fuck that,” I growled.

“To be fair,” Liam continued, “it’s also not good to stay stuck in the same place for a long time. I’m a prime example of that.”

“You?” I asked incredulously.

He smiled sadly. “Yes, me.” He turned on the bench so he could face me. “My father died of a massive stroke almost nine years ago. I was there when it happened. I tried everything I knew to save him, but nothing worked. Even after the doctors assured me nothing could have been done, I still blamed myself. I almost quit nursing school because I couldn’t handle the possibility of someone else dying on my watch.”

“Holy shit,” I said without thinking. “That would have been a waste. You’re an amazing nurse.”

I could see his shy smile in the light of the streetlamp. “Thank you. My mother had a talk with me about it. She reminded me that the people I’d help would greatly outnumber the people who’d die.”

“Good for your mom,” I said.

“Yeah, she’s awesome.” He squeezed my hand again. “I think today was a little hard for her too. It’s been longer for her, but I know she and my dad loved each other. She didn’t start dating again until this year.” He smiled. “Robert’s been great. He lost his wife four years ago, so he knows what it’s like. They’ve never pretended like each other’s spouses didn’t exist. I’ve heard them talking about my dad, and I’ve never seen Robert get pissy about it.”

“That’s really good.”

“It is,” he replied. Liam put a hand on my chest, right over my tattoo. “Terry will always be there. Whoever you end up with, when you’re ready, will understand there’s a space in your heart carved out just for Terrence Sanders, and they’ll honor that.”

This man. Eyes burning, I stood, bringing him with me with his hand still on my chest, and pulled him into a hug. We didn’t say anything else. We just stood there holding each other. Finally, I kissed the top of his head and said, “You’re something else, Liam O’Neil.”

He smiled up at me. “You’re not so bad yourself, Marco D’Angelo.” He stepped away and held out his hand. “Ready to go back?”

“Yeah.”

We walked hand in hand until we got back to the restaurant. On an unspoken agreement, we let go and walked in separately.

The drive home was quiet. Sean and Jeremy had decided to stay in Jeremy’s apartment in the City. Most everyone else had a light buzz or was just tired. Every once in a while, I looked in the rearview mirror of the stretch limousine and saw Liam. Sometimes he was looking back at me. Sometimes he was just staring out the window.

I dropped everyone off at Moonlight Inn so they could get their cars and go home. Liam lingered until after everyone else left. “How are you doing?” he asked.

“Good,” I said. “Thank you. Talking to you really helped.”

“I’m glad.”

“So,” I began, suddenly feeling awkward, “do you want to follow me back to my place?”

Surprise and something else I couldn’t put a finger on flashed in Liam’s eyes. He shook his head slowly. “I have to work tomorrow. Plus, I have to start going through my stuff. Sean and Jeremy found a house to rent not far from here, and Sean said I could move into his cottage behind the hotel.” He smiled. “I’ll finally have my own space.”

“That’s great. It’ll be nice for you to have a place of your own.”

He held up his hand. “Speaking of your own place, I still have your house key.”

He unbuttoned his coat to dig into his pants pocket. I put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. “Keep it. Knowing me, you’ll probably need it again.”

Liam’s eyes narrowed. “I hope not. I don’t like seeing you hurt.”

I shrugged. “I don’t like getting hurt, but it comes with the territory.”

He sighed in resignation. “I know.” He stretched up and kissed me on the cheek. “Good night. Will I see you at the Christmas Eve party at Moonlight?”

I nodded. “I’ll be there.”

“Okay.”

I watched him as he walked to his car, telling myself I just wanted to make sure he was safe. I snorted. I didn’t even believe my own lies. I couldn’t shake the disappointment that we were spending the night apart. What the hell was wrong with me?

Liam

Sean helped me carry the last of my moving boxes into what was once his cottage. Now it was mine. After the new year, he and Jeremy were moving into a house they'd rented. I had a sneaking suspicion they would be buying a house sooner rather than later. Their wedding was set for late September, but I doubted they'd wait that long to find a home of their own.

He put the box on the floor and stood with his hands on his hips, looking around. "This is a great place," Sean said with a wistful smile. "Are you sure you have everything you need?"

I nodded. "Yep. Mom loaded me up with groceries. I bought new sheets and blankets, and the new mattress will be delivered on the fifth."

"You didn't have to get a new mattress," Sean grumbled. "The one on there is only two years old."

I glared at my brother. "How many times have you and Jeremy fucked on that mattress?"

"How should I know?"

"Exactly," I retorted. I went to him and put my hands on his shoulders. "I appreciate you leaving me all the furniture. I really do. But I don't want to sleep on top of my brother's spunk."

Sean laughed and shoved me. "There's a mattress cover on it. Just take it off and wash it."

"Nope. Don't care. New mattress."

He hooked his arm around my neck and gave me a noogie. "You're such a pain in the ass."

I used one of the moves Marco had taught me to get out of Sean's hold. "Ha!" I said triumphantly. "Self-defense training for the win."

Sean chuckled. "Not bad." He handed me a set of keys. "It's all yours."

I took the keys from him, suddenly feeling choked up. “Thanks, Sean. This means a lot to me.”

He pulled me into a tight hug. “I’m glad I could do this for you. You deserve it.” He stepped back and asked, “Are you sure you don’t want to come to the City with us tonight?”

“Positive,” I replied. “I’m not up for all those people this year.”

He looked worried. “Do you want us to stay here? We could just have a quiet night in.”

I shook my head. “No. Go have fun with Jeremy’s fancy friends. I’m going to order Chinese, make popcorn, and watch *New Year’s Rockin’ Eve* until the ball drops. I’ll be fine.”

“It’s just Evan and Raphael,” he countered. “They’re not fancy.”

“Oh. You mean the principal cellist for the New York Philharmonic and the high-powered lawyer with the multi-million-dollar apartment on Central Park West? Nah, they’re not fancy at all.”

“They’re good people,” Sean said in their defense.

“I know they are. I’m just messing with you,” I said. “But seriously, I’ll be fine.”

“But...”

I grabbed his shoulders and steered him toward the door. “Go get your man and have fun in the City. I’m sure traffic will be horrible.”

He checked his smartwatch. “Which is why we’re leaving at one. I’d better get going. Tony will pick us up soon at the front of the hotel.”

“I can’t believe you’re staying in the hotel. I could have waited a couple of days to move in, you know.”

Sean shrugged. “It was just for a couple of days. We’re staying in Jeremy’s apartment from tonight until we move into the house.”

“You’d better go,” I said.

He gave me a quick hug. “Happy New Year, Liam.”

“Happy New Year,” I replied.

“I’ll text you tonight,” he said.

“I’ll probably be asleep.” I shoved him lightly. “Would you go already?”

After I shut the door on my brother’s back, I got down to the task of unpacking my boxes. I didn’t have a lot of stuff, so it didn’t take long to put everything away. My mother had surprised me with a new set of pots and pans and given me a whole stack of cookbooks.

Once it was all put away to my satisfaction, I stood in the middle of the small living room, surveying my new kingdom. The cottage was small but warm and cozy. The open-plan living room and kitchen made it feel bigger. The front bay window let in a lot of light. The short hallway led to a big bedroom. The best feature, though, was the extra-large bathroom. Sean had opened the wall to what was once a small second bedroom and expanded the bathroom into it. Taking showers in there would be glorious.

I had a sudden urge to call Marco to tell him all about my new place. I pushed it aside. I was sure he had his own thing going on New Year’s Eve. I hadn’t seen him much since Sean and Jeremy’s engagement. He’d made a brief appearance at the Christmas Eve party at Moonlight, where I’d given him a diecast model of his 1965 Mustang, and he’d given me a star chart of the constellations on the day I was born. After that, all I’d heard from him was a Merry Christmas text the next day.

I made a late lunch, then got out my guitar and started to play. It felt good to sink into my music. My therapist had been right. It was therapeutic. I thought about Marco and his cars and played “Fast Car” by Tracy Chapman.

As if my thoughts had conjured him, my phone chimed with a text message. I picked it up, and sure enough, it was from Marco.

Marco: Hey, Liam. What's up? Tony told me he drove Sean and Jeremy to the City, but you stayed home. Everything ok?

I rolled my eyes. I was surrounded by overprotective papa bears.

Me: I'm fine. I wasn't in the mood for a big, fancy party.

Marco: Where are you now? At your mom's place?

Me: Nope. Sean moved out of the cottage early so I could move in. I'm here enjoying my new space.

There was a pause while the dots danced on the screen. Finally, Marco replied.

Marco: Why didn't you call me to help?

Huh. Marco seemed...hurt? That surprised me.

Me: There wasn't much to move. Sean left all his furniture, and I don't have a lot of stuff. I think Sean wanted some brotherly bonding time.

Marco: Yeah, I get it.

Me: Why don't you stop by if you're not busy? I'm just hanging out, playing my guitar.

Marco: Since when do you play the guitar?

Me: Since 5th grade.

Marco: You're always full of surprises.

Me: I like surprising you. It's fun. So, are you coming over?

There was another long pause.

Marco: Sure. I'll be there in about half an hour.

I pocketed my phone and did a quick cleanup of my lunch dishes. Then I went into my new bedroom to make sure I had lube and condoms in the nightstand. Despite my protestations about sleeping on my brother's old mattress, I wouldn't pass up an opportunity to have Marco fuck me into said mattress.

Punctual as always, Marco knocked on my door almost exactly half an hour later. I opened it with a smile. "Welcome to my humble abode. Come on in."

I took his coat while he looked around. "Nice place," he said.

"Thanks," I said. "Do you want something to drink? I have soda, water, or iced tea. I also have Guinness."

"I'll take a Guinness," he said. His lips twitched into a smirk. "You sure you know how to pour one of those?"

I put my hand to my chest in feigned outrage. "I'll have you know, sir, my Irish roots are highly offended by your insinuation."

Marco chuckled as he followed me into the kitchen area. I took out two Guinness pint glasses and two cans of Guinness Stout. I poured it like I'd been taught by an Irish bartender to give it just the right amount of creamy, rich head. I snickered when I thought about giving head and glanced over at Marco. He must have been thinking the same thing because his eyes had a predatory gleam.

I handed him a glass and raised mine. "Slàinte,"

Marco touched his glass to mine. "Cheers. Is that Irish?"

I nodded. "It means health."

I took my first mouthful of the rich, dark brew and came away with creamy foam on my upper lip. I licked it off slowly, watching Marco's eyes track the movement of my tongue.

He leaned forward and swiped his thumb across my bottom lip. "That mouth of yours is trouble."

“The best kind,” I said before sucking his thumb into my mouth.

Marco set down his glass and took mine from my hand. He pulled his thumb away and replaced it with his mouth, taking mine in a deep, searing kiss. Our tongues tangled and our limbs entwined. When we finally came up for air, Marco said, “I want that mouth on my cock.”

I ground my hips against him, feeling his rigid length press against my stomach. “I’m down with that as long as I can have that cock in my ass.”

“Works for me.” He put his hands under my thighs and lifted me so I could wrap them around his waist. His casual strength was such a turn-on for me. I pointed the way to the bedroom, not that it would have been hard to find.

Marco sat me on the bed and unbuttoned and unzipped his jeans. I slid my hands inside, disappointed that he was wearing boxers. I fake-pouted. “No commando?”

He threaded his fingers in my hair and tugged lightly. “Take my cock out and suck it.”

I quickly obeyed his command, taking the familiar, hefty weight in my hand. I licked a stripe up the underside before taking the fat head in my mouth. The salty, tangy taste of precum burst on my tongue, and I hummed with pleasure. Marco’s grip on my hair tightened and he started thrusting, gently at first but with increasing strength as I opened to take him deeper. For a while, there was nothing but grunts and slurps, along with occasional gasps for air. My chin was wet with saliva and my eyes were watering from taking him so deep. I slipped one hand under his balls, stroking and tugging. He grunted as his cock thickened and hardened in my mouth.

Marco let go of my hair and pulled out of my mouth. “Do you still want my cock in your ass?”

I nodded vigorously. “Yes,” I croaked, my throat raw from taking his dick.

I stood and quickly got undressed while Marco did the same. I leaned over to get the supplies from the nightstand

drawer, and Marco smacked my bare ass. “On the bed. Hands and knees.”

“Yes, Chief,” I snarked.

Once I was in position, Marco got on the bed behind me. I heard the click of the lube bottle being opened and felt the cool liquid as he drizzled it onto my hole. He circled my rim with one thick finger before slowly pushing in. “Yes,” I hissed. “Just like that.”

He followed with a second finger and then a third, twisting them until they brushed my prostate. My back arched as pleasure zinged through my body. “Yes. Right there.” I panted and pushed back against his fingers. “I need you in me. Now.”

Marco pulled his fingers out and slapped my ass again. “Behave.”

I groaned. “I don’t want to.”

Marco chuckled. “Such a brat.”

“Still not calling you Daddy.”

“I fucking hope not.”

I heard the crinkle of the foil wrapper and another click of the lube bottle before his blunt cockhead was pressed against my hole. I took a breath and pushed out, letting him slip in through the tight ring of muscle. “God, yes. Fill me up.”

Marco grabbed my hips and pushed in the rest of the way. He went still, letting me breathe through the burn. It always took a minute to get used to his fat cock. “Okay,” I said. “I’m good.”

His grip tightened as he pulled out to the tip and slammed back in. I cried out at the pleasure-pain. “That’s right, take it,” he growled. He set up a punishing rhythm, and I was there for it. He angled his cock toward my prostate every time he drove into me.

It didn’t take long for my orgasm to gather at the base of my spine. “Close,” I gasped.

I reached for my cock, but Marco got there before me. “I’ve got you,” he said, his voice deep and rumbly. He wrapped his hand around my aching dick, using my precum to ease the glide.

In a flash, I was there, my climax rocketing through me so fast it left me breathless. I threw my head back and cried out something incoherent. My cock pulsed in Marco’s hand and my arms turned to jelly. I collapsed face-first into the pillow while Marco continued to pound into me until his dick throbbed and the warmth of his cum filled the condom.

I was still gasping for air when he eased out of me and got off the bed. My heart twisted because I thought he would just get dressed and leave. But he returned a short while later, cleaning me with a warm washcloth.

I fell onto my side, trying to avoid the cooling puddle of cum beneath me. To my surprise, Marco got back on the bed and lay next to me. I instinctively snuggled into his warmth, stilling when I realized what I was doing. When he didn’t move or seem to mind, I turned to lay my head on his chest. “What a great way to end the year,” I said.

“Definitely,” he rumbled.

I traced the bone-frog tattoo over his heart, which reminded me of the tattoo he had down his left side. It looked like Japanese characters, and I wanted to know what it said. He twitched when I ran my finger down his side. “Oooh, ticklish. I’ll have to remember that,” I said.

Marco glared at me. “You do that and see what happens.”

I rolled my eyes. “All right, Mr. Grumpy Pants. But I have a question about this tattoo.”

To my surprise, Marco groaned and covered his eyes with his arm. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I raised myself up on my elbow. “Why? What happened? What does it say?”

He clenched his jaw and muttered, “It says US Marines.”

I blinked, unsure if I'd heard correctly. "US Marines? Why? Did I miss something?"

"No," he said glumly. "Our SEAL team was on a joint mission with a Marine special operations team. We were all going back and forth about which force was better: the Navy or the Marines. Anyway, we all got drunk one night while on leave, and the next morning, I woke up with *that* tattooed on me."

I tried not to laugh. I really did because he looked so aggrieved. But I couldn't help it. I started giggling and couldn't stop. I covered my mouth to stifle myself, but it was no use. Tears streamed down my cheeks as I gasped for breath. I thought I saw Marco's lips twitch, but I couldn't be sure.

Finally, he grabbed me around the waist and pulled me on top of him. He positioned his fingers on either side of my ribs and said, "Go ahead, laugh it up." Then he started tickling *me*. That just made me laugh more, and I retaliated by digging my fingers into his side.

We finally stopped, both of us breathless and smiling. I folded my hands on his chest and propped my chin on them. "If you don't have plans for tonight, we could get some takeout and watch *New Year's Rockin' Eve* together. What do you say?"

"That sounds really good."

Liam

Marco seemed different after New Year's Eve. I couldn't put my finger on it. Sometimes, he would ask me to come to his place to watch a movie, which almost always led to sex on the couch. Other times, he'd go a whole week without inviting me over. I couldn't figure it out and kept reminding myself this was casual. Marco didn't want a relationship, and I needed to manage my expectations. I was trying, but it was hard. I went on a few dates, but none panned out to anything.

The off-the-books missions slowed down during and after the holidays. I didn't know if that was Tony's decision or if things naturally slowed down at that time of year. That lasted until the end of February when I got a call from Marco to meet the team at his place. This time, the tip came from someone in law enforcement in Atlantic City who was frustrated because they couldn't get anyone to pay attention to the problem. Michael did some digging and found out that the police commissioner and some high-level politicians from that area had a vested interest in keeping the authorities from finding the trafficked kids. Sometimes, I really hated people.

The drive to Atlantic City took only about an hour. This time, we did take a few of the Escalades because they wouldn't be out of place there. We also needed the room because Michael said there could be as many as eight kids.

Andrea and Dante left right after the planning meeting so they could do reconnaissance on the house where the kids were being held. According to Marco, the operation had to be tightly controlled and as quiet as possible because we would be in the middle of a city. To that end, everyone going in for the rescue also had tranquilizer guns.

I rode down with Marco, and we talked and laughed the whole way. He finally told me what happened on the mission where he got hurt. "I'd just gotten this one guy down when Gabe called a warning. Another guy we hadn't accounted for came out of nowhere and fired at me. Luckily, Gabe saw him

first. Saved my life. I got the gun away from the asshole, but in the fight, he pushed me down the stairs. Gabe put a bullet in the guy's skull."

The casual way he talked about his brush with death freaked me out. It scared me that he could have been killed. He glanced over and must have seen something in my expression because he said, "It's fine, Liam. This is what I do. It's why we work in teams. We all have each other's backs."

"I get it," I finally said. "It's scary though. I don't like thinking about you getting hurt like that."

Marco smirked. "Look at you being all overprotective and shit."

I rolled my eyes. "Touché. Okay, I'll let it go."

We got into Atlantic City around eight. The sun had set more than two hours before and the streets were fairly quiet. Marco took us down some narrow side streets lined with houses packed so tightly you could spit on your neighbor's house from your kitchen window.

When we drove past a long, narrow two-story house, Marco pointed and said, "That's it."

The house itself was unremarkable in every way. It had dull white vinyl siding and a single concrete step leading to a white aluminum storm door, behind which was a pale-aqua interior door. All the windows were darkened by what I assumed were blackout curtains. The only outward sign of life was the light shining through the two small panes of glass at the top of the entry door.

Marco continued past the house and parked half a block away, behind Michael's Ford Explorer. After he turned off the engine, he pulled out two small cases and handed me one. "Michael should be setting up comms soon."

I put the small device in my ear, and a few minutes later, I heard Michael's voice. "Comms check."

"Go for Marco."

I hesitated because it felt strange for me to be part of this elite group of warriors. After Dante, Andrea, Pete, and Gabe checked in, Marco looked at me with a raised eyebrow. “Oh, right. Uh, go for Liam.”

Chuckles came through the earpiece, and I felt myself blush. Marco shook his head and smiled. “All right, Michael. Liam is headed your way.”

“Roger that,” Michael said.

Like the other mission, I would wait in Michael’s modified computer cave while Marco and his team went and took care of the bad guys. Marco had hinted that their connection this time was more at the federal level but wouldn’t say anything else about it. Whoever that was would come in after we left and collect the people our team left behind. We would take the kids to a hospital north of Atlantic City, where we would be met by an organization that reunited trafficked children with their families whenever possible and safe.

I grabbed my medical bag and hurried out of Marco’s car, pulling my coat close and my hood over my head. February was freaking freezing with the wind coming off the icy cold Atlantic Ocean.

Michael once again took control of the cameras and also somehow disabled their alarm system. I was decent enough with computers, but I had no idea how Michael did what he did.

Marco’s team went in the back door this time, and even though I was on the comms with them, I barely heard a sound until there were shouts of surprise and muffled thuds as the team made their way through the house. “Ground floor clear,” Marco said. “Securing four targets now. Gabe and Dante take the second floor.”

“Roger that,” Gabe said.

Michael said there were six guards in the house so that left just two more. Andrea and Dante had seen three customers enter the house earlier, so they were also in for a nasty surprise. It was quiet for a few minutes, with only the

occasional grunt from one of the team or groans of pain from the bad guys.

A strange static blasted through my earpiece, and I had to pull it out. “What the hell was that?” I asked. Michael just stared at me wide-eyed.

I put the earpiece back in time to hear Marco shout, “Gabe!” and then pounding feet. Scuffling and cursing were followed by the distinct sound of a fist hitting flesh. “Motherfucker!” Marco shouted. “Move one muscle, and I will put a bullet right between your eyes.”

“What’s happening?” I asked.

It was Andrea who answered. “Gabe got hit by a taser. His heart stopped, and he’s not breathing.”

“Shit.” I grabbed my medical bag. “I’m heading your way. Is someone doing CPR?”

“Marco,” Andrea replied.

“What about the kids?”

“Pete and I are getting them out of the rooms now. We’re going to bring them downstairs and leave the johns tied up in the rooms. Dante is standing guard over Marco and Gabe.”

“Got it,” I said.

I ran down the street, my heavy medical bag bumping against my leg, hampering my stride. I went around the back of the house because that door was open. I raced through a sorry excuse for a kitchen, down a narrow hallway into a living room. Four men lay on the floor in various stages of consciousness, hands and feet tied with zip ties and mouths stuffed with cloth. I raced past them and up a flight of stairs.

I reached the top just as Andrea and Pete led a group of children down the hall. The oldest looked to be no more than twelve. The poor little things looked so scared, but I couldn’t stop to comfort them. Two more men were lying on the floor, also bound. One looked like he had been punched in the face several times.

Marco knelt on the floor next to Gabe, doing chest compressions, then stopping to do mouth-to-mouth. He looked up when I knelt on the other side of his fallen teammate. “You have an AED in there?”

“Yep. Keep going while I set it up.”

I got the AED out of my medical bag and got it set up and started. I pulled out a cloth and scissors and said, “I need his shirt cut off, and I’ll have to wipe him down so the pads stick.”

Marco took the scissors without question and cut straight up Gabe’s T-shirt. I handed him the cloth, and he wiped down his friend’s chest. I placed the pads on Gabe’s chest while Marco resumed compressions. Once the AED was charged and ready, I called out, “Clear.” The shock caused Gabe’s body to jerk. I checked the small screen. His heart rhythm was better, but he was still in ventricular fibrillation. “Go back to compressions, but no mouth-to-mouth,” I said to Marco while I recharged the unit.

The longest two minutes of my life went by until I called, “Clear,” again. This time the shock brought back sinus rhythm, and I heard Gabe take a gasping breath. “Oh, thank God.” I breathed. “Get him into recovery position.” Marco rolled Gabe on his side while his friend continued to rise closer to consciousness.

Finally, I heard Gabe rasp, “Ow. Shit, that hurt.” Marco laughed, but there were tears in his eyes.

“We really should call an ambulance,” I said.

I could see the conflict in Marco’s eyes. “We can’t be here.”

“No ambulance,” Gabe croaked.

“You have to go to the hospital,” I insisted.

“We’ll drive him there,” Marco said. He looked up at Dante, who was standing behind me. “Have Pete and Andrea take the two Escalades with the kids and bring them up to that hospital in Little Egg Harbor. They’re waiting for us.” He tapped his comms unit. “Michael, reach out to our contact and let them know they can move in. And call the officer who gave

us the tip and tell him to meet us at the hospital here. We have to have a cover story. Dante, you're with us."

"Aye, aye, Chief."

I sighed. I knew I wasn't going to win this argument. "Fine. But I get to drive the Charger back home."

A shadow of a smile touched Marco's lips. "Deal."

Marco

I had just put the last of the cans of Guinness in the refrigerator when Gabe walked into my kitchen with a bakery box. “Where do you want the cake?” he asked.

“Set it on the counter for now,” I replied. “I’ll put the candles on it later.”

Gabe saw all the Guinness in my fridge and said, “It’s pretty funny that the Irishman has his birthday on St. Patrick’s Day. Do you think his mother planned it that way?”

I shrugged. “I suppose she could have. She is a nurse.”

“When is Liam supposed to get here?”

I checked my clock. “I told him to get here at eight. He thinks we’re going to be watching a movie.”

“Uh-huh,” Gabe said with a smirk.

I glared at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shook his head. “Nothing.” He pulled a small jewelry box out of his jacket pocket. He opened it to reveal a small, black metal caduceus on a black chain. “What do you think of this? Do you think Liam will like it?”

I looked at the necklace and back up at my friend. “You got him jewelry? What the fuck?”

Gabe stared at me with a flat expression. “Why not? Why should it matter to you?”

I opened my mouth to say...something. But what could I say? I’d made it clear to Liam that we were casual and not exclusive. I could go out with whoever I wanted, and so could he. But my inner cavemen wanted to tear that box out of Gabe’s hands and throw it in the trash. In a fit of temporary insanity, my brain screamed, *He’s mine!* I shook off the thought and clenched my jaw. “It doesn’t,” I finally answered.

For some reason, Gabe looked disappointed. “That’s what I thought.” He shook his head. “It’s a shame. Liam is one of

the nicest, sweetest people I know.”

My gut twisted. “What’s that got to do with anything?”

Gabe narrowed his eyes and glared at me. “Do you really think we don’t all know you two are fucking?”

“I…”

“Seriously, Marco? We’re fucking ex-Navy SEALs. Observing human behavior is part of the damn job.”

His attitude put me on the defensive. “He knows it’s casual. He knows that’s all I can do.”

“Well, good luck with that,” Gabe sneered. “That man looks at you like you hung the moon and the stars.”

Andrea poked her head around the corner. “Liam just pulled up.”

Gabe put the box back in his pocket and left the kitchen. Andrea’s brows pulled into a frown. “Y’all okay, Sarge?”

“Yeah, we’re fine,” I replied gruffly. “Just a little difference of opinion.”

“All right,” she said, clearly not believing a word I said. “You better come on out. He’s almost to the door.”

I got my shit together and hurried to the living room as Liam walked through the front door. Gabe, Dante, Pete, and Andrea stood in the middle of the room, waiting for him to come in.

“Surprise!” the team shouted.

Liam froze for a second, then his hand went to his mouth. His eyes searched the room until he found me. “You said it was a movie night.”

I couldn’t help but smile. He was cute when he was flustered. “I might have stretched the truth a little.”

He gave me the sweetest smile. “Thank you.” He walked into the room. “You all are great. This is so nice.” He hugged everyone on the team in turn, saving me for last. He wrapped

his arms around my waist and rested his head on my chest. “Thank you.”

I wrapped my arms around him and kissed the top of his head. “Happy birthday, Liam.” I looked up and saw Gabe staring at me with narrowed eyes. I stepped away from Liam and said, “Michael couldn’t make it because he had a job tonight, but he said to tell you your present is in your inbox.”

Liam’s smile grew. “Ooh, maybe it’s that game I’ve been wanting to play.”

“Probably,” I replied. “There’s food on the table. Come and eat up. We’ve got a whole chafing dish of Guinness beef stew from that Irish pub in Spring Lake, Irish soda bread, and a birthday cake from Wegman’s.”

Liam’s eyes lit up. “All my favorites.”

“Yep,” I said. “Plus some Guinness and Jameson to wash it down.”

Gabe put an arm around Liam’s shoulders. “You’ll have to introduce me to this Guinness beef stew. I’ve never even heard of it before.”

I was going to kill Gabe. I knew what he was doing. He was trying to get me to stake a claim on Liam. To make it “official” or some shit. It wasn’t going to happen. It couldn’t. At the same time, I wanted to pull him off Liam and choke the shit out of him.

Dante came up to me with a bowl of stew in one hand and a can of Guinness Stout in the other. “Everything okay, Chief?”

I nodded curtly. “Yep. It’s all good.”

“You know, Liam’s a really good guy,” he said out of nowhere.

I stared at him. “I know he is. One of the best.”

Dante nodded. “I just thought I’d remind you of that.”

“Okay...?” *What. The. Fuck?*

My dining table wasn't big enough for all of us, so I set out tray tables in the living room and put on some music. The stew smelled delicious, and everyone took a big helping. I might have put on a shit-eating grin when Liam grabbed a tray table and sat next to me on the sofa. He leaned closer to me and said, "This is really great. I wasn't expecting it."

I nudged him with my shoulder. "You're part of the team. Everyone here likes you."

A blush tinged his cheeks, and he smiled shyly. "It's nice because I was worried I wouldn't fit in with all you big, strong warrior types."

"But you're soft and squishy," Gabe said as he sat on the other side of Liam. "We like that about you. It reminds us what we fight for."

"Hey!" Liam objected, shoving Gabe playfully. "I am *not* soft and squishy. I go to the gym three times a week and have self-defense training with this one"—he pointed at me—"twice a week."

"Is that what they're calling it these days?" Gabe asked with a leer.

It was official. I was going to kill him. Liam's face paled. "What...?"

Gabe had the grace to look embarrassed. "It's nothing, Liam. I was just kidding around." He squeezed Liam's shoulder and quickly got up before I could murder him with my eyes. Liam turned to look at me, his eyes wide and expression anxious. "I didn't say anything," he whispered. "I swear."

"I know," I said. "Don't worry about it." I got up and started collecting dishes. "Everybody bring your dishes into the kitchen. It's time for cake."

"And presents!" Dante shouted.

Liam stood to help, but I shooed him away. "You're the birthday boy. No work for you tonight."

Andrea came to Liam and put her arm around his shoulders. “Don’t mind the soft and squishy comment,” she said. “Think of it like playing D&D.”

His brows rose all the way to his hairline. “*You* play D&D?”

“Sure do,” she replied. “Me and Dante play every week. Sometimes Pete joins us. Think of it like this: we are all fighters, and you’re like a mage. Powerful in your own way, but not a lot of hit points.”

Liam threw back his head and laughed. “Okay, I get it.” He hugged. “Thanks, Andrea.”

“All right, let’s get to these dishes so we can open presents!” Pete shouted.

As we walked into the kitchen, Andrea leaned close to me and said quietly, “Please be nice to him, Sarge.”

Once again. *What. The. Fuck?*

Pretty soon, all the dishes were in the dishwasher and the presents were set on an end table. I grabbed the envelope I had for Liam from on top of the refrigerator after handing the cake to Andrea. We all decided Liam deserved to have all twenty-nine candles lit for his birthday, which led to Pete jokingly bringing my fire extinguisher in from the kitchen when Andrea carefully set the conflagration on the coffee table.

“Ha-ha,” Liam grouched. “You’re just jealous because you’re all older than me.”

“All right, youngster,” Gabe teased. “Let’s see how good your blowing skills are.”

Liam raised a brow and smirked. “I’ve been told my blowing skills are exceptional.”

There were a bunch of “oooohhs” and catcalls from the group, and Liam’s cheeks went pink. I just wanted to grab him and take him to my bedroom so he could use those exceptional skills on my cock. We all sang “Happy Birthday,” mostly off-key, and then Liam blew out all twenty-nine candles in one breath.

“Damn,” Dante commented. “I’m impressed. Didn’t you have pneumonia last year?”

Liam nodded. “I did. After I got back from Lebanon. Now I do breathing exercises every day to keep my lungs strong and healthy.”

“Present time,” Pete sing-songed.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re worse than my nephew. And he’s three.”

Liam ended the argument about whose gift to open first by closing his eyes and reaching out his hand to take one. Seriously, sometimes my team acted like kindergarteners. There seemed to be something of a theme. Andrea got him a soft throw with the Army emblem. Dante got him a Navy SEAL hoodie. Pete got him a US Navy fleece.

Liam was smiling from ear to ear. “Why do you all think I’m cold all the time?”

“Because you’re soft and squishy,” Gabe said with a chuckle. He took the box with his gift out of his pocket. “This won’t keep you warm, but I wanted to get it for you because you saved my life.”

Liam opened it and immediately teared up. He ran his finger over the black caduceus. “Oh wow. That’s really nice.” He went over to Gabe and hugged him. “Thank you.”

Gabe squeezed him back. “Thank you for being an awesome nurse.”

My inner caveman was freaking the fuck out. I took a breath to calm myself. I pulled the envelope from behind my back and handed it to Liam. He opened it and pulled out the card with a picture of the Milky Way on the front. He read the inside aloud. “This card is good for one night of stargazing on my brother’s boat. Happy Birthday. Marco.”

“Oh, Marco,” he breathed. He blinked away tears. “This means a lot to me. Thank you so much.”

I stood and pulled him into a hug. I only barely resisted kissing the top of his head. “You’re welcome. And we can go

as early as this Tuesday if you want. It's the new moon and the spring equinox on the same day."

He leaned back and smiled up at me. "It sounds like you did your research."

"I wanted it to be special for you. To thank you for taking care of me. Of all of us."

He stretched up and kissed me on the cheek. "Thank you. And I would love to go out on Tuesday night."

He rested his cheek against my chest, and I wrapped my arms around him tighter. I looked up and saw each of my teammates staring at me, and none of them looked happy. Fuck.

Liam

Marco insisted on picking me up for our stargazing trip. We had dinner at the restaurant on the Belmar marina and then he took me to his brother's "boat." Why is boat in quotation marks? Because it was a *yacht*. A freaking yacht. I stared at it for a few minutes after Marco pointed it out. "Your brother has a yacht."

"Yes," he replied, elongating the word. "Is that a problem?"

"No, of course not. It's just that you called it a boat, and I was thinking one of those little things the fishermen take out."

Marco snorted and shook his head. "Nah. Santino's a big-time lawyer. You won't catch him on some dinky fishing boat."

"Okay then," I said. "I guess I'm going on a yacht."

Marco put his arm around my shoulders. "Trust me, you'll be much warmer and way more comfortable on Tino's yacht."

I had to admit, I was happy about that. Although it was technically the first full day of spring, it was a bracing forty-five degrees, and it would feel colder once we were out on the water. As we walked up the dock, I noticed there weren't a lot of other boats in the water. "Is it too early in the season for boating?"

"Technically yes," Marco answered. "But money gets you a lot of things, and Tino has a lot of it."

"Alrighty then." A thought occurred to me. "Wait, did he put his boat in the water early so you could take me out tonight?"

"Yeah. He did it because I asked him to. That's what family does."

I didn't have much to say about that because I was sure Sean would do the same if he had a boat. Only he would probably ask ten thousand questions first. When we got to the

slip where the yacht was tied, I snickered when I saw the name: Not Guilty. “Nice name,” I said.

Marco chuckled. “Yeah. He bought this boat after he won a big defense case. Someone framed his client for murder, and his team dug up the evidence that the police ignored because they thought they had an open-and-shut case. The family went on to sue the city and won a hefty settlement, which he got thirty percent of.”

“Nice.”

Marco stopped by the back of the boat up against the dock and said, “Let me get on first and then I’ll help you aboard.” He stepped onto the yacht with the ease of many years of practice. Then he turned and held out his hand for me. “Just go slow and make sure your first foot is steady before you bring the other one on.”

Once we were on the boat, Marco untied it from the dock while I stayed out of the way. He was quick and efficient, and we were soon underway. We cleared the marina and got into the river that led to the ocean, and Marco picked up speed. He was certainly right about the yacht being way more comfortable than a small fishing boat.

I sat on the bridge with Marco as he navigated through the travel lanes of the inlet and out into the ocean. He told me about the different light configurations on the different vessels and what they meant. Thankfully, there weren’t many boats on the water since it was still cold. He did ask me to be a second set of eyes to look for the unexpected.

Marco’s plan was to take us far enough away from the shore that the lights wouldn’t interfere with me being able to see the stars. After about an hour, he slowed to a stop. I had no idea where we were, though he’d told me we were headed mostly south and a little east. I couldn’t see any lights on the shore. It was pitch black all around us except for the lights on the sides of the yacht.

Marco checked his instruments and turned off the engine. “Wait here while I set the anchor.” He went up the short set of stairs to the outside deck. I heard some noises coming from the

back of the yacht and the boat rocked a bit. Then there was silence until I heard Marco's footsteps on the stairs.

"Bundle up," he said. "It's cold out there."

I let out a short laugh. "I got several layers worth of warm clothes from our team." I spread my arms to show him my Navy SEAL hoodie underneath my US Navy fleece. "I even brought the blanket Andrea gave me."

Marco smiled indulgently and held out his hand. "Come on up. Bring the blanket."

I grabbed the blanket and took hold of Marco's hand. He was right. It was really cold out in the middle of the ocean. But I forgot all about that when I stopped and looked up at the sky.

"Oh wow," I breathed. "Look at them all." The sky was alight with millions of stars. With no city lights to dim them, they shone brightly in the night sky.

Marco put his arm around my shoulders. "Come on. There's lounge chairs on the back deck. You'll be able to see better if you're lying down."

We both lay on the deck chairs. Marco was right. I could definitely see better lying down. Even though we were mostly out of the wind, it was still cold, so I draped the blanket over myself. "I wish I knew the names of more of the constellations." I pointed at the ones I knew. "That's the Big Dipper. And that's the Little Dipper."

"Also known as Ursa Major and Ursa Minor," Marco said.

"I guess you would know all about the constellations since you were in the Navy."

"Yeah," he replied. "We had to be able to navigate by the stars in case we lost our instruments or were on our own."

A gust of wind blew, and I shivered, even under my blanket. Marco made some kind of noise of disapproval and, with one hand, dragged my lounge chair right next to his. Then he draped the blanket over both of us and pulled me close to him. "Better?"

“Much,” I answered. I snuggled close to him, careful not to make the chairs separate. “Show me more constellations.”

Marco pointed to another place in the sky. “That’s Orion. See the three stars in a row? That’s Orion’s Belt.”

“Like from *Men in Black*?” I asked.

I heard the amusement in his voice when he answered, “Yes, like from *Men in Black*.” His arm moved in another direction. “That’s Leo.”

I squinted. “It doesn’t look much like a lion.”

His shoulder moved in a shrug. “I guess the old astronomers figured it was close enough.”

“I’ll have to tell Sean. He’s a Leo.”

Marco snorted. “Why doesn’t that surprise me? He’s a bossy fucker.”

I shoved him lightly. “Hey. He’s a good big brother.”

“Never said he wasn’t,” Marco replied. “That doesn’t mean he’s not bossy.”

I smiled and shook my head. “You’re not wrong.”

Marco pointed out more stars and planets and taught me how to navigate by the stars. All the while, he kept one arm around me, holding me close. My heart was so full that I finally leaned over and kissed him. “Thank you. This is the best birthday present I’ve ever gotten.”

Marco folded his other arm around me and pulled me on top of him to deepen the kiss. Before long, the lounge chair made noises like it wasn’t handling our combined weight very well. With a growl, he let me go and stood. He held out his hand. “Come on.”

I awkwardly got to my feet. “Where are we going?”

“Stateroom. There’s a king-size bed in there.”

I took his hand, reveling in the warmth of his touch. Marco led me back inside the yacht, down to the bridge, and then down another set of stairs I hadn’t noticed. He flicked on

lights as we made our way through a narrow hallway toward an open door. When we reached the doorway, Marco turned on a light, revealing a beautiful stateroom with a king-size bed, a large dresser, and nightstands on either side of the big bed, one of which already had lube and condoms waiting. One side of the windows would no doubt show an amazing view in the daylight hours. Right now, they showed only the pitch-black night.

“Gorgeous,” I said in wonder.

Marco kissed me. “Yeah.”

With a tenderness he’d never shown before, Marco got me out of my multiple layers of clothing. We didn’t speak as we undressed each other, neither seeming to want to break the sacred silence of the moment.

Once we were both naked, Marco pressed me down onto the bed, his lips never leaving mine. He kept kissing me while he prepped me, moving his mouth over my throat, my chest, my stomach, my thighs, everywhere but where I wanted. My cock ached with need. “Marco, please,” I begged.

He lifted his head and chuckled. “We’ll get there.” He slid two thick fingers in and out of my hole, crooking them just enough to hit my prostate. My back arched up, and I cried out, “Oh God. Hurry. I need you inside me.”

“Not just yet,” he teased. He added a third finger to my hole while taking my cock down in one swallow. My eyes rolled into my head as I threw it back with a wordless cry.

I felt so full, stretched almost to my limits, but I needed more. “Marco,” I pleaded, “fuck me.”

He slowly pulled his fingers out and reached for the condom. I went to roll onto my stomach since that was Marco’s preference. He put his hand on my shoulder to stop me. “This way. I want to see you.”

I swallowed hard, my throat constricted. “Okay,” I whispered.

Marco rolled on the condom and slicked it with more lube. He rose between my spread legs, his eyes on me while he

aligned his cock with my hole. He leaned down with his forearms on either side of me as he slowly pressed inside me, filling and stretching me so wonderfully well. We were both panting by the time he was fully seated.

I took a few deep breaths while I waited for the burn to subside. When I met his gaze, he was watching me intently. “You good?” he asked.

I slid my hand to the back of his neck and pulled him down for a kiss. “Yes.”

He started to move while still kissing me. I wrapped my legs around him, deepening the angle. He moved his hips faster but stayed close, our chests almost touching. I was lost in his beautiful dark eyes, and I didn’t ever want to be found.

He shifted a little and hit that magical spot. I gasped as I felt my orgasm suddenly rocket to the surface. He wasn’t even touching me. The friction of our bodies on my trapped cock was enough. “I’m close. God, that feels so good.”

He sped up his pace and growled, “That’s it, baby. Come for me.”

And that was all it took. My orgasm crashed into me so hard my vision whited out. I threw my head back and cried out, “Marco!” I was so overwhelmed that tears came to my eyes and spilled down my temples. Marco slammed into me one more time and stilled, a groan of pleasure rumbling up from his chest as his cock pulsed inside me.

I tried to throw my arm over my face to hide my stupid tears, but Marco wouldn’t let me. He wiped them away with his thumbs and kissed me for a long time. When he finally pulled away, he smiled at me and said, “Happy birthday.”

“Best birthday ever,” I murmured as my eyes drifted closed.

Marco

Liam and I stayed on the boat all night. We didn't dock until after watching the sunrise over the ocean. Liam had told me that one of the last things he thought about when the militant had a gun aimed at his head was how much he would miss seeing the sunrise over the Atlantic. Seeing his joy in something so simple touched something in me I couldn't put a finger on.

When I brought him back to the cottage behind Moonlight Inn, I got out of my car to say goodbye. Liam looked surprised when I came around to his side of the car. It made me feel like a shitty person that he should be surprised at something so basic.

"Hey," he said, looking up at me, squinting in the early morning light. "Thank you again for a wonderful night. It really was the best birthday present ever."

I cupped his cheek and kissed him. "It was my pleasure. I had a good time."

When I pulled away, Liam blinked rapidly and his eyes looked a little shiny. He cleared his throat and said, "I was thinking maybe I could come by your place tonight after I get off work. I could make us dinner, and we could watch another unrealistic action movie."

Liam's expression was wary, as if he expected me to say no. Was I really that cold? "Sure," I replied. "I'd like that."

His face lit up with the same smile that had first caught my attention in that picture in Sean's office. "Great. I'm done with work at five, so I'll probably get there around six or six-thirty."

"I'm looking forward to it," I said. "Make sure you get some sleep before you go to work." I smirked. "We didn't do a lot of sleeping last night."

"I will," he replied, his cheeks pink. "I should be able to get a couple of hours before I have to go in."

I gave him another quick kiss and got back in my car. On the drive home, I reminisced over all the times Liam and I had been together. I realized that he was right to be surprised this morning. I'd never kissed him goodbye before today.

It was all I thought about the whole way home. I'd told him it was casual, and he'd never asked for anything more. But something nagged at me. It was the same feeling I'd had after the first time Liam and I hooked up. I'd told him my rules, and he'd done what I asked. I was the one who felt off-balance about it. I felt like I was missing something just out of reach.

By the time I got inside my house, I hadn't gotten any closer to the answer. I went over to the mantel and touched the picture of Terry and me like I always did. Then I went upstairs to my bedroom, deciding sleep would help me work through the problem.

The nightmare started like it always did. My team was under fire, and I stood over Terry's prone body, protecting him from further injury. Then the scene shifted to an empty beach. All my team members were gone, and it was just me standing over Terry's cold body, watching his blood soak into the sand. "*Terry*," I choked out, reaching for him to do something, anything to save him. To my horror, the dream changed, and instead of Terry lying there, Liam stared up at me, his beautiful pale-green eyes cold and lifeless.

"Liam!" I woke screaming from my dream, my heart pounding, my stomach churning like I was going to throw up. I gripped my hair in both hands. "No. No. No."

I couldn't do this. I couldn't get involved with someone again. I almost didn't survive it the last time. I threw myself out of bed and paced the floor. I didn't know what to do. Liam was making this out to be more than it was. Liam must have thought he saw something in me to encourage him to invite himself over. My conscience hammered at me, highlighting everything I'd done the night before to make him think we could be more.

I shook my head. No. I hadn't done anything but give a friend a birthday present. I had to stop this. I had to make it clear to him that we were nothing more than friends with benefits. I could call him and cancel. That would be enough. But would it?

My phone pinged with a text from Tony, reminding me about the security gig in two days. I groaned. It was a high-profile wedding in New York City. It was a two-day event and security would be tight. I hated weddings. They were too fucking chaotic.

I texted Tony that I'd be there. When I closed my text app, I noticed the Grindr app. It occurred to me that I hadn't used it in weeks. *What the fuck?* I tried to remember the last time I'd hooked up with anyone besides Liam. I couldn't.

There was one way I could show Liam where we stood without question. He would have to understand then that we could never be more than friends with benefits. I ignored the part of my mind that screamed at me that I was being cruel. Better that than risk a repeat of what happened with Terry.

I pulled up the app and logged in.

Liam

I hurried up the sidewalk to Marco's front door. I was running later than I wanted because I got caught up at the clinic and then everyone in Monmouth County decided to go to the supermarket after work. I shifted my grocery bag to my left hand to get Marco's house key out of my jacket pocket. I teased him all the time for locking his door even when he was home, but I understood it, given his line of work.

"Sorry I'm late," I called out.

"No problem," I heard him say. It sounded like he was in the kitchen. Good, he could help me prep dinner. My heart was hammering hard. After our night on the boat, Marco seemed different, warmer. I had hope that we could be more than just friends with benefits.

I turned the corner into the kitchen and saw Marco leaning against the counter, looking at his phone. "Hey," I said. I walked over and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Did you get any sleep after we got back?"

"Yeah," he said absently. He set his phone down on the counter and gave me a hug. "I forgot something upstairs. I'll be right back."

"Okay," I said. I set my grocery bag on the counter and took off my jacket, hanging it on the back of a chair. I started taking out the food I'd bought. I had decided to make chicken Marsala because my mom had a really good recipe for it, and it wasn't that difficult. I'd also bought a nice bottle of white wine to go with it.

I had just finished emptying the bag when Marco's phone pinged with that distinctive Grindr app sound. I felt a sick twist in my gut. Was Marco really on Grindr right now? It pinged again, and despite my head screaming at me to leave it, I picked up Marco's phone.

On the screen was a picture of what was objectively a very nice, tight ass. Two hands held the pale cheeks apart to reveal

a puckered pink hole, already wet with lube. I distantly wondered how the guy had managed to do that and take such a good picture.

Underneath was a message:

Cutietwinkboi817: Don't keep this pretty hole waiting too long.

I thought for a moment that I was going to vomit. I put Marco's phone back down and noticed my hands were trembling and my heart was racing. I let out a long breath. Tears pricked my eyes, but I forced them back. "Enough," I whispered. The phone pinged again with another notification. I grabbed my leather jacket from the back of the chair I'd hung it on. The phone lit up yet again just as Marco stepped into the room. I gestured to the phone with my chin while I zipped up my jacket. "You should get that," I said. "You wouldn't want to keep that pretty hole waiting."

Marco flinched at my coarse words, and part of me was glad I'd at least stung him. He took a few steps toward me. "Liam..."

I shook my head. "You wanted me to see that, didn't you?" When his eyes shifted away from mine, I raised my hands in surrender. "It's fine. You warned me. You don't want anything serious." I looked into his beautiful, dark eyes. "But we had something. You know it, and I know it. Last night was..." My words stuttered to a stop. "Never mind. I can't do this on your terms anymore, so I'm going to exit gracefully while I still can." I took his house key from my jacket pocket and put it on the counter. "Goodbye, Marco." I stepped around him, giving him a wide berth as I made my way out of the kitchen. In the doorway, I turned to face him one last time. "You know, before this started, you said we were friends." I gestured toward his phone, which pinged again, as if making my point. "That was just plain cruel. Friends don't do that." Then I walked out his front door without looking back.

I didn't remember driving to Sean and Jeremy's house. I just suddenly found myself sitting in my car in their driveway. I didn't want to interrupt anything, so I called Sean before I

barged in on them. My brother picked up on the first ring. “Hey, Liam, what’s up?”

“Sean.” I could barely get out his name.

“Liam? What’s wrong? Where are you?”

I choked out a laugh. “In your driveway. Can I come in?”

“Of course.” I heard him moving and saw the front door open. Sean hurried down the porch steps and over toward my car, his phone still in his hand. I barely had time to get out of the car before he was there, pulling me into his arms.

That broke the dam. My brother was solid and strong, and I’d always felt safe with him. The tears I’d been holding back surged up. I fell apart, unable to speak intelligibly while he held me tight. He didn’t ask me any questions. He just closed my car door and led me into his house. Jeremy stood in the doorway, looking worried.

They ushered me inside and sat me down on the couch. Jeremy brought me a glass of water while Sean sat beside me, his arm still around my shoulders. “Talk to me, Liam. What’s wrong? What happened?”

“I did something really stupid,” I said, my voice quavering. They waited patiently for me to speak, so I blurted out the whole sad, pathetic story. When I was finished, my throat was raw and my voice was hoarse from crying.

“I’m going to kill him,” Sean said matter-of-factly.

“Sean, don’t,” I said quietly.

He shot up off the sofa. “No! Liam, he doesn’t get to do that to you. If he wanted to break it off, he could have just said so. That right there was some first-class bullshit. He deserves a good beating, and I can give it to him.”

Before I could tell Sean I’d seen Marco in action for real and he could not, in fact, give him any kind of beating, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out, part of me hoping it was Marco. It was Tony. Oh God, was he going to call us out on a mission tonight? I didn’t think I would be able to be in

the same room with Marco right then. “Hello?” I said hesitantly.

“Liam, what’s wrong?” Tony asked right away.

The man was perceptive. I had to give him that. “I’m having a really rough night. Did you need me tonight?”

“No, not tonight. I was going to ask you to come on as the medic for this wedding we’re doing security for. It’s a paying gig.”

“I don’t know, Tony.” I stopped and tried to take a breath to stem the threatening flood of tears. “I don’t know if I can...” A sob rose up and choked me despite my efforts.

“Liam, what the hell is wrong? Talk to me.”

“Let me talk to him,” Sean growled as he reached for my phone.

I shook my head vigorously. Jeremy put his hand on Sean’s shoulder to still him and said, “I’ll talk to him.”

I reluctantly handed my phone to Jeremy and then turned into my brother’s arms, sobbing. “I’ve got you,” he murmured.

Jeremy came back with my phone after a while and handed it back to me. “I can honestly say I don’t think I’ve ever seen Tony get as angry as he was just now.”

“At me?” I asked incredulously.

Jeremy looked taken aback. “Of course not. At Marco. He was livid. I expect Marco will be hearing from him soon.”

I sighed. “Great. One more reason for him to be mad at me.”

Sean sat up and leaned away from me so he could look me in the eye. “Liam, that man has zero reasons to be mad at you. You weren’t the one who arranged a romantic night of stargazing. That was him. You also weren’t the one who pulled that shitty Grindr stunt. That was all him.”

“I just wish I understood why,” I said plaintively.

“He’s a shitty person. End of story.”

But I knew that wasn't the whole story. Marco wasn't a shitty person. He was kind and loving. I'd never seen him be cruel except to people who deserved it. What had I done to make him act that way toward me?

Marco

Well, fuck. I watched Liam walk out of my house without saying a word to stop him. I was frozen in place. He was gone and presumably wouldn't be coming back. The house key he'd left on my counter mocked me. It was like it was saying, *This is what you wanted, isn't it? He was getting too close, and you were starting to care too much.*

Right. I straightened. Liam knew what he was getting into when he decided to hook up with me. It wasn't my fault he'd gotten his feelings hurt. My mind helpfully brought up images from the last time we'd fucked. I'd wanted to see his face when he came. I'd wanted to kiss him while I drove into his body. And yeah, that wasn't fucking at all, was it? Which was the reason for the Grindr hookup. I had to get my head out of the clouds. I didn't want to get attached. Liam just made it easy by walking away.

Then why couldn't I swallow past the lump in my throat? Why did my stomach feel like it was lined with lead? My phone lit up with another message from Cutietwinkboi817. I picked up my phone to answer and saw the picture I'd left for Liam to see. I guessed it was the last straw for him after what had felt like making love the night before.

Cutietwinkboi817: Hey, Daddy, I'm all slick and ready for your big cock.

Christ. I hated when they called me Daddy. First, I was not *that* old, and second, it just wasn't my thing. I almost didn't want to bother. I wasn't feeling it anymore. Then again, maybe Cutietwinkboi817 could get things going for me. I put on my dumb-as-fuck Jersey-boy persona.

Jerseyjoe09: Where u at?

Cutietwinkboi817: The Empress. Room 204.

Fuck it.

It took me less than twenty minutes to get to Asbury Park. The Empress Hotel was down by the boardwalk, connected to Paradise, the gay nightclub. The club where I'd had my first taste of Liam O'Neil. I heard the muted bass beat coming from the club as I walked past its doors.

My steps slowed as I rounded the corner, heading toward the hotel's entrance. Normally I'd be hyped and ready to fuck. But every time I thought about the picture on my phone, it was overlaid with the hurt in Liam's eyes as he calmly exited my life. And apparently, my dick was team Liam tonight.

While I was standing on the sidewalk like a dumbass, my phone vibrated with a call. I checked the screen, partly hoping it was Liam, even if he was calling just to curse me out. Disappointment filled me when I saw it was Tony. I swiped to answer, hoping he had a job that would take my mind off all this shit.

"What's up?" I asked.

"You asshole," Tony growled.

"What...?"

He didn't give me a chance to finish. "I just got off the phone with Jeremy. Liam is over there after coming from your house. He's a mess, and Jeremy had to stop Sean from going out to look for your dumb ass."

My head fell back and I squeezed my eyes shut. "Fuuuck. I told Liam it was casual. He knew it when we started."

"Oh yeah?" Tony snarled. "How many of your hookups do you take out on your brother's boat to go stargazing?"

"I..." I had no answer for him.

"That's what I thought," he replied curtly. "Normally, I'd tell you to fix this, but I don't think you can. Liam is one of the nicest people I know, and you treated him like shit. You should have kept your dick in your pants since you're too much of a coward to take a chance with someone like him."

Anger flared in me. “Fuck you, Tony. You know what happened with Terry. You know I can’t go through that again.”

“Liam is nothing like Terry!” Tony shouted. “Terry never wanted help. I get that he was dealt a shitty hand, but he had the chance to still do good. He couldn’t get past not being a SEAL anymore. He was on self-destruct from the second he got back to the States.” His voice got softer. “He almost took you with him, and I can never forgive him for that.”

Tears pricked the backs of my eyes. “Tony...”

“Enough,” my brother said quietly. “I’ll talk to Liam tomorrow, see if I can get him to stay on the team. He’s a good medic, and he’s good for morale. If he stays, I’ll have Andrea or Dante pick him up for missions since they both live down here.”

Everything I wanted to say got stuck in my throat. All I could manage was, “Okay.”

Tony sighed. “You need to get past this, Marco. Liam... he’s one of the good ones. You might not get many more opportunities like that.”

“Yeah. Okay. I guess I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” I ended the call and barely resisted throwing my phone against the building. My head was such a mess. I didn’t know what to do with myself.

Another Grindr notification came through, and I groaned. I couldn’t do this now.

Cutietwinkboi817: Hey, Daddy. You on your way?

Jerseyjoe09: Sorry, can’t make it. Something came up. Maybe next time.

I turned off my phone and put it back in my pocket. I didn’t want to go home, so I crossed the street and headed onto the boardwalk. It was quiet this time of year. The boardwalk nightlife didn’t get going until Memorial Day weekend. In mid-March, a few year-round restaurants and bars were open, as well as the retro arcade, and that was about it.

I stood at the railing separating the boardwalk from the beach. The sky was dark, with no moon. Only a few stars were visible, the rest dimmed by all the lights from the boardwalk businesses. In my mind, I could hear Liam complaining about light pollution. Out in the distance, I saw the lights of several small boats shining like stars that had somehow touched the ocean.

I unexpectedly felt tears come to my eyes as the memory of my night with Liam on Tino's boat rose in my mind. I remembered the wonder in his eyes as we'd gazed at the stars spread like a carpet over the moonless sky. I also remembered the look on his face when I'd risen above him to enter his body and the tears he'd tried to hide from me when his orgasm crashed over him.

My head dropped and I gripped the railing tighter. I really was a complete and total asshole. A memory came to me then, sweet as honey and sharp as a knife: the night Liam had come to my house to take care of me. In my haze of pain and grogginess, I'd said I was a mess. Tears poured down my cheeks as I remembered what he said to me. *"You're not a mess. You're fine just the way you are."* Another memory came right on the heels of that one. The night of Jeremy and Sean's engagement, when he'd seen me suffering and taken care of me yet again. He'd allowed me my grief and honored my relationship with Terry.

It hit me with the force of a tidal wave. Everything he'd done was out of love, with no strings or expectations of me returning it. "Oh God," I whispered. "What have I done?"

I finally dragged my sorry ass back to my empty house. All the lights were still on. In the kitchen, the food that Liam had brought for the dinner he had never made sat on the counter next to a bottle of white wine. I picked up the bottle, remembering him telling me how much he liked this wine. He'd wanted to share it with me.

My head was a mess. I couldn't think straight. Everything Tony said to me was true. Liam was nothing like Terry. He never shied away from getting help when he needed it. He never gave anyone, including me, grief for asking for or

needing help. He had the biggest heart of anyone I knew, and I had just stomped on it because I was scared. Tony was right. I was a coward.

Liam

I ended up staying overnight at Sean and Jeremy's place. I couldn't bear being in my cottage alone with my maudlin thoughts. Sean even went over and got my pajamas and a change of clothes. We stayed up late and watched stupid comedies. I thought about calling out of work the next day, but I needed to keep my mind busy. I was working the afternoon into the evening shift anyway, so there was no excuse for missing work. Except for a broken heart.

When I groggily wandered into the kitchen the next morning, Jeremy handed me a cup of coffee and Sean sat me down at the table and put a plate of bacon and eggs in front of me. They both joined me at the table with their own breakfasts. After we finished, Jeremy turned to me and said, "Tony called me this morning. He asked me to ask you if he could stop by later to talk to you."

I blinked at him. "I'm confused. Why didn't he just call me? He has my number."

"He wasn't sure you would want to talk to him," Jeremy replied.

"And you don't have to," Sean added curtly. "I don't know what the hell he was thinking, getting you involved in dangerous shit like that."

That got my back up. "First of all, dear brother, I have a mind of my own. He asked me back in October, and I thought about it for a couple of weeks before I said yes. Second, I am never in danger. All the former military people do the dangerous stuff. I just go in and patch people up."

"I still don't like it," he grumbled.

"You don't have to," I retorted. "Sean, I know you worry about me. I get it. But I have to live my life in a way that feels meaningful to me. I'm the only one who gets to decide what that looks like."

Sean closed his eyes and sighed. "Yeah, I get it."

To Jeremy, I said, “I’ll text Tony to tell him he can come by here if that’s okay with you both.”

“That’s fine with me,” Jeremy said. Sean just nodded while wearing a disapproving frown. It almost made me laugh.

I texted Tony.

Me: Jeremy said you wanted to talk to me. I have to be at the clinic by 2:00. You can come over any time before 1:00.

Tony: Great! I’m at my parents’ house in Belmar. How about I come over in half an hour?

Me: Sure. I’ll see you then.

I rose from the table. “He’ll be here in half an hour. I’m going to take a shower.”

I was just coming down the stairs after showering and getting dressed when the doorbell rang. I hurried to answer it but didn’t beat Sean to the door like I wanted.

Sean opened the door, a frown creasing his brow. “Tony.”

“Hey, Sean,” Tony said with a smile.

I jogged over before Sean could go into protective-brother mode. I practically shoved my brother out of the way and said, “Hi, Tony. Come in. Sean is being a pain in the ass, so ignore him.”

Tony looked bemused. “Okay?”

Sean narrowed his eyes at me, and I glared at him. “Let. It. Go.”

Jeremy came over and intervened. “Come on, love. Let them talk in peace.” He turned to me. “You can use the study.”

I gestured for Tony to follow me down a short hallway to the study. There was a large wooden desk on one wall and a loveseat and armchair angled toward each other on the wall across from it. I took the armchair and gave Tony the sofa. He looked troubled, almost nervous. I thought I would put him out

of his misery. “Tony, just so you know, I still want to work with your team.”

His shoulders relaxed, and he let out a whoosh of breath. “Thank Christ. I think the team would have mutinied if you decided to quit.”

Surprise rendered me speechless for a moment. “The team knows?”

I noticed, with a pang, that when Tony looked frustrated, he looked a lot like Marco. I guess, technically, it would be the other way around since Tony was older. “Gabe picked up on it when I told him you wouldn’t be coming on as the medic for our security gig. He was pissed because the team asked for you to be there.”

“They did?” Warmth filled my chest and tears pricked the backs of my eyes. “That’s...wow.”

Tony leaned forward. “Listen, those people adore you. They think you’re an amazing nurse. Hell, you saved Gabe’s life. He’s not going to forget that.”

I was filled with conflicting emotions. I wanted to be there for the team, especially since they’d asked for me specifically. I just wasn’t sure I was ready to see Marco again so soon.

Finally, the nurse in me won out. “When and where is it? I have to work tomorrow until five. My boss gave me off on Friday since I had to work on my birthday last week.”

The relief on Tony’s face was flattering. “It’s a wedding. Thursday and Friday night in the City. The rehearsal dinner is Thursday night, starting at eight. The wedding is Friday evening starting at six. It’s a high-profile wedding and they want tight security. The bride’s family comes from money. The groom is nobody famous, but the bride has an ex that didn’t take it well when she started dating the guy she’s marrying. He’s been sending her letters that hit just below the line of threatening. She has a restraining order against him for harassment. He’s been quiet lately, but she’s worried he’s planning something for the wedding.”

“Wow, that’s rough for her,” I said.

“Yeah,” Tony replied. “And she’s really sweet. I was expecting a bridezilla because of all the money, but she’s been nothing but nice. The groom too. He’s very protective of her. It was his idea to hire security.”

I was a little surprised. “I would think the family would want security for something like this regardless.”

Tony shrugged. “They have their own in-house, but nothing specialized for tracking a stalker. The groom insisted. He heard about how we handled the Gage event from someone who worked there and called us in for the wedding.”

I blew out a breath. “Okay. I’ll do it. But I can’t ride in with Marco. And I won’t be able to leave here until after I get off work at five.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “This isn’t something that requires a team meeting like the other missions. Andrea volunteered to drive you up if you changed your mind.”

I smiled. “That works for me. We can talk about her D&D campaign.”

“Her what?”

I snickered. “Andrea and Dante play D&D with some friends. I was thinking about joining them.”

He shook his head. “Whatever floats your boat.”

“It’s fun,” I said. “I haven’t played in years.”

Tony rose. “All right, I have to get back to the City to get ready for this shindig. I’ll have Andrea call you to work out the pickup time and place.”

I stood as well. “Okay. I’ll be ready.”

Tony stopped before he got to the door. Turning to me, he said, “Listen, I know Marco fucked up big time with you.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “He’s not a bad guy. He was just such a mess after Terry died that he couldn’t find his way.”

“I understand that,” I replied. “But it doesn’t excuse what he did last night. That was some next-level fuckery.”

“I know,” Tony said. “I’m not defending him.” He hesitated for a moment. “How much has Marco told you about Terry?”

“Nothing really, except they were engaged and Terry died,” I answered.

Tony’s mouth turned down in a deep frown. “Terry didn’t just die. He killed himself.”

My hand went to my mouth. “Oh my God. That’s awful.”

“It was,” Tony agreed. “I won’t go into detail because that’s Marco’s story to tell, but my brother was so torn up after Terry that he couldn’t find his way back to being the man he used to be. It was only recently that I caught a glimpse of that guy.”

“I appreciate you telling me this, Tony,” I said. “But I can’t be with someone who treats me like he did.” I shook my head. “I don’t think he wants to be with me anyway. Otherwise, why would he have done that?”

“I get it,” Tony said. “I just thought you should know.”

“Okay.” I had no idea what to say after all that.

“Andrea will give you a call later today,” he said as he left the room.

“Got it.”

I walked Tony to the front door. After I closed it behind him, I leaned against it. His revelation put a whole new spin on Marco’s behavior. Not that I could do anything about it. It was all on Marco to change if he wanted to. I just wished my stupid heart would stop hoping he would want to.

Marco

I was in hell. The rehearsal dinner went fine. So far, the wedding was going fine. Everything was fucking *fine*.

Except I had to watch Liam talk to everyone but me. Not that he was ignoring me, exactly. He'd checked in and said hello when he got to the venue last night. He'd listened when I talked about his part of the operation. He'd said thank you. And that was it. No jokes. No sassy comments. No eye rolls. No smile. He barely looked at me.

The worst part was I knew I deserved it after what I'd done. I probably deserved worse, but Liam wasn't the kind of person to be spiteful. No. He calmly walked out of my life after laying on some pretty heavy truths that I was still trying to accept. Truths that left me feeling unmoored.

I was used to having a plan. I was used to anticipating an outcome and making it happen. The situation with Liam was one huge unknown. I didn't want to have feelings for him, but I did. I absolutely fucking did. The question was, what was I going to do about it?

My comms came to life. It was Michael. "Marco, one of our cameras picked up the ex-boyfriend coming in through the service entrance."

"Gabe?"

"On it."

There was a shout and the sound of a scuffle. A man's angry voice shouted, "Don't you know who I am?"

Gabe's voice came back. "Yeah, you're the whiny bitch who can't take no for an answer and who's now going to jail for violating a restraining order."

There was more inarticulate yelling, which I ignored. "Michael, did you call NYPD?"

"They're on their way."

“Good work, everyone.”

“This guy’s a wiggler,” Gabe said. “I could use a second pair of hands.”

“On my way,” Dante said.

“I’m taking him through the kitchen.”

“Copy that, Gabe,” I said. “Andrea and Pete, discreetly get the bride and groom to the conference room Michael’s using.”

“Roger that, Chief,” Pete said.

“Roger that, Sarge,” Andrea acknowledged.

I continued to scan the ballroom where the reception was taking place, confident my team knew what they were doing without me monitoring their every move. None of the guests knew there was a problem, which was how I liked it. Andrea and Pete approached the happy couple and drew them to the side. The bride looked upset, and the groom looked furious. Andrea put her arm gently around the bride’s shoulders and spoke quietly as she guided her toward the exit.

“Michael and Liam, the bride and groom are coming your way,” I said.

“Copy that, bro,” Michael said.

“Okay. Sorry, copy that,” Liam said.

There were snickers and gentle teasing from the team. I said nothing. I wanted to tease him and make him smile, but that wasn’t going to happen. My team was barely speaking to me. They were all pissed about what had happened with Liam. I couldn’t even justify it with myself, never mind them.

A shout came over the comms and a vicious “Motherfucker!” from Gabe.

I started heading toward the exit to get to the kitchen. “What’s happening, Gabe.”

“The asshole grabbed a knife from one of the kitchen staff and cut me.”

“I’m almost there,” Dante called out.

“Is it bad?” Liam asked. “Do I need to go down there?”

I wanted to shout no. He wasn't allowed to put himself in danger at all, ever. Gabe answered him before I could say anything. “Nah, it's not that bad. I got a towel from one of the staff. I'll bring myself to you to get patched up.”

“I'm with Gabe now,” Dante said.

Now that we knew he was safe, the team started bitching at Gabe.

“Jesus Christ, Gabe!” Pete said. “Can't you go on one op without getting hurt?”

“Maybe we should label *you* soft and squishy,” Liam snarked.

“Listen, you,” Gabe shot back, “I might just join your little D&D game so I can smite your squishy self.”

“I'd like to see you try,” Liam retorted. “Fireball is my friend.”

“Ok, this sounds good,” Pete said. “I want in.”

“Sounds like our first game with Liam is going to be a riot,” Andrea said.

For the first time since I put my team together, I felt isolated from them. I wasn't sure how I could fix this rift between us. I had to get out of my own way somehow.

I kept going toward where Gabe and Dante would be coming out of the kitchen, trying to push aside my hurt feelings. They had no place in a professional operation. “On my way toward you, Gabe. What's your location?”

“Exiting the kitchen now. Heading to the conference room.”

“Copy that,” I said. “I'll meet you outside the door.”

“Andrea and Pete, what's your status?”

“Standby, Sarge,” she said quietly. A couple of seconds later, she came back. “The bride's mother saw us leaving and

wanted to know what was happening. Now she's all upset. I'm trying to calm her down."

"All right. You're good at calming people down. Do what you do best. Let me know if you need backup."

"Roger that, Sarge. And thanks."

I hurried toward the conference room because I didn't want Richie McAsshole in the room with Michael and Liam without me putting the fear of God in him. I got there just as Gabe and Dante were dragging him down the hallway. He was still yelling and cursing them out, which I mostly ignored until I heard the N-word come out of his mouth when he was addressing Dante.

I strode over to him and grabbed the front of his shirt in my fist. "Shut your filthy mouth right now."

"Don't you know who I am?" he snarled.

"Oh, I know who you are, Charles Edward Wainwright the Third. I also know you're violating a civil restraining order that requires you to stay away from Miss Fairfield... Oh, wait, that's *Mrs. Kelsey* now, isn't it?"

"No! She was supposed to marry me! Not that lowlife nobody!"

"And yet she did marry him," I said. "You, on the other hand, are going to go up on charges of assault with a deadly weapon. And believe me, we *will* press charges, we *will* follow through, and we will *not* be scared off by Daddy's money."

Charles sputtered and took a breath for another rant. That died like a deflating balloon when four New York City police officers arrived. He tried to look pathetic and said, "Thank goodness you're here, officers. This thug assaulted me, and he won't let me go."

One of the officers knew me from other security jobs we'd done in the City. He narrowed his eyes at Charles and said, "What do you have, Marco?"

"Charles here violated a restraining order and then attacked my teammate, Gabriel Warner, with a knife." I

pointed at Gabe, who was holding a bloody towel against his upper arm.

“Do you want to press charges, Mr. Warner?” the officer asked.

“Yes, I do,” Gabe replied.

“Do you need medical attention?”

Gabe shook his head. “Nah. We have a medic here. He’ll patch me up.”

“We’ll need to take your statement,” another officer said.

I opened the door to the conference room. “We’re set up in here.”

We all filed in, and I closed the door behind me. Michael was set up in the middle of the long conference table with his laptop connected to four screens. Liam had already opened his medical bag and was set up in the corner with a side table and two chairs.

Liam smirked and patted the chair next to his. “We have to stop meeting like this.”

Gabe plopped into the chair and took the bloody towel off his arm. “I thought this was the best way to meet cute nurses.”

Liam smiled and blushed. Gabe’s gaze slid over to me, and I knew he’d done it on purpose. I was going to kick his ass. Andrea’s voice came over the comms. “Hey, Sarge. I have Marissa and Scott out here. She doesn’t want to be in the same room with Charles.”

“Okay. I have NYPD here. I’ll bring an officer out, and they can take her statement.”

“Copy that,” she replied.

One officer was already taking Gabe’s statement. The other three were talking to Charles in a corner of the room. I got the attention of one of them, who came over and asked, “What can I do for you, Mr. D’Angelo?”

I gestured with my thumb to the conference room door. “I have the bride and groom outside. The bride has a restraining

order against Mr. Wainwright and wants to press charges. But she doesn't want to be in the same room with him.”

The officer nodded. “I get it.” She briefly spoke to one of the other officers before following me into the hallway. The hotel manager was there, wringing his hands nervously. We assured him repeatedly that this wasn't his or the hotel's fault. I gave him the job of setting up a room for Marissa so she could make her statement in private.

Andrea and Pete had already gone into the conference room when I got back. I went in and sat in a chair, trying not to stare at Liam giving Gabe stitches. I decided closing my eyes would be the best way to deal with that.

I caught myself almost drifting off to sleep, which was bad. I never did that in the middle of an operation. A light touch on my shoulder startled me, and I turned my head to find Liam standing there. Now that I saw him up close, he looked as bad as I felt. “What's up?” I murmured.

He looked so uncertain it broke my heart. I'd done that. “I'm all done with Gabe,” he said quietly. “Since the rest of the night is just talking to the police, I figure you don't need me anymore, so I'm headed home.”

In my head, I said, *I always need you*, but the words stuck in my throat. I didn't want him to leave, but I didn't say that either. Instead, I said, “You don't have a ride.”

For some reason, his frown deepened. “It's okay. Tony said he'd drive me home.”

Stay with me. I'll drive you home. We can talk. I can tell you...

I sat a little straighter. Tell him what? My throat closed around the words as the revelation struck me. I couldn't speak, and Liam was backing away from me. I finally opened my stupid mouth to say something, but all that came out was, “Thank you for coming. I really appreciate it.”

His eyes got a little shiny and he swallowed hard enough for me to see his Adam's apple bob. “Sure. I'll...see you next time.”

He grabbed his medical bag and coat and walked out of the room. When the door closed behind him, someone slapped me on the back of the head hard enough to actually hurt. “What the fuck?”

I turned to see Gabe standing there. “You idiot.” He pointed to the chair where Liam had sat while he worked on Gabe. “You know what he did the entire time he stitched me up? He talked about you. He kept saying how he wished you would talk to him. Tell him what’s going on in that stupid head of yours so he could understand why you were such a flaming asshole to him.”

I narrowed my eyes. “He said all that. Just like that.”

Gabe shrugged. “I might have embellished a little.”

There were snickers around the table. Michael spoke up, “Marco, the guy is head over heels in love with you. You know that, right?”

The police officer interviewing Marissa came back into the room to save me from the inquisition. “Mrs. Kelsey wants to press charges. We’re going to take Mr. Wainwright down to the station for booking. We have all your statements. We’ll call you if we need anything else.”

“I have the video from the kitchen,” Michael said.

She nodded and handed Michael her card. “Send it and anything else relevant over to that email address.”

After the officers left with Charles in handcuffs, my entire team just stared at me. “What?”

“What are you going to do about Liam?” Gabe asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered sullenly.

“Well, you better figure it out,” he said. “Because he won’t wait for you forever, no matter how much he loves you.”

“I know.” I just didn’t know what to do about it.

Liam

It was Saturday morning, and I didn't want to get out of bed. After all, I didn't have to go to work, I had no plans with my family, and I certainly wasn't going to have self-defense training with Marco. I threw my arm over my face. I needed to get him out of my head. Yeah right. Fat chance of that happening.

I'd asked Tony to drop me off at my place rather than take me back to Sean and Jeremy's house. I really didn't want to face another inquisition from my brother. I loved him to pieces, but as Marco would say, Sean was a bossy fucker.

I wasn't sure what I'd expected when I agreed to be the medic for Marco's security operation. Initially, I'd wanted nothing to do with Marco. Until I'd seen him. Then it was all I could do not to throw myself at him and shake him to make him talk to me.

First of all, he was wearing a suit and, damn, that man wore a suit well. It was cut perfectly to fit his big body. I wanted to climb him like a tree. Second, he looked sad. Every time I caught his eye, he dropped his gaze and looked away. I finally had to stop making eye contact with him because it was too hard.

I wanted to be angry with him. I still was, on some level. What he did was shitty. But learning about Terry's suicide gave me a different perspective. I better understood Marco's fear. I just wished he had talked to me instead of driving me away. I wasn't even sure if that had been his intention. I wondered if he'd thought I would take his Grindr escapade as a sign to keep things casual and not get too attached. Not so much. I was attached. More than attached if I let myself think about it too hard.

The problem was he seemed to want to get attached as well. I'd had my fair share of hookups, and never once had any of them taken me on a romantic boat ride or thrown me a

birthday party, and I doubted they would have kissed me on the forehead after a flashback.

I groaned. I was not going to stay in bed mooning over Marco D'Angelo. I made myself get out of bed. I decided to go for a run on the boardwalk to chase away the last of the cobwebs. It was cold outside, but I wore long running pants, a long-sleeve sweat-wicking shirt, and gloves. I figured the run would help me get my head on straight. But nope. All it did was get me cold as the wind whipped up in icy gusts off the Atlantic and chilled me to the bone. A big difference from our night out on the boat only four days before. March was a fickle bitch.

I headed right to the shower when I got home. The dual showerheads were my absolute favorite thing about the bathroom. I had a renewed appreciation of Sean's renovations every time I used it.

I stood under the spray and groaned as the water heated my chilled body. As I soaped myself, my thoughts inevitably went to Marco. I imagined his big body over me, his long, thick cock driving into me, filling and stretching me so wonderfully well. My own cock thickened. I took myself in hand, wishing it was Marco's on me instead. Images of the last time we were together flooded my mind. My cock hardened painfully as I remembered every look, every thrust as he sent me over the edge hands-free.

A moan slipped from me when I drove my aching dick through my fist. I soaped up two fingers of my other hand and slid them one at a time into my clenching hole. I wanted Marco so much. I wanted him behind me, his hand around my throat, his cock thrusting into me without mercy.

Just imagining it was enough to send me over the edge. My orgasm slammed into me, radiating throughout my body. I couldn't help myself. I threw back my head and cried out Marco's name, loud enough for everyone in the hotel to hear, no doubt.

My head dropped as I tried to catch my breath. Jerking off to Marco wasn't helping me forget him. Not that I really

wanted to forget him. I wanted him to talk to me. To say something, anything. Before I'd left the hotel the night before, he'd looked like he was about to say something important. But then he'd just thanked me for coming, and that was it. I'd been so disappointed that I had wanted to cry.

I finished my shower and dried off. Once dressed, I decided to go to the hotel dining room and use the piano. It was just after ten, so I'd have a couple of hours to play before customers showed up for lunch. Music had always soothed me in the past.

Before I got to the dining room, I was stopped by my brother coming out of his office. "What are you doing here?" I asked. "I thought you stopped working on Saturdays."

Sean shrugged, looking a little sheepish. "There was an early delivery and we're shorthanded today. I'm heading home now." He looked me up and down. "What about you? What are you up to?" His brow creased in a frown. "You're not doing more of that hand-to-hand combat training, are you?"

I rolled my eyes. "First of all," I said, "It's self-defense training. And second, if I did want to learn hand-to-hand combat, it would still be none of your business." I put my hand on his shoulder. "Sean, I get that you love me and want me to be safe. But I am twenty-nine years old and quite capable of taking care of myself. I love you, but your overprotectiveness is driving me crazy."

Sean sighed and his shoulders slumped. "I know. I'm sorry. I just can't get past what happened to you last year. You could have died. It was only thanks to Jeremy knowing Tony that you got rescued. I hated feeling so helpless."

I pulled him into a hug. "I know. I was very lucky. I give thanks for that every day. But I also have to live my life, Sean. I do my best not to put myself in danger, but I'm not going to stop helping where I can just because there's a risk." I pulled back and looked into his eyes. "I need you to understand that."

Sean's eyes were shining with unshed tears. "I do. It doesn't seem like it, but I do. I'm trying to do better, but every

time I think you're in trouble, something clicks in my brain, and I react. Jeremy thinks it might help if I go to a therapist."

"It probably would. You can have PTSD symptoms even if you weren't the one in danger." I hugged him again. "I love you, Sean. I couldn't have asked for a better big brother."

"I love you too," he said, kissing the side of my head. "Now, about Marco..."

I stepped back and shook my head. "Nope. That goes for who I date as well. There's more going on than you know, and it's not my story to tell. It doesn't mean Marco gets a pass for what he did the other night, but if he wants to talk to me about what's going on with him, I'll listen. Okay?"

"Yeah. Okay." He gave me a sad smile. "You know I'll always be here for you if you need me."

"I know," I said. "Now go back to your fiancé and enjoy the rest of your day."

He waggled his eyebrows comically. "You bet I will. We have *plans*."

I stuck my fingers in my ears. "La, la, la, la. I don't need to hear about my brother's sex life."

Sean laughed and ruffled my hair like he used to do when we were kids. "I'll see you later."

I was still smiling when I sat at the piano and started to play. Although I could play classical music fairly well, I preferred to play music I could sing to. I started down my old playlist of songs, trying not to be too loud with my singing. After finishing "The Words" by Christina Perri, I realized I was trending toward melancholy love songs. Yeah, I wished Marco would use his words. So, of course, I started playing "Say Something" by A Great Big World.

By the time I ended the song, my voice was barely above a whisper and tears were running down my cheeks. "Damn it, Marco," I whispered.

"Liam."

I started and whipped my head around. “Marco?” I hurriedly wiped my eyes with my shirt sleeve. “What are you doing here? How did you know where to find me?”

Marco’s eyes were shiny, and it looked like he was holding back tears. “I went to your place first. I wanted to talk to you. When you didn’t answer, I was trying to decide what to do when I ran into Sean. He, uh, tore a strip off me and gave me the shovel talk. Then he told me where you were.” He swallowed hard. “I was hoping you’d want to talk to me, even after...everything.”

Marco

I wished I could have taken a picture of the look on Liam's face when I asked that question. It transformed from sadness to pure joy in seconds. He blinked away his remaining tears and wiped his face again. "I would like that a lot." He looked around the dining room, noticing the staff getting the room ready for lunch, and said, "Let's go to Sean's office. We'll have more privacy."

I followed him out of the dining room, through the bar area, and down the back hallway to his brother's office. I couldn't believe how much I missed him after only a few days. We'd been apart longer than that when I'd gone on extraction missions, but we were still in communication with each other. He would send me snarky texts or funny memes, and I would pretend I wasn't eagerly anticipating every one of them. The silence from him had been excruciating.

Part of me didn't want to talk. I just wanted to grab him and hold him and never let go. But I knew I had to talk to him, especially judging by the songs he'd been playing when I walked into the dining room. I got the message loud and clear.

Liam unlocked the door to Sean's office and ushered me inside. He closed and locked it behind him. He gestured to the two chairs in front of the large wooden desk and said, "We can sit here or over there on the sofa."

"Here is good," I said.

He angled the chairs so we could face each other and then took the chair farther from the door. I was about to take the other chair when I spotted the picture on Sean's desk. I picked it up, remembering the first time I'd seen it while helping with security at Jeremy's best friend's wedding. I smiled at the image of Liam with a broad grin, standing with his brother and the old guy who used to own Moonlight Inn. "You know," I said, "When I saw this picture of you the first time, I asked your brother who the cutie was."

Liam rolled his eyes. “Oh lord. I’ll bet he got all growly and big brotherly.”

I shrugged. “Kinda. When he said you were over in Syria, well really, Lebanon, I think I scared him by saying civilians should stay out of war zones.”

“You weren’t wrong,” he replied quietly.

I sat with the picture still in my hand. “You were needed.” I looked at the picture again before setting it back on the desk. “You know, I thought about you a lot after that. I mean, before we had to go rescue you. That smile of yours stayed with me for some reason.” I glanced at my hands before looking back up at him. “I missed that smile when it was gone,” I said hoarsely.

Liam put one of his hands over mine. “I missed you too. So much. But we have to talk about what happened. I can’t just push it under the rug and pretend it didn’t happen.”

I nodded, swallowing hard. “I know. I want to tell you first that I didn’t follow through with the hookup. I couldn’t do it. It made me feel sick just thinking about it.”

His hand squeezed mine. “That’s good to know. I appreciate you telling me. But why did you feel like you needed to do it in the first place? And why advertise it to me the way you did?”

“The short answer is, I was scared,” I said.

“And what’s the long answer?”

I looked Liam in the eyes. “Before I answer that, I want to say I’m so sorry for what I did. It was fucked up beyond reason, and even though I know why I did it, it’s not an excuse. I only hope you can forgive me.”

He squeezed my hand again. “I appreciate your apology. I want to forgive you, but I also want to understand why you did it.”

I nodded. My hands clenched into fists on my lap. I took a slow breath in and let it out even more slowly. “You know that Terry and I were engaged, and you know he died.”

Liam nodded. “I should tell you that Tony told me Terry died by suicide. He didn’t elaborate on how or why. I think he wanted me to understand there was more to what you did than you just being an asshole.”

I didn’t know if I wanted to laugh, cry, or punch my brother. “Speaking of overprotective brothers...”

Liam shrugged. “He loves you, and he knew you were hurting.”

I turned my hand over so I could hold his. “I met Terry when he was assigned to my team. We hit it off right away. It was a couple of years before we got together because, technically, he was my subordinate. But we just couldn’t keep our hands off each other. So we kept it on the down low for a long time. My commanding officer found out but pretended he didn’t know anything. As long as we didn’t let it affect our mission readiness, he didn’t care. And thankfully, he wasn’t homophobic. We were happy. Everything was good until Terry was wounded in combat.” I stopped talking and closed my eyes as flashes of that day ran through my mind.

I felt Liam’s hand on my cheek. “Hey, you don’t have to tell me anything more if it’s going to hurt you.”

I opened my eyes and put my hand over his. “It’s okay. I want to tell you. You need to know.” I took another deep breath. “Terry’s injuries were so bad that he was medically discharged and sent home.”

“Oh shit,” Liam whispered.

I nodded. “Yeah. I followed him home as soon as I could. He did rehab here, and it went well. For a while, things were good. Good enough for me to propose. Good enough that I thought Terry was ready to join our extraction team. I was wrong. He got reinjured on our first mission. Badly enough that he had to have another surgery, and his doctor banned him from that kind of work indefinitely.”

“And he didn’t take it well, did he?”

“No, he didn’t,” I agreed. “He went downhill fast after that.” I felt my heart racing. My throat was closing up. I didn’t

know if I could get the words out.

Once again, Liam gave me an out. “Marco, don’t. It’s okay.”

I clenched my jaw. “It’s not okay. It’ll never be okay.” My voice was thick when I could speak again. “In the middle of the night on October twenty-second twenty-nineteen, he drove out to Sandy Hook beach and blew his brains out.” I couldn’t say anything else because my throat was so tight with tears that wouldn’t come.

“Oh God, Marco.” Liam got out of his seat and crawled into my lap. He put his arms around me and held me. And finally, finally, the tears came. I sobbed like a baby in his arms while he spoke soothing nonsense.

When I finally stopped crying, he gently wiped the tears from my cheeks with his thumbs. He smiled tenderly and said, “Why don’t we go to the couch? There’s more room, and you’ll be more comfortable.” He stood and held out his hand to me. I took it and pulled him into a tight hug.

“Thank you.” It was all I could say at the moment.

He led me over to the couch and gently pushed me to sit. He sat next to me, but I wasn’t having any of that. I grabbed him around the waist and dragged him back onto my lap. “That’s better.”

He made a happy sound and snuggled into me. “I always wanted to do this, but I figured you wouldn’t want to.”

“I did, and I didn’t,” I said. “I wanted you more than I wanted to want you.”

Liam leaned back and looked at me with a raised brow. “That’s a lot of wanting.”

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up.” I pulled him close and sighed. “I want to tell you why Wednesday night happened the way it did.”

“Okay,” he said.

“After I dropped you off, I went home. And, of course, I got all up in my head about our night out. I decided to sleep on

it and had a nightmare.” Liam put one of his hands over mine and squeezed. I blew out a breath. “It started out the same as they always do, but at the end, instead of Terry being dead on the ground, it was you.”

Liam gasped. “Oh. That’s...”

“Awful,” I finished. “I lost my mind. Literally. All I could think about was how I didn’t ever want to go through what I went through with Terry again. I figured I’d show you once and for all that we were casual, and you would stop wriggling your way under my skin. And into my heart.”

Liam leaned away from me so he could look into my eyes. “Have I?” he asked.

“Have you what?”

“Wriggled my way into your heart.”

I cupped his cheeks and kissed his forehead. “Yes, you have. Despite my best efforts to stop it.”

His eyes filled with tears. “That’s good then because I love you too.”

I put my arms around him and held him close. “I never thought I’d want to hear those words from anyone else. I can’t believe I almost lost you. I love you, Liam.”

He leaned back again, a glint of mischief in his eyes. “I think you need to make it up to me.”

“Make what up to you?” I asked, smirking.

“All the heartache and angst of the last few days.”

“Is that so? And how do you propose I do that?”

He moved to straddle me. “Pucker up, sunshine.”

I couldn’t help it. I had to smile. But I played along. “Nobody calls me sunshine.”

“All right, Mr. Grumpy Pants,” he said with a grin. “Then kiss me already.”

I wrapped my arms around him and stood. He wrapped his arms around my neck and his legs around my waist. I moved

my hands down to cup his sweet little ass. “Remember what happened the first time you called me that?”

“Yeah,” he murmured as he kissed his way down my jaw. “I’m hoping for a repeat.”

“Not here,” I said. “I’m pretty sure your brother and Jeremy have had sex on this couch.”

He shuddered. “You’re probably right. Lucky for us, my place is just behind the hotel.”

I patted his ass. “Feet on the floor. We’ll get there quicker if you walk.”

He pouted. “Kiss me first.”

I slid the fingers of one hand into his hair and drew him down into a kiss. He opened sweetly for me, tangling his tongue with mine. By the time I pulled away, we were both breathless. Liam dropped his legs, and I leaned my forehead against his. “I love you, Liam.”

“I love you,” he said. “So much.” His eyes gleamed with excitement. “I can’t wait to see what adventures we’ll have.”

I kissed his forehead. “As long as we have them together, I’m happy.”

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

Liam

I listened to the waves gently lapping against the sides of the boat. Okay, yacht. Marco had rented a yacht. It was a moonless night, and we were anchored far enough away from shore that we could see all the stars in the night sky. Only this time, we weren't in the cold Atlantic. This time, we were in the lovely, warm Caribbean off the coast of Puerto Rico.

Marco sat beside me and handed me a glass of wine. "Happy birthday, baby."

I leaned over to kiss him. "Thank you, my love. This might rival last year for the best birthday ever."

"It's definitely a lot warmer," he said. He eased himself slowly into his chair.

"How's the leg?" I asked.

"Better." He stretched it out in front of him. "It's not as stiff."

"That's good. I think that orthopedic doctor is going to get tired of seeing you."

He took hold of my hand. "I'm just glad you were there. That asshole the corporation sent was useless. He had no idea how to treat combat wounds."

I rolled my eyes. "It was a fractured tibia. It's not rocket science."

Marco snorted. "It was a fractured tibia complicated by a bullet wound."

I shuddered. "Don't remind me. Why is it always you who gets shot?"

He shrugged. "Just lucky, I guess."

I narrowed my eyes. "Uh-huh. And that's why I insist on going with you on those extraction missions."

“Nah,” he said with a smirk. “You just miss me too much when I’m gone.”

I leaned over to kiss him. “Of course I miss you. I always miss you when you’re gone.”

After Marco returned from an extraction mission with another shoddy stitch job from the medic hired by the corporation, I lost my shit. I’d called Tony and insisted I be included in those missions from then on. Tony warned me that I’d probably have to quit my job at the VNA if he hired me because I would likely be called to leave on very little notice. That was a difficult decision for me to make. I loved the work I did at the clinic. But I loved Marco more. I wanted to be there to take care of him when he needed me. I’m sure there was a part of my brain that believed if I was there, I could magically prevent any harm from coming to him. Magical thinking for the win. So sue me.

As luck would have it, I reconnected with one of my classmates from nursing school who was looking for some work with underserved populations. He had a flexible schedule because he had a private practice, so we made a deal. Whenever I got called away, he would fill in for me. So far, it was working out pretty well. We even got a third person involved who could fill in when he couldn’t. My boss was thrilled.

“Okay, Navy man, show me some constellations.” Marco grabbed the leg of my chair and pulled it closer to his. He put his arm around my shoulders and started pointing out all the constellations visible this far south.

“What about the Southern Cross,” I asked.

“Not from here,” he said. “We’re not far enough south. You have to be at twenty-six degrees latitude or lower, and we’re only at eighteen. And even at twenty-six degrees, you won’t see it year-round. You’d have better luck in the Southern Hemisphere.”

I sighed. “Maybe someday.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he said softly. He stood and held out his hand. “Come on downstairs. I have something to show you.”

I waggled my eyebrows. “Is it you naked?”

Marco chuckled. “It might be if you behave.”

“Pfft. What’s the fun in that?”

He wrapped his arm around my shoulders. “Come on, trouble.”

We went down below deck to the luxurious stateroom. I was still trying to figure out how he’d managed to rent such a huge yacht. Then again, Tony had a lot of connections with wealthy people. So did Jeremy, for that matter. I sat on the king-size bed and took off my sandals. Marco was rummaging around in his duffel, looking for clothes, I assumed.

I pulled my shirt over my head, and when I looked up, Marco was standing in front of me with a large envelope. “What’s this?” I asked.

“It’s part of your birthday present. Sort of.”

“Sort of?” Now I was super curious. When I took the envelope from him, I noticed he looked nervous. What the heck was in there that would cause that reaction in him? I opened it and pulled out a sheet of paper with Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve printed on it. A second sheet of paper was a voucher for two for the Summit Experience with an open-ended date. My heart started racing. “What is this? Are you...?” I stopped and swallowed hard against the lump in my throat. I tried again. “Are you going to take me to New Zealand to go stargazing?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. If you want to go.”

I jumped up and threw my arms around his neck. “Of course I want to go!”

He wrapped his arms around me and kissed me before leaning back a little to look into my eyes. “I was kinda hoping it could be our honeymoon.”

I blinked. “Our honeymoon?” I repeated. “Is this...are you asking me to marry you?”

“Yes?”

I leaned my forehead against his chest and started to laugh. “Oh my God. You are... I don’t even know what to do with you.” I looked up at him with tears in my eyes. “I love you, Marco D’Angelo. Of course I’ll marry you.”

He let out an explosive breath. “Thank God.” He leaned his forehead against mine. “I love you, Liam. I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“Nothing would make me happier.”

THE END

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Down the Shore Series

- [Sunset- Prequel Novella](#)
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evie is a new author who has always been an avid reader, mostly fantasy, science fiction and, of course, romance. After raising three children into adulthood, acquiring a master's degree, and opening a counseling practice, she figured she didn't have enough to do, so she decided to write books. Evie lives "down the shore" in New Jersey with her husband, her youngest son, his fiancée, and her goofy Rottweiler. Every summer she complains about "the bennies" coming down and snarling up the traffic, but she's a Jersey Girl through and through.

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