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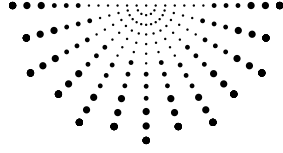
LOST LETTERS

A **FALCON FALLS SECURITY** NOVELLA

JOSEPH CANNATA
BRITTNEY SAHIN

THE LOST LETTERS

A FALCON FALLS SECURITY NOVELLA



JOSEPH CANNATA
BRITTNEY SAHIN

EMKO MEDIA

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This is dedicated to our amazing readers ...

Love,

Brittney and Joseph

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INTRODUCTION

From Joseph Cannata and *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author Brittney Sahin comes the love story of Jesse and Ella told from a unique perspective in this companion novella to the international bestselling novel *The Broken One*.

Step back into the Falcon Falls Security world and experience it like never before. Revisit some of your favorite characters as Jesse and Ella relive their love story surrounded by A.J., Marcus, Rory, and Savanna.

Written in first person dual point of view, *The Lost Letters* includes bonus content such as author forwards, letters by Jesse and Ella, specially curated music playlists, and audio clips by Joseph Cannata, the muse for Jesse.

The Lost Letters includes a prequel story for Jesse and Ella, who found their HEA in *The Broken One*, as well as alternative perspectives, extended scenes, and a bonus epilogue. For the best reading experience, it is highly recommended that this love story be read **after** [The Broken One](#).

Author Note: Select audio clips are hyperlinked and also listed in the afterword.

FOREWORD

JOSEPH CANNATA

As I sit here, I'm grateful for that cold winter's day—I mean, minus the “cold and winter's day” part—when I saw a message from someone named Brittney Sahin politely asking me if I had some images available for her upcoming book. I remember it like it was 5 minutes ago—and at the end of her very polite message (I think Brittney is secretly Canadian) saying “you probably won't see this anyway, I'm sure you're super busy.” Well, here we are, a little over two years ago since that message was viewed, and I still scratch my head at how the earth has spun far too quickly lately.

I am extremely grateful to you, Brittney, and to your loyal and future readers. I didn't think two years later I would be writing material for you that would be shared with you and your readers in connection to one of your bestselling books.

This was a challenge for me, and that's what I wanted it to be, that's where we find our growth. I hope you all enjoy these notes from Jesse to Ella. I enjoyed this process, something I've never actually done before, with the exception of writing in a journal as myself. So, once again, thank you, thank you, thank you. I hope that you all enjoy the new material. Maybe it will make you cry, smile, laugh (I'm hoping all those things).

Best,

Joseph Cannata

FOREWORD

BRITTNEY SAHIN

I'm someone who believes that (almost) everything in life happens for a reason. In my experience, every wrong turn I've taken wound up ultimately being the "right" one, even if it didn't seem so at first.

A little over two years ago, I purchased an image from a photographer for Roman's cover, *Chasing Shadows*. After going back and forth with my designer, I realized it was the wrong choice. It wasn't working because I had a very specific image in my head for Roman. So, on a whim, days after my deadline with my designer, I messaged Joseph Cannata.

Two years later ... here we are. I've never really stopped and wondered "what if" I had settled on that original image and didn't have the courage to reach out to Joseph—but I can imagine my life would be very different had that "wrong turn" image and last-minute message to Joseph not happened. And I'm so grateful to be on this path.

I've been blessed to work with Joseph on so many projects, and we've had so much fun bringing these books to life. Hopefully one day we'll also see these books on the big screen. It's been a privilege and my pleasure being on this journey with him.

Thank you, Joseph. And thank you for taking on this new project of becoming Jesse through writing.

X, Brittney

MUSIC PLAYLIST

Joseph's playlist on [Spotify](#).

Brittney's playlist on [Spotify](#).

Playlist curated by Joseph Cannata

Sam Hunt - *Young Once*

Foreign Air - *Your Touch*

Lifeshouse - *Everything - Live in Studio* (chapter four)

Kaleo - *Save Yourself*

City and Color - *Sleeping Sickness*

Osman - *For Us*

Colter Wall - *Sleeping on the Black Top*

Rufus du sol - *I don't Wanna Leave*

Playlist curated by Brittney Sahin

Luke Combs - *5 Leaf Clover* (chapter 2)

Nickelback - *Far Away*

Kygo & Dean Lewis - *Lost Without You*

Jordan Davis - *What My World Spins Around*

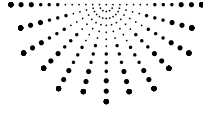
Morgan Wallen - *Sand in My Boots*

Cole Swindell - *Never Say Never*

Thomas Rhett - *Where We Started*

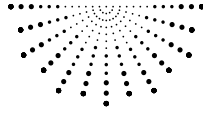
Arizona - *Oceans Away*

PART I



The beginning ...
(2006 - 2016)

CHAPTER ONE



ELLA

FALL 2006 - WALKINS GLEN, ALABAMA

ARE WE REALLY GOING IN THERE? I STARED AT THE HUGE SIGN that said: **Under 21 & You Get the Boot**. Well, there was a picture of a cowboy boot instead of the word. Walking into a local bar was a bit more brazen than simply stealing my brother's secret Tennessee moonshine on a cold Alabama night. "You sure about this?"

"No one is going to card us, and we don't have to order a drink, but everyone is in there. Why should we miss all the fun because we're not old enough?" Rory turned off her car.

Decision made, I supposed. *We're going in.*

The Drunk Gator was jam-packed based on the cars and trucks in the parking lot. Our small town, Walkins Glen, only had two real places to go and hang out for the over-twenty-one crowd. And all four of my brothers were currently throwing back whiskey inside this bar. Well, that was the mental image I had in my head. They weren't exactly tea drinkers.

"What's really got you nervous?" Rory probed.

I swallowed back a little bit of the fear and the nerves and deflected, "Jesse's home, right? Drove in for the party?"

"Saw him this afternoon, yeah. Why?"

I'd been mentally preparing myself to see him at the ranch tomorrow ever since Mom sent out invites for my brother's "Going Away to the Navy" party. A.J. had recently graduated from the University of Alabama and surprised us all with plans to join the military and become a SEAL one day.

I'd already been a hot mess since the day Jesse left for the Army the second he graduated high school. Now, I had A.J. to worry about, too. Overthinking, not my most endearing quality. But at eighteen, I was pretty sure that was a requirement—a skill we honed in high school as a survival mechanism. If you plot out every possible outcome of what

might happen, you're prepared for the best- and worst-case scenarios.

"Ella, you ever going to stop sweating and respond?"

Rory broke my nervous train of thoughts, and when I flicked the front of my shirt, a bead of sweat trickled down my cleavage.

My nerves had nothing to do with going into the bar and violating the "boot" sign; I was terrified of going inside and seeing Jesse. What if he was flirting with some girl? An ex-someone. Or a new-someone. Hell any-someone.

Oh God. I'm already a mess. "It's just been a minute since I've seen him." I peeled my focus back her way.

"My brother?" She arched a blonde brow.

"Yeah."

"That's one reason why we're going in there. Yeah, we'll see everyone at the party tomorrow, but I want to spend as much time with them all as possible."

"Me too." My shoulders fell. "Okay, let's go in. Try and not get booted."

She chuckled. "We'll be fine. No bouncer."

Before I could change my mind, I got out and hesitantly followed her to the front door.

Not even two seconds inside, and we were blocked by a wall of muscles. Of course my police officer brother would be the one to try and stop us from having fun.

Beckett tipped the brim of his Stetson before crossing his arms and staring at us like we were two little kids in trouble on the playground. "What in the blazes are you two doing in here?"

Rory grabbed hold of his big bicep and gave him her signature pouty look. "You're all only in town one weekend. We just want to spend time with everyone. We won't drink. Promise."

“Come on, Mr. LAPD, Big-City Guy,” I teased him. “Don’t be a grump.” I pushed up on my toes to try and see over his shoulder. To find the man that had me all out of sorts right now.

“Who are you straining your neck trying to see?” my brother asked. The guy didn’t miss a thing. Not a bad quality to have if he planned to make detective one day.

“Jesse,” I whispered what had meant to be only a thought the second I set my eyes upon the man.

Jesse had his arm over A.J.’s shoulder, but he was laughing at something A.J.’s good friend, Marcus, was saying to them all. Seeing that man smile. Laugh. My heart just ... may have exploded.

Beckett pivoted to the side, but I didn’t follow his gaze. And I didn’t have to. I knew he had Jesse in his crosshairs since Jesse was currently in mine.

I couldn’t steal my eyes away from him. Not for anyone or anything.

The manager would have to literally “boot me” out before I’d go anywhere.

The second Jesse’s eyes slid my way, as if suddenly realizing I was there, his laughter died. He lowered his arm from A.J.’s shoulder, said something to the guys, and began cutting straight to us. Blue eyes intensely focused on me.

“You’re letting us stay, right?” Rory asked Beckett. I was only vaguely aware of their continued back-and-forth, still too busy locking eyes with the man who starred in every one of my fantasies as he dodged people trying to talk to him.

“Fine, fine. But if I see you drinking, I’m personally escorting you both home,” Beckett warned just as Jesse reached us.

Jesse took me by surprise and lifted me up in the air as if I were weightless, his hands beneath my underarms, bringing us face-to-face. “Hey, you.” He blinked a few times as if startled by the fact he’d literally swept me off my feet. He slowly

lowered me down before I threw my arms around his waist and hugged him.

I smashed my cheek to his chest. Breathing him in.

He was safe. Alive. There in the flesh.

And there was so much muscle beneath the clothes that I didn't remember being there before he went to the Army.

"Alllllright, that's enough of that. If you don't stop, you're going to squeeze the life out of that man," my brother said, embarrassing me. Basically, what big brothers were probably supposed to do. That and protect their sister, which mine were almost too good at.

And having grown up with four overly protective brothers, the guys in town were not exactly lining up to ask me out.

And maybe that wasn't a bad thing.

Because the only guy I cared about was currently pressed up against me in my semi-death grip. "Sorry," I cried, realizing we were in a bar with pretty much *everyone* in town.

I finally peeled myself free from Jesse and stepped back to take him in.

"Good to see you, Ella." Jesse tipped his head, then spun his ball cap backward before jerking a thumb toward A.J. and the others. "You going to let them hang, or be a buzzkill and kick them out?"

"I guess they're fine." Beckett tossed a hand over his shoulder, then left us to join A.J., Shep, and Caleb—our other brothers.

"I wasn't sure if you'd really come," Jesse said, eyes on Rory now.

"Wait, it was your idea for us to come tonight?" I looked back and forth between my best friend and Jesse.

Rory smirked. "Maybee I convinced him to think it was his idea."

Jesse laughed.

Ah, that sound again. So beautiful. Why didn't he do it more often?

My attention cut over to where Marcus was pretend-slugging A.J., a shit-eating grin on my wiseass brother's face.

Jesse and A.J. had been friends since birth, but A.J. had met Marcus at the University of Alabama, and they'd become close as well. Marcus had plans to be a SEAL, too.

"How's Bama? You liking it so far?" Jesse asked us.

"Only been a few weeks on campus," I said with a sigh. "It's nice, though. Different than here." *Overwhelming, really.* But our entire family bled Bama's colors, so, there I was.

"Everywhere's different from here," Rory remarked. She wanted to travel the world. Go places. Escape our small town.

Me? I could live in Walkins Glen forever. Hell, our little hometown was even, in part, named after my father.

"I guess you've seen a lot of the world now," Rory said, her tone light and almost wispy.

Jesse grunted. "I've seen one place so far. Iraq." He shook his head. "Zero out of ten, don't recommend. Not now, at least. Maybe one day it'll be better ... but ..." His tone was bitter. The sweetness gone.

Rory grabbed his arm. "Sorry," Rory whispered. "You okay?"

That was a question I wanted to ask him myself but kept those two little words trapped behind my lips, so I didn't simply echo my best friend.

"I'm fine." He expelled a heavy breath. "Feel like playing pool?"

Rory let go of him, then peered at me. "I'm good. I'm going to catch up with Marcus. Haven't seen him in months. He always has fun stories." Rory nudged me in the side. "I bet Ella would love to play a game with you."

"I mean ... if you want to?" I asked him.

Rory took off before either of us had a chance to stop her.

“Maybe remind me how to hold the stick?” *The stick? Can I be more obvious?* “The cue stick, I mean. I have no experience with other, um, sticks.” *Holy shit. What is wrong with me? I don’t babble.* After a quick facepalm, and more than likely a deep blush setting in my cheeks, I finally chanced a look at him.

Jesse brought a closed fist to his mouth and faked a cough. “Um, sure. I’ll teach you to hold a stick.”

Why on God’s green earth I dropped my focus to his crotch was beyond me, but when I peered up at him, Jesse had one eye closed as if as embarrassed as me.

“Er, you know what I mean.” He gave me a cute little lopsided smile, thoughts of Iraq seemingly gone now. “Come on.” His hand went to my back for a split second before he pulled it away. “Let’s do it.” He squeezed the bridge of his nose. “Pool, I mean. Not it-it.”

Am I making this up, or is he ... nervous?

“Define ‘it-it,’” I pressed, unable to stop the words from tumbling from my mouth.

He playfully rolled his eyes, then lifted his chin. “Girl ...” was all he said with a smile, then grabbed a stick and handed it to me. “Rack ’em up.”

* * *

“I CAN DRIVE THEM HOME. I’LL COME BACK FOR HER CAR IN the morning.” Jesse took the keys from Rory.

“You weren’t supposed to drink,” Beckett drawled as we stood in the parking lot of the bar.

“Aw.” Rory pushed up in her boots and pinched my brother’s cheek. “Your scowl is kind of adorable.”

“It was one shot of whiskey to celebrate. You were all doing it.” I shrugged, my attention shooting to Jesse who kept fidgeting with the car keys, eyeing me like ... well, I couldn’t

quite figure out what kind of look he was giving me. It was new.

“Yeah, yeah. But no driving allowed now.” Beckett faced Jesse again. “I’ve got a truck full of drunk guys, or I’d take them home.”

“My parents’ place is on the way to the ranch. I’ll drop Rory off, then take Ella home. It’s no problem,” Jesse insisted.

Alone with Jesse in his truck? Wait ...

I mean ...

Okay.

“See you tomorrow, Papa Bear,” Rory teased Beckett, loving to give that man a hard time.

“Papa? I doubt I’ll ever have kids,” Beckett said, then shooed us away, urging us to get into Jesse’s truck.

“I’ll take the back since I’m getting out first,” Rory decided before I could protest.

Jesse opened the passenger door for me, his gaze climbing up from my cowgirl boots all the way to my lips.

Well then. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, darlin’.” He smiled, then surprised me with a wink. Once I was tucked inside, he closed the door and rounded the truck.

I erased my ridiculous grin before he got behind the wheel, then tossed a look back at Rory. I had a feeling my semi-wild best friend snuck in more than the one shot I had, because her eyes were already closed.

Jesse pulled onto the main road and turned on the radio. “Country okay?”

“Of course, silly. It’s pretty much all I listen to.”

I caught his smile even though his profile was to me, eyes on the road. It was late. Dark. And a deer could jump in front of us at any time. I admired his dedication to keep us safe.

I also opted to keep quiet on the ride to their parents' house. I was worried I'd babble again. Talk about sticks of all things. Jeez, I needed to grow up.

After arriving at their house, Jesse made sure Rory was safely inside before climbing back in the truck to take me home. It was just the two of us now. *Breathe, Ella.*

I couldn't remember ever being alone with him. Well, not since that one night I'd snuck a few sips of Beckett's moonshine and asked Jesse to kiss me. I'd been fifteen and tipsy. So, of course he'd said no with zero hesitation. Plus, he was a few years "too old" for me, or so he'd said.

Jesse's eyes shifted toward my legs, and I realized I was gripping my thighs for dear life. "My driving making you nervous, darlin'?"

There it was again. The word that I'd heard thousands of times from Southern gentlemen all my life. But from Jesse, now all hard angles and a military man, it had new meaning.

"I trust you with my life," I said softly, then eased my grip on my legs just a touch. I didn't trust myself to let my hands free completely. I might reach over the console, no *stick* shift, thank God, and maybe grab—

"I'll always keep you safe." His firm, reassuring tone cut off my wayward thoughts.

"I know you will," I returned, loosening my grip a touch more. "Thank you."

"Of course."

I cast a quick look his way, and he tipped his head in a polite nod before focusing back on the road. One hand on the wheel, the other resting on his ...

For the love of God, get the word stick out of your head. You're eighteen, not ten, I mentally chastised myself.

"You okay, Ella? You didn't sneak more whiskey like my sister, did ya?"

I laughed. "No. But you noticed that, huh? I thought she did."

“She worries me. You’ll keep an eye on her for me while at school, right? Don’t let any of those college boys fuck with —” He cut himself off and shook his head. “I meant bother her. I don’t want to know about that other stuff.”

Yeah, I needed a second to recover from Jesse’s use of the F word. It was now going to play on repeat in my head.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. What if I asked him to take my virginity tonight? Pull over. Do it in the bed of his truck in some field beneath the stars. How perfect would that be?

But he’d said no to my kiss request, why would he want to make love to me? And what if he had a girlfriend? Someone near his post? Or a long-distance someone he wrote love letters to? Or emails? Emails were becoming more and more popular. Ohhh, and chat rooms, too. Shit.

“Ella?”

“Mmmhmm?” I swiveled on my seat to give him my attention.

“Should I be worried about you, too?”

I finally let go of my thighs only to slap a hand over my heart. “Me?” I swallowed. “Like at college?”

He focused back on the road and took a turn down the long driveway leading to my family’s ranch. “In general, I reckon.”

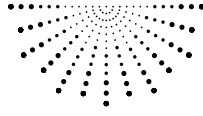
“I’m not quite as free-spirited as Rory. I don’t think you have anything to worry about, no.” I may have been sassy, but I was pretty much a by-the-book good girl. *Sure, a good girl who wants this man to pull over and make love to me. In the bed of his truck, for God’s sake.*

“Well, I know you have Shep and Caleb still around, but if someone ever ... or you ever ... I’ll hop on a plane all the way from Iraq to come to your rescue if need be.”

“You’d go AWOL for me?” I whispered in disbelief, trying to wrap my head around what he was saying in a roundabout way.

“For you?” He shot me a quick, almost sad look. “I reckon I’d do just about anything to keep you safe.”

CHAPTER TWO



“YOU’LL TAKE CARE OF THIS GUY, RIGHT?” I TIPPED MY HEAD A.J.’s way, eyes on Marcus. “Don’t let him get into any trouble.”

Marcus grinned, then lifted his gun—his *water* gun—closed one eye and focused on A.J. “I don’t know. Should I have your six? You’ve been kicking my ass in this water gun game,” he teased.

Water gun fight for adults. Totally Shep’s idea.

A.J. put his hands up, palms out, since he wasn’t currently “packing” and backed up a few steps. “You wouldn’t shoot an unarmed man, now would ya?”

Marcus kept his weapon aimed on A.J. and stole a look at me. “I guess fair is—”

Before he could finish, A.J. snatched a small water gun he had hidden at the back of his jeans and squirted Marcus in the face. “I’ll never surrender,” he said with a laugh before turning and taking off toward the others still engaged in “battle.”

Marcus lowered his gun to lift his tee up to dry his face. “He’s still just a big kid.”

“Yeah, I hope the Navy doesn’t change that heart of his. It’s pretty big, too.” I smiled.

“Nah.” Marcus shrugged. “That man will probably find humor in every situation. Wouldn’t be surprised if he kills bad guys in those American flag boxers that I’ve had the

displeasure of seeing him in a time or two while drunk during our Bama days.”

“Yeah, I can totally see that. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

Marcus tossed a thumb toward the fight. “Time for payback, though.” He winked at me, then took off toward my brothers.

I sighed and dropped my eyes to my pink shirt, which was fairly wet from Caleb and Beckett ganging up on me five minutes ago. And Rory, the traitor, helped them out.

“You coming back over, or what?” I heard Beckett call out, and I turned to see him waving me over down near the barn where they were gathered on our ranch.

But then I spied Jesse off on his own, removing his wet shirt beneath the shade of one of the way-older-than-me trees.

“Be there soon,” I promised my brother, already en route to Jesse like some magnetic pull was drawing me there.

Abs. His abs are drawing me there. Who am I kidding? Not to mention the hard curves of his biceps. And now he was using his wet tee to swipe at his chest, and he was doing one hell of a job of it.

“Hey, you,” he said when he spotted me, and I joined him in the shade. He wrung out the water from his shirt and slapped the tee over his shoulder. His eyes landed on my T-shirt and his mouth fell open but nothing came out.

“I’m soaked, too. Thanks to your sister teaming up with my brothers.” I looked down at my shirt, and ohhh. *Hello, nipples.* Sports bras weren’t great armor for water.

“I guess you need to hit the range a bit more often if they nailed you that hard.” His Adam’s apple rolled as he visibly swallowed.

“You took it easy on me. You didn’t nail me.”

Sticks last night. Nails today. Is this progress? Or a sad progression of the English language getting all mucked up in my head?

“No, I’d never nail you.” Jesse blinked a few times and ripped his eyes to my face. “You know what I mean.” The same lopsided smile from last night met his lips. Warmed my heart for a half a second until reality of what he was saying without saying it settled in.

Sadly, I think I do. “Of course.” I faked a smile, unsure if he’d see through that one or not.

“So, um.” He removed his tee from over his shoulder, and his eyes dipped back to my breasts before he took a step in the opposite direction from me.

“You okay?” After an agonizing moment, he made eye contact, but something was different in the way he was looking at me. Like he was seeing me as someone other than a Hawkins. And if I was being honest, I kind of loved it. Maybe there was no other girl. Or someone he was chatting it up with online. Because I had a feeling Jesse wasn’t the type to look at me this way if he had someone in his life.

“I’m sorry, did you ask me something?” His brows pinched tight, and a line of distress cut across his forehead.

“Just if you’re okay.” I ate up the little smidge of space he’d placed between us.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He held his wet tee at his side, and I took a moment to drop my eyes to the buckle of his well-worn jeans. “Maybe we should ...”

“We should what?” I asked, sounding oddly breathy as I found his eyes again.

His lips were a hard slash. A determined look in his eyes as he studied me. But what was he determined to do?

When he took a step forward, only inches separated us. I thought he might reach for my chin, urge me to look up at him so he could steal a kiss right there on my ranch and not give a damn who saw.

But I startled at the sudden feel of cold water spraying my back, and Jesse caught my arms when I went forward his way.

“Gotcha!” Shep yelled, and of course my firefighter-hopeful brother would extinguish the moment. Put out the fire I’d spent years willing to happen.

“You good?” Jesse cupped my chin and directed my focus his way.

I had to assume Shep had already taken off for a new unsuspecting target, or Jesse wouldn’t be holding my face like this.

“I’m just wet,” I murmured.

His brows stitched together as if catching the double meaning there. It hadn’t been intentional, but hell if it wasn’t true. My panties were wet, but not from the water gun fight, and I’d need to find some relief later. I was aching with want.

“You’re wet, hmm?”

“Very,” I whispered, and my chest lifted with a deep inhalation. My breasts touched his naked chest, and I vaguely noticed him letting go of his shirt with his other hand.

“You, um ...” He released my face and stepped back to snatch the shirt he’d dropped.

“I’m what?” I lifted my hand to the column of my throat before grazing my fingertips across my lips. I longed for him to touch me. Paint my face and body with his kisses.

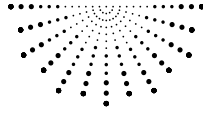
Jesse stood tall with the shirt clutched in hand and frowned. “You should probably change.” His tone became deeper. Slightly commanding. A touch military perhaps.

“Yeah, okay.” Disappointment cut through my words, and he reached for my arm. “You’re a Hawkins, Ella.” He nodded as if convincing himself of something, and with that, he turned and left.

Ouch. Shivering slightly, I left the shade to get in the sunlight and sat in a clover field as I watched the man of my dreams climb up the grassy hill and toward the others.

My eyes fell to the clovers, and I picked one. “Five leaves.” I held it in my hand and made a wish. *One day, Jesse, one day maybe you’ll see me as more than just a Hawkins.*

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

I'M TRYING TO WRAP MY HEAD AROUND LAST WEEKEND. DID we almost kiss? Did I almost cross the line?

We've known each other our entire lives. I love you like family. You're a Hawkins. My best friend's sister.

But now ...

You're all grown up.

A.J. would kill me if he knew the thoughts I had all weekend about you.

Do you have any idea what you did to me when you asked me to help you with the pool stick at the bar? You know how to shoot better than most. And yet, you asked me for help. Had your ass against me. I couldn't hide the damn bulge in my pants, either.

And don't get me started on when I dropped you off at home. Your long legs. The way you gripped your thighs while I drove had me white-knuckling the wheel.

But God help me, the next day at the ranch beneath that tree. Did you know your nipples were showing through your wet tee? (You did, didn't you?)

Am I messed up for getting off to that image later that night? Am I a special kind of fucked up for writing this all down before I go stroke my cock to the idea of it being your hand instead?

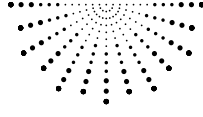
But even if you weren't A.J.'s sister—or a Hawkins—I shouldn't look at you that way again.

The thing is, I doubt I'll be able to stop thinking about you. Picturing you. Wondering what it'd be like to kiss you.

Not that I'll ever send this, but ...

JESSE

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

I'M WRITING TO YOU KNOWING I'LL NEVER PUT THIS IN THE mailbox. I'll never tell you how I feel. And how can I? You're A.J.'s best friend. You're ... *you*. The man I'll forever want and never be able to have.

Sometimes I think wanting someone you can't have is a special kind of hell. It hurts. God, does it hurt. The pain in my stomach. The way my chest squeezes when I look at you, wishing so much I could be yours. Knowing it'll probably never happen.

Of course, last year at A.J.'s going away party, I almost thought you'd make a move. Then my brother showed up and "put out the embers" between us before a fire could even get started.

But honestly, right now all that matters is you stay safe. I heard you had to spin up. You're deployed again. I hate to admit I'm scared. Scared for you. For A.J. now that he's serving, too.

Whenever the phone rings, I see the way Mom's hand trembles, worried if it'll be "that call." And you know my mom. She's so tough. But she hides her nerves about A.J. And I hide my nerves about you.

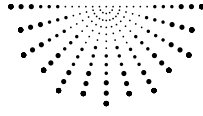
Please come home. Please come back. Even if not to me ... just come back.

Until then—I'll keep your photo with me always. Keep you in my heart forever.

YOURS,

Ella

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

I'VE BEEN FEELING A BIT OVERWHELMED LATELY, AND I thought it might help to vent. Do you remember when life was easier when we were younger? (Even when shit was hard at home, it felt easier in comparison to this. To being here.) I miss those days when I'd escape to your ranch and forget about everything else for a while.

I guess I'm feeling nostalgic tonight. Missing those hot summer days. I can't believe I've been in the military since I was 18. Did I grow up too fast? Run too far away from home?

It's hard to wrap my head around how much everything's changed. Even harder to believe I never got caught staring at you by A.J. or your other brothers. I still can't get over that weekend last year at A.J.'s party. Every look and almost touch.

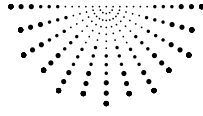
And fuck ... that last look you gave me at Christmas has been forever etched in my mind. I wish I'd gone ahead and kissed you beneath the mistletoe at the Christmas party. And also, beneath the tree at A.J.'s party the summer before. Wished I'd said something a million times over.

At least while I'm here, though, I know you have people looking out for you. Your family. My sister, too.

I know Rory never told you about our dad. She was so innocent and vulnerable. I took the brunt of his wrath as much as possible. I knew I was strong enough to absorb his verbal abuse, among other things, to keep Rory out of it. To keep her protected and safe. But still, I can't help but wonder if I did enough. My dad's a story for another day, though. But ... I came from a broken world, Ella—does that make me a broken man, too?

JESSE

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

A.J. TOLD ME YOU LOST A FRIEND LAST WEEK IN IRAQ. GOD, I'm so sorry. I can't begin to imagine what you must be going through.

I wish you'd let me be there for you. Open up to me. Tell me what's bothering you. I know there's so much more beneath the surface. So much you're keeping from me. From everyone. Even from A.J.

Your smile is gone. Your laugh.

The few times I get to see you ... you look so unhappy now.

But you're not alone. You have me. You have all of us. I hope you know that.

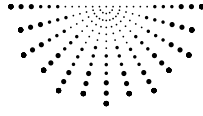
I should tell you this in person. But for now, I'm sending you this note and a photo of me ... the one my mom snapped of me that day of A.J.'s party ... in the field wearing my hat. It's a sunny-happyish photo. So, I thought maybe you'd want it?

Stay safe.

LOVE,

Ella

CHAPTER THREE



ELLA

SPRING 2007 - TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

I WAS PARTIALLY TEMPTED TO BOLT AND CUT AWAY FROM THE party since Rory was MIA with some hot guy she'd met. I weighed my options: head back to the dorm and work on some of my design sketches, do homework for my actual major, which was education, or stay and get hit on by a frat boy.

"Well, well, well. Who are you?"

Great. This will make my options easier. Leaving was now at the top of my list with this guy blocking my path. He wasn't from the frat throwing the party, that much was obvious.

"Which frat brother do you know?" I decided to entrap the guy. Why not have a little fun first before I bailed?

"Um." California Ken, with his long blond hair pulled into a ponytail and his surfer-boy good looks, smiled. "Jack Henley."

"Yeah? And where's Jack from?"

"Ummm—"

"Mhm." I knew guys like this. The kind that attempted to crash a frat party he didn't have an invite for to pick up women. "Let me save you the trouble. You don't know Jack." It was corny. But too good not to say.

I may have been a freshman at Bama, had far too much tequila already after failing my exam earlier, but I didn't lose my A game in separating the wheat from the chaff, and this guy was not my style. Not even close.

He wasn't well ... Jesse, so.

I started to turn, but the hand circling my upper arm had me halting in place, and I had to resist the urge to rear my leg back like a pissed-off mustang.

When I slowly pivoted to give Ken a bit of my Southern mouth, I nearly stumbled at the sight in the distance.

JESSE?!

Was that really him talking to California Ken's counterpart, Barbie, across the lawn? He had on a backward black ball cap, a white tee beneath a plaid shirt, and faded denim jeans.

His eyes cut my way, and he waved off Barbie.

"It's just a party," Cali-Ken said.

Right. You're still here.

"Cut me some slack," he went on.

"Huh?" I whispered, my eyes pinned on Jesse instead as he dodged a guy doing a handstand near the keg while beer funneled into his mouth with some type of tube. I'd forgotten California Ken's hand was still around my bicep. Forgotten absolutely everything with my Army Ranger heading my way.

"I would let me go. I'm tipsy." Okay, drunk-ish. "But not interested in kissing you. Or doing anything with you for that matter. Well, aside from kicking you in the nuts if you don't unhand me."

And poor Ken had no idea there was a man capable of damaging his face with a few punches heading his way.

"You always such a bitch?" the asshole asked me.

I tossed a hand to my chest and eyed Cali-Ken. He did not belong at our school. "Bless your heart. Seriously. You won't survive the South if you—"

"Let. Go. Of. Her." The roar choked out all the surrounding sounds once it escaped Jesse's lips.

My stomach muscles banded tight as I set eyes on him. It'd been too long since I'd last seen him. Christmas. Mistletoe neither of us took advantage of ...

"You her babysitter? Big brother?" Ken let go of me and faced Jesse.

Did the jerk not see Jesse's corded forearms? Because, well, damn, I did. I noticed.

Did he not witness the lock of his bladed jawline? The angry stare? The bunch of his hands ready to throw down at

the slightest provocation?

And Jesse was one hell of a fighter. I was pretty sure growing up I'd witnessed him block a bully on more than one occasion from going after someone weaker.

"She's like my sister, so you need to step off," Jesse hissed the command that was a knife to my heart.

My stomach protested the ridiculous word. I have four older brothers. I was NOT looking for a fifth.

Sister? No freaking way. I want you to bang me. Every day. All day.

"He was just going," I finally spoke up. "He's not worth it." I stepped forward and wrapped a hand around Jesse's arm, and my palm skated up along the ridge of muscle in a soothing motion.

Wow, his arms really had grown since becoming a Ranger.

Cali-Ken split.

Good idea.

"Hi," I whispered. "You're here."

His blue eyes fell to my hand still on his arm, and I'd swear the muscle in his jaw jumped more now than it did when he wanted to rip Cali-Ken apart.

"I just got back from ..."

"Iraq," I finished for him when I realized he had no intention of finishing his sentence. *Did you get that one letter I sent? The photo? Hmm. I should probably let go of you.*

He took a step back and cocked his head to the side, his eyes taking a slow journey over my body.

For the frat party, I had on a simple jean skirt and white tank top. Cowgirl boots, too, of course.

Before I could digest the odd look he was giving me, I found myself slammed straight into the rock-hard wall that was his chest when someone careened into me.

“Watch it,” Jesse growled out, and I didn’t bother to look back to see who’d bumped into me, because Jesse’s hands were on my arms, and my breasts were smashed against his chest.

“You okay?” he asked, his tone sounding a bit battle-hardened. Husky and deep. Or was that ... desire?

“I’m fi-fine,” I stammered, still not ready to unglue myself from his embrace. “Which, um, brother of mine are you here with tonight?” A.J. was somewhere overseas, so he wasn’t there with him.

“Shep, but he ditched me about five seconds after we got here for a petite brunette.” He dropped his focus to my face, a smile playing across his lips for a moment as his thumbs made small circles on my arms. Did he realize he was doing that? Did he know we were still locked together as if we’d been destined to be that way? “Where’s my sister?”

“Ah, she ditched me for a tall, dark-haired broody guy.”

He cocked his head as if wondering whether he needed to go fuck someone else up since he missed his chance with Cali-Ken.

“Trust me, she can handle herself. The guy won’t set a hand on her unless she wants him to.” I smiled. “And I wouldn’t mind if you keep your hands on me all night.” Yup, that was the tequila.

“How much did you drink tonight?”

“Maybe not enough.” A little more might coax every word I’d held back from him over the years, and maybe that wasn’t a bad thing?

“Why don’t I walk you back to your dorm, and then I’ll go find my sister and make sure she’s all set?” he suggested while letting go of me.

“Come on.” He reached for my hand, and it felt so small inside his big one.

“Rory says you don’t call much. Or write,” I softly confessed once we were in front of my dorm building after

walking quietly hand in hand. “Why not?”

“Busy doing the whole war thing,” he deadpanned.

“Mmhm.” I rolled my eyes after facing him.

“Come on, woman, time to get you to bed.” He juttled his chin to the building as a directive.

Yes, please, get me to bed. Join me. Be with me. I need you.

He wordlessly followed me to my room. “You can come in. I don’t bite,” I joked.

A slow smirk slid across Jesse’s lips, and he hesitantly joined me in my room. His eyes landed on my bed. Somehow, he knew which side of the room was mine.

Once the door was shut, he set his back to it.

This is going to be harder than I thought. *You’re so damn stubborn.*

I fidgeted with the hem of my top, trying to work up the nerve to ask him the question. The big one. The will-you-take-my-virginity-card one. Yeah, THAT one.

“Jesse?”

He met my eyes. *Finally.* “Yeah?”

My palm landed on my chest as I tried to get a grip. “I’m a virgin.”

His lips parted in shock.

“What?” The word was more like a strangled sound. Battered and bruised from shock as it tumbled from his perfect lips.

“Plenty of boys want to,” I awkwardly confessed, feeling the need to let him know my lack of sex wasn’t because I wasn’t wanted. But I regretted it immediately at the look in his eyes. And that dark, dark look washed over me. Blanketed me in chills.

I erased the space between us and set my hand on his shoulder. His gaze fell to my touch. A slow, slow journey back to my eyes.

“None of the boys were you, Jesse,” I admitted. “And I want—*no*—I *need* you to be my first.”

The quiet way he studied me had my heart breaking into a million pieces. The rejection was coming like the onset of a Southern summer storm.

“Ella, I, um.”

“I know. I’m a Hawkins.” I hated the echo of defeat in my tone.

When he pushed away from the door and surprised me by bringing his body flush to mine, my breath hitched at the feel of his cock straining against his jeans.

So, you do want me?

He frowned. “You’ve been drinking.” He shook his head. “I just can’t. I’m sorry.”

I closed my eyes, but I didn’t pull away. I wasn’t ready to lose him.

“I need to go,” he rasped, and—*oh my God, did his cock twitch against me?* “I’m sorry. I *have* to go.”

I almost fell to the floor when he pulled away and shot me a grim look.

There was pain in his haunted eyes.

He tipped his head goodbye ... and then he left.

* * *

JESSE

I slammed both palms against Shep's truck in the parking lot and then did it again. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

I bowed my head to the driver's side window, trying to pull myself together. To not turn around and head straight back to Ella's room and take her virginity.

"Don't do it. Don't fucking do it," I hissed under my breath, then pushed away from the truck and turned to put eyes on her building. My heart pounded fiercely as I spied her light blink and go out from the fourth floor.

The devastation in her eyes when I'd walked away from her was going to haunt me, but what kind of a man would I be to take something so sacred from her when she'd not only been drinking, but I wasn't even close to being in the right state of mind ... *plus, you're A.J.'s sister, and ...*

"Don't go up there," I had to tell myself again because my dick was throbbing, and more than that, my heart hurt like a son of a bitch.

Because I did want her.

I wanted to tell her so many damn things.

About my brother-in-arms I lost last month. Killed five feet away from me by a sniper, and I couldn't save him.

About the fact I had nightmares every other night.

And also ... how I felt about her. How I couldn't survive Iraq without looking at the photo she sent me. How I did write her back ... but couldn't bring myself to send it to her. How I read her letter so many times it already looked decades old.

But I can't tell ...

I'm too ...

God, I wasn't sure.

I grabbed my wallet from my back pocket and pulled out Ella's photo I kept with me, trying to get a grip.

My shoulders fell at the vibration of my Nokia in my pocket. It was Shep.

"Hey, man. Where are you?" Shep asked straightaway, a bit breathless.

Not about to screw your sister. Nope. "Just walked Ella back to her room. By your truck now. What's up?"

"I'm about to go fuck up some frat boys. I mean, Rory had it handled, but the fucker did try something on her, and well ..."

"Where are you?" I rasped, the urge to fight strong as ever. "I'm on my way." I pocketed my phone and bowed my head, doing my best to eliminate thoughts of Ella.

To get that woman and the way she smelled out of my head before I faced her brother.

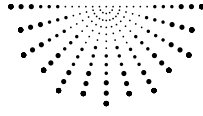
But hell, I knew exactly what I'd be doing tonight when I was alone. Stroking my cock, pretending it was her hand. Then her mouth on me. Then her body writhing beneath mine as I made her cry out my name and come.

Virgin.

Virgin?!

Yeah, also, maybe it was my good fortune Shep needed help knocking out some frat boys, because the idea of another man one day touching Ella and making love to her had me wanting to ... well, kill.

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

I CAN'T BELIEVE I DID IT. LAST NIGHT I ASKED YOU TO MAKE love to me. To be my first. That's braver than the one photo/letter I sent you.

And I could feel your desire press against me. You wanted me, too. I'm not sure if knowing that makes things harder for me, especially since you walked away. Leaving me here alone. I can't be mad at you for saying no. I'd had tequila. You're a standup guy, so of course you'd say no ...

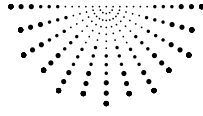
But maybe one day we'll get another chance, because I don't know how to ever be with anyone but you.

You're it for me. Always have been. Always will be.

YOURS (NOT THAT YOU KNOW IT),

Ella

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

I'VE LOST COUNT OF HOW MANY DAYS I'VE BEEN AWAY. EVERY day seems to be fading into the next. How is it possible that time is going by so slow, yet so fast? I feel like I'm ready to give it all up. Leave the military when my time is done. I don't want to break more than I already have, and I know there's something more in me to give than to only hold a weapon ... Even though I'm good at it, I can't just be ... *this*.

And damn, I didn't realize until this moment that writing these letters has kept me more connected to you than I thought. More than the photos I look at every morning when I wake up and every evening before I shut down.

Ella, you've been my guiding star in all of this, and I don't know if you'll ever know that ... because I don't know that I'll end up sending these letters to you. But you deserve to know how I feel, you deserve to know all of me.

I look up to the sky and I feel you here with me. I don't want to hurt you, Ella. Not now, not ever.

But some days I have second thoughts about my decisions. About saying no when you asked me to make love to you. God knows I wanted to. I wanted nothing more than to feel you, your breath on my skin, your gaze on mine ...

Those big, beautiful ocean-blue eyes would make any strong man fall to his knees. My heart rate increases when I think about it. The things I wanted to do to you, Ella. *Still* want to do to you.

I wish we were together outside in the summer heat with some shade falling upon us ... but enough sunlight beaming down over your blonde hair and sparking those eyes to shine even brighter.

Unlike that one day when we almost kissed beneath the tree before your brother showed up ... this time I'd make a move.

Lay you down. Slowly match your breath with mine. Inhale you and ... *mmm*, how is it that you always smell so fucking good?

My boxers are tighter now. The blood rushes straight to my cock—wishing I could kiss every inch of you. Feel your body with my hands. Work my way down to where you get the most wet ...

What I would give to taste you ... my eyes roll back at the thought—reassuring me once again the power you have over me.

I just want to please you. Feel your body move to my actions. I want to hear you say my name. I want to hear you moan against me. If only you could feel how stiff my cock is for you. But with all these miles and secrets between us—I guess I'll have to release this tension on my own.

I have to admit that just thinking about making love might actually help me sleep tonight. I'll even go to bed wearing that broody grin on my face (you know the one, the one you like to remind me of—always teasing me that I have a smile in me after all).

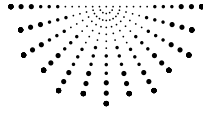
Ella? I think I may be in love with you.

YOURS ALWAYS AND FOREVER (MAYBE ONE DAY I'LL TELL YOU that),

Jesse

P.S. - I WISH YOU'D WRITE ME AGAIN. I KNOW YOU ASKED ME TO open up in your letter, and this seems to be the only way I can do it. If only I'd send the letters ...

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

TODAY'S NOT BEEN A GOOD DAY. THE NIGHTMARES ARE getting worse. Harder to sleep. Been a tough few weeks here on base. There are days when I question everything, like what the fuck I'm even doing here.

I know this is what I signed up for, and I'm proud to serve my country, but some days it's hard to see the bigger picture, to see the finish line of what exactly we're trying to do here. The things I've had to do and see are beyond anything I ever thought possible. And today, it's taking a toll on me both physically and mentally.

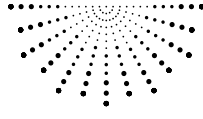
But when I feel like giving up, I think of you. I remind myself I didn't just run away from home to get away from my father—I came here to make a difference in this world. Not that I've yet to tell you about my dad ...

I'm trying my best here, though. I think of you, and you give me the strength I need to keep going. In some crazy way, it reassures me that being here is right, that somehow, I'll leave this world better than when we found it. But lately I question WHY. Why am I here? What's this war doing to me? These aren't the questions I should be asking during war, though. Just one of those days, I guess ...

JESSE

[Listen to the audio](#)

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

LAST WEEKEND WAS THE FIRST TIME I'VE SEEN YOU SINCE MY dorm room. The butterflies in my stomach were out of control the moment I saw you.

My heart had raced faster than one of Daddy's prized horses when you hugged me.

And is this unladylike to admit—probably—but I was sweating when our eyes locked at Mama's dinner table that first night.

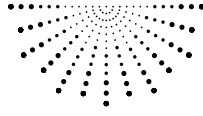
Were you as uncomfortable as me? Worried I'd ask you again to take my virginity as we broke bread together amongst my family? Or curious if I gave it up to someone else?

There was a tightness to your jaw as you studied me. The constant clench was noticeable since you were clean-shaven. I couldn't help but wonder why. Make predictions in my head.

WELL, UNTIL NEXT TIME,

Ella

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

A.J. DID IT. BECAME A NAVY SEAL. ALTHOUGH HE & Marcus like to refer to themselves by a few other names: Frogman. Teamguy. Badass.

I chuckle every time A.J. calls and starts talking again about Hell Week at BUD/S. I had to ask him to define “BUD/S” a few times. The full name is a mouthful: Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training.

Of course, you’d know that. Lots of acronyms in the military, I bet.

Anyways, I’m not sure why I’m even writing this. You were at the ceremony when he earned his trident. You’re always there for him. No matter what. But you came and went so fast. I barely had a chance to talk to you. See you.

So much has changed since the last time we saw each other. For me, at least. Has it changed for you?

I have a job now. Teaching.

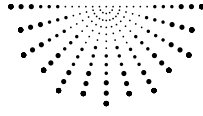
Still working on my fashion designs but only as a hobby.

I love teaching, don’t get me wrong. My students are everything to me. But every so often I wonder what might have been if I’d followed my dreams and pursued fashion. Oh well. I’m happy making clothes and shoes for myself.

UNTIL I SEE YOU AGAIN. HOPEFULLY FOR LONGER NEXT TIME,

Ella

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

ME AGAIN. YOU KNOW ... THE MAN WHO'S INSANELY IN LOVE with you but still can't find the courage to send you a fucking letter. Maybe I need a punch in the face. Knock some real sense into me.

I was thinking about Marcus and Savanna today, and it's crazy how fast everything happened with them. And now they're engaged? Marcus and Savanna saw each other—what?—five times in person? Seems like they were destined for one another. Even if he was operating overseas, they were always writing each other letters and emails ... you know, the ones you actually send back and forth. Not the kind that I'm doing, writing to my fuckin' self essentially.

Life and how things work out is ... interesting sometimes, I guess. Not sure what I'm trying to say exactly, but I keep pondering life's greatest mysteries. Overthinking a bit too much lately. Time on my hands.

Anyways, what I'm getting at here is ... maybe ... ugh. Why is it so difficult for me to say out loud I want what Marcus and Savanna have? Because I do. And with you, Ella. Fuck me, why was that so hard to even just write? Of course that's what I want. And it's going to be hard to see you at their wedding and not wish that was us.

Look forward to seeing you, though. I'm sure whatever you'll be wearing—one of your fashion designs—will cause my brain to malfunction and all the blood to suddenly rush ... well, *there*.

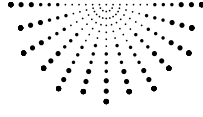
The things you make me feel.

THINKING ABOUT YOU ALWAYS. YOURS,

Jesse

Listen to the audio

CHAPTER FOUR



JESSE

EARLY 2012 - WALKINS GLEN, ALABAMA

“TOO BAD YOUR SISTER COULDN’T MAKE IT,” A.J. SAID FROM behind.

I was staring out the window of his parents’ kitchen, eyeing their expansive property as the storm cut through hard and with fierce intensity. “She’s on another one of her adventures with that Andrew guy I can’t stand.”

It was still hard to believe my sister was off treasure hunting for a living.

I’d told Rory adventure-type stories growing up whenever our parents would fight and I’d find her hiding in the closet. I’d make her the star of the story to calm her down and distract her, and now here she was ... living the life that I’d once made up only to help her shut out the noise.

“Yeah, I don’t like her boyfriend, either,” A.J. confirmed as he settled in next to me. “No one in town does. He left a shitty impression. Snubbed his nose at us small-town folks.”

When A.J. nudged a beer at my side, I turned and faced him. He popped the top and handed it to me.

“Hopefully she’ll dump his ass soon before that son of a bitch gets her hurt. The places he takes her ...” I couldn’t even think about it without getting sick. And there was no stopping that woman. She was a thrill seeker. It wasn’t like I couldn’t relate, though. *Look at my life*. I pretty much got shot at for a living. And speaking of that ... “How do you do it?”

“Do what?”

I took a swig of the cool liquid. “Not let the shit you see and do on a daily basis change you?” I frowned. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m relieved to know it hasn’t fucked with your psyche the way it has mine, but—”

“It does mess with me. I’m just ...” He lifted one shoulder as if unsure how to continue.

“You’re just you,” I went ahead and finished for him. “Thank God for that. One of us needs to keep our humor.”

A.J. laughed. “When were you ever funny?” He winked, then grew serious a beat later. “You need to talk, though? Something wrong?”

“No, no, I’m fine.” I shook my head, clueless as to why I brought anything up, especially on a night like this. We were at what A.J. had dubbed “The Vasquez Celebration 2.0.” Marcus had married the woman of his dreams, Savanna. Their wedding was small and nearby last year. But a few close friends and family had been unable to attend, so A.J. had decided he’d throw them another party.

A.J. was a damn good friend. I was happy Marcus had his six downrange. And a little envious the two of them worked together. I should have gone the SEAL route, but the idea of winding up on a submarine ... fuck that.

“If you change your mind and wanna talk, man, you know you can anytime. Even if we’re both outside the wire.” He slapped his free hand over my shoulder, meeting my eyes.

“Yeah, same for you.” I nodded, then turned to the side to see his mom hollering for him to head into the living room where the party was.

Everyone had been outside up until an hour ago when the storm decided to crash the party, forcing us inside.

I faced the window once again when A.J. did as his mom said, because you didn’t want to cross Deb Hawkins, that was for sure.

“What are you doing alone in here?”

I caught sight of Marcus in the window’s reflection. “Food is in here,” I joked, then turned to look at him.

Marcus slapped a hand to his chest and smiled. “The Hawkinses and their parties.”

“Ain’t that the truth. Give Deb a reason, and she’ll give you the party of the century.” I gulped back some of the beer.

“Am I really married, though? I mean, it’s been months and yet it still doesn’t feel real. You know? I just keep asking myself how’d I get so lucky? All my dreams have come true.” He erased the space between us, and I set the back of my head against the window.

“Because you’re a good person, Marcus. That’s how. Got yourself the heart of a lion.” *So A.J. tells me.*

“Don’t go telling the bad guys that. I’ve got a reputation with them. They like to call me Rambo.” He chuckled. “Wrong military branch, but I shoot them before I can correct them.”

“Sounds about right.”

Marcus set his palm to the glass, eyes on the storm. “But really, it’s wild to think I’m married. Only hanging out a handful of times before tying the knot is probably why it feels surreal, too. But Savanna says the whole falling in love through letters and emails had a *Notebook*-movie feel to it.”

I pushed away from the window and looked toward the living room bustling with people. “I don’t know what that means, so I’ll take y’all’s word for it.”

“But hell,” Marcus drawled, stealing a look at me, “when you know, you know. Right? Whether it’s through writing or drinks at a bar. Savanna and I just clicked from the start.”

I searched for my “when you know, you know” girl in the crowd in the distance.

Ella was holding her niece, McKenna, at her hip. McKenna’s father, Beckett, was now a single dad. His daughter’s mother had abandoned them shortly after McKenna was born, and—

My thoughts stopped when Ella leaned in and nuzzled McKenna’s nose with hers while tickling her belly, making her laugh.

Fuck. Me.

I’d never been more certain of what I wanted in my life.

That woman. And our child in her arms.

Up until tonight, I'd started to think my heart was dead. I'd even been struggling to sit and write Ella what I'd nicknamed in my head "the lost letters." Lost to the war. To the chaos of it all.

Dead men didn't write. And I'd felt at the brink of death every day. Alive enough to keep moving forward. Keep me in the war.

Long operations. Days bleeding into one another. Time as lost to me as the letters.

And in the last few months, my heart had become encased by titanium. Nearly impenetrable. Well, the only thing to cut me down would be a bullet in that fucked-up organ of mine. One kill shot would be all it'd take to finally put me down.

But seeing Ella again was like discovering there was still breath in my lungs. Somehow this woman always gave me the will to fight. To do more than simply survive. To try and be more than "just alive."

Ella's eyes met mine a few seconds later, and her beautiful blues stunned my thoughts into silence yet again as she stared at me.

"When are you ever going to tell her how you feel?" Marcus's comment shocked my focus away from the vision in the pale pink dress and back to him. "A.J. will approve. Don't let that stop you."

"How do you ...?" That was one sentence I wasn't prepared to finish.

Marcus smiled, set down his beer bottle on the nearby table, and fidgeted with the black band on his wrist. His lucky charm. A.J. said he rarely went anywhere without it. "Pretty sure everyone in this little town knows how you two feel about each other. I think even folks in Tuscaloosa know. Definitely in Birmingham." He shot me a cocky wink.

I couldn't help but laugh at that. And it'd been a minute since I'd laughed. It felt good. "Is that so?"

"That's so." Marcus looked toward the living room open to the kitchen area, his eyes landing on his wife. From what I'd

heard, Ella had taken Savanna under her wing. It was an Ella thing to do. Take care of others. Make them feel welcome and wanted. Never alone. “And maybe Savanna has told me a thing or two since she’s become best friends with Ella and your sister.”

“Like what?” I arched a brow, curious.

“Well, you see,” he started, “I promised my wife I’d zip my lips and not open my mouth about what she told me. And here I am sticking my foot in it.”

I angled my head, waiting for him to remove his foot and just tell me. I needed confirmation. Fuck, I needed a lot of things. That was also part of the problem keeping me away from Ella.

Ever since A.J.’s going away party, I knew Ella was the only woman I wanted. She made me feel things I didn’t know possible.

I just couldn’t ... get the words out. Take action on my feelings. Couldn’t even send a letter.

What’s stopping me? Holding me back? Why don’t I just ...? Then my gaze snapped over to *one* of the reasons. The man who broke me down for over a decade. Years and years of making me feel worthless. A failure and screwup. Unlovable.

My father cut me down until there was nothing left in me but to offer up my life to the military. At least I could do something. Be useful somehow. Make a difference.

“You’re not going to tell me, huh?” I pressed.

“Tell you what you already know, you mean?” He slapped a hand over my shoulder, then jerked a thumb toward A.J. gathering the room by the guitar and microphone stand, which was more than likely a request from his mom. “Ask her to dance. Pretty sure A.J. is planning to sing.”

A.J. happened to have one hell of a voice. All the men in the family did, in fact.

Deb began rounding everyone up, and she peeked into the kitchen and waved us over.

“Yes, ma’am,” I said with a smile, and Marcus mock-saluted her.

I tossed my bottle in the recycling bin and followed him into the living room. A.J.’s dad was at his side now with a guitar in hand.

Beckett’s daughter’s little hands slapping together was all I could hear as I stared at Ella, her eyes on her brother and dad, waiting for them to entertain us.

“You ready to dance with your husband, Mrs. Vasquez?” A.J. winked at Savanna.

The furniture had already been pushed aside to create space for dancing. Marcus went over to his wife. I was pretty sure Savanna was wearing a dress Ella had designed. White-and-blue flower print.

Savanna looked as happy as Marcus. I really was thrilled for them. I was just a little jealous, too. Maybe more than a little.

A.J. took the lead singing Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Sweet Home Alabama,” and Ella’s mom snatched McKenna from her arms and urged her to dance.

Ella peered around the room, bunching the fabric of her dress with one hand as if nervous. Before I had a chance to move in, one of A.J.’s Teamguy friends snatched her wrist and twirled her.

I turned to the side and took a second to contemplate what to do: knock the SEAL out or sit back and do nothing like always. I supposed there was a third option. Be a gentleman and ask to cut in.

Why in the hell was my first instinct always to fight, though? *Right, right*. Because I got used to having someone raise their hand to me my whole life. *Fucking A*. I didn’t need to think about my old man.

Making my decision, I crossed the room. “May I cut in?” I asked, doing my best to remain a Southern gentleman and respect the sailor and Ella’s choices.

Ella stepped back from the SEAL—his name currently escaping me because his hand was still on her waist, and I wanted to break it—and peered at me with her beautiful eyes.

And, of course, A.J. would choose this moment to switch the songs up to something slow. More intimate. A song I knew damn well. I'd listened to it on the lonely nights in Iraq more times than I cared to admit.

Ella didn't say anything, she just nodded at the other guy, then offered me her hand. The feel of her palm sliding against mine hushed the overwhelming thoughts in my mind. Almost silenced A.J. singing Lifehouse's song "Everything." Fitting tunes. *Really fucking fitting.*

My hands were now on her waist. Her arms draped over my shoulders. We simply moved side to side just staring at each other.

The world fell away.

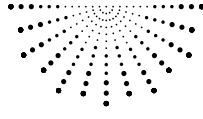
It fell to pieces.

All the hurt and pain in my head and body disappeared with her in my arms.

One day, Ella, one day I'll be the man you deserve, I promised her in my thoughts. Promised myself, too.

But until then ...

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

GOD, IT WAS GOOD SEEING YOU AGAIN. WISH RORY COULD'VE made it, though.

But I swear, it feels like whenever you and I breathe in the same air lately, I get a little dizzy. But last weekend, spending time with Marcus and his wife made me realize how much I want what they have one day.

But is it still a wild idea to want that with you? I want you to be my someone. My forever. You keep pushing me away, though. Even Rory and A.J., too, from what I've heard. I'm worried about you.

Talk to A.J. He knows what you're going through. He's living it, too. Let him be there for you since you won't let me in.

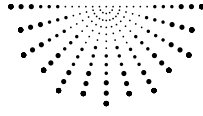
Missing you already and you're not even mine to miss.

LOVE,

Ella

P.S. - I SKETCHED A WEDDING DRESS DESIGN. THE ONE I'D WEAR if we were ever to, well ... you know.

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

NOT THAT YOU'LL EVER READ THIS LETTER, BUT I NEED TO GET my thoughts down. Seeing you again last month ... I think my heart stopped.

Watching Marcus and Savanna together made me wish that ... well, is it crazy to wish that one day that could be us holding hands? Happily married?

Hell, you don't even know I love you. And I do. I just wish I could say the words out loud.

Maybe we can never be together, and maybe that's okay if it means you're better off without me. But I hope somehow you know how much you mean to me.

My heart really is yours, Ella. And every time I see you, I have to work so hard to keep my feelings hidden. But God, it's just so hard. The pain I feel each day away from you is unbearable, and the only thing that keeps me going are the photos I have of you in my wallet. I look at them every day, and they remind me of the beautiful woman I love. Envisioning a life with you brings me joy. Hot summer days on your ranch with a cold drink in hand. Your sun-kissed skin and the way you smell ... That's enough to keep me going here. Keep me surviving.

I don't know if I'm enough for you, Ella. I've made mistakes in my life, and I've done things that I'm not proud of. And because you're the most amazing woman I know, you've still been there even if I don't deserve that. But I'd do anything for you, even if it means sacrificing my own happiness to make sure you're kept safe.

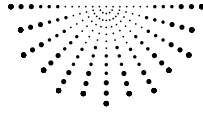
ALWAYS YOURS,

Jesse

P.S—IF YOU COULD CONVINCED MY SISTER TO DUMP HER boyfriend and quit treasure hunting, that'd be great. Just the idea of her job is giving me an ulcer. And she won't listen to me. Maybe she'll listen to you.

[Listen to the audio](#)

LETTER



ELLA

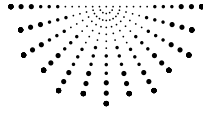
JESSE,

RORY'S NOT ANSWERING MY CALLS OR EMAILS. I'M concerned. Your mom says she's on a boat somewhere and not to worry. But, well, I am. I may call you and see if you've talked to her. Maybe text. I've started using texts more and more these days. I was resistant to the idea at first, but ... okay, I just texted you. I know you're at Ft. Bragg right now and not deployed, so hopefully you get it. A little weird to actually reach out for real. Also ... kind of nice.

YOURS,

Ella

CHAPTER FIVE



JESSE

FAYETTEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA

INSIDE MY BEDROOM, I FUMBLED MY PHONE, AND IT FELL TO the ground. The screen was probably now cracked, but seeing Ella's name pop up was not on my 2012 bingo card. *Fuck, I sound like my mom.*

I crouched and picked it up but didn't flip it over. I remained frozen, staring at it like it was a bomb waiting to detonate. Why was I so nervous to see a message from Ella?

The knuckles of my left hand were red and purple from the fight I'd been in earlier. What would Ella think about me using leave to make money fighting people in the next town over?

She'd think it was a terrible idea. And it probably was. God help me if the Army found out about it.

But I could only hit the gym so many times to relieve my tension, and I'd stumbled upon the secret fight club last month, and without thinking it through, offered to fight their "unbeatable" guy.

I'd lost.

And I hated losing.

So, I went back for weeks until I finally won. Fourth time was the charm. Won a few grand, too, since I'd been the underdog and bet on myself.

Besides the benefit of the extra cash, the fighting was ... oddly cathartic. The more I went, the more I noticed my body turn into a lethal machine. I just had to do my best to keep my face from getting damaged so no one on post realized what I was up to.

"Look at the phone, you idiot," I grumbled, feeling far too anxious to read a simple text. But it was the first one from Ella, so, yeah, kind of a big deal.

Closing my eyes, I sighed. I'd been fantasizing about the woman nonstop lately. Often stroking my cock in the shower,

sometimes trying to relieve the leftover tension after a fight, and visions of Ella always ran rampant in my mind.

Her on her knees, plump lips wrapped around my dick instead of my bruised hand. My hand fisting and tugging her blonde hair back to guide her eyes up to mine. Staring down at her while I slowly slid my cock in and out of her warm mouth. *Fuck.*

Opening my eyes, I cursed at the hard-on I was sporting at the mere thoughts. I forced myself to stand upright and flipped over the phone. *Wow, not cracked. Shocker.*

I dropped down on my bed and swiped open the message.

Ella: Hey, Jesse, hope this is okay I'm texting you. I haven't been able to get ahold of Rory, and I'm worried about her. I was wondering if you've heard from her. Your mom said not to stress. But I'm stressing. Like a lot.

Ella: Last I heard she was with her boyfriend, Andrew, the guy none of us like ... and they were in the Caribbean, I think. Anyways, hoping you've had better luck reaching her.

I reread her messages a few times. Processing. Absorbing her words. Hearing her voice in my head as if she were in the room and talking to me.

I opened my email to check when Rory had last written me, because, well, damn, now I was nervous, too.

Thirteen days ago. That wasn't too long for her. She didn't always have great service.

I went ahead and called her up. Nothing. Tried one more time, and still nada. I had no clue what to tell Ella, and it took me entirely too long to come up with something.

Jesse: Hey, you.

That's brilliant. Anything else to say? I shook my head at my own ridiculous nerves.

Ella: Hi.

“Okay, we’re on the same page, at least.” *Both don’t know what to say. How to do this.* And there was a “this” happening, right?

Jesse: Good to hear from you. I checked my last emails. Rory messaged 13 days ago. She’s not answering her phone, but she rarely does.

Ella: I heard from her then, too. But we talk every week. She never misses a check-in. She didn’t get back to me two days ago like normal.

“Well, shit.”

Jesse: I think I have her boyfriend’s number. I’ll call him, and as soon as I hear something, I’ll let you know. Okay?

Ella: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Jesse: Of course. Um, hope you’re well?

“I sent the ‘um’ ... really?” I hung my head. It was times like these someone would question how I’d survived the war.

Ella: I’m okay. You?

Jesse: Doing my best.

Jesse: Be in touch soon.

And that was all I could get out. I searched through my emails for the number Rory had provided for Andrew in case of an emergency, then called it, hoping Ella’s concerns weren’t justified.

No answer. Before I had a chance to call again, there was a knock at the door. I tossed my phone onto my bed and answered it.

“Rory,” I mouthed her name in shock. Her arms were across her chest, and she was trembling. I lunged for her and pulled her into my arms, realizing she was more than just

upset. She flinched at the contact, and a sob tore from her lips. “What’s wrong?” I pulled back and urged her into my place, closing the door behind us.

“I—I ...” Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she turned her back to me and lifted her shirt.

I stumbled and bile rose in my throat. She was more than just hurt. A rage like I’d never known worked up inside me. Hard and fast. Relentless.

“Who did this to you?” I hissed, closing the distance between us to assess the welts on her back. Her torn flesh. Whipped? *You were fucking whipped?*

She dropped her shirt and faced me. “Andrew and I were taken. Forced to provide the coordinates for a sunken ship we were about to ...” Her lower lip quivered as she let her words trail off. “Andrew paid them a million dollars to let us go once he gave up the location to the ship, but I’m just ...”

“You’ll be okay. I won’t let anything happen to you ever again.” I pulled my sister back into my arms, careful not to touch her back. “Where are they? Who hurt you? I need to know,” I whispered into her ear as she cried against my chest, gripping hold of my back as another uncontrollable sob escaped her lips.

“Somewhere in the Caribbean. Probably gone from where they dropped us by now, but what can you do?”

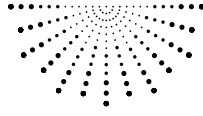
Oh, I knew exactly what I was going to do.

Find them.

Torture them.

And then kill them all.

CHAPTER SIX



JESSE

OFF THE COAST OF ST. LUCIA

“IT’S WAY MORE LIKE A WAR SHIP,” A.J. SAID FROM WHERE WE were all gathered inside the boat we’d rented for the op. It was zero dark thirty, and we’d be moving in soon.

It’d taken a few days to track down the men who’d taken Rory and her boyfriend last week, and the “pirates” were now docked in the Caribbean Sea, about a kilometer off the coast of St. Lucia.

Whether A.J. changed his mind or not, I’d be going in. No way in hell would I let the men who’d taken a whip to my sister live to see another sunrise.

“What are you trying to say?” Marcus asked, pretty much speaking for me.

“There’s only six of us,” A.J. said. “Two armed tangos in our line of sight on the deck. God knows how many below deck.”

“Most should be sleeping,” I reminded him, looking out the window toward the “war-like” salvage ship in the distance. Our exterior lights were off, and we were floating dark for now—just a lantern at our feet so we could see each other without being seen by our targets.

“We still have no damn clue who is inside that ship, or how many people,” A.J. countered, clearly deciding to take the lead on this impromptu mission. And although I had more years in the military than him, as a SEAL, he had more experience with these types of strikes. So, I’d let him lead. Well, as long as we were in agreement to infil the ship and kill everyone on board.

I peered back at my best friend, my trigger finger fucking itchy. Head not quite on straight, I supposed. But then a thought hit me. “I’ll go on board alone first.”

“What?” Marcus piped up, wrapping a hand over my shoulder, urging me to look at him, but I kept my eyes steady

on the team leader. On A.J.

“I go on board and silently take out the two tangos on deck without popping off any shots. I can kill them with my hands,” I promised. “Then I pull the move we did as kids at Old Man Shaw’s place.”

“That haunted cabin you told me about?” Marcus asked A.J. with a chuckle. “You two believing in ghosts ... still cracks me up to this day.”

“Ghosts,” A.J. said under his breath, clearly connecting the dots with my proposed plan.

I tossed a quick look toward Marcus and a few of my veteran friends I’d recruited for this mission. “I’m going to take out the tangos, then move around like a fucking ghost. I promise, they’ll never know I’m there. I’ll radio back what we’re dealing with, so everyone knows what we’re up against before anyone else boards. Just like we used to do.”

“This plan may have worked with your walkie-talkies as kids playing war games,” Marcus said, his tone a touch more serious now, “but we’re talking about a vessel with armed men who are willing to hurt an innocent woman, and—”

“No, Jesse’s right,” A.J. cut him off. “This is the best plan. I’ll sit on the long gun on deck here. Have eyes on him. If I have to cut someone down and make our presence known, so be it. But we should give Jesse a chance for silent kills first.”

“Two of y’all can swim over with me. Wait in the water just in case I need an immediate assist before I can signal back,” I decided.

“You mean, if you get caught?” I faced Marcus as he’d asked the question I was trying hard to ignore. “What if they shoot you instead? We can’t have you dying, man. Not on my fucking watch. Not for revenge.”

“No one is going to die.” I refused to accept any other outcome than putting these wannabe pirate assholes six feet under. Well, in this case, at the bottom of the sea.

“He’s got this,” A.J. said, eyes on Marcus before looking around at our quickly assembled crew.

Thank God A.J. had been stateside and not operating when I'd reached out for help six days ago.

I would've come anyway, but him having my six increased odds for mission success.

"Okay, okay," Marcus said with a nod. He offered me his fist to bump it. "Just promise you won't die." He cocked his head, waiting for me. "Rory would kill me if I let something happen to you." A slow smile spread across his lips before he added, "Pretty sure Ella would hate it, too."

* * *

TWO DAYS LATER - WALKINS GLEN, ALABAMA

“Those men will never be a problem for you again,” I told my sister as she hugged me inside her childhood bedroom.

Being in our parents’ home was the last place I cared to be. I never wanted to share a roof with my old man ever again. Not even for an hour. But for Rory? For Rory I’d do it. For one night. Just the one. I could barely breathe being there, though.

“You’re safe,” I went on, reassuring her without giving her any additional information. She didn’t need to know all the messy details of how the operation went down. Like how I used my fighting skills to disarm the two men on deck. Choke the life from them. How I’d watched them take their last breath, and I didn’t mourn the loss of their lives. Not for a second.

No, she’d worry about me if I told her that.

Maybe I was a little worried about me, too?

I squeezed the lump down my throat at the memories.

“We rescued three women, though. You saved their lives. By coming to me, telling me what happened.” I would share that part. Because that part was good. Not dark or ugly. My sister needed to know she saved those women who’d been kidnapped from their yacht.

We hadn’t expected the op would turn into a rescue mission, but thank God we’d made it in time before those assholes had set their hands on them.

“Really?” Rory whispered, pulling away from me.

I lightly pinched her cheek, forcing myself to put on a front, to smile. “Focus on that, okay?”

“Not on the fact you more than likely killed a bunch of people for revenge?” She lifted a brow and swiped the last of her tears from her cheeks with the backs of her hands.

“I mean ...” *It is what it is.*

“*Where the fuck did you learn to fight like that?*” A.J. had asked me en route back to the U.S. post-op. “*I knew you were a great fighter, but what I witnessed tonight was next level, man.*”

I’d kept my mouth shut about the underground fighting, and lied instead, “*Been taking some martial arts classes in my free time.*”

“*Looks like they paid off,*” Marcus had commented before slapping my back.

“Thank you,” Rory spoke up, cutting through my memories.

I had to admit, operating with A.J. had felt good. It had me wishing once again we were in the same branch. Of course, I didn’t have much time left in the Army. I’d be getting out. And A.J. would most likely be a lifer, so ...

“No need to thank me. Just glad you’re okay. Maybe quit this whole treasure-hunting thing, though? Break up with your boyfriend, too.” *Please, for the love of God, because you’re stressing me out.*

Rory backed up, almost falling onto her bed. “You think I’ll let those men win? Stop me from following my dreams?” She shook her head. “If anything, what happened just makes me want to go harder.”

I closed my eyes and hung my head. *Because you’re like me, dammit. Dad fucked us both up.*

“Besides, now I know who to call if I ever—”

“Always,” I cut her off, opening my eyes. “I’ll always have your back. Whenever. Wherever. Don’t forget that.” *Dad couldn’t protect you. Protect us. I sure as fuck always will.*

She quietly nodded, tears gathering in her eyes again.

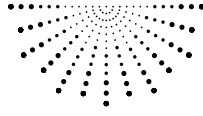
“Have you seen Ella while I was away?”

“Of course.” A smile slipped to her lips. “You going to see her while you’re here?”

Seeing Ella was all I wanted to do. But I'd just killed five men two nights ago and slept better afterward because of it. And I'd been beating the shit out of people for "fun" back in North Carolina. There was something wrong with me. And I had a feeling Ella would see right through any facade I tried to put up for her. See the darkness in my soul. And I wasn't sure I could handle her looking at me and hating what she saw. Or worse, fearing me.

I took off my ball cap and let go of a gruff breath. "No, I'm thinking I better not."

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

I ALMOST TEXTED YOU WHEN I HEARD YOU WERE BACK HOME.
I almost reached out again. I still kind of want to.

But here I am writing another letter I'll never send instead.

I wish you'd stayed in town for more than one night. I wish you'd stopped by. Said hi.

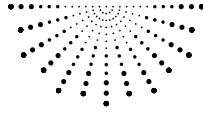
I wish a lot of things, though.

Hope to see you soon. And maybe, just maybe, I'll work up the nerve to text you again. Or better yet, you'll reach out first.

*YOURS (EVEN THOUGH I'M STARTING TO DATE SOMEONE ... SUCH
a bad idea since, well, I'm yours),*

Ella

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

A FEW WEEKS AGO, I TOOK OUT THE “PIRATES” (IS THAT STILL a thing, really?) ... and is it bad that I don't feel any guilt about it? Hell, it was a relief to eliminate that scum from this earth. It just feels different somehow. No orders from the Army. Not sure if I should feel bad about that, but I don't.

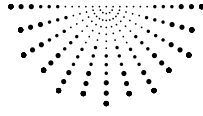
The skills I picked up in the underground/street fighting came in handy when we needed to silence a few guys without firearms. Oh right, I don't think I've told you about my fighting yet. Better for you not to know actually. I'm acting like I'm sending this. Yeah, I must need some rack time.

I'm sorry I didn't see you when I was home. I regret that now. Just add that to the pile of regrets I've been stacking up lately.

GOODNIGHT, ELLA. I MISS YOU,

Jesse

CHAPTER SEVEN



ELLA

JANUARY 2013 - WALKINS GLEN, ALABAMA

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU’RE QUITTING? I’M CONFUSED. Marcus, too?” Mom tossed both hands into the air, then peered at Dad, waiting for him to knock some sense into A.J.

“Can you just stop being a SEAL? Is that possible?” Dad asked as Mom poured herself a glass of wine.

I looked out the window, growing distracted at the sight of the tree down yonder where I could’ve sworn Jesse nearly kissed me the day before A.J. left for the Navy. Was that really seven and a half years ago?

I hadn’t even seen Jesse in almost a year, not since the wedding party 2.0 for Savanna and Marcus. It felt like a decade had passed since then, not just eleven months.

“You can trust me when I say it’s all good. My t’s are crossed. I’s are dotted. Yada yada yada,” A.J. remarked in a tone that was even too casual for him.

His story didn’t add up. He was obsessed with being a SEAL. Was he really turning in his trident to work in private security? No way did he care more about a bigger paycheck than being a SEAL.

I turned away from the window, facing him head-on, and tried to get a better read on him.

Based on the way he stood, arms locked across his chest, gaze on the floor ... well, the mystery reader in me said he was keeping secrets. Maybe he’d be secretly working for the President? That this new “Scott and Scott Securities” gig was just a cover story?

Okay, this is real life, Ella. Not a movie. But still. THAT made more sense than A.J. quitting his SEAL Team.

“I just need you to not question me on this,” A.J. said, his arms falling to his sides. “Please. And the good news is I’ll be around more. I’ll be doing private security jobs for the government. Stuff they need help with but can’t send

Teamguys to do. That's how I'm able to leave the Navy. Kind of not leaving if that makes sense. And Savanna's obviously excited to have Marcus around more. And if I ever find someone, I'm sure ... well, you know." A.J. popped up one shoulder, and it looked awkward enough to produce a light laugh from Mom.

"*You find someone one day ... don't get me all excited,*" Mom teased, then she shot me a funny look that said, *Maybe A.J. has a better chance at love since you're still pining over a man you can't have.*

"Hey, I'm dating someone," I answered her "look," unable to stop myself.

"Dating who?" That had my big brother's attention. "Do I need to talk to this dude? Check this guy out?"

I chuckled. "You realize how old I am now, right? An adult. I have a career. Even have my own place."

"That doesn't change anything," Dad grumbled, answering for A.J., and I swore the two of them shared a brain sometimes. I'm sure A.J. had been a split second away from saying the same thing.

"Who?" A.J. barked out. "Details."

"You're deflecting," I challenged, narrowing my eyes.

My brother made a give-it-up motion anyway. Stubborn. Pretty much all our middle names in this household.

"Tim. Works at my school. Resource officer. Nice guy." The problem was I didn't want a "nice guy." I wanted rugged, broody, and a man to make my temperature spike and body sizzle with a smoldering look. *I want what I can't have. I want Jesse.* "And speaking of Tim, we have a date tonight. I brought my stuff over here to get ready. I should go clean up."

"Their fourth date this month, too," Mom added. "Maybe you'll make things official soon?"

"Yeah, sure. Maybe." I went over to A.J. and squeezed his forearm. "Congrats, I guess?" I ignored the dirty look he gave me, because I knew he wanted to ask a hundred more

questions about Tim. But I could fire back a few myself, and he saw the look in my eyes ... saw the fire there.

So, he grumbled something under his breath, then waved his wrist, dismissing me before I pressed. "I'll be waiting here until Tim arrives," he called after me. "He *is* picking you up at the front door, right?"

I peeked back over my shoulder, realizing A.J. was going to scare Tim off within two minutes of his arrival if I let that little face-to-face happen.

"Leave her alone," Mom said. "Shep and Caleb like Tim. They approve. So, back off," she warned.

I took my chance to hurry away to my room to change. Once inside, I closed the door and looked around. I only stayed at the ranch whenever our parents had parties, or A.J. or Beckett came home. It was nice to still have a space of my own there.

It'd been over a year since I'd slept in my childhood bedroom, and since I had no plans to sleep with Tim after our date tonight, I knew I'd be back later.

A touch of nostalgia hit me when I caught sight of the white corner desk my dad had built when I was a kid. He was a talented craftsman and a good teacher. He'd shown Jesse a thing or two when we were younger. Jesse used to eat up every ounce of affection and attention my father had given him. It was sweet how he'd looked up to him.

I went over to the desk and opened the bottom right drawer to grab one of my old journals. In truth, I'd been writing to Jesse ever since I was a kid. Letters inside my journal I'd never let him or anyone read. Not much had changed.

I started to flip through the pages when a knock at the door startled me and I dropped the journal onto the desk. "If you're here to lecture me again about Tim, you can go away."

"It's Jesse."

Goose bumps covered my arms, and I whipped around to face the door. "You're not home."

“You’re right. I’m standing outside your door instead.” He was quiet for a moment, and I took the chance to collect my messy thoughts. “Any chance I can see you?”

“It’s unlocked.”

The door clicked and opened a moment later, and he stood in the doorway and folded his arms, leaning into the interior frame.

Holy hell.

He was ...

Everything.

My everything.

Tanned, golden arms, hard and muscular, flexed across his chest. His black ball cap faced backward, and I could clearly make out the slant of his brows over his stunning eyes.

Faded denim jeans. A tee. Boots. His typical look that always got my heart going a few beats faster.

“Hi.” I tucked my hair behind my ears, nervous as hell.

“Hi.” He smirked. “Been a minute.”

“More like eleven months.” I chewed on my lip, searching for what to say. To do.

“Does that mean I deserve a slap for being gone so long, or can I maybe get a hug?” He lifted a brow, continuing to stand like a statue of muscle, filling my doorway. His gaze roamed over me, taking in my outfit. Nothing fancy. Jeans and a tee with cowgirl boots. Something he’d also seen me in plenty of times, but the way he was looking at me now felt ... different.

I took a few steps his way, my boots clicking across the hardwoods. “A hug, please.”

He pushed away from the doorframe and ate up the space between us.

I smashed my cheek against his chest and wrapped my arms around his hard body. He squeezed me right back. And

I'd swear he was even inhaling me. Breathing me in. Maybe that was just my imagination?

"Ella." My name came out more like a choked sound. "I've—"

"Ah, there you are. A.J. said you were here." Mom's interruption was the last thing in the world I needed.

What had he planned to say? Was the moment—our moment—lost; the opportunity to find out what his words would've been gone forever?

Jesse let go of me, and I untangled myself from his arms so he could greet my mom. As she pulled him in for a hug, he told her, "I came to visit, um, A.J. Try and make sense of this quitting business. I had the weekend free, so ..."

Visit A.J. Not come here and confess your undying love. That's crazy.

"You better be staying for dinner," Mom said once she let go of him.

"I'd be delighted. Thank you, ma'am."

Mom set her sights on me. "Ella, you have a date to be getting ready for," she said as if I'd forgotten.

In truth, I did. With Jesse there, how could I think of anything else?

Jesse turned to look at me. "Tim?" His brows stitched together, a hard look in his eyes that made my stomach turn.

Right. I said his name when I thought you were my pain-in-the-ass overprotective brother.

"Change of plans, actually. I'm staying in." Well, I'd be calling Tim to let him know that the second I was alone. I couldn't lead that man on. Not when two seconds with Jesse made me feel so, so many things. It wouldn't be right or fair to either of us. Any of us.

"So, no Tim?" Jesse cocked his head a touch and his chest rose and fell with a heavy breath.

I shook my head and whispered, "No Tim."

* * *

JESSE

I looked around my room at the local inn. A small, cramped space. Just a bed and nightstand. No TV. No dresser. Not that I needed anything. I was there for only one night. With Rory off on another adventure, there was no need to force myself to stay at our parents' house.

And although Deb Hawkins had invited me to crash at the ranch, the second I found out Ella was staying there, I knew it'd be impossible to share a roof with that woman. I'd go to her at night.

I'd peel back her covers, ask her to let me in bed with her, and we'd make love. The mood I was in—especially after watching her smile and laugh all night long at the house—nope, I'd have snapped. Begged her on my hands and knees to let me be with her.

And that'd be a bad idea. Because I hadn't been home in eleven months because I was getting worse.

Fighting more.

Fucked in the head.

No good for her.

The fact I'd considered looking up this "Tim" guy and going to pay him a visit was evidence I was in a really bad place.

But I had to come back to see A.J., make sure he was okay with the whole quitting-the-Teams business. And to be painfully honest, I wanted to see Ella. Needed to see her. I needed some of her goodness. Some of her light. Seeing her tonight ... saved a piece of my soul. Kept me from totally surrendering to the depths of Hell trying to reach for me every single night over the last year.

I let go of a heavy breath while removing my boots, then I busied myself with stripping down to my boxers.

Before I had a chance to brush my teeth and collapse onto the bed, my phone pinged.

Ella: It was good spending time with you tonight.

I sat on the bed and stared at her text.

Jesse: I missed you.

I deleted it before I hit send. I'd almost slipped and told her those words in her bedroom earlier, but those words felt ... hopeful somehow. And maybe one day we would be together, but first I had to find my way back into the light on my own, without needing to steal a bit of hers just to survive.

Jesse: It was good seeing you, too.

Fuck, that feels so empty. Pale in comparison to what I wrote in my letters.

Jesse: Weird that A.J. is quitting.

Ella: Right? So weird.

I smiled at the fact we both sucked at texting. I couldn't help but wonder what she'd think if she knew I sat down and wrote to her, though.

Ella: But if this keeps him safer, and he's happy ...

I doubted whatever A.J. and Marcus planned to *really* do with Scott and Scott Securities was safer, but I wasn't about to tell her that.

Jesse: Of course.

Simple. Straightforward. And cowardly.

Jesse: Hope you sleep well, Ella. Goodnight.

I wanted to add more, tell her how I wanted her to come over and share the bed with me. Pin her body beneath mine and kiss every inch of her till she was writhing in anticipation. How I wanted to devour her, taste her sweet mouth ... her clit.

Clearing my throat, I licked my dry lips and adjusted my hardening cock. *At least part of me is not dead.* Sighing in frustration, I hung my head. Ella was the only person who could ever make me feel alive again.

My phone pinged, and I inwardly sighed reading her response.

Ella: Sleep well, too. Goodnight.

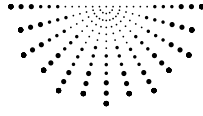
I could almost hear the sadness in her words. Her disappointment that the conversation was over.

There was no denying it, we wanted each other.

But would we ever find our way ... *to* each other?

Cursing, I chucked my phone and removed my boxers, preparing to get myself off. I may not have been worthy of Ella in real life, not yet at least ... but in my fantasies, I was, and she was always the star of the show.

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

I DON'T EVEN KNOW AT THIS POINT IF I'M WRITING TO YOU OR talking to myself, but clearly this is the only way I'm able to express myself while being so far away. You've seen my texts. Not so great.

But I want to tell you something. Tell you that my love for you keeps growing. It's like a nuclear reaction—burning bright and strong every day even when we're thousands of miles apart.

I know I haven't been the best man in my life. Not that you even know the shit I've done.

I'm on my last deployment before I leave the Army, and my time over here has shown me just how much I need to work on my demons.

I promise, every day, I strive to be a better man for you, to be the kind of person who deserves your love and admiration. My intentions are always pure even if it doesn't seem that way.

This deployment has been tough. More so than the last time. Maybe because I can't fight to take the edge off like I was doing back in North Carolina. And maybe, in some weird way, it's because it's my last one. Makes no sense, but ...

There are days when I feel like giving up, but then I think of you, and everything becomes clear. You're the reason I'm fighting (the good kind of fighting, not the kind I've been doing with my fists).

But you're the reason I'm trying to be a better man. I swear.

I want to come back to you feeling whole again, ready to be the man you deserve.

I can't promise you the world, but I can promise you this: my love for you will never fade, and if we can be together one day, I'll always do my best to make you smile.

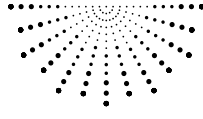
I know now more than ever you're the one I want to spend my life with, Ella. I just wish I knew how to make that happen.

It's so cold and dark today but writing to you gives me some light and warmth. The idea of seeing you again ...

ALWAYS YOURS,

Jesse

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

ANOTHER YEAR HAS GONE BY SINCE I'VE SEEN YOU. IT HURTS.
I try to keep myself busy. I'm even dating again. But no one is
you.

Do you think when you're out of the Army, you'll come
back home? Move back here?

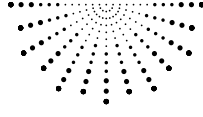
I miss you. I wish I could just text you that.

Until next time whenever that may be.

LOVE,

Ella

CHAPTER EIGHT



ELLA

NOVEMBER 2015 - WALKINS GLEN, ALABAMA

“WHERE IS HE?” I ASKED, TEARS ALREADY STREAMING DOWN my face at the thought of seeing my brother. Knowing he was in hell.

“He’s in Dad’s workshop, but he wants to be alone, Ella.” Mom dragged a palm down her face, a slight tremble in her hand as she did her best to keep it together.

But none of us were “keeping it together.” Not since Marcus’s death was aired on live TV by terrorists three days ago.

I’d been waiting for A.J. to come home ... with an empty casket. Because even though it was a public execution, Marcus’s body hadn’t been recovered, and ...

“I have to see him,” I cried and took off before she could stop me.

Flinging open the door, I nearly lost my balance as I slammed into a wall of muscle. *Jesse*. His strong arm slipped behind my back to steady me, then he hauled me close and hugged me tight.

Standing on our back deck, I fell apart, sobbing against his chest as he quietly held me.

“You’re here,” I whispered, sniffing as I clutched his shirt.

“Of course I’m here,” he rasped, running his fingers through my hair to try and comfort me. “Where’s A.J.?”

I forced myself to stop ugly crying long enough to free myself from his embrace. “Dad’s workshop.”

“Come on. He shouldn’t be alone.” He offered me his palm, and all I could do was stare at it. My fears, nerves, and every other emotion had me in a chokehold. Knowing A.J. would be ...

Closing my eyes for a moment, I forced myself back to the present, then took his hand, and allowed him to guide me to a

place I'd been a million times before.

We stopped outside the worn-down barn Dad used as his workshop, and I winced at the sounds of A.J. scream-crying.

"Maybe I should go in first? Alone?" Jesse let go of my hand and faced me, shielding his eyes from the bright sun.

"No, I *need* to see him." I lifted my chin to meet his gaze, then gave him a firm nod to say I was ready. He shook his head but took the lead and opened the door. Protecting me with his body, as if worried something might go flying my way and hurt me, he cautiously stepped inside.

"A.J.," I cried as he flung a partially constructed rocking chair across the room. It fell to the floor, splintering into pieces.

Breathing hard, A.J. turned toward us, tears streaking down his face. "We shouldn't have followed fucking orders. Shouldn't have let him go on that op alone," he roared. "He didn't have his ..." He frantically reached into his pocket and produced the lucky black band Marcus always wore ... "Why the fuck did he forget it that night, of all fucking nights?"

He collapsed to his knees before falling forward in agony. Forehead resting in the dirt, he pounded the ground with his fist as sobs continued to shudder through his body.

I ran over to him, dropped to his side and hugged his trembling frame. Laying my head on his back, I closed my eyes and we cried together.

I didn't need to look to know Jesse was near us. I could feel him—quiet and unsure of what to do, or how to show emotion—but his simple presence was all we both needed.

A.J. shifted, and I finally sat up and smoothed my hand up and down his back.

"Just ... last week ... it's like he knew his time was up," A.J. said a few seconds later as he tried to push up, obviously struggling, overcome by emotions.

"Savanna. She's ..." I began.

"I'm here."

I startled at the sound of her voice, letting go of A.J., then shifted on my knees to see Savanna in the doorway. Light shone all around her like it was ... like it was Marcus's light protecting her—embracing her—and oh God ...

Struggling to move, Jesse helped me up while A.J. remained on the ground, eyes locked on Savanna.

I ran over and embraced her as she broke down and cried.

I'd seen her since the horrible night Marcus was killed, but this was her first time seeing A.J. since he'd been overseas with Marcus when it happened.

"I'm so sorry, Savanna," A.J. choked out, bowing his head again. "I'm so fucking sorry. He was the best of us. And if ..."

"It's not your fault, A.J.," Savanna whispered once we unlocked arms, and she swiped at the tears on her puffy cheeks.

The anguish and exhaustion were clear on A.J.'s face, but he gripped Jesse's hand and hauled himself to his feet. Joining me in front of Savanna, he offered her the black band.

Shaking her head, she closed his fingers over it. "He would want it to stay with the team. Wear it in his memory and know that he will always have your six."

Savanna choked out a sob and A.J. grabbed hold of her and pulled her into his arms as they both broke down again. As he held her, Jesse and I left the workshop to give them a moment alone to grieve.

Outside, I spotted Marcus's classic red Mustang. Savanna never drove it, but today ... yeah, today ...

I sniffled, trying to keep the tears at bay. Then again, there was no reason to fight them. How did this happen? How was Marcus gone?

Jesse laced his fingers with mine as we both stared at the bright red car in the distance, the sunlight washing down over it.

"Why were they fighting terrorists when they were supposed to be retired?" I whispered what I'd only meant to

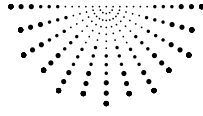
ask in my head.

“I don’t know, Ella,” he said, rubbing his thumb soothingly over mine. “I don’t know.”

I kept hold of his hand but turned to peer at him. “I can’t lose you, Jesse McAdams.” My chest was tight. The pain damn near intolerable. “Promise me I won’t ever lose you,” I pleaded, tears falling down my cheeks again.

He closed his eyes, a tortured look on his face, and he mouthed, “I promise.”

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

I CAN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT MARCUS.

Watching A.J. and Savanna grieve, watching their hearts ripped out was one of the most gut-wrenching experiences of my life. I can't begin to imagine their pain. I'm devastated, and I didn't know Marcus nearly as well as A.J.

I'm going to be there for Savanna, though. For A.J., too. No matter what.

I hate this. Hate the evil in this world. The evil you've been fighting. I wouldn't survive if anything happened to you or A.J.

Come home when you're out of the Army.

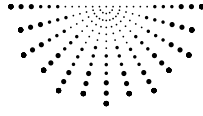
I need you.

We all need you.

LOVE,

Ella

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

I'M GRIEVING HARD FOR A.J.—FOR WHAT HAPPENED TO Marcus. And how it happened ...

It wasn't supposed to go down this way.

It's been tough on all of us. Hell, on the whole country after seeing him killed live on TV.

It's hitting me hard tonight. I guess I'm human after all. My heart still works.

My nightmares are getting worse, and I can't seem to shake the feeling of loss, sadness, anger, every other fucking emotion running through me like a thousand volts of lightning.

I don't regret being in the Army. Serving our country has always been important to me. And for the most part, I'm proud of what I've done (while serving, at least). But now that I'm thinking about what comes after the Army, I'm not sure what I'll do with myself.

What am I good at outside of the military? What's my purpose? Will I fit in with the crowd? Be able to live a "normal" life? Fuck, I hope so.

Maybe I'll die before I have to make that choice, though. All I know is Marcus should never have died. Maybe it should've been me? But I can't let that happen. For you, I can't die.

I shouldn't talk like this. Ask these questions. I know what you'd say. You'd yell at me. But maybe these questions are ones everyone asks themselves at some point?

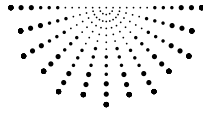
Not sure why they're weighing so heavily on me now. Probably because my heart is breaking for A.J. For Savanna.

I want to be the strong friend he needs; I'll always be there for both him and you, whenever you need me. (Even if I'm not good at saying that out loud, I hope you know it's true.)

ALWAYS YOURS,

Jesse

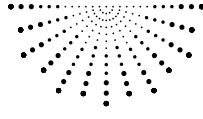
PART II



**Jesse's years as a CIA hitman ...
(2017 - 2021)**

*Also includes an alternative POV scene from the prologue of
The Broken One.*

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

I CAN'T EVER TELL YOU THIS. NOT EVEN A.J. BUT THE CIA recruited me after I left the Army. I was at my breaking point. Feeling completely hopeless. Useless. Lost.

This guy named Thatcher, who looks like Harrison Ford's doppelgänger, which you'd appreciate since you love his movies, promised he could help me. Get me back on track. Take me under his wing. He's kind of like the father I always wanted.

Thatcher said I could make a difference in the world again without being in war. Hopefully, he doesn't disappoint me the way my old man always has (not that I've yet to tell you about him, either).

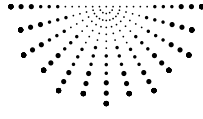
The scary thing is ... I'm kind of good at what I do. It's fucked up. Because my job is to kill people. They're all bad. Really, really bad. I promise.

But now more than ever, I don't see how I can be with you. Especially when I'm lying to you. To A.J. and everyone about my life. You all think I'm designing furniture for a living. No, that's my cover story. Fuck, I hate lying. But it's safer for you not to know the truth.

Now I can't help but wonder if by saying yes to the CIA, did I run away again? Run away from the possibility of us?

JESSE

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

TIME HAS BEEN GOING BY SO QUICKLY. ODDLY, EVEN MORE SO since you left the military. You keep coming and going from town. Feels like we spend almost as much time together as when you served, which is kind of depressing when we live ten miles away from each other. Seems to me you're avoiding me.

We bumped into each other at the grocery store last week. Our carts collided. You smiled. It felt like one of your real ones, too. And then we just stared at each other like we were the only two people in the world. And then the next day, you were gone. Well, not that you told me you left town. I worked up the nerve to visit you at your shop, only to find it empty and your truck missing.

I wonder where you went. You're still not back.

You left your shop unlocked, though, so I may have snooped. Looked around. Saw what new masterpieces you've been restoring from reclaimed wood.

You're so talented. You blow me away. Truly. I'm so glad you found your calling after the Army.

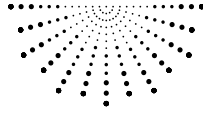
But now that you're living back here ... what's keeping us from being together? Why do you still look at me like I'm so unreachable? Untouchable? Where do you keep disappearing to?

I don't know what to do anymore. Do I give up? Find a way to move on for real? I'm thirty-two next month. How wild is that? I wonder if you'll be in town for my birthday. Maybe you'll surprise me. A birthday kiss would be nice.

UNTIL ONE OF US WORKS UP THE NERVE TO MAKE A MOVE,

Ella

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

IT'S BEEN WAY TOO LONG SINCE I'VE WRITTEN. BUT TODAY, I'm feeling like an asshole even more than normal, because I missed your birthday. I had to lie. Make up some pathetic excuse why I wasn't there. Why I disappeared yet again.

How could I tell you that I got called in for an emergency job at the last minute to go kill a guy and make it look like an accident?

You think all I do with my hands now is create. Build furniture.

I'm still taking lives, Ella. I don't fight in stupid underground places anymore. (Can't remember if I ever told you about that?) But no, instead, I take out human traffickers, other hitmen, and overall monsters for a living. What if I'm a monster, too?

I think I fucked up saying yes to the CIA. I think Thatcher tricked me. Made me feel like it was my only choice.

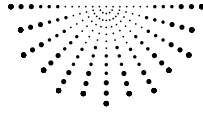
And now, I think I want out. No, I KNOW I want out. But even if I leave, I can't tell you what I've been doing. I'll have to keep lying. I have so much blood on my hands, Ella. How can you ever be with a man like me, especially without knowing the truth about my past?

Sorry again about your birthday. Sorry that I chose the CIA after the Army because I was too much of a coward to ... well, be the man you deserve.

FORGIVE ME?

Jesse

CHAPTER NINE



JESSE

THAT WINTER - 2019 - SANTA MONICA,
CALIFORNIA

I CLOSED MY EYES WHILE GRIPPING THE STEERING WHEEL. I couldn't breathe and my heart was trying to pound its way from my chest. But being behind the wheel of a Porsche 911 on the windy roads of the California coast wasn't the best place to lose my shit. *Fuck*. I opened my eyes just before I went off the road.

I'd been at a black-tie event fifteen minutes prior. Followed my mark down a hall, then used my tie to strangle him. Finished him off with my bare hands ... *I can't keep doing this*.

Sighing, I rested my skull against the headrest and continued to drive recklessly down the road. *How the fuck did I get here?* How'd I become a man I couldn't stand to see in the mirror anymore?

Groaning, I took my foot off the accelerator, slowing the car slightly as I came to a bend in the road. I was so fucked in the head tonight. More than normal.

Typically, I was behind a long gun when taking out a target. Or rigging a car to explode. Or making someone's death look like an accident. They all deserved to die. Every fucking one. But tonight ... I watched the life drain from my target's eyes; his body went limp as my hands squeezed tightly around his throat. Fucking hell, what would Ella think of me? A.J.?

A.J. served his country in an honorable way, and I was pretty sure he was still doing something honorable. Even if he hadn't fully opened up about his job with Scott and Scott Securities. And some time ago, I, too, served our country honorably, but what I was doing now felt far from it. And Ella, well ... she was everything good in this world and didn't deserve to be tainted with my darkness.

I pulled over a moment later. I was going to cause a wreck if I kept going. And hurting someone else wasn't something I could live with. I got out of the car and walked over to the edge of the road, the murder weapon—my tie—hung loose around my neck over my white dress shirt.

Setting my hands on the metal guardrail, I bowed my head, needing to find the energy to keep moving forward. To find a way to make things right in my life. Make them better. Because at this rate, I wasn't going to last much longer.

A few minutes later, I started back for the car and halted when my phone pinged with an incoming text from my sister.

Rory: I'm taking Ella to NYC next weekend for a girls' trip.

Rory: Thought you may want to know ...

Ella in New York? In the big city? With assholes like the one I killed tonight? Rory was used to big cities. Her life was ... well, wild. But Ella? Fuck, she'd be ...

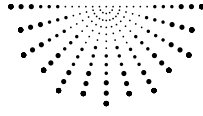
Of course I wanted to know about the trip. More than that, I needed to be there. To watch over them. Protect them.

Jesse: Thank you for letting me know.

That's all I said. All that needed to be said.

Because I'd be there no matter what. And Rory knew it ... as evident by her "stomach bug" the following weekend.

CHAPTER TEN



ELLA

ONE WEEK LATER - NEW YORK CITY

“WELL, UM. HOW ABOUT WE GO SEARCH OUT THAT ‘NEW YORK AT CHRISTMAS’ FEELING I WAS CRAVING?” I tipped my chin in the direction of Rockefeller Center.

“That sounds much better.” Jesse offered me one of my favorite smiles. Innocent. A little boyish. Like he no longer had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

My other favorite smile, though? A dash of broody with a hint of bad-boy cocky. That smile always did me in.

After watching Jesse “handle” a guy for being an asshole, we’d left the nightclub and were currently walking the streets of Manhattan like we were in some type of fairy tale.

And when Jesse set his hand on the small of my back, I went momentarily still. I wasn’t used to him touching me. Not even like this. And damn if it didn’t feel ... perfect.

I supposed this night made up for the fact he’d missed my birthday. *Maybe. Kind of. The night’s young.*

I did my best to school my features and started forward.

Golden angels with trumpets pointed toward the heavens lined our path as we neared the massive Christmas tree. “Rory planned this, didn’t she?” I asked a little bit later, stopping in front of the classic holiday display. His hand slipped away from my back, and I instantly missed the warmth. “Her birthday was recently, so I thought she meant this to be a Christmas-slash-birthday celebration weekend, but the stomach bug is fake, isn’t it?”

“I’m thinking so.”

I turned to face him, and a cold breeze whipped my way. “Why does she keep trying to set us up?” When he didn’t respond, I added, “Rory’s my best friend. She knows you’ve rejected me on a few occasions, so I don’t know why she keeps pressing the idea we’ll end up together. You obviously don’t see me that way.”

“Reject you?” He scoffed as if offended. “When did I ...” He cupped his jaw as if he truly didn’t know, working through his memories to latch on to the two times his rejection had shattered me into pieces. Little fractured bits of glass. Finally, his brows snapped together.

Annnd you remember.

“You talking about the kiss, and, well, the other thing?”

All I could do was nod. My eyes landed on his big hand moving along his strong jawline. He was referring to my virginity.

“That wasn’t rejection.” His brows remained tight. A defensive look crossing his face.

“I asked you to be my first kiss. You said no,” I spat out, being a tad “defensive” right back, but I couldn’t help it. The man could be frustrating at times. *So much for the fairy tale night.*

He winced as if I’d slapped him. “Ella, I hardly call that rejection. I mean,” he said while holding a hand up between us, “you were fifteen, and I was eighteen. I was about to join the Army, *and* you were also drunk on Beckett’s secret stash of Tennessee moonshine. What’d you expect me to say? Me saying no was the right thing to do, and you know it. That’s not rejection.”

“It sure felt like rejection to me.” I shrugged. “And by the way, I was drunk *because* you were enlisting.” That was the honest-to-God truth, too.

His only response was to mutter, “You were still too young. And also, a Hawkins.”

“Is that how you’ll always see me? A Hawkins?”

“Ella.” His tone was gritty. Real texture there. It slid right under my skin. Hell, between my legs. Probably not his intention.

And my stubborn self wasn’t about to give up, so I pushed further. “Okay, what about when I was in college, then? And I

asked you to take my virginity? I was of age. That was rejection.”

He took a step back and grabbed the back of his neck. “Tequila. Still a Hawkins.”

There was a third something to that short list. I could feel it. But he obviously wasn’t going to share.

“So no, that doesn’t qualify as rejection. And any man that would have said yes to you after you’d been shooting tequila should be dragged behind one of your daddy’s horses for a good mile. Maybe more.”

“I didn’t have that much tequila that night.” *At least I don’t think I did.*

“Regardless, there were a lot of reasons for me to behave. But it wasn’t that I didn’t want you. That I rejected you.” He went quiet for a moment. I could see the emotional turmoil in his eyes. Feel the tension vibrating in his voice. A conflict of some kind. “But also ... Iraq,” he admitted. “I’d just come home after a bad deployment.”

The third reason. *You’re giving it to me?* And now that I knew ... “Is there such a thing as a good deployment?”

“The ones where everyone comes home alive, yes.”

“Oh.” I looked up at the sky, unsure what to say. Writing him letters to express my emotions over the years was so much easier than actually speaking the words out loud. And if I’d never even sent those, how could I share what I was thinking now?

“Listen, I really can’t stand here and have a conversation about this. I don’t want to know who gave you your first kiss. Or who took your ...”

My virginity? It was awful. *Because it wasn’t with you.*

“But I don’t need you thinking I rejected you in the past because I didn’t want you. That’s the furthest thing from the truth.”

It is? “Okay,” I whispered. “I think I’d like to go back to the hotel. I’m tired.” I gave him one of my smiles. The fake

kind. Hoping he wouldn't see through me. "I didn't have a nap like you did."

"Ella," he called out, but I was already on the move. He yelled my name once more, then caught up with me. Matched my steps.

At the feel of tears on my cheeks, I murmured, "It's the cold air making them water." A lie.

"Don't be sad. Why are you sad?" He reached for my hand. Another surprise.

"It's nothing. Please." *Do not ugly cry. Do not ugly cry.*

He let go of my hand and kept quiet the rest of the walk back to the hotel.

The second we were in our shared room, he tossed his coat and I rushed into the en suite, grabbing my night tee from the suitcase next to the vanity.

I was breathing a little too hard as I stripped, telling myself it was the cold air that'd been harsh on my lungs.

Jacket hastily tossed.

My red dress next.

The uncomfortable strapless bra gone-gone-gone. *Thank God.*

I quickly washed my face, then slipped into my night tee and set my hands to the counter as I peered into the mirror. My windblown blonde hair framed my face, cheeks red from both the cold and colored by my emotions.

You've got this. Go out there. Just go to sleep. Act like you're only ... only what? What are we?

"Friends. You're Rory's brother. Nothing more," I lied to myself before doing my best to lock up my emotions and head back into the room.

Jesse was in front of the window with one hand in his pocket. His back to me.

You're here to watch over me. Keep me safe. Not to make love to me.

“Are you sure it’s okay if I sleep in here?” he asked.

“There are two beds,” I reminded him. Then my sassy self snapped out, “Plus, we’ve already established you’re not interested, and Rory is just wasting her time.”

“We established that, huh?” He slowly faced me, removing his hand from his pocket.

Stilling, he quickly schooled his emotions behind the passive frown he was now sporting. His jaw was tight, and there was something blazing behind his eyes. It was hard to get a good read on the man sometimes, though.

I dropped my eyes to my oversized black tee that said “Cowgirls Do It Better.”

“I think you’re missing something,” he pointed out, eyes never leaving mine.

“And what’s that?”

One brow lifted. His signature broody look pointed my way. “A pair of pants.”

“I’ve seen you shirtless on the ranch a million times, I, um.” I shrugged, like it was all the same thing. But I knew it wasn’t. And I wasn’t sure I much cared. He’d starred in every single fantasy of mine. Tortured me my entire life. Wanting him. Unable to have him. Payback was a bitch.

“You sure you didn’t pack an adult onesie? Or maybe some fleece pants with cute puppy dogs wearing Santa hats on them?” he asked, his tone more gruff than teasing. He was even fidgeting with his belt now. Was he nervous?

I wanted him to unbuckle the belt and whip it free from the loops in one fast movement. And then maybe ...

“No, I hate being hot at night. I like sleeping in barely anything, jacking up the AC, and then getting cozy under the covers. That a problem?”

“Barely anything. Is this barely anything? Or is this more normal?”

He unbuckled his belt and undid the top button of his pants.

All I could do was swallow. And stare.

Oh. My. God. Did his cock just twitch? “A tank top and panties. Or maybe just the panties. Tank tops tend to get all twisted in my sleep.”

“So, you’re doing me a favor by wearing a tee, huh?”

“Why, you’d see me as someone other than A.J.’s sister if you saw my tits?” *Yeah, I just said that.*

“Ella,” he rasped, the warning clear in his tone.

Frustrated over this entire conversation, I tore my tee over my head, tossed it on the bed, and stood before him in only my red thong. “Go ahead. Reject me again. For a third time. I barely had anything to drink. I’m way over age. And you’ve been out of the Army for a few years. So, what excuse will you come up with this time to try and hide the fact you just don’t want me?”

His eyes went to my breasts, riveted there for a few moments before he shifted to the side, offering me his profile.

“What if it’s for one night? Only one night. And we don’t tell anyone what happens. Instead of what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas, this’ll be what happens in New York, stays in New York.” Was I really offering him no-strings-attached sex? “I won’t tell Rory. Savanna. Any of my friends. Or family.”

“Why do you want to do this? Won’t it ... complicate things?”

But I could feel him surrendering. Giving in.

“Jesse, I’ve wanted you since as far back as I can remember. I’ve always wanted you, and you have to know that,” I admitted, setting my hand on his arm, urging him to look at me.

“Then tonight would be a mistake.” He finally faced me, the full effect of his conflicted expression trained on me. “Because I can’t be the man you need.” He shook his head. “You deserve to be with someone whole, Ella. And I’m about as broken as they come. Far too many pieces for me to ask you to try and help put me back together.”

My heart about stopped at his words. At the emotion in them. At the sadness in his eyes. Not whole? Why not? What are you keeping from me?

“But, Ella, the last thing in the world I want is to reject you tonight. Because I do want you. I want to throw you on the bed and fuck the ever-loving daylights out of you. And then do it again and again and again.”

I nearly melted. Right to the floor.

“But saying no is something I need to do. It’d be wrong of me to give you false hope. I’d be an asshole.”

“Then be an asshole. Don’t say no. Not tonight. I don’t want to be a good girl. The trusty and reliable Ella that does no wrong,” I murmured. “I want to be bad.”

He lightly gripped my arms. He was desperate to say no. Just as much as he was desperate to say yes. I could see the conflict warring in his eyes. His need to protect me. Even from himself.

“We won’t kiss. Anywhere. Not even, you know, down there,” I blurted. “Nothing intimate. I think that’ll help make it less ... hopeful.”

He licked his lips. Probably unaware he even did it. “I don’t have condoms.”

Three beats later, my heart landed back in a normal rhythm as I shared, “I do.”

He held me a touch tighter at my words. “Were you planning to hook up with someone this weekend?”

“I may have hoped that you ...” I leaned closer, my breasts touching his hard frame.

“We don’t tell anyone. Rory won’t ever leave us alone if she knows.” He swallowed hard, and I wanted to lick his Adams apple. “I can’t be with you,” he reiterated. “I don’t want you to try and fix me. To think I can be ... fixed.” His gaze softened. “You have to promise me you’ll move on ... please.”

Move on? How in the world ...? But I relented and nodded. I was desperate to feel his touch, and if keeping us a secret was the way to get it—hell, I’d agree to just about anything.

“I have to hear you say it. I need to look into your eyes when you do.”

I might as well have been crossing my fingers behind my back when I told him, “I promise. I’ll move on.”

He let go of me and stared me up and down. “You’re beautiful.”

I let go of a shaky breath at his compliment. Had he ever said that to me before? Of course, we were barely ever alone without my brothers around.

“So are you. You know, in a manly, rugged way, of course.” I smiled, starting to feel nervous that THIS was finally happening. I stepped forward and reached for his zipper, opting to be bold, lowering his pants to expose his boxer briefs. He was rock hard and ready for me.

“No kissing, but can I touch you?” he asked, his tone ragged, like he was still fighting to restrain himself. Fighting this thing between us despite his question.

“Yes, please,” I said with a tiny nod.

He hooked his fingers around the thin straps and pushed down my panties, then set his palm to my pussy. He hissed as he felt my arousal when he slid his fingers along my sex. I bucked into him, and he rolled one of my peaked nipples between his other fingers.

Holy shit. “Jesse,” I cried when he crooked two fingers inside me, instantly hitting my G-spot.

“Don’t,” he demanded. “Don’t say my name,” he growled out as he squeezed my tit, continuing to work my pussy.

“Why?” I breathlessly moaned, my eyes locked on his.

Releasing my breast, he slid his hand around my neck, fisted my hair and lightly pulled.

“Because I will tear you apart, darlin’, and I’d prefer to be gentle with you.”

“Oh.” Well, that sounds hot. “What if I want you to, uh, tear me apart?” I pressed up against him, and he pulled my hair a bit harder, angling his head to stare down into my eyes. That cocky-sexy-broody look was there. Heaven help me.

“Maybe later. We have the night, right? It doesn’t have to be the one time.”

“Oh.” *More than one time? Yes, please.* I squeezed my thighs together, trapping his hand there. “I might come if you don’t stop. And I want it to happen with you inside me.” I met his eyes. “Please.”

He studied me for a quiet moment before releasing my hair and removing his hand from my pussy. I stepped around my discarded thong and climbed onto the bed.

Trying to be as bold as I was in my fantasies with this man, I went on all fours. Ass in the air. “Condoms are in the side zipper in my suitcase,” I rattled off, biting my lower lip while gazing back to find his eyes pinned on my ass. “What? I’ve been working on my dump truck.”

“Dump truck?” He smirked.

“I think that’s what the twentysomethings call it. It’s not near Kardashian levels, but I’ve been hitting my glutes a lot at the gym.”

“I don’t know anything about the Kardashians,” he said while securing a condom over his thick cock, and I wet my lips at the sight of his girth, “but I’d say your ass is, well, perfect. And as much as I love the view, I want to look at you while we ...”

Don’t say love. My heart can’t handle it.

My heartbeat was frantic as I nodded and flipped on my back, the chaotic rhythm pounding in my ears.

Climbing on top of me, his gaze roamed over my body as I palmed my breast, beckoning for him to come closer with my finger. He lowered himself to his forearms and positioned his tip at my soaked center. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” I responded without hesitation, then reached for the nape of his neck, drawing him closer to me. Too close. Close enough to kiss.

“Ella.” The warning was clear. Last chance to change my mind.

“Jesse,” I begged.

His blue eyes pierced me as he rasped, “You really do want to be a bad girl tonight, don’t you?”

I caught my lip between my teeth as he nudged the head of his cock in just an inch. “Mm. As long as you whisper, ‘good girl,’ at some point tonight, I’ll be as bad as you want me to be.”

“You *are* a good girl,” he rasped as his eyes met mine.

Ugggh, I want to be YOUR naughty but good— He thrust into me in one hard movement, silencing my thoughts. “Ohhh,” I hissed as our eyes locked. My hips and ass lifted off the bed as our bodies joined perfectly.

And for a second, my heart stopped, every part of me stilled ... and for the first time, I felt alive. Tingling sensations swept through every part of my body as emotions I never knew existed crashed through me. A sensory overload with our bodies connected in such an intimate way. *Breathe, Ella.*

The thought of never feeling like this again, that this weekend was a one-and-done affair had my heart splintering.

Blinking back tears I refused to let fall, I let my worries and fears slip away. Surrendering my body to him, I allowed him to take the lead, guiding us to ... nirvana.

Shifting his weight to one forearm, he reached for my hip and slid his hand to my ass, keeping me tight against his body

as he started grinding faster. Harder.

Holy shit. “I’m going to come. I—I’m sorry. I can’t wait,” I moaned on a breathy exhale.

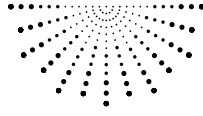
“Waiting on you, darlin’. I can come any-fucking-time being inside you. You feel so good.”

Continuing to roll my hips, I stared into his eyes until I felt myself coming apart. Unable to stop, I whispered his name, arching into him as my orgasm rocketed through me.

Breathing hard. Nostrils flaring. Jaw tight. Jesse thrust hard once more before falling to pieces and releasing inside me. A breathtaking sight to behold.

Coming down from ecstasy, I knew that this handsome man had just ruined me forever.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



JESSE

AFTER ONE MORE DEEP EXHALATION, I OPENED MY EYES AND peered out the giant hotel window. It was still dark out, but I couldn't sleep. My mind had been running a mile a minute, but I had finally come to a decision. Looking at my phone again, I hit send. *I did it.* I messaged Thatcher.

Jesse: We need to talk. Monday. Meet me at our spot.

I turned back to face the room, eyes now on the bed as I waited for Thatcher to respond. Ella was asleep, naked and sprawled out above the covers. Best sight of my life.

I couldn't wrap my head around wanting her for—I mentally did the math—over fourteen years, ever since she was eighteen ... and now here we were in a hotel room together in New York, and we'd made love. I wished she would've let me kiss her, but if that'd only complicate things for her more, I supposed I understood.

But staring at those pouty lips, partially open, as she slept ... I was so damn tempted to wake her up and beg her to let me.

My phone dinged a moment later, and I dropped my focus back to the screen.

Thatcher: Is this what I think this is about?

Jesse: Just meet me at our spot at 14:00.

My mind was made up. I was quitting. But even after I left the CIA, I still had to find a way to make things right. Redeem myself first before I could ask Ella to be with me.

Hiding my work phone in my suitcase, I didn't bother to see his reply. I was too anxious to join Ella back in the bed. To spend every second of the weekend with her.

It'd only been three hours since I told her she had to move on, and there I was planning to do the opposite. But I had to make certain that if she was in my life, she'd be safe. That my past wouldn't endanger her. Put some distance between my time as a hitman and when I finally stepped up and showed her all my cards. Showed her my heart.

Ella moaned softly as I crawled in bed next to her. I wrapped a hand over her hip, and unable to stop myself, slid my hand down to the curve of her ass cheek. I was hard already. Just one look. One touch. I was ready to go.

Her eyes fluttered open. A soft, slow, almost surprised look from her. Like she was wondering if she was dreaming.

Same, darlin'. Same.

"This real?" she whispered, reaching for my chest, skating her palm over my pectoral muscle.

"It's real," I returned, nearly leaning in and kissing her. Forgetting her rule.

Thank fuck I could at least touch her. I drew her body against mine and she arched into me, bringing her pussy against my cock.

"Careful," I warned. "I'll slip inside you, and it won't be an accident." My heartbeat climbed as she stared deep into my eyes like she could see all of me. And I'd swear she still saw a soul there. I'd thought my job had robbed me of it. The devil, at least, owned it. For now. Until Monday. And then I was getting my life back.

"That wouldn't be such a bad thing," she murmured, rubbing her clit against me, and I clamped down on my back teeth.

Unable, or unwilling, to stop myself, I shifted and climbed on top of her. Pinned her beneath me. Let the heavy weight of my cock rest at her soaked center. I held her wrists alongside her head, allowing her to grind against me, to feel me. *Fuuuuck.*

“You’re going to come if you keep doing that.” I smirked. “Do you want to come that way, or do you want me to put my cock inside you?”

“Mmmm.” Her tits lifted and touched my chest. “You know exactly what I want, *Jesse.*”

I released one wrist at her use of my name and cupped her pussy before sliding two fingers inside her, my thumb caressing her sensitive spot. “You don’t come until I say so, got it?” I hissed.

She stared at me, a touch of defiance in her eyes, before she wet her lips and nodded.

I brought my mouth just over hers and whispered, “Good girl.”

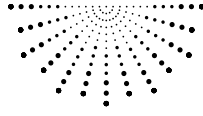
The power that phrase had on her was intense, and we fucked. Hard.

And I still couldn’t believe it. Any of it.

Getting to spend the weekend with her was life changing; yet, come Sunday, I’d have to walk the fuck away from her.

Again.

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

I'M STARTING TO HATE YOU. I NEVER THOUGHT I'D SAY THAT. But it's true. I hate you for keeping us apart when you know we belong together. I hate you for keeping secrets from me.

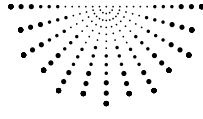
I hate you for giving me the most incredible weekend of my life in New York and making me promise to get over you. That's like asking me to live without my heart. (I know, I begged for it. I promised you I'd move on. I LIED. I can't move on.)

But more than anything, I hate the way I still love you. (Maybe that's a famous line, but it's true.) How do I fall out of love with you? How is that even possible?

YOURS (EVEN IF I'M TECHNICALLY NOT),

Ella

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT NEW YORK AND WHAT HAPPENED between us. What was *meant* to happen ... I wanted you so much more than you'll ever know. Wanted to taste you. Have my mouth all over your sweet spot and make every part of you mine forever.

Ughhh, one day, hopefully soon, I'll be a real fucking man and express to you that side of me. You know the one. The one no one ever really sees. You deserve that; I shouldn't be so guarded with you ...

But I promise you, right now, I'm just trying to keep you safe out of love.

I need to feel you again, this much I know. And I can't wait for that to happen. At least I hope it happens again. And again.

I spoke with Thatcher, and I told him that my hourglass is running on its last few bits of sand. That I want out of the CIA. Time to move on and start a new chapter before I'm so far down this rabbit hole I see no way out ...

I don't want that for me; I don't want that for us. Believe it or not, I see a future now, and it's you that's in it.

Thatcher can be a real asshole sometimes; but I guess it's not his fault. He holds me in high regard. Unfortunately, he made me sign on for one more year.

One more year away from you, and away from building a life with you, doesn't sit well with me. But I tell myself I've come this far, so, what's another 365 days?

I asked you to move on, but when I'm done with the Agency, and I find a way to redeem myself ... I hope you're still there. You will be, won't you?

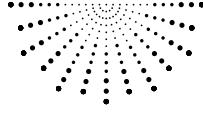
I need you to be there, Ella.

ALWAYS YOURS,

Jesse

[Listen to the audio](#)

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

BRIAN. FUCKING BRIAN ... REALLY? THAT'S THE KIND OF GUY you're ... I'm going to lose it. Fuck.

I don't know what to do. Why in the world did I expect you to wait? Just because you never listen to me on anything ... this is the **one** thing you finally did and now you're ... dating this guy?

I want to go to you and tell you to dump him. But it's my fault you started dating him in the first place. I didn't tell you my plan. How could I? I'm not allowed to tell you I work for the CIA. To tell you that Thatcher made me give him one more year without "issues." You can guess what "issues" means when it comes to the Agency.

There's no way I could be with you while I work with them. Too dangerous.

But now my year is almost up, and ...

You've moved on.

I want to fight for you. For us.

But what if you're happy with banker-boy Brian? What if he's better at keeping you safe because he doesn't have a dark past and a laundry list of bad guys he's killed?

I mean, I already checked. He's clean. No kill count. Not even a parking ticket ... what a motherfucker.

What if you're happy? I don't want to interfere with your happiness.

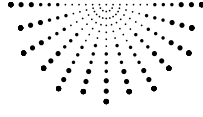
I don't know what to do.

Tell me what to do, Ella.

I have to go out of town again. Kill two people this time responsible for a terrorist attack in Yemen. This is my life. STILL my life. But I want YOU to be my life.

FUCKED IN THE HEAD,
Jesse

LETTER



ELLA

JESSE,

I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH YOU KNOW, BUT BRIAN, THE GUY I've been dating, asked me to marry him. We haven't even had sex. I've never even let him go down on me.

I didn't want to say yes.

Somehow it happened, though.

Put on the spot, I guess.

Can I take it back?

Wouldn't I rather be single forever than to marry someone who doesn't have my heart? I already gave my heart away. I gave it to you.

Long before our weekend in New York last year.

With every horse ride on the ranch.

With every little look my way.

So many "with every" moments I could go on and on.

All with you.

So many reasons I shouldn't marry Brian.

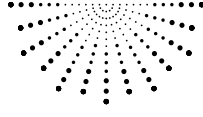
All of them because I still love you.

I'm a horrible person because I said yes.

HATING MYSELF TONIGHT. CRYING A LOT, TOO.

Ella

LETTER



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

YOU'RE MARRYING THAT ASSHOLE IN THREE DAYS.

I'm ... I don't know what to say. How to feel. I'm so messed up right now. I was about to leave the CIA last Christmas, and then A.J. told me you were engaged. After I threw up, and killed my mark, I told Thatcher I'd stay. Why quit if you're marrying someone? Why stop doing something I'm so good at?

You think I make furniture for a living. You think that's my only job. In my shop ... working with my hands. That's my cover story, Ella. But it was going to become my real story. My real job soon.

I guess this is fate. We're not meant to be together. I'm no good for you.

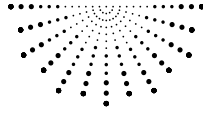
But I have no idea how I'll watch you marry that man and not put a bullet in his head before he can say *I do*.

I'm so sorry I waited so long. I'm sorry you fell in love with another man and did what I asked you to do: move on.

I'M SO, SO FUCKING SORRY.

Jesse

CHAPTER TWELVE



ELLA

SUMMER 2021 - WALKINS GLEN, ALABAMA

I WASN'T SUPPOSED TO CRY AT MY DRESS REHEARSAL DINNER. But there I was in the bathroom, escaping for a minute alone to try and swipe away the tears that had been aching to break free all night long.

Tears for the fact I was about to marry a man who wasn't Jesse. All because Jesse said he was bad for me. Too broken for me. Forced me to move on.

But how in the hell do I walk down the aisle and marry Brian?

Brian wasn't my lifelong friend. He didn't make my heart leap from my chest with just one look. He didn't have my insides twisting whenever we shared the room together.

Brian didn't have me feeling ... anything.

He was the safe choice.

Safe because he couldn't hurt me.

He couldn't break my heart and rip it in two.

Unable to stop the tears from escaping, I gave in and let them flow.

I could barely breathe as I stared at myself in the mirror, willing the pain to go away.

I just wanted it to stop. It all needed to stop. No more loving a man who'd only ever cause me pain.

"I have to move on. I have to move on." I repeated the mantra again, hoping I could convince myself. Hoping those words would somehow ease the death grip fistling my heart that only wanted to beat for one man.

I hated that man right now. Hated him so much for ever letting me wind up in this very situation.

We should've been together after New York.

“How could you walk away from me after that weekend?” I murmured under my breath, the words still coming out strangled with emotion despite my soft tone.

I hadn't even had the stomach to sleep with the man I was marrying tomorrow. But every kiss with him had felt like a betrayal to Jesse, to my heart, and to the man I was about to spend forever with.

Forever with Brian? No, I ...

I thought back to A.J.'s words to me in my childhood bedroom before the dinner tonight ...

“You know that horrible, empty feeling as though your soul has left your body, and you can't breathe?” A.J. had asked me. “Can't eat. Everything hurts on the inside, and your heart is just ... gone? That's how I feel when I imagine my life without Anastasia. And I just want to know if you have the same gut-wrenching and painful feeling when you imagine your life without Brian.”

I almost admitted to my brother then and there I did have that feeling, but for his best friend.

I hung my head and did my best to zip up my emotions, but I knew what I had to do.

Spending my life alone was a better option than marrying someone that wasn't Jesse.

My parents and family would support me. They wouldn't care about all the money spent on the wedding, and I'd find a way to make that up to them. Because it was my fault I let things get this far.

I went back into the room where everyone was gathered for the dress rehearsal. Some people were laughing, others making small talk.

Everyone was all smiles. Everyone but Jesse. His hard, bladed jawline was even sharper than normal. His eyes fixed on me, and I'd swear in that moment, I was certain that stubborn-ass man was in as much pain as I was.

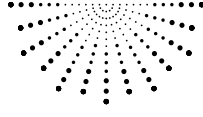
I sat back in my seat, trying to figure out how to get the words out that I couldn't marry Brian. But then Jesse met my eyes from across the table, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood. The words froze in my mouth.

He pushed up from the table and gritted out, "I'm sorry, but I can't do this. Brian ain't right for you, and I can't watch you marry him tomorrow." He tossed his napkin on the plate.

And just like that, he left.

Gone again.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



JESSE

I WASN'T SURE I'D EVER FELT THIS KIND OF PAIN BEFORE. I'D rather be shot. Take shrapnel in my body. Take fucking anything else but this pain.

I slid down the wall inside the cabin, whiskey bottle in hand, and I rested my head against the wall.

Ella would be married tomorrow, and it was all my fault.

I took a swig of whiskey, letting it burn my lungs, then my eyes snapped to the box I'd brought with me to the off-the-grid location thirty miles away from our town. I kept it for emergency situations. And hell, this called for it.

I reached for the shoebox and flicked off the lid.

The letters I'd written Ella over the years were inside it.

Letters I'd never had the balls to send her, and now ... it was too late.

Too *fucking* late.

I snatched one and began reading.

Letter after letter I read as I nearly emptied that bottle. My chest ached, tears fell down my face, and my entire being wept for the loss of my soulmate. My forever person I'd never have.

"What'd I think I was, a poet or something?" I grumbled to myself. "What in the hell did I write? Fuck." I set the last letter down and doused the letters in what was left of the whiskey.

"I'm such a ..." So many things. So many words. None would do justice for the mistakes I'd made.

Years and years of mistakes. Running away. From her.
Because I ...

I forced myself to stand, grabbed a lighter, and then I
burned every last letter.

* * *

THE NEXT DAY

Dancing with Ella on her would-be wedding day. Was this really happening right now?

My letters were ash—lost forever—but she was in my arms. She was still here. Not married. And dancing with me.

I had powered off my phone last night before taking off for the cabin. But when I woke up semi-hungover and finally turned it on, I fell to my knees at the messages. Ella had canceled the wedding.

The Hawkins family had turned the canceled nuptials into a Fourth of July event instead. Only the bride's side of the family in attendance, of course.

It took much less time than it should have, but longer than I wanted, to get back to the Hawkinses' ranch.

I'd stood on a hill in the distance for a few minutes, watching Ella dance. Do the two-step to that "Git Up" song she loved.

I'd dug my hand into my pocket for my work phone and called Thatcher right then and there.

"I'm out. I'm done. Not another day. Not another fucking reason," I'd said, then hung up before he could reply. That year I'd given him had lasted a lot longer than I'd promised. Yet another mistake.

I should have quit, gone to Ella, and told her to tell Brian to fuck off, because she was mine. We both knew it. We felt it every single time we looked at each other.

After that call with Thatcher had ended, I'd broken my work phone and chucked it, then walked straight to Ella and took her in my arms.

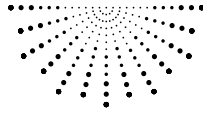
And now we were together.

Well, not together-together. Not yet. But the look in her eyes told me one day we would be. One day soon.

Somehow. Some-fucking-way. I had to make it happen. I wouldn't lose her again. Fuck, I hoped I wouldn't mess up again.

As we danced, I cupped her head, drew her cheek to my chest, and whispered words I wasn't sure if she even heard over the band playing, "Give me a little time. I won't let you down again."

PART III



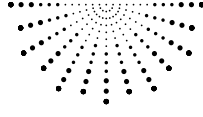
Extended Epilogue for The Broken One

Brief reminder of what happened in *The Broken One*:

Jesse and Ella must fake marry to catch a killer. Jesse's secrets are revealed, and Jesse will do anything to protect Ella and keep her safe.

At the end of the book, Jesse turns in the marriage license, and they stay married.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



ELLA

MARCH 2023 - SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA

MY LIFE WAS ...

I didn't want to say picture perfect, because nothing in life was really perfect. We were all flawlessly imperfect. Hell, I wasn't sure if those words would make much sense to anyone else, but somehow, they did to me.

I really had everything I wanted; it just all came to fruition in such a wild and strange way.

I was now Jesse's wife. And yes, maybe a psychotic hitman from his past, hell-bent on revenge, had finally pushed us together, but I only wanted to focus on the fact we *were* together. *Finally*.

My fashion design "hobby" had grown into a lucrative side business and turned into more of a full-time job. Paired alongside my teaching gig, and I was quite busy. But God, did I love it.

Knowing that, Jesse managed to surprise me with tickets to a fashion show in Beverly Hills, California. It wasn't his thing, and I'm pretty sure he spent the whole evening watching me watch the show. But the man kept trying to make up for lost time.

And sure, we had lost quite a bit. But we still had our whole lives to make up for it. And he was here with me now and that was all that mattered. With any luck, maybe we'd wind up pregnant sooner rather than later.

I let go of a small sigh, unable to rip my eyes off the incredible man before me. His hair had grown darker and darker as he'd aged. Less time in the sun, more time in his workshop. To be honest, I kind of loved the color.

We were both dressed casually tonight. I had a simple sundress on with sandals. And Jesse, well, he looked like he'd stepped off the pages of *GQ*. Then again, he'd humored me by letting me shop for him in the city yesterday. No way would he

buy jeans with holes in them like the pair he was wearing now. And the look he'd given me when I insisted he try them on ... well, priceless.

But holy hell, the look worked for him. *I mean, fashion is my thing, so . . .*

The gray long-sleeved shirt fit like a dream, showing off his hard chest and muscular arms. I'd let him keep his black Apple watch on, because a fancy watch was pushing my luck, but ...

Jesse shoved a hand through his hair as he studied me, leaning against the fancy rental car. Before this weekend, I never would have pictured him behind the wheel of a Porsche 911. Now? Well, damn. The car suited him, too.

"What's on your mind, darlin'?" He smiled as he offered me his hand and he drew me against him.

What was on my mind? A lot, apparently.

"This weekend has been incredible, don't get me wrong," I began as I draped my arms over his shoulders, "but why do I get the feeling you brought me here for more than just a weekend away in this big city?"

"We may be in LA for a secondary reason, but I promise you, I really did want to surprise you with those tickets and bring you someplace you've never been before. Plus, I've had to work a lot with Falcon the last few weeks, and we needed some alone time."

Although he loved designing furniture, and he still did it as his "hobby"—a much better one than assassinating people—he now worked in private security to help save the world from bad guys. I was happy for him, even if his work was dangerous and had me a little on edge from time to time. I knew this man was meant to help people. It was who he was, and I wouldn't ever want to change him.

"Sooo, what's the secondary reason?" I prompted, wondering if my man would ever speak up, or if he'd just continue to stare at me like I was his whole world. Not that I'd complain about that. It was nice being his world when I'd

spent most of my life feeling just on the outside of it. “Why’d you abruptly pull off the road in this spot?” I asked when he continued to pierce me with his broody gaze.

I mean, it was a great spot. But something told me we weren’t there for the view, even though I could make out the Hollywood sign off in the distance in the rolling hills.

“Well,” he said before dipping in to kiss me, “a little over three years ago I was driving down this very road, and you don’t need to know why I was here ... you, um, really don’t want to know, so don’t ask ... *but* it wasn’t for a good reason, and ...” He kissed me again. “I have so many bad memories. So fucking many. I kind of want to replace some of them with good ones. Ones with you, if that makes sense?”

“I think it does,” I whispered between a few more soft kisses. If we didn’t stop ourselves, we’d end up making love against the Porsche in broad daylight alongside the road. We weren’t so great at keeping our hands off each other. Time to make up for and all.

“I just,” he started again, his brows drawing together, “wish that I sent you those letters I wrote all those years.”

I eased back to better focus on his eyes. “Letters?” *What?* “You wrote me? And more than once?” *All this time I thought* ...

The side of his mouth hitched. “I wrote to you for half my life, Ella. The way Marcus wrote his brother letters but never sent them ... yeah, like that.”

I blinked, pulled my arms from his shoulders, then backed up.

“Writing you helped me survive. Kept me from totally losing it. I knew I’d never send them, but ...” His smile dissolved. “Say something. You look upset?”

“What?” I frowned. “No. I just ... I wrote you, too. I mean, way more than just the one I sent with the photo.” I knew how much that photo meant to him, I mean, he’d said as much in his wedding vows, but ...

He stepped forward and reached for my wrist, guiding me back into his arms. “You wrote letters you didn’t send, too? Really? Well, then why do you look so sad?”

“Just wondering what would have happened had we sent them.”

He kissed me before saying, “I think we’re right where we’re supposed to be. I’ll lose my mind if I do the ‘what if’ thing when it comes to you and us.”

“Mmm. You’re right. I don’t want to go down that road.” I smiled. “Especially when we’re alongside such a beautiful one now and I’m in your arms.” I wet my lips. “But can I read them? Tell me you saved them.”

His eyes fell closed. “Burnt every last one the night before you were supposed to marry that asshole.”

Oh. Brian. Right. “Well, hmmm. I guess I shouldn’t let you read mine, then.”

His hand slipped around my back and to my ass, and he squeezed. “Oh, I think you’ll be letting me read them when we get back home.”

“Mmmm. I might need a little convincing,” I teased, and before I knew it, he had my back to the Porsche, and he was pressed against me, letting me feel how hard he was.

“You want me, darlin’? Want me to convince you right here?” He playfully lifted his brows up and down twice.

We were on the other side of the Porsche, away from any possible cars on the road, so ... why not?

He slid his hand between our bodies, and when I bunched up my dress, he reached for my panties and thumbed them.

I leaned forward, pulling his earlobe between my teeth before whispering, “I’m wet,” which only spurred him on that much more.

“Not a chance in hell I’m going to risk someone seeing me fuck my woman.” He feathered his finger along the seam of my panties again before withdrawing his hand to grip the back of my neck. “So,” he rasped while angling his head and

drawing his mouth near mine, “you’ll just have to be a good girl and wait.”

* * *

TWO DAYS LATER - WALKINS GLEN, ALABAMA

“Are you ...?”

Sitting on our bed back at home, Jesse quietly reached for another one of my handwritten letters from the box. “Me? Crying? Not on your life,” he said, his glossy eyes catching mine.

“You wanted to read the letters.” I clutched the bedsheet, hiding my breasts. Feeling exposed in a new way. Jesse was seeing me in a whole new light. The progression of my thought process about him and our relationship over the course of fifteen-plus years from my unsent letters. Well, *one* had been sent.

“I didn’t know it’d be this ... hard.” He closed his eyes, and I kept hold of the sheet and reached for his forearm and squeezed. “I want to go back in time and do a little more than just smack my younger self for making you feel this way. For making us wait so damn long.”

I shifted to a kneeling position alongside him, still holding the sheet as if my husband didn’t have every square inch of my body already memorized. “Babe, don’t do this. Remember what you said in California? No ‘what ifs’ allowed. We’re where we should be.”

He opened his eyes, his gaze falling to the letter in hand.

Oh. Not the best letter of the bunch. It was the one where I’d told him I was engaged to Brian. *Ouch.*

His hand was trembling slightly, and he let go of the letter and curled his fingers inward. “Where does Brian live now?”

“Why?”

“I’m in the mood to commit murder.” A quick smile slid across his face.

“But Brian and I never ...” I wasn’t going to finish that sentence, not with the hard look on his face.

“No man should have ever touched you but me, Ella.” His eyes snapped my way. “You wanted me to be your first kiss. Your first in bed. And I fucked up. Then I kept fucking up.” His breaths quickened, and shit, I was losing him to anger. To pain. This was what I was worried about. The guilt and regret. “Hell, I even burned the letters you probably wish you could’ve read, and—”

“Stop. I have *you*. I don’t need the letters.” I squeezed his hand. “Don’t do this. Please. And as for the past, you were trying to protect me. You’ve always had my best interest at heart. And Jesse, you’ll always have something that no one else ever will. That no one else ever has.” I smiled, brought our hands to my chest, allowing the sheet to slip and fall. “My heart. My love.”

His brows pinched, and a tear fell down his cheek.

“Tell me something you wrote to me,” I whispered when he kept quietly staring at me. Dealing with past demons I’d thought he’d laid to rest.

His shoulders fell. “I told you how much I loved you. Missed you. Regretted not being with you. How you kept me alive. Just the thought of you helped me survive the war.” Another tear. “Told you about my nightmares. My dad. The fighting.” The catch and emotion in his voice as he relived those memories was going to destroy me. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry I put you through hell for over fifteen years.” He shook his head as tears formed in my eyes.

I dropped our hands from my chest and pushed the letters aside to climb on top of him, hooking my ankles behind his back and cradling his face.

His mind may have been hurting, but we were naked, so his body didn’t care. His cock stood at attention the second my pussy got near it.

He groaned in response.

“What if we burn my letters, too? Let them all be lost forever? That was our past. The good, bad ... the whatever it

was. All that matters is the now. Today. The life full of tomorrows to come.”

“I’m not burning your letters,” he said under his breath. “Not a chance in hell.” The crook of his lips into an awkward smile gave me hope my Jesse was coming back to me. “But I still kind of want to kill Brian.”

I cry-laughed at that and he covered my hands still on his cheeks.

“Sweetheart?”

“Yeah?” I murmured.

“You’re sitting on my cock, do you expect me not to fuck you right now?” That sexy smirk had my heartbeat flying.

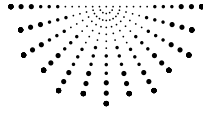
“If you promise not to kill any of my exes. *And* promise me you’re not going to be sad or regretful about the past.”

He sighed, then slid his hands along my silhouette. “What about if I just—”

“No.” I *tsked*. “If you want to fuck your wife, be a good boy, and—”

“Mmmhmm. Good?” He winked. “I know how much you love when I’m bad,” he added before he flipped me around to my back so I was beneath him. “And I’m about to show you just how much you enjoy it ...”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



JESSE

EARLY SUMMER 2024 - EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND

“I SWEAR, YOU TWO NEED TO GET A ROOM AND JUST DUKE IT out there. Alone.” I shook my head. It was both too late *and* too early for Oliver and Mya’s bickering. I’d been out all night, so while the sun was now up, I’d yet to sleep.

The whole team—well, minus Griffin, because his wife, Savanna, was in her third trimester, so he was home with her—was exhausted and running on fumes. Our mission was supposed to be short and sweet. From the looks of it, neither of those two things would be happening.

“We’re just in disagreement on the next plan of action,” Mya said, standing from where she’d been working in the living room of our hotel suite.

“You’re the reckless one, buttercup,” Oliver announced. “I like to play it safe. That’s the issue.”

“Just ignore them,” Gray said, then jerked a thumb toward the bedroom. “They’ve been at it all night. Get some rest. You need it.”

I looked around the room. I’d been on recon and surveillance all night, and Jack had just taken over for me, watching our mark. I wasn’t sure where the rest of the team was, but I was so tired, I wasn’t sure I could get the words out to ask. “Yeah, yeah. Maybe I’ll get a few hours of shut-eye.”
After I text my wife.

“Good. We’ll fill you in on what we know when you’re up.” Gray nodded, then he went back to work. Gray, one of my two team leaders, recently married his “the one,” and I was damn happy for him. He deserved the kind of happiness I had. I knew being away from his wife was hard on him as well.

I quickly went into the bedroom and grabbed my personal phone and messaged Ella while dropping onto the bed.

Jesse: Hey, darlin'. It's morning here, but I know with the time difference you're probably sleeping. But if you're awake ... will you message back? I miss you.

I smiled at the sight of her prompt reply, then felt a little guilty that she was awake and not sleeping like she ought to be.

Ella: I just fed Remi and put him back to sleep. I'm awake. I miss you too.

Jesse: I'm just getting back to the hotel from pulling an all-nighter. And I was thinking about you. I know it's only been a few days, but fuck ... thinking about how you kissed my neck before I left you ...

Ella: I think I did a little more than kiss your neck ... but go on. ;)

Jesse: Mmmhmm, yeah you did. It's getting harder and harder to be away from you. Literally and figuratively. I can't wait to come back home to you. What are you wearing?

I couldn't help myself. I just couldn't. When it came to this woman, I was obsessed. Wanted her every hour of every day. I'd never get enough of her.

Ella: Ahh. So, you're messaging me for a little tension relief, hmmm? I mean ... I could use some myself. It's hell being away from you. I'm in pain. Wet just thinking about you touching me. God, do I need you. I wish you were here.

Ella: Oh, and what am I wearing? A white tank top and panties. You?

Ugh. Fuck. That combination was my kryptonite, and she knew it.

Jesse: I'm messaging you for several reasons. ;) Tension relief is absolutely one of them. Another being you're my wife ... My very sexy, beautiful, fuck-me-crazy wife. And, of course, I'd like to check in on how our little man is.

Jesse: I love what you're wearing. *fire emoji* I just stripped off a layer or two for the shower. Come join?

Ella: Our little guy is perfect. He misses you too. I hope your op finishes soon.

Ella: But since we're both awake and turned on ... tell me what you'd do to me if I joined you in the shower? Tell me how you'd make me even wetter than I already am.

Ella: ... I'm touching myself now. Wishing it was your hand instead. Your mouth on me. Tasting me. Holding me.

I groaned at the mental image.

Jesse: *fire emoji* I wish you were joining me, babe. I need to feel your skin on my skin. Pin you up against a wall. Hell, all the walls of the shower. Please you like I know how. Taste your sweet lips and slide into you as I'm rock hard. Need you. Now.

Jesse: I'm so hard, I don't even think a cold shower will stop this. I need an ice bath ... But fuck it, I know what I really need.

Ella: Mmmm ... Are you touching yourself? Thinking about me on my knees for you in that shower? The water rolling down my body. Over my breasts. While I take you in my mouth.

Ella: And then just when you get to the edge, you'll pin me to the wall. Take me hard. The way we both like it. Then ... you'll make love to me after. Softer. Trailing your lips along my body. My nipples pebbling as your breath fans across my heated skin.

Ella: Talk to me, Jesse. Tell me more ...

Naked in bed, I stroked my cock. Root to tip. Slow, steady. Gripping a bit too tightly, wishing it was her hand instead.

Jesse: Killing me over here. You know very well I'm touching myself ... you just want me to tell you, I know. I can't wait to look into those eyes as you're wrapped around me, looking up at me ... I'm fucking salivating over here for you.

Jesse: See what you do to me? All I was trying to do was send you an innocent text to check in. Next thing I know my cock is harder than stone, and I love it.

Ella: You? Innocent? Mmmhmm, sure. I can't remember a late-night text from you that didn't end with both of us coming hard. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Ella: Want me to send a pic? Something to help you? I'm naked now. I'm already getting close ...

Jesse: Alright, maybe I'm not that innocent, maybe my alter ego is? But you're right.

Jesse: Yes, babe, send me a not-so-innocent naked pic, you know how crazy it drives me to see you satisfying yourself. I'm going to explode.
bomb emoji

Ella: Fair is fair. Send me one first. And maybe you'll get one back.

Jesse: As you wish. Ask and you shall receive.
sly smile emoji

Ella: *crying laughing emoji* Making me laugh and hot at the same time. Only you can do that.
:)

I took a quick photo for her and sent it. My abs and cock on display.

Ella: Well then ...

I clenched my teeth and fisted my cock at the video she sent me of her sliding her finger over her wet pussy.

Ella: I'm close. Can you tell?

Jesse: Mmm, I can tell, and it's making me weak ... Go ahead and finish yourself off. God knows if I was there, you'd be on round two or three already.

Ella: Always so stubborn making me get off first. I will if you're close ... are you?

Jesse: Of course, need to make sure you're happily satisfied well before me ... And let's be honest, I'm always close with you, a few more strokes and I'm going to explode.

Her next video came through, and I was done. She was moaning while getting herself off, and God help me ...

Ella: I may have left the sound on in that one for you. *sly smile emoji*

Ella: Your turn. Finish for me.

I did my best to record myself getting off as I came hard all over my stomach. Once I found my breath, I managed to message her back.

Jesse: Was that what you wanted? Sorry for the mess, but someone has to be at fault here, and ... well. *winking emoji*

Ella: It was what I needed, yes.

Ella: I just can't wait for you to be home to touch me yourself.

Jesse: Waiting to see you is unbearable ... Can't wait to get home to you too.

Jesse: Want to hold you and look into my son's eyes and see all the good there is in this world through him ... and you, of course. You're both everything to me. My heartbeat.

Ella: Well, now I'm going to cry. I don't think I'll ever get tired of hearing you say that. Just come home safe. We need you. Okay?

Jesse: Don't ever get tired of it.

Jesse: I guess I'll go clean myself off and get in that shower now.

Jesse: Will you go to bed?

Ella: I'll try to get a few hours before Remi wakes up hungry again. I just miss you. Wish you were sleeping next to me. But your work is important, and I know I have to share you.

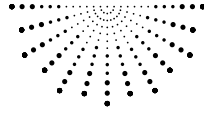
Jesse: I'll be back home soon enough, counting down the minutes until I see you. Get some sleep, I'm sure you're feeling well relaxed now.

Ella: You have that effect on me.

Ella: Sleep well, too, babe. I love you.

Jesse: My everything ... I love you too.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“DO YOU HAVE ANY CLUE WHEN THEY’LL BE BACK?” I TOOK A sip of my coffee, freshly brewed by Savanna, and peered at her husband, Griffin. He was at the table next to us, flipping through a newspaper. How old school? Kind of cute, though.

Griffin set the paper down and smirked. “They leave me out of the details, because it makes me a little—”

“Nuts,” Savanna cut him off. “He can’t handle knowing his team is out on an op without him.”

Griffin lifted his chin and grunted at her. She flicked her wrist, then leaned back in her chair and set her hand on her pregnant belly.

“You could’ve kept operating. Baby isn’t due for two months. Totally your fault.”

“I’m not leaving you while you’re that—”

“If you say big, I will knock you out,” Savanna teased, and I chuckled at their adorable back-and-forth that would probably result in sex in the back room of her café the second I left.

There were currently no customers in the little café she ran, so we were able to get away with being ourselves. As they continued their teasing conversation, I tuned them out and let my thoughts drift.

Seeing the two of them together ... I was happy Savanna was given a second chance at love. She never thought it’d happen after losing Marcus, and she resisted the idea of it for a

long time. But then Griffin came along, a member of Falcon Falls Security, and swept her off her feet.

I knew Marcus would be happy she was in good hands. As fate would have it, Griffin and Marcus's paths had once crossed during their military days, too, and Savanna swore Marcus had somehow guided Griffin her way.

And, well, A.J., who Marcus used to tease about believing in Old Man Shaw's ghost ... well ... A.J. swore he'd talked on more than one occasion with Marcus's spirit. *Not* ghost. No unfinished business for that man. He was on the other side. The bright, happy side.

I smiled at Savanna as she winked at her husband, then checked my watch. My mom was babysitting Remi for another few hours so I could come into Birmingham and visit Savanna, and I had some new designs I wanted to work on when I went back home. It was days like these, when I wasn't teaching, I had to fill my schedule to capacity to avoid playing the "what if" game while Jesse was operating. My nerves would get to me, fear of the danger he could face would choke me up.

"So, remember the thing I said I wanted to show you?" Savanna's question pulled my focus back her way.

She stood, walked around behind her counter, then came back with a stack of papers. "I finally wrote a book using the old-fashioned typewriter Griffin gave me. I was wondering if you'd read a few pages?" She settled back in the seat across from me, and I eagerly reached for her book.

I smirked. "You're kidding, right? Just a few pages? I want the whole thing." The top page said: **Untitled**. By Savanna Andrews. "What's it about?"

Griffin piped up, "A cocky asshole billionaire, of course."

"Jealous?" Savanna teased him.

"Not on your life, Sugar. Those hot scenes you wrote ... *fact*, not fiction."

"Thank you for that." I giggled at Savanna's mock embarrassment. "So, now, when I read this book, I'll know

you two tested all those hot scenes out, huh?” I tapped at the stack of pages.

“Like your sex life isn’t hot enough to start a fire without a match?” Savanna joked, eyes back on me. “Just pretend the billionaire and his intern are ...”

“Not you and Griffin?” My smile stretched. “I’ll do my best.

“What’s the plot about?”

“Plot?” Griffin laughed. “It’s all sex.”

Savanna swiveled on her seat and shot him a dirty look. “It’s the pregnancy hormones that have me feeling a certain way. I don’t see you complaining.”

Another wink from him. Oh, he wanted a little fight to have makeup sex. Ugh, I loved that kind of sex.

Jesse and I used to argue all the time back before we wound up together, and then I’d wind up getting myself off. Turned on by our fighting.

But now, at times, he liked to piss me off just to get me all hot, bothered, and frustrated. Then we’d rip each other’s clothes off and go at it hard.

“Well, I’m going to take this back to the house and read it instead of working on my sketches before I go get Remi from Mom’s.” I stood, cradled the stack of papers against my chest, then kissed Savanna on the cheek and gently punched Griffin’s arm as my goodbye.

“If you hate it, don’t tell me,” Savanna called after me on my way out.

I tossed her a quick look. “Girl, if you wrote it, I’m going to love it. Promise.” *Plus, a sex book? Sign me up.*

* * *

“WOW. OKAY.” I WAS GETTING HOT IN THE FACE. HOT everywhere. “This is ...” *Now I’m talking to myself.* I snatched

a glass of water and gulped it back to cool off, then continued reading Savanna's story.

"Get on your hands and knees. You want me? Crawl to me. Fucking look up at me and beg for it ..." was the last line I read before I felt hands come down over my shoulders, scaring me half to death.

At the feel of Jesse's mouth near my ear, my body erupted in chills. "I'm back early, darlin'. I wanted to surprise you." He swept my hair over my shoulder and kissed the side of my neck.

I closed my eyes and sighed, then reached back for his hand. He gave it a squeeze, then urged me to stand and face him.

Seven days away from him had been pure torture.

On my feet now, I murmured, "I love the surprise." I slung my arms over his shoulders and linked my wrists behind his neck. I'd never get tired of looking at him.

He bent in and nipped my lip, his hands sliding up my back as he kissed me. Tasted me with his tongue. His hands dove into my hair. Then he held my face between his strong palms, gentle but somehow still strong touches as he kissed me. Made love to me with his mouth.

Only when he eased back did I finally share, "Remi's at Mom and Dad's right now."

"Before we go pick him up, do you want to ...?" He lifted his brows a few times and smirked.

I eagerly nodded, and he stepped back and reached for my hand.

God, I'd follow this man anywhere.

Once in our bedroom, he pushed me up against the wall, hastily unzipping his jeans and shoving them down.

He slid his hand inside my shorts, moaning in my ear, "Fuck, you're already so wet for me."

I wasn't sure if I should admit I was wet before he came home, reading that naughty scene and picturing Jesse demanding me to get on the floor and crawl to him.

We'd have to try that sometime. But right now, I just wanted him this way. Hard, rough, and against the wall.

His thumb slid over my sensitive flesh, brushing against my clit before he pushed two fingers inside me. I threw my head back, overcome by the sensations.

"Take me," I begged.

He angled his head, his nostrils flaring. Yeah, I knew that look. Neither of us would last long.

"Yes, ma'am." His voice was low, husky, as he prepared himself to do as I'd asked.

He slid my shorts and panties down to my ankles, and I kicked them to the side.

He hoisted one of my legs up to his side, then bent his knees a touch so he could position himself at my soaked center.

I cried out his name the second he filled me.

Leaning in, he brought his mouth to mine, softly kissing me while moving in and out. My breasts smashed against his hard wall of muscles as we moved together.

"Come for me," he ground out a few minutes later—hanging by a thread, more than likely—the stubborn man refusing to get off until I came.

"Tell me something. Tell me something you plan to do to me later when we have more than a few minutes," I begged, burying my fingers into his arms as I clung to him. I tried to match his movements, but the man was fucking me hard. And I loved it. Needed it.

He brought his mouth to my ear and whispered, "Get you naked. Throw you on the bed, spread your legs open and just look at you. Stroke myself until you're wide-eyed with want, soaked and aching for me. Then I'll fuck that pussy with my mouth, and ..."

“Make me crawl to you?” *Ooops.*

He found my eyes, a smile lighting his face. “Crawl to me, huh?” He wet his lips. “You want to get on your hands and knees for me, darlin’? It’s me who should bow to you.”

I was so freaking close to coming, but I didn’t want to. Not yet. “Maybe I’ve been a bad girl, and you need to tell me what to do, though? Get me to behave.” Yeah, this was all coming from Savanna’s book. I needed to read romance more often. *Damn.*

He kept moving. Driving in, then pulling nearly out. His eyes pinning me with a hard and hot look. He was about to explode, I could tell. The dirty talk was getting to him, same as me.

“I’ll tell you what to do, no problem there.” He brought his mouth to my ear. “Come for me. Now. Be a good girl and fuck my cock and come for me.”

Yup, that did it. “Yessss,” I cried. My orgasm encouraged him to go harder and faster. A bit wild.

A string of curses from him followed, and he released inside me. Then he lowered his forehead to mine as we both struggled to slow our breathing.

“I’m glad you’re home,” I half-panted. “That was ... nice.”

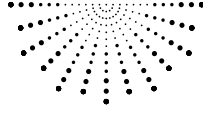
Jesse chuckled. “A little more than nice, I hope.” He pulled back and set a tender kiss to my lips. “But tonight, maybe if you’re good ... I’ll let you be bad.” He winked.

Ugh, I was so glad to have him under the same roof again.

“Now, let’s go bring our boy home,” he rasped. “I need my little dude in my arms, too.”

I grinned, never so happy in all my life. “He needs you, too.”

LETTERS



JESSE

DEAR ELLA,

AS I SIT DOWN TO WRITE THIS LETTER, AWAY ON ANOTHER OP, but with Falcon Falls this time ... I can't help but feel a sense of excitement and nervousness. I'll actually send this letter to you. And you deserve to read it. To see all sides of me.

Although, something tells me you know damn well all parts of me now: the good, the bad ... the ... sexy?

Saying I'm grateful to have you in my life doesn't even begin to truly express what you mean to me. I put you through so much pain, so much distress, anguish—and yet—here you are, the love of my life, **IN** my life, now and forever.

We're a family. Wow, to actually see the words written down. To take it in.

Almost feels surreal—like I'm living a dream with you, Ella. One that I never want to wake up from. Your ocean eyes, your smile, and your presence gives me life and breath and a sense of purpose. Not to mention our little man ... how did we do it? I know now it's all I've ever wanted. You are my purpose. You're everything to me.

I want to thank you for being patient with me, for being there for me when I needed you, and for being the woman I was able to count on. Even if you didn't know it, I felt you there for me during my darkest days, the ones when I saw no light ... you were the light, kept me strong, kept me focused ...

This is a new start for the both of us. I have so many hopes and dreams for our future, and I can't wait to see what the years ahead will bring us.

With you by my side, I know that anything is possible. Fuck, I love you so much it's almost painful—the good kind of pain. The pain I want to feel every fucking morning and every night when I look at you, feel you, kiss you ... I'll always be there for you, Ella.

Man of my word.

ALWAYS YOURS, MY LOVE,

Jesse

* * *

DEAR REMI,

My son. My life. My everything. The happiness I feel from you and your mother, it's almost hard to explain because everyday I look at you both, I feel something new, something I never had. You have your mother's eyes, my boy. Looking at you, I see so much of her. So much good. So much light.

Please know, I'll always be there for you. We both will. Every step of the way.

I'll spare you the details of my childhood, but my father wasn't exactly the greatest, especially to me. Our relationship was essentially non-existent, but he taught me how NOT to be. What NOT to do. And I can promise you I'll be nothing like him. I'll be everything you do need, though.

When times are tough and you need a shoulder, don't hesitate to ask me for help. And when things are going great for you, I want you to enjoy those moments and appreciate the good in them.

Sometimes in life, the bad will challenge you, though. The darkness may try to hide the light, but we'll be your light when that happens.

Right now, you're sitting on my lap and throwing your baby food on the floor while I write this, so ignore my messy handwriting. But you're making me smile, so ...

As much as I love these moments, I also can't wait to see what you'll be like when you're older. Will you like to fix cars? Work on furniture like me? Maybe drive the Porsche 911 I secretly now want (don't tell your mom, let's keep that our secret for now)?

There's so much I look forward to doing with you. Sharing moments in the workshop (if you happen to like building). Teaching you the way your grandpa (your mom's dad) taught me. Now *he's* a man you can look up to unlike my father. The lessons he taught me, like respect, I'll pass to you as well. And every day you wake up and look in the mirror, you'll love the

person staring back at you. You'll grow into a man you'll be proud of—I just know it.

Remi, I see all these moments with you as if they've already happened. And it reminds me that one day I won't be here. Even when that day comes, I'll always be watching over you. Loving you unconditionally.

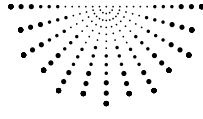
I love you Remi Tucker, my son.

LOVE ALWAYS, YOUR FATHER,

Jesse

[Listen to the audio](#)

BONUS SCENE



EXTRACT FROM "SAVANNA'S ROMANCE BOOK"

"GET ON YOUR HANDS AND KNEES. YOU WANT ME? CRAWL TO me. Fucking look up at me and beg for it," he rasped, determination in his icy tone.

Oh. My. God. "You're such an asshole." I did my best to keep my voice low. People were still at the office. In the building *he* owned. I swear Chase owned practically everything in this city. But I'd be damned if he ever owned me. "I don't need your help *that* much. I don't need you!" Okay, so I raised my voice that time.

Feeling hot all over from anger, I turned, but Chase snatched my arm in one fast movement.

I whirled back around to face him, finding his chin jutting forward as he towered over me. Dark suit. Dark eyes and smile. And a dark freaking heart, too.

He was damn near snarling at me as he hissed, "Look me in the eyes and tell me you don't want my help. Don't need me." He cocked his head. "Without me, you'll—"

"I'll never need anything that bad that I'll get on my hands and knees and beg you of all fucking people," I said with as much venom in my tone as possible. "Find someone else to play pretend with. I'll never do it. Not for all the money in the world. I don't care how desperate for help I am, I'll never be able to act like I like you."

His deep brown eyes slid to my white blouse, and I stupidly followed his gaze to find my nipples betraying me through the material. "You may not like me, but you want me. That much is obvious."

"What I want to do is grab hold of that stupid tie around your stupid neck and ..." I needed to say, "wrap it around your stupid throat," but that devilish glint in his eyes as he peered at me again made me want to say something totally different. Something along the lines of, *Shut me up with it.* And now I

hated him even more for the fact maybe I did want to get on my hands and knees and crawl to him. But not to beg. *Hell no.*

“There are plenty of things we can do with my tie, sweetheart. My belt, too.” His sexy Southern drawl fucked with my head. He tipped his head like he knew the effect he’d just had on me, then leaned in even more, his mouth nearly brushing mine. “Just say the word, Lorelei. I’ll happily fuck this attitude right out of you *after* we close the deal.”

AFTERWORD

We sincerely hoped you enjoyed this unique look at Jesse and Ella's love story and how it unfolded from the beginning.

Don't miss out on the list of [audios](#) that accompany the novella.

Brittney & Joseph

Still need to read Jesse & Ella's story? [*The Broken One*](#)

For a list of [free bonus scenes](#) to download

[A list of books by series](#)

Continue for a timeline of events in chronological order, author links, and more.

TIMELINE

2006: A.J.'s going away to the Navy party

2007: Spring semester at Bama / Jesse visits (the only letter Ella sent happens this year)

2011: Savanna and Marcus marry

2012: "Vasquez Wedding 2.0"

2012: Rory and her boyfriend Andrew are abducted (this scene is mentioned in Rory's book, *Chasing Fortune*).

2013: A.J. "leaves" the Navy to work for the President as part of an off-the-books SEAL Team. Cover story: Scott & Scott Securities. He is on Echo Team. Marcus joins Bravo Team. 10 team members in total. A.J.'s book / more of Marcus: *Chasing Daylight*.

2015: Marcus is killed by terrorists. Although we never see this event happen in the Stealth Ops Series (because the books take place after his death), Marcus played a huge role in shaping the team dynamics for Scott & Scott Securities. Asher Hayes is recruited to take over for Marcus as Bravo Three in the book, *Finding the Fight*.

2019: NYC when Jesse & Ella make love for the first time. This scene is also available from Jesse's POV in *The Broken One*'s prologue.

2020: Ella engaged to marry Brian

2021: The dress rehearsal dinner is mentioned in A.J.'s book, *Chasing Daylight*, as well as the Fourth of July party where Jesse shows up to dance with Ella.

2022: Savanna meets Griffin when she is in need of a protector. Jesse shows off his “John Wick-like” fighting skills and joins Falcon Falls Security in this book. Savanna feels as though Marcus’s spirit guided Griffin her way. Savanna’s book is *The Hunted One*.

2022: Jesse and Ella are forced to fake marry in *The Broken One* to draw out a hitman and all of his secrets come out (his struggles, backstory with his father, as well as being a hitman for the CIA). Jesse and Ella turn in the paperwork and stay married at the end.

Present day - Jesse and Ella now have a son, Remi. Jesse is still working with Falcon Falls Security.

ALSO BY BRITTNEY SAHIN

Standalone

Until You Can't

Let Me Love You

The Story of Us

Becoming Us

Someone Like You

My Every Breath

Stealth Ops Series: Bravo Team

Finding His Mark

Finding Justice

Finding the Fight

Finding Her Chance

Finding the Way Back

Stealth Ops Series: Echo Team

Chasing the Knight

Chasing Daylight

Chasing Fortune

Chasing Shadows

Chasing the Storm

Falcon Falls Security

The Hunted One

The Broken One

The Guarded One

The Taken One

The Lost Letters: A Novella

Dublin Nights

On the Edge

On the Line

The Real Deal

The Inside Man

The Final Hour

Hidden Truths

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Beyond the Chase

The Hard Truth

Surviving the Fall
The Final Goodbye

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