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LAYLA LOCHRAN

**BATTLE
BORN**

for *You*

Book 2 in the Tell All Secrets Series

GORSKI, L.
ALEXANDER
C12345678
USMC
CHRISTIAN

USMC
SERPER F1
FREEDOM IS NOT
FREE

BATTLE BORN

for *You*

BATTLE BORN FOR YOU

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ABOUT

Alexander

Stumbling upon the one person you're missing in your life only to screw up and watch her walk away. It's Soul crushing. Heartbreaking. What Lili doesn't know is this Marine's endurance is untamable. I've been beaten down, now it's time to rise, or submit and lose it all. Do I succumb to the darkness and welcome the silence? My sunshine is shrouded in ominous blackness; the trust she placed on me now vanquished. She's gone and I fear my demons will find their way out. *Knock, knock*. Poetry is my expression, only now that life is grim. I'm no longer in control. I do not want to hurt those I love, but I cannot keep afloat. I'm drowning, calling for help; the gun is in my hand and I'm eager to pull the trigger.

Liliana

He betrayed my trust and now my skeletons are out of the closet for all to see. If any of my secrets fall in the wrong hands, chaos would follow. I knew I could never love, so why does this hurt so? The monster is at the forefront of my mind, enjoying the game. *Time to play*. Can I trust Zander and his mates with their vow of protection? If I have learned anything, you should never question a Marine's promise. With music as my emotion, the songs playing behind the locked door tell me of a broken man's world. Sometimes it's the hero that needs saving, this be one of those times. Do not fret, Alexander, I'm going to save ye.

DEDICATION

For friend Allan Brown, my family, friends, and all
members of the United States Military.

Thank you for your service.

We miss you buddy.

AUTHORS NOTE

Dear reader,

Please know there might be moments in this book that can be overly emotional or triggering for some. While military and childhood PTSD are real in today's world, please know these happenings are fictional. I have always been thankful for our military in providing us our freedom and it hurts my soul knowing so many out there are struggling.

A version of this book originally released on August 7th, 2020, in honor of National Purple Heart Day. On this day we Americans pause to observe, remember, and honor the brave men and women who were wounded, or gave their lives in the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

22 a day is 22 too many. The battle with mental health is a daily struggle. Let's put an end to Veteran's suicide.

Please, honor those we have lost.

- Layla

PLACES TO SUPPORT OUR TROOPS

Til Valhalla Project:

A veteran owned company that strives for reducing veteran suicide and honors our fallen heroes with handmade wooden plaques to their families.

Quote from their website: "Our goal is to make sure no fallen Hero goes forgotten and to ensure veterans are getting the treatment they deserve."

<https://tilvalhallaproject.com>

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PTSD Foundation of America:

From their website: “PTSD Foundation of America is a non-profit organization dedicated to mentoring to our combat veterans and their families with post-traumatic stress. Many warriors are coming home with visible wounds; countless others are coming home with scars we cannot see, wounded souls from witnessing the horrors of war over and over again – PTSD. We feel it is our duty as Americans to help these mighty warriors and their families adjust and find their new normal.

<https://ptsdusa.org>

GET HELP 877-717-PTSD (7873)

* In no way am I affiliated with these companies; these are places I myself, the author, have purchased/donated, and feel can make a difference

PROLOGUE - ALEXANDER

“I am not afraid of an army of lions led by a sheep; I am afraid of an army of sheep led by a lion.” — Alexander The Great

May 2014– Afghanistan - Two Weeks ‘til demobilization

ONE WORD. MARINE.

This looming threat our country is facing is inevitable, the need for soldiers ever growing. My mind is clear, I am always battle ready; after some recoup time on American soil, our next deployment could be to Iraq for this infantry.

I am all for it. Bring it the fuck on.

We are Marines; we protect what is ours, destroy those who threaten, sacrifice everything for our people. We give it one hundred and ten percent, even with our last dying breath. With my brothers and sisters by my side, we are unstoppable.

I know my men, we have long since bonded throughout our time together and we have each other's six no matter the cost. But *holy shit* this war has been a long one, and I doubt we will see an end to it anytime soon.

With this second tour coming to a close, I am thankful we've had nothing major transpire during this go-around. My men and I are ready to wrap this up, get back onto US soil to our loved ones, and have a few celebratory beers.

In the early hours of the morning, my team and I linger outside our sleeping barracks as the dry desert heat slowly ticks up. With the morning routine now complete, we are making small talk while Ford and Owen smoke a cigarette, enjoying the last tendrils of coolness before we head out on patrol. These relaxing moments are what the four of us strive for, often with Shark telling us of certain times with women; not one, but multiples, and often. The kinky bastard.

There isn't much that man won't fuck, which has us wondering how the dumbass hasn't caught an STD yet.

“Man, I am so ready to get back *home*. I'm going to stay in bed for days unless it's to catch some waves.” Lance Corporal Harrison Young, or ‘Shark’ as he's nicknamed, said with a gyrate of his hips.

There is no mistaking that devious grin plastered on his face, he has plans once he's home.

“With more than a few ladies to celebrate, no fuckin' doubt.” Ford's deep Southern Texas drawl makes everyone chuckle as he billows out his puff of smoke.

The three men went on talking and boasting about their ladies, even Owen, one of the youngest in the infantry was getting in on the fun. At nineteen, he is the youngest and the only one in our four-man team that has a wife and ten-month-old little girl back home. We call this guy ‘Little Bear’, as for him being only five foot four and a twig. He's an adorable little bear we all pick up and toss around.

Ford has told many tales of his Latino wife back in Houston, and how they are going to start a family the moment he's back. Ford and I are the closest out of all the guys here, long since bonding over our dreams once out of the service. Ford doesn't really have a nickname, well, maybe Gunner; he's the ammunition operator on our Humvee. Ford- is Ford, unless an officer feels the need to razz him about his full name. Oh man, don't get him started- we'd never hear the end of it.

Shark on the other hand, is a different story. He can't stand commitment, doesn't get attached, loves his party life, and has no shame. A true bachelor for life- there is no changing him. He loves living up the Virginia Beach life with multiple women and is never bashful when the topic is brought up. Go ahead- ask him why his nickname is Shark. Fair warning- the story is a violent one.

Then here we have my shitty predicament.

Last week my fiancée, sorry, *ex-fiancée*, said she couldn't be a wife to someone who is already married to the military; went on saying she wasted the past eight years of her life with me, and that she all of a sudden wasn't meant to be a military wife.

Rebecca packed her shit and moved into an apartment, with her new boyfriend, *Josh*.

Here is what went down: Mom stopped by my house one afternoon to drop off a few items for wedding planning and caught Rebecca in our bed with said *Josh*. The wedding binder mom had in her hands became a weapon. She ended up flinging it at the guy, then proceeded to chase the bare ass motherfucker out of the house, screaming she was going to tan his ass and call his momma.

Fuckin' awesome, right? What are moms for?

I say, good riddance.

Leaning against the wall, I fold my hands behind my head then heave a groan at hearing more about their bed buddies. I can't stand to hear this shit anymore.

"Will you fuckers pick something else to talk about?" I bark, their laughter turning menacing. Shark nudges my shoulder and my eyes open to glare at him.

"Awe, still butt hurt?" He taunts then sighs dramatically, "Corporal, your ex was caught fuckin' another man." He shakes his head, "high school sweethearts are so overrated. It's time you have some fun. Let it go, bang a lot of chicks before your dick wrinkles. Unless you aspire to be Hugh Hefner, then by all means, keep bangin' away!"

Everyone in the infantry wonders if Shark secretly wants to be like the Playboy man. At least he has goals in mind.

That many women at my disposal whenever I want, sure it be fun for a bit. Then again, I don't think I could handle the number of ditzy blondes and drama.

One with drama is enough for me. Here's a thought, let's skip the drama and live the sweet bachelor life. What

woman would want to come second? I'm already married to the Marine Corp.

Owen grimaced, "Yeah, let's not talk about wrinkly junk, I just ate." His full smile contrasts against his darker complexion. Never without a smile this kid, "I agree with Shark; take advantage. Have fun while you can, you know, before the kids come."

Smoke billows from Ford as he laughs, "You have no fuckin' room to talk, you're married and have mini bear. Sounds to me like your strapped in, there little bear." He bent down to scrape the last of the cigarette on the ground, then switches the subject, "I damn sure wish I was a fly on that wall when your momma attacked that Josh guy. *Scare me.*" His body gives a theatrical shiver as we all agree.

Everyone loves my mom for her treats and knows just how kindhearted of a soul she has; they also know that it takes quite a bit to piss her off. I can only recall two other times she has exploded in rage, each one having more than ample reasoning. This moment in time though, someone hurt her son; she protected her own just as I do for this country.

Family, it's the Gorski way.

I love my brothers, but I better get them settled down and focused. We have a few more tasks to complete.

"Alright, enough of the chitchat. Sarge wants us ready. Let's go." I push off the wall to gear up for our patrol into the remote village. Not sure what's planned for the day, but I always get a little anxious whenever we're about to head out.

Call it what you will, but I live for this shit, it's all I know, all I've trained for. Aside from my family, this is all I'll ever need.

Fuck it.

If my plan stays on track, I'll become Sargent in no time, then I'll be climbing ranks, reaching officer status, and making a full-fledged life in the Marine Corp.

Ain't no better way.

I've known since the age of six or seven that my career- my destiny in life- is to be here, doing exactly this.

The freest feeling in the fucking world.

Three generations of Gorski served in the Navy. I wanted to follow in their footsteps but found the sea and I do not get along well. So, the day the recruitment officer stopped by the school I signed up without a second thought.

This is what I knew I wanted to do. No doubts. Just one thought; defeat our common enemy and come home in one piece.

Even if it wasn't meant to be and I die here in this shithole, I die knowing I made my country proud. No one can take that away from me.

No better feeling in the world than making my family, and Uncle Sam proud.

Ford, Shark, and Owen, follow on my heels, they are quiet now that their leader has directed an order.

“Time to get our heads in the game boys. Let make this day an *outstanding* one.”



“Load up!” Sergeant Stark shouts, wrapping up the patrol for the day.

Today we checked around the mountainous terrain, found some leads, but other than that it was a pretty boring day. Only a few more of these and we will be golden.

“Wrap it up, boys.” I boom, surveying the dry landscape as we go.

Shark is quick with his usual, *humorous* “*that’s what she said*”, after my statement making a few of the guys

chuckle.

It wasn't funny this time, nor was it the seventy-five times before now.

I swear I'm surrounded by children most days.

We stay vigilant as we make our way back to the MRAP (em-wrap) vehicle. Something is nicking at me; my gut instinct is churning, telling me our day might not be over with after all. Who knows, maybe I'm just ready for this to end so we can get back to base, go get some chow, and relax.

My men can clearly hear it in my tone that something isn't sitting right. Their trust in my judgement is why we are still here. Things were a little hairy on our first deployment, further North from where we are now; so many brothers and sisters fallen due to our enemy.

Trust the gut.

The one thing my men have come to know is when out on a mission my motto is to always give your everything or go the fuck home; there is no time for fuckin' slackers.

Ford sets up in back; as the gunner he's our eyes that continue scanning the terrain for any sort of threat. I swear, his eyes are better than a hawk's. Not to boast, but I have the best gunner in our infantry right here; nothing gets past Ford, always ready to strike with guns blazin'.

The second he locks into his station, I don't have to worry that he is, or ever will be distracted. Like me, this is what he lives for and I'm glad to have him as a brother.

Owen jumps into the driver seat and quickly straps in. He pulls out a picture of his wife and newborn, gives it his good luck kiss, says his usual *'I'll be home soon'*, just like every time we are out here, then sets it back in his vest pocket. It's his ritual every time we finish the day's work or if he is really missing them.

We all have our coping mechanisms. Whatever works to get us through. Mine happened to be dabbling in writing the occasional poem up until about a week ago, now I can't stand to write; the shit I want to say is too dark.

He shoots me one of his grins, “I’m pussy-whipped, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

I laugh and close my door, “she’s a lucky girl Private. You better stay true to her, or I’ll be at your front door to knock some sense into you.” My tone conveys my promise, “don’t think I won’t? Natasha has my number, she will rat you out, Little Bear.”

His grin widens, his laugh nervous, “I may be the one to visit you. She won’t be able to keep her hands off me once I’m back. I’ll be begging her to allow me some R&R. *She is a fiend in the sack.*” He let out a sigh, “don’t you worry though, she’ll be well taken care of, you have my word.”

He leans his head back and removes his shades to rub at his eye.

Owen’s nickname is ‘Little Bear’; he is so happy and eager to learn new things all the time and finds amazement in everything. He is well liked and makes friends with everyone, but I think he has been hanging around Ford and Shark too much; those two are rubbing off their bad habits. It’s my duty to see that he is safe. I promised his wife Natasha as much.

Marines never break a promise. Never. I’d no sooner die than go back on my word.

“You know, she said she’s ready to have another baby.” Owen gripes, but I can tell he’s hankering to please his woman, “Hell, I haven’t spent much time with the first one, and she wants to put a second on me? *Fuck me.*”

Shark laughs as he climbs inside the truck and settles behind the driver seat, smacking Owen’s shoulder for good measure. I chuckle and eye Owen with intent.

“That’s kinda the idea Private. You best do as she says. Happy wife, happy life, and all that bullshit.”

“I won’t let ya down.” He makes an ‘X’ across the pocket that held the picture, “cross my heart.”

A minute passes before Owen’s mild, attention deficit disorder kicks in and he begins tapping a musical beat on to

the steering wheel. He is a great Marine, one that doesn't like to stay stationary for too long unless it's ordered.

“My daughter definitely has my temper.” Owen mentioned as his drumming went silent. “The last video call she screamed because her mommy wouldn't give her the phone with daddy's face on it.” His face lit like a tree on Christmas morning, “I got to hear my daughter call me daddy for the first time.” His laugh turns sentimental, “my little princess. I'm glad I'll be home for her first birthday. You're all coming, right?”

My unofficial goddaughter, Ellie is a spunky little hellraiser. It's an honor and a privilege only we brothers know.
Family.

All of us will extend our protection onto one another's families, no matter how far the distance. We will always stand united.

“Uncle Zander wouldn't miss her birthday.” I would do anything for that little sweetheart, or Mini bear, as we have nicknamed her.

I'm a person who grew up in a big family. I was changing my baby brother's diapers when I was twelve; I've witnessed just about everything a baby can do, and if that didn't scare me, I knew the Marines would be a cakewalk in comparison.

Shark leans forward to lay his two cents into the conversation, “Uncle Shark has the best present for the little pipsqueak.”

“Knowing you it would be a boring fuckin' book about a shark or sea life.” Ford retorts as he finishes things back there.

Shark's infatuation with marine animals is comical.

“I'll have you know – it's not a shark.” There is a pause as we wait for him to elaborate, his pride conveyed in his tone, “it's a mermaid doll.” Taunting laughter and a snort or two fills the truck, “*fuck you guys.*” More laughter and razzing follows.

I'm pretty sure I rolled my eyes.

They begin to banter back and forth over what actresses they think are hotter and which new movies they watched were better; the battle today is over 'The Wolverine' or 'Iron Man 3'. Personally, I enjoyed Hugh Jackman's take on the supernatural fighter more-so than the robotic suit man.

"No way man, Hugh Jackman kicks ass as the Wolverine. No better movie for the year." Shark quips, ready to get Ford riled up. He does this on purpose.

I should put a stop this now before fists fly. I'll give it another minute or two.

Ford's love for Iron Man is so strong you'd think he has a crush. His tellings of all things Iron Man can go on for hours on end.

Fucking Shark. He will pay for this later, mark my words.

"The Wolverine can't fly, can't blow his enemies up with a flick of his wrist, and doesn't have a protective suit." Ford pops his head down and wiggles his fingers dramatically to take a jab at Shark, "he just has long Lady fingernails that scratch people. *So fuckin' boring.*"

Owen chimes in with 'Now You See Me', a different movie to aid in changing the subject. Magic can be pretty cool too, I guess.

The other men roar in laughter, Ford laying into Owen now, "did the *wifey* make you take her to see it? *Shiiit*, I bet she did." Ford follows up with kissy noises.

Owen jabs right back, "be fuckin' jealous. If you loved your wife, you would take her to see any movie she wanted and pretend to enjoy it. Like Corporal said, 'happy wife, happy life.'" He's quick to lay on the double meaning, "And *damn*, that night was an *outstanding* one. She thanked me quite well – in the car after the show, and when we got back home, too."

Hoots abound from the back.

"Ahh, yeah, get it private." Shark chants.

“So that’s how Ellie was made. I got it now.” Ford jokes.

This is a sign we are all anxious to get the hell home.

“Alright men, focus. Let’s continue this conversation back at base.” I arrange my gear around and wait for the radio call giving us the all-clear to move.

Ford mentions he has a video call tonight with his *Madre (mom)*; according to her letters she is planning his home coming dinner with all his Tex-Mex favorites and is having his whole family there to welcome him back. Ford has a massive Latino American family; at twenty-four he is the oldest child of eight kids. If they are anything like he is, then bless his mother for having survived this long.

We quiet once more as the radio gives us the words we have not so patiently been waiting to hear.

‘All-clear. Back to base.’

Shark gives a quick *‘fuck yeah’*, while Owen grins and woops his agreement. With the truck in gear, we’re off.

Everything is as normal as things could be in this war-torn landscape. The terrain and roads are filled with dips, bumps, and potholes every-fucking-where; they rock the truck back and forth, making us keep our eyes and ears on alert as we slowly creep forward.

IED’s or hidden explosives can also be unseen along the road in this section, so we are more vigilant through the tight passageways until we are in the clear zone.

We quiet once more and focus intently as we enter in an area that could be at a huge disadvantage for us. We are at the lower point of the trip, surrounded by hills and broken buildings. Our enemy might be lurking anywhere there is a bush, mound of dirt, or a pile of rubble, waiting for their best opportunity.

We have trained for this though; we’ll be ready if something happens.

The team in front begins rounding a corner and we lose sight of their truck. As soon as the truck disappears, the distinct pops of gunfire and the tinkling of bullets begin bombarding our truck.

Ford caught sight of the attackers, “target acquired, two-hundred meters.”

I bark out orders for him to begin firing, then radio to Sargent Stark who happens to be in the truck in front; he too has come onto rapid gunfire.

These fuckers had to know we came through this morning and could've been staked out all day.

There they are, I can barely make out their movements, but I see them. In the location of a broken building roughly two-hundred meters out, the enemy is clustered together. My gunner is on the hunt for these bastards as each team blasts round after round onto the enemy, the third MRAP is stationed at a distance behind us, lying in wait for orders.

Suddenly, a flash illuminates my vision, something smacking the front of the truck on the driver side.

A single alarm begins to blare.

“We are taking on RPG fire.” I calmly radio in, the constant ‘*Beeep- Beeep- Beeep-*’ alarm ringing throughout the cab, but we ignore it. I repeat the words over the radio one more time. My body is tense and thrumming with adrenaline.

No doubt my men feel the same way.

“Shark, hand me that fire extinguisher! I think I can put it out!” Owen hollers, Shark handing him the canister by his feet.

The loud caliber gunfire from Ford pounds out above us like a sweet songbird screeching a melody; only this melody has fifty caliber bullets, ready to tear things apart. Like I said, sweet melody.

Ford is relentless in his return fire, not wanting for these fuckers to win.

“Hold your position, Little Bear.” I turn and yell so the gunner can hear me, “Ford! Cover Owen so he can get that fire under control!” I continue listening to the radio and responding when necessary.

Sargent then radios for the other team behind us to aide our truck.

These trucks have come a long way in safety and durability, and I believe this tiny fire on the driver side of the hood should not stop the truck from performing its duties in getting us back to base.

“I got you! You’re good! Go!” Ford roars a little too enthusiastically as his gun spits out more bullets.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven shots from Ford, the truck rocking after each one. You’d think my gunner had gone insane with the way his maniacal laughter boomed over his gun rounds. A second barrage of gunfire shakes the truck, then a third wave. He is having way too much fun right now.

Let him have fun, no way is he allowing these asshats to bring him down.

Shark sits with his gun at the ready, patiently awaiting orders, no doubt his body thrumming with anticipation at the thought of getting these bastards.

Owen’s driver door is open as he starts spraying the tiny can onto the ever-growing flames.

It’s bigger than we thought.

“Shit! This one’s out. We need another fire extinguisher!” Owen climbs back in, his door slightly ajar so he can get back out once we figure out what the hell to do.

Ford shouts over a short break in gunfire, “Scout’s team is pulling up Corporal!” I can barely hear him over the damned alarm in the cab. It’s making my ears ring. “Hey! We need your fuckin’ fire extinguisher!” Ford shouts to the neighboring team then continues the barrage of bullets to the building.

Why won’t these assholes go down?

We have to be making some sort of headway with this enemy.

“Shark! Help Owen and grab their can!” I begin radioing in our location. I vaguely register Shark opening his door, then Owen hops down and takes the new canister. Shark hops back inside the truck but keeps his door wide and gun at the ready.

In this moment we are sitting ducks as Ford reloads.

Owen is placing a huge amount of trust on Ford; he is wide open and could face an enemy strike any second. My gunner will not allow these bastards to win, that’s his promise.

Owen activates the canister and douses the flames, making them recede a bit.

“Awe, shit! Awe, Fuck! *FUCK!*” I hear Ford yell the same time I turn to open my door, about to get out and join the firefight.

BOOOOM!

Blinding light fills my vision as a massive explosion rocks the front of the truck, a direct hit from the first one. Another following directly after, this one near the roof of the truck, aiming right for my gunner.

Searing flames and metal blast the whole driver side and inner part of the cab where the door remains open. My head ricochets off the side of the cab, hard, making my vision blur and ears deafen.

Flames and shrapnel explode everywhere – numerous shouts and screams – I can’t make out who says what – it’s total fucking chaos.

“Oh- fuck! Get him out! Get him out!” Someone shouts, not sure if it’s me or one of the other men, or a collective. I can’t think straight, and my back is burning like a motherfucker.

I try to turn but find I can’t move. I have to move. The cab is filled with black smoke, so thick I can’t see the handle to open the door.

Have to get out, need air. My body screams its protest.

I will protect my men.

“Ford! C’mon man! Awe- fuck! Gunner down! Gunner down! Ford! Stay with me man! CORPORAL! RADIO FOR A MEDIC!”

I barely can discern shark’s shouting or Ford’s wailing as a familiar scent reaches my nose.

Burning. So many things – burning - my men - all burning.

“Get them out!” I bellow, my throat straining from my yell. The metallic tinge of blood clings to the inside of my nose, unmoving. It will never escape me now.

I can make out the faint glow of a fire raging outside our windshield, my vision clearing enough to locate the door handle.

My head spins every time I start to shift my body.

There’s blood on my hands, my blood? I don’t know.

“Get this fucking door open!” I hiss, damn near passing out from the effort. It hurts with each breath, but I don’t relent, yelling for someone, anyone, get this door open so I can get my brothers out.

Please!

The pounding in my head intensifies, my vision wavering. *Gotta push through it, Zander. Nothing else matters but to see your men safe.* I have no care for what happens to me as long as my team all make it out. I promised their families I would keep them safe.

Someone finally opens my door and I stumble out, the smoke is relentless as I choke.

“I have to get them out!” I see red, my focus on one thing and one thing only. Get my men out of harm’s way.

Pops of gunfire sound from somewhere, but where? How far away? I reach for my gun finding hot metal and a busted radio.

God damn it!

The world tilts, darkness threatens, the will to fight the impending darkness wanes as I sway on my feet. I need to do my duty, protect my men, my country.

Turning, I ready myself to dive back into the vehicle. I find the cab is fully engulfed, boiling flames escaping from the inside out.

A panicked call escapes me.

“*NOOO!*” I try removing my gear and find I can’t lift my arms. What the hell is wrong with me? “Shark! Ford! Get out of there!”

My body sways into someone as I twist to round the back of the truck, needing to get to the other side.

“Little Bear!” *Please* be okay. “Answer me! Fuck! *Little Bear!*”

A body blocks my way making me reel to the side, the edges of my vision darken, and the feeling of being weightless sooths me.

.
. .
.

My last thought before hitting the desert floor is how my one true promise has gone up in flames.

I’m sorry, so sorry.

CHAPTER 1 - ALEXANDER

“In peace, sons bury their fathers. In war, fathers bury their sons.” – Herodotus

The day regret settles in

The line of trucks, motorcycles, and police escort went on for miles throughout the usual bustling town. Flags wave in the hands of the innocent, a flag we protect to the end. The community is shut down, everyone in mourning over the loss of their young warrior.

Along the sidewalks, children held signs and banners, thanking him for his service and sacrifice, not truly understanding the meaning of today. Women and parents held their children tight, shedding tears, no doubt making a mental promise to themselves to steer their children out of the idea of serving.

I don't blame them, not one fucking bit. Parents do not want to be the ones to have to bury their children, in yet, here we are.

Passing the retirement home, Military veterans stand saluted as the congregation passed by, even the ones in wheelchairs were determined to give one final proper send-off to a fallen brother. These men and women know what loss is like; I wonder how they've managed to live on in this darkness.

Thunder rumbled in the distance, however the sun blazed hot and unhindered, not a single cloud nearby, an omen of Owen's bright smile. He's getting a kick out of this right now I bet.

He loved being the center of attention.

Damn it to hell.

I sit in the back seat and bow my head, not able to glance out the window another second.

Keep it together Marine. You will not fucking break.

At least not until I'm alone with Jack, Jim, or Johnny, hell, let's make it a support group. What is the opposite of AA?

It all felt like a nightmare, one I will wake from eventually, right? *I have to wake up.* My men need me. Ford, Shark. Owen –

**Broken whisper* Owen.*

Fuck. This. It's not fair. Not one bit.

Owen had so much to live for, to fight for, and now – now he's gone and all who experienced his light and positivity are now cast in a blanket of uncertainty and misery.

We follow the hearse from the church to the small cemetery where Private Owen Victor Jacobs will be laid to rest today at nineteen years young.

My grief for his family is raging inside but my mask is set. There isn't a visual cue giving away an ounce of distress. We Marines stand strong so that others do not have to. I shall let them grieve, allow them to show their vulnerability, and at the same time they will ask God why he took such a bright soul so soon.

The service begins but I can barely recall the words as Sergeant Brett Stark, Shark, myself, and the other pallbearer's wait to carry our brother one last time.

Ford would've been with us today to help bear this heartache; however, he's recovering from yet another surgery. I'm worried about my gunner and the long road to recovery he has.

I carry the burden of his wounds.

The pain in my back and shoulder at carrying the casket doesn't compare to the anguish my heart is going through. It will forever be a permanent displacement, shattered, unmendable. I'd endure this pain a thousand times over if I knew it would bring Owen back to us. I know the same can be said for all who were there that day.

My men blame themselves at this outcome.

It was my fault, all my fault. Mine and mine alone.

Tears sting behind my eyes as we set the casket in place.

Keep it together Marine.

The look of confusion on the little girl's face as she rests in her mother's arms left me *gutted*. We should be celebrating her first birthday; instead, we are here burying her father six feet under.

Fuck.

It took everything I had to not allow the screams inside my head to make their presence known.

It's just nightmare. I'll wake soon, I have to wake up.

WAKE UP ZANDER!

The priest begins his sermon, a fog of words, spoken all too often for our fallen brothers and sisters.

Once finished everyone stands for the rendering of honors.

“Present Arms.” Sargent Stark commands.

We salute.

The rifle bearers give a send-off for our brother, a twenty-one-gun salute, each shot is a direct hit to my heart.

Everyone, say the large sum of Marines, bow their heads and wipe away tears. Still I stand saluted – emotionless, or so it may seem.

Not one of us wanted to be here today.

We didn't want to hear the words of prayer from the priest, the gunshots ring out one after the other, or the bugle singing the final song of goodbye.

It's all too soon. Our brother should be here.

“Order Arms.” Salute.

Family and friends are seated once more as the sound of mourning fills the silence. Birds twitter merrily, a sound similar to Owen's laughter and paying homage to all the light he brought into this world. Thunder rumbles, closer this time. Still, there is sunshine.

The flag is folded by the two bearers then handed to Sergeant Stark who presents it to the fallen hero's wife. The solid stature of the Sergeant is a stark contrast against the fragile young woman who lost her husband.

Wives want to have years with their companions, grow old together and have the promise of seeing their grandchildren.

Owen and Natasha were only married eighteen months...

"On behalf of the President of the United States Marine Corps and a grateful Nation, please accept this flag as a symbol of our appreciation for your loved ones honorable and faithful service."

Sergeant Stark offers his condolences to the family members as he hands the flag to Natasha and Ellie, Owen's wife and daughter.

"Taps", the song of the final goodbye is played by his sixteen-year-old brother. He's now the man of the house; three younger siblings to raise with his mom.

One by one Owen's brothers offer their token of empathy to the family at the end of the procession.

I saw nothing but anguish in their eyes and the knowing I should have done better to protect their soldier, their brother, a son. Their glares, wailing, and sorrow will haunt me for infinity.

I'll never forget the day our lives changed.

How can I forget?

I apologize here and now to my men, my family, my friends, and my country. I failed you.

It's my fault Owen is dead. No one will convince me otherwise. *I'm a fucking slacker*; my head wasn't in the game, I wasn't giving my one hundred and ten percent that day.

**Inner demons* Fess up to your sins, Zander. You're a murderer. You're going to hell. We welcome you home.*

That voice in the back of my mind grows louder by the day. They are correct. *I am a murderer.*

This melancholy and sheer anguish shall go with me to my cold, silent grave. How soon will it be until I'm there?

Not soon enough I suppose.

Life is not fucking fair, nor is it guaranteed to last.

Part of me is permanently marked on that hard desert earth in Afghanistan. Don't worry, Afghanistan made its mark on me as well. Made its mark on too many of us.

May 14, 2014, numerous lives were changed.

A mother lost her son, wife lost her husband, a child lost her father, the Marines lost a devoted soldier.

The world lost a beloved man.

Rest in peace brother...

CHAPTER 2 - ALEXANDER

“If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy, my journey home is gone, but my glory never dies. If I voyage back to the fatherland I love, my pride, my glory dies.” – Achilles, Homer’s *The Iliad*

Three months later

You know the question kids are asked in elementary school, ‘*what do you want to be when you grow up?*’ My answer never changed; I *knew* I would be a soldier and serve my country as my father and grandfather before me. The feeling went deep in my bones, a sense of rightness, a calling to protect the innocent. I had dreams to move up the ranks and become an officer, it sent an abundance of pride thrumming through my veins. I wanted to be praised when coming home from deployment, to celebrate in our victory, and exhibit honor for my country, my brothers and sisters in arms, and all Americans.

Only what I thought to be my destiny quickly ended in a firestorm of chaos and grief. Part of me is buried six feet in the ground, and no amount of therapy, surgeries, or poetry will bring me back.

This is the new Alexander Gorski. A shell casing, cold and empty, taking up space, pride diminished to nothing.

The day Owen died; I died as well.

“How are you feeling today, Zander?” I hear my therapist ask in his monotone way as he looks over my folder. I sit on the couch with my arms crossed over my chest and a blank stare at a random wall.

Does he even give a shit? I doubt it. It’s part of his job to make sure I am so-called *healing*. How much of what is in that folder is fudged? Is it prettied up, so it paints me in a better light? Wouldn’t put it past this crew.

I flick my eyes to his for a brief second then shrug as my gaze flicks back to the darkened spot on the wall.

Someone did a shitty paint job.

My pain can be intense at times, and I don't sleep much unless I drink myself that way. It happens more often than not nowadays.

The mid-forties balding man in his fancy pink polo shirt is there in his beige chair, sitting nicely prim and proper, acting like he's ready to go golfing the second he's done with me. He seems to care little about my situation. I wonder how many people he sees on a daily basis. Many of us get lost in the suffocating void with no help.

Typical.

No wonder why so many turn to other means of a feel-good factor. I know I have mine waiting for me in the cupboard at home.

He prescribed sleep meds, it only warps the nightmares, shifting them to where I'm me being chased by wolves, or Afghani's have captured me, ready and willing to torture. Then again, it could be a side-effect of pairing it with alcohol. That right there is why I don't take them.

"I'm fine." My response is just the same as it always is but maybe I just want to mock the man's tone. No more than a handful of words ever crosses my lips when I'm here.

Is there any point to these sessions? I mean, *let's be real*. Honestly, how should I feel after everything that's happened?

I'm numb, emotionless, lost in that void I mentioned.

There is no help for me.

I don't need these shit meetings; they don't help.

I'm ready to go home. Am I, though? Home isn't all that great either.

With my career path now tanked and no fiancée to come home to, I relied on my family the first couple weeks

and they aided me throughout my surgeries, only now, as I look deeper and see their sadness, and their fucking pity, I find I'm nothing more than a burden. So, I shut them out.

I do not deserve them.

I'm better off like Owen. Dead and buried.

It be for the best, they don't need to see what a fucking mess their son and brother has become.

I'm a castaway, just like *Battle Born* by Five Finger Death Punch it rings true. Exhaustion weighs heavy, my mind obliterated, my body unable to endure anymore.

They have no clue what I have been through, they can't relate, nor do I want them to.

Fucking hell, I just need an escape, escape from the pain and the misery, and all the fucking heartache.

I want my brother back.

I want it all to end.

No, I'm not talking suicide, although – I just want– *sigh* I don't know anymore. I'm at the bottom of the barrel, scraping at the edge with no way to climb out. Maybe that is dark contemplation of what lay in store for my future.

I give a mental shiver as a tinge of lingering hope clings to my subconscious.

What else is out there for me? Military life is all I know, all I've trained for, and now that I've been honorably discharged, something I *never fucking* wanted, I have to ask myself, where do I go now?

I vaguely hear the doctor's ramblings as my thoughts stray to when I came home. The amazing people in my hometown came together to celebrate my being *alive*, making me a local celebrity of sorts. My smile firmly in place as I waved at the on-lookers while the float slowly made its way down the main drag. I wanted to be anywhere else that day, but I had an image to uphold and people to impress.

What a fucking disappointment I am.

It was all just a façade; deep down inside my fucked-up mind I was screaming, no one heard it though.

This should not be how life goes; I didn't sign up for this. I'd rather be back in the desert with my brothers, it's the only place I found purpose.

Owen had a growing life with a wife and child, all I have is me. My family would've mourned my death, but they would know I died doing what I loved, and what destiny had set for me.

After parade day, everywhere I went, someone knew me. I hated it and felt worse each time they thanked me for my service, had me sign something, or asked me how I fared.

If only they truly knew the storm raging inside my mind.

I'm not an honorable soldier; I couldn't keep my promise. I don't deserve any of the pomp and circumstance.

I just want to be left alone.

So, I quit going places unless it was to the liquor store. I ordered delivery at least four nights a week and ate three-day old pizza from my coffee table like a true bachelor would. No one here to feed me fucking salads for dinner, no sir, not going back to that shit. I'm a burger and beer kinda guy.

Drinking became my solace, my escape, at least for some time.

I didn't care what it was in the bottle as long as it burned so good going down. No feeling is the best sensation, until they slammed right back in place, matched with the worst fucking hangover ever.

I'm not one to learn anything after the first time, so I kept at it, giving the excuse to myself I had to build up my tolerance so I could drink more the next time around.

That was until my mom and sister found me in a drunken steeper on my couch wearing ripe week-old clothing, reeking of stale booze, the place littered with weeks of pizza boxes, foam containers, and bottle after empty bottle of beer

and liquor. I could've opened my own bar with how many I had, if they still had product in them.

These women bitch-slapped me until I woke, then continued at it until I agreed to get help; therapy, anything, just as long as I didn't sit there and drink myself into the grave.

A cold grave sounds appealing to me right now.

**Taunting demons* Yes, Zander. End it all. The world will be a happier place without you.*

Shut up! I mentally scream back at my demons.

I'm never going to be the boy they knew at seventeen. He's long gone. I would rather drown my sorrows than have this constant reminder. That boy would've never thought about touching a bottle.

How innocent and naive he was.

"I want to see you progress and better cope with everything, but I can't help you if you don't let me in, Alexander."

I forgot I was still here. Using my full name like that; **Scoff** He hasn't earned that right. That is only for one person, my mom.

Asshole.

He sighs and leans forward setting the folder on the circular glass coffee table between us. Threading his fingers together he places them in his lap and sets his elbows on the arms of the chair, "have you thought about what I said at our last session? About a support animal? I believe a dog or cat could help in your situation."

I couldn't contain my annoyance; *it was more like a snarl*. Yeah, that's what I need, a pesky thing that barks all day or something that scratches the living daylights out of me.

"Not interested in an animal."

He sighs again; it's all this guy does when I'm here. I don't even know why I come to these sessions; a wasted hour I

could be home hanging with Jack, Jim, or Johnny. Hell, maybe I'd invite the Captain too; we'd have one *outstanding* party.

I like the sound of that. Might have to make that reality.

“Before you go, promise me something, Zander.” His bland asking has my eyes rolling but I won't show him that, he'd keep me here longer.

Someone should tell him I'm the king of not upholding to my promises. We wouldn't be in this room right now if that were the case.

Our eyes met when his pause lingered, waiting for my confirmation of yes or no. I didn't budge.

Yet another damn sigh came from him.

“You mentioned you write poetry and lyrics.” His statement brings a twinge to my heart, “before I see you next week, make it pertinent to try and write down your thoughts, anything at all.” His lips twitch for some reason, “you're intelligent and I want you to see how this might help you cope.”

My eyes may be staring at the man, but my mind is playing out what dinner will go best with my Jack and Pepsi tonight.

Maybe hot wings. I wonder if Anchorman's Bar will deliver. Maybe if I use my celebrity status, they-

“Zander. Did you hear me?”

“Huh?” I catch his stare, **dazed** “yeah. I can do that.” Not really sure what I agreed to, but if it gets this quack to shut his yap and let me leave, I'll say just about anything.

I stand and flex my hands, roll my shoulders as much as I could, then shift around to release the tension building inside. I'm a caged animal pacing back and forth, waiting for the door to open so as to be set free.

Sitting for long periods of time can make my left side uncomfortable and sometimes numb to my elbow. That is only a piece of my gory tale.

“Great,” my therapist stands, grabbing my file off the table, “I would love to see some of your poetry.”

“We will see.” No emotion, my mask in place. Who does he think he is? That is not happening. I do not write poetry anymore. Not for anyone. That sensitive man died in Afghanistan.

Again, why do I even go to these fricken things?

Because your mother would kick your ass if you stopped going.

Well, isn't that the truth. She can be scary when she wants to be, and fuck if I want to be in her war path.

I heave a mental sigh as I wait for the receptionist to give me the card with my new appointment date. Would this be the one I skip?

Tempting.

I climb in my battered Chevy truck, the hinges creaking as I close the door. Just as I was gearing up to turn the key over, my cellphone rings. I pull it out of my pocket and let out a curse when I glance the name of the caller. It's the other woman in my life who I'm surprised has not kicked my ass yet, “hey sis.”

My sister Emma has been relentless in helping me find my way back. I love her, but I wish she would leave me be. I want to be left alone, to drown in my suffering; my newfound escape from reality.

“How'd the appointment go today?” She asks straight out of the gate, not even a hello. How rude! Then again, I should be used to it by now. She does this after every appointment.

As tiny as my big sister is, Emma can give a good beating; maybe because she grew up with all boys. She knew she had to be tough in order to survive. Growing up I'd pumble anyone who'd picked on her and called her names. We are only fourteen months apart; Irish twins in a Polish family, try and figure that one out. We'd often give our parents a good run around. We were always close. *Always.*

Can't say much of it now. Yet another thing that is all my fault.

My eyes roll as I glance out at the hazy sunbaked city. September seems to be having an Indian summer heatwave. Reminds me how much I miss the desert. Not a bit of air conditioning there.

If it wasn't for being discharged, I'd be back there in a heartbeat.

Best not to lollygag and keep her waiting, she will pester me until I spill whatever she thinks might be positive in today's session.

No way am I mentioning the non-AA party I'm throwing tonight. She would make sure to pop over and shut that shit down.

No sir. Not happening.

Annoyed "He wants to see me write again, I guess."

Her tone brightens, "oh that is wonderful, I love your poetry and songs. Speaking of songs, how would you feel about meeting tonight at our old stomping ground? The band is in town, and they would love to see you."

And there it is, her real reason for calling. She always does this and has tried getting me out of the house on more than one occasion; I always turn her down.

Emma views this dismissal as her invitation to stop by and annoy the shit out of me. Sibling competition is a big to-do in our family.

At least there would be booze involved if I go. I can sit at the bar and watch the band. I haven't heard from Derek in over a year other than the welcome home text he sent me while he was touring with the band. He probably wouldn't even recognize me.

I don't even recognize me.

"I don't know-

“Don’t make me come over there,” she snaps, ready with her comeback, “you know, I will drag you out by that scraggly beard of yours if I have to.”

That makes me cringe. She would do it too. Emma has our mother’s inner Gorski fury. Why is it the tiny women tend to be most terrifying? Maybe it’s because we think they should all be sweet and innocent, which they can be, but cross them and you’d better watch out. You will have your balls served on a platter.

“Please don’t do that, I’ll go if you buy my favorite thing on the menu.” I can’t believe I spit that out, *I didn’t want to go*.

Hey, can’t go wrong with drinks and wings, right? It’s what I wanted for dinner anyway.

“How about I double it and you buy my Cosmo’s?” I can hear the grin in her tone, “Wyatt is playing tonight so I need you to be my dance partner.” I picture her shaking her hips in the pediatric scrubs she has on right now.

“Ehh- Not sure I can keep up with you. You know I suck at dancing.”

“Maybe it’s a tequila night then, that *always* has you strutting your stuff on the dance floor.” Emma pops her lips excitedly.

“*Hell no, no* tequila. We are *not* doing that again.” Jose Cuervo is not part of my party group, and for a good reason.

She giggles, no doubt thinking of the time I came home on leave, multiple shots of tequila consumed, and little miss Emma started dancing on the bar. Grady hasn’t witnessed action like that since his drinking days twenty years ago. I don’t remember much about that night, but pictures and receipts are proof we went off the rails.

No tequila for this guy. Ever.

Emma let out a groan, “I gotta go, my break is over.”

“Oh, I’m so sad.” I jest.

I imagine her sticking her tongue out at me like we did as kids, but her words surprise me, “I love you brother. See you at seven,” Emma’s quick to darken her words, “remember, don’t make me come and get you.”

“Message received, sister.” I mock then hear her laugh before we end the call.

I toss my phone in the center console and stare out the windshield, a small grin ghosting my lips. Smiling doesn’t happen often, and it feels foreign. My sister is the only one to put it there, and even that is a struggle more days than not. It hurts me to know I disappoint her.

Why? Why can’t things be like they were before boot camp?

I’m just a shell of the man I once was, no ambition to continue.

**Demons* So don’t continue. How about you end it? You’re a disgrace to your family. They will be better off without you.*

I shake my head at my thoughts then start the truck.

First things first, I need to head home and shave this overgrown jungle off my face.

Best not tempt the little hellion.



For a Friday night *Harbor’s Edge Bar and Grill* it isn’t as packed as I thought it be, then again, this bar’s atmosphere draws a different kind of crowd. The walls are covered in local sports memorabilia and signage, as well as a few comical signs from the owners’ home country of Ireland.

Grady, the bar’s owner and I have a good connection and our talks come naturally, often relating to our enjoyment

for classic rock.

I'll be sure to ask him tonight as to why there's a '*For Sale by Owner*' sign in the window. Why would he want to sell this place?

Emma, Wyatt, Derek, and I grew up coming to this bar to watch Derek's band, '*Fold or Fade*', who now go by *Sly Van* and soon will be making bookoo bucks. This is where they picked up their first true gig, mainly out of pity from Grady but hey, you gotta start somewhere. Now the band has a manager and a record label, plus their first official album is coming out in a few weeks, it's been all a buzz over the local rock radio stations. It's fucking awesome to hear someone you know play on the radio, but why did it have to be *that* song? Couldn't it have been one I didn't help create?

Fucking hell. I want no part in it.

They have their dreams on track and are ready for the big time.

Mine dreams went up in flames.

"You're here!" My sister finds me near the entry and launches herself in my arms. Her eyes shimmer before she blinks it away, eyes that likely were set on the door every time it opened, waiting to see if I walked in or if I stood her up for the up-teenth time. "Ooh, now this," her fingertips trace along my clean-shaven jaw, "this I like. Much better."

Approval by the facial hair snob.

Tonight, I'm the military man everyone envisions me to be. Clean cut, hair high and tight, and spiffy clothes. I even put a dab of smell-well on.

Who is this person, and where did the mopey sorry sack of shit go from this morning?

Oh, he's here, don't you worry.

I give myself a mental beatdown, not wanting that part of me to surface tonight. Tonight, is for Emma and the band.

Maybe it was Wyatt's text chain earlier telling me I didn't want to miss this show. Apparently, he has *big news*.

“Well, you know, ‘*No Shave November*’ is right around the corner. I better do my part.” It’s been far too long since I’ve picked on her. It feels so good.

Emma has never liked the look or feel of facial hair. My lips twitch with satisfaction. I love getting a rise out of her.

“It’s only September,” she scoffs, “how about you keep your face clean until then, kay?” She giggles as she takes my hand and leads us to our usual table near the worn-out stage.

“Hey man, you made it!” Wyatt calls out as he hops off the stage and we clasp hands. “It’s good to see you.”

Dressed in his favorite *Mayday Parade* shirt, rectangular wire rimmed glasses, and lone behold, a clean-shaven jaw, he seems all-too happy to see me. I guess it’s been a while since I’ve made an appearance.

The crawling under my skin makes its way to surface, guilt making purchase in the here and now.

A mental map of my escape is being drawn as we speak.

Why did I come here tonight?

My friends want to see me. Only I know what my limits are.

A chorus of hey man’s, bro hugs, and fist bumps ensue from Chris, Ryan, Derek, and Tyler, the other band members. It’s been two years since I’ve seen everyone together like this.

Where the hell does time go?

My sister the almighty protector she is, likely filled them in and made sure they took it easy on me. The sense of their curiosity lingers in the air; no one dare bring up the fact I’m just a *poor soldier* living a lonely existence and not faring well being back.

Ha. Sounds like I’m a fucking song they can write.

Hop to it, gentlemen, time’s a ticking.

My friends knew my path in life and wanted nothing but the best for me. That path now has jagged cliffs and

slippery terrain; the warning sign is posted at the beginning for all to make their judgement call.

I wouldn't continue further if I were you.

My shoulders relax, the smile I adorned the moment I walked in has not left. I feel at home here. The smells, the atmosphere, and the people; all of it takes me back in time, to happier, simpler times.

“Let's get soldier boy here a drink!” Derek bellows. The heavily tattooed and married lead singer slaps my shoulder, giving it a shake.

Everyone hoots their agreement as they fight over who is paying for first round.

Yes. This is exactly what I needed; a night to leave my troubles at home.

A little while later after two shots and two beers, the bar becomes packed; word has spread over social media about the band being in town. Drinks are flowing freely, which ratchets up new wants and needs for me.

The desire for pussy.

Who knows, if that leggy blonde and her brunette friend, dressed in skimpy skirts and high heels keep eyeing me that way from across the dance floor, I just might get lucky tonight.

Maybe I'll play Shark's game and take them both home with me. *Hell, to the fucking yes.* I'm game. Let's see if they make the first move.

For my sister's sake, and maybe a little bit of my self-image, I find I'm pacing myself in the drinking department. Quite a few people here will tattle tale on me to my mom.

Best be somewhat behaved. *I said somewhat.*

Emma tries pulling me to the dance floor, but my ass is going to stay parked in this seat. She knows I don't dance; no amount of alcohol or sad puppy faces will have me out there. And no damn tequila. Thankfully the song comes to a close.

Wyatt steps to the mic and hands his guitar to one of the guys.

“Where is she? Emma?” He searches the crowd, “where is my little firecracker?” His face lights up when she practically bounces to the front of the stage. Wyatt helps her stand beside him, then she’s wrapping herself around his body, not the least bit shy of being in the spotlight.

His face turns ashen as he adjusts his glasses on his face then locks eyes with her, “hey baby,” he says way too nervous for the Wyatt I know. What is he planning on doing?

Barely five feet in height, Emma only makes it nipple high against her boyfriend as she stares up at him with pure admiration.

“Hey boo.” She squeaks, the crowd quieting to a murmur.

He isn’t- no way. That little bastard. He isn’t doing what I think he’s doing.

Wyatt clears his throat, “While we have been together for a few years, we have known one another since the seventh grade.”

No –way- My heart slams against my ribs.

glee No fuckin’ way-

“You stole my heart the moment I laid eyes on you. This precious being formed the band, helped me study the night before a test while I perfected my guitar triplets, and made this prom king overjoyed to find his prom queen.”

Emma brings a hand to her lips and giggles, not quite grasping her boyfriend’s meaning of this moment. Her hair matches her personality at times. She will catch on.

“You were my rock through college, and you nurture me when I’m sick.” He folds his six-foot frame down on one knee, pulls a black box out of his pocket and gazes up at her.

Holy shit-

A hush blankets the room, even the bar patrons have gone quiet.

How did I not know they were this serious? Just goes to show how lacking I've been with the family get-togethers.

Emma tries hiding her shock but it's no use. A few women swoon over the proposal happening before them.

"Emma Marie Gorski, I love you with every breath I take and every ounce of energy I have in this lifetime and the next. Will you do me the honor of becoming my soulmate?" A sparkle from the box strikes the overhead stage lighting, making the ring shimmer.

"Say yes, lassie!" Grady yells across the establishment getting a few patrons to shout their agreement.

Her cheeks go red as she nods her head slightly almost as if she didn't recall what he said, then tears begin streaming down her cheeks. She nods more vigorously, "yes! A thousand times, yes!"

His grin is ear-to-ear as he takes the ring from the box and places it on her trembling finger. Her arms wrap around his neck and their lips lock in one emotional heartfelt kiss.

The crowd lights up in a storm of excitement for the happy couple. Clapping, whistling, and cheering fill the small space as I stand there watching them with a joyous smile.

I am ecstatic for them; I just wish the asshole would've given me fore-warning that he was going to do it tonight. After all, he did tell me there'd be big news, this falls under that category for sure.

Still, the fucker should've told me.

My mind drifts to how I proposed to my ex-fiancée, if you call it a proposal. We were in the gym about finished with our workout when I made a little joke about marriage. She took my *'if you think you can handle me why don't we get married?'* to the next level and said yes then and there.

No ring, just us and a handful of people working out. I'm pretty sure there wasn't even a kiss involved.

Looking back at it now, I could see she wasn't the one I wanted.

Hell, she probably had her side piece way back then too.

Shake it off Zander, it's time to show your sister that you're happy for her. Which I am, truly.

"I love you so much my little firecracker." Wyatt says into the mic after breaking their kiss, "hey gents, I think I know what song we need to play next."

The crowd lights up in cheers again as the familiar song, *Firecracker Girl* intros on lead guitar, Wyatt leans in for one last kiss before grabbing his guitar, wearing it like a second skin.

I remember helping Wyatt write this song back in our high school days, his way of telling me about the feisty spirit who took his breath away, his firecracker.

Emma rushes to me as they play her song. She wraps her arms around my neck, the pressure on one of the deeper healing wounds has me wincing in pain.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry," shock stealing her excitement as she pulls back, "what can I do?"

"No, it's fine, I'm good." I say through clenched teeth willing the pain to subside, "I'm good," I repeat. After a few seconds, the pain ebbs and I am able to distract her by taking the hand now adorning a decent sized rock, "You're getting married!" I pull her in for a bear hug and place a kiss to her hair, "you two are perfect for each other."

Her blush is back with a glittering of joyous tears in her eyes, "I know! I had no idea he was doing it tonight, did you?"

I shake my head, "maybe it was a spur of the moment kinda thing."

Can I really be mad at the guy for leaving me out of the loop? I'll be sure to get him back later.

Her look says it all; with that wide smile and twinkle in her eyes, my sister is on cloud nine right now and no one is going to bring her down. I bring her in and wrap my arms around her for another squeeze.

“I am so happy for you sis. Congratulations.”

The chorus of the song has her head snapping up, the blazing guitar riffs from Chris and Wyatt, thumping of bass by Tyler, and explosion of drums from Ryan excites the crowd as they sing along. Derek does this song justice as it extends through the mic and into each individual soul here and now.

She's a live wire of untamed desire

One spark, flames extending higher

Burning with need, oh, God please, please

Kiss and tease, bring me to my knees

Firecracker girl, you own my world

She removes herself from me, dancing and pulling me out of my chair to the dance floor.

Alright, fine. I'll give her this one single moment in time to remember. A sliver of the free, fun-loving boy might still lay dormant amidst the hardened Marine.

It was then I reminded my sister how bad of a dancer I really am.



I couldn't take being close to the loud noise of the music, my anxiety close to flagging as the night progressed but I wanted to be here for my sister and friends.

Alcohol would be my reprieve.

Nixing the thought of taking the two ladies back to my place, I left them alone and gravitated towards the bar, finding

an open seat on the end where the owner is stationed.

He served me drinks, and I noticed the liquor lightening after every refill. I'm fairly certain that last one was full-on Pepsi. I really didn't care instead enjoying the 'I-Spy' game I've played each time I've stepped foot inside. Not finding any new items I can confirm my suspicions. He is really selling this place.

“Grady, why is there a ‘For Sale’ sign out front? You can't sell it; we need you here.” I tell the owner a little tipsy, “Who's going to be the one to give me wise wisdom?”

Grady chuckled as he poured a pint for a local.

I made it back to this place any chance I had after boot camp and my first deployment; the bar and owner changed ever so little. I have to say, for being in his mid-seventies he looks damn good. Grady has always come off as being ‘tough as nails’ paired with his ‘no bullshit’ attitude and gruff persona, he is one to get straight to the point. That is until you see him with his sweet Irish lass of a wife. She is his sun, moon, and stars. She is the one to tame his beast.

His Northern Irish brogue sounds worn down, “Ah lad, I'm dried up as a Nun's tit, can't do much o' anything ‘round here.” He let out a huff as he wiped the bar top. The newest youngster of a bartender, Trent, finishes serving a fella at the other end of the bar, Grady giving the patron and his bartender a chin lift before bringing his gaze back to mine, “Tis time me and the misses become one of those ‘snowbirds’ everyone tittles on about.”

There's a long pause as rock music plays in the background.

“You know, I can't picture this place any different. There is quite a bit of history here. I'd hate to see it go.” This building has a history in of itself. Not many people would take pride in keeping the old brick standing.

Something inorganic would be built to match the newness of future plans further down the harbor. Not sure the

historic society would have it in them to save this building, it's seen better days.

His eyes twinkle with interest, "Well now, you seem pretty attached here." He starts placing clean glasses in the station under the bar. "What did you say you're doing now?"

"I didn't." I pause to contemplate what to answer with, knowing he wouldn't take well to finding out I'm drinking myself to an early grave. Doubt and guilt hit me like a sledgehammer to the head as I take the last swig of my drink then set the glass aside, "I guess I don't know what I'm meant to do now, my military career is kaput. I don't know why I'm still here."

It would have been easier on everyone if I were the one to die that day. It's all I can think about.

Ah, yes. Here comes the sorry sack of shit back in action. Like an old friend you can never be rid of, right, Zander?

With his sleeves rolled to the elbow, I catch a hint of an older military tattoo on the inner part of his forearm as he places his palms on the bar, his gaze raking over my disheveled appearance hidden underneath. He can see under my mask, knows what it's like.

Most would be oblivious to the concept.

"I'll lend you an ear when you're ready to talk about it." His eyes meet mine, understanding laced within.

Grady hasn't spoken of his time in the Irish Army in damn near fifty years, I now know why. I loathe talking about my time in Afghanistan; it's best left in my head, so I do not hurt those I love.

My mask locks away the strain of emotions fighting to break free.

Then his words hit me and the mask shatters. Grady has said the one thing no one else has been able to get through to me.

When you're ready to talk about it.

Will I ever be ready?

I don't know how I'm to move on from the loss of my brother; he will always be inside my head, my heart, what's left of it anyway.

Darkness follows with each step I take and for some reason Macbeth decides to make an appearance, "*Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle toward my hand?*"

I feel you Shakespeare. The torment is front and center.

"I'm lost." I choke as the heels of my hands dig into my eyes. It takes everything in my power to keep it together right now. Strangers sit to my left, listening to the conversation.

Fucking embarrassing.

Shut it down, right now. Get the hell out of Dodge. This will not end well.

I'm not going to ruin my sister's night by breaking down in one of our favorite places. It be forever tinged with the melancholy; I'd never visit again.

He rounds the worn wooden bar to stand at my side, "come with me, I need to show you somethin'."

I lift my head from my hands and watch him head to the back of the kitchen. By the time he reaches the swinging door I hop off my stool and follow him, that inner voice shouting to me to trust what this man has to say.

Once inside the small office the smell of mint and worn leather hits me and oddly enough, I'm immediately calm. I click the door shut and he silently gestures for me to have a seat on the tan leather loveseat, which I do, then he hands me a bottle of water.

I thank him then my gaze floats around the ten by sixteen room. There isn't much inside other than a worn black chair, an old oak desk, a filing cabinet stuffed in the corner next to a small floor to ceiling shelf filled with miscellaneous items and knickknacks, and a tiny table directly across from

me. It be cramped if more than two people were in here at any given time.

Memorabilia coats the walls similar to what is out in the main area, but instead of local sports items there are pictures and keepsakes of his wife and children, and surprising to me, there are also pictures of his time spent in the Army. Aged paper clippings and men in uniforms in frames splatter most of the space.

He leans his body against the desk and crosses his arms, all while studying my face for any reaction.

I wonder why he brought me in here. Clearly this is *his* space and not many get to venture in its depths.

“Quite the history I’ve accumulated, wouldn’t ye say?” Grady says, “This is where I come to get away from everything and just think for a bit.” His gaze peruses the room at the history he is willing to share with me.

I give him a nod but can’t find any words to say, so I uncap the bottle and take a swig of water, not that it does much.

“Not every part of history is tragic or terrifying, there are good things that have come from my time spent in the Army; the men I served and formed bonds with, I found my wife then, had three children, and a chance at a new life here. See, it opened my eyes to new possibilities.” I watch one side of his lips twitch, a secret memory playing in his minds’ eye, “This place gave me a second chance, it put food on our table, our children through college, the first of our family to do so. It’s here that I kept the most important sliver of my sanity. Life, Zander. Ye need to fuckin’ live it.”

His eyes met mine, not sure what all he saw in them, but I was beginning to understand more about this man.

They say a bartender is like a therapist; they listen to your bullshit, might feed you a little of their advice, and give you a drink while they’re at it. This bartender though, he relates to me far more than any other man; my father included. That man didn’t experience live combat. I can now see that

Grady has witnessed some shit go down in his time; the good, the bad, and even some ugly. Like I have.

“Aye, I know there is *gobshite* in yer head,” he taps a finger to his temple, resilience glinting in his eyes, “You’re no eejit, but sulking around and drinkin’ as you are, some might say otherwise.”

“What else am I to do?” I ask as I rake a hand through my hair. Those green eyes of his pin me to the spot, an idea sparking to life within them.

He scratches his scruffy white jaw weaved with the faintest hint of orange, “How ye feel about helpin’ ‘round here?” Grady asks, “The place needs some sprucin’ up and I’m not the spring chicken I once was. You look like you’ve got a good head on your shoulders; I could use a strong man such as yerself.”

“But I can’t do much of-

“There is no such thing as ‘can’t in my book,” he cut me off, his tone stronger than before, a crease now etching his brow. He moves from the desk to lean against the tiny table across from me, “feekin’ hell, ye said it yourself, ye feel lost, allow me to help ye find yer way.”

He’s stern but not quite commanding. I can accept that.

I can’t help but mull over his offer. There isn’t enough alcohol in my system giving me the liquid courage I need to agree.

Coward. That’s all I am, a fucking coward.

“I could use your help getting the place back in order so it can better sell.”

My hand routinely clasps my left shoulder where the stolen muscle, scars, and tense pain linger as a constant reminder.

I *can’t* help him; I have little movement on the left side of my body. Hell, I struggle putting a fucking cap back on a water bottle. The skin is tight, and the flames of pain are

enough to bring me to my knees most days. How can I help him when half of me is forever immobile?

He gives a lift of his chin to where my hand rests, “don’t allow that wound to stop you. Overcome the pain, you’re bloody stronger than that Zander, you got a lot of fight left, don’t waste it on the bottle.”

My mind for once is not fogged by heavy liquor, hell, I’m practically sober right now compared to any other night.

There is nothing more I despise than the physical therapy sessions the VA says will help. I’m sorry but squeezing a stress ball and pinching clothes pins up a fucking string does absolute dick for me. Grady must sense my agitation; he wouldn’t have brought me in this office otherwise.

Can he see how close I am to tipping off the edge?

“How’s about this; ye go home, sober up, and if yer up for helpin’ then report here Monday mornin’, nine o’clock sharp.” His tired eyes flash with determination.

This man isn’t going to let me go until I surrender.

Did my sister have a talk with Grady about my behavior lately? I wouldn’t put it past her, the little thing can be cute and highly persuasive, but she also has pride for her family and will do anything for any one of us, even if it means going against our wishes most times. Emma is wanting her brother, her best friend back.

This guy might be the one who breaks me, but what do I have to lose? Not much I suppose.

“If you can get passed me doing a half-assed job,” I gesture to my side, “I guess I’m your man.” I sigh then stand, placing myself toe-to-toe and give him my undivided attention to show respect, “I don’t want you taking pity on me-

“*Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.*” He spat, “This is no damn pity-party Zander.” His eyes flame with fury over that word. Pity. No man wants to say that word let alone hear it pertain to them, “I’m only askin’ for ye to consider my offer. If ye want

to help an old lad, bring yer arse here. If not – don't show. Ye have choice.”

I take in a breath and let it out slowly, all while feeling his eyes boring into me. Through all the discussions Grady and I had these many years, this one is the only one he's shown a pinch of anger. No way will I cross this man.

Nodding once I give a little shrug, “I'll do it. Just take it easy on me, kay?”

One side of his lips twitch at his win, “Lad, if only it be that easy.”

Well, shit. What in the ever-loving hell did I just agree to?

There is no backing out now. It's not a Marine's way, and I'll be damned if I fall back on this promise.

I have to follow my own daily marching chant I'd give the infantry; *Give it your everything or go home. No time for fuckin' slackers.*

CHAPTER 3 - ALEXANDER

“The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing.” –
Marcus Aurelius

Moving on

They say all things happen for a reason. I didn't know that night at the bar would change my outlook on life. Grady and his bar gave me purpose. He saw something I didn't even know was possible to unleash within myself.

The day he handed me the keys to his precious bar and told me to take care of it for a few months while he and the misses traveled to their home in Belfast, Ireland, I felt it, that shimmer of hope, the flame sparking life inside me that hasn't been there in a long while. I was both thrilled he trusted me enough to man the place, and also fucking afraid I'd let him down.

New mission: Prove to Grady that as acting manager things will run smoothly. Yeah. Hopefully I'm not digging myself a hole.

At first, I was overwhelmed with everything an owner must endure to keep things running; the bookkeeping, the vendors, the breakdowns, the employee drama, the rowdy customers, the list goes on and on.

I soon found my rhythm with the help of Maddie, the head waitress. She knows this bar inside and out and has taken on a few of the smaller tasks in the bookkeeping department due to Grady's straining eyesight. I even learned a few pointers from Trent about making the proper mojito, Long Island iced tea, and other popular mixed drinks. By the way, drink mixing sucks. End of story. If I have to be at the bar I'll do it, only I will steer you in the direction of something simple, like a Jack and Coke, now those I have mastered. I'd rather be in the kitchen or helping Maddie out on the floor before being stuck behind the bar.

A bartender I am not.

Once things fell into a decent groove, I quickly came see this place as my second home. I spent most, if not all my time here. The For Sale sign came down shortly after. Once Grady returned, he and I would be having a chat.

Grady returned after calling and checking in on the place, deciding to extend their trip an extra month. Once he arrived, I quickly sat him down and went straight to the point. I want this place for my own and know I can make it happen. I have savings, especially now that I've cut out ninety-nine percent of my drinking habits, not to mention every single paycheck I've made working here has gone untouched. The ladies at the bank were more than helpful in any information I needed. Still with that cringy celebrity status of mine. I'll never be used to it and hopefully it wears off sooner rather than later.

For the first time since arriving home I had a dream, a big one at that. Not as big as the Marines, but this was a start and holds promise to a new fork in my road.

Grady gave me a deal I could not refuse and a month later I became the new owner of *Harbor's Edge Bar and Grill*.

Six months into my new business adventure, I received a desperate call from a Texas area code; I knew immediately things were not good. It was Ford's *Madre* giving me the low-down on her eldest son.

Ford went through countless surgeries to repair about sixty percent of the right side of his body; he needed extensive work to mend and regain better mobility, far more than I needed. He is damn lucky to have all his limbs as mangled as they are; he survived the blast, but I can sense his suffering.

I couldn't stand the thought of losing another brother. I needed to help him.

Ford's *Madre* explained to me how his wife recently filed for divorce, sending him spiraling out of control and finding his solace in alcohol and pain pills. He fell deeper into his depression and found his solace in prescribed medications;

his doctors were all too happy to hand it over, upping the dosages to far past critical levels. Pair that with alcohol and you have a concoction for all things seriously terrifying and deadly.

Maria, Ford's *Madre* was at her wits end with the stress of raising seven other children, having her eighth begging for his life to end damn near broke her. She called me after he landed himself in the hospital from an overdose.

It's enough to break any mother's heart.

The following week when business was slow, I flew down, met with Maria, and made a plan to get him the help he needed back in my hometown. He needed major rehabilitation and quite possibly more surgeries. His mother couldn't tackle much more and was on the verge of having a heart attack. This then had her calling me her *hijo favorito* (*favorite son*). I reassured her Ford would stay with me in my big empty house once he completed rehab. Ford had a long road ahead of him.

I packed whatever I could inside his Tahoe, loaded his massive ass inside, and drove back to New York, all because he has a fear of flying.

That drive sucked big, massive hairy ball-sacks... I was ready to knock him out less than an hour in; so instead I blasted the radio, sang along at the top of my lungs, and rationed his pain meds all while he spouted off never forgiving me and name calling.

What are brothers for? I can take it. Bring it the fuck on Gunner, try as you might there is no way you're pushing me away.

Step one into his recovery was hell, but we got through it.

I was in a better frame of mind and knew my brother needed me. Nothing was going to break me from my new mission in ascertaining myself in his recovery whether he like it or not. I was their leader, the one they all looked to for guidance, and when given an order, it was still second nature for them to see it through.

Shark made his way from Virginia any chance he had to lend his assistance with our pain-in-the-ass brother. Ford was worth it. We needed our brother back. After the months of fighting and self-loathing he endured, what ultimately broke Ford from his stooper was the visit to Owen's wife and family for his daughter's second birthday.

It broke us all.

Tears flowed freely that day, and the remembrance at how amazing of a young man Owen was gave us the breath we needed, at least for one single night. To tell his family about his jests and poking-the-bear fun he often did around the infantry put smiles on everyone's faces, and soon we all had a funny story to add in. Our mini bear connected us and that smile of hers gave us hope for the future. Her future.

We needed to be better people, do better, think better, all for his little girl. Owen's princess. We would make sure his daughter knew how brave, strong, and loving her daddy was. She has three uncles that will always be here for her and her mother. No matter what.



Now two years into the business, the area is teeming with new projects, a great expansion for our community as tourist flock to the events and festivals. Finally. That tinge of purpose flared inside me. I knew I was on the right path.

Once Ford was stable, spent time in rehab and kicked his addiction, he found his solace in the kitchen. This man can cook. Only one big downfall to having him here all the time now, Ford thought the place as prime hunting grounds for finding willing ladies. Being that he worked for me in the kitchen he was not allowed to antagonize my patrons.

Do you think I could tame Ford's Southern charm?

Hell no.

That man is back and forth between two women who travel to town for their work, I think both of them might even be married. The bastard is going to end up in a sticky situation if their husbands find out.

It's none of my business what he does as long as it's not popping pills.

'The hens can't get enough of this cock,' is his motto and he takes pride in never wanting to settle down again.

Shark started his own security firm in Virginia Beach, hiring only retired military and police officers as his elite staff. The wounds he incurred were fragment blasts from both strikes; his left side taking on a substantial peppering of shrapnel and he came at losing an eye. He says the chicks dig his battle scars, earning him pussy anytime he turns around.

Each one of us thrived on maintaining our normalcy anyway we could. The three of us had our vices and were always on the go. It was the only way to keep the demons caged in our mind, the thoughts of that day with it.

Shutting everyone out and locking myself away in the sanctity of my office, my safe place, was necessary to do until I got over whatever plagued my dismal thoughts.

My sister stopped by the bar one morning, finding me stuffed away in my office where I usually resided.

I was in a funk, we all had days like that, but sometimes my days turned to weeks and before you knew it a month would pass. I would beat myself down, bury myself in work and the bar, not visiting my family or friends. Hell, I barely made it back to my house to sleep most nights; the well-worn loveseat is probably why my shoulder and back feel like flames are searing the inside.

I just needed to be left alone to go through whatever was eating at me.

This day though, was the day my life changed once again.

“The sun is shining; you need to get out of this office.” Emma placed a hand on her hip and a determined scowl etched her features.

Shit, I let my beard grow out again. At least it wasn't at the length she could yank at it yet, so I'm safe there.

I groaned, “Why? I have so much paperwork-

“Fuck that. Get your ass out of that chair- or I will have Ford do it for you.” My sister commands, making my lips twitch.

I'll have you know my sister is not one to swear, so she must be pretty pissed off about something.

Ford walked into the room and gave me that knowing crack of his knuckles, telling me he isn't messing around either.

Maybe it's best I do as she says.

My hands come up in surrender, “Fine.” I stand and watch the two of them smirk at one another then give each other high-fives. “Where are you taking me?” I ask, rubbing the sleep from my eyes, not remembering the last good night sleep I had. Two weeks? Three?

Fuck my shoulder hurt. I needed to get back to the gym; that seemed better than any physical therapy appointment. The bar always has some crisis, call-in, or breakdown needing my attention.

I needed to get my shit together.

“You'll see.” This statement said in that tone of hers can mean anything.

I should be worried.



After making a pit stop at our friend's bookstore café for a well-needed sandwich, amazing cup of coffee, and of course so Emma could snag the latest romance novel she has been dying to get her hands on, we ended up at the last place I'd expect to be.

"Why the hell are we here? I thought your condo didn't allow dogs?" I ask as we pull into the parking lot of our local animal shelter.

The new condo her and Wyatt purchased after marrying had a strict policy with the HOA. Is she trying to get reprimanded right after buying the place?

She waves her hand, "we found out we can have small dogs under twenty pounds." She opens her door and steps out of her sedan, "and you're going to help me pick one."

She slams her door signaling the conversation is over.

I let my head fall back onto the head rest. I close my eyes and take in a few deep breaths knowing I have too much shit going on at *Harbors Edge* to help my sister pick out a fricken puppy.

Damn sisters anyway. I'm staying in the car. All that barking will be enough to drive me nuts.

I'm slightly startled when a heavy knuckle rap sounds on the passenger window. I turn my head and open my eyes to see Emma, hands on her hips, a scowl thrown my way. She resembles mom so much when she does *that* look. Her finger points at me, then to the building.

"Get your ass out of my car."

My sister caught the twitch of my lips and I sense she's ready to brawl. Best do as she says, I'm not in the mood to bicker.

Once inside, I immediately let out a groan at all the barking. I'd rather deal with my drill Sergeant than a yapping rat-looking dog any day. I really didn't have time for this, my bar could be burning down right now, and she wants me to help her look for a damn dog?

Fucking hell.

“Just look around, I’ll be over here.”

I rolled my eyes as she sauntered off. Stuffing my hands in my pockets, I walked down the fenced in areas, finding I was trapped here with these annoying things. Emma insisted she drive; this was her plan all along, to make sure I couldn’t get back right away. I’m stuck here until she is ready to go. Maybe I’ll hang at the picnic table outside, tell her the sound was too much. Would’ve be a lie.

The minutes ticked past; each one a reminder of what Ford could be doing to my bar. *‘Free shots’*, and *‘Dance for me up here on the bar’* kept ringing in my head.

He knows better than to test me.

Here at the shelter the staff and volunteers seemed helpful, but I didn’t want any part in owning a dog.

I have no time for a dog, they are too much work. My bar comes first, always will.

Then wouldn’t you know the damndest thing happened as I walked down one pathway. This mid-sized copper colored Pitbull looked at me, I looked at him, he jumped onto the metal fence then let out a little howl, not a bark, just a happy little growly howl.

“This is Hank, he is about a year old, isn’t a big barker, and we’re working on his jumping habit. You wanna see him?” The volunteer who happened to be following me around asked.

When I didn’t say anything, she didn’t wait, she released the lock and had a leash ready to go.

We were led outside to the yard where Hank seemed to have quite a bit of energy as he chased the ball I threw. Over and over, not stopping for anyone or even other dogs, his attention dead set on having fun.

At last, over an hour of nonstop fetch play, the pup came over, panting hard, ready for a drink.

I didn't care about the slobber as I knelt face to face with him, stroked his ears, and scratched him under his chin. He licked my face and whimpered excitedly.

Was that me laughing? I forgot what it sounded like.

"Looks like someone has a new best friend." My sister says from behind me, giggling as she walked towards us. Hank caught sight of her beside me, excited at the newcomer. When it looked like he was about to jump on her I pointed and gave him a stern, '*Down.*'

He obeyed no problem at all.

I gave another command for him to '*Sit.*' Again, he followed my order. *Just the same as a Marine would...*

"Wow. That's amazing." The volunteer gaped.

"What is?" I ask, confused. Hank is a dog who clearly can take an order, it's easier than training a Marine.

Emma leaned forward to give the dog a little love. I watched him eat it right up, rolling onto his back and asking for her to rub his belly.

"Hank has been here a few months now and hasn't warmed up to anyone as much as he has you. No one can get him to do what you just did. He's quite stubborn." The volunteer pointed to the dog, "you two work well together."

"You should get him Zander; Blake would help you with him, seeing as how mom and dad will never get one." Emma paused to baby talk Hank, cooing over how handsome he is.

My youngest brother Blake, fourteen, has asked for a dog ever since he was in diapers. It was one of the kid's first words.

Speaking of Blake, I need to talk to him about several projects I have in mind for the bar. The kid is a whiz with graphics.

Now, back to my sister. I gave her a look and crossed my arms and cleared my throat, "I thought we were here to find *you* a dog, not me."

That little minx had this planned all along.

She let out her very telling, ‘*I’ve been caught*’ giggle as we stand, “just think about it. You two would be good together.”

At first, I thought the patient, doctor confidentiality agreement with my therapist was thrown out the window, then I remembered Emma worked in a pediatric office. She of all people would know what a doctor would recommend for a person with high anxiety, someone with seizures, or in my case, a person diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – raised to the enth degree.

Wouldn’t you know it, Hank came home with me a week later...

One thing about my pigheaded pup; he needed training and I needed guidance. What ultimately broke the camel’s back on my decision ended up being a huge mess we were cleaning for the next month.

Coming home after a long day at the bar, the place pitch black and no dog in sight. Something had to be up. I was running late today, and Ford went to blow off steam at the gym after work.

I quickly found out how much my pup loves shenanigans.

All I wanted to do when I came home was relax for a bit on the couch and watch Houston get their ass kicked by Buffalo, preferably with a beer or two. No liquor for this guy; gotta maintain the good boy owner image.

Unbeknownst to me, Blake went off to a weekend camp and Gavin, a senior in high school, had a date. That left Hank home alone.

Key word. *Alone*.

Oh God, the fluff was everywhere...

As soon as I walked inside, I knew something was fishy. Hank popped over and greeted me as I flipped on the

light, discovering white cottony stuff strewn about my entire living room, up the stairs, and throughout the whole house.

A winter wonderland of stuffing.

I wanted to be mad, I really did. But Hank's hidden sentiment made it difficult to really touch on that feeling.

My pup obliterated the couch I'd planned to lounge on. There wasn't an ounce of stuffing left, only springs and wooden framing. This piece was what remained of my ex-fiancée, something I planned on being rid of soon anyway, I mean, I cringed every time I'd sit on it thanks to Shark and his orgy...

That's a story for another time. *shudders*

My first thought was doing a total update of the living room. *Bachelor pad, here we come!* Then my sister stopped by after I sent her a picture of what her fur nephew did, and the plan went out the window.

Can't I get whatever the hell I want? It's my house after all.

Men want a massive flat screen television, beer in the fridge, and enough seating for the guys when they visit. Maybe a recliner to fall asleep in from time to time. However, Emma was having none of it. She wanted to make sure it held a *women's touch* in case I brought a lady friend over to play.

Pfff. Women. Who needs 'em?

I'll be damned if I'm ever settling down. The bachelor life is far less complicated.

CHAPTER 4 - ALEXANDER

“Life without experience and sufferings is not life.” –
Socrates

April 2017 – Present Day

You know I have it bad when Jack Johnson’s *Better Together* plays on repeat inside my mind each time I see or even think of her.

This so-called bachelor life I wanted for myself flew out the window the second I laid eyes on her. Like a magnet, we are joining together in an unbreakable connection, never wanting to be parted again.

Ever since she played her guitar and sang this song to me, for us, all I can think about is how this life is far greater because of her.

I feel more complete than I have ever been.

We *are* better together, and my hope is that it will be filled with more of her sweet talents and joy.

My siren calls to me.

She’s radiant, my beacon of sunshine amidst the thunderous clouds threatening to break free. The waves in my sea are churning, her voice calming them to sleep. The sound she emits is music to my soul and I never want it to end.

This woman deserves so much more than I can give her, in yet, here she is, still with me, why, I will never know.

Her past has been hidden for so long; she has battled her monster every day, still with a smile as she fights.

Can I ever be as strong as she?

With her by my side, I feel we both can take on the world.

For when she is strong, so am I.

I leaned my body against the outdoor dining post to take in the family and friends enjoying our annual Dyngus day celebrations. Buffalo gives Polish pride a whole new meaning and offers us Pollocks a reason to get together. We live for Dyngus day; you better bet your *dupa* (ass) this family does it right. Perogies, kraut, and Krupnik included.

The natural sense of this moment is how life was before going off to Basic.

If I do not speak, I can live in the silent memory just a bit longer.

My gaze wanders the backyard filled with people, searching for the one person who has centered me these past weeks, more than I have felt in a long time.

She has me writing poetry again, laughing more, and taking time out of my schedule to be away from the things that sucked the life out of me, my bar included. Not to mention, it's a magnificent sight watching her toss bottles with ease. My clumsy ass would smash a ton of inventory and probably knock out a customer.

Liliana Hayes crashed into my life kicking and screaming, ready and raging for a fight. I knew the moment I laid eyes on her she'd be my kind of mystery I'd want to solve.

Instinct drove me in her direction, temptation had me wanting to know more, desire stirred in every cell of my being at just one single glance of her arresting beauty.

Taking in my siren, I find the cascade of her dark blonde hair flows ever-so graciously to the curve of her waist; those luscious hips of hers drive me wild as they shimmy to the beat playing somewhere in the background. The entrancing mystical movements beckon me to join in, wrap myself around her and sway along to the beat. I'd press in close, nuzzle her neck, and whisper tendrils of prophesies yet to be enacted.

What a spectacle we'd make in front of everyone here.

It has temptation written all over it.

I can barely contain the flood of lust flowing through my veins – or is it more? We agreed we should take things slow and now I regret making that decision. This euphoric sensation is here to stay.

All because of my siren.

I'm cast under her spell, willing and able to be hers for the taking, and do anything within my power to please her. Some might call that being pussy whipped. I beg to differ. She doesn't call *all* the shots. While her mistress begs her for complete control, Lili herself holds a secret, a submissive side she has only given to me.

I'm honored.

To stand with Lili and battle her monster is a promise I've knowingly generated; I worry if I speak this promise aloud, I will fall back in fear and allow chaos to take hold of the reigns.

Never in a million years did I think it be possible to feel something other than constant anguish or entertain the desire to find purchase in my life now that the military will have me no more.

Lili has me budding with existence again, this shell of a pathetic man is bandaged and rebuilding. She saves me every day from my torment; because of her my demons are weak, frail, and drab, they tremble in their carcel begging for food.

Let them fucking starve.

While I know she may never entirely recover from her traumatic past, not that I expect her to, I at least want her to find some sort of solace, my hope is that it's with me.

The one thing most clear to me is how I will always be there for her through her rise and falls, through her good dreams and her nightmares, most of all, I'm the one who will *love* her unconditionally.

Love. There is no denying I have feelings for her.

Can I call it love quite yet? Is it too soon?

Again, if I say anything, she will not feel the same; she will run. Then what would I do? I'd never be allowed to bask in her artistic light, or gaze upon her immense beauty. The thought frightens me.

A rattling of the bars inside my mind sounds, the demons flinching awake, sensing my unease.

Best not to think that way.

Across the yard I find Lili, a warm smile lighting her lips and her head thrown back in laughter at something my sister went on about. Four children weaved in and out of the group of adults, chasing one other, lighting an even brighter smile from Lili as she watched.

The littlest one, all of three or so, tripped on someone's shoe and started to cry. She placed the little girl in her arms, dusted off her dirty knee and soiled hands, then tickled her belly until the toddler's cries turned to raging giggles. Ready to get back with her friends, she thanked Lili and ran after the older boys, Hank bouncing around with them.

Lili's beauty is on a scale much deeper than what most see on the outside; she has a deep love for everyone and everything around her, even with her monster lurking within the shadows, Lili is powerful.

Donating her time, her paintings, plus so much of her money and energy on her children's foundation and other organizations in need, this woman is amazing. She radiates passion and grace with everything she sets her mind to.

It does not matter to me the size of her bank account or the clothing she wears.

Although, those boots and that skirt of hers had me wanting to take her in my office and have my way with her. I'm going to need another session very soon with her mistress, and that outfit.

Enraptured doesn't begin to describe how bad I have it.

My thoughts wander to the previous day when she invited me to Easter at her grandma Claire's. It was in that

moment I saw a side to her that solidified my rising feelings and extinguished the lingering tendrils of self-doubt.

Meeting her family and seeing how similar they are to my own, it gave me a sense of calm. They welcomed me in just like I was part of the family. Not once did I want to run.

Okay, maybe in the beginning, but we were kept busy enough with the children to send my nerves on a hike.

Remembering how relaxed she looked with her baby niece placed on her hip brought out my smile here and now for all to see.

For a brief moment I had a thought of her holding *our* child, chasing *our* daughter around the yard, kissing her boo-boo's, dressing her in frilly attire, finger paintings and pictures lining the walls and refrigerator. She'd be an artist just like her mom.

You're going to scare Lili off if you mention thoughts such as those. Keep it locked away, man.

I wasn't horrified at the prospect, I welcomed it. For the first time in my life, the thought of having kids of my own, watch as Lili's body swells with our child, taking late night drives to grab her favorite ice cream, and rubbing her feet after a long exhausting day; it felt purposeful, more than just a fantasy. A chance at a new life, a new destiny.

Is it odd to have these thoughts so soon? Is it all a ruse? My smile says otherwise.

Nothing but wishful thinking, Zander.

"I love seeing that look on you." A small voice broke me from my trance.

Pulling my gaze away from Lili I peer down to the tiny woman at my side. Mom, dressed in her red Dyngus day hoodie and dark jeans, she stands there with a glittering smile and a knowing twinkle in her eye.

"What look is that?" I ask her, already knowing her answer.

I want to hear her version.

This woman, all four-foot-eleven of her may be tiny but don't think that stops her. She's an ambitious person; always helping one person or another in our community, works at the city's food pantry and organizes many of the farm markets, is active at her church, and she even crochets little hats for the newborn babies at the hospital.

Mom enjoys keeping busy and if one of her children mentioned they were *bored*, you bet your ass she conjured a task with our name on it.

We learned quick to never utter *that* word when around her.

I take one last sip of my pop then toss the can in the bin nearby.

"It's the same look your father gives me every day. You're smitten." Mom pats my forearm, "She's good for you, and vice versa." Her tone conveys her approval, "I have a good feeling about this one."

My smile turns sheepish, a schoolboy caught sneaking a peek at something he shouldn't but loving it all the same.

"It's too soon for that kind of talk." My heart screams otherwise as I wrap my arm around her and draw her in, a move I have not done willingly since I left for Basic over ten years ago.

"Don't be so sure," she tilts her head to catch my eye, "I've noticed Lili stealing fanciful glances when you're not looking. *A mother knows*. You are the happiest I've seen in a while." Her surprise at my affection doesn't go unnoticed as she relaxes and wraps an arm around my waist.

You can thank the Military for my emotionless state; they want their soldiers cold, hard, and focused. You are trained for a specific mission; defeat the enemy, protect your country. No time to be sappy. It's all I knew. The United States Government owns your ass; better do as they say, and things will go smoothly... *most of the time*.

This woman has been through so much worry because of me. It's time she know her eldest son will be alright now

that Lili be by his side.

I catch the happy tears in her eyes. Leaning down, I place a kiss to her hair, making her pull back and look up at me.

“What was that for?” She asked awestruck.

“What? I can’t do that anymore?” I say dumbly and tighten my hold on her. She has the look she is about to burst into tears. “Awe, don’t cry mom.”

Fucking hell. I’m messing this up. It’s supposed to be a joyous day, not one filled with crying.

She sniffs then laughs lightly, “they are happy tears.” She swipes one that escaped, “it is good to see my boy finally coming home. After all these years, I’m getting my son back.”

“I was only gone for a time. I’m here now. I’m not going anywhere.” I confirm to her and rub her arm as if to warm her.

My dog takes that moment to prance over, his mouth yet again covered in dirt, tongue hanging out, and dare I say, a knowing glimmer of satisfaction in his eyes.

Sigh “Hank, what is grandma going to do with you?” Mom laughs then pats his head.

Hank is quick to take off running when the group of children call for him to come and play. He loves fetch and will no doubt be one happy tired pup later given all the attention he’s had today.

“I’m pretty sure I owe you a trip to the greenhouse for more flowers.” I give her a sheepish grin and wait for her scowl.

“That and you’re going help me plant them mister. After all, your dog made the mess.” The crease in her brow softens as she relents, “but you know I love him to pieces.”

Should I tell her Hank’s shenanigans are nine times out of ten only ever done at her house? I think I’ll keep that one a secret. She’d rescind her agreement for Hank to stay tonight, and any other night thereafter.

“You pick the day and I’ll be over, mom.” She’s been pestering me about my landscaping, best not get on her bad side. There will be hell to pay. I better get this in my calendar as well.

“What are you two jabbering on about over here?” My sister butts in the conversation at the right time.

I could sense Lili before words were spoken. My body knew her. The scent of soft lavender petals blew in on a light breeze, enveloping me and sending a forethought through my mind; the taste of her lips still lingered on mine from our stolen random kiss on the front porch earlier.

Mercy woman.

Lili didn’t know it yet, but she owned me.

“Rena, Scott and his family are heading out.” Dad calls out, mom giving me a side hug before releasing her hold.

“Be right there dear.” Mom responds then turns to her children, “I’m off to mingle. *Behave you three.*” Mom sent me a knowing glance as she backed away, quickly finding purchase at my dad’s side.

My arms come around Lili’s waist, and I breathe in her intoxicating scent. The slight flush to her face makes me wonder if her thoughts are mirroring my own, or if it’s from all the sun she received today. Either way, I love that look on her, more so, I love her wearing my hoodie.

“I’m cold and it’s getting late,” my sister mentions, a little annoyed, “Wyatt and I are about to take off. Unlike you, some of us have to work in the morning.”

Wyatt mimics my stance behind his wife, wrapping his arms around her possessively. I send him a tilt of my chin in greeting, one he silently returns.

“You ready to head out then?” I ask Lili, her eyes meeting mine and I notice the storm that is usually there is chased away, all that is left is a deep-sea pulling me in. Might I drown in their depths? It’s possible. I’d welcome it.

“Let’s give our goodbyes,” her voice lowers as she eyes me cheekily, that Scottish flare telling me she’s relaxed being here, “the mistress has a plan she’s dying to enact.” Her lips tilt in a grin.

Is she reading my mind?

“I like the sound of that.”

Needless to say, we gave a quick shout goodbye to everyone and raced out of there.

We have somewhere *very* important to be.

The second the door to my house slams behind me Lili is tugging at my shirt as we make our way up the stairs to my bedroom, a littering of clothing left in our wake.

So much for taking things slow. I don’t have the power in me to deny her what she is wanting, and boy do I sense her mistress ready to claim what belongs to her.

Hell to the fucking yes.

“Shall we play a game?” She teases, moonlight dancing on her skin as she stands naked at the foot of the bed, “tonight will ye be a good lad, or bad one?” That tilt of her chin and quirk of her lips has me ready to bow at her feet.

I am not worthy of this Goddess.

“What if I don’t want to be a good boy?” I taunt, moving in, tilting her chin up and capturing her lips, a kiss she welcomes, until I’m spun around and shoved, my back hitting the mattress with a bounce.

Tsking “Ah, ah, dear boy, that was a trick question.” Her playful manner is exactly what I was hoping for, “Ye should always want to be a good boy fer me.”

“I’ll be your good boy, *until I’m not*,” I smirk, prompting a sinful gleam in her eyes, “will you accept that? Or should I expect to have me a *naughty girl* tonight?”

Lili returns my smirk two-fold, “just you wait, dear boy,” she drapes herself along my body and whispers seductively, “you might see both sides of me tonight.”

“Outstanding.” I growl. That one adjective can hold meaning to us Marines, Ford will tell you, it used to be my favorite word.

Maybe it’s time I bring it back.

Her lips find mine the same time she grips my cock, stroking and teasing me into a fucking frenzy. I rocked my hips, my hands finding purchase along her body as I groan into her mouth. Her hum of approval through our kiss heats my blood, but don’t expect me to let her have all the fun. I take one taught nipple between my fingers, rolling and pinching the tight bud, coaxing a shutter from her.

Whisper “Ye don’t play fair.”

There is a slyness to my tone, “You never mentioned any rules,” I grab a handful of that ripe peach and squeeze.

Fuck, how I want to bite it, mark it so no other person can claim her as theirs.

“God, yes.” The moan that escaped her then has me hard and aching.

Mercy woman. I need to take control of this before we get any further, “I have one rule for tonight.”

Her hand moves leisurely as she returns a wicked taunt, “enlighten me oh, wise one.”

My siren is ready for play.

My fingers toy with her nipple while the other kneads the soft flesh of her ass making her writhe, only further egging me on to tempt her, see how far she will let me go. She let out a protest, silently saying I’d better get on with it.

Yes mistress.

Shifting my body up the bed I pull her with me then state my command the second my head hits the pillow, “I’m going to tongue fuck you until you’re coming all over my face.”

“I beg yer pardon?” She asks whimpering, then just as quick, she sobers, “my thighs are too thick, they will smother

ye-

“Your thighs are so damn perfect,” I trail my fingertips along the back of one making her wriggle, “and if I’m suffocated, I know I’m doing it right and I’ll die one happy man.” I give her a smirk that she tries kissing away.

“Don’t be daft,” she mocks and pulls at my lower lip with her teeth. The moonlight gives away the pink in her cheeks.

Has my mistress never sat on a man’s face?

Ooh, we will remedy that right the fuck now.

“What will it be, mistress? Are you going to be a *good girl?*”

Lili worries her lip, contemplating giving herself to me, then I catch the mischief within. She shifts her body so she’s straddling my hips then leans in close to my ear to whisper her sweet seduction, “define, *good girl.*”

“Let’s just say, *good girl’s* get rewarded.”

Lili stares into my eyes, that frisky gleam of hers has me excited, **teasing** “Ohh – I like the sound of that.”

“Then you better get your ass up here so I can show you how much of a good boy I can be.” She complies, settling the heart of her right where I want it. **whispers** “*God damn, so fucking gorgeous.*” I kiss a path along her thigh, my beard stubble sending shivers of anticipation coursing through her.

Lili sways her hips above me, her wickedness giving away her intentions, “play your cards right and a good boy might have a treat.”

Holy hell. A skitter of lust shivers down my spine straight to my throbbing cock.

There she is my seductress. Let the games begin.

I release a zealous growl, my mouth watering with impatience as I grasp her hips and pull her weight down on me, more than ready to dive into my desert.

So much better than tiramisu.



A twittering of birds outside filters into the otherwise silent bedroom. Shifting to my side, ready to wrap an arm around the woman who kept me up far too long the night before, I instead find emptiness. Moving a hand around I discover the other side of the bed vacant and sheets cold. Peeking a cautious eye to face the impending sunlight streaming through the open curtains, I can confirm now she is not here.

I thought I'd wore her out, Lord knows she did me in.

Lili found out just how fun sitting on a man's face can be. *God damn*, the memory of her screaming as my tongue went to work on her folds ramps up my need to find her right the fuck now. We need another go-around before Shark and Ford come storming in and ruin our day.

Wait a damn second, this is my house, those nitwits can fuck right off, pleasuring my woman is more important.

Whatever they have planned for today, they're going to be shit out of luck and have to do it without me. Lili and I have our own adventures we're going to travel, *not that we're going far*.

My siren has sparked life into my philosophies, my lyrical mind screams I have to write this down, right now. No waiting. That is what she does to me. Never has a muse been so forceful, so strong or demanding. Never does she speak a word, she doesn't have to.

Yet another way I recognize Lili is meant to be mine.

There is no messing this one up, the final puzzle pieces came together, ready to come to life in script.

Grabbing my pen and notebook from the oak dresser beside the bed, I sit, open to a fresh page, and reach into my

mind, ready to open myself to the sensations of my muse in the other room.

*Altruistic love
Is the concept even real?
So long without luck
Now the sight of you
Fills me with foreign senses
Heartbeat intensifies
Hands tingle and sweat
Not a heart attack, I'm sure
It's you, only you
Thoughts of you in day
Holding your body at night
Uniting passions
Syncing to the beat
Gasping, begging, pleading, more
I give you it all*

My State of mind - Alexander (5 stanza Haiku)

To my sweet Lili, I give this to you the day I know you feel the same way I do. Two souls together as one.

Sliding into a pair of running shorts and nothing else, I slip the notebook in my sock drawer then head downstairs to the living room finding that too, unoccupied. Our clothing still strewn about the staircase and has my mind racing. Visions of how fast we stripped and teased each other, I was proud of myself for not taking her right there on the wooden treads. *Now there's a thought if there ever was one.*

This has turned out to be one of the best weekends I've ever had. It's about to get even better. I believe in it.

I need more tiramisu, but first, to find my siren. Wherever could she be?

The smell of coffee wafts through the air, encouraging me to snag a cup and begin cooking breakfast for my woman. Yes, Lili is *my* woman; I told her she's mine right before I sent her over the edge with a playful bite. Don't worry, I was sure to lick her first.

It's official, I licked her, she's mine now.

As much as my poetic heart wants to tell her I love her, the moment isn't there quite yet. *It will be soon though.*

Lili will be reading that poem in no time.

As I suspected, Lili sits at the little table in the kitchen, head down, coffee cup set aside and half gone, her gaze intent on something she's reading.

"Good morning beautiful." I beam, striding to her and landing a kiss to her temple.

Immediately I sense something is off.

Lili is stone, her gaze downcast as she reads pages from a manila file strewn across the table, a file much like that of Shark's intel. I catch the name on the tab of the folder; *'Hayes, Liliana J.'*

Oh, shit. Zander, what the fuck did you do?

Dismay I told Shark to cancel the search on Lili, to not dig into this. Why did he disobey an order? Why the hell is it sitting out, right there for anyone to find?

What the fuck, what the actual FUCK!

I am going to kill him!

I stand frozen, unsure what to do or say, unsure how to comfort her, and to be honest, I'm a bit curious as to what lay within the pages of the file.

This isn't happening, it's not real.

Maniacal laughter *Oh, but it is. You fucked all this up for yourself. Now you must pay the price by losing Lili*

forever.

My demons taunt and rattle their barred enclosure, excited and ready to break through the locks, their hunger palpable.

That pale tear-streaked face sends shivers throughout my body, not the good ones either. Lili's grip tightens on a handful of papers as she stands, then in one swift motion, her scowl strikes me down as she slams the papers on the table and glaring at me like I've never seen before. Rage poured off her in tidal waves, the storm she's emitting grows by the second, lighting streaks across her tear-filled eyes.

The menacing laughter escalates in my mind; demons waking from their slumber, hungry for a fucking feast.

Thick Scottish "Ye better start explaining, what the bloody hell this is." She takes a beat waiting for my answer, her posture tall and intimidating, chin raised, tears escaping as she builds her defenses.

I don't have an answer she'd believe. I did it for her.

"I TRUSTED YE!"

Small "Lili – I can explain." I take a few steps away, my heart not able to withstand the hurricane force winds she's producing.

The slamming of my front door sounds as Shark gives his usual rhetorical greeting, Ford coming in behind him.

There is a perception that door is the door to Lili's heart, our future. She's slammed it closed and I know she's never going to open it for me ever again. In the span of a few minutes, I've lost everything we built together.

There is no way I can fix this. Not one.

Inside my mind, the links break on the chain wrapped around the cage, the lock disintegrates. The door is now open.

Welcome home, Zander. We've been waiting for you.

"Honey, I'm home!" Shark singsongs as he and Ford laugh, making their way to the shitshow happening right now.

**Enraged* Fuck!*

Voices near, as my grip tightens on the door frame, my muscles beginning to burn.

I glance her attire; short shorts and a string top do nothing to cover her, or her secrets. There isn't a scrap of clothing nearby I can lend her, and I'm afraid if I move, she's going to bolt, and my men will let her leave. She noticed me regarding her and tried tugging at her shorts with little benefit.

"Mornin' Corporal!" Shark's hand clasped my shoulder, ruining this more than private moment.

I let out a growl of fury and sent him a death glare before placing my eyes back to hers. My grip on the molding slackened as I brought a hand to rub at my forehead, feeling a sudden headache brewing.

"Boss. Why are you not upstairs with that pretty little thang? I saw the clothes as we came in, seems you two had some fun-", Ford's words trail off as the tension in the room hits him.

"Did ye know about this?! Do they know, too?" Lili bites out and slashes a hand to point at my men. The file on the table is still open and spilling its contents for all to witness.

Flamed anger lights her cheeks, the look of a formidable warrior ready to strike. She shoves her hair in a messy bun atop her head so it's out of her face. The movement has her shirt lifting and showing everyone a glimpse of her tattoo.

Maybe it's dark enough my men didn't catch the scars.

I growled, actually growled at that thought of my men seeing Lili's vulnerability, her secrets she hides from everyone.

**Inner demons* You can't protect her, look at yourself. So very weak. Give in Zander. We will make this go away.*

Her monster was a bastard who took advantage of a young innocent girl, marked her body, tried making Lili his

forever. She endured pain no person should have to ever go through.

I've now added to that pain.

What the fuck. I'm just as bad as her monster.

**Demons tease* She's never forgiving you now, it's time you let us out to play.*

Do I have enough strength to hold this cage closed alone? The answer is no. The demons are feeding from my rage; they grow stronger while I weaken. I'm not strong enough. I can't do it alone.

"Oh – *shit.*" Shark mumbles behind me, "I didn't get here quick enough."

"I dinnae want to hear it." She's quick to interrupt Shark's explanation, "Why did ye do this, Zander?" There is a hurricane brewing in those eyes, category five and nowhere to hide.

I'm not surviving this.

"Whoa. It's not what it looks like." Shark steps between the two of us, his hands out to her as if he is trying to tame a tiger.

"Isn't it?!" She shifts on her feet gearing up for a fight, "Was this yer game all along? Get me to open up so ye could take advantage?"

"Hell no, that isn't what I do." Shark starts in.

Lili takes two steps deeper into the kitchen, fearful of my men. The only person she should fear in this moment is me, or part of me at least.

The one tactic Shark has specialized in is keeping civilians calm while we searched towns and villages for leads. Often enough, these women and children were tossed around, molested, and raped by men in their communities; they would offer us any information they knew if we would secure their refuge. We couldn't help them all. Shark had a leniency to him that I would sometimes lack and start to show my animosity, not for them, but for their men.

Two vastly different cultures. Other worldly.

“Please understand this is all on me. Zander had nothing to do with this.” Shark lies on my behalf.

I was the one who poked the bear and started this mess.

“Did I miss somethin’ here?” Ford asks, his question going unanswered as he stands beside me with his arms crossed, his bulky body taking up the rest of the walkway, foiling any exit strategy Lili may have planned for herself.

Whatever you do Ford, don't move.

At least I could try to talk to her this way, and I pray she doesn't shut down. I just don't want her to leave without knowing the full story.

Hell, I need the full story.

Shark better start explaining why he defied my direct order and instead kept digging. He would've done this only if he found something worthwhile. The thought makes me sick.

It's all mind games now as the banging on the door intensifies inside my mind.

Show no weakness, and don't give up the fight. Two mottos of a Marine. Well, this Marine died in Afghanistan. He's never coming back. Those sayings are null and void.

All business now, Shark exhales when Lili shifts on her feet, face flaming with kept secrets and a mean to murder.

“Corporal has my back; we protect our own. You mean a lot to him, which lead me to protect you, too.” Lili opens her mouth to start her rampage, but Shark stops her. “Hear me out,” he held up a finger, “Give me a few minutes to explain why I did this. God knows Corporal is behind me ready to rip me a new one.”

Ford chuckles beside me not grasping the intensity of it all, “Ha, you got that right Shark. Your ass better be ready to rumble.” He groans and stretches.

I get Ford trying to lighten the mood, but it's only pissing me off more. He and Shark are on my shit list.

“I’m gonna to need coffee before I can process whatever the hell is goin’ on right now, kay?” He pushes past us, grabs a cup, and pours himself some of the dark liquid, sipping it as if there isn’t a huge crisis going down right now.

My thoughts are chaotic as I try to grasp the reasoning behind this mess. Could Shark really be onto something? What else did he find in her history that made him want to involve the team? And why did he leave the *fucking* folder out for anyone to stumble upon?

I’m a hairs breath away from doing something I’ll regret later.

**Inner demons* Do it! Let your rage free! We want free, Zander!*

They’re banging and pushing on the door, and I don’t know how much more I can take.

Please, help me.

Focus on Lili, she needs you. The thought of her sends my demons stumbling back a step.

Lili’s face is ashen against the dull manmade lighting, her body trembles as she tries maintaining her façade. Whatever is in that folder cannot be good. It takes all my willpower to hold back from wrapping her in my arms. She wouldn’t accept me holding her right now anyway.

Why couldn’t I have been the one to find the damn folder, be the one to confront Shark at his stupidity.

I want to reassure her things will be alright.

They will be, right?

“Let’s talk.” Shark motions to the folder on the table. “Give me five minutes, after that you can take your anger out on me.”

Ford let out an amused chuckle, “Is that all the time it takes now, Shark? You used to have more stamina than that. You’re gettin’ soft buddy.” Ford takes a loud sips of his coffee.

Shark is quick to stand toe to toe with Ford, and I question if I'm going to be the first one to throw a punch this morning.

“Lili is in danger, and you are trying to make sexual innuendos? Not the time fuck face.” Shark’s tone is full of indignation as he glares at our brother.

The sensation of being doused in ice water suffocates me.

Lili stiffens in the same moment. Ford’s face goes ashen, and he swallows hard. He knows he fucked up.

“Sorry. I’m – uh, I think I’m still a bit drunk.” Ford weighs a petty excuse as he scrubs at his face.

I need to know right the fuck now what is going on. I can’t lend my aide if I do not know what we are facing. Protector mode clicks into place as my mind plays out potential scenarios, all negative ones as I try and keep the demons at bay but their relentless.

Lili tied to a bed, tortured; Lili taken over and over against her will; Lili told to keep quiet; Lili being burned; Lili scared and crying out, begging for someone to save her.

FUCK!

The demons scratch and draw blood now, wanting free.

**Eagar* Let us out! Let us out! We want to play!*

The door, I can’t hold the door much longer, their claws are in too deep.

Her eyes lock with mine, that bottom lip of hers quivering, then her mask falls into place. *Damn it*, I’m too late. She is shutting down. I knew then I lost her.

I can’t fix this. She’s never going to forgive me.

**Demons spit* Never will you be good enough Zander. She doesn’t want someone as pathetic as you. You’re nothing but a sorry piece of work.*

I’m screaming inside, the demons gaining strength. I’m so fucking tired. I *can’t* do this anymore.

Grady's words won't help me now, his notion of *Irish* '*no such thing as can't*' is nothing but a *fucking* lie.

It's all over. I've lost. My sanity is next.

Here I am, I've done nothing to protect my siren, and have been oblivious to what secrets she has kept, how deep they truly go.

How has Lili kept herself so fucking strong? I would crumble, hell, it's happening right before my eyes.

I want to take this all back. I'll give her anything she desires, anything at all. I can't do this without her.

*Please Lili. *Broken whisper* I need you.*

CHAPTER 5 - LILI

“I love to see a young girl go out and grab the world by the lapels. Life’s a bitch. You’ve got to go out and kick ass.” –
Maya Angelou

Insight to our future is a fickle thing, but to dig into the past, dredge up the slew of pain, regret, and anguish.

It’s all too much to bear.

Why now?

Why is my tormenter doing this? What does he want? What is his endgame? He has taken so much from me already, *why now?*

I recall a time I questioned Isaac, something I regretted the second it left my lips.

**Monster* Because you’re mine, little flower. Have you forgotten this? You’re mine forever. No one else will ever have you.*

I crave a Xanax, *give me one*, please, only one, I swear that is all I need to get me through. At least then I’d have a mindless fog of nothingness to hide behind. Alas, I have not a one with me. My thumb and forefinger tap in a constant rhythm of two and I can’t stop.

Stress is a frequent companion.

Shark mentioned there is one thing my stepfather had overlooked, or so it seemed. It’s the one thing no one would have expected someone to dig for and possibly use against me. The one thing that could make me a laughingstock. No one will want to collaborate with me. My art career would be forever tarnished.

I can’t even voice it. It’s right there, mocking me from within the pages.

Here I sit on the sofa, muscles tense, hands balled into fists as I glare at the three Marines.

I must be strong.

Alexander cannot see the truth uncovered in this file, the one I'm currently sitting on. I'm not moving from this spot, nor am I handing it over to Shark. They have no business learning of my misdeeds and tortured events. I want to be the one who informs Alexander.

Does he deserve it after everything? How much good outweighs the bad?

It's there, hidden within the hospital notes and the therapy sessions; the one thing I know for certain will turn him away, wishing he never knew me. **Anguish* Christ. It's all right there, right down to the disgusting nickname he called me.*

**Monster* Ah, yes, you will always be my little flower.*

I cannot retain my shudder at the vial ways Isaac announced his ownership over me. Alexander has possessed me, but he doesn't own me, not like my monster. My skin is eternally branded, a mental state teetering on the edge of insanity most days due to this beast.

Here I thought Alexander would one day be the person to take over ownership. What is the likelihood?

We were doing so well these past days too.

These papers will be my ending, our ending.

"Let me get this straight. Your tellin' me this guy is in jail and is keepin' tabs on Lili? How the fuck is that possible?" Ford asked, placing his coffee on the side table next to the chair.

I would love to know the bloody answer to that.

Shark has not an ounce of party in him now. This man is lean but not what one would call small. Pair that with a sharp intellect, that captivating sun-kissed skin, and his laid-back behavior, Harrison screams sex appeal with an edge. Yesterday he looked ready to ride waves on a surfboard, not

hunt bad people. *I* found out Shark happened to be in *laid-back* mode yesterday. The second he caught sight of my reaction this morning, he slid into Marine mode.

I'm beginning to see Harrison's true colors come through; he has unfinished business.

I'm intrigued, *heavily raging*, but intrigued all the same.

I have to ask myself; do I think I'm intimidating? *Sometimes, I guess.* I ask this because Shark has not once met my gaze while telling us of his findings. He knows I do not fancy him right now.

Visions of me sparring with Shark, knocking him to the floor while I lean over him, my breathing coming quick, and heart thrumming wildly, asking if he's had enough yet.

This needs to become reality.

"I believe he has eyes and ears within the department he worked for. I do not know their names yet; it may be an old partner or someone to whom he was close. I have not found the reason behind it other than he is keeping tabs. His obsession will only increase as time goes by."

Zander curses under his breath, "Who does this fucker think he is? How is he getting away with this?"

My eyes lock for a brief second with Zander before they fall back to my lap.

If they only knew. Eyes and ears are everywhere.

It's why I've remained silent on social media and interviews.

"It's only speculation, nothing solid yet. I'm flying out tonight to get more details." Shark held out his hand asking for the folder.

I shake my head. Its bad enough Shark has viewed so much of my private life; I'm not wanting anyone else involved. Too many know as it is.

He heaves a sigh and drops his hand, “I have a guy back at my office who I trust with this case. He-

“You brought more people into this!” Zander shouts, grabbing a fist full of Shark’s shirt and slamming him against the wall, a forearm pinning him in place. Shark held his hands up, “I’m going to kick your ass, Harrison!”

That growl was not the Alexander I’ve come to know. He is not himself in this moment.

“*¡Maldita sea! (Goddamnit!)*” Ford shouts his curse as he tries pulling Zander off, “*¡Basta! (Enough)* Alright boss, time to take a chill pill.”

He grips Zander under his arms and around his chest, easily pulling them apart. Shark rubs his neck for a second but otherwise seems fine. This is the first time I have witnessed Alexander lash out at someone; the sight should frighten me, but it doesn’t.

He’s being protective.

“I deserved that.” Shark murmurs.

“You deserve a hell of a lot more.” Zander growls, his breaths coming quick, “*Who* is helping you? So help me, if they say so much as a word about this-

“It’s Brett.” Shark interrupts, the room immediately falling silent. He rubs the back of his head where it slammed against the wall.

“Our Brett?” Ford’s postures relaxes as he releases his hold on Zander, then they both give Shark a quizzical look.

Shark shrugs like it’s no big deal, “who better? Right?”

Who is Brett? He must be someone they trust given their easy demeanor.

Can I trust these men? Do I have a choice in the matter?

“Sarge is workin’ for you now? I thought he was still active.” Ford asked as he grabbed his coffee and took a scalding gulp.

Well that answered one of my questions. Brett is another brother. Great. Another Marine.

“I thought so too, until he stumbled in my office a few months back, asking if I had any openings.” Shark sends Zander a look, “I wouldn’t trust just anyone with this case. No one else knows, you have my word.”

When all eyes turn on me, my heart begins slamming against my chest. I despise being the center of attention, the looks their giving me are a mixture of pity, rage, and worry.

How revolting.

An ocean is between Isaac and I so I’m unconcerned of physical harm, but rumors can spread like wildfire, expanding across the globe before I have a chance to voice my side of the story.

What if my father finds out about all this before I have a chance to tell him myself? What then?

I never wanted to tell him. He is going to be devastated.

I knew then I had no choice but to tell these men my biggest secret, my side of the story that has been locked away for more than a decade.

I just hope they do not look at me differently.

Taking in a deep breath, I grabbed the file from under my bottom and threw it on the table in front of me.

“Seeing that others know. There it is. Take your fill lads because I obviously have no feckin’ say in this.” I throw my hands dramatically.

Stand tall. Do not shut down, not now.

I will not give Isaac the satisfaction of consuming me any longer.

Ye are strong my Lili, show no weakness. Gran’s words of empowerment ring true. Thanks Gran.

No one went for the folder.

“You do have a say in this. We only want you to be safe.” Shark begins, “I am sorry it came out this way without consulting you first, but the situation isn’t something we’ve seen very often, yours is unique to say the least. I wanted to go over things with both of you.”

All three looked at me waiting for my breakdown.

Not happening.

“I need to ring Tamara.” My mobile lay face down on the table next to the file. They all nod.

I bit my lip, naïve at the prospect these men will understand my condition, “I need to know I can trust the three of ye.”

“Darlin’, you’re damn well important to our Corporal here, anyone that’s tryin’ to get to you is going to have to come through me first.” Ford states in a manner of absolution, “I’ll give them a real good lickin’.”

“Same can be said for myself and Sergeant Stark, you’ll meet him soon. His tactics are one of the best when it comes to catching our targets. This asshole doesn’t stand a chance against four United States Marines.”

Fear floods Alexander’s eyes, his mask cracking as he nods his silent agreement.

I’m worried for him; his inner battle is raging behind the covering. This is too much for him, for me. How can we make it if neither of us know how to voice our thoughts?

This is not the time for music or poetry.

I tear my gaze from his and I know what I need to voice next.

Please don’t let them think of me any differently.

I’m still the same Lili, just with a few skeletons buried deep.

“Shark, you obviously have read everything in that file. Even the second to last page?” I cringe, Shark catching it.

“That would be correct.” He said deadpan, his face not giving away his emotions. All business. His fist clench at his sides, his only tell of what he found inside.

Ye can say it, trust these men, they need to know how badly the monster tried to ruin ye.

Closing my eyes and taking a few deep breaths, I open them to find all three staring back waiting for whatever I would say.

I can't keep up the façade anymore, I need out of this.

Strength in numbers.

“Ye must know, at one time this information could all be found by public record. My stepfather Raymond is a well-known lawyer in London, it's where he and my mum met. He ended up being the one to seal away any findings with my name on it after- *Breath* after everything.”

Zander's voice is but a whisper, “You don't have to do this-

“Yes, I do.” I interject, stronger now that I've heard his voice, and determined to get this off my chest. I met his anxious stare, “Isaac can no longer control me. I have to move on from the monster that resides within.”

His jaw ticks at the mention of my monster's name.

“Fuck Corporal, let the woman speak. I wanna know what the hell we're up against.” Ford sat across from me in the chair then gave a tilt of his chin, asking for me to continue.

Breathe, ye can do this.

Yes, I can do this.

“From the start of eleven to just after my fourteenth birthday, Isaac used me as his personal puppet.”

Ford sucks in sharp inhale then a slew of Spanish curse words ensues as he gripped the arms of the chair tighter. I guess I could have worded that a little differently, but it is my perception of how he treated me. Like a marionette tied to strings, unable to do or say anything for myself.

No longer rattled, I continued, feeling the need to get everything out in the open.

“He threatened my Gran, my friend, and anyone I knew. As an officer of the law, I was naive enough to believe he could do so. I couldn’t tell anyone and had to go along with it.” I clear my throat, “I’d never want my actions to cause others harm.”

“Lili.” Zander whispers but I ignore him.

“He took advantage of you, that is good enough for me to get battle ready.” Ford cracks his knuckles one by one, “no one hurts Corporal’s woman and gets away with it.”

I turn my gaze away from This part I knew would be the hardest to get out. I’m embarrassed having to voice it.

“He planned to kidnap me then take me to a place no one would ever find me. In his plans he even went as far as to how many children we’d have together, and where he would begin his new tally on my body.”

I stand and lift my shirt to show the right side of my torso. Through the large colorful peacock adorning my skin lay over one hundred burns, all from Isaac. All eyes fall on the evidence. I despise the attention, but they need to see how disgusting of a man Isaac is.

“What a sick fuck!” Ford shouts as he stands and begins pacing the room, “está muerto! (He is dead)” His second round of Spanish lashings go on.

“No more.” Zander’s snarl snapped like a rabid dog as he blocked the men from viewing my body, tugging my shirt down, then he tried wrapping his arms around me.

I refused his touch.

I wanted nothing more than his touch, to fall apart in his arms, but I couldn’t do that in this moment. It hurt me to see my snubbing cut him deep.

“Please, no more.” Zander pleads, not wanting to see the misery playing in my eyes.

He is sadly mistaken, for it's not misery, it's determination to see this plague finally end. The bandage holding this secret together is manky and not held together well anymore. Time to rip it off.

"I need to say it." My eyes met his, blazing willpower within, "let me speak. There is more I need to say."

There is no holding back now. This bit of information is going to come as a shock.

"Little did anyone know, he had me with child."

"He's a dead man." Zander growls, his hands clenching at his sides.

"You bet your ass I'm helpin'." Ford seconds, "fuckin' vile prick."

Their disdain for my monster sends shivers of awareness through me, lending comfort and encouragement.

There is one last secret that cannot be found in that file nor anywhere else. That secret is never spoken. Zander knows of my surgical scar; however I would always derail the conversation about it. It's not something I want anyone to know about. Maybe in time if Zander and I find we can make things work, then he will be the one I confide in. It would impact him just as much.

"Make your call." Shark cuts through the tension clouding the room.

"Right." I agree.

Zander reluctantly shifts out of the way so I can retrieve my mobile. I tap it to life, and it begins to ring on speaker. My eyes flicked momentarily to the three men who stood sentry, their hard features and crossed arms doing little to set me at ease.

The line connects as Tamara begins ranting without a greeting.

"Well, it's about damn time. I mean really, are you making it a purpose to evade me? You don't answer your

mobile and I hate that you're so far away. Tell me, did your family see him fit? How 'bout your father? Daniel can be-

"Tamara." I try to silence her to no avail.

"What is it? Don't tell me Daniel has his knickers in a twist. That man needs to lighten up-

"Bonsoir Lune. (Goodnight Moon)"

Silence reigns over the line for a few beats. Ford leans in closer to the mobile. The two other men stood, bodies tense and unmoving.

"Merde! (Shit)" came across the line. Tamara knows what this means. It means someone has found my secret.

'Bonsoir Lune' is our code phrase my stepfather, Tamara, and I put in place, so we could mention my situation without others knowing. It happened to be a story my younger sister was obsessed with and took everywhere with her.

She begins speaking in rapid French, something she often did when flustered. *"Qui sait?"* (Who knows?)

"C'est grave." (It's bad) Is all I can conjure to say.

Shark chimes in, his tone is strong and all business, "Tamara this is Shark, I'm a good friend of Zander's. It would be best if we talk in person, not over the phone. I sent files and spoke to Raymond about my concerns. He is expecting to hear from me this afternoon."

"Retour à Londres, Lili (Return to London, Lili)," Tamara demanded as the clacking of keyboard keys sounds in the background, "I'm booking your flight."

My gaze jumps from the mobile in my hands to Zander's stormy depths. *I can't be involved with him, it's too risky.*

He has a business to think about, he doesn't need the drama and all my bullshit. I wouldn't be able to forgive myself for ruining his career.

The need to flee is strong but I know I will not get far before these men find me.

“Whatever you are thinking, don’t.” Zander slides in next to me on the sofa. His arms come around me as he breathes near my ear. His whisper sends a shiver through me as I close my eyes, “we will get through this. You need to trust that my men and I will keep you safe.”

Is he off his trolley? I’m no eejit; trust for him is but a drop in the bucket now. As much as Shark would like to go on about this being his idea, I know better. Zander will push and push until he has answers. He’s done so once already.

Bile rises but I push it back. I need to be strong. The itching for a Xanax is front and center, the comfort, and mind-numbing sensations it lends is what I’m in search of.

**Monster* You’re not getting rid of me that easily little flower. I’ll be seeing you very soon.*

“Alright. I’ll keep you updated.” Shark’s tone snaps me out of the trance.

Silence fills the space now; they’re waiting for my breakdown. Well, here it is, my mind has locked any and all emotions away. I’ve closed myself off from everyone. It’s for the best.

Time to pack, snag a Xanax for the ride, and become numb. Ever-so numb.

Zander’s arms are around me, his grip tightening as he tries to hide his trembling, “I promise, this will all get straightened out. We have you. You are safe.”

His whispers will not sink in. How does he know it will work out? No one can be sure of it.

One thing is certain, I need time away from Zander to clear my head.

An ocean between us might do the trick.



Landing In London by 3 Doors Down kept cycling through my shuffles during the plane ride and as the song would have it, it has me thinking of nothing but Alexander. Should I take this as a sign? Music is a guide for me, a way to tell someone my thoughts and emotions, but this, this is different. The music is speaking to me this time, or at least it feels that way. I'm torn and in need of guidance.

I need my Gran.

At our café nestled just outside the city, you can always find a good cuppa, fresh scones, and a relaxing atmosphere, this day however had a dark ominous hinderance hanging over my head. I'm grateful there are only two other patrons sat down, too many more and I'd want to leave. If my body language and black attire were enough to tell my story, it confirms I'm not in the mood to be very people-y today.

You can say I might've woken up on the wrong side of the bed. Or it could be jet lag.

Either way, it's best to not cross me.

My thoughts are clouded. I need my Gran; her warm embrace and wise words are exactly what I crave and why I love her. If anyone can help me understand this rollercoaster I'm stuck on, it's Gran.

June Hayes, better known to all as Gran, is a spirited lass from Glasgow. Her long strawberry blonde hair is most times in a braid, something she began donning when I asked to play and style her hair as a wee lass. She's confident, selfless, and a doer. Even after everything we've been through, my Gran is my light, the beacon that has guided me through tumultuous waters and who has steered me in open seas rather than allowing me to crash into the rocky shore.

She is the most beautiful soul out there.

As the hour crept around, not one word is brought up about the monster, this is not the place for any of that. Only happy telling right now.

Gran filled me in on her two-week trip to Australia, Tamara was excited about the gala preparations, and I had an update about my dad's recovery process. Wouldn't you have it, my blasted love life had to be next, thanks to Tamara's flapping jaw.

"So, tell us more about this hunky man of yours." Tamara eyes me over the rim of her latte, "he's quite taken with you."

"I see yer having fun with Alexander." Gran beamed as she took a sip from her cup, eyeing me expectantly then she snickered, "ah, look at ye blush. He's a keeper then."

"Oi! Hush now." Seriously, is anything private in my life anymore?

Tamara is unrelenting as she cradled her latte, "the look he gives you; *wistful sigh* he is so in love."

There is a pause as they wait for my details of Alexander. Visions of our time together, more of the good than the bad flow through my mind. In yet there is still something niggling at me.

"I don't know what we are anymore." I state truthfully, "It's too dangerous for him to be with me." I bite my lip to hold back what my mind would like to say, how I'm more than taken with him.

"That's utter shite and ye know it." Gran takes my hand in hers.

"I second that." Tamara agrees.

Did my Gran, the teacher who only uses nice words, just toss off a curse? *Wow*, Australia has allowed her to really relax. Maybe it's the new lad she's seeing. I'll be sure to get all the details from her on that subject.

Love seems to be in the air as of late.

Love? That isn't what Alexander and I have, *is it?*

“There's untruth in what ye speak, dear.” Gran's tone softens as a look of nostalgia sweeps across her features, “I do wish Zander could've visited; I want to meet the handsome man who has stolen my granddaughter's heart. All things will work themselves out in the end.”

My ever-devoted assistant did her research on Alexander. Always looking out for me. Tamara informed Gran that the man I'm with is a decorated Marine veteran, is a business owner, and donates generously to the cancer center in his area.

What they do not know is how much lay beneath the exterior; he's kind, will lend a hand when you need it, is passionate, intimate, and bears the weight of so many around him. He sets others before himself, stretches himself too thin.

It's Gran's approval I pine for above anyone else.

“Alexander went behind my back; how can I forgive him?”

“We all make mistakes, love.” Tamara remarks. “Have you asked him why he did it?”

“There wasn't time before our flight.” Not exactly true, I knew if I opened my mouth, things would've been spouted that I'd soon regret. Silence seemed to be the best solution.

Having thought it over during the long flight, I'm positive I would've done things differently, stayed in bed a bit longer. Would this have gone badly if we found the file together? At least then he and I could've sat down, talked this through.

I feel defeated.

Rather than deal with Alexander and his looks of worry, I requested Ford drive me home to pack, then he dropped Shark and I off at the airport, not before promising to keep an eye on Zander for me. They truly are brothers.

“Dear, do ye remember when yer father first arrived? He wanted to know everything about ye; he asked so many

questions.” Gran quiets when a couple passes our table, “while he doesn’t know yer truth, Dan is no numpty. He and Alexander are trained to dig fer details. It’s in their nature.”

I guess I can agree with that. They are only doing what was instilled in them, but there should be a line they know they should not cross.

I heave a sigh, “Why does life have to be tits-up all the time? Can’t we have a break?” *Groan* Now I’m sounding more of my mum. Not a good thing. My fingers rake over my scalp and my eyes close.

“Ah lass, if yer only lookin’ for the negatives in life, that is all ye will ever reap. Ye need to look beyond everythin’ and see how much the great outweighs it.” Gran knew what to say to have her words sink in. I’d expect nothing less from her.

“That was a brilliant way of putting things, could not have said it any better.” Tamara grins, “he is a considerable upgrade from Zane.”

“Is that the rockstar lad?” Gran asks.

Tamara, why must you flap your jaw to Gran about everything? Such a tattle.

I groaned and tossed my hands in a dramatic fashion, “Gah! Shut yer pus (be quiet). Why must you bring him up?”

Tamara leaned in closer with a determined glimmer in her eye, “because you still have to call him, or did you forget you stood him up?”

“I’ll have you know; I did call his mobile. His number must’ve changed.” I return her stare two-fold, “does that please you?”

Her grin widens, “Just so. Good riddance to the wanker.”

“Oh, it’s that one. What a tube (stupid person).” Gran deadpans then her features sober, “that’s what the youngsters say now, right?”

Tamara must’ve filled in Gran on her spat with Zane and not to me. *What is happening?*

We all laugh at Gran's confusion of new slang. As we settle my mobile chimed with a text. Pulling it from my pocket, I see not one, but two messages. The newest came in from Shark, telling me he finished his meeting with Raymond and is heading back to the flat for a nap.

The other message shouldn't surprise me, but it did.

Zander- Good morning beautiful.

He's sending his daily morning text, the promise he made me when we first met.

Alexander is not giving up on us.

"Uh-oh, I know that look." Tamara sets her cup down and pulled out her mobile, "it's time we take a trip to Mayfair for comfort food. Let's order takeaway curry from that amazing Indian restaurant." She peeks at me as she taps her screen, "I also have the perfect distraction for you back at the flat."

Gran stands, "That is my cue to be off. I'm meetin' a certain someone for dinner tonight." Her grin widens, cheeks pinkening a bit.

"How exciting. You better fill me in on how it goes. Morton is so sweet." Tamara pockets her mobile then stands to give Gran a hug.

Just how much have I missed?

Gran and I made plans to meet up tomorrow for lunch at Tally's, only the two of us. She'd better be ready to spill everything. Then again, she will want me to do the same. Not sure I'm ready for this conversation with her. I best prepare myself for what is to come.

Sometime later after declaring our eyes were bigger than our stomachs and consuming a bevvy or two, or five, Shark woke from his kip in search of food and ended up devouring the last of the items.

He is taking over Tamara's room and she is in my room, just like old times. Our third bedroom is more of a storage room of paintings and office items. She wanted Shark

to remain close for additional protection, something he agreed wouldn't be possible if he stayed in a hotel.

I insisted there be no talk of my monster for the rest of the evening; anything pressing could be dealt with in the morning.

They agreed without hesitation.

I couldn't concentrate with the wine flowing as freely as Tamara poured glass after glass. I'm surprised I haven't gained a stone or more with all my eating and lack of exercise as of late. Then again, who gives a shite, Alexander enjoys my eating habits.

That's it. There will be no talk of him either.

"I'm jealous of how much food you two can eat." Shark points his fork at me after taking his last bite.

"Don't get me started on Lili's love for tiramisu." Tamara sends me a smile, "speaking of, I made sure to swing by and pick some up. Do you want a piece?"

I shook my head then waved her away when she tilted the remnants of the wine bottle asking if I wanted it. I had more than enough wine today. Tiramisu would have to wait for breakfast. Then a thought crossed me.

Can I ever enjoy tiramisu now that I know it's Alexander's favorite as well? Visions of us sharing the container he brought flashed through my mind. Here I thought I'd be clearing my head, not wallowing in the memories.

Through my wine-soaked brain I sensed Tamara was more than pleased with having me back; it's easier to keep track of my life that way. What happened to being in hiding? The recluse who sits in her art studio all day. Where is she and why did she leave her safe space?

Enough of the pity party for one.

Tamara deserves a long-extended holiday after this gala is over with. She can choose anywhere in the world, and I'll see to it that it happens.

I sighed and sat back on the wide gray sectional sofa; the wine, food, and jet lag lulling me into a knackered state.

Strong Scottish “I’m off to bed.” I slur and stand, a bit wobbly and dare I say pretty steamin (drunk). I rarely drink this much in a month, let alone a day. I just needed my bed, the place where there are no ties to Alexander.

“But it’s only eight, the night is young.” Shark protests, ready to have a bevvie or two himself.

“Mate, ye took a kip. I dinnae.” I slur. After the flight landed, I thought it best to stay up so when I do crash into bed, I’m out all night.

“I could use a few hours at a club.” Tamara returns from the kitchen with a bright smile.

I stumble but catch myself on the chaise part of the sofa. *When did that move?*

“Let me help.” Harrison’s hand comes out to clasp my shoulder. “You had quite a bit to drink.”

“I’ve got her. Meet you out here in twenty.” Tamara and I shuffle off to my room, once inside she is hesitant on leaving me. “Maybe I should stay home with you.”

I wave her off, or at least I think I do, *sloshed* “go have fun. Harrison might make a better wingman.” I start to ramble, the one thing I often do when having too many things on my mind. “Ye deserve to find love too. Someone is out there, I know it.”

Tamara is helping me into bed as I’m telling her in the sappiest of manners how much I adore her, then before I know it, I zonk out.

All the while, Alexander’s message seemed to stay at the forefront of my thoughts. That, and our love for tiramisù.

Alexander. I need you more than ye know.



Waking but not wanting to move, I found myself entangled around Tamara, her body wrapped around me so tight I could not leave. My bladder was protesting.

I started to remove myself from her, but her grip tightened, and she groaned sleepily.

“Five more minutes.”

I glance at the clock on the end table to find it only six in the morning. I wonder what time she and Harrison got in; by the sound of it, they had a late night.

I sighed, laying there a few more minutes listening to the pitter patter of the rain falling outside the windows, until I couldn't take it any longer and *had* to get up.

This time she allowed me to untangle from her.

One thing Tamara has always been great at is cuddling. It's her way to show affection.

Don't let her fool you with her bubbly, outgoing, happy-go-lucky persona; Tamara has secrets too. It takes a lot for her to put her heart out there, it's also why every girl she has hooked up with has only been that: a hook up. Tamara isn't on the pull as much as she would like me to believe. A long holiday would fix that problem for her. *Sigh* *Yes*. Somewhere warm and beachy. That would cheer her up.

After brushing my teeth, and popping a few headache tamers, I tried shaking off whatever this dreadful feeling was. Maybe it's just a wine haze. It's been quite a while since I've consumed that much. Yes, let's blame the wine.

By the time I leave the lav, I find Tamara out of bed still in her silver sequin dress from the night prior. She's

stretching her arms high in the air and shaking out her poufy bedhead.

“How are you feeling, love?” She asks on a yawn.

I close my eyes and scrub my forehead just as thunder rumbles outside. I feel exactly like the weather; dreary, foggy, a bit chilled.

Groggy “I need a pot of coffee in order to function.”

She smiles but it doesn't reach her eyes, “we have to make that priority number one of course.” Then she draws closer and eyes me with skepticism, “do you remember anything from last night? You were close to being off your rocker.”

I meet her gaze as her hand gently brushes hair away from my face, the worry in her stare has me questioning what all took place.

I don't remember much about last night. The last thing I can recall is Tamara tucking me into bed.

“Don't tell me I made a fool of myself in front of Harrison.” I groan with the onset of embarrassment.

The only time she masks her emotions from me is when she is hiding something dreadful. She's doing so now.

“No, love.” She says as she bites her lip.

Confusion “What happened then?”

I try racking my brain to recall anything from last night. There wasn't a thing there. The wine gave me the best sleep I've had in a while. That tone she uses though, it's the tone used after one of my nightmares. *Did I have a nightmare?*

She must sense my frustration because she sets a hand on my shoulder.

“Don't stress yourself out about it.” She pauses as she studies my face waiting for my reaction.

I knew that dreadful feeling had to be something more. I furrow my brow and do the exact opposite of what she said.

She's hesitant to continue, "you – wanted Alexander."

My face falls and eyes widen, my voice barely a whisper.

"What did I say?"

She continues cautiously, speaking slow and gentle, "We came home and heard you screaming. It wasn't Gran you called for – it was Alexander." Her eyes are sympathetic as they study my reaction, "I couldn't take your sobbing, so I wrapped myself around you to try and get you to quiet. It broke my heart."

Well, shite.

"It's going to be alright," she takes my hand and squeezes, "We have a plan. Don't you worry."

All I can do is nod. What else is there to do?

If anything, I need to have trust.

**Monster* Ooh, my little flower, don't be so sure now. You're not getting rid of me that easily. Look where trusting me lead you.*

I'll admit, I'm a bit worried. This gut instinct tells me this will not end well.

CHAPTER 6 - ALEXANDER

“He who is not every day conquering some fear has not learned the secret of life.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

The thing about silence, it's not ever truly silent. At least for me that is. There is no way to shut off my brain, turn off the constant agony raging inside. Not a dial to turn down or a switch to disconnect. No plug to pull.

What is the secret to turning it off?

Does anyone have the answer?

I'm in my own hell, strapped in the chair, unable to get up and unplug the television playing the torment of my past on the screen before me. I can't look away for when I close my eyes the torture plays behind my lids. The laughing of my demons around me has sweat beading my brow and shivers of awareness flowing through my body.

The demon's claws dig in deeper.

**Sneering* We will take good care of you Zander. We've got you. You're 'safe' with us.* Vicious laughter follows.

They mock the words I spoke to Lili before she left, only I know they're guaranteed to keep their word.

I can't take much more of this. Lili is gone, my siren no longer here calming my seas as they churn from the moon's pull. A storm is upon me, the bow of my ship is battered, and I'm stalled in open waters, the whitecaps relentless and eager to yank me under.

“The swirling surf had covered his death, hidden deep in murky darkness, his miserable end, as hell opened to receive him.” - Beowulf

Lili chased away the demons, but now, now I fear things will become darker, for the return of my demons means I no longer have control. With her an ocean away and not so

much as a word of goodbye, how am I to know where we stand?

I thought I was done with this bullshit. Wishful thinking on my part.

**Demons* We are just getting started, Zander. Surrender and see what your sins will manifest.*

Darkness settles in. Blackened and grim. I give myself to demons within.

The one thing about playing a song on repeat, you learn something new about it each time you hear it, no matter the age of the song; a missed twang of a guitar string, or certain pitch the singer uses to convey their emotion or unearthing the hidden meaning of the lyrics.

Here I sit on my bedroom floor not sure what time it is or how long I've been at it, all I know is the sun has gone down and I bask in subdued darkness. My back is against the wall, my breathing is labored, body exhausted, my shoulder, neck, and back weep from the beating I delivered.

I ignore it. All of it.

Gone Away by Five Finger Death Punch blasts through the speakers on a continuous reel.

It's my anthem to just how fucked up my life has become.

Welcome to the party.

Their song speaks a resemblance of hardship, this song though, this one is my agony embodied in stanzas and drumbeats, the guitar ripping out my heart, and the lead singer screaming of an inner struggle.

It's the only thing I can feel. *Heartache.*

Owen is gone, unfair in his offer to the cause. *God damn you, Owen! You weren't supposed to go!*

I can't reach him no matter how hard I try.

Lord, take me instead. *Bring him back!* Take me in his stead, *please*, I beg you.

Dangerous metal lay only feet away from my reach; it sits there, mocking me, taunting me, *just like my demons, and now this item in my hands*. Why do I have it?

I don't remember grabbing it.

It's cleaned and primed, but I swear I locked in the safe.

**Demons* We snatched it from its hiding place for you. Take it! Make us proud, Zander!*

This lethal weapon holds multiple rounds, but I'm only needing one to get the job done.

How I want to end the misery, the guilt plaguing me, the promises I couldn't uphold. My intended career is no more, and I lost a brother in the process. My woman is withdrawn and damn it, *I know she's not coming back*.

Maybe the demons were more of a friend than I thought, at least they know of a cure.

My forty-five lay there in front of me, ripe for the picking, at least one in the chamber. I only need to reach out, place it in my hand, and unlike the times before now where I came to my senses and put the gun down, this time I will complete the mission.

The gun is in my hand, the safety is off. How did it get there?

**Demons* Yes! Yes! Pull the fucking trigger!*

"What 'cha doin', Corporal?" Ford's question is heightened to be better heard over the blaring music.

I don't look up, but I sense his body filling the doorway, alarm written all over him.

He's left unanswered, my eyes trained on the gun in my right hand.

"It's not worth it, *hermano* (brother)." Ford takes a step towards me.

Bite "Back off, Gunner. This isn't your battle."

The music is silenced, making my ears ring and my head pound. The demon's taunts only scream louder now.

Ford looms over me, his words a lashing in the night.

"The fuck this isn't my battle." His massive body folds into a crouched position, far enough away to give me the space I demanded. His hands rest on his knees as my eyes find his in the dim light, "Your battle is my battle, brother. You do not have to suffer alone."

Spite Where have I heard those words before? I'm pretty sure I spoke something similar to him. *How not fortuitous.*

Anger "Don't use my words against me – don't *fucking* mock me, Ford. Get the hell out of here, leave me be." My hand rakes over my scalp, tugging at the ends of my hair. An obtrusive laugh escapes me, "better yet, I can make this all go away, right the fuck now."

I think I've insane.

Demons *No. Not insane, Zander. It's your truth. Pull. The. Fucking. Trigger!*

"Don't say shit like that," he roars and lowers himself to sit on the floor, eyes are trained on the loaded weapon waiting to be cocked back and fired, "all your family, your friends, the brothers and sisters in arms, and yes, even Lili, we'd have a piece of us unwillingly taken away all because of your petty selfishness right now."

The mention of Lili has my head spinning, I can't go on like this, it hurts too much. "Fuck off, Ford, I didn't ask you."

"Naw," he scoffs, "I'm not in the mood to call the coroner tonight. My ass right is stayin' right here." He shifts so his back is against the wooden footboard, "paybacks a bitch, ain't it?"

My head tilts as I glance from the gun to Ford, my temper stirring, "what the hell are you talking about?"

Ford has no filter as he chuckles, the bastard *fucking* chuckles, “Remember that long ass drive from my house to Buffalo? I told you I’d get you back for everything you did to me during that trip, maybe not that day or the next, but one day,” he held his hands out like the holy Mother Mary he is not, “here we are. It’s my turn to help you, Corporal. Like you helped me.” He sighs a deep breath, “see, I wouldn’t be here right now if it wasn’t for you.”

I kept silent, wishing he’d leave me be, allow me to consider my next move alone. The bastard won’t shut the hell up.

“Sure, the docs patched me up some, but it was your aggravatin’ determination that had me gettin’ up out of that hospital bed every *damn* day.” His lips spread in a grin, “I wanted to make sure I was the one who kicked your ass.”

My lips twitch in a ghost of a smile, “you still have yet to fulfill that. Now’s your chance. I’d rightfully deserve it.” My eyes land back on the cold metal in my hand.

A hint of self-pride flickers within, a sign of hope that today might not be the day for me after all.

**Demons* Lili doesn’t want you; your family and friends are better off. You’re pathetic, look at how weak you are. You won’t have to endure anymore pain if you do it! Pull the trigger!*

I squeeze my eyes shut and knock a fist against the side of my head, careful not to have my finger on the trigger as I plead with the voices inside my mind to be quiet.

**Agonizing* God! Make it stop!*

Ford’s words are a distraction, “Naw, ain’t no ass whoopin’ today. Maybe tomorrow though.” His pause lingers and I can feel him scrutinizing me. There is nothing but fucking pity pouring off him.

Disgusting.

I am pathetic. My head thuds against the wall, a pained breath leaving me as I war with myself.

His tone sobers, “I’m just a brother who knows what this emptiness feels like.” Dread hangs low in the confined space, his voice choking the slightest bit. “I miss Little Bear as well, Zander. Ain’t nothing going to bring him back, certainly not what you’re thinkin’ of doin’. We’d only have more emptiness inside us with you gone, too.”

Does he know how close I am this time to giving in? I don’t think anyone but me understands the severity of that answer.

I open my eyes as we share a silent look. His observation conveys truth, honesty, and his own determination to make sure his friend lives to see tomorrow.

A timid Hank strode in then, head bowed and tail tucked in. He came straight to me, settled in between my legs, making me choose between holding him or the firearm. The pup sniffed my face, his way of checking on me, then he licked my cheek and whimpered, sensing my torment.

I lied. My pup knows the strength of my demons only he will never tell a soul. I set the gun down without thinking too much about it then I cup his face and lean into him, a sob caught in my throat as I run my fingers along his ears.

“It’s alright, buddy. – I’m alright.” I choke on the words to try and reassure them. Hank can sense I’m anything but alright. Ford grunts his silent knowledge of a similar conclusion.

Hank crowds into me seeking his owner’s undivided attention, the same time he’s lending me his comfort. My eyes close and arms wrap tightly around him as I rest my chin on his head, trying my damndest to block out the venom being spewed.

I need guidance, and one can hope I have met my lowest point. Something tells me though, that’s wishful thinking.

“Now, we need to get you ready for battle. What was it our drill sergeant would holler? *‘It pays to be a winner!’*” Ford sits up, taking the gun and clicking the safety on, “you gotta

win to get some of that weight off your back, soldier. Only one way to do it.” I glance at him when his pause lingers. A smirk plays at his lips, “pure determination, Corporal.”

The demons roar their mighty protest, the gun now out of sight.

I lean into Hank and choke out a sob, “I may not make it, Ford. *I’m so fucking tired.*”

I have nothing left.

“Tomorrow begins a new day, Corporal. Let’s fuckin’ get it.”

Sigh “if you say so.”

No way to do this on my own

I ask for help, a way to phone

Silence is all that will be known

Forever soundless and alone

My mask cloaking the misery

A glimpse at my artillery

All are blinded by history

A shadow of contradictory

Remove my mask, what do you find?

Can you sense I’m on the decline?

A storm swirling inside my mind

Now one bullet in the carbine

It’s time I hide away from all

Expect this to be my last call

The Hidden Truth- Alexander (Sonnet)

Hurry, come back to me Lili.

You are the only one who can keep my demons caged.

-CHAPTER 7 - LILI-

“You know what you know. And you are the one who’ll decide where to go.” – Dr. Seuss

Later that afternoon Gran and I made our way through Soho, or in other words, my home away from home. Tally’s Pub is close to the Academy of Arts center, and around the corner from Uni, attracting all the lively energy; a place I can feed from and gain inspiration. I get giddy thinking about it.

We step inside the bar to escape from the misty London weather. I’m unsure where my mind is at, for it tells me I’ve come to miss the dreary days. Let’s face it, I’m a nutter. *Carry on.*

My senses do a happy dance as I enter the establishment I love dearly, and at once, My body drops the anvil I’ve carried with me for weeks. *Don’t you worry*, I’ll pick it up when we leave, unwillingly of course.

Gran is off to find our seats, perhaps to give me a minute alone with my mate. I have some groveling to do.

This place has played witness to its celebrities and even a music video or two has been filmed here. Patrick’s place is always lively. Speaking of my mate.

“Well, ye are a sight fer sore eyes,” Patrick bellows from behind the bar with open arms, “come here lass!”

The man could be mistaken for a young Kevin McKidd if it weren’t for the extra stone of muscle and that silver lip ring he’s sporting. He’s dressed in jeans and a white Tally’s tee that shows his scattering of random black and gray tattoos over his arms. Which reminds me, I should finish drawing the back piece he requested; it’s going to be *wicked* once done.

Patrick tends to hide his rust-colored mop under a beanie, no matter the weather, and his mysterious crystal blue eyes hold the faintest hint of green shimmering within.

So, my question is, why is it he doesn't have a lassie?

As he rounds the bar, I crash into him, squeezing him tight, then relaxing into his hold. He's part of my home; his embrace is a comfort my subconscious has longed for.

"Patrick!" I give a shout, fully at ease and free here, "sorry I left ye hangin that day." I step back and gaze at him, noticing his brows draw together.

"Dinnae fash yerself! (Don't worry) Family is more valuable." He leans his back against the bar and eyes me up and down, "why the long face, lass?"

His stare turns to concern, and right then I knew I'd been caught. Nothing I do ever gets past this man. Not since the incident.

I whisper and glance to the kitchen door behind him; not having eye contact is one of my tells. Another is the thickness of my accent coming out to play, "we'll talk soon." He narrows his eyes, but I won't budge as I eye him right back, "not the time." I sigh, "I promise before I head back-

"Ye're leavin' back to the states? Why?" Patrick asks as the entry door swings wide. He pauses his ranting knowing this isn't the proper place for this bickering match.

Shark surveyed the Scottish pub's interior as he made his way to the aged bar. A man as large as Ford who clearly screamed military entered a minute later. Both men gave us a nod of greeting before taking residence at two stools nearby.

"Tis not the place to have a *blether* (chat)." I stand my ground, especially now that we have patrons within earshot. My voice lowers, "Shark is a mate from the states. Try and behave yerself."

His nostrils flare signaling this conversation is far from over, "fine." He submits and doesn't ask why I have someone with me I've never mentioned before. Shark will not be expecting this man's bluntness, not on my watch. "Go sit with Gran, I'll be there in a few."

I place my hands on my hips, my frustration evident. Patrick can be stubborn, but he knows I'm just as determined.

There is a sudden sharpness on my thigh, making me yelp with surprise and jump away. *Did he just do what I think he did? Snap me with his towel, will he?*

“Oi! Mind yer heid!” (Mind yourself) I scowl at him as he just stands there and smirks, *scoff* “oh, ye’re lucky I dinnae have one to beat ye with!”

“We’ll continue this battle later,” his chuckle is all I receive as he saunters off.

Patrick Shaw, my best mate since we were all of nine, he is a treasure; except when he’s taking the piss. He enjoys pushing my buttons and finding it a laugh when I turn bright as a berry.

Hear my warning Mr. Shaw, I’m coming for ye.

Over the many years together he’s taken hold of being the protective brother figure in my life. He’s one of the few who are aware of the grave details and markings my monster left on me. Trust me when I say, Patrick’s rage came out full force when he found out. His upbringing, being told never to harm a lass then seeing a man take advantage of someone so young, it sent him over the edge.

He still will not tell anyone, not even me where he was the four days he went missing. We had many dark days before the news came to light and I came damn near close to losing his friendship. If it weren’t for his determination to show up at my door every day asking Gran to see me, I don’t think I’d be here today.

Twenty minutes or so goes by, Gran telling me more about her trip. I’ll never have enough of living in this woman’s positive light.

“Here we go, two pints and two shepherd’s pies.” Patrick comes back ‘round, placing the items in front of us.

It was this, or bangers and tatties; both being my weakness. Then again, all cuisine is my weakness. This savory *Guinness* brazened steak, mashed tatties, and veggies all put together in a savory puff pastry and paired with extra crispy chips on the side is what my hangover calls for.

My mind has me thinking he deserves payback for snapping me earlier. I know how to get a rise out of him.

“Ye know, this is all yer good fer.” I jest and point to my plate.

“Heathen!” He declares, turning to Gran for support, “Gran, any help for yer favorite student?”

“Away with ye!” Gran shakes her head, “ye’re on yer own.”

Patrick tosses the bar rag at my face in protest, and I catch it before it smacks me. I toss it back with a giggle and don’t miss his wide grin.

I will never have enough of our banter.

He leaves us to enjoy our meal and I notice him ready to give Shark a good talking to. Best of luck to Shark. Patrick can be ruthless.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen ye drink before now, Gran.”

She lifts the pint to her lips and takes a sip, “ye aren’t the only one having fun.” She lowers her voice as she gestures to the bar, “besides, Patrick is quite bold in those tight jeans, *oh*, and look at-

“Gran!” I practically shout, my jaw hitting the floor, “bloody hell! Ye did not just say that!”

Who is this woman? Surely, I’ve been left in the dark; she has never been so emboldened like this in my lifetime.

“I barely know ye anymore!”

She laughs lightly around her glass before setting it back, “Patrick is too young fer me,” she says on a laugh then waves her hand playfully, “there’s nay harm in lookin’.” She wiggles her fingers and grins.

I’m speechless. How do I respond to this?

“Gran, are ye thinking about getting in the dating scene?”

Her brows raise, “thinking? Lass, I’m already there.” She gains a wistful look in her eyes, “I have ye to thank. Ye sent me off on the most *magnificent* trip of dreams.” The way she touched on that particular word has me guessing there is more than one meaning behind it. “I wasn’t alone fer long.”

Just as I thought, my Gran found someone.

For Gran’s sixty-ninth birthday I surprised her with this trip. This wonderful woman raised me when my own mum felt she was ‘*too busy*’ getting her career in order. My marvelous Gran taught music to school-aged children for thirty-two years, encouraged me to be who I am today, taught me how to play many instruments, guided me through many life lessons, and most importantly, instilled in me to be kind and loving.

I adore her. She didn’t have to take me under her wing and raise me; for her doing so, I shall give her the world.

For being sixty-nine, she has taken on the cheekiest side yet. Maybe it’s the number? Who knows, it could be.

Gran reminds me of a fair-haired Jane Seymour; full of grace and humility and can easily pass for ten years younger, catching many a lad’s eye.

“Wow. So, ye have found love? When do I get to meet this mystery man?” I egg her on, “is he tall, dark, and handsome? Maybe a bad boy? Ooh, he’s an Aussie. Their lingo is super sexy.”

We laugh together and it’s what I needed, what *we* needed.

It’s been a long winding road this past decade.

“Neither, dear. Ye met him when ye were ten, or so. I believe ye told me he could pass fer, and I quote, ‘*a portlier David Tennant*’.” She takes a chip from the plate and dips it in sauce.

I nod and take a few chips of my own, chew then swallow as I recall Morton, this mystery man of hers, “the professor from Cambridge?”

I remember the day she is talking about; we went in our usual café to warm ourselves after walking around St. James Park, the air was crisp and cool, the rare dusting of snow on the grass and trees made it feel as if time stood still.

I was nearly eleven at the time, just before Gran's retirement from teaching. This happened to be before Isaac was shot and my world was altered. These were happier times.

Gran's lips tilt in a grin, "Aye, he is the professor of Medieval History, and quite the looker."

"That he is." I nod, recalling the gentleman sat alone at the corner table with a scattering of literature about the crusades.

"But enough about me, it's ye we have come here fer." Her motherly side begins to take shape, "how are ye and Alexander? Ye're not quite yerself. Did something happen?"

"It's complicated." Here we go. I pestered her about her new lad, it's my turn to tell her about mine.

She points a crisp at me before popping it in her mouth, "Is it the news about Isaac that has ye scared? Or is it hard for ye to accept Alexander's help?"

"They had no right."

"No, they dinnae." She agrees but I could tell she is far from done, "Had they not searched, and something happened to ye, I'd be devastated." She sat resolute, "let them help ye and listen to Alexander's reasonings. Ye owe him that."

I took a sip of my pint and let her words sink in. A tourist couple nearby gathered their items to depart, leaving Gran and I alone at last. Her words solidify what my heart has tried to tell my mind however I've been too caught up in my selfishness.

"It's time Daniel ken yer past-

"No. Absolutely not." I interject, "he doesn't need the added stress."

He is still recovering from his accident and the news of this would only set him back.

I never wanted Daniel Thompson to learn of my secrets; he is going to be devastated and wonder why I kept it from him all these years. Sure, he can speculate as to why I have a therapist without knowing the exact truth, but as Gran said, he is no numpty; he has to sense something amiss.

Would my father view me as the same person? Would I be able to look him in the eye and not see the destruction written there?

That is why I can never tell him.

Gran gave a curt nod knowing the subject is a touchy one.

Her knowing stare raked over my face, “He’d rather hear it from ye then from someone else.” Gran took a fork full into her mouth and eyed me as she chewed.

Silence filled the space as I soak that in. I don’t want my father to think of his only daughter in that light, but in the same aspect she has a point. Either way, this cannot end well.

About halfway through our meal, it’s time I bring up a certain subject; the man who has me in knots.

“Gran, tell me about the harmony of the heart. How did you know Grandfather was the one?” I ask, remembering her stories of the first encounter and everything leading up to his untimely death.

I never met my grandfather, but his lively spirit and the love they shared is kept alive even now. The way she speaks of him, they were soulmates, a music teacher, and a factory worker in everlasting devotion.

Pure harmony.

I’ve piqued her interest as she takes the hand I had resting on the table, “ye know the stories dear,” her eyes fill with a faraway look, “Our hearts knew we were destined for eternal love. Yer grandfather Walter swept me off my feet, his heart singing the sweetest song ever heard,” her eyes crinkle with the delight of the past, “my heart sang with his in perfect harmony.”

A love like theirs is one I have always imagined finding one day. The way Gran describes it is naturalistic and easy, the flow of two becoming one. Could this be what Alexander and I share?

“What does it feel like?”

Gran gave my hand a squeeze, “everyone’s experience is unique, only two are the same, two souls singing the same song in search of the other.” She lends me her comfort in my otherwise uncertainty, “is that what ye’re beginning to feel fer Alexander?”

Gran has that look like she already knows the answer.

“I can’t explain it. He makes me feel in a way no other person has before – it’s damn frightening.” I allow that to hang in the air for a long moment and I can sense her wanting more, “it’s like the collywobbles have invaded every cell of my body.”

Gran met my gaze, “ye’re still lacking in the trust department with him.” Her eyes narrowed declaring it be best not to tell lies.

I shrug, trying to voice my exact thoughts, finding it difficult because I do want to put all my trust in this man.

There I said it.

Something is missing though, something that cannot be put by the wayside and forgotten. Whatever this is, I need Alexander to hear it and allow him to hear whether or not I am singing the same song he is. Will I ever be good enough for this amazing man?

Gran continues tenderly, “dear, we all have secrets, some can be discerned far easier than one would think. Ye were the one to initiate his curiosity by opening the door about Isaac. Alexander wouldn’t have asked Harrison to do what he did if the man didn’t care.”

Whisper “I can see that now.” My throat tightens as I voice the thoughts that have plagued me these many days, “but what if one day all too soon he thinks it too much, and he walks away?”

I couldn't bear the thought. My heart wouldn't be able to withstand such a blow. I wouldn't recover.

"Ye're being too negative." Gran gave a shake of her head.

"I'm only being realistic." Voicing this intimidates me.

"No, ye're thinking too hard; ye need to live in the moment. Talk to him, ask the lad if he feels the same way. I raised ye to be strong, now show me just how bloody strong ye are, Lili. Be yerself." She smiles and gives one last squeeze of my hand before letting go.

I smile at her because she is right. She is *always* right. Gran knows best and just what to say to kick me out of my mood.

She picks up her fork, ready to make her last proclamation, "besides, I'm not getting any younger, I'd want time with a great- grandchild before I'm old."

"Gran." I sigh heavily.

"I'm not saying right now, but someday." There is a twinkle in her eye, her positivity shining through, "Ye would make a great mother." Under her optimism lay a hint of sadness, and I know exactly where her thoughts stray to.

I'd give anything to have a child of my own; the chances of that are slim to none, thanks to my monster.

I bow my head, "One can only hope."

She takes my hand and squeezes, "Have faith, Lili dear. If it's meant to be, it will happen."

I'm aware then what I must do; take off the mask, stop hiding, and be myself.

It's time I tell Alexander the whole story.

CHAPTER 8 – ALEXANDER

“We win by tenderness. We conquer by forgiveness.”

– Frederick William Robertson

Saturday- Day four without Lili

Melancholy is all to blame
Now secrets be cast in the light
Ravens cawing their mocking shame
How tempting to give up the fight
My head like a weeping willow
Aiding a deplorable cause
My guilt heaving from the billow
No way to relax, breathe, or pause
Chaos seizing hold of the reigns
Control on my lucidity slips
Nothing but anguish floods my veins
Welcome to my apocalypse
Demons squeezing me in their grasp
All I hear is my choking rasp
Defeat Is Near- Alexander (Sonnet)

Three agonizing days without a word from anyone. I've sent text after text to Shark with no response and I've messaged Lili once every day trying to keep my promise. Overall, the lack of response cuts like a knife and has my demons continuing their wrath.

Through it all, *my heart aches*.

I could still smell her faint lavender shampoo on my sheets, and the pillow she rested upon is now a lifeline in my

arms.

I'm damn near driven insane.

Someone, *anyone*, fill me in on what the hell is going on.

I should've gone with them to do my part in finding the bastard. Alas, I have a business to run and employees who need more participation from their boss, I've been too lax these past weeks, I can't afford to slack anymore.

Talk about being torn in multiple directions.

The stress of everything is too much; I can't eat, can't sleep, and when I do pass out from pure exhaustion, my nightmares return, but only this time they are warped and twisted in a way to break me.

It's Lili I see being attacked and threatened by the vicious beasts inside my mind. The demons enjoy pinning me down, giving me no other choice but to watch their torturing of my precious siren.

Her screams are a residual haunt throughout my waking day.

I don't have the desire to go home for that is where I last saw her. Even my bar carried the reminder of her; nowhere was safe from thoughts of Liliana Hayes.

Trent asked every day how she was doing, and Ford's knowing glances and watchful gaze pissed me the fuck off. I don't need his help.

I just need Lili back.

**Demons* No one wants you, Zander. We are your only friends.*

Some friends you are.

Two nights ago, I pondered ending everything, the gun be in my hand and my anthem play on a reel. Endless torture. Would I have gone through with it this time had Ford not intervened? Possibly. The way my demons screamed their menacing trills, I was on the edge of losing it.

I'm deranged.

The only thing that will help throw my demons back in their prison is my siren; therapy sessions will not do me any good and working out is only enough to exhaust me physically. Mentally, I'm as vulnerable as a puppy. I'm fighting a losing battle.

I need her back.

Here on my desk sits a picture of the two of us from her family gathering, it's sitting here mocking me. I dare not move the picture from view, it might solidify her being out of my life for good.

My weapons were then hidden in places I didn't know about or outright taken by Ford, and I cannot for the life of me ascertain how I agreed to it. Apparently, this needed to be done.

**Demons laughter* Naïve Ford. Little does he know there are other ways to get the job done, Zander. It doesn't have to be a gun.*

I needed a distraction, where else better than my business. It be nice to bury myself in the endless stack of paperwork and the bar updates, but when I did, it's as if every sappy song of love, loss, begging, and pleading played to patronize me with purpose.

Did Ford change the station to get under my skin? Or is it but a coincidence? I wouldn't put it past the fucker to take this jab at me.

I had enough of hearing Florida Georgia Line's, *Stay* and Theory Of A Deadman's *Hurricane*. The tipping point ended up being Bon Jovi's *I'll Be There For You*.

I inwardly exploded, experiencing the demons rising to the surface for a split second. There might've been a holler of a curse as I stood from my desk and raced to the door.

I slammed my office door shut and locked it, something I rarely ever did.

Silence. God. I needed silence.

Still, the damned songs kept ringing through my head.

**Misery* Lili, I'm sorry I did you wrong, I'm sorry I hurt you. Please forgive me. I can't take much more of this. Please. Come home.*

If we overcome this, I promise I will be the best I can be for her, for us. A promise I will not ever break. Not ever.

**Demons* Yes, you will. You will fuck up once again and Lili will cut ties. Just you wait, Zander. We will have you with us very soon.*

Ignoring the games my mind plays, a different thought crosses my mind. What if I did as one of the songs said? What if I told Lili I love her? Do I have it in me?

Then again, is love supposed to hurt this much?

This can't be normal.

Drained and far past exhausted, going on day four without her, I wake to find I'm laid out on the couch fully dressed in the workout gear from the night before. Ford and I went to his gym to blow off some steam, ending up staying well past midnight and completely exhausting our bodies.

The demons were still there, they're still fucking with me.

Blinking, I find my pup staring at me, whimpering to be let out. I rub my eyes and peer out the window, the pink rays of dawn breaking through the clouds, giving a false sense of tranquility.

I know better. Growing up with a father in the Navy, a sailor in his spare time, seeing a pink morning is an omen, a warning if you will.

Pink night, sailors delight. Pink morning, sailors warning.

Rain is on the way today. What else is coming for this day?

Opening the back door for Hank I sit on the stoop and breathe in the cool morning air. I run a hand through my sleep

tousled hair then pull my phone from my pocket finding a new message from Shark.

Shark- *Just landed. I'll be at your house in a few.*

As I sit there staring at the message, he sends another one.

Shark- *P.S. Bring you're a-game. As you say, ain't no time for fuckin' slackers.*

Whatever this news is promising, he seems to have it under control. He will keep Lili safe. I feel I'm unable to do so, at least until I hear her say she will take me back.

**Demons* If she will take you back... It's doubtful. We are all you need Zander. All in good company.*

Why is this happening now? Why didn't her stepfather stay updated on the sealed documents?

Just one of the questions I've asked myself these many days.

I stood and stretched, my muscles screaming from the grueling session with Ford, the couch certainly didn't help my cause. My phone chimed just as the pot of coffee finished brewing.

Excited and hopeful to find Lili's name, instead I found a number I didn't know. Before opening it, my military training took over. A brief thought this could be someone trying to get to Lili through me.

I'd like to see them try.

Unknown- **British* Zander, it's Tamara.*

It might not be Lili, but it's the next best thing. Lili's mate.

Message two came in not even a minute later.

Tamara- *I'm in town. Call me when you can. I have a plan that will guarantee you win Lili back.*

My heartbeat thrummed wildly as I hit the call button.

Tamara, you are a Godsend.

Tamara answers after the first ring and I can't help at displaying my concern.

“How is she?” *Choked up* “I know I fucked things up, but *Tamara*, I can't be without her.”

“She's sleeping right now,” Tamara whispers, “I need you to know, she had a nightmare the other night. This one scared the living daylights out of Harrison, me too if you can believe it.” She paused as I heard liquid pouring in the background, “this one was different; she called out for you. She wanted you.”

I've watched Lili go through one of her nightmares, I know exactly how scary that shit is. To sit there and do nothing but watch as the person you care for battles their inner monster, all alone, afraid, and helpless. It's fucking torture.

“Tell me how I can fix this.”

I hear the giddiness in her tone, and I perk up the slightest bit.

“Oh, you're going to love this.”

A half hour later and a plan in place, I feel confident in winning Lili's trust and affection back. It may take time, but I don't care. It can take years, I will wait, as long as I know she will be with me.

There is something undeniable about my siren.

“So, are you on board with my plan or do you have something better?” Tamara asked.

This plan of hers is one-hundred times better than anything I could have come up with. For once these many days and sleepless nights, I have confidence.

“This plan is amazing – *you're amazing*. I will see you at the harbor around one.” Shark saunters in and makes himself a cup of coffee as I wrap up our conversation. “Thanks, Tamara. I owe big time.”

Her tone is full of assurance, “You're quite welcome. I know this will work. *Sing-song* See you soon.”

My mind is more at ease as we hang up. Tamara's well thought out plan might just work; In a few short hours Lili should be back in my arms.

"I'll admit, Tamara's good at what she does." Shark mentions as he sipped from his mug, "that chick takes planning to a whole new level. She puts me to shame, and you know how fricken OCD I can get." He downs the hot coffee in a few gulps then sets his mug to the side and smacked his lips, "I slammed an energy drink on the way here. Let's get to work before I lose my boost."

I grunt and give him my less than impressed stare down. He knows what could be in store as my payback; it might be given now, or I might wait. A Marine never knows for sure.

I'll make him sweat a bit.

"Awe, c'mon man – whatever you're devising just do it now and get it over with."

I get a good look at him and see just how out-of-it and disheveled he is. A semi-rumpled blue button-down, slacks adorned with a sauce stain, and hair stuck-up on one side signaling he slept some part of the plane ride.

This isn't my Marine. Has he actually had any R&R these past weeks? Doubtful from the looks of it.

Shark has probably had less sleep than me these past few days. He might've gone against my orders, but I don't want to think about what could've happened had he obeyed me.

"Thank you."

Shark's brows draw together, his arms crossed as he leans against the counter, "I'm sorry – what?" He asks, a bit baffled.

"I've had a few days to consider and realize now if you hadn't done what you did, we wouldn't know Lili could be in danger. Thank you for defiling my order. This is your one and only pass. Don't do it again."

“Don’t thank me yet.” He sighs, “we’re only seeing the tip of the iceberg. We still need to figure out who hacked into Raymond’s sealed accounts”

With today’s technology, anything and anyone is a target.

“Is it possible there is someone on the inside at Raymond’s office instead of at the police force?” He’s more than likely already ran through employee files and connected anyone who has ties to Lili’s pedophile. Hopefully that list is a small one so we can narrow our search and catch this bastard.

Shark shrugs, “that’s what we’re trying to figure out.”

I tilt my head, hesitant in wanting to include more people in this case. “We? Is Tamara aiding in this?”

He shakes his head, “she’s only helping minimally. I’ve brought on Miles Weston, twenty-nine years old, adopted, a strong-willed decorated Army soldier. He’s someone I’ve wanted on my team for a while now. I gave him a call asking if he wanted a more fulfilling job rather than working warehouse security.”

I open my mouth to protest. Shark held up a finger.

“Before you go on a rapid-fire tangent, you of all people have known I’ve wanted to go global with Axis Security.” He waits for my nod before he continues. “Given Lili’s dual citizenship and her interest in you, she will be traveling more. That is a cause for concern. There needed to be teams in both countries. Weston is collaborating with me in this expansion project and assisting in finding highly qualified team members.” His energy drink is kicking in; Shark likes to ramble when he’s consumed sugar. “As much as I would love to have the technology of teleportation, I can’t be in two places at once. I’ve given all my U.S. assignments to other qualified members in my homebase so I can devote my focus on this case. Rest assured, whomever is behind this will be brought down. You have my word.” He takes a well needed breath and rakes a hand through his disheveled hair.

“Sounds like we’ve got our work cut out for us.” I push off the counter, “let’s get crackin’ before you crash.”

“Let’s do this,” Shark smirked, a devious glimmer in his eye, “before we get started, I think it’s time we wake up our gunner. Is it too early for an air horn, Corporal?”

I chuckle and shake my head, “well, wouldn’t you look at that,” I check my imaginary watch, “you have *outstanding* time, Shark.”

“Hell-to-the-yes.” Shark woops as he runs to his duffle and pulls out a small air canister, “payback never felt so good.”

I pat him on the back and open the door to the basement.

It’s times like these I miss deployment; I’m in need of a good laugh. Shark is the king of getting away with pranking. Ford isn’t an easy target, in yet he will never see this one coming.

Rude awakening, here we come.



Twelve-thirty.

According to a text from Tamara, everything is in place.

I hope this works.

One o’clock on the dot I crossed the street and preceded down the bike path along lake Erie’s edge. Skimming over the growing number of people walking, biking, and roller blading along the pathway, it took me a minute to locate her, but once I found her, I couldn’t tear my gaze away.

For the first time in days my demons were silent. Were they just as stunned at her beauty as I?

She sat on a bench next to a tall thin woman who bobbed her afro and danced in place to a song playing on a speaker nearby. This must be the lively Tamara. From what I gathered after my time talking with her over the phone and what Lili has told me about her, I've concluded she and my sister Emma are two peas in a pod; always telling it like it is, needing to control the moment, and live life as positive as can be.

Lili had her hair done while away, no doubt a demand by Tamara for her to relax and be pampered. Her hair is a shade lighter, blonde, and beautiful, and is straight rather than her typical waves.

Even from this angle she is spellbinding and captivating.

It seems I have a bounce in my step as I grow closer.

Target acquired. Locked and in position.

She's dressed in a bright yellow tee and frayed jean shorts that give only a peek at her thigh tattoo. I love her in yellow, it reminds me of the dress she wore to her family's get-together. Ever-so cheerful and free spirited.

It was the happiest I'd ever witnessed her to be. There was not a single frown crossing her features that day.

Focus Zander. No time for slacking on this mission. No time for failure.

It's time I win her back.

She turns her head as I make my way down the path, closing in.

That smile she shares with the world; it renders me speechless.

It's the smile that gives me purpose; the sense of hope, hope I can one day win her heart again. I feel my own pounding a faster rhythm as I near her, it's thrumming in my ears and chasing away all doubt.

Not only do I think she's beautiful, but she's strong, alive, and I sense a freedom she's lacked prior to now.

She stands from the bench, and I quicken my stride without it seeming too obvious I'm chasing her.

Don't leave, Lili.

I need to make amends with her, with myself. Right this very second.

She straightens once she sees me.

“Hey, Lili.”

Her brows raise as her eyes travel the length of my body, “Alexander. What are you doing here?”

There is no time to worry over the longstanding awkwardness between us; I want no part of it today or here on out. She is to know how much she means to me, what that accent of hers does to me, and how amazed I am by her.

Not sure where my confidence comes from as I lean in, pull her close, and dust a quick kiss to her lips. At first, she freezes, and I think a slap from her might ensue. Lord knows I deserve it, but I need to take that chance. My tongue caresses her bottom lip. A soft intake of air escapes her as her body molds and melts into mine, her arms coming around my waist as she initiates deepening our kiss.

Here in front of everyone.

I barely register Tamara standing nearby; my focus on the only person that matters most to me as I pour my feelings into every ounce of our bliss.

Always will.

Lili's lips linger and chase, sending a charge throughout my body. My wicked thoughts crash into me, picturing us hand and hand as we sprint to my bar down the road, lock the office, then I spread her out on my desk, more than eager of a feast.

Slow your roll Corporal.

I gently suck her bottom lip for a few more seconds, drawing out an airy murmur from her as I run my hands across her back.

A feminine throat clears behind Lili, and we come to our senses. Mostly.

She blinks dazedly at me several times but doesn't let go, cheeks flushed, breath coming out in short pants. My body must be grounding her, otherwise she feels as if she would fall. No way I would let it happen.

She furrows her brow when Tamara giggles at us. What a spectacle we must make.

“Well now, if that wasn't a proper greeting, I'm not sure what you'd call that.” Tamara stands from the bench, “should I say, get a room?”

“Umm.” Lili clears her throat, the slight blush to her cheeks now deepening its color. She's embarrassed and more aware now of the world around us. Lili isn't a fan of PDA. She steps back but keeps my hand in hers, the contact bringing that shiver through my body again. She turns so we both face the intruder. “Tamara- I-uh-, she stammers and it's the cutest thing ever.

“So, this is the illustrious Alexander I've heard so much about. Nice to meet you, I'm Tamara, Lili's best mate, best not forget it.” She held out a hand to shake and I shift to properly greet the mastermind who transpired this scheme. Her multicolored sun dress and small afro gives her a fun and inviting appearance.

“It's good to finally meet you.” I shake her hand, needing to gift her something as a thank you for getting my Lili back.

I like that, *my Lili*.

A perfect ring to it.

Tamara leans in and places a kiss to my cheek then whispers, “everything is set to go.”

I smile then turned my gaze back to the woman who is in my clutches, finding a twinkle of mischief in those entrancing eyes.

I'm at this woman's mercy and want it to be that way for the end of my days.

"I will see you two lovebirds later. I'm meeting Daniel and Claire for a late lunch. Don't get into too much trouble now." Tamara winks, kisses her fingertips, and walks off, *singsong* "*Au revoir*. (Goodbye)"

Lili and I watch Tamara stride off, a happy skip to her step.

"How did ye know we be here?" Her Scottish lilt is stronger now, more like herself than I've ever heard her be. Her eyes narrow and a hand comes up, "wait, ye don't have to answer that. Tamara is always twelve steps ahead of me." She waves her hand in dismissal then sighs.

I cup her face with my hand and press my forehead to hers.

Whisper "God how I've missed you."

She melts into my touch, closes her eyes, and whispers back.

"Me too."

I kiss her then and it's as if we are communicating the agony of these past few days. People pass by but it's this woman in my arms who has my undivided attention.

Then I remember we have somewhere to be, and I reluctantly break our kiss.

"Are you ready to go?"

Her eyes dazedly open and she gives me a quizzical look, "where are ye taking me? I hope it involves food; I'm famished." She giggles and that sound is pure heaven to my ears.

I bring our clasped hands to my lips and place a kiss to her knuckles.

“Well then, we best be on our way. *Glimmer of hope*
How does Italian sound?” I send her a knowing glance.

Her eyes light with merriment and quite possibly a hint of another type of hunger, “only if there is tiramisu afterwards.”

She winks, and a low growl grows from within my chest, my body humming to life. I lean in close and whisper.

“So much tiramisu.”

I’d give this woman all the tiramisu in the world if I could glance that smile at least once every day.

Only her and I know what that one delicacy truly means.

I’m going to do this right.

Pray Tamara doesn’t forget the *tiramisu*.

CHAPTER 9 - LILI

“Keep love in your heart. Life without it is like a sunless garden with dead flowers.” – Oscar Wilde

The second I woke, I knew Tamara to be devising a plan; that woman makes my head spin with how tactful she can be. The song *Girl On Fire* by Alicia Keys is the epitome of this beautiful soul.

She is my cherished instigator.

I had not a clue what to expect, however the last thing I did expect was to see Alexander in the park.

And that kiss.

Oh God, that kiss of his.

I wanted it last forever, confess my devotion to this man, praise him for sticking it out through my trials and tribulations, and ask him if he's experienced as much torment as I have these past days.

I don't have to ask him, I can see written in his eyes, the hazel lightning is damn near non-existent. I have to bring back their spark.

Tamara may have her plan, but I have one of my own, one my monster will rage over. *Determined* Let it rage, for I am free, freer than I have been in well over a decade, even Tamara is loving this new me. Speaking of love, the reason why I am this way is due to the man before me now.

I am in love for the first time in my life and nothing is going to stop me.

My monster will control me no more.

“What do ye have up your sleeve, Mr. Gorski?” I ask as we take the lift to my flat.

“I guess you will have to wait and see, won’t you?” He winks and squeezes my hand.

My heart does a flutter as the doors open and we make a game of it by racing down the corridor, a laugh bubbling to the surface. We stop at my door, and I pull him in for a well-deserved kiss and also to rake a hand over his beard. I love the way the rough texture feels against my skin. I hum my approval and feel my mistress wanting set free as I slide the key into the lock. I’m impatient to get everything off my chest and open myself to him.

It’s time I tell him all my secrets.

“Wait here, I’ll be right back.” He rushes to say and sneaks into my flat before I had the chance to question him.

I’m confused. Why am I not allowed in my flat?

What is this man up to? Should I be worried?

Alas, I did as he asked. I’ll be the *good girl*, for now.

Leaning a shoulder against the wall, I send a quick text to Tamara.

Me- *You cheeky lass.*

My mobile chimed a second later and I grin.

Tamara- *You love it when I’m cheeky. *Wink emoji**

Tamara- *Now quit texting me and go shag your man.*

I smile and shake my head at her boldness. My assistant acts more like the older sister I never had. We lean on each other and also like to irritate and push buttons. It’s magnificent.

I set my mobile away just as the door to my flat swings inward, Alexander holding it open, asking me to enter, a bright smile and full dimple on display.

“I’m ready for you, Ms. Hayes.”

How I adore this man. My body tingled with awareness at his nearness and that cheeky dimple. My body knows what it wants.

Him. Only him.

Meeting his gaze, the dark circles that plague under his eyes tell me he has not slept well, and I know I am to blame. He should never have to endure such chaos because of my actions, and I hope to be the one who changes that for us both. He deserves better.

That wonderful, tousled hair makes me want to run my fingers through it and add my own touch.

I need it so damn badly it hurts.

I can't contain my grin, mind conjuring an answer, the only answer in this moment.

Excited "*Allons-y, Alexander!*" There is no restraint in my giggle as I take his hand, *Elation* "I've always wanted to say that. It makes my Whovian hearts happy."

He won't understand the reference, given we have only finished season two, however, I couldn't resist. *Ten is the best.*

"You are absolutely adorable." His chuckle is soft as he presses a kiss to my temple then we enter a completely transformed space.

Awe-struck doesn't describe the sensations rushing through me right this second.

Glittering strand lights cascade down the blackout curtains along the bay of windows, and candles flickered all over, setting an intimate mood. The smell of pasta sauce and sweet treats filled the space, concluding with a hint of fresh rainfall woodlands on a stormy day. Alexander's scent. I want to capture this moment on canvas, encapsulate it in an eternal picture. *Magical.*

Pristine white linens adorned the dining table complete with place settings for two, plates full of delicious Italian cuisine and a basket of bread as the centerpiece. There was a bottle of red wine that sat next to a plate of strawberries and chocolates.

However, *no tiramisu?* How unfortunate.

How did he have time to do all this?

“Your eggplant parmigiana awaits madam. Something special will come later.” Zander declares with a mischievous glint then he bowed as a butler would and swiped a hand in gesturing to the table.

It’s then I’m taken back to the morning we first met.

It was a cloudy day on the back of the ambulance after I was attacked whilst on my morning stroll.

Disheveled hair and clothing, his left arm a sling, I’m still entranced by this man’s mystery.

I will always be captivated by him.

He held his hand out, helping me off the step. The sun peaked out at that exact moment, casting a bright aura around him, and only further extending my desire to sketch him.

I knew I had it bad. Two minutes in this man’s presence and my senses went into overdrive, that zing of awareness I felt when we touched, it was monumental.

This was the moment I heard his music, his heart calling out to my own. Alexander’s heart held the harmony my heart searched for; I didn’t know it then what the sound truly was.

I know now. *The sound is nothing I’ve ever heard before*

My breath hitches as I take in the unique space, “You did this?”

It was beautiful, every bit of it. Something out of a fairytale.

Soft music played in the background, *Hey Soul Sister* by Train and I see now Zander is taking on my musical tellings. He couldn’t have picked a better song that resembles us. Although, I’m certain we know we belong together.

Candles around the space dance with the melody, their flames igniting my fire and stoking my adoration.

He brought my hand to his lips for a kiss, a way to keep a constant connection between us as he led me to the

dining table.

“I had the help of Tamara, Claire, and your dad.”

My eyes widened at his admission, “my father, too? Wow. He must like you.” I jest and give a playful nudge of his shoulder.

My father has been quite protective over his only daughter; protective and attentive.

He knew something was up these past few days, so when I made this sudden trip back home and kept him in the dark, his sleuthing went into action, but I also blame that on his boredom. I reassured him with my best positive tone that it was only to button up a few things for the gala and I’d be back in no time at all.

Zander chuckled hesitantly as he led me to my seat then pulled my chair out for me, “I hope I made a good impression.”

I smile as I sit down, “no doubt you have.”

With the lights low and dancing candlelight surrounding us, it all felt like a scene straight from a romance novel.

“This is beautiful.” I voice, still awed by everything as he pours my glass of wine.

“No.” He pours his own glass then placed the bottle back, “This is no comparison to the beauty you possess, my siren.”

My heart melts and the rest of my body reacts to his endearment.

As always, Zander blew me away with his tenderness.

I’m falling, *‘ass-over-tit’* as Tamara would put it, falling hard for this loving man before me.

We ate as we listened to the music of love, heartbreak, and forgiveness, giving the other person perceptive glances, expressive smiles, and light touches. Zander enjoys personal

touch and affection, and the more he gives me, I find I'm beginning to like it.

Gran's words fluttered through my mind and solidified my feelings for Alexander. It helped open my eyes, to take a chance at the unknown, to not be in fear of it, but to shout my warrior call and tell the world I am not afraid any longer.

So, I take this same notion with me as I battle my monster, only I need someone by my side to fight with me.

Alexander is that person for me.

Once finished with our meal we sat at the breakfast counter and shared a slice of delicious tiramisu he had hidden away in the fridge. We made sure to devour every morsel before claiming our bellies happy and content.

I turned my body to face his and caught him studying me.

I'm Gonna Be by The Proclaimers wraps up then switches to *Under the Bridge* by Red Hot Chili Peppers setting the perfect mood of our sadness and suffering we've faced since the news came to light.

This feeling is real. I want this man in my life. In my heart.

Nothing else matters.

He placed a hand on my knee and pushed them open so he could move his body inward.

"I missed you, so damn much."

"I missed ye too." I couldn't get over how natural those words felt. These days apart have been hell on the both of us, and I know exactly what he needs from me.

My heart-to-heart therapy session with Gran helped me solidify a few lingering doubts about mine and Alexander's relationship. I wanted to show him just how much my words mean when I say them, but he was the one to speak first.

"Please forgive me, I never-

“Shhh.” I placed a finger to his lips, “No talking.” He needed to know where we stood. I slowly removed my finger, “there is nothing to forgive. Ye did the right thing. I see that now.” I cup his face and kiss him tenderly, “thank ye for protecting me.”

His shoulders sag in relief and his arms come around my waist as he deepens our kiss. Tongues tangle and beautiful tension builds, his silence is expressive in the most harmonious of ways.

I want him, no, *I need him.*

I leaned in and whispered seductively in his ear, “*Shall we have more tiramisu?*”

He knew it wasn't the second container in the fridge I wanted, it was *so* much more than that.

He lifted me as if I weighed nothing, “Wrap your legs around me and hold on.”

I did so then he started down the corridor, my giggles abounding in the small space. We entered the bedroom, my dark dwelling.

No more darkness. It's time to cast myself in light, allow this man to see me.

As we pass through the threshold, I flick the overhead light on. His approving stare sends a skitter of hunger through me. Alexander is a visual man; nothing turns him on more than to view every inch of my body. The curves I've always thought as a nuisance, that extra stone or more they say I should be rid of, and my marks I've had since age eleven, all of this had me covering my body.

No longer.

Alexander praises my physique, drools at the thought of placing his hands on my thick thighs, round bottom, or full breasts. He admires my strength and everything I've overcome.

It's on the tip of my tongue to blurt out everything, so why can I not find my own voice?

“We can take this slow-

I planted a kiss on his lips to silence him, my desperation flaring to life, my mind ready to let everything out in the open, but still the words would not come.

My fingers ran through his hair then I released my legs from his hips and rested my hands on his shoulders. His arms encase me in his grasp, unwilling to let go.

I do not *ever* want him to let me go.

Our eyes locked, the weight of my whispers felt in the room even before the words were said.

“I need ye to own me, Alexander. Please, only ye. Yer touch is the only thing to take away the memories of my monster.” A tear slips free, “I only need ye.”

“Fuck, Lili.”

He swipes away the tear on my cheek then cups the back of my head and finds my lips once more in a fierce kiss.

Our tongues entangle, battling for victory, our sounds filling the room as we hastily tugged at clothing. We couldn't get undressed fast enough, our desires piercing the veil on the last bit of indecision between us. As soon as my shorts hit the floor, he pinned me against the wall, making me gasp into his mouth.

“*Yes*, like that. *More*, Alexander.”

He took that moment to begin a trail of hurried kisses along my neck, then further down, down.

He brought my leg over his shoulder, then in one swift motion he ripped away my nickers, leaving me bare before him.

His growl of appreciation and that perfect length of raspy beard hair along my skin further heightened my arousal.

This make up sex is going to be mind-blowing.

CHAPTER 10 - ALEXANDER

“There is always some madness in love. But there is also always some reason in madness.” – Friedrich Nietzsche.

I rubbed my face against her inner thigh and delight at the sounds it evokes from her.

“My siren, you’re all I need.”

“*Alexander.*” She gasped my name as my tongue delved inside, showing her exactly how much I needed her, craved her, was enraptured by her.

“Fuck, I love it when you say my name.” I growl then swirl my tongue around that sensitive bud, her hips gyrate and press into my mouth, wanting more. I will give it to her.

Being with her gives a sense of rightness in my world of otherwise darkness. She’s here, I have her back in my arms and *holy hell* does she taste even better than I remembered.

Her breathy moans and swaying of her hips has my cock throbbing, straining against my jeans to the point of pain. No way is my dick getting any action until the lass is satisfied.

I cup her ass in one hand to better hold her up and tighten my grip on her hip as she begins to tremble above me.

Already so close. So responsive. This is a new Lili, less burdened and more care-free. A whole new woman. I can’t begin to describe what that accent does to me.

Lili is calling for me to erase every inch of that bastard from her memories. I will. She will *never* have to live in fear *ever* again.

A solid promise, one I will never go back on.

“You’re so wet for me.” I rumble, “we’ve only have just begun.”

I ran a finger through her folds then slid a digit inside as my tongue got to work on her clit.

She grips the molding, her head landing back on the wall with a thud as a moan crossed her parted lips, completely enthralled at the knowledge of her body.

“I can sense your need.” I added another finger, pumping rhythmically, the licks and flicks of my tongue moving in tandem with my strokes, that- come hither motion setting her ablaze.

She’s panting, the first flutters of her orgasm telling an approving story, “Only-, only you do that. *Don’t stop.*”

Her legs shook as she whimpered, her hips jerking uncontrollably. I sucked and flicked at her clit faster, “Alexander- *yes-*

“Come for me, my *good girl.*”

On my command her body stiffened then she cried out my name again, and again, making it damn near impossible to hold myself back. The taste of her flooding my mouth was never going to be enough, I wanted to possess every inch of this woman, *my woman.*

She deemed me as hers, so I will gladly what is mine.

Before she could fully recover, I stand, press my body to hers pinning her against the wall, then I cup her face and kiss her breathlessly.

We moan as I grind my body against hers, creating tension and making the room temperature rise.

“I love the taste of me on yer lips.” She whispers, eyes closed, breaths coming quick.

I unclasp her bra and toss it somewhere aside. Now all of her was nicely flushed and bare before me.

“*Gorgeous.*”

She undoes my belt and zipper in quick secession then my length is in her hand and she’s stroking it root to tip.

So damn good.

I watched as her index finger slid over the bead of pre come at my tip then she brought it to her lips for a taste,

sucking the digit with a smirk. I shivered at the sight.

Fuck, that was sexy. She makes me insatiable, but I know she loves it, she craves it. Lili has it just as bad as I do.

Goading “On the bed? Or right here against the wall? Either way, it’s going to be primal and oh, so fucking dirty. I hope you’re ready.”

The menacing tilt of her lips tells me I’m not in control of this moment any longer.

Her mistress has come to play.

“Bed, dear boy.”

Hell to the fucking yes.

Maybe if I’m good for her she will wear a certain outfit later. *I like the sound of that.* Lili knows I can’t resist her thigh high boots and skimpy skirt. I wonder what other outfits she has stashed away we can test out.

“*I’m waiting.*” Her words are full of sass as she stands there, arms crossed, hip cocked, and a fire blazing in her eyes. She gives a devious smirk and lift of her brow, then a wave of her hand.

No way she has to tell me twice. Then again, I’m almost tempted to disobey her, receive more of that sass she keeps bottles inside.

Definitely happening next time. I can’t wait right now.

Shucking off my jeans, I grabbed a condom from the back pocket and quickly sheathed myself, then I laid back on the bed, propped my head up with two pillows, a smirk playing at my lips as I summoned her to me with a come-hither wave of my hand.

If Lili wants to be in charge, I’ll let her be in charge. I can never resist her mistress.

She sashays her hips in my direction, a powerful lioness stalking her prey, and I for once am thrilled to be said prey.

The bright lighting from above accents her curves and highlights the places she's kept hidden. Not anymore.

My Goddess stands before me a fierce warrior.

Nothing is stopping her now.

Lili climbs atop the bed, slides her body over mine, lips just out of reach of my kiss. In a move that has my pulse thrumming with anticipation, her hand wraps possessively around my throat, this dominating move has my body zinging to life, her silent demand I submit to her registers loud and clear.

“How do you want me, mistress?” I tease.

As I wait for Lili to answer I begin rolling one taut nipple between my thumb and forefinger, my cock twitching from the sounds she makes. Part seduction, part aggression.

Will she punish me now for my defiance? I can take it, I welcome it.

Her cheeks pinken the slightest bit, lips hovering over mine as courage surges wondrously through her, “right – there.”

Lili sank down then shifted back to gain more of me, a collective groan filling the space. Our eyes lock and don't let go as she begins to move once I'm fully sheathed inside her warm, tight heat.

In this moment Lili relinquished herself to me.

Never have those ominous stormy oceans bore into my soul in such an intimate way. She's always hidden her face from my view or had her eyes closed whenever we had sex. It's then I knew we were meant for this.

This is more than sex; *I can feel it*. Can she feel it too?

My pulse thrummed wildly against her palm, strong and true. This is this only person I will submit to; being dominated by Lili is a big fucking turn-on.

“*Alexander*,” the hitch in her voice has her chin lifting, baring her neck to me. I took that as admission to nuzzle and

nip her throat the same time I thrust my hips, shifting deeper inside her, giving her what she needs, what we both need.

She's close yet not quite there; my woman needs a little more in this moment.

One hand toys with her breast, tugging and kneading the flesh while the other moves between us, circling her clit, making her writhe atop me. Her movements turn erratic as she chases her peak. Lili's pussy ripples around my cock, her body taut, mouth agape, soundlessly, *beautifully* crying out her pleasure. The hand around my neck squeezes me tighter and *I see stars*, my climax slams into me out of nowhere.

"*Fuuuck.*" I growl, almost sad to have it end so suddenly.

She stays straddling me, stroking a hand through my hair as the lingering waves of pleasure wash over me and we come down from our high.

"*Mmmm*, good boy." She hums after a moment, eyes set on me, pure rapture and bliss within.

I'm no God damn marathon man, but the way she said that just now has my dick perking up, gearing up for yet another round.

I'm game.

This woman's confidence fucking does it for me.

Entangled with Lili atop me, our breaths mingling, taking only a moment of calm before we became wrapped up in a flurry of kissing, touching, and tickling. She found my most vulnerable spot along my ribcage, and I explored her body until I found the most ticklish part of her in the crease between her thigh and ass cheek.

And I shall pocket that info for a future date.

I was ready to go again in twenty minutes, pausing only long enough to put on another condom.

This time around wasn't like the last. I allowed her to ride me until she came, then I flipped her over and drove *deep* inside, my movements languid and unhurried as we held each

other and spoke soft, sensual words of affection. There wasn't a need to rush, none at all. It felt like we had all the time in the world, just us.

After some time of being sweet and tentative the heat and desire built in the room and soon, we were chasing our peak, a second powerful orgasm washing over us in a carnal devotion.

We cleaned up and moved under the covers to cuddle, my fingers playing with a random lock of her hair, her head resting on my good arm as she sang a sweet song, *Fallin' For You* by Colbie Caillat.

I couldn't help my grin as I tucked her in closer; Lili is using this song as her way of expressing feelings for me.

She's falling for me.

It was a quick association for the both of us and one we were not expecting, some might say a little rushed even. Lili crashed into my life, she surprises me at every turn, and most of all, my demons cower in fear at her strength.

I'm far past fallen for my siren. I'm madly in love with her.

My Lili.

I wrapped her in my arms, her sigh of contentment soothing me as she finished the song. Inspiration sparking to life, I stare into my muse's eyes and recite a poem that has weighed on my mind.

"All I need is her

Demons flee in utter fear

Each time she is near."

Chased away – Alexander (Haiku)

"You keep my demons caged, Lili. Only you."

Her eyes sparkle with admiration, a sight I want to see every day.

I want to write this woman a poem, one that is as beautiful as she. Maybe one day it will come to me, and I can express what her divinity does to thee. One day.

My fingertips brushed over the curve of her breast and down to the abundance of scars on her abdomen. I expect her to tense, push my hand away, and begin her process of shutting down. She doesn't, however she remains silent as I continue my exploration.

"I need them gone, Alexander," she whispers and pulls the covers back, "please, it's your touch that quells my monster."

Lili is no longer hiding, in yet why am I still surprised when she requests this of me? Maybe deep down I'm waiting for the other shoe to drop. Or could it be the last tendrils of my demons, trying to dig their way to the surface? They are being shoved back in their cage, where they belong. I need her help to chain the door, lock it, and stand guard.

We need each other.

"Anything for you, my sweet siren."

If it's my touch my Goddess is wanting, she will have it, forever.

I shift my body over hers and land a kiss to those delectable swollen lips, then I begin my slow trek along her jawline, down her neck, then hear her light gasp from the contact of my rough beard between her breasts. I stop at her ribcage adorned by a majestic peacock stretched the length of her right side, the marks her monster made are hiding there in plain sight.

"By the time I'm done, you will forget him, Lili. That is my promise."

I'm absolutely mesmerized by this woman; I'm lost in her scent, enthralled by her beauty, her talents and strengths inspire me to be a better man. A man who has purpose again. I owe her everything, and more.

My lips connect with the first set of raised scars, continuing slow and methodical, tracing every inch of skin her

monster defiled. Then I landed on the scar directly below her belly button, a long seven-inch mark with a few puckered burns nearby. She never mentioned her monster using a knife, this looks too clean for that.

I've questioned her about this scar before, each time she shut me down. Will tonight be the same? Either way, the answer isn't going to be one I will enjoy.

"And this," I trace my fingertip along its path to end just above her mound, a shiver rocks through her then skitters through me, "Did he give you this one, too?"

Lili paused, a crease in her brow that wasn't there a second ago.

"In a manner of speaking." She weighs the words swirling in her mind before telling the truth, "The pregnancy I spoke of – it was ectopic."

My breath left me in a rush as she reveals what has plagued her for a decade. *God, no.* My heart breaks for her. Someone so young having been defiled, permanent tragedies haunting her daily, and now this.

"The pain was intense, I passed out in the corridor at school, and when I came out of surgery – doctors told me," Indecision weighed in her stare so I took her hand, lending what I could to help get her through this. She took it and squeezed tight, "They told me there was too much damage – the likelihood of becoming pregnant later in life – improbable."

Sadness and acceptance filled her eyes and I see now why she was the happiest I'd ever seen her be at our family gatherings.

The children.

Lili adores children, does everything she can for them, supports them in their dilemmas through the magic of art, and her foundation is to aide children going through things no child should have to endure.

With these selfless acts she has kept herself hidden from the outside world; I see the why of it all now.

Give me five minutes alone with this monster – when he is found dead it would be no fault of mine. The fault would be his own.

Then a flicker of positivity flares inside.

Improbable doesn't mean *impossible*. There is still a chance she can have a child. There is hope.

Tears welling in my eyes, I place a kiss to her surgical scar then move back up the bed.

“Lili.” I choke as I cup her face and brush away the onset of tears now streaming down her cheeks.

Her voice is small and holds acceptance of our future, “I understand if you don't want me anymore-

I silence her with a bruising kiss, one that is meant to leave a mark, my mark. This kiss should tell her I am here to take on her pain, how she no longer has to go through this alone, and how I want to be with her, always.

“I love you, Lili.”

Those three words –

Dread slams into me. *This is it*; Lili wasn't ready for this; she's going to run again and this time I know she isn't coming back.

Whisper What have I done?

Demons *Don't worry, Zander. We are here, we will always be here. You cannot escape us, no matter what you do. Better say goodbye to Lili.*

A shiver shook me as the demons' taunt hits home.

Through their insult a spark of optimism flickers.

Will it be enough?

Or will this too, go up in flames?

CHAPTER 11 - LILI

“Take a lover who looks at you like maybe you are magic.”– Frida Kahlo

Did I hear him correctly? Or is my mind playing tricks?

I’m pretty sure I heard him say what I have tried to voice all damn day.

Let’s rewind to a few moments ago, shall we?

“I love you.” Alexander whispered, his announcement coming after I just confessed my deepest secret to him, and he is still here, he’s not running, even with the possibility of not having a child of his own.

Alexander *loves* me.

My smile is ear to ear, and I have a ken to think he’s expecting *me* to run. Quite the opposite, love.

I say the only thing there is to say then, the one thing I’ve never said to a man before now. My confession.

“I love ye, too, Alexander.”

Elation, gratification, and adoration; three words I would describe what he experienced then.

“*Really?*” He asks, stunned at the prospect as a war raged within, expecting a different outcome.

I said it, didn’t I? Or was that all in my head? I kiss the tip of his nose, my confidence shining as bright as the sun.

“I, Liliana Hayes, am completely and irrevocably in love with ye, Alexander Gorski.”

And just like that, the anvil I’ve had riding on my shoulders upped and disappeared. *Poof*. Gone.

I’m free. Free to be me at last.

I never thought I wanted love or that I could love someone else. Love found me, and now I never want to be without it.

Harmony of the heart, with Alexander. I never thought it possible.

I cup his face this time and plant a kiss of my own. Sweet and straight to the point. He is first to break our connection.

I have never witnessed a child being gifted a puppy for Christmas, but I'd imagine it be something how Alexander is acting in this moment.

With a burst of energy, he looms over me, his strong body humming with excitement, eyes gleam with a marvelous lightning storm, and his smile is heaven sent. *God*, it's been too long since I've had the pleasure of seeing that cheeky dimple of his.

His hands cup my ears then it's like the bubble containing his excitement pops as he begins a flurry of kisses over every part of my face.

I can't contain my giggle as I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him in, our proclamations of love only further exciting us as we repeat them over and over again. There is no question now; we have clarified our love multiple times over so that the other knew.

Contentment washed over us as we relax in each other's arms.

"I love that sound." Alexander states, brushing kisses along the apex of my neck.

I laugh lightly as his beard tickles me. "What sound would that be?"

There is a smile on his lips, I can tell, even though I cannot see.

He hums approvingly, "that, right there. Your laughter. It's a piece heaven on Earth, right here in my arms." He settles me in the crook of his arm, a contented sigh escaping us.

Sleep beacons as I close my eyes.

“It’s yours, I give you all of me.”

Alexander feathers a kiss to my temple, his words laced with the barest hint of fatigue, “my Lili. My siren. My love.”

I tilt my chin and gaze adoringly into his eyes, silently asking for his kiss, one he remarkably delivers.



Alexander’s mobile chimed back-to-back, then a firestorm of calls came in, one after the other. On the third round of hearing *Under The Sea* by The Little Mermaid, Shark’s ringtone, I decided to get up and answer it. I forgot to ask Zander if Shark is aware of the song he picked for his marine mate. He only smirked and mentioned how it suits him. Shark did talk about Marine life whilst we were in London; I thought it his way to distract me from all the news, now I’m wondering just how far this story goes.

The man next to me doesn’t stir as I remove myself from his hold, not so much as a sigh of displeasure leaving him. Seems the multiple shagging sessions we had sapped my boyfriend.

Blissed I like the sound of that. *Boyfriend*. One could get used to saying that word.

Pulling the mobile from a pocket of Zander’s jeans I glance at the time at the top of the screen, finding it to be just after seven at night. It’s then I wonder how Zander got out of working on a Saturday night.

“Oi! This better be good! We’re busy!” I jest. Nothing like adding a little bite to have him question if I’m being

serious or not.

“I bet you two are *very* busy.” Shark’s tone takes on a guilty sigh, “my apologies, Lili. Is Corporal there?”

Music thumps in the background along with a few shouts from a group of females. Is he calling from a bar?

Wickedly “He’s rather – indisposed at the moment. What can I do for ye?” I glance to my man sprawled out on my bed, the sound of my voice coaxing a ghost of a smile on those talented lips of his.

A grunt fills the other end of the line, bringing my focus back to Shark, “well, hate to cut your festivities short, but we have a situation here at the bar.”

That doesn’t sound good. I’ve been yearning to sling some bottles. I wonder if they are shorthanded behind the bar.

“Just a moment.”

As if he sensed the change in my attitude, Zander sat up in bed, beckoning me to hand over the device. I was momentarily distracted by how the duvet rested low on his hips, barely covering his package. *And what an exquisite package it is.*

There’s mischief in his eyes as I hand him his mobile. Unfortunately, it doesn’t seem like we have time for another delightful shag. *Sigh* Such a pity.

Background noise flows through the speaker, Zander’s exasperation is shadowed by sleep deprivation, “what the hell did Ford do now?”

“That’s the thing, he isn’t here. Ford is AWOL, Corporal.” Shark held his mobile away to shout to someone, then he’s back, “your place is getting busy. Maddie called Gavin; he is on his way in. I’m helping ‘til then.”

Zander sighs and rubs at his eyes, “Damn it, Ford.”

“Hang on – I just got a ping from his phone.” Shark pauses then growls, “fuckin’ Ford.” He sighs, “you’re not going to like where he’s at.”

“Don’t tell me he’s –”

“Ford’s location is the police station.”

Zander deflates, “at least he’s not at the morgue,” he huffs, “sit tight, we will be there soon.” He ends the call then tosses his mobile none too gently across the bed. His head thuds against the headboard, his eyes close as he heaves a weary sigh. I take his hand in mine.

Zander is concerned about his mate. I’m worried about Zander. A person can only give so much of themselves to others before they are completely drained; a shell of themselves.

“Come. We are going to shower, then – we kick Ford’s arse.”



The next two weeks went by in a blur of planning, painting, and love making. That last one, *well*, needless to say, Alexander loves when I’m in charge, but it’s like he can see right through my mistress, and he takes control when it matters most. He can sense what I secretly crave. It’s a give and take that matters most. There is no greatness in one person having all power. It should be shared.

Evil thought Maybe next time I’ll introduce him to a bit of back door play, not on me, on Zander.

My mistress is fond of taking men to their limits, she relishes in subtle experimentation, and takes pride in the power she upholds.

It’s a thrilling sensation.

Even with all the constant rain plaguing the area on a daily basis, I couldn’t be any happier. Life seemed to be

missing puzzle pieces, only now the pieces are coming together. It's tremendous how creativity can blossom when someone's mood changes. My works of art have gone from capturing darkness, to basking in the light; the whole of my color pallet has changed and instead of using blues and blacks, I now use yellows, pinks, and whites.

"I am my own muse. The subject I know best. The subject I want to know better." Frida Kahlo.

This woman's art career is an inspiration to me; her surrealism and magical realism are two types of art that have transformed me into the artist depicted before you. Most of my portfolio is based on tragedy, nightmares, and pain, with only a handful of warm pieces scattered throughout my short history. Recently though, my creations have taken on the representation of the natural world, wellness, and most important of all, *love*.

So much love.

One afternoon whilst tucked away in the office at *Harbor's Edge*, I relaxed on the tiny sofa and sketched as Zander caught up on paperwork, a blossoming playlist of love songs croons through the speaker nearby. Never did I imagine I'd have a collection of songs that would tell such a story.

Zander added Mayday Parade's, *I Swear This Time I Mean It*, and Eric Clapton's, *Layla*, saying these are just the beginning to what he has up his sleeve for us, hinting he might write me a song.

My heart melted.

To show my adoration, my additions for him were Sonny and Cher's, *I Got You Babe* and Alison Krauss's, *When You Say Nothing At All*.

Other than using fine arts to convey my emotions, I often use songs, forming them into playlists and telling my story when words fail.

Fair warning though, it be best to steer clear if you hear death metal. I'm in a mood and do not want to be disturbed.

Those days seem far a few now with a certain man by my side.

Tamara flew home to aid in the final touches on the gala preparations and also to assist Shark's new international team with intel on Isaac. I can only imagine what tales she will tell Gran. Our conversation next time will be a lively one.

Ford landed himself in hot water the night he went to the police station, shark had to go get him. He did something he's been told on countless occasions not to continue pursuing. It finally came to a head and bit him in the arse, so to speak. Hopefully he will learn from his mistakes and stay away from married women.

Zander is just glad he didn't overdose.

Speaking of my boyfriend.

Something is off with Alexander these past days. He seemed cloaked most of the time now and will not talk about it. He's shutting everyone out. I sense his change, do others as well?

Keeping close to him, I let him know I'm here whenever he's wanting to talk, not pushing the subject. We know how badly that can play out.

Maddie and I connected as we decorated every inch of the bar for *Cinco de Mayo* in a few days' time. It was a way to distract her from everything happening with her mom's cancer battle. I learned more about Ford's *Madre*, how she taught him special recipes and secrets in the kitchen. Ford is an excellent cook, now if only he would turn his focus to food and take a break on the hen hunting.

Zander seemed to snap at the slightest upset, often slamming his office door and hiding away inside the four walls like it be his incarceration. When asking Ford about it he stated it wasn't his place to tell, reassuring me it's nothing I did, and that he would talk to his brother. He said Zander would come out of it in a day or two.

If Zander needed space, then I would give it to him to a point. He'd eventually come around and all this would blow

over. I wouldn't be far, for I am just as stubborn.

Alexander has met his match, in more ways than one.

The day or two Ford mentioned it take to turn Zander around flew into being now a week and a half without any change. He wouldn't come over, barely responded to my text messages with more than a one-word answer, and through his locked office door he blared an ominous playlist of darkness, war, and despair.

This is not the man I came to know. I was afraid of losing him. There is a dark cloud over his head, an evilness tinging the air, and a haunting plaguing his every move.

Still he will not speak.

Now I know how he felt when I wouldn't tell him my secrets. How the tables have turned.

Doesn't he realize how many people there are in his corner? We are ready and willing to lend a hand, or an ear, he need only to ask for help. But that is not a Marine's way, I should know, my father is just as tenacious and set in his ways.

Even though he be out of the military, the everlasting desire, no, *mandate* he holds himself to, that calling to protect others, bear the burden for them, he places himself last and gives everything until he can no longer stand. When you think he cannot give any more, he drags himself to continue, beating his body, and worrying his loved ones.

Would Zander confide in the one person he felt closely relatable to? Has Ford tried reaching out? Is there a group I can get in contact with? Ford promised me he'd get to the bottom of things. I have to trust he will follow through.

I'm certain this all pertains to his time in Afghanistan. When I asked Ford about the men in the military photograph behind the bar he clammed up and wouldn't talk about it. It's a rough subject for more than one.

If nothing changes, I will have Emma come for tea, she will assist in this plan I have brewing.

After a week of non-stop tasks keeping my attention, such as catching up on gala details, shipping paintings from New York to London, and planning a visit to the recreation center in town, this lass was ready for a time out.

The Thursday after *Cinco de Mayo* I thought I'd take a visit and check on dad. We spent the greater part of the day together, the only thing upsetting him is his leg brace being a nuisance in this heatwave. Summer is barely upon us, and the poor lad has to wear it for quite some time yet. It's best I prepare for one cranky man.

He sat in the shade and watched as I paddle around in the pond on the kayak. Soon after, I hopped on his riding mower and went about trimming his garden for him. I enjoyed the mindless task.

He insisted he'd do it, but I beat him to it. The man can't run, how did he think he'd win this battle? Of course, I made sure to rub it in.

Two stubborn peas in a pod we are.

Fresh air and time away from the things plaguing my mind seemed to do the trick. With no updates from Ford about his progress on the task I set him to, I decided tomorrow I'd show Alexander a side of me he thought maybe he'd never see again.

This lass needs her man back. He and Tamara are not the only ones who can plan. One way or another, he will tell me what has him this way, even if I have to coax it from him.

Back at my flat I find my nose, cheeks, and shoulders were a bit rosy from the days sun. It gave a nice sun-kissed glow, but it also made me drowsy. Too much sun and an overdue workout can make for one knackered lass.

Tamara insisted I have a photoshoot on Monday; this should be interesting. Tamara and tan lines do not mix. She will be on a warpath to find a local makeup artist to fix it then yell at me for not using a better sunscreen.

After taking a shower, I curled up on the sofa with a nice cuppa and an episode or two of Lucifer.

Still not a word from Alexander today.

My last text I sent him this morning shows he read it.

Me: *I'm here for you. I love you.*

It's then I realize Alexander has not sent his usual morning greeting text in two days. This confirms there is something amiss. He was adamant he wouldn't break his promise.

It shouldn't hurt, but it does.

I tell myself he is busy with the upcoming festivals in the area and is short-staffed. Deep down I knew differently.

His darkness is suffocating him, from the inside out.

A week and a half of distance will end tomorrow. Heed my words, Alexander, I'm coming for ye. This lass is ready for battle.



Blinking, I find I'm curled up on the sofa, a blanket wrapped around me. The tele plays the beginnings of the local news, the room cast in dim lighting. A loud round of thumps came from my entry door, giving me a start.

At first, I thought it just a figment of my imagination, still placed in a sleep haze, but then it sounded again. My heart leapt into my throat. *Was someone trying to break in?*

Heart racing, I blinked vigorously and rubbed at my eyes, then threw the blanket and sprinted to the door, making sure to turn on every light I could. Now bright as day inside, I bolstered my nerves and checked the peep hole.

What I found surprised me. A disheveled Alexander leaned against the door, grumbling something under his breath.

“Lili?” He slurs.

Elated to find him here, I turn the two locks, throw open the door then shriek with surprise. Zander stumbles inside and I barely have time to ready my arms to catch him. His body crashes into the entryway and I have to lock my knees to stop us from toppling to the floor.

“Feckin’ hell, love – what’s the matter with ye?”

An intake of breath gives me the answer I’m seeking.

Alexander is *pissed...* and dare I say, quite *boggin’* (dirty). He is rank; smelling of stale ale and liquor, the dark gray bar shirt had stains from being in the kitchen, and there is wing sauce on his face and hands. Zander’s high and tight hair hasn’t seen a comb in more than a day, and his beard has grown scraggly.

A complete opposite person entered my flat just now.

Next question: *How the bloody hell did he get here?* He better not have driven, he knows I have a no bullshite rule about drinking and driving, especially after what happened to my dad.

I struggle to shuffle him inside then close the door. If I can shift him enough to get him to the sofa, we should be fine. Now to gain a decent hold on him and not lose him in the process. If he falls, I fear I will not be able to get him up.

“Zander, you need help me out here, ye’re too heavy to carry myself.” I instruct, battling to keep him upright as I wrap an arm around him, and we begin a slow shift to the main room.

He snaps his head up to answer me and in doing so, his crown connects with the underside of my chin. The taste of iron fills my mouth then.

Damn it.

Muscles burning from the strain of holding dead weight and the shock of being accidentally struck, I can’t keep my grip.

I watch as he collapses and lands in a heap on the floor just before making it to the sofa.

Breathing harder than normal, I bring a shaky finger to my bottom lip and sure enough, it came away wet with blood. Sighing, I lick my lip to try and stanch the flow then bend down and give his shoulder a gentle shove.

“Oi! Wake up, Zander!”

No response other than a low groan. He is out cold.

Well, shite. How am I going to get him to the sofa?

It’s then I find a good-sized wet spot on his thigh and in his lap. I am thankful when I learn it’s spilt liquor and not the alternative.

Alexander said doesn’t drink much at all after purchasing his business, he told me of a time how his place was usually littered with bottles. At least until Emma and his mom came to his rescue.

A moment’s hesitation follows as I try and regain my bearing’s and think of what to do. With Emma and Wyatt out of town until tomorrow, I don’t have any other choice but to give Ford a call to help me.

Checking his pockets, I find his mobile and grimace when I find it too covered in wing sauce. *Yuck.*

I swipe it and find the Uber app still open, answering my question of how he got here. *Good*, at least he wasn’t stupid enough to drive in this state. I’m surprised he made it up to my flat without hurting himself.

Opening his contacts I locate Ford’s number and tap the call icon. After two rings he picks up and a blast of loud metal music fills the speaker. He hollers over the background noise.

“You over your sour mood enough to meet with me? Seriously Corporal-”

“Ford, it’s Lili.” I interrupt his ranting.

Is that me stammering right now? I bite my lip in frustration then let out a curse at the contact of my split lip. I try soothing it as best I can with my tongue. It takes him a second to respond, probably flabbergasted at hearing from me.

“Lili? What’s up darlin’?” Ford moves away from the sound of Metallica’s *Master Of Puppets*, Hank making his presence known with a growly howl.

It’s been too long since playing with the pup. I need some Hank snuggles.

“Alexander arrived a minute ago and passed out on my entry floor. I can’t move him.” Kneeling, I brush my fingers over Zander’s tousled hair, moving it off his dampened brow to better glance his beleaguered features etched there like granite even in this state. “I’m worried about him.”

The chime of a car unlocking sounds as he slams the door to the house. A disgruntled sigh mixed with a slew of Spanish curses leaves his lips.

“I was afraid of this.” He calls for Hank to hop in his vehicle then the door snicks closed, “Don’t worry, Hank and I will be right over. Sit tight until I get there, kay?”

“Right.” I say weakly then hang up and find the news explaining the weather for the next seven days. I get up to shut it off, not before noticing rain all this weekend. That will put a damper on the chalk art festival at the old silo buildings down the way. I was thinking of going to it so I could talk to a few local artists and connect with my kind of people.

Alexander is more important.

I turn off the tele then wander to the kitchen for a wet cloth to clean Zander a little, no need for Ford to see his brokenness. Thinking of the swelling on my face, I grab a plastic bag, put an ice cube in it and apply it to my lip. *Tamara is going to kill me for having to reschedule the photo shoot.*

Ford must’ve flew here because he arrived at my door in under fifteen minutes. He knocked twice then entered on his own accord, Hank giving a jovial greeting as he made his way inside, Ford on his heels.

“Jesus, boss, what have you done now?” Ford exclaims as he surveys the scene. He placed a hand at my elbow to help me up, the cloth covered in greasy wing sauce in my opposite hand. His Southern drawl more pronounced now, “Alright, up ya go darlin’. Let’s get him settled.” His gaze moves from the heap on the floor to my face and immediately his mask darkened.

He didn’t say anything about my lip, just picked Zander up as if he weighed no more than a sack of flour then made his way to my bedroom. Once inside, he tossed Zander on the bed as I switch on the overhead light; even the blinding light doesn’t have him stirring, confirming he’s consumed far past any reasonable amount.

Ford turns in my direction then strides two steps to stand in front of me. Bringing one large hand out to cup my chin, he turned my cheek to get a better look at my lip, then let out a growl, “What the hell happened?”

I swallowed hard but waved my hand in dismissal, “nothing, I swear it was an accident.”

I can smell the cigarette smoke lingering on his clothing and in his breath, even past the chewing gum he has in his mouth. It’s the same revolting smell I have never been able to forget. It makes my stomach churn and my pulse quicken. My throat tightens.

Ford isn’t here to hurt ye, get your shite together, focus on Zander.

His other hand tightens into a fist at his side. His tone extends in anger as his brows draw together in a scowl, “Lili, don’t you dare go about protectin’ him, I mean it. He is gonna to be madder than a wet hen when he sees this. So, again, tell me what the hell happened?”

I look him in his eyes as I push his hand away. Stepping back, I take in a well needed breath, willing my pulse to slow.

“He came through the doorway, I caught him, his head connected with my chin. See? An accident. Accidents

happen.” My fingers go to my swollen lip, and I wince.

“He isn’t going to accept that as an answer, you know that, right?” He cocks a brow in challenge, waiting to see if I’d break from the original story.

Instead I try to switch the subject around, “What is wrong with him? He has barely talked to me. Have I done something?”

Ford sighs as he crosses his arms then shifts on his feet, a shake to his head as his answer.

If I didn’t know him as well as I do now, I’d be frightened by the man’s demeanor; he radiates anguish now that his barriers have slipped.

“Seriously, Corporal?” He growls and begins rubbing his forehead, “I thought I was the only one he was pushin’ off. I didn’t think in a million years he would do that to you. I’m sorry.”

He let out a mumble of Spanish that I didn’t quite understand, however, I caught most of it. He runs a hand through his short espresso colored hair then scratched at his thick scruffy jaw, hesitant to expose anything about their past.

What he reveals leaves me stunned.

“This month has been three years since Afghanistan.” He paused as his nostrils flared, “since-.” His words fall short as a pregnant pause fills the room.

I lightly grip his tattooed forearm covered in scars and can sense his trembling.

Then it hit me.

“Oh, no.” I reply weakly, understanding the premise but not the full details as I trace a darkened line along his skin, “since you received these.” His scars.

He nods and tries giving me a smile that ended up more as a grimace, “We were gonna to sit at home and have a beer together as our annual send-off to our brother, but he insisted on being alone.” He voiced, waving a hand to Zander on the bed, “the stubborn bastard.”

My Thoughts exactly.

I purse my lips and let go of him, wrapping my arms around my middle, “What about Shark? He shouldn’t be alone right now either.”

He takes a deep breath in then lets it out slowly, “Shark, he has a different way of dealing with this and is more than likely not alone right now.” He shakes his head.

He is trying not to think about the past, but it’s written all in his body language; tense muscles, flexing hands, ticking jaw.

Whatever happened three years ago haunts every single one of them.

His voice breaks at his next words, “Corporal has been through a lot, has helped me through a lot.”

“You and Zander seem to be close. He needs you, as much as he might say otherwise.” I turn my gaze to the bed, then back to Ford, “he will not talk to me about it. But I know pain, Ford. None of you are alone in this fight.” I allow that to hang in the air a moment, then I turn and make my way to the foot of the bed where Zander’s feet are still dressed in his boots and hang off the bed.

“Can you help lift him up to get his shirt off? I’ll get his clothing in the wash.”

I unclasp his belt then shuck off his trousers, adding them to the pile on the floor. Zander doesn’t stir as we jostle him around.

Once stripped and set in a clean pair of pants, Ford allowing me to take on that task, we settled him onto his side, concerned about him choking in his sleep. I gathered his soiled linens and threw them in the laundry. Behind me, Ford shut the bedroom light off and left the door ajar.

Laundry machine running, I made my way into the kitchen, finding Ford leaning against the counter, staring intently at one of my paintings in the dining area.

“I’m going to make some tea; would you like some?” I ask, filling the kettle. In no way will I be able to rest; I’m too nervous over Zander’s current state to leave him alone.

Unimpressed “Tea? Do I look like a tea drinker to you?” He asks, turning to glance at my reaction. He crosses his arms then smirks and winks.

I let out a laugh at his lighter mood, fully aware it’s a front he’s illustrating. “No, ye don’t. Although, I bet ye like sweet tea?”

He chuckles, “it’s like you know me.”

There is a certain glint in his eye that unnerves me.

He better not try using that Southern charm on me; my adrenaline is ramped up and I’m ready to take him down if need be.

No matter the size, I’ll still give it my best shot at standing my ground.

The thought is quashed at his next words.

“Corporal is so damned lucky to have you, darlin’.” His tone takes on a unique mixture of melancholy and delight, “For everythin’ the two of you have been through, for everythin’ he has done for me, it’s good to see him happy.” His crossed arms shake as he begins to chuckle, “you have no idea how big of an ass he could be at times.” He shakes his head, “now, if only you would have fallen for *my* charm, now that would’ve been somethin’.” Ford sighs dramatically, “I need someone to save my cattywampus ass.” He pauses, a grin playing on his face, “You wouldn’t happen to have a friend back home that you could hook me up with, would ya? I’m going to steer clear from the married ones this time.”

He nudges my shoulder at the jab to himself. We laugh together as the notion of needing to kick his arse recedes.

“The only mate I have back home likes men as much as you like hot tea,” he knows I am referring to Tamara; they met whilst she stayed a few days, they seemed to get along pretty well. I give him a nudge back, “Yer lass is out there, and when the time is right, the two of you will meet. Give it time.”

A few minutes go by with us standing side by side leaning against the counter, arms crossed as we stare at my *'Nightscape Harbor'* painting I created the first night I arrived to my flat.

“Say, my walls at home could use some art. Maybe I can get you to do up one for me sometime.” He says gesturing to the painting.

My smile brightens, “I’d love to, Ford. Give me some time after the gala and I’ll have it done.”

Just then the kettle signals it’s at temp and out of habit I hurry to shut it off, so the noise won’t wake Zander.

“Think you’ll be okay alone with him? I’m gonna to give Shark a call, check on him, then maybe I’ll head to the gym.” He pushed off the counter, readying to leave.

“Ford, wait.” I pause and stare into the eyes; their back to hinting at his misery, “please, stay. I don’t want you alone right now.”

His shoulders visibly relax, implying he secretly wanted to be here just in case.

He nods once, “I can do that.”

“Ford,” I set my mug on the counter and stand in front of him, “I want ye to remember that everything happens for a reason. The good and the bad. We are to work through it, to overcome it. To survive.” Gran’s words have ultimately made their mark and now it is my time to pass them on. “It’s the love of friends and family that will help ye through.”

He squeezes my shoulder and bends down, setting a kiss to the top of my head, “You are one wise woman, miss Lili.”

The next hour flew by, sipping tea, switching laundry over, and mopping the floors. Anything that I can do to stay awake. I went in and checked on him every twenty minutes or so, then I snuggled with Hank on my sofa. *Yes*, I let him on my comfy sofa. As long as Hank and Ford keep the secret, Zander will be none the wiser.

Ford sprawled his bulky body out on the sofa, bottle of beer I found in the fridge is just about gone, he's half-awake, and streaming a docu-series about the Roman Empire. I did not peg him to watch that type of show, but now I know what to fill our silence with when in need.

I overheard Ford's voicemail to Shark and almost wish I hadn't.

Ford: *"Shark. Corporal isn't in a good frame of mind. I had to hide his guns, now he took to the brown bottle. This might turn ugly. Give me a call when you can."*

I had to give myself a few minutes before exiting my bedroom, not wanting a confrontation with Ford tonight. My mind spun at all the questions bubbling to the surface. What did he mean by he had to hide Zander's guns? Would Zander harm himself? To others? How long has Zander's mental state been spiraling out of control?

When I'm set to refill my mug, I damn near drop it and shriek as a male's guttural screams sounded from my bedroom.

Racing down the corridor with Ford right on my heels, I entered my room, turned on the light, then went in the bathroom for a flannel. Wetting the cloth, I ring it out then go to Zander's side. Given his agitated state, I didn't want to startle him or have him hurt me, so I made sure to keep my distance.

One of his hands held a fist full of the duvet tight in his grasp, the other lay at his side, nothing but anguish and panic filling his tense muscles, and creased brow. Sweat poured off him now.

I began wiping the flannel over his brow and down his neck, offering what soothing shushing noises I could muster through my shivering. I wasn't cold, only ripe adrenaline.

"Shhh - Shhh, it's alright. It's going to be alright, I'm here."

I glance to Ford, stock still in the doorway, not an ounce of tiredness in his wide eyes, as he takes in the scene of

his brother in the midst of a nightmare. *Not a nightmare, but a memory.*

My eyes find Zander just as he let out a moan and began gasping.

“- fire extinguisher!”

“What?” I look around the room, confused.

Ford’s face is as pale as a ghosts. Zander shouts another curse, cutting off my question.

Zander rears up in bed, his eyes wide as his gaze darts frantically around the room, his thoughts not physically here in this moment. *He’s in a flashback.*

“Fuck! I need to save my men! Get this door open!”

“Ford! What do we do?!” My shout strains from the lump in my throat.

Ford didn’t answer as Zander’s free hand rummages around the comforter in a hysterical behavior. The temperature rises a few degrees as beads of sweat form on his brow and the shouting continues. I back off the bed, my body trembling as I glance at Ford.

He stands frozen in the doorway, pasty white as he takes in deep breaths. His muscles bulge as he grips the door casing with both hands. He’s ready to bolt.

**Panic* What do I do? What do I do?*

Is this what Tamara and Gran have gone through so many years with me? Bloody Christ, it’s enough to give someone a heart attack.

“Fuck! We’re burning! Everyone is burning! Ford! Shark! Get out!” Zander shouts, “Scout! Get this fucking door open!” He shakes his hand harder against the imaginary door and begins panting and choking on what I can only imagine to be invisible smoke.

I tamp down the tea that is trying to make its way back up and instead focus on his needs. I get back in the bed, take

the cloth in my trembling fingers and swipe it over his face, continuing with any soothing sounds I could think of.

“Shhh. It’s alright, love. Ye’re okay. Everyone is fine.”

My intuition tells me Owen didn’t make it home alive.

“I gotta go – * deflate * Fuck!”

Ford chokes on a sob and grips a handful of his hair as he comes to a conclusion.

“I’m sorry, - I gotta to go-” he parrots, finding my concerned eyes before he turns and storms out of the room, leaving me with more questions than I originally had.

CHAPTER 12 – ALEXANDER

“The soldier above all others prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war.” – Douglas MacArthur

First thing I noticed is the blinding headache washing over me, I'm swaying on a carnival ride and willing it to come to an end. I can't get off; the demons have their claws dug in deep, and this ride has only one true conclusion.

One final ending in mind.

Is today that day?

Mind is not my own

Weapons of man's destruction

Now rest in my hands

Words lost in the void

Drowned out by demon's snarls

No longer myself

Regret lay heavy

Swallowed by hate, shame, loss

I travel there now

Not keeping steady

I venture this on my own

Not asking for help

Shh, shh, quiet now

The handgun whispers sweetly

My final poem

Accepted Fate – Alexander (5 stanza haiku)

The ball of cotton in mouth is the reminder of what I did last night, not that I can remember much of it. Nothing like paying homage to my fucked-up life with more than two-thirds a bottle of Johnny.

Yeah, sounds about right.

Once I'm able to open my eyes and sit up, I find I'm not home, or sprawled out on the couch at the bar.

And why am I fucking naked?

What the hell happened last night?

Let's back track to what I can remember. It was a slow night, I sent everyone home early, made myself wings for dinner, and stayed to work on the never-ending paperwork. One thing led to another, my thoughts became something other than my own; the demons taunts churned like level five rapids, encouraging me to take to the bottle, and drink away my regrets. I wanted nothing more than to shut them up for any amount of time, potentially forever if I could get the ratio right. So far sadly, that hasn't happened.

**Demons* Ohh, we had fun with you last night, Zander. A little nod to the past to bring about your misdeeds.*

Rubbing at my eyes to clear the blurry vision, I glance around to find I'm in a familiar room, Lili's room. The scent of her permeated the atmosphere, the mood set in a pitter-pattering of rain on fresh lavender. My sweet Lili.

How did I end up here?

Turning slowly, I find a glass of water and an uncapped bottle of pain relief lay waiting for me on the side table.

I pop a few pills in my mouth and chase it down reluctantly with the water provided.

A pair of basketball shorts rest at the end of the bed so I pull them on and stagger to the exit. Opening the bedroom door, my stomach gave a grumble of both pleasure and disgust at the smell coming from the other room.

Strong coffee. to get me through the day.

I take it slow down the hallway, the sound of bacon sizzling, and sweet humming encouraging me to continue. *I Caught Fire* by The Used croons through the speaker on the counter.

She's listening to our playlist. It's a much better sound to hear than the playlist I've held on to as of late; Motionless in White's *Voices*, Linkin Park's *Crawling*, and Shinedown's 45 tops the charts on my demon's brutalization of my mental state. They do enjoy it when I reach my low point, then they dig in even deeper, catching wind of my vulnerability and claiming what they believe to belong to them.

"Lili?" I rasp and try clearing my throat.

Her back is facing me, hair up in a messy bun, and her skimpy tank top and shorts showing off a pristine hint of curves, making my thoughts drift to how long it has been since I've held her.

"Morning." She said warmly, her position unmoving by the stove, "take a seat." She had a coffee mug set out ready to fill.

I did as I was told the same time Lili placed the cup of dark liquid in front of me. She kept her gaze downcast so to not show me her unapproving stare, or so I thought that to be the reason.

Bringing the cup to my lips, I immediately began to shake, damn near scalding myself when I finally took in her appearance; the sight was a punch to my gut unbelieving what I see to be real. I splashed coffee all over the counter then knocked the stool over in my haste to get to her.

I cupped her jaw gently and inspected her lip as my thumb ran over the fresh mark, her breath hitching at the contact. My scowl deepened and I saw red. *Who the fuck did this to her?* My grip tightened the slightest bit making her eyes widen a fraction. I'm going to kill whoever decided to touch her, mark her, harm her.

**Demons* Oh, don't you remember, Zander? We mentioned you had fun last night.*

**Dismay* No. My stomach sank, blood ran cold as the breath rushed from me.*

"Please." I whisper, *"God, please tell me I didn't-*

"It was an accident- ye didn't do it on purpose." Lili attempts at pulling away only to find herself ensnared within the confines of my grasp. I'm beside myself; what did she say? I can't get my mind to work. Then it clicks.

"I hit you?!" I shout, taken aback, withdrawing my hand from her as if burned then I clutch the counter and fight the nausea. *This cannot be happening.* The dull headache is now a full-blown migraine. Spots dance in my vision, my body breaks out in a sweat, my throat constricts, I'm unable to take in a breath. *No, no. This can't be happening.*

**Demons laughter* Ah, but it is. You hurt your precious siren. How can you ever live with yourself? *Tsking* Stooping so low as to harm a woman. How unfortunate. *Sinister* You're not willing to finish the task we set before you, so now you take it out on others. Who are you anymore, Zander? How long until those you love suffer by your hand?*

I've gotta get out of here. She is not safe with me, not safe at all.

She shook her head intently, her accent growing thicker, "no, I swear to ye, it was an accident-

"Injuring you isn't a fucking accident, Lili!" I screech at her confirming my suspicions, my body trembles and I sense my breakdown boiling inside.

There is no way to stop it, I'm unable to hear her protests over the ringing in my ears as an upsurge of nausea takes hold. The room spins and I let go the counter. I'm swaying on my feet as I stumble to the bathroom, my shoulder screams as it connects with the wall, *"fuck!"* My mouth waters and my breathing turns panicked.

I know what is about to happen.

The plaguing thought of harming her twisted my insides, sending wave after wave of shame washing over me. My knees slammed to the floor, and I made it just in time to lift the lid and retch.

She isn't safe, no one is safe from me. How could I be so reckless?

**Demons* Lili is better off without you. It's too bad really, we could've had more fun with her, torture her, you'd have no other choice but to watch. *Evil laughter* You'd like that, wouldn't you? Deep down you do, we know you do, you're thinking about it right now.*

"Shut up! Shut up! I can't take it anymore!" I whimper, unable to stifle the agony expanding to its limits. The demons have free range, their venom and evil schemes constantly plague me. There is no escape to them.

There are no other options for this life but to end it. *I can't live like this.* The gauntlet lay before me, and I welcome it.

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, / that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / and then is heard no more. It is a tale / told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / signifying nothing." – Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5.

** In tears * I'm sorry Owen, so fucking sorry!* I failed you. I failed your family; Natasha and Ellie, they need you here, and *I took that all away.* I've taken so much from everyone around me. I'm a murderer, a vial beast with no purpose other than to bring down those I've proclaimed a promise to.

I will hurt everyone I love no matter if I live or die. Why suffer? Why continue on in this life of give and take, when I give so much to my friends, my family, and my country, and here I take ever so little from them?

Will I ever see Owen again? Certainly not in this lifetime, what about the next? "*Quoth the raven, 'Nevermore'.*" Thanks Edgar Allen Poe. *The Raven* said it best.

This quest before me is at its end. It's time I lay siege from those I love and meet my eternal silence.

**Demons* Yes! There is nothing here for you now. Best to let us help you put an end to this existence. Join us.*

**Agony* "Please! Make them stop! They will not stop!"* I cup my ears and plead through a sob.

A cool cloth came across the back of my heated neck while a second one swiped at my forehead. Lili knelt beside me, silent and observing as she trailed the cloth down my cheek. I shivered at the contact, unable to move away from the bowl as the tension in my gut signaled there may be more.

"I'm here, Alexander," she states as calm as she could, a broken whisper following after, "I'm here."

I do not deserve this woman. Lili deserves a man who can lift her up, comfort her through her struggles and dark days, and praise her every day. I fear this beast is too far gone.

Shifting so my back is against the tub, my pulse thumps to a battle beat as I will it to calm. My head hangs low between my legs, my hands grip my knees, and I try wracking my brain at what all took place last night.

**Inner battle* It doesn't pay to be blackout drunk, now, does it?*

No, it doesn't. Not when it comes at a cost.

"I've never hit a woman before. *Never.*" I rasp. Shame is the burden I must bear now, "You have to know; I was raised better-

"Will ye can quit blethering on about it? Ye dinnae hit me." She confirms much stronger now, swiping at the other side of my face with the cloth, "I'm fine, I swear to ye it was an accident." Her hands clasp my cheeks, and she stared straight into my eyes, "Ye stumbled into my flat, went off balance, yer hard head connected with my chin."

I snagged her wrist to stop the comfort she offered. I didn't deserve that either.

"I could have hurt you far worse-

“I highly doubt that.” She smiled weakly, “ye were steamin’ and I couldn’t hold ye up. Ye fell to the floor, out cold.” She stated with a lightness trying to alleviate the tension, but it did little to help.

I fought the acid trying to make its presence known again. I closed my eyes and took deep breaths.

She was tortured and molested by her mother’s drunk boyfriend for years; I could’ve unknowingly over-powered her and taken her, raped her like that monster, then I’d transform into exactly what the demons want me to become.

Fuck! The thought chills me to my soul.

“I can’t do this anymore! I’m so fucking tired, Lili.”

I drank myself into a steeper, the demons possessed my body and made me do these things I cannot recall, like a marionette on strings I couldn’t control my thoughts or actions.

It scares the shit out of me.

“Shh.” Lili starts in but I’m quick to change my tune.

I need to be strong for her, not the other way around. Lili shouldn’t have to comfort me, shouldn’t have to deal with a broken man who has one foot in the grave.

“You should *never* have to deal with me like this. *Fighting back tears* I’m sorry, Lili-

“There is no need to apologize,” she cut me off casually, “I’m not leaving ye. We will get through this, together.”

“Lili.” I lift my head to find her gentle stare filled with tears as I go about studying her. The dark circles under her eyes told me she was up all night, her complexion is pale, worried, maybe even slightly scared, *and that broken lip*; I am to blame for her being in this state. “Did you even sleep at all?”

I felt guilty after everything she has done for me. Even after what I did to her last night, she is still here. *Why?*

She shook her head, “I dinnae want anything happening to ye.”

A flicker flashed through my mind as she swiped the cloth across my forehead again, “you did this for me last night,” I strained to say, taking her wrist that held the cloth, “thank you.”

She smiled faintly and shifted between my open legs to continue her comfort. My eyes close as I accept what she is willing to give. Through all my giving, I take for once. I release her wrist and she resumes cooling me down. The thumping in my ears lessens as she begins humming *Hey Jude* by the Beatles.

“Gran always did this fer me when I was ill. It helped, even just a little.” Her eyes rake over my appearance and her nose crinkles the slightest bit, “come, it’s time ye get a hot bath and have someone take care of ye fer once.”

I nod unconvincingly, finding I couldn’t move. I just stared at her, those tired eyes, that cracked puffy lip. *Fucking hell*. How could I be so insensitive? There is enough happening in her life right now to keep her busy, I’m only adding to the burden.

Can she ever forgive me?

“No, yer not doing that,” Lili bites out, a finger wagging and a stern scowl on her face, “no more thoughts of blame. Let me clean ye up,” her smile returned, her tone doing a one-eighty and relaxing into a hint of humor, “then we need to have a serious chat on how ye went through the Marines hitting like a lass.”

My head snapped up in surprise, a chuckle skirting past my lips, “that isn’t funny.”

Resentment struck then. Whenever Owen and I sparred he’d yell at me, tell me to quit hitting like a girl. Owen never experienced a punch from my sister. Trust me, girls can hit just as hard.

She grinned as she stood, set the washcloth in the sink, then said she’d be right back to get the tub in the master

bathroom filling.

I watched her leave, my mind in a fog of being hungover and depleted of just about all my willpower. No desire to move, I just sat there, not wanting to face reality, or the cost it carries.

She knows something is wrong. I've shut her out for more than a few days, unwilling to show her the true hand I've been dealt. Yet again, I have not kept my promise to tell her how beautiful she is, each and every day.

See? This Marine can never keep a promise.

I'm a mentally deranged man, plagued by darkness, guilt, and fury. How much can one man take before crashing? Am I to that point yet? How alone can I stand to be until I break?

You're not alone anymore. Lili is willing to stand beside you. Let her in, Zander.

This voice responding to my questions is new, calm, and positive, and not the dark demons for once. Still I am hesitant, however this new voice wouldn't relent. It demand I change my tune.

What do I have left to lose?

Body aching, stiff, and tired, I pushed myself to get off the tiled floor to find the woman who hopefully would hear my apology.

She is my rock through this fight. Liliana Hayes is so much stronger than I will ever be, but maybe, if I bask in her light, feel her warmth upon me, one day I might be half as brave as she.

Shuffling down the hall to the other bathroom, the sound of water splashing as it filled the tub wasn't the only thing drawing me in; Lili's siren call is there, singing along with Three Days Grace's *Lost In You* as it plays softly on the portable speaker; her tone takes on a gentler cover of the ballad, my body aching at needing her close. My heart skipped at her selecting the right song to sing at the right time... How did she know?

She knows you, Zander. Let her in. It's time you tell her about your deployments, how you acquired your scars, and about Owen.

“Lili.” My voice breaks as I lean against the door frame and find her sitting on the edge of the tub, her hand wisping around in the water as she sings sweetly. A true siren come to take me away. That gentle smile is all I need from her. Why have I denied myself? I have to tell myself it wasn't me who shut her out, but my demons.

What a sorry excuse.

After brushing my teeth a few times, the song switches to Elton John's *Don't Let The Sun Go Down On Me*, and Lili continues with her reciting the lyrics as she shuts off the taps then strides to stand in front of me.

“Lili, I'm sorry-

Her finger pressed to my lips, halting my apology, “*stop.*” She whispers and eyes me expectantly, “Let me love ye, Alexander.”

She moves in close, chest to chest, and shifts her hand from my lips to cup my unkempt scraggly jaw. My eyes close, body visibly relaxing into her touch. *This is what I needed all along, her.* Again, why did I deny myself? Why did I push her away?

I lean in and place a kiss to her lips, one full of emotion, heartache, and hidden agony. She can sense all of it; I can feel her drawing it out of me and taking it into herself. Then reality came crashing back and I break our kiss.

Tired “I have to get to the bar.” I need to call Maddie and give her a heads' up. I grimaced when I caught sight of the time on the docking station. It's damn near ten a.m. *Shit*, I'm running really late today.

“Ye are goin' nowhere.” Lili barks her protest, “I've taken care of it.” She points to my shorts, “take them off, now. Get in before the water gets cold.”

I shake my head, ready to drop my drawers, “so demanding.”

“I’ll show ye demandin’. Just ye wait.” Her hands go to her hips.

I chuckle at her sass, I’ve missed it, “whatever you say, mistress.” I drop my shorts and catch her approving stare as it skirts across my body. Then an idea hits me, and I pull her into me, “you – strip, too. You’re joining me in this tub.”

That grin of his about did me in.

Once settled in a comfortable position, her back to my front, we sat there, caressed and cleaned one another, and silently expressed our devotion as our love playlist continued.

I give Lili props, she tried being the big spoon, however, having her behind my larger body, it didn’t fit right. So, she tucked herself between my legs, her ass resting almost right where I wanted it, and her hands stroked my thighs. She was ensnared in my hold, unable to be let go, stuck with me as I am to her.

As we took turns with the washcloth, my demons had plans of their own as bits and pieces of last night flashed through my mind, making my heart race, my body tense.

“Don’t run.”

“Hmmm?” I ask, her voice bringing me back to the present.

Could she sense the change taking over? My darkness settling in? She turned her body around and straddled my thighs then wrapped her arms around me.

“Ye told me before not to run. How can I cage yer demons if ye keep yer distance? Let me in, love.”

Love. That word rang in my ears and dampened the anxiety forcing its way to the surface. Our eyes connected and my heart melted from her dark-sea gaze.

The feelings crashed over me before I could tamp them down, a sob escaping through my parted lips.

Then another.

And yet, another.

Fuck! what is wrong with me? I'm a Marine, we have to stay strong, I can't be doing this...

But I was.

Tears filled my eyes, long guttural tortured cries of agony escaped me with no way to control them.

Her hands cup the back of my head, her strong tone whispering, "Shhh. It will be alright. Let it out."

My body shakes against her as the vision's plays out in my mind of what it wants me to remember.

The flames. The high pitched alarm. Waiting on radio calls. The rapid gunfire. The constant boom, boom, Boom, *BOOM*. The damn ringing in my head. The shouting. The explosions. The fire. The screams of my men. The blood, *oh, God*, the blood.

**Whisper* Owen...*

"I'm here, love. It's okay." Her sensual voice has me clawing my way to the surface, wanting to break free from these chains my demons trapped me in. "I've got ye. I will always be here."

She held me through it all, long after my sobs dissipated.

The memories you have of Owen shouldn't die. Let him live through you. He has so much to give, even with him gone. Think of Ellie. There goes that angelic voice again. Where has this being rested? Dormant inside me, and why only now has it made its presence known?

It's time Lili know what happened. You can trust her.

I released a shaky breath, the same time her hands sift through my hair, wordlessly encouraging me to continue only when I'm ready.

"Ford, Shark, and I, we lost our brother, Owen three years ago this month," I whisper from the crevasse of her neck, my throat constricts with the onslaught of fresh tears, "and it feels like it were only yesterday."

That soft tone of hers and the soothing glide of her fingers through my hair sends shivers throughout my body.

“He isn’t gone, Alexander. Owen lives inside ye, he breathes even now – the memories you have of him can live on. No one can take him from ye.” Her pulse is strong and steady as mine tries syncing with it.

Lili truly knows who I am, what I need, and how I desire to be loved. As long as she loves me – that is all I ever need.

I kept silent and allowed her words to sink in. The more I think about these previous years, the more I can see the truth in her words and how much I have bottled the good memories inside, intermixed with the negative.

He’s been with me all this time; Owen is one of the reasons I bought *Harbor’s Edge*, and how I ended up adopting Hank. He’s here with me through my brothers as well as his wife Natasha, and most importantly, his almost four-year-old daughter, Eleonora.

Owen may not be physically here, but he is still very much part of mine and so many other’s lives. We are here making our daily decisions based on the memory of our fallen brother. We should be doing things to better ourselves, things that he’d be proud of, not drinking ourselves into an early grave.

In a way it’s like he sent me my siren to watch over me and love me for all my flaws, and also to keep me in check. If anyone can help me get through my worst days, it’s Lili.

Brett Young’s, *In Case You Didn’t Know* strums through the speaker making Lili hum along ever-so beautifully, her siren call has me sighing and relaxing into her.

Her eyes rake over my visage, seeing right through my façade as my head shifts away from her shoulder, “what is occupying in yer mind?” She asked as her hand continues in my hair and *God*, it feels really damn good to have her this close to me again.

Our time together is better than any therapy session I've had since coming home. Holy shit does it hurts like a *motherfucker*, but I'm beginning to see the light, and what a blinding sight it be.

Time to apologize.

"I'm sorry I was an ass these past weeks and falling back on the promise I made to you. I am an asshole."

Her hand stills in my hair and her stare turns analytical, "*Haud yer wheesht! (Hold your tongue)* Stop it, right this minute. Do not bring pity back into this, Zander. Ye are one of the strongest men I ken. It takes an immense amount of strength to go through what ye have." Her brow furrows, "The pity party ends today, Alexander. Ye're stuck with me. That's final." She settles herself into my arms and tilts her head to peer up at me.

I place my hand under her chin and gaze fondly into her eyes, "I love you."

"I love ye, too." She smiled, brighter than the moon and stars combined.

She is my Goddess Theia, shining her light upon me, casting the darkness far, far away. The demons cry out in agony now, scurrying to their cage and hiding in a corner.

The door to their prison cell is bolted closed, chains wrap around and around, and my guard stands tall by my side, not allowing any entity to hinder on my stability.

I am going to marry this woman someday; I knew it the moment I saw her. The tumultuous sea inside my disturbed mind is now soothed to sleep, and my shattered heart, what I'd thought to be forever encapsulated by grief and misery, is now bandaged by her touch.

Lili is my salvation.

I gaze dutifully at my siren, the mission I've assigned myself at an early age seems like a lifetime ago, my path coming to a fork in the road, endless options at my disposal, only one is the brightest.

The path with Lili.

I brush away damp strands of hair then cup her face and get lost in her stormy seas whisper clarity.

“Serving my country is what I believed to be my one true destiny. In actuality I am meant to be *Battle Born for You*, Liliana Hayes.”



Later on in the day, after a well needed cup of coffee and some toast, Lili parks her SUV near the entrance of a worn two-story brick building on the outskirts of the medical district in town. I know this building well, I've helped mom with her volunteering in city functions and community rallies. The food pantry is a big need for this area due to the only grocery store in a two-mile radius having shut down and thankfully a different store chain recently took over the building. Most who live and work around here are people who walk or take transit, getting to a grocery store and hauling it back on foot, especially in the winter, isn't feasible.

Boxes of supplies and gifts in hand, we made our way to the double doors, entering as a loud siren wails in the distance, reminding me I should make plans to visit the cancer center, do my part and volunteer more often. This also reminds me to ask Maddie about taking her boys for the day, give her a break. Maybe she will be more compliant to do so if Lili is the one to bring it up.

I like this; making plans with her, supporting causes that hit home, and giving back to our loved ones and communities. Lili has taken on the role of supporting Buffalo and harboring pride for this area. My heart is full to bursting at this woman's generosity and strength.

Once inside we locate the door we need and set the boxes down on the table near the entry door.

It doesn't take long before we're noticed.

Six-year-old boy "No way! Miss. Lili is here! Guys! It's Miss. Lili!" A scrawny boy with short curly black hair and beauty brown eyes is dressed in a red Spiderman shirt and blue pants. He rushed into Lili's legs, wrapped himself around one and screeched as he bounced up and down, "I'm so happy to see you! Do you bring me something? Did you?! Cuz you know I likes gifts. Your gifts are the best ones, EVER!"

Lili laughs, grins big, and pats his back, "would I come here without bringing ye something, Waylon? I think not."

Waylon's screech is borderline ear-splitting, or maybe it's just the hangover and the echo in the room, "Really?!" His eyes are wide with untamed joy, "is it new paint? Miss. Gloria said I couldn't finger paint any pictures until we gets more paint, so *please* say you brought some, oh, *PLEEEASE!*" That last word comes out begging as he crosses his fingers on both hands and squeezes his eyes closed.

By the time he was done with his excited outburst and Lili gave confirmation about the paint, a crowd of twenty or so had formed around us, ranging in age from six to eighteen, some giving high-fives and fist bumps while others hang back and wait their turn to share in the excitement.

Everyone had a smile this day. Lili surprised the children with not only an abundance of art supplies, and toys, but also the necessities; cases of snacks for both the facility as well as to take home, simple meal starters, clothing, and personal items.

Miss. Gloria instills the music of Ella Fitzgerald and firm manners in every child she encounters, and it shows even now. Every kid was set to a task and had to make sure the items were put away in their proper places before they went off to play. She runs this place like a well-oiled machine, tending to these children as if they were her own.

This moment with Lili, the children, going back to my youth, and finding out how much one person can make a difference for others, I damn near wept glorified tears.

At the end of the day, tired for reasons other than dwelling in self-misery, I packed box after box of cards, drawings, and creations into the backseat of Lili's vehicle. Her excitement at getting to open every single piece had her dancing in the driver seat and singing Andy Grammer's *Keep Your Head Up*. We swung by my place, picked up Hank, my duffle bag, and my notebook, then ordered to-go from our favorite restaurant, adding in an extra piece of tiramisu for when we want to indulge our curiosities later.

Lili promised me she'd wear her short skirt and thigh high boots whenever I felt the need. She knows exactly how much of a fucking turn-on that outfit is, and loves teasing me to no end.

I want everything this woman will give me.

Once at her condo we were quick to enjoy our meal as she opened one of the boxes of thank you creations, spreading them along the carpet in the living room, ready to cover her walls with every piece she could.

Virgin elation is the only way to describe my siren now that she has set herself free. Pure light, a warm heart, and an innocent, child-like wonder about her; she's magic, possesses mystery, and harbors resilience.

And she is in my corner, wanting to see me succeed as well.

We lounged on the couch, her body pinning me down as she lay on top of me, about ready to fall asleep as we watched season four, episode three of Doctor Who. This episode I was definitely into; Pompeii and ancient Roman history is where it's at.

"Would you like one more gift before today is over with?"

My question has her head popping up, a sleepy stare then a yawn escaping her, "if ye're going say tiramisu, I don't think I can stay awake, no matter how good the orgasm."

Her body trembles as I laugh underneath her, "no, it's not that," she shifts to sit on the cushion next to me and I have

this primal urge to prove her wrong. One thing at a time, Zander. What you have for her will hopefully make her day that much better.

“I wrote something – for you,” I start in and grab for my worn leatherbound notebook on the coffee table, “can I recite it to you?”

Lili takes my free hand after I open to the page I wanted, curiosity sparkling in her sleepy stare.

“Take me on a journey, Alexander.”

I smile and squeeze her hand before pausing and clearing my throat. This is written for her and her alone, it’s my way of taking one of the most trying times in her life and giving it positivity.

I release a shaky breath then it’s her turn to squeeze my hand and lend reassurance.

I can do this.

I can do this.

No such thing as can’t.

I’ve got this.

Deep breath

“To my beautiful Lili.

That fourteen-year-old that didn’t think she’d make it – take a good look at her now. She is one fierce warrior. The strength she has is cosmic – she continues to tread water, not willing to give in and sink, no matter how tired she’d be. The selfless acts she gives onto others, never does she want praise – the perseverance she encompasses – and the control she has in standing tall through it all. It’s immensely powerful.

Be inspiring. Spread your wings and fly – soar high bird, past the stars and galaxies, be the unstoppable woman you are. Bare your beauty to the universe – for you are the formidable Goddess Leto, ready to brave anything. Cast your light onto those who deserve you, and those who inspire you.

Shine your light so that others may follow your path, and bask in your warmth, and sense your passion.

Be brave. Be true. Be uniquely you.

I love you.”

I finish reciting my message to Lili and keep my gaze downcast. She knows I'm not one for an audience or public speaking, although this moment holds a premonition of what is to be in our near future.

I've never been one to share my poems outside of my family, for Lili though, it's welcomed and retains a sense of honor I never experienced while serving my country.

Her nimble fingers trail along my jawline, the subtle rasp and my pounding heartbeat are the only two things I can hear before lifting my eyes to meet hers.

Nothing but love shines within. Pure in its entirety.

“Ye are amazing.” She sobs and flings herself around my neck, her lips finding mine, cheeks damp with the onslaught of tears. Lili pulls back, face flushed, voice but a whisper, “thank ye.”

I brush away the rivulets streaming down her cheeks and bask in her carnal beauty.

“My love for you is eternal, Liliana.”

Forever.

-CHAPTER 13 - ALEXANDER-

Life and death are one thread, the same line viewed from different sides. —Lao-Tzu

Sunday. May 14th, 2017.

Three years to the day our lives forever changed.

I am ready to face my reality. Life too, shall go on.

The same mind clearing realization instilled in me during the Marines is now transformed throughout my civilian life. Today we travel to pay our respects to the young man who died too soon.

Since reciting my words to Lili the other day, things have opened up for me, for us, and for all that we encompass.

I am strong because she is.

As I bask in this transition between the darkness and the light, there is always an ebbing and flowing of mysticism that awaits.

While I race towards the bright light and welcome its warmth and rays of positivity, I sense Ford traveling backwards. I need to reach him before he spirals again. If I don't get to him in time, he will find a way to gain his solace, use and abuse pain pills, mix his concoction with alcohol, give in to the voices that are growing louder.

I'm here, Ford.

Speaking of my gunner, I wanna know why he's been eyeing my girlfriend these many days.

Should I be worried something is going on with the two of them? Lili isn't one I'd peg to cheat; I trust her completely. Ford on the other hand, well, he is a different story. He likes when woman are unhappy in their marriage apparently. Fricken *twat-waffle*.

He's being a recluse, attending extra gym sessions, getting back to the house really late or not at all, and keeping his distance. I knew the second something was up when he ceased all contact and flirting with any women that came into bar, instead hiding away in the kitchen, doing his job, and leaving the second he's off the clock.

That isn't my gunner; his mask is up, and an ominous cloud lingers. I made it clear I'd kick his ass if I found out he's been doing shit behind my back. He made his promise and said he has no desire to find pain pills.

How long until that mantra of his changes?

Would my gunner stoop so low as to shoot up on heroine or other mind-numbing drugs? The thought has this Corporal extra vigilant.

I understand where his mind is at during this month; he too harbors guilt he didn't do more to protect our brother, admitting as much when hitting rock bottom and overdosing the first time around. That mindfuckery can send anyone spiraling out of control and ready to burn it all to the ground.

I've been there. It's the last place I ever want to be.

No longer am I in my own personal hell.

My days such as these are lessening, and I have plans at seeking help through music therapy, thanks to the guidance of my sister and Lili. Not only that, Lili, or rather her Gran's words have helped me realize the past cannot be changed, we can only look to what we have in front of us, and not all aspects of this journey can be set dwelling in the past.

That is how we get by in life. The name of the game, so to say.

This Marine will keep his eyes and ears more attuned to his men now that his mind is clearer.

Lili, Hank, and I set out to meet Natasha at the cemetery around one; it's after the rest of the family pay their respects. I needed to take this slow, no need to rush into making amends with everyone all at once.

The sky was gloomy like it was going to rain, a cool front was making its way in for more seasonal late spring weather. Lili dressed the part in a dark blue jumper, as she called it, the sweater making her eyes shine bright against the bleary sky.

She and Tamara were messaging back and forth on matters with the gala; an unsuspecting early donation came through from an anonymous person after a morning broadcast on the news where Lili had an interview to better promote awareness. There was enough sent in from this patron that I would be able to pay for my truck, twenty times over.

It's humbling to know there are others who have the same connections as Lili. She isn't alone in this fight.

I have not a single doubt in my mind, she is going to go far with her plans, and doing so many beneficial things with the foundation. I will be there to help her in any way, shape, or form that I can. She already knows I cannot draw, so that thankfully is out of the question for me. Even if I cannot draw, there are other ways I can assist, of satisfy.

A little while later we made it to Owen's hometown, traveling similar streets to what route we took the day we brought him home, his final resting place at the cemetery.

It brought me back to that dastardly day. I pulled up to the gate and slammed the truck in park.

My throat felt tight. *I can't do this*. I should turn the truck around right now and go home. I thought I was ready; I am not. *Panic* *I'm not, I'm not*.

Will I ever be? I swallowed hard. Was I going to be sick? I tried deep breathing but it was all too much, too fast.

That day rushed back like a tidal wave slamming into the shoreline. The music faded from my senses as TAPS instead rang out louder in my head. Grief. So much of it.

The gunshots. Twenty-one of them.

My anguish raged deep inside me as I stood century, watched over all the grieving members before me. I was

unable to release it, in yet I couldn't staunch the flow of obscure misery and problematic thoughts swirling in my mind.

I clenched my jaw and expelled an agonizing, "*fuck.*"

Lili placed her hand over the clenched fist I had on the center council.

"I'm here, Alexander." Her voice is solid, giving me strength, "Take as much time as ye need. Hank and I are here."

Her touch. That is what I needed. I don't have to come back here if I do not want to. I do not have to get out of this truck.

Jaw set tight, I ground my teeth so she couldn't view my breakdown, although I know better, Lili can see right through my ruse, and it has this rough and tough Marine howling in sorrow.

The barrage of bullets and explosions sound in my memories, and I wonder if I'm going to implode from the impact.

"I can't take it! It's too much!" I squeeze my eyes shut and expel the tears waiting there.

In the next instant Lili is unbuckled and swinging herself onto my lap, wrapping her body around mine and whispering sweet assertions. I cling to her like a lifeline, holding her a little too tightly.

"Yer okay, yer okay. I'm here, Alexander." Lili rakes a hand through my hair, "let it out. I will take yer troubles, give them to me, right now. Allow me to bear the burden for ye."

I fight the battle, wanting nothing more than to be cowardly and run away from this.

"I don't know if I can do this." My voice is pathetic as I sob into her chest.

"Ye can. Give it a wee bit. We can sit here for however long ye need." She begins singing our song softly under her breath knowing how to bring me back to the present.

Hank nudged my shoulder from the backseat then came up and licked my face needing to check on his owner and lend his own comfort. *My pup is my secret keeper, the teller of none.*

It took me the better part of ten minutes to get under control, by that time I knew I was in a better mindset. I'm meant to be here today. Owen deserves to be respected.

Still no rain fell, at least for now.

Stepping out of the truck the cool air hits me, sending a shiver racing through my heated and already taxed body. Lili came around with Hank on the leash, even he seemed somber today, his usual jovial cheeriness is muted. He knows; dogs can sense whatever we humans are going through, it's why I have him.

Hank is my best friend.

We strode hand and hand up the path with Hank sniffing curiously in front of us. No one else seems to be here until I spot a tiny woman in her early twenties watching as a mini version of herself runs around the headstones. When we make our way to them the woman turns and immediately her brown eyes lock with mine.

"Is that you, Zander?" Her voice is tinged with a hint of the South, her dark sun-kissed complexion is free of makeup, and her long curly reddish-brown hair blows freely in the breeze. Three years is too long.

I clear my throat and take a deep breath, "hey Natasha, it's been a long time." Her daughter comes over to her side then, eyes wide over seeing Hank.

Lili offers her hand to Natasha, then pulls her in for a hug, something Lili doesn't do often. These two were collaborating this morning over a secret phone call and many text messages. Not sure what all it pertained to, and I have no plans to ask. Whatever it is, Lili will fill me in eventually. Ellie tugs at her mommy's navy-blue dress. Natasha bends down so she's eye-level with her daughter.

“Mommy, can I pet Hank?” She asks, so small and dare I say, looking so much like her father now that I can see her better. Her baby-faced smile she sent my way is exactly how his was, no one could stay in a bad mood with Owen’s smile around, “Uncle Zander, pleeeeeease.”

I relax just a bit at her forwardness and couldn’t help my smile broadening at the sound of ‘*uncle*’ coming from her, “of course. He loves to play with kids.”

Lili tells Natasha she will take Ellie and Hank for a little walk, just far enough to give us some privacy. I watch as my lifeline strides away and I so desperately want to drag her back to my side.

Be strong.

It’s Natasha’s turn to pull me into her embrace, her tight hold surprising me.

“It’s good to see you,” she pulls back and shifts her hair away from her face, “I owe so much to the man standing before me. Thank you, Zander, for everything.” Her tone isn’t sorrowful, no tears form in her eyes like I thought there would be, instead, a smile forms. This twenty-two-year-old single mom has been through her own hell and back, acting unbreakable for her daughter.

“Don’t mention it, anyone would do it.” I shove my fists in my pockets, not sure what to do.

“Lili mentioned you’d say something like that.” Her hands go to her hips, “take the complement. Owen would tell you as much.”

I smile and shake my head at her boldness; She’s right, Owen would call me a fucker and tell me to kindly respect his woman’s gratitude. I’m nervous as hell and I know it shows.

“Thanks, Natasha. You are just as much part of my life as Owen was-uh, -still is.” Do not break.

She smiled warmly, her features softening, “Ellie is so excited to be meeting Uncle Zander, she knows who you are, I’ve told her all about you. I remember how much he wanted you in her life.”

“Well, what about Uncle Shark?” Shark pops off from behind me and strides to us, his business suit pressed and hair in place. “Hey Corporal. Good to see you here.” We clasp forearms and give each other the silent recognition only we can understand.

I hear Hank’s little growly howl as the three of them make their way back over.

“Uncle Shark!” Ellie giggles and sprints to the newcomer.

Shark bends down and scoops her up, a laugh as he greets her, “hey, hey, Mini Bear! Happy birthday!”

“I’m four now!” She holds up four chubby little fingers to tell us her age.

“No way!” he beings, tickling her belly and coaxing more giggles from her. “Four already? Wow, that’s a big number.”

“You sure you can count that high, Shark?” Another voice booms from behind me, Ford’s Texas drawl. We turn to inspect the addition.

Ellie doesn’t miss a beat and begins counting ever-so cutely in kid Spanish, “uno, dos, tres, cuatrooo!” She sing-songs.

We break out in laughter at her bubbly antics. The same time a ray of sunshine peeks through the darkened clouds above, casting itself upon the group.

Owen, ever a ray of sunshine.

I know you’re here buddy, I can feel you.

“*Mui bien, Leonora. (Very good, Eleonora)*” Ford praises then saunters in next to me and mimics my posture of casually placing his hands in his jean pockets. His gaze locks with Natasha’s, his smile budding to life behind his overgrown facial hair, “hey Nat.”

Natasha returns a ghost of smile and a one-word answer, “Ford.”

“You’re just jealous she likes me more, that’s all.” Shark tilts his chin up in a ‘look at me’ way, his tone matching his jesting.

Ford rolls his eyes, “whatever you have to tell yourself, Shark.”

Lili and Hank are on my other side, she’s leaning into me and offering her body heat; It’s keeping me grounded in this moment.

I’m not going to break today.

**Playful Owen* Quit being fuckin’ pussy, man; live your life. Make every day outstanding. Do it, or I’ll kick your ass.*

It’s the first time I’ve heard Owen’s voice call to me, the demons have been so overpowering these past few years, I haven’t had a chance to reminisce on all the fun times we shared.

Thunder rumbles above, the better telltale sign that rain is coming.

Shark glances to the girl in his arms as she traces a tiny finger over the scar by his left eye, “We should move this party indoors. Do you want pizza, birthday girl? I have a present for you, too.”

“Yeah, let’s go! Can we gets a pineapple pizza with lots of cheese? **Wistful* I like cheese.*”

Shark laughs and pokes her belly, “you know it, Mini Bear. There’s no better pizza topping out there.”

“That’s gross.” Ford mumbles.

“Says the guy who likes shaking Worcestershire all over his pizza. Now that’s gross.” Shark balks.

“I’m rather fond of corn on my pizza,” Lili chimes in. We all fall silent and just stare at her. She huffs after a moment, “Oi! Dinnae knock ‘til ye try it, tis good.”

“Ewww! That’s gross!” Ellie cringes, mainly to parrot Ford and Shark’s words to be cute and funny, which she is. We

all laugh again.

“I’ll take your word for it,” Shark shakes his head, Ellie doing the same. These two are super close. Two peas in pod.

“Don’t worry, babe,” I wrap an arm around her, “I’ll brave corn on my pizza, just for you.” I mock a bit, wanting to get in on this.

The mood lightens. I’ve missed these moments.

“Come off it.” Lili sighs, exasperated, and slaps my chest playfully.

With everyone in agreement on where to go from here, we get ready to head out.

“Good to see you, Little Bear.” Shark is first to set his coins on the headstone next to the abundance of other stacks, Ford following suit but not repeating Shark’s words. It’s the same coins I have in my closed fist.

A penny, a dime, and a quarter.

A penny means you have visited the grave.

A nickel means we went to basic together. We didn’t.

A dime means we served together.

And a quarter means I was there when he died.

Everyone starts back to their vehicles, laughing and joking to keep the mood alive. Lili asks Ford if she and Hank can ride with him, making everyone turn back around in question as they find me in the same spot, unmoving. I lock eyes with my men, they nod once in understanding. Lili wanted me to do this solo.

Can I do this mission solo? What if I need her?

Just breathe. Lili’s words give me encouragement.

“Go on. I’ll be there shortly. There’s something I need to do first.”

This is long overdue, an awareness of how long I’ve kept my distance and wallowed in self-pity is ever present.

It ends today.

“We’ll be sure to save you some scraps, Corporal.” Ford quips, giving a finger wave to confirm he’s going to take care of my woman.

In the distance car doors shut, engines rev to life, and gravel crunches, the sign of all departing, leaving me alone.

Am I really here alone, though?

Hundreds of gravestones surround me, saying otherwise.

It’s a sense of coming home in a way.

I place my stack of coins next to the other ones then kneel to get a better understanding of just how cold this existence would be if I were here, six-feet under. Silence reigned, no birds, no breeze.

Just me and this slab of granite with Owen’s markings.

Owen Victor Jacobs

Private US Marine Corps

October 13, 1995

May 14, 2014

Loving Son, Husband, Father

“Hey, Little Bear.” I pause, unsure of myself and what to say in this moment. “Sorry it’s taken me this long to come to my senses. I’m such an asshole.” I pause as the fluttering of leaves in the trees sound like his whispers of agreement, “I miss you buddy.” I sigh, tamping down the emotion wanting free. “You’re on my mind every damn day. I could be having the worst fucking day then something stupid would take place and I automatically think of you and your antics. That smile of yours lit the way for positive days and mischievous nights. You were one smart cookie, Private.”

I parked my ass on the ground feeling a bit tipsy, but completely sober. Another rumble of thunder in the distance momentarily took me back to the day of his procession.

Drawing my knees to my chest, I relax, the naturistic sounds lulling me into a meditative state.

“We should’ve switched places that day, I drive, you radio, or hell, we could’ve let the truck burn until Ford got a better hold on the enemy.” Here come the emotions flooding me. “We want you here; your daughter needs you; your wife craves you; your family mourns you; your brothers and sisters in arms honor you.”

I wipe a tear away and heave another sigh, the breeze picking up now and acting as a comforting embrace.

“Owen, Little Bear, I’m so fucking sorry I didn’t keep my promise to you. I didn’t protect you. Now here we are, you’re gone, and I have dishonored you still.”

There is no stopping the collapse of my mental state, it’s crumbling, breaking down, “I’ve let so many people down, have dwelled in my own misery for three years, contemplated ending this life, more than once, and in multiple scenarios, the demons screamed so loud, Owen, I couldn’t hear you, had no way to view your smile through the darkness.”

Then a flicker of my new life, my reason for wanting to live shines in my mind. Clear as day. Calm settles in.

“Even though I couldn’t sense you, I feel like you were the one to put Lili in my path that day; you knew I was close to breaking, to grabbing my gun, to falling off the ledge, or crashing my truck, anything to staunch the ache possessing me. I wanted to put an end to the pain, the dread, and the pitying looks from all around me, make it come to an end.”

My head lifts from between my knees and I look to the darkened sky above, a smile exploding from me at the thought of my siren, of Lili.

“Thank you, Owen. Thank you for sending her to me. My days and nights are brighter because of Lili. I am a better person because of her and don’t know what I’d do without her in my life.” I pause as another rumble sounds, closer now, “guide me Owen, and I promise I will make you proud. *Whisper* I promise.”

A few seconds went by, and the clouds parted, a flood of sunshine casting itself in the area I currently reside.

An answer.

We met at the small mom and pop pizza shop and ordered enough to feed fifteen starving Marines. Mind you, that is a lot of food. We sat outside at the picnic tables, enjoying the modest air now that the storm clouds passed over. Lili kept quiet as she wrapped herself around me, smiling, and sensing my shift. The weight and dread constantly plaguing me is for the most part gone. I can take that well needed breath of fresh air.

Hank stayed well behaved and didn't beg as he stuck to Ellie's side. He wasn't fooling anyone; Hank isn't a dummy, he knows she would share her pizza, which she did.

The day was filled with laughs and nitpickings, but there were also tears that fell. The only thing that would've made this day outstanding would've been to have Owen here. Although, he is very much here. He left an everlasting imprint on this world, his daughter.

Ford, Shark, Brett, and I, Owen's brothers, we will do anything in our power to see his little girl grow up with love and guidance, not to mention the interrogations when she starts dating. At least we have some time before that happens. Something tells me Ford will be the scariest of us all, just you wait and see.

One thing is clear: Ellie needs stability.

I thought I was doing that by supporting her and her mother with anything pertaining to finances and car repairs, but it takes more than that. Communication, being face to face, giving a comforting embrace, playing Barbies with her, and learning how to braid hair. I'm not quite sure about that last one.

I need to start being the type of Uncle Owen wanted me to be.

I've let him down, I see that now, and I'm so sorry brother. I will do better by you from here on out.

Like Ford could feel my mind churning across the picnic table, he starts humming and clapping a similar beat, one I haven't heard in a long while, Shark quickly figuring it out, too and joining in.

Elation *This song*, Owen's favorite song he'd sing to the infantry every damn day. *My Girl* by the Temptations.

And so, we sang for him.

Cheers, Owen.

CHAPTER 14 – LILI

“Our greatest glory is not in never failing, but in rising every time we fail.” –Confucius

All night I glanced him watching me. Our unspoken words crackled between us like lightning. I’d give him a wink; he’d flash me his dimple in a smirk. We knew what we both wanted but could not have until we were back at my flat. This went on all night; he stood by my side the whole time, his hand could be found at my back or often enough in my own, our fingers entangled like a lifeline.

No place better than right here with him, surrounded by friends, family, and the people who here to support a cause near and dear to my soul.

I rose from my chair, the movement catching the attention of everyone in the room as they quiet, and I made my way to the podium. I placed my palms on the wood, habitually bit my lip in concentration, then closed my eyes, took in a deep breath, and opened them to find Alexander.

My amazing man.

My body retained a stiffness until I caught him miming his ‘I love you’. I have his devotion, his comfort, and his praise. The room fell silent, the thrumming of a racing heartbeat in my ears.

It’s now or never.

“All around the world, childhood sex abuse has been a longtime ever-growing and horrific tale. Take a look around your table at the people sitting amongst you now, most of you might know of someone that has experienced such tragedies. This terrible truth is why we are all here this evening.”

My body relaxed as my gaze fell to Gran next to Alexander, then back to my man. Gran took his hand resting on the table, a comfort both seemed to need then. As I told my story in a vague premise, I swept my eyes around the tables.

My hope is that I'm telling my story in the most profound way possible without feeling overly sappy.

“As an artist, I want to live in adventure; go places, see things, explore the unknown. The idea is to bring back many tales, set them to canvas, tell people of these magical places they may never experience for themselves in the physical. My goal is to plant a seed in their minds’ eye of these wonderous places frozen in time. I’d like nothing more than to observe the desire light their eyes, see their imagination take them on a journey no one else will ever truly understand. Everyone experiences art in their own unique way. That in of itself – is exquisite. To see a person find their joy as they visually touch one of my pieces – it’s the most profound feeling in the world. From this journey, I then can take my creations and give back to those who need it more than I.”

Deep breath. Keep composed.

I had the attention of everyone in the room. I’m not the girl who fears her past any longer. The eleven- to fourteen-year-old is screaming her elation at what we’ve overcome and worked through. We cheer today. We cheer all days now.

I’ve got this. My smile is broad, shoulders are back, posture is tall, and my chin is raised high.

“Thank you for your thoughtful donations and contributions to this ever-needing cause. Children all around the world need our help, and one day soon, Tamara Kennedy and I hope to see the *L.J. Hayes Art Foundation* give to children wherever it’s needed. With your continued support we will end childhood abuse, once and for all.”

I stepped away from the podium, the crowd all stood, clapping and cheering, my smiling dancing, my mind whirling from their praise.

Tamara and I hug ever so tight, this dream started off as a college project, soon forming into a plan, that plan shifting to a multitude of ideas and strategies. Paintings, sketches, pastels, and so many other fine arts have led me to this moment, all this wouldn’t be possible without Gran. She is

the true mastermind behind everything we have set to accomplish; a dream that is now a reality.

Shark stood near the curtain behind me and touched his earpiece, scanning the room for anything out of place. I trusted no one better than Alexander's Marine brothers as my security detail.

Weston stood at the other side of the room and did the same movement as Shark, communicating the all clear.

I don't know much about the lad other than he spent years in the British Military and Special Reconnaissance Regiment. He is now head of command at the new *Axis Security Force* London location. He seems to be a loyal lad that I can grow to trust.

I'm not going to ruin anything, but I see something blossoming. I'll keep it to myself, that is until Tamara catches wind, then all bets are off.

"Lili dear, that was absolutely wonderful!" Gran said, wrapping me in her warm embrace.

"This is all for ye, Gran. I love ye, so much. Thank you fer believing in me."

As soon as we pulled apart there were approximately twenty patrons surrounding us to ask me questions, and give complements, something I have taken in stride and can better accept.



ALEXANDER

This talk with Lili's Gran had me on edge.

I cannot believe I am this nervous.

A Marine should never be nervous.

Think of it as a mission Gorski, you can do this.

And so, I did. I had nothing to worry about. She gave me the news I wanted to hear; plus an extra wonderful gift I know Lili will love for all days. It's almost as beautiful as she is.

Later on in the evening Lili's best friend and bar owner, Patrick Shaw made his way to the table Daniel, Gran, and I were stationed.

Lili was whisked off to somewhere with Tamara, potentially for a new project they might start on in the next few weeks. This night keeps getting better and better for my siren. The light in her eyes shone as bright as Sirius, the brightest star in our night sky. Today is her day, she is taking on this momentous path, gearing up to explore the wide universe at her disposal. She's triumphant. Fearless. This Goddess is soaring high. Lili did it. I am so proud of her.

"A word, Alexander." Patrick's tone is clipped, not giving anything away, but I know what this to be about. The man is dressed in traditional Scottish attire, a blue and green kilt, hoes, and a black sporran. Quite a unique style compared to my damn penguin suit. He isn't the only one dressed in such a way tonight, the pride for their country is alive and well within these walls.

I expected this to happen, not tonight, per' se, but the timing couldn't be better. This Marine is ready for what this mission has in store. Excusing myself from the company of Daniel and Gran, I caught her knowing stare before we departed.

"Behave, Patrick. Dinnae make me want to kick yer arse." Gran is quick to chastise. Remind me never to get on her bad side.

Patrick, face flaming to match his hair, blows a breath through his nose as a bull would readying itself to chase the red drape.

I send a nod to Shark to let him know I'll be right back, and to not fill in my woman. Yes, I can relay that in a single stare. Shark knows. That is what a brother does.

We round the corner where I'm led into a darkened storage room of sorts, a few folded tables sit propped against the wall, a stack of chairs beside them.

Patrick closes the door once I enter, his mask still in play. For now. For not having served in the military I give this man props; he's ready to wage war with me. I'm ready, *oh, am I ever*. Time to play coy.

“What can I do you for, Patrick?”

“Dinnae be daft, ye ken why we're here.” His accent is thick as he places his hands on his hips, the scowl he sent me might knock down someone with lesser strength. Lili has helped build this man back up.

I place my hands casually in my pockets and shrug, remaining silent. He's quick to release a growl.

“The damn talk ye had with Gran earlier, what the shite?! A ring! Ye only just met.” His face flames hotter, “ye could've had the decency to me, too, seeing as I've known her the longest, can gauge whether ye are good enough.” He scoffs, “Honestly, ye suppose she'd say Aye, so soon?” He shifts on his feet, a fighting stance that I want no part of. “For feck sake, ye better mind yer heed.”

Patrick took in a deep breath then let it out slowly.

“Are you done?”

“Ye bloody well ken I'm not done! Were ye going to ask me?” Patrick questions then shakes his head, “never mind, Lili will be done with ye the second after ye ask. Mark my words.”

“Patrick. I wouldn't ask Lili without her closest friend giving me his blessing.” This is the truth. I want to do this right.

“Oh,” He says weakly, his temper calming the slightest bit, “that's good to know.”

I take out the box from my pocket and stride to his side, “I wanted to ask you tonight after the event, get to know Lili’s best friend, have a pint, shoot the shit, man to man.” My stare must say it all as his face heats now with a tinge of embarrassment.

“Ye mean it? Yer not just sayin’ that.

I open the box to expose the ring, the one Gran said Patrick had seen before.

Awe “*Holy – shite*. Ye are askin’ her then.” His eyes widen as he inspects the contents of the box, “if Gran gave ye this, then I can’t argue. Ye have my blessing, as long as ye can protect her. Lili deserves a man who can love her – material items are not her thing. It’s devotion she’s wanting.”

I nod, surprised that is all it took. *Damn*. I was expecting more fanfare. Lili warned me Patrick sometimes expresses his Scottish temper, mainly before knowing the full story. The saying, ‘all bark and no bite’ comes to mind. I can’t blame the guy; he’s only looking out for his closest friend, the one who knows about her monster and dark past. No harm, no foul.

Closing the box, I tuck it away and cup his shoulder, “how about we go get that drink. I’ll fill you in on my plan.”

“Nah, tis the first-time meeting ye. Wouldn’t be a proper Scotland greeting without a bit a whisky.” His grin is infectious.

“Now you’re talking. Lead the way.”

Tonight I learned the key to winning over a Scotsman. Women, wisecracks, and whisky.

Thank you, Grady, for your words of bartending wisdom.



LILI

We rush onto the lift, the doors closing ever so agonizingly slow, purposely torturing me. Our eyes lock in the mirrored enclosure as we begin our ascent to my flat. His eyes are blazing with desire and his hand tightens in mine as the heat between my thighs kicks up a notch. I rub my thighs together, the delicious friction stirring my blood hotter.

He has that glint in his eyes like he's enjoy nothing more than to pin me against this wall, run his fingers through my hair, and press his lips to mine in a hungry kiss. I bit my lip at the thought of his hands running all over my body, caressing and stroking me in all the right places only he knows will get me off. The heat intensifies in the tight enclosure and my breaths come out in little puffs of anticipation, sending jolts of want and need to pulse through me.

The lift dings and the door glides open. I pull him along then stop at my door, fumbling inside my clutch for my key. His body presses against my back as his hands trail down both my arms. His lips begin a trail along my neck, *why didn't I get this damned key out while in the lift? –Bloody thing-Ah-ha! Found it!* The key slides into the lock ever too unhurriedly, my hand hardly steady enough to turn the handle from this man's sucking and nipping.

I only remember the door opening, Alexander scooping me up under my knees and cradling me in his arms, then in a flash he set me on the end of my bed, and he stripped off his suitcoat, tossing it on the nearby chair. He crouched down at my feet, removed the tortuous high heel and pressed his thumbs into my arch.

“Why do women wear such things? I will never understand it.” He furrows his brow in concentration then

takes off my other heel. I let out a moan when his fingers find the right spot near the ball of my foot.

“I dinnae think I’d make it to the car.” I try and remember the last time I wore heels. I can’t help that I’d rather be in my trainers, better yet, bare feet are more freeing.

“I would’ve carried you, no questions asked.” He says with a grin and stands, taking my hand and asking for me to follow. I stand and gaze into his passion filled eyes, then his lips brush mine in a tender kiss. He breaks the kiss all too quickly and twirls his finger around, “I need you out of this dress, now.”

His voice comes out in a low growl, sending shivers over my body. *Bloody hell, that is sexy.*

I oblige and move my hair to one shoulder so he can undo the zip. The sound of the metal teeth slowly spread open as he lowers the clasp heightens the anticipation; his breath coming hot on the back of my neck, and his lips and teeth kissing and nipping. His hands remove the dress from my shoulders, down my arms, and it ends up pooling onto the floor at my feet. His mouth trails down my neck to my shoulder, across to the other side.

“I want to undress ye.” I whisper and turn, beginning the process of undoing the buttons on his shirt.

As he had done with my zipper, I take my time, paying close attention and not taking things too quickly. Once undone, I untuck the material from his trousers then run my hands over his shoulders to remove it then toss it over by his jacket on the chair. I rake my nails gently over his chest and down his abdomen, his light dusting of hair is a trail leading to a very happy place.

I stop at his belt, my whisper turning sultry, “Tell me, was it difficult having to keep your body under control all night?”

“Unbearable.” He answers all too quick. “You have no idea the number of times I was tempted to drag you into an empty room, pin you against the wall, lift your dress up and

feel how drenched the lace between your legs would be. I wanted nothing more than to sink my fingers inside your soaked pussy, watch you come undone for me, all while hundreds of guests lingered just on the other side of the door.”

I suck in a breath. I’m no exhibitionist, but that, *oh my, why didn’t he do that?* I would’ve agreed.

His hand leaves my hip and trail lower. He groans when his fingers come in contact with the damp material, my breath hitches as he begins rubbing along the outside of the triangular patch of cloth.

I fumble with his belt, wanting to feel how hard he is for me. *Feckin hell.* A bulge greets me when I tugged down his trousers, his boxer briefs barely containing his erection. I stroked his length through the cotton material, implementing another groan from deep within his throat. He kicked off his shoes, his trousers quickly follow suit then his breath hitches when I tug down the last piece of clothing.

I felt his body heat rise as I lowered my mouth to his chest, placing sensual kisses over his pecks, down to one of his nipples making his cock jump in my palm, then down his torso. *Alexander likes nipple play.* The dusting of light hair led me to my liking destination, wanting nothing more than to wrap my lips around him and have him coming undone for me.

I knelt on my knees and took his length in both hands. I licked the bead of pre cum from his head, the greeting a welcoming sign. I peered at him when a growly gasp escaped him.

“God, your lips are enough to do me in. I’m afraid I won’t-

I took him deeper in my mouth, swirling and licking as my tongue traced over the thick veins. He lost his words, a groan the only thing to leave him now.

“Don’t – Don’t you dare touch yourself. That is for me to devour, to fuck, to claim, to love.” Alexander ran a hand through my hair.

My skin tingled and my sex throbbed between my legs at hearing his dominating words. His hands sifted through my scalp as his barks and curses filled the room. Suddenly my mouth made a loud ‘POP’ as he wrenched my body up in a standing position and gripped my chin to plant his mouth on mine.

“That’s enough. It’s my turn siren.” He states forcefully.

The same time one of his hands undoes the clasp of my bra allowing it to fall easily to the floor. His hands then went to massaging and kneading them.

“Yes. Ah, please.” I begged, “give me more.”

He scooped me up, laid me atop my comforter then yanked me closer to the end of the bed and spread my legs wide.

“You are so fucking beautiful.” He praises.

I moan and close my eyes. I’m not shielding my body like I have so many times before now; he has earned my trust tenfold, my body, my heart, now all I need is for him to own me completely and my days will be perfect.

“Only ye make me that way.” I whisper.

He lowered himself to my pussy, licking and sucking, stirring me into a tantalizing frenzy, my pleasure telling him a story as it floods his mouth. Caught off guard, I came suddenly, that close to the peak without much foreplay. That tells me just how on edge I’ve been all night.

Alexander took a step away to grab for a condom from his bag, but I caught my wrist before he made it too far.

“Alexander.” I start, and he is quick to turn back, “I want all of ye. Bare. I need to feel all of ye inside me.”

Shock steals him, “I’ve never-

“Me either- well- not willingly.” My face falls and I can tell he is wanting to make that bastard pay for everything he has done to me.

“Please. I want ye to be my first.”

Take away my monster's touch, all of it. every last bit.

Careful to take things slow, Alexander knew exactly what speed to play this at, ensuring his siren be well taken care of. Not an ounce of my monster be inside my mind with Alexander here. My only request is for him to be on top.

Erase the monster entirely.

Set me free.

With Alexander atop me, we moaned at the same time as he entered me, stretching me, filled me. Our eyes stayed locked on one another.

“Lili, it’s-

“Ye feel - *so good.*” I let out the breath I held, my hand coming around his neck to bring him down to my mouth.

The best tiramisu in the world, right here.

Alexander and I make extra sure my monster’s touch is no more, three times in one night if you can believe it. I’ve never laughed so much during sex either.

He played with a strand of my hair as I laid against his chest, the continuous rhythm of life beating under my ear and the lull of sleep pulling at me, welcoming me into a most peaceful state.

“Alexander, can I ask ye something? It’s somewhat sensitive.”

“Whatever it is, we will work through it, just like everything else.” He confirms.

I know we’ve had this talk before, but I want to make sure he is aware what all might take place if he changes his mind.

I shift to better view his eyes, I need to see if there is any change to him from the first time, “how do ye feel about having children?”

His brow furrows, “If it were to happen, I know we would be great parents. Why? Did I do so well you think you’re pregnant now?”

I couldn't help the laugh from escaping me. He is too cute.

Smiling with a hint of sadness, I ran my fingers through his hair, "I may never be pregnant, Alexander." I pause and wait for his reaction. There isn't a change. "My cycles are irregular to the point I miss them most months," tears fill my eyes, "I may not be able to bless ye with children if ye want yer own."

He shifts me closer and pressed his lips to my forehead in reassurance, "Then we can adopt if and when the time arises. There are plenty of children out there that need a loving home."

"I would love nothing more than to have this with ye." I choke out the words, "I know that is crazy to say so early in the relationship, but I feel so at peace with ye."

"You are my peace, Lili." He leans down for a kiss, sweet, sensual, and unhurried.

I break our kiss and place his hand on my heart.

"Ye are the only one who has obliterated the monster's touch." I place my hand atop his as we lock eyes, "Feel that? For the first time in so very long, this has beat without the broken shards stabbing me, it's damn near whole again."

His body melds into mine, his sweet whispers of love and devotion fill my heart full to bursting.

"I love you so much, Liliana."

"Love you, always, Alexander."

We kiss drowsily until sleep pulls us under, the nightmares hindering us no more.

CHAPTER 15 – LILI

“A picture is a poem without words.” – Horace

The morning after the gala Gran insisted she'd host brunch for everyone at our family home.

I would have gladly preferred to stay in bed, but Alexander insisted we at least make an appearance. Why did it seem nervous all a sudden? He's met my family, well, all but my mother; Guinevere said she felt *under the weather* to attend last night's festivities.

It did not hurt my feelings. One. Single. Bit.

When the door opened and the smell of warm baked items filled my nose, I received a knowing look from Alexander as heard my stomach growl. We laughed as I took his hand and led him further inside.

“Alexander, care to join me in the study? There is too little testosterone in here, us men need to stick together.” My stepfather Raymond held his hand out for Alexander to clasp, which he accepted.

“Go ahead, we are going to have girl talk anyway. Have fun with Raymond and Patrick in the study.” I kiss him sweetly then rush into the kitchen where everyone else is drinking mimosas, coffee, and there is sparkling grape juice for my little sister.

Tamara shoved a glass at me with yellow liquid, “mimosa, extra bubbles, light on the juice. You're welcome.”

I took it, gave her a good hug, and grinned, “and that is why I love ye. Yer amazing.”

Gran thought of everything to eat, thankfully she didn't have to slave over making the items, having instead catered the feast from a couple small shops nearby. There was enough spread out on the table to remind me of Harry Potter and the scenes of the Great Hall where mounds of food were to be had.

We gathered then we all immediately went wild.

So much of the yummy delicacies. You know when you eat too much and the relief of undoing the button on your trousers takes place? I'm at that point, but my trousers have no button, sadly. I'm going to have to work out extra for the next few days to burn this off. *Zander might be able to help me with that.*

Yes, I like the sound of that.

A devious grin forms on my lips and is noticed by him. He raises me a wink, no doubt wanting to continue what we were doing mere hours before this.

“Something on your mind?” Alexander asks, wanting me to voice it.

“Just happy to be with everyone.” I smiled and looked around the table at every single person here.

To my left sat Patrick and Gran. The head of the table held Raymond, next to him Guinevere, then Sadie, and Tamara. Alexander be on my right. *Family.*

My mum and I still had a very long way to mend any sort of relationship. To be honest, if it wasn't for my sister Sadie, I would have nothing to do with mum.

I'm done giving in, it's time she give a little herself.

They say to never burn your bridges, well, what if your bridges were never built to begin with?

Nearly finished with our meal, mum leaned forward and intertwined her fingers together, resting them on the table.

“So, Alexander. How are you coping with everything?” Her tone screams hidden meaning – this cannot be good.

He gives her a quizzical stare down, “what do you mean?” He knows what my mum has put me through, his hatred for her is palpable, in yet, he knows my reasonings for enduring this woman.

Her tone takes on something of boredom laced with darkness, “you know, Lili's time with Isaac. She likely has

given you her rendition of a sappy tale. Lili can be, *overly dramatic*.” She gives a wave of her hand in my direction.

I tense, my hands ball into fists into my lap. Alexander’s hand intertwines with mine and I can feel his body turn to stone.

“Guinevere!” Gran shrieks. Jaws drop from everyone at the table.

Thankfully, Sadie asked to go play with the girl across the way and is not here to witness this.

“He knows the truth; unlike the things ye have conjured *mother*.” I bite back, trying my best to keep a level head, “he knows, and he accepts me, for me.”

Alexander gives my hand a squeeze for reassurance. He is ready to explode.

My mother has a twisted sense and has created these illusions for herself.

“Lili – Ye dinnae have to take this. Yer ma is a mad woman.” Patrick is quick to point out. Glad I’m not the only one to

“Patrick, mind your tone.”

Guinevere ignores Patrick’s jab and instead sneers.

“Oh, so he knows you were the one seducing Isaac-

“I was raped!” I stand, knocking the chair over, my words slashing like a knife. “There was no seducing!”

My anger boils at my mother’s ill-intentions and misguided truths. She wanted to believe that her daughter would speak out the first time it happened, but she doesn’t want to be burdened by the full story.

“Ye have not a clue how I would beg each time for him to stop, or for the pain to be enough to make me pass out, and if it did, I’d wake up with more burns. I was too afraid of him following through with killing Gran or Patrick, the man killed my cat; they were innocent in all this. I thought to end my life

at one point but knew I couldn't leave Gran, I had to endure the torture so his plans wouldn't change."

"Lies. All lies." She dismisses.

"How would ye bloody well ken? Ye were never home. Ye should have been watching yer daughter." Patrick stands up for me, banging his fist on the table then standing next to me, Alexander following suit and pulling me into his side. "Lili let's go. Ye dinnae deserve this feckin' shite!"

Tamara has a hand to her mouth, a sense she might be ill.

"Stop this! Right this second!" Gran interjects, "this is supposed to be a grand day of celebration, not filled with hate."

I take a deep breath in then let it out, my hands trembling, "I have the constant reminder, well over one hundred of them. He damn well ken what he was doing each time he forcibly took me. Pissed or not, it was his favorite game."

I tried to quash the tears but alas I wasn't strong enough.

My mother rolls her eyes, annoyed as she snaps, "that wasn't the Isaac I knew, he would never have done such accusations. He is a good man, and you put him in jail."

"Guinevere, that's enough." Raymond tries reigning in his wife.

I'm unsure if this is pent up opinions after all these years for Guinevere, or if it's the champagne talking, either way, she is out of turn.

"Lili, dear." Gran starts but I hold up a hand.

I need to get this off my chest, Isaac is not going to control my life a moment longer.

Life is too short.

My body relaxed when I spoke the vile truth next, my tone taking on a monotone aspect as the tears continued to fall.

“I was raped. This went on for three straight years, by the man ye allowed into our home, who we all grew to trust, who ye supposedly loved but were never there for. He molested me, sodomized me, physically abused my body, made me ill, did what he wanted, when he wanted. I will never forgive him for what he has done. The people who have to watch me go through it, they ken, *the ken the truth*.” I shook my head trying to grasp my chaotic thoughts, “Ye couldn’t see it, wouldn’t acknowledge that yer own daughter needed her mother.” I scoffed, “ye didn’t care about me then, and ye sure as hell still don’t.”

“Do not say those dastardly words.” She snarls and wipes a forced tear from her cheek, “Isaac is a good man.” She had the nerve to sniffle then.

I tried, really tried to fight the urge not to battle her. I was losing the battle. She is not my mother. This is the end for us.

“Ye heard the doctors and how they could not believe I endured everything I had for so long. **Breaking** They all said there is a good chance I will never have children, so there ye go. Ye must be happy; it’s the karma ye feel I deserve. But hear this mother, if I am to be blessed with the ability of carrying Alexander’s children, ye best believe ye will never be part of their lives. Until ye can open yer eyes at the truth in front of ye, I see no need for ye to be in my life. I’m done. Goodbye, Guinevere.”

I rounded the turned over chair and kept my gaze downcast. Raymond stood and blocked Guinevere from my path, ready to intervene if I planned to lash out physically at her.

There was no need. I wouldn’t waste the energy on her.

Patrick and Alexander followed my movements and assumed embracing me. I took in a deep breath and allowed their touch to wash over my body, bring calm to me, hold me up when I feel as if my world could crash at any second. I turn to Gran as she stood, my main reason for coming here today, “apologies, Gran, but I’m not wanted, and need to leave.”

Home. I need to go back to Buffalo. I cannot stand being in this city a second longer.

“Lili please,” Gran weeps, tears in her eyes.

Tamara wraps herself around Gran to hold her up. She knew I had to do this. This has been a longtime coming.

“Thank ye for the meal, Gran. I love ye and will be in touch. Tamara, I’ll see ye at the flat.” I let out a breath, “tell Sadie I love her.”

My eight-year-old sister is the one caught in the entangled mess between our mother and me. I will not recuse myself from her life just because of this. She is my sister; she needs support in all this too. I never had or mother, while Sadie has complained about having too much. She feels suffocated.

A visit to her sister’s flat in Buffalo might, be an ocean, it should the trick.



Alexander and I made it back to my flat ten minutes later and ended up on the sofa. We sat in silence, wrapped in one another for some time.

No tears.

No words.

Just holding.

Touching.

Loving.

“Ye are all I need.” I say after some time and smile at him, “and Hank too.”

He chuckles, “Can’t leave Hank out of this.”

I leaned into him as honking horns and city life made its way through the open window.

“I planned on doing this at the end of brunch, but I like this moment better.” He gave me a quick kiss, removed himself from my grasp, and stood.

I protested and took his hand not wanting the cold to seep back in, “where ye going? I was comfortable. Don’t leave me.” I wanted to stay there all day with him, wanting nothing more than to fall asleep in his arms, tell him of my love for him. I never wanted him to leave. He was etched in my mind, body, and soul. This man had all of me.

Then I watched as he crouched down to fix his sock or something, but he wasn’t crouching.

The lad was kneeling.

CHAPTER 16 – ALEXANDER

“May you never steal, lie, or cheat. But if you must steal, then steal away my sorrows. And if you must lie, lie with me all the nights of my life. And if you must cheat, please cheat death, because I couldn’t live a day without you.” – Irish Proverb

I love this woman.

Do you think she’d say yes if I asked her to marry me?

Something tells me, chances are good.

I met with Daniel in secret weeks ago and asked him for his daughter’s hand. I know, it seems old-fashioned, but my family was taught to do things right.

Once I had Daniel’s approval, I needed Raymond’s. He agreed, as long as I can keep her protected.

Always.

The true test was asking her Gran the day of the gala. Do not get me started on her best mate Patrick. He was more than a little upset and thought I’d forget about asking him, too. We are damn near best mates now after our bonding session.

Gran brought up the short time it’s been since meeting Lili and that it seemed quite fast of a timeline. She smiled, leaned in and told me that is how her and her late husband did things. They knew they were in love with each other, heart and soul. A harmony of their hearts coming together as one. They sang to each other, just like Lili had told me. It’s beautiful.

June Hayes, or Gran as she’s loved to be called, gave me a tight hug, a kiss on the cheek, and most of all what I wanted to hear.

Her blessing.

Not to mention, she had the most important item I'd need.

The ring.

So here we are.

I had it all planned to ask her in front of her family after the brunch ended, but with certain circumstances taking place during the celebration, I obviously lost my chance there, not that I'm overly hurt about it, I'm more pissed off at her mom and never want to see this lady again. Patrick was right, she is a man woman.

The way Lili put things, her mother is no longer in her life, but what does that mean for her sister, Sadie? We will figure it out. One way or another, whether it be through Raymond or Gran, we will be sure Lili can visit.

I really wish Gran could see what I planned to do, it's all she has ever wanted for her granddaughter.

Now back at her flat, just the two of us, I felt this to be more intimate and what she would rather prefer, anyway.

Tamara even has tiramisu in the fridge. Win – win if this all backfires.

I wasn't nervous per 'se, I was confident that she would be surprised, I was just anxious she would say no.

Holy shit, what if she says no?

No time like the present. Complete this mission, Zander.

Time to turn this shitty day into an *outstanding* one.

I stood from the couch, Lili taking my hand in protest to my leaving her.

“Where ye going? I was comfortable. Don't leave me.”

I'm going far, siren. I promise.

I knew exactly how this scene would play out. Taking her hand tighter in mine she sat up with a timid smile, then I began to kneel, my eyes locking with hers.

“Alexander, what are ye-

“Liliana June Hayes, I’ve been running for so long from my demons; you cage them for me and keep them locked away. You guard me. I thought I’d never find myself with anyone that could silence the nightmares. I knew from the moment I met you on the back of that ambulance, you were going to be someone very special to me.”

“Alexander.” She whispers, her eyes going wide, and her bottom lip begins to quiver.

Excitement struck, the words at the forefront of my mind begging to be released, “you are passionate in everything you set your mind to; your art, the children’s foundation, the recreation center, your family and friends, hell, even the way you bartend; you pour your heart into everything you do.”

Her emotions take hold as her eyes well with tears then the first tear fell, happy tears, rather than the ones she experienced earlier today.

Lili is never going to suffer heartache like that ever again if I can help it. I will respect whatever wishes she demands on what took place today. If that means she will no longer have her mother in her life, or at least be an ocean away to maintain distance, I will be there to hold her up, wrap myself around her and whisper that everything will be alright.

Because it will, I know it will. I will be whatever she needs me to be.

The anaphora poem, my mental speech to my siren has transformed, and is now complete for her ears, for this moment. There is nothing holding me back from expressing my devotion for my woman, for her beauty, for her light, and for her love.

“I want to be the one you can run to when times get tough.

I want to show you that I may someday be enough.

I want to make long lasting memories together.

I want to brave this life with you in any sort of weather.

I want to share my deepest poetry with my artist.

I want to see every creation you've made, even the darkest

I want to be victorious, tell our monsters and demons they will not win the war against us.

I want to have not a single thing between us we can't discuss.

I want to possess you, through sunshine and rain, thunderstorms and hurricanes, and everything in between.

I want to cherish it all with you."

A Life With You – Alexander (Anaphora poem)

I pulled out the small black velvet box her Gran gave me last night, opening it one handed, and displaying it to her. The engagement ring Lili's grandfather gave her Gran some forty years ago sparkled inside and I catch the moment Lili recognizes the piece.

It's simple and elegant, not flashy, or gaudy in the least. This is perfect for my Lili.

The ring is a thin gold aged band that held a row of five smaller diamonds. Even with her millions sitting in her bank account, this family heirloom means the world to her, Gran told me as much when relaying the story of Lili in her youth. She adores this ring and has expressed her dreams of one day wearing it.

"It only been a short time, but I can't deny this feeling. I love you, Liliana. Will you spend a lifetime with me? Be my wife."

Her lips crashed onto mine in a passionate kiss and her arms came around my neck. I held her, she embraced me.

After a minute she pulls back, eyes full of elation, desire, and love.

"Is that a yes, then?"

She nodded and swiped at her eyes, "Aye. One million times over. I love ye!"

Unable to contain my excitement I grabbed the ring and slid it on her finger, watching as it fit ever-so perfectly, like it was destined to be hers all along.

This moment will be etched into our minds, an addition to our good memory pile. Soon, we will have so many of the happy ones, they will suffocate our demons, dwindle them down to nothing.

I hear her heart singing to me, it's soft and sweet, and holds a glorious tune. I hear it, for it's the same song my heart makes.

Harmony of the heart.

CHAPTER 17 - ALEXANDER

“Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.” – Mahatma Gandhi

-One Month Later-

I couldn't wait to accomplish all the design improvements to *Harbor's Edge Bar and Grill*, my pride and joy, a big reason for why I am still amongst the living. This place was one of the first things to help me find my purpose. It was time this place had an upgrade to fit in with the evolving harbor area.

Grady made it into Buffalo today and is excited to go through the blueprints and ideas with me. I am to let him know the second the lovely Lili is back in town so that he may meet the woman. I will forever be grateful for this man and his wise bar wisdom, and I cannot wait for him to meet my siren. Whether he likes it or not, his original bar style will stay here, long after he's gone. He built this place; his kids names are etched under the bar top, hints of his Irish homeland are permanently scattered throughout the building, and the original bar signs and memorabilia should be given to him. There is quite a bit of money covering these walls, most of the jerseys and signed items are in frames to keep their authenticity.

It's time I make this place my own.

Ford seemed to enjoy my happier mood; everyone did. I wanted more time with Lili and knew the only way to do that would be to open my mind at the possibility of having a manager or two to help run things while I'm away. Afterall, we could be traveling more, seeing the world together, as Lili is wanting.

I asked Maddie, a longtime hard worker of the bar, to come into my office.

Maddison Boyd is thirty-two and a single mom to two boys, ages seven and eleven. Being a single mom of two can be difficult on anyone but watching what this woman has gone through over the years, dealing with a pain-in-the-ass ex-husband who walked out on the three of them, and who's mom is fiercely battling lung cancer, I have no idea how she does it all.

She never has her personal problems while work, she is always the first to come in, work double shifts no problem, and keeps the front of the house tidy and in order; it tells me she is overdue for a pay increase, way overdue.

“Hey Maddie, how have things been? How are the boys?” I lean forward in my office chair and intertwine my fingers together on my desk, two files sit there patiently waiting.

She sits in the chair across from me, a questionable glance in her gaze, “things are good. The boys are excited for the fair to kick off next week. They are going to leave me broke by the end of it.” She cocks a brow, “but I know that isn't why you called me in, so, what's up?”

I smile, that's Maddie, no time for bullshit. It's why we get along so well. I opened her folder with the new pay increase and job title.

“You have been here, five years now, correct?” I watch her nod then I keep going, “you have proven yourself time and time again over the years, and I know Grady will agree with me.”

“Grady hired me when I had nowhere else to go. I'm glad you decided to keep me on. I can't be more grateful for this job. The extra hours this past year has allowed me to save enough to get the kids to camp. I owe my life to this place.”

I sense her hesitation at mentioning her vulnerability to me, but her determination is right there with it. This feisty woman can put Ford in his place and is one of the hardest

workers out there; I'd hate to lose her. We will remedy that, right now.

“That is one of the reasons I asked you here.” I hand her the packet with detailed plans and improvements for the bar, the seating, bathrooms, host stations, and kitchen. Everything is being revamped, no more broken coolers, or things that need constantly mended.

Lili did an amazing job at mixing in the older style of the building with the new modern industrial touches. I wanted to keep the outside mostly original, the bricks were placed here in the early eighteen-hundreds. I never imagined this place could look like her renditions. She told me to have faith, so I shall.

She silently pours over page after page, her eyes growing wider with every picture. When she made it to the last page with details of the time frame and date of the project, her face fell. “Is this for real?”

My smile grows, “yes, it is. The bar will be closed from November first to December thirtieth for renovations. We will have a grand re-opening party for our staff and their families New Year's Eve.”

She shifts uncomfortably in the chair then tosses the packet on the desk with distain, “what does this mean for me? I can't go two months without an income Zander. I don't have much of a savings-”

Her words trail off when I hold out another packet for her to look through, this one she will be more than happy with.

“In here you will find the answers.” I give her a minute to peruse, taking a sip of coffee right before her face brightens. She shifts in her chair, nowhere near uneasy now. “I would like you to become my front house manager, effective immediately. There is also a check in the back as your bonus.”

“Are you serious!?” No way!” She stands and shows me the paper with her new salary, “Are you for real? Like, for real, for real? This is almost double what I make in a year! This can't be real.”

Her excitement is tinged with anxiety.

“I’m playing no trick, it’s real. You have more than proven yourself over these years, and especially these past months.”

She is stunned, “I can’t believe it. I don’t know what to say.” She sits back in the chair, a little peppier now and still very much awestruck.

“I value what you bring to this place and want to ensure you stay with us for a long while yet.” I knew without a doubt she could do the job; she helped me grasp the owner role when I had no idea what the hell all this entailed. She helped Grady with ordering, checked over his books, and even repaired things here. Maddie is a Ms. Fix-it and is one who’s always done things to make sure they’re done right. “Say yes, Maddie.”

She smiles ear to ear, “Alright then. I’m going to go with a yes. *Hell yes!*”

I laugh, “that’s the spirit.” I look at the clock on the wall and think about my siren. I should give her a call, check in.

She stands and bounces up and down then vigorously shakes my hand to complete her review, “Thank you, Zander. You have no idea what this means for my family.”

I couldn’t help but notice she left herself out of her statement. Ever so selfless. Then again, mom’s usually are.

“Maddie.” I wait for her to face me, “if you need anything, please let me know; you are family, we have to stick together.”

I hate seeing her run herself ragged; Maddie takes her mom to just about all her appointments, boys to their baseball and soccer games and stays every game to cheer them on, provides for those around her, and the list goes on. A powerhouse. She knows where I’m getting at and doesn’t feel like she needs to protest.

“Yes boss.” She gives a salute, “will do.” Then she’s giggling and damn near skipping out of the office.

I follow her out, gather all staff in attendance, and welcome Maddie as Harbor's Edge's Front House Manager.

Cheers and claps sound from the handful of workers. Everyone here can share more than five things on what makes Maddie perfect for this position. I'm glad she said yes.

Lili, Tamara, and my sister Emma are attending some sort of music festival with a new featured band '*Seasons of Sirens*', I guess they have exploded throughout Europe. I gave Shark the heads up and so he and Weston were going to oversee Lili's security. Things for Shark are only just getting started and he doesn't have the full manpower quite yet in London, but he knows I trust him above anyone else with Lili's safety. Weston is a very analytical thinker and will do well in this new profession. I was more than impressed with their detail at the gala.

"Hey babe, how was the flight?" I ask as she picks up, I can hear traffic honking in the background of the city life. A loud groan comes over the line.

"*Bloody Christ* – I said no." She states, exasperated. She then whispers for someone to go away.

I straighten in my chair, tension simmering now, "Lili? What's wrong?"

She growls on the other end, "I have no bloody idea why I agreed to this trip with your sister and Tamara. They are dragging me all over the city. *I just want to take a nap*. This music festival is going to end tits up, I just know it. I do not need a new outfit."

My sister yells at her in the background how she should've slept on the plane.

I relax and breathe a sigh of relief and wonder why she is thinking the festival will end badly, "awe, poor baby." I start to chuckle, but then I'm cut off.

"They are yelling at me to hang up, it's '*girl's night*'. If ye do not hear from me within the next twelve to fourteen hours don't be alarmed. I'll just taxed and sleeping the day away."

My sister chimes in the background again, “no way are you sleeping! Off the phone, it’s party time!”

“Emma, don’t-

Before we can say I love you, the line cuts off, from the sound of it, by my sister’s hand.

Lili is absolutely in trouble, just not in the way I thought in the beginning. I’ll be sure to have Shark give me all the details when they arrive back home, Lord knows these ladies will leave things out on purpose.



Lili returns a few nights later fully alive and beaming. I’ve missed her terribly and want to show her just how much by taking care of her. A few days is all this man can endure without his siren. Maybe I can convince her to put on a certain outfit; those damn thigh high boots and that mini skirt of hers fucking do it for me.

I have a *very* special gift for my *good girl* – if she follows orders that is.

Her new hairdo is down, a little shorter, and a lighter blonde. My siren is wearing an adorable navy-blue dress covered in sunflowers, it hugs her delectable hips and accentuates her waist and full breasts.

Magnifique.

My parents and Blake offered to take Hank tonight so I can have her undivided attention. They know how much this woman, my fiancée, has brought out the best in me. Everyone is happier, the world is brighter when I have her. Just imagine how blinding it will be when I can call her wife.

There is a work in progress I need to complete for her, it only has one stanza so far. I think I’ll name it, *Her Beauty*.

*You're a field of wildflowers
Dancing in a warm summers gust
A laugh holding immense power
That smile, warm with wanderlust*

Now that I have her back, my muse comes to life. Lili will help me finish the other verses, only I need nothing more than to ravish her first.

She greets me with a hungry kiss then helps close up by turning off the neon beer signs in the windows as I continue cleaning behind the bar. I want rush things, be done here.

My woman needs me.

I need her naked, like, now.

The music blasts through the speakers a little louder than normal and when *I Don't Dance* by Lee Brice comes on, I see her meet my gaze as she shakes her tempting hips and walks towards me as I round the bar.

I can't look away.

Her body sways to the music like she was born for this. She crooks her finger in a 'come hither' motion.

My body stirs to life, and I just about forget that I despise dancing.

What we do on that open dance floor I wouldn't call dancing.

Ooh, no. It was so much more than that.

Our bodies melded together, hearts racing, minds whirring over the prospect of wanting the other person naked right then and there.

I do as the song says and spin her around and around, the chairs all stacked on the tables and the floors freshly mopped. The lights are dimmed but I can still make out every feature of this spectacular woman before me.

When the song is finished and something more upbeat comes on, she swings away from me long enough to give a

glimpse of her intense stare then she sets her back to my front and grinds her body against mine.

The temperature in the room skyrockets. My hands fly to her hips, and I press my body harder into her, revealing to her how much she is turning me the fuck on.

I growl and nip at her earlobe, a lust-filled roar escaping her. She is already panting, needing my hands to roam over her, cup her breasts, glide them lower to lift her dress and confirm how I have ruined her panties.

“Let’s get out of here.” I say low and deep in the crook of her neck, “I need to possess you, siren.”

“I can’t wait. Office. Now.” She takes my hand in hers and leads me in that direction.

I am unable to say no, we need to make new firsts in my office. There is a nice new couch just begging to be broken in.

The second we enter the small space I spin her around and pin her to the open office door. I clasp her hands over her head and hold her wrists high. I devour her mouth and she tastes like something familiar but I cannot place it. But I like it.

“What did you have before coming here? I want more of it.”

She moans when I suckle at her collarbone.

“I had a Loganberry. I’m addicted now, thanks to ye. We need to make a cocktail with that, everyone will love it.”

“Ooh, business *and* pleasure, I like your drive Ms. Hayes. It turns me on to hear you talk shop while I have you at your mercy.” I smirk and kiss her again.

“All work and no play can make boss man Gorski a dull boy. I should take care of that.”

She moans when my fingers glide over that patch of lace between her thighs. I push the material to the side and let out a groan at feeling how fucking wet she is.

“Such a good girl.” I circled her clit and pushed a finger inside her, making her gasp, and her eyes flutter.

“Alexander, don’t tease me, don’t make me beg for it.”

I love it when she pleads for my cock, it has me ruthlessly grinding against her thigh as a flush spreads across her chest. I let go of her wrists so I could keep my rhythm, and so she can have her control over me.

Give and take.

Her hands fly to undo my button and in the next second my jeans and underwear were down, then she took me in her hands.

God, I could never have enough of her touch.

“Fuck babe, that’s amazing.” I groan.

“Don’t stop dear boy – I’m so damn close.”

I’m eager to please and quicken my pace; her hands squeeze my shaft and go still as she rocks her hips in time with my motions. She closes her eyes but opens them and meets mine once more. She knows I love watching her come undone.

“Come, Lili.”

My demand was met, her body going taut and trembling. I hold her up and allow the sensations to wash over her. When she’s caught her breath, I remove my hand and bring it to my lips to suck them clean.

So. Fucking. Good.

I catch the approval in her stare and press my cock at her entrance. The lasting ripple effects ghost over the head of my dick and call me in, begging for more.

And more she shall have.

Should I take my siren up against this wall or on that new couch. Who am I kidding? They both sound too good to pass up.

We can’t forget the last time something like this took place; I had her spread out on my desk, devouring her like a

starving beast, and earning an approving stare from Ford after we exited, our rumpled clothing and finger combed hair telling our story without a single word necessary.

I slid in, all the way home, then lifted her chin for a kiss, "I love you, Lili."

Nothing but harmony shown back in her stare. *Love.*
So much love.

We make this one outstanding night, with the prospect of so many more yet to come.

Every day is a new adventure with Lili.

I cannot wait.

My Life – Alexander (Haiku)

A promise, siren

Let my love speak its verses

Battle Born for You

Epilogue- Alexander

“Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies.” - Aristotle

Harmony of our hearts

August 19th, 2017.

Nothing will ruin this day, for today is our wedding day.

Surrounded by her family, my family, our friends, the people who mean the most to us.

Today I marry the woman of my destiny.

Tamara did an amazing job decorating Lili's father's woodlands, especially on such short notice. Lili made it clear all purchasing were to be done through the local shops in the nearby town to keep things simple; Tamara doesn't do simple; Tamara enjoys going over the top and detailed. Lili gave up and allowed her assistant free reign.

Colorful lilies were perfectly placed, the yard, or 'garden' as Lili called it, held a tent, tables and chairs, and just enough to seat right around fifty people. We wanted this kept small.

There is a makeshift white cloth archway between two oak trees near the pond. Rows of chairs with an aisle in between completed the look. The sun is not hampered by clouds today, an omen, or a token from my brother Owen.

“We are looking damn good today, my brothers.” Shark strides to my side as we wait in the garage. I'm not nervous,

there is nothing to be nervous about today. I will have my siren, my wife in my arms soon enough.

Shark, Ford, Brett, and I are dressed in our dress blues, the only request my bride asked of us, and I wasn't going to deny her. Ford looked uncomfortable as hell but wouldn't dare voice his opinion.

“Zander! You have to go! We are about to start!” Tamara yells, pushing past the men and shoving me out the door. “Scoot. Out. You're going to ruin it.”

I hold my hands up in surrender and chuckle, “alright, alright. I'm going.”

Once outside, I stand there under the draped linens and converse with the minister, a mid-fifties man in the early stages of balding, a white mustache and beard, and a laidback spirit about him. The sun is shining brightly, and the mid-morning August heat is making its presence known. Guests wave little fans around as the seating begins to fill. Soft music begins and my heart leapt inside my chest. We kept things casual for this wedding with only the party dressed formally. We will change right after the ceremony and pictures.

Country weddings involve getting dirty, no need to ruin the bride's dress. *I'll be sure to help my wife change out of it*, we might just be a bit before getting back out to mingle with the crowd.

Ford, my best man, started down the aisle with Shark and Brett behind him. They clapped my shoulder and shook my hand, then stood at my side, an empty chair with a sign draped on it next Brett, Owen's spot. He's here with us today. Every day.

Gran, Lili's matron of honor, started the line for the women with Tamara and my sister Emma following, all carrying a small bouquet of colorful lilies. They dressed similarly in modest knee length navy-blue dresses, contrasting well with the white floral arraignments and pairing pristinely with our suits. They each gave a kiss to my cheek, Gran lingering for a second to express her adoration for me loving

her granddaughter, and how proud she is of us, then they went to their set positions.

Next came Lili's eight-year-old sister Sadie holding the hand of Mallory, Lili's two-year-old niece and our little flower girl. In Sadie's other hand was a leash. Tamara came up with the idea to have Hank as the ring bearer. My pup had on his tuxedo scarf and a pillow on his back with the rings. Let's hope we can keep him clean enough to have pictures. No doubt my pup is eyeing that massive pond in the foreground.

"I'm so excited to have a big brother now!" Sadie says handing me the leash and wrapping herself around me in a hug. I smile and hug her back then watch as she sits next to her dad, Lili's mom is not in attendance today.

I hand Hank over to Ford just as the tingles of awareness shiver through me.

It's time.

The music changed to *Better Together* by Jack Johnson.

Everyone stood.

No single word and no set song can describe our love, but when combined, magic is made. I'm ready to travel the universe with this amazing lady.

The first glimpse I caught of my beautiful bride about dropped me to my knees. The rays of sun hit her as she came out from behind the awning by the garage, her father Daniel at her side and dressed in his dress blues.

I just saw her. Only her.

There was no containing my smile as I fought back tears.

She is so beautiful.

Her white lace dress fell just off her shoulders, hugging her delectable curvy figure, curves I have traced time and time again, never having enough. Her blonde hair flowed in long loose curls down her back, framing her glowing face, a sparkle of her Gran's gold hair comb glittering in the sunshine. I met

her eyes, those luscious deep blue gray pools shone brightly, no storm in sight, her smile, *God*, that smile, it's the smile I know will be mine for the rest of our days.

The sun cast upon her through the leaves on the trees as she neared the gathering. Light makeup adorned her skin giving her a natural look without being overbearing. It was very much the woman I knew.

Then I caught the tears welling in her eyes before she turned to her father. Daniel gave his daughter a tight hug then a kiss to her forehead.

"I'm so happy for you sweetie." Daniel turned and faced me then, a deep-seated tenderness continuing in his stare, "Alexander, take good care of my little girl."

We clasp forearms and I'm sure to look him dead in the eye.

"You have my word, sir."

He nodded once as confirmation then turned to Lili and kissed her temple before taking his seat next to Patrick.

I offer my hand to her just like I have done so many times before, only this time she will be taking it forever. That spark of awareness as our fingers touch sends me soaring.

The first tear fell from her as she smiled and tried blinking them back. *Let them fall, Lili. I will catch every last one.* I cup her cheek and swipe at her soft skin.

It took everything I had not to ruin the moment by pulling her in and placing my lips on hers.

After a minute of her nuzzling into my touch, Tamara clears her throat, silently demanding we get the show on the road. Lili hands her bouquet to Gran then takes both my hands in hers and squeezes. Her touch tells me exactly what she is thinking, her thoughts pairing my own in this silent connection we share.

The minister begins.

We say our vows, short and sweet; the standard terms to say when promoting general marriage.

We didn't want anything more.

My poetry is for her, while her singing and playlists are for me.

Just as we want it to be.

Hoots, hollers, and cheers abound from the onlookers, Hank joining in and giving his growly happy howl, the same time the minister declared his final words.

“You may now kiss the bride.”

Don't mind if I do. I cup her face and bring her in, placing my lips on hers, her arms coming around my waist. The setting falls away and it's just her and me, and nothing but time.

I probably should have stopped myself from kissing her as long as I did, but in my defense, she wasn't letting up either.

Ford nudged me to signal moving things along. I broke our kiss and shifted only inches from her lips, taking in her flushed features and wanting desire. She wanted me in the worst way, I could tell by the hitch in her breathing and the way she shifted restlessly. I knew was thinking what she was thinking.

Let's start the honeymoon right now. Why wait?

I will only behave if she does.

After pictures, Lili and I race upstairs to change.

You heard this from me. Rushed sex, is amazing! Not quite a quickie, more of a 'I need you yesterday', rush. There is a thrill at knowing so many people lurk just outside this bedroom door.

Her desire, my need, our love. Pure harmony.

Our breathing intertwines together as we come down from our blissful high. Then I sober when remembering Shark's comment earlier this morning.

“We better hurry, Shark said he has big plans for the reception. Words such as this from him is never a good thing.”

She laughs as we dress in a haste and head downstairs to find Shark in the garage holding a peculiar, gift-wrapped item.

“You have you to open this right the fuck now so we can get the party started. C’mon, chop-chop.”

All I can say is, I was not expecting his gift to be a giant inflatable pink flamingo floaty that held up to eight people.

Shark is all too happy with his gift, and I should’ve known by the way he’s dressed in all pink bird attire this was where he’d go with this.

The flamingo board shorts, a baby blue tank top covered in the pink birds, and those damn flamingo sunglasses should have given it away. Apparently, he’s wanting to start his vacation on our wedding day.

“Let the party begin, bitches!” Shark let out a big whoop then coaxed Ford and Patrick to help him blow the damn thing up.

I need to radio this in.

Sargent. We are in trouble here.

Big, big trouble.

Sneak Peek!!

MORE FOR ME

TELL ALL SECRETS SERIES BOOK 3

This scene was inspired by a narrator's fan group on Facebook back in 2020. The topic of the number, 669 came about, which happens to be known in my polyamorous world. So, I thought I'd introduce you to a few of my characters in a spicy scene who LOVE this number, and enjoy what 'comes' with it. _

This M/M/F workplace/ roommate romance is full of hot spicy scenes in South London and Virginia Beach, has experiences with multiple partners, M/M, M/F, and even a F/F scene. If you are not a fan of the word fuck, then you may not enjoy how these military men and badass Cali biker chick like to talk. Let the fun, begin!

Shark's POV – South London

With Weston in taking a shower after his workout, I take it upon myself to begin the nightly rituals. No, it's not like we're practicing in witchcraft. Although now that it's mentioned, there is quite a bit of begging, pleading, and cursing when the three of us are together. Maybe the slightest hint of torture, too.

**Proud* Oh, man.* With this plan, or shall I say the *number* I have in mind for us tonight, I won't be surprised if people in Glasgow hear us.

Avery is on the couch with her legs tucked under her as she watches one of her girly programs, *'The Hills'*, or something, I can't remember.

Doesn't matter. I could care less about the Television right this second. My eyes and thoughts are specifically on her and what color those damn cheek-peeking panties might be. After dinner Avery put on one of Weston's many superhero shirts. She likes tempting me with no bra on, nipples peeking through, and her brunette hair atop her head in a messy bun. No makeup. Strictly raw and beautiful.

The girl knows exactly how to get my engine revving.

Yes, fucking please.

I place my phone back in my pocket the same time Avery's phone chimes from the arm of the couch. She pops the last green grape into that delectable mouth of hers, sets the bowl down on the coffee table, then picks up her device. She's quick to toss me a glance across the living room as she held her screen facing me, her tone bland and unamused.

"I'm right here. Did you really have to text me right now? Couldn't you just say that out loud?"

**Mischievous* Good.* She read my message. Let's see how long it takes her to decipher it. I keep silent, a smirk

ghosting my lips as I just stare at her from across the room.

“Am I supposed to know what this means?” She asks, her mind clearly not where mine is at. I’ll get her there.

C’mon Avery, don’t disappoint me. You know what that means.

I remain oblivious as the lines on her face give away her confusion. Then it clicks and the lines smooth out, replaced by a growing smile full of wickedness.

“Is this what I think it means?” Her voice turns sultry, “Who’s in the middle this time?” She set her phone on the coffee table next to her bowl and planted her purple painted feet on the floor. Pink tints her cheeks now.

Good. Our girl is on board for what I have planned.

I can see her mind whirling at all the possibilities, and *damn*, what a sight it is.

“How ‘bout we see where tonight goes, and decide from there?”

Her approving glint is exactly what I wanted.

That text I sent her, a simple three-digit number. ‘669’. That’s all it took to get that reaction from her.

It’s quite a fun number if you ask me. Makes me hard just thinking about the three of us acting it out.

Bring. It. On.

Like a flash of lightning, we pounce at one another in a haste. Kissing, touching, groping, then tearing at each other’s clothes, wanting to outdo the other. She’s feisty and I fucking love it. Pair that with her tangerine smelly stuff and, I’m a goner.

The second she rips my shirt off I pick her up, her legs instinctually wrap around my waist and her hands rake through my hair. Avery strips herself free of Weston’s shirt as we make our way down the hall into Weston’s bedroom.

The greedy man has a king size bed all to himself.

Well. He did.

It's a shared space as of late, or according to Weston, it's a forty/ forty/ twenty split. Forty percent for each Avery and I, and he, as the biggest person in the bunch, has the twenty percent and cannot fathom as to the why of it.

I'll be the first to admit that I am a bed hog and I have no shame in admitting that.

I like snuggling, so when someone moves away from me in the middle of the night, I move closer to them. If you move, come towards me, not away. Simple as that. Then you will have more of the bed.

Avery slides down my body as we pass through the doorway, her ass landing on the mattress with a bounce. Her head is at just the right height as she undoes my button and zipper then pulls both my jeans and boxer briefs down to my knees in one swift motion. I'll allow her to play a little before Weston can join us.

Then it's game on.

She breathes out one of her sexy sighs and, *God damn*, I want that sound on fucking repeat. No matter how many times this girl sees my body it's as if she is unwrapping a surprise each and every time.

Lucky me.

"Are you just going to stare at it all night?" I ask playfully as I shuffle out of my pants. Don't worry, the socks are going too. Weston will never let me live that one down.

One time. It was one fucking time I left my socks on and now he is forever commenting about it. The asshole.

Awe, fuck. Now I'm thinking back to our time in Virginia Beach, me and him. Good God the man can suck cock. If he keeps that up all bets are off, I will grant him control every day if he so wishes.

Part of me is wanting that.

Woah, where did that thought come from?

Get back to the task at hand, Shark. No fucking time for thinking, just do what you do best. Please this woman.

“Maybe I will.” She peers at me the same time those mischievous lips flash in a grin, “or maybe I’m envisioning you in between Weston and I, helpless and at our mercy.”

Holy hell. My mouth goes dry as I see the wicked intent play out in her eyes. Her hand beings stroking my shaft and what a sight it is. I give a twitch of my cock, damn near helpless from her touch already.

This woman’s sex drive is higher than my own, and that is saying something because I am what you would call a sex fiend. She craves touch, forever is seeking the thrill of something new. She’s smart, sexy, curvy, and feisty. Not to mention, she owns more than one motorcycle.

Hell-to-the-fucking-yes.

I vaguely catch the sound of the shower turn off, signaling Weston is getting ready to head to bed.

I’ve got less than five minutes to get us into position.

Get ready Weston. This sight is going to blow-your-mind.

Recalling my thoughts from the living room, I still want to glimpse those cheek-peeking panties of hers. I take her wrists in one of my hands, pull them high above her head, then we fall back into the middle of the mattress. With my body atop hers, our tongues tangle and fight for dominance.

Sorry little miss, you’re not winning tonight.

We all are.

I break our kiss and begin my exploration of her sensuous curves. I start with trailing kisses down her neck and along her collarbone, stopping at that one lonely freckle of hers just before the tip of her shoulder and I give it a kiss. Continuing lower, I breathe a trail of cool air as I go. These full ‘C’ cups are all natural, pink and perky. They are all mine, and Weston’s of course. My hands let go of her wrists to fondle and pinch a nipple into submission. Her fingers dive

into my hair, her nails raking my scalp and driving me fucking wild. I glance at her as I take a nipple into my mouth. Her eyes are closed, body arched into mine, pure lust coursing through her veins and a flush growing on her skin.

So damn perfect.

I'm not going to linger too much this time, there is so much more yet to do, and the night is far too young.

“Shark- where you going? Don't leave.” She all but begs, then opens her eyes and releases my hair from her grip.

Never has my hair been played with as much as with these two, and I love it.

“That was just getting good.” She groans and I have the pleasure of viewing her rub her thighs together, an unconscious movement, like she had a premonition of where my next stop would be.

Devious “I need a good look at these panties you have on, little miss.” I shift lower down her torso, then reach the top of my destination. I tug at her shorts. I can't ever get enough of what this woman does to me.

A divine wine.

She gave a faint hum of approval which stirs my blood even hotter.

Those cheekies, they match her nail polish. *The little minx.* They are a purple cotton but have a bright pink lace trim on them that matches the strip of color in her hair. If memory serves me correct, these panties show just the right amount of the underside of her peach. I want to bite it, taste if it's as sweet as the fruit.

Focus on the task, Shark.

There's something else I find that catches my eye, my cock taking notice as well.

The wet spot is visible between her thighs, the cotton material soaking it in. I know exactly how she tastes, how she moans and writhes under me, how her demands turn me the fuck on, and I know right where her pleasure points are.

I need to be between her legs, like yesterday.

You were there yesterday, Shark

**Delighted* So I was.*

I make quick work of removing her cheekies, toss them just outside the threshold for Weston to find. Weston is a fish, the panties are the bait, and I am the fisherman eager to reel him in.

She's trimmed, not bare like most women today. Avery doesn't give a shit what play out in the media and what she is supposedly meant to look like. She is proud being herself. Plus, this she-devil knows how much Weston and I love it.

Ready to dive into her delectableness, she instead closes her legs before I can get there.

"Nuh-uh, this is not you eating me out singularly". She sits up on her elbows, "get that delicious cock of yours over here, right now."

"Yes ma'am." Can't say no to that.

Avery sits up then shifts so her head is at the foot of the bed, her feet now tucked under her pillow.

T-minus ninety seconds until Weston arrives. I know his schedule like the back of my hand. Us military men tend to stick to a routine no matter how many years out of the service.

Once Avery and I are in position, both eager and willing, and shaking with desire, I shift her leg to an angle where I can get a better view my dessert.

Mag-nificent.

Usually, I'll dive right in, but we have to make sure Weston is here to watch her come the first time. That low growl deep in the back of his throat is enough to do me in.

Fucking right it is.

Instead, I tease and trail kisses along her thighs, nip at her sensitized skin, breathe in her sweet citrusy scent, then I finally give in and trail my tongue along her slit.

Is it possible for a woman to taste better and better the more you have them? Like a fine wine.

If so, I've died and gone to heaven.

Avery's thighs quiver the same time she takes my cock deep into the back of her throat then releases me with a pop and starts nipping and massaging my balls.

We groan together, the sound filling the room and stirring us to keep going.

Footsteps, then an inhale, and I picture him gripping Avery's cheekies in his fist and bringing them to his nose to take in her scent.

Weston growls, Avery and I pausing to glance to the doorway.

He's standing there, dark gray towel slung low on his hips, Avery's cheekies fisted in his hand like I'd thought they'd be, his well-toned body held a dusting of lingering water droplets strewn about, his face giving away every bit of his interest.

Avery is first to speak, "We have a different kind of plan tonight. Wanna know what it entails?"

Weston cocks a knowing smirk, meets both mine and Avery's stare, then he allows the towel to come loose and fall in a pool at his feet.

Fucking-hell.

He's thick and I approve. His eyes rake over the two bodies on his bed, that deep British baritone making my head spin.

"Do tell, little miss." That gravely tone sends shivers through me. The nickname we gave Avery sounds hella good coming from him.

"Shark and I will continue on doing as we were," A level of her own dominance now lacing her words, "which in turn requires you to fuck Shark tonight."

The beefy six-foot-six linebacker of a man bites his lip as if in contemplation, a ghost of heat in his cheeks, then his eyes flash with a newfound flame of need.

“I rather enjoy that idea,” he pauses, grabs the lube from his nightstand, then bends to Avery demanding a kiss.

That sight is so. Fucking. Hot.

Their tongues tangle then Weston breaks the kiss and moves his bruting body over to me, landing a hard passion-filled kiss on my lips. He growls again then pulls back.

“I love Avery’s taste on your tongue. It drives me mad.”

“Don’t I know it.” I give a telling grin.

He’s quick at getting right down to business, his slick lubed fingers glide up and down the seam of my ass, the same time Avery is pumping my cock and licking the pre-come off the tip.

She keeps that up I’m going to blow.

“Do you want me here tonight, Shark? Because I want to be there.” Weston states confidently, always asking for permission first.

“You know I do.” My tone is breathy and begging, the same time more lube is added, and his slick finger teases my hole. “*Yes, please.*”

Weston’s finger slides in and out a few times then he goes still, his domineering traits in full force.

“Mate. I will not continue until you have that fucking mouth of yours is on our lass.”

Right. How could I forget? I make quick work at parting her folds and giving our woman what she most craves. What she deserves. My tongue swirls at her clit making her buck into my mouth. Her wetness coats me the same time I hear her moan.

“Weston.” She gasps and I glimpse through the tangle our of limbs.

Weston is now two fingers deep in me, hitting that sweet spot. All the while, his other hand cups Avery's breast, flicking her nipple with his finger, back and forth, back and forth, and playing tonsil hockey with her. He swallows her moans and pants as the two of us bring her closer to the edge.

Thank fuck she stopped stroking me. It's there set in her hand but she's otherwise too occupied at the moment to continue. I lap at her clit and, holy shit, by the flood surrounding my mouth, she is so damn close.

I give a good hard suck to her clit and flick my tongue rapidly. Her body stiffens but I don't let up until she is squirming away, her sign of it being too overly sensitized. Her satisfied sigh sounds as I let up.

"Give me your mouth, Shark. I need to taste our lass again, then maybe I'll give you what you want." Weston shifts his weight on the mattress then takes his hand from Avery's body and grabs my jaw, not menacing. Just right. A man's rough tender touch.

He takes everything from me he wants, what he demands. That low growl of his fills my mouth and I can't help as my ass tightens around his fingers at the sound.

"God, Weston," I breathe, "make good on your promise."

His grip on my jaw tightens a fraction, "Is someone begging?" His tone turns sly, "I thought you didn't beg, Shark."

"Only when the gettin' is good." Avery is quick to chime in, her hand lazily stroking my shaft, "And trust me, the gettin' is *really* good. Shark wants your cock, Miles. Best give the good boy what he wants."

I heave a sigh as he plunges his digits deeper, then deeper still, "What she said." I murmur.

With one last kiss on my lips, he plants a few to my tanned shoulder then grabs a condom from the nightstand, rolls it on, then positions his front to my back as he lays with

me. I feel the head of his cock at my entrance, but he pauses there, not going further.

“Round two. Show me how much you love Avery’s cunt. I want to watch you pleasure her.” Weston declares, his hips rocking in and out, teasing me.

More pre-come beads from my slit and the sensation of Avery’s warm tongue lapping at it sends further shivers down my spine.

“It’s too good. I’m already so close to coming.” I squeeze my eyes closed to find a distraction. Avery pauses her little licks and sucking so I can get back under control.

“Eyes on me, Shark.” His demand is clear. The tone of a hard worn military man who is used to giving orders. “*Damn it, Young.*” He pulls away from my body and grabs my jaw once more, my eyes jerking open to stare directly into his, “I said, eyes- on- me.”

Unspoken words flashed through his eyes, words only a soldier can understand. Calm settled in.

He finds what he was looking for in my stare then nods.

“Better.” He says then removes his hand from my face.

“Give it to me rough, Weston. I want to feel you for days.” I begin, but he’s quick to voice his opinion.

“I’ll give you what you deserve, not what you want.” That brutish tone of his voice, *fucking hell*. “Now, I instruct you to do as I said and show me how much you love Avery’s cunt. I will not repeat myself, am I clear?”

Oh, yes. Commanding Miles Weston has to be my favorite.

“Yes, sir.” I’m sure to meet his stare, then I get to work on our woman once more. Time to follow orders.

Weston adds more lube to his cock and makes sure I am ready for him.

The plump head is like pure heaven as he enters me. He knows I can take to being stretched. Weston has a big dick, stretching me near my limit. I love that slight burn as he passes the ring of muscle, then deeper still.

“Awe- so good. Yes. More.” I can’t make complete sentences, my words muffled by Avery’s writhing body beside me as she tends to my dick. I nip and tease her, just like she’s doing to me.

He does, give me more that is, and soon he is buried to the hilt. Then, all bets are off.

I rest my head on Avery’s thigh and began fingering her slick hole. I add one, two, then soon three fingers deep inside, pumping and curling my digits as I lap and suck.

Avery has my length in her mouth, gripping and swallowing damn near all of me. The same time she begins playing with both mine and Weston’s balls. It is *so fucking erotic* to feel them constrained and fondled by our woman’s nimble fingers.

Weston and I groan approvingly, our bodies completely at her mercy.

All while that is taking place, Weston is balls deep in me, continuously rubbing his shaft in just the right spot with every thrust. His mouth, God, that man’s mouth is evil as he nips and sucks my neck, then soothes it with his tongue, lathing over my wounds and pushing me dangerously close to the edge.

“Fuck.” I’m so damn close. I can’t come yet though. Gotta get our girl off one more time before that happens. She’s close too, I can taste it.

“I’m about to- *gasp* “yes-” *gasp* “right there- ah-.” Avery trembles against me and the bed begins to shake with all three of us riding the precipice.

“Come, Avery” Weston commands then growls, “Shark, save her come for me. It’s mine.” His movements are harder, deeper, more along the lines of how I love it and fucking need it. He’s close too.

Avery is getting help from Weston thrusting into me, she is better able to control how deep my cock goes down her throat.

What a fucking sight we must make right now.

We need a mirror on the ceiling.

The thought makes my orgasm slam into me the same time Avery is also sent over the edge. We both cry out.

Three more thrusts from Weston then he shouts his pleasure, each jerky movement further extending my orgasm as his cock presses on that perfect spot inside me again and again.

I'm not sure how long it took for us to move, as I was the Shark in the middle, I wasn't going anywhere, nor did I want to.

Next time, Weston is in the middle so I can fuck him and experience that *glorious* view.

Weston eases out slowly and sits up. The three of us are panting and trying to gather ourselves. Then Weston begins to chuckle lightly, an uncommon noise from him.

Sitting up I catch sight of what he is laughing at.

Avery didn't quite get all my come in her mouth, rather, I'd say most of it landed on her face, chest, and in her hair. Well, at least she wore her hair up this time. I began to chuckle too, then Avery joined in and the three of us had a good long post-sex laugh together.

"Time for another shower, little miss." Weston states on another laugh.

He easily picks her up in a cradle hold then the three of us made our way to the bathroom for a well-deserved shower, another round of orgasms be had by all.

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For my son, I love you so much dude!

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– LAYLA

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Layla Lochran is an international bestselling author known for her suspenseful romance *Tell All Secrets* series, her paranormal / Sci-Fi Ambrota Defenders series, as well as her poetry.

Layla resides nestled deep in the woodlands of Western New York with her son and their pet, Kit Kat. School-life is her passion and funky hair color is her fashion. She enjoys her family, musical instruments, festivals, and takes pride in being a volunteer LGBTQ+ youth counselor and advocator of **Love is Love**.

“There is always a rainbow after rain.” - Layla Lochran

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