

In Finn's Heart
Fighting Connollys #3
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Chapter One

Feet cold and feeling nervous, I shifted uncomfortably on the exam table and frowned as the thin paper shield under me crinkled loudly. I gathered the too big gown a bit closer to my naked chest and wondered why they hadn't offered me a heated blanket or even a sheet. I shivered uncontrollably, my skin prickling with goosebumps caused by anxiety and the chill.

At the pediatric cardiology practice I had been with since birth, the staff always had lots of warm blankets and sheets on hand. Here, in this adult practice, they had shoved me into an exam room and ordered me to strip. The office was freezing cold, the air conditioner on high because of the triple digit temperatures searing Houston.

I swung my legs quickly back and forth and tried to slow my racing, nervous heartbeat. Licking my lips, I glanced at the posters and art. Unlike the cheerful heart posters at the old practice, this one had some really depressing public service ads on the walls. There were no happy little heart cartoons to make me smile. No, I was forced to read about the signs of a heart attack and clogged arteries.

I shook my head and reached for my phone. Swiping the screen, I tapped in my passcode and checked my text messages to find one from my best friend and roommate Coby. Only she knew I was visiting my new heart doctor today. I hadn't wanted to worry anyone else, not until I knew for sure.

Well?

Still waiting.

What?!

Yeah. But I have some creepy heart attack posters keeping me company.

Awesome. Hey! Want to grab an early dinner tonight before I head to Faze?

Coby's alter ego, DJ Cobalt, was one of the most popular DJs and electronic musicians in the world. Russian tycoon Yuri Novakovsky had recognized her talent early on and had signed her as the house DJ for his string of unbelievably successful and highly exclusive night clubs. She now hopped from one international hotspot to the next, spinning some of the sickest tracks ever for wild crowds who lined up hours before the doors opened just to hear her.

Sorry. I've got plans.

Oooohh. That sounds interesting. His name is...?

It's a double date.

A knock on the door interrupted our chat.

Gotta run. Doc's here.

K. Lemme know how it goes!

Will do.

Setting aside my phone, I watched Dr. Rae stroll into the room in her bright blue scrubs and shockingly orange clogs. She smiled at me and extended her hand. "Hello, Hadley. It's good to see you again. What's it been? Six years?"

"Eight," I corrected gently, my fingers tightening their grasp on the scratchy gown fabric. I had been fifteen when she had assisted in my last open heart surgery. She had left the pediatric practice I had been seeing since birth to move to this newer adult-oriented practice right after that. Since it was finally time for me to make the transition to a "grown-up" team, I had chosen Dr. Rae because she was familiar and nice.

"Gosh," she said with a shake of her head, her dark hair swishing side to side in her ponytail, and sat down on her rolling stool. "Time has really gotten away from me! Are you still writing and drawing those graphic novels?"

I nodded. "I'm wrapping up one series this year and planning a spinoff."

"That's fantastic! I read the feature on your arts center in the paper earlier this year. I think it's really wonderful that you've opened up a new avenue for special needs kids and adults. It looks like a really great place. You're keeping busy?"

"We've got a full schedule and a waitlist. I'm probably going to add some new instructors for the fall so we can get more classes open."

She smiled at me. "I can see how much you love your work there by the look in your eyes. Looks like you've found your passion." Leaning back, Dr. Rae clasped her hands together. "So, kiddo, what's the problem?"

Not minding the way she called me kiddo at all, I pinched the thick blue trim of the gown between my fingers and fiddled with it. "I spent most of April, May and June traveling abroad."

"Backpacking?"

"Yeah," I said with a smile. "It was really fun, but I noticed that I was having a harder and harder time catching my breath when I was on long walks or trying to climb. Like, for reals, I thought I was going to pass out cold when I hiked Tiger Hill."

"Oh, Darjeeling! Such a beautiful place," she remarked wistfully. Then, more seriously, she asked, "The shortness of breath is painless?"

"Yes."

"And it only happens after physical exertion?"

"So far," I confirmed. "It reminds me of the way I was as a kid, before Doctor P put me on the digoxin and before we did the valve replacement. I feel like I'm getting tired more easily. You know, twenty minutes of Zumba and I'm looking for a chair and a water bottle."

"Hmm," she said, tapping her fingers on her thighs. "Any other symptoms I need to know about?"

"I sometimes feel like my heart is skipping a beat or two."

Her brows knitted together with concern. "This is new?"

"Very," I said and absentmindedly rubbed my chest. "I've never had any issues with arrhythmias, but I think I'm having one now."

"And it happens when? While you're exercising or while you're sitting still?"

"Mostly while I'm exercising, but the other night I had this weird episode in bed," I explained, my palms sweating as I remembered the frantic pounding in my chest and the throbbing in my head. "I rolled onto my back and coughed. It stopped."

"I see." She unlooped the stethoscope hanging around her neck and stood. "Let's take a listen, okay?"

I swallowed nervously and sat up straighter. This was as familiar to me as breathing. Since birth, I had been poked, prodded, studied, sliced open, rearranged and sewn back together. The prospect of going under the knife again bothered me more this

time than it had at five days old, six months old, nine years old or fifteen years old. That last surgery was supposed to be the final surgery—ever.

This wasn't supposed to happen. I was supposed to be free. I was supposed to go out and live my life. I had gotten a taste of that freedom while traveling alone across India and Asia. It was the first time in my life my mother hadn't been on my case about my heart or my father hadn't been hovering in the background, ready to swoop in when I got breathless. Now, I sat here, taking deep breaths and trying to hold as still as possible while Dr. Rae moved the cold metal disc around my chest, and fought the urge to punch the wall in frustration.

Dr. Rae took a step back and draped her stethoscope along the back of her neck again. She held my gaze for a moment. "I'm going to be straight with you, Hadley. I don't like what I'm hearing. I'm going to have one of the techs come in to do an echo and a strip."

I sighed heavily. "Great."

"Hey," she said gently and grasped my hand. "This isn't a rush to the operating room sort of thing, okay? If there's something wrong with that valve we replaced when you were in high school, we have a couple of options that we can pursue before another big surgery."

"Okay."

She squeezed my hand in an encouraging way. "We'll fix you up, kiddo. Everything will be all right."

God, I hoped she was right. I watched her leave and waited for the tech to return. He came in a few minutes later towing a portable ultrasound machine. A nurse hot on his heels pushed an EKG machine. I slid onto my back on the flat exam table and welcomed the sheet the nurse placed on top of me. The male tech stepped outside long enough for the nurse to apply the sticky leads all over my torso and chest.

When he returned, the nurse was already running a twenty second strip off the machine, capturing every beat of my heart on the graph paper. I had seen enough EKGs of my heart to know that wonky little blip wasn't normal for me. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuckity Fuck Cakes!*

Staring at the ceiling, I let my eyes adjust to the dimmed lighting as the nurse flicked switches to make it easier for the tech to see his screen. He shifted aside the open flaps of my gown just enough to bare my sternum. I hated the feeling of the warm gel plopping onto my skin. The pressure of the ultrasound wand gliding over my sternum and along the top of my breast made my teeth grind together.

Hiding my fear and anxiety, I made pleasant conversation with the nurse and tech in between screen captures of my heart. Every now and then I glanced at the grainy screen to watch the rhythmic pulsing of my heart. The chambers squeezed and pushed blood through the valves and arteries. I had seen this view so many times, sometimes five or six times in a year, that it was like seeing an old friend.

As a baby, my parents had brought me in for echocardiograms every four weeks. I still had the heart sketches my Dad had drawn to help explain to toddler me what was wrong with my ticker. I had been born with Tetralogy of Fallot, a complex set of defects that had required two huge surgeries before I was even a year old to repair holes between the walls of my heart. The thick, ultra-muscular right ventricle had needed to be carved and shaved.

There had been some complicating factors along the way. The artery feeding my lungs wasn't big enough so I had undergone a number of catheterization and stent procedures in elementary school. My pulmonary valve had always been a gnarly little thing that refused to work properly, but my rock star surgeon had left it in place until I was nine. Medications had eased some of the symptoms I had experienced because of my craptastic valve, but at nine, the decision was made to go in and replace it with a new conduit. But by high school I was struggling again. It wasn't unusual. Growing kids have different needs so a change to a "big girl" valve had been expected. That was supposed to be the last one for a good, long while.

I watched the valve flapping open and closed on the screen. It didn't settle into place the way it was intended. I could see the swoosh of blood regurgitating from the valve. I clenched my teeth together and shuttered my eyelids. *God, not again. Please, not again.*

The last open heart surgery hadn't been as easy as the others. I had caught a nasty case of the flu from some jerk who had visited his son in the CVICU despite his hacking cough. I had nearly died from the complications, including a collapsed lung and a fever so high I had had seizures. The thought of going through that again made me want to run away and hide forever.

But I couldn't do that. I wanted to *live*. I wanted to survive.

So I had to face the cold, hard reality staring me right in the face. My poor broken heart needed some help.

By the time I had cleaned off the sticky gel on my chest and slipped back into my clothes, Dr. Rae still hadn't returned. I walked around the exam room, studying the lame-o posters. My fingers itched to make them better. Once that mischievous streak struck me there was no denying it.

I pulled the package of markers I carried everywhere out of my purse and approached the only poster that wasn't in a frame. The boring, text-heavy poster featuring heart attacks signs begged for something funny to make it interesting. I sketched a happy, bright red heart dancing at the top of the poster. Next to each bulleted sign of an impending heart attack, I drew the sweet little heart experiencing those symptoms, clutching his chest, sweating bullets and even struggling under the weight of a tutu-wearing elephant dancing on his chest.

The door swung open behind me as I was doodling the last details of the heart on a stretcher. I steeled myself for chastisement but Dr. Rae actually laughed.

"Oh, I've always loathed that poster!" She came to stand next to me. "I like this version much better." She gestured to the corner. "You have to sign it for us."

Happy to oblige, I scrawled my signature along the bottom. "If it's a problem, just have them bill me for replacement posters. I shouldn't have doodled on this one without asking."

Dr. Rae shrugged. "You're nervous. You needed an outlet."

I slipped the markers back into my purse and leaned back against the exam table. She leaned against the counter and crossed her arms. Finally finding my courage, I asked, "Well?"

She exhaled slowly. "The valve isn't closing completely. You've got some right side dilation that I don't like. There's evidence of an arrhythmia."

I gulped hard and tried not to burst into tears as my stomach wobbled. "So what do we do next?"

"I want you to come in for some testing on Tuesday, if that works for your schedule."

"It does." Working from home gave me a lot of flexibility, and I didn't teach any art classes on Tuesday either. "And after that?"

"Best case scenario? One of our cath specialists will be able to go in and fix the valve in a minimally invasive way. The arrhythmia is a bit more complicated. With your heart history, medications aren't a starting point. The testing will give us more information, and I'll make recommendations from there. Worst case scenario? You're back in the operating room before Christmas to replace that valve and have a pacemaker installed."

My sternum actually ached at the mere mention of another surgery. Rubbing the scars hidden by shirt and feeling the knotty hardness of the metal wire holding my breastbone together, I shook my head. "I won't do another surgery in the winter. Never again," I swore. "I'm not risking another flu infection while recovering."

Dr. Rae nodded in understanding. "Let's see how the testing goes first."

"All right."

"Listen," she said with a careful tone, "I know this is something you probably discuss with your primary care physician or your OB/GYN, but are you sexually active?"

"Not at the moment," I answered honestly. *Not ever*, I silently amended.

"But you had the progesterone implant inserted last fall, right?" She must have seen that in my chart because she touched her upper arm.

"Yes, Dr. Vargas recommended it because she said the progesterone was safest for my medical situation and least likely to cause blood clots. I didn't trust myself to remember to take the pill every day."

"Understandable," she said. "Well, if your romantic situation changes, be careful. Condoms *and* the implant, okay?"

"Yes." At twenty-three, protecting myself so that I didn't get pregnant seemed like the most normal thing in the world, but with every passing year, I started to wonder about my future and the things I might want someday. "Dr. Rae?"

"Yes?"

"Do you think...? I mean...?"

Her expression softened. Somehow she knew what I wanted to ask. "I honestly don't know, Hadley. Let's cross this bridge first, all right?"

I understood that was her gentle way of telling me to start coming to terms with the hard life had dealt me. Not that I had much to complain about, really, I thought as I scheduled my testing appointment and rode the elevator to the lobby of the building. Life could have been a hell of a lot worse.

Sure, I had this broken heart that was causing me some grief, but I had a big, crazy family that adored me and friends who loved me. I had been born into a wealthy, privileged family which meant I had always had access to the best medical care and schools. My career as a graphic novelist had kicked off before I had even been out of high school, and now I had an arts center that gave me a purpose and a source of constant happiness.

Sliding behind the wheel of the obscenely expensive luxury convertible my father had given me as a college graduation gift, I closed the door, revved up the engine and the air conditioner and shut my eyes for a long moment. I ignored the panicking voice in my

head that urged me to call my father. I longed to hear his voice telling me everything was going to be okay. "*Mi'ja*," he would say, and the whole world would be right again.

But I didn't want to worry him, not with all the work stress he was under at the moment. My mother had her hands full with my niece's upcoming *quinceañera*. I didn't want to spoil Ally's special day with worries about my heart. She was such a sweet kid, and she was so excited about her birthday and the wild bash my brother Carlos and his wife Vonny had planned for her. If even a whisper of a problem with my heart met the family's ears, everyone would go into full-on coddle mode. I refused to take any attention away from Ally.

Planning to make Coby swear silence about my doctor's visit today, I dropped my cell phone into the cup holder and tossed my purse onto the passenger seat. I shuffled through the playlists on the touchscreen mounted flush with the dashboard and found something upbeat and fun. I was just starting to back out of my space when the tones of a ringing phone interrupted my music.

Glancing at the number displayed on the screen, I didn't recognize it. The Houston area code piqued my interest. I tapped the green button. "Hello?"

"Hi, Hadley."

A thrill of excitement shot right through me at the sound of that deep, slightly raspy voice. I had only heard him speak a few times, but that voice—Oh, God, that voice—it was one I would never forget.

"Uh, I'm not sure if you remember me or not, but it's Finn Connolly." He sounded almost nervous. Considering how capable and brave he had proven himself, I was surprised by that.

"Oh, I remember you all right. There aren't many girls who would forget a man who saved them from a sniper by diving through a window."

The memory of that terrible night Mattie, one of my students, and Abby, his older sister, had been targeted by some crazy cartel sniper was still fresh in mind. Five weeks had passed, but I still woke up in a cold sweat when the nightmares came. Even now, I could feel Finn's brawny arms wrapped around me as he swept me up and barreled through the shot-out window. He had curled his body around mine, cradling me and protecting me from the glass shards as we slid across the shiny floor.

Before I could even make sense of what was happening, Finn had sat up, turning his back so that he was between me and the open window, and had gathered me close to his chest. He had dragged me into the corner, kicking over a sofa with the boot encasing his prosthetic foot, and huddled over me until the police came.

I had been shaking so badly. He had gently clasped my face and tugged the ear buds of my iPod out of my ears. I hadn't wanted to cry or show weakness, but I hadn't been able to stop the tears. Finn had tucked me against his chest and rubbed my back in slow circles, all the while murmuring gently to me, "You're all right, girl. No one will hurt you, not while I'm breathing."

Other than my father, no man had ever sworn to protect me. Finn had kept his promise. We had both been taken to the closest emergency room. Somehow I had managed to escape without a single scrape. Finn, on the other hand, had deep gouges in his forearms and back from all that glass. He hadn't seemed to mind. The whole time they had been patching him together he had kept a protective watch over me.

Until Daddy had shown up and all hell had broken loose, that is. I grimaced at the memory of the way my father had thrown his name around and threatened to have Finn

arrested. For what, I hadn't the slightest idea. Honestly, I don't think Daddy knew either at the time. I think he had been scared and had lashed out at the only target he could find.

"I meant to come by the arts center that next morning," Finn said, "to check on you and see how you were doing, but your Dad—"

"I am so sorry about that, Finn," I interjected quickly. "He can be crazy over-protective sometimes."

"He's your father. That's his job." He sounded as if he respected my father for his overblown reaction. It made me think about Finn's family. My other best friend, Bee, dated Kelly, Finn's younger brother. I had heard all about their alcoholic, gambling addict father. Something told me Finn's father had never shown even a tenth of the concern mine had.

"Regardless, he shouldn't have yelled at you like that or threatened you."

"It's all right," he assured me. "It's in the past. Listen, uh, about that double date you're going on tonight with Mattie and Ellie?"

"What about it?" I had agreed to chaperone a date between Mattie and Ellie, two of the special needs students in one of my evening art courses. Over the course of a few weeks, I had watched the pair exchange smiles and glances. Their mutual interest hadn't escaped me. Mattie had finally worked up the courage to ask Ellie out for dinner, and she had accepted, with her mother's only condition that it be a double date. Ellie had asked me to come with her, and I had happily agreed to go. Mattie had asked Detective Eric Santos, a longtime friend of his, to drive.

"So, I know the original plan was that Eric Santos was going to come with Mattie, but he's got a case that's keeping him late. Mattie asked if I'd come, but I wanted to make sure it was all right with you."

"Of course it's okay with me." My heart fluttered in my chest, but it wasn't a bad valve and an arrhythmia making it go crazy this time. No, it was the prospect of sitting next to dangerously handsome Finn Connolly at some cozy little restaurant table.

"Great." The hint of a smile filled his voice. "Am I picking you ladies up at Ellie's place?"

"Yes." I gave him the address. "We'll see you there around seven?"

"Yes."

"Um. Okay. Well. I guess I'll see you later."

He laughed softly. "Yes, later. Bye, Hadley."

"Bye, Finn."

The call ended, and my music started playing right where it had been muted. After the depressing and unnerving visit with Dr. Rae, the unexpected phone call from Finn had lifted my spirits. Before he had saved me that crazy evening in front of the arts center, Finn and I had shared only one short but promising conversation. There had been an undeniable spark between us. I wanted to explore where that might lead.

As I backed out of the parking spot and reconsidered the outfit I had chosen for the night, I ignored the irritating voice in the back of my head that warned me against getting entangled in anything romantic. My broken heart wasn't going to stop me from having a good time tonight.

Leaning against the counter of the gym's laundry room, Finn held his phone to his ear a moment longer than necessary. The sweet sound of Hadley Rivera's voice played on a loop in his head. He lowered his phone and placed it on the stack of towels he had been folding. His gaze dropped to the pink origami frog she had given him that day he had met her at the arts center while escorting Abby and Mattie.

In a moment of weakness, he ran his fingertip along the silver scrawl of her name and number. The frog had been crushed during the fall they had both taken when he had saved her life, but he had carefully managed to get it back into the right shape. With a tiny bit of pressure, he flicked the funny little paper contraption and made it hop.

"You get tonight sorted out?" Jack, his older brother, peered at him through the open doorway of the laundry room. Wiping sweat from his forehead and the back of his neck, he leaned against the door frame and waited for his answer.

"Yeah."

Jack motioned to his own buzzed hair. "You might think about a visit to the barbershop. Shave that scruff on your face and trim up that hair. You're starting to look like a hippie."

Finn snorted. His hair barely curled around his ears and dusted his shoulders, but coming from a long line of Marines who favored the traditional high-and-tight haircut, he looked like a shaggy dog. "I'll think about it."

"Think hard." Jack swung the towel in a slow circle. "Is your friend still planning to drop by tomorrow?"

"Conn called me at lunch to let me know his flight times. Pop said he'd finish up Kelly's room today. Conn says he'll only be staying a week."

"He can stay as long as he likes. Conn saved your life, man. The least we can do is let him sleep in a bedroom that isn't be used by anyone." He paused and seemed to be considering his words carefully. "Look, speaking of house guests, we've got to do something about Pop."

Finn had been expecting this discussion for a while now. "He's getting back on his feet, Jack. We can't put him out on the streets when he's finally getting sober and staying away from the gambling dens and bookies."

"He's a grown man. Let him find his own way." The harsh edge to Jack's voice warned Finn not to push too hard on the matter. The house belonged to Jack, and truthfully, his older brother had been more than gracious when it came to housing and supporting their abusive, alcoholic father after he had been shot trying to protect their youngest brother's girlfriend from a crazed stalker.

"Give me two weeks," Finn negotiated. "I'll get him out of the house and into a safe place."

"You don't have to babysit him. He's sixty-two years old."

"He's a recovering alcoholic and a gambling addict who is hanging on by a thread." Finn glared at his brother. "He's making progress. He needs support."

"We needed support when we were kids, Finn. Our mother needed support when she was dying. That old bastard gave us nothing but pain and grief. We've done more than enough to help him." Shaking his head, Jack pressed his tongue against the inside of his cheek and seemed to be fighting for control. "Two weeks, Finn, and then I throw his shit out of the den and onto the front yard myself."

"All right." It wasn't much, but he would take it.

Changing the subject, Jack asked after their brother who was gallivanting around the world with his wunderkind tech goddess girlfriend. "Did you talk to Kelly today?"

"Yeah, I caught him on Skype early this morning. He and Bee are headed for Hong Kong. He said he'll touch base tomorrow." Not sure how Jack would react to the news, he carefully added, "Kelly told me he spoke to Dimitri last night and let him know that he's not coming back to Lone Star. He's hanging up the bodyguard uniform."

"Like hell," Jack said with a knowing chuckle. "He's just traded one boss for another."

"Bee's prettier. Pays better, I'm sure."

"Oh, I bet it's the benefits package that interests him most."

Chuckling, Finn went back to folding the freshly laundered towels. "We need to get more detergent."

"All ready?" Jack came into the laundry room and dropped his dirty towel in the first open washer. He picked up one of the hampers Finn had dragged in from the locker room and dumped it in the machine. "We may need to look into signing up with a vendor for deliveries instead of relying on monthly trips to a warehouse store."

"If you're about to start bitching about pennies, you're not going to like what I'm about to tell you."

Jack finished loading the machine and closed the lid. "Just lay it on me, Finn."

"I heard Gabe growling about these classes you've got him teaching the Lone Star guys. He's grumbling about his pay rate. Seems he found out what Dimitri Stepanov is paying the gym on that contract we secured to train his bodyguards and bouncers. He seems to think you're pocketing a tidy profit. Of course, he has no idea about silly little things like overhead, health insurance, equipment..."

His older brother's growling sound didn't bode well for anyone. He snarled a few choice words. "I'll deal with it."

Finn's mouth slanted with a knowing smile. "I'm sure you will."

Taking an armful of towels out of the dryer, Jack remarked, "Looks like Mattie might need a helper to keep up with his duties now that he's going to class three mornings a week."

"It's this rush of sign-ups we've had since the latest wave of college kids returned to the city," Finn said. "Half of them will probably drop their memberships once we hit October. They'll have to choose between beer money, rent and the gym. We're going to lose that battle every time. Maybe we should hold off until then to decide whether we want to look for more help."

Jack sorted the towels for the locker room from the smaller towels meant for the gym. "I can live with that. If we do add some more part-timers to the roster, we've got to do it the right way. I won't have Mattie's feelings getting hurt. We'll let him help us go through the applications and sit in on the interviews."

Finn smiled at Jack's protectiveness of his girlfriend's brother. "I like that plan. We have to make sure that any employees we hire understand that we have a zero tolerance policy for bullshit when it comes to bullying or harassment."

"Agreed," Jack said with a nod. He folded three towels before speaking again. "So, about your date tonight—"

"It's not my date," Finn cut in quickly. "It's Mattie and Ellie's date. Hadley and I are going as a buffer, just in case."

"All I'm saying is that the universe did you a huge favor by giving Eric that big case that's keeping him from going tonight. Don't waste it." Before he could protest, Jack held up one hand to silence him. "I don't want to hear a list of reasons why it won't work."

He ignored his older brother's order. "She isn't interested in a torn up old vet like me."

"You're thirty-one years old and compared to some of the men who came back you've got nothing to complain about, Finn."

His brother's retort hit home. He thought of Conn and the horror that IED had made of his face. He remembered the dozens of other men, most of them boys fresh out of high school, he had met in the hospital and rehab who had lost so much more than a leg.

Jack reached for something behind the stack of towels he had been folding. It was the pink origami frog he placed on the stack of white cotton towels closest to Finn. "She didn't just write her name on a slip of scrap paper, bro. She made you a freaking frog. She *wanted* you to call her and to remember her."

Finn gingerly picked up the frog and held it on his palm. He swallowed hard as the truth hit him. Not meeting Jack's curious gaze, he said, "I haven't been interested in a woman since losing my leg and the drinking. Not...not like this," he added. "There were women." He shut his eyes as shame engulfed. "Too many women and too many empty, angry one-night-stands, but Hadley? She's different. One look, and God, Jack. I couldn't breathe."

Jack squeezed his shoulder. "I know how that goes. It was the same way for me the first time I walked into the pawn shop and spotted Abby."

"You had something to offer Abby. All I've got to offer a woman is a shit fucking ton of baggage," Finn growled with frustration.

"That's not true, and you know it." Jack's hand tightened on his shoulder. "You own this business with me. You volunteer with other addicts. You coach special needs kids and adults. You make a difference to people who know you." He gestured to the blade-like prosthesis Finn wore around the gym. "You're a war hero, Finn. You lost your leg fighting for your country. Sure, you were a mean, pathetic drunk, but you whipped that addiction's ass. Thirty-one months and one week, Finn. That's a hell of a thing to accomplish."

He wasn't surprised Jack remembered the exact day of his last drink. If it hadn't been for Jack, he would have been dead by now. A wreck, a bar fight or choking on his own vomit while passed out drunk in some fleabag motel—he would have gone out with a nasty, ugly death.

"Just go out tonight with an open mind," Jack urged. "You like this girl. Brother, you ran across a parking lot to save her from a sniper."

A vision of Hadley's striking gray eyes and warm, honey brown skin flashed before him. He would never forget the panicked glint to her strangely hued irises as the bullets snapped and clanged all around them. She had clung to him, her small hands gripping at his shoulders and arms. The scent of her, something floral and sweet, had made an impression on him even in that adrenaline-fueled moment.

Stroking her back and hair, he had tried to calm her with gentle words. He had sworn to protect her. That vow hadn't been an empty one. Later that night, he had killed the man who had tried to take out Hadley, Mattie and Abby with one clean, perfectly

placed shot. Not that Hadley would ever know that. It was a secret he would take to his grave.

"Give it a chance," Jack suggested. "She might surprise you."

Glancing at the paper frog on his palm, Finn smiled. "She already has."

Double dates had never been his idea of fun, but he had a sneaking suspicion tonight was going to be a night he would never forget.

Chapter Two

With a smile I didn't even try to conceal, I watched Mattie and Ellie chatting excitedly in front of me as we slowly made our way down the busy sidewalk. The couple exchanged eager glances while discussing the musical we had watched. I had to hand it to Mattie. He had made Ellie's first date a beautiful thing.

Not wanting to collide with a passionately kissing couple obviously veering toward me, I stepped to the left and bumped into Finn. His arm shot out to steady me, curving just above my waist and tugging me in closer to his side as another larger, more raucous group squeezed by us on the sidewalk. His fingers spanned my hip, the grip easy but firm. It was the first time he had touched me all night, and my body thrummed with an illicit buzz as the heat of his big hand seeped through the fabric of my dress.

I cast a shy look his way and caught him staring at me. The tawny flecks in his green eyes seemed to glow in an almost supernatural way. It was the castoff light from the theaters and restaurants surrounding us lending him that otherworldly quality. He had cut his hair since the last time I had seen him and shaved too.

His handsome face made my breath catch in my throat. The hard angles of his jaw were marked by faint scars. He had more rippled, ridged lines on his neck, forearms and hands. I assumed he had sustained those injuries during his tours of duty, most of them probably at the same time he had lost his leg. It occurred to me that I might have finally met a man who had more scars than me, physically and emotionally.

The pressure of his grip along my hip increased, and he gently slowed my pace. When my expression turned questioning, he gestured toward Mattie and Ellie with a lift of his chin. Lowering his face until his mouth nearly touched the shell of my ear, he murmured, "Let's give them a little space."

A wicked shiver coursed through me as his breath tickled my skin. Unable to help myself, I moved fractionally closer. Finn's cologne enticed me. He smelled of the outdoors, like pine and fresh, crisp mountain air with a hint of cedar. Ever so slowly, he lowered his arm and let it drop away from my waist. I mourned the loss of his touch and heat immediately but found some small comfort in the way our hands bumped together as we walked.

"I think this was a good date for them," Finn remarked, his keen eyes roving the area. It had taken me the first few minutes of dinner to realize that he wasn't being deliberately aloof or ignoring the conversation at the table when he glanced around like that. He was scanning for threats. Considering his time in the Marines as a sniper and the battles he had probably seen, I assumed it was a hard habit to break. I had wanted to tease him about it, but then I'd remembered what the hell had happened that night outside the arts center. He had every reason to be so uptight.

"Did Eric choose the restaurant?" It had been quiet and cozy with just the right amount of fancy to make the night special.

"He did, but the musical was all Mattie. Apparently, Mattie saw Ellie looking at the flyer in the lobby of the arts center. He said it made her smile, and he wanted to make her smile."

"Aw! What a sweetheart he is! God, what I'd do meet a guy who actually paid attention to the things that make me smile."

Finn cast a sidelong glance my way. "You're meeting guys in the wrong places."

"Probably," I agreed with a short laugh.

We walked in silence for a few paces before Finn piped up again. "Raspberries made you smile. I caught you swiping the ones Ellie had pushed off her dessert."

My ears felt hot. "I didn't think anyone noticed that."

"I did."

I swallowed hard. Feeling a bit brave, I asked, "What else did you notice?"

"You like your food super spicy, but it gives you heartburn because you've been touching your chest all night. You rub your thumb against your palm when you're bored. You've got sensitive ears because you winced during the loud dancing numbers during the show." His attention dropped to my foot for a second. "You've been favoring your right foot all night. You probably stubbed it while getting dressed."

Taken aback by the info he rattled off so easily, I gawked at him. "You noticed all that, huh?"

"I was a sniper, Hadley. Noticing the little things was the difference between evading detection, making a clean shot and guaranteeing a successful extraction or being killed, captured or failing a mission and getting lots of good men killed." He said it all so matter-of-factly, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

"You were right about the toe but wrong about the heartburn." I hadn't been rubbing my chest out of pain. Until Finn had mentioned it, I hadn't even realized I had been doing it. It must have been a nervous tic sort of thing, no doubt brought on the black cloud of possibility hanging over my head. I made a mental note to keep an eye on my hands because it would make my parents super paranoid during Mass and Sunday lunch if they saw me touching my chest.

He frowned. "I know what I saw after dinner."

"And I'm telling you I don't have heartburn."

"Did you pull a muscle?"

I snorted indelicately. "Doing what? Drawing some lines on paper and shading in some angel wings?"

My retort earned a grin from him. "I finished the latest installment in your series a few days ago."

"Oh?" I didn't fish for a compliment. I had spent enough time on the conference and book signing circuits to know that I probably wouldn't like any compliments I had to seek out. The ones freely given were the ones I cherished most.

"I got to the end and shot out of bed. I yelled loud enough that Jack smacked on the wall between our rooms and told me to keep it down," he admitted with a sheepish look. "I hate cliffhangers—but I secretly sort of love them. Especially when they're that well written," he added.

"I struggled hard with ending that installment of the series that way," I confessed. "I actually sketched out sixteen more thumbnails, just in case I changed my mind before I did the final coloring pass. I could...I could show them to you if you would like."

"Are you kidding? I would love to see them." His enthusiasm made my heart race in a good way.

"You know, the last time we discussed my books, you promised to help me as an expert on insurgent warfare."

"Did I?" His mouth quirked with the tiniest slant of amusement, and I knew he remembered that he actually hadn't promised any such thing. "Well, I'm not busy tonight."

My belly trembled with anticipation. "Would you like to come over after you drop off Ellie and Mattie?"

Finn captured my gaze. "Yes. Very much."

"Great." I nervously brushed some loose curls behind my ears. We would go back my place, cozy up on the couch and...well. I wasn't sure what would happen once we were alone, but even if it was just an evening of talking over sketches and a bottle of wine, it would be very nice. Finn wasn't the kind of guy who would spend the entire night trying to impress me. We could have a real conversation, not the stilted, one-sided tortures I usually sat through on a date.

We finally made it to the parking garage tucked away on a corner behind the restaurant and not far from the theater. We had managed to find a spot on the first level in one of the oversized vehicle slots. Finn unlocked the doors from afar, and I watched Mattie open Ellie's door and gently guide her into the rear passenger seat of the crew cab monstrosity. The model for Mattie's gentlemanly behavior, Finn opened the front passenger door for me and put a warm hand on the small of my back as I used the running board to hoist myself into my seat.

The conversation on the ride back to Ellie's house was easy and friendly. Finn and I remained in the truck while Mattie walked his crush to her door and saw her safely inside. We both averted our eyes when the two exchanged pecks on the cheek. Mattie was still blushing when he slipped into the backseat. I glanced at Finn, silently praying he wouldn't tease Mattie, but Finn seemed to sense this wasn't the time for brotherly teasing.

Instead he turned the conversation to Mattie's college classes, and I listened quietly as the pair bantered back and forth. Abby had gotten her brother into a pilot program one of the local colleges was offering that catered to special needs students. By the sounds of it, Mattie enjoyed what he was learning and planned to stay in for the full two years.

When we reached the house Mattie shared with Abby, I wasn't surprised to spot Jack's truck parked in the driveway. He sometimes brought Mattie to art class so I had become familiar with his vehicle. From what Abby had told me, things were very serious between them. I expected an engagement announcement by Christmas.

The porch light was on, and I thought I noticed a bit of movement behind the wooden blinds guarding the picture window. No doubt it was Abby anxiously awaiting Mattie's return.

"Thank you for the ride, Finn." Mattie unbuckled his belt.

"No problem, man." He twisted in his seat. "You coming to work tomorrow?"

"I'm going in early with Jack. Are you coming in tomorrow?"

I could feel Finn's heated gaze skip to my face but didn't dare meet his eyes. "Maybe," he said eventually.

"Okay." Mattie leaned forward and gently clasped my shoulder. "I'm glad you came with us, Hadley. Good night."

I patted his hand and smiled. "Night, Mattie."

Jack waved from the front porch when Mattie was safely inside. Finn checked the mirrors before sliding back out onto the street. "Do you mind if I turn on the radio?"

"Not at all," I said, glad for the background noise. He chose a country channel and that didn't surprise me at all. Of all the Connolly brothers, Finn fit that image of a Texas good old boy best. He was rougher and louder—and more dangerous.

Looking for something to talk about, I decided complimenting his truck was a good bet. We were in Texas, after all. "This is a really nice truck."

He shot an amused smile my way. "You know a lot about trucks?"

"My dad has this exact model but two years older. He drives it to work every day."

"Your dad drives himself to work?"

"Well, yeah," I said with a frown. "What else is he going to do? Ride a bike?"

"He doesn't have a driver?"

"Mom has a driver. Dad prefers to drive himself."

"But he has bodyguards," Finn remarked. "I saw them at the emergency room that night we nearly got dinged like a couple of Coke cans by that sniper."

The rather crude way he described our nearly being shot surprised me. I reminded myself that Finn was a battle-hardened man who had seen things I would never be able to imagine and let it slide. "He had just come in from a trip to Central America. He always travels with bodyguards when he's out of Houston."

"You should have guards around the clock."

I wasn't sure whether to be annoyed or touched by that one. "I had guards until I was in college. I got rid of them a few years ago and haven't looked back."

"It's not safe."

"I'm perfectly fine. Other than that bizarre shooting at the arts center, I've never had trouble of any kind. I backpacked around India and Asia for weeks without a problem." Not the kind he was thinking, at least. My hand lifted toward my chest, but I remembered what he had said and dropped it quickly.

The thought of my scars made me think of his. I sneaked a glance at his legs as we drove toward my penthouse. Though I wouldn't call it lucky, I gathered that losing the left leg in that awful IED explosion in Afghanistan had been slightly better than losing the right. At least he could still drive with the same natural rhythm.

"You can ask any questions you'd like." His gruff voice startled me.

"Sorry," I hastily apologized. "I didn't mean to stare."

"It doesn't bother me." He met my gaze long enough to convince me that it didn't. "If there's something you want to know, ask."

"Were you the only one injured in the blast?" I had only the vaguest idea of the details surrounding his career-ending injury. I couldn't exactly ask Bee a lot of questions without rousing her suspicions about my interest in her boyfriend's brother.

"No." He let that single word hang in the air for a long time. "I was hitching a ride back from a mission with a supply convoy. The lead truck—two trucks in front of mine—rolled right over the first damned IED. The explosion almost tossed me out of the vehicle I was in and killed everyone in the first truck. A remotely detonated device was set off once we all started piling out to take cover and secure the wounded. A goddamned door blasted off the hinges of the vehicle took me out at the knee."

My stomach lurched at the imagery his words evoked. I could imagine the heavy slab of superheated metal flying at him and slamming into his leg. I swallowed hard but didn't speak. I sensed he wasn't done with his brutal tale.

"The two men next to me were both killed instantly, but one behind me was gurgling and choking." His voice had deepened and grown raspier. "I crawled toward him and found a shank of metal sticking out of the poor bastard's throat." He made a gesture toward his neck. "Doc made it to him fast, but that wasn't a wound even he could fix. The kid was young." He glanced at me. "Younger than you are now. I saw the panic

in his eyes. It wasn't...it wasn't the first time I had watched a man die. It sure as hell was the first time I thought I might be going with him."

Finn let his tale fade as he merged onto 59 but picked it back up once we were cruising along the freeway. "We started taking heavy fire after that. I managed to snap out of it long enough to tie off my belt above the wound and then it was kill or be killed. Talk about asses and elbows," he growled low. "But's that war for you."

I didn't know what the hell asses and elbows meant but figured it was his way of describing a hot mess of a fight. "You were able to shoot while you were bleeding like that?"

"You'd be amazed what you can accomplish when you've got that much adrenaline pouring into your bloodstream," he said matter-of-factly. "You forget about the pain because you want to live. Survival is a hell of a motivator."

"I know," I murmured quietly.

He laughed at that, the sound unnecessarily harsh. "Do you?"

Annoyed by his arrogant question, I grasped his hand and tugged it toward my chest. He tried to yank his hand back when his fingers grazed the front of my dress. "What are you—?"

"Stop." I spoke firmly and held tight. Pulling down the high neck of my dress with my free hand, I pushed his fingers against the scarred skin on my chest. I felt him flinch.

Realization dawned, and his head quickly turned toward me. Curious now, his fingers moved gently over my marked skin, following the long, thick line formed by so many incisions there. He pressed down to feel the wire securing my breastbone. His hand moved from my chest to the back of my neck. He cupped my nape so gently and ran his thumb in slow, warm circles on my skin. "Oh, sugar, what the hell did they do to you?"

The sympathy and understanding of what I had been through sparked off an intense need within me. Had any other man ever really understood what I had survived in the last twenty-three years? No. That answer came swiftly. But Finn? Oh, Finn knew all about pain.

"I was born with a really bad set of heart defects. I had surgery four times by the time I was in high school plus a whole bunch of smaller procedures."

His thumb continued to massage my neck so tenderly. "Are you okay now?"

"I..." How did I answer that? If I said no, would this be it? One tease of a date and then nothing more? It wouldn't be the first time a guy had bailed after seeing my scars or hearing about my medical history. Deciding it was best to find out exactly what sort of man he was, I confessed, "I had a not so great visit at the cardiology clinic this morning."

The hand resting against the back of my neck gently swept along my shoulders in the most soothing way. "How bad is it?"

"Not, like, dying bad, but bad enough that I'll probably end up right back in an operating room in a few months."

His thumb brushed my jaw. "I'm so sorry, Hadley. That's rough."

The sweet way he caressed my neck and jaw left me trembling inside. I inhaled a shuddery breath and prayed my heart wouldn't start sprinting wildly. Finn glanced at me as we barreled down the highway. Our gazes locked, and a look stretched between us. It was a moment unlike any other I had ever shared with a man. He didn't have to say a single word. He looked at me like that and it was easy enough to read his

handsome face. He wasn't going to fill the space with empty words and platitudes. No, he did something even better.

His hand drifted down my neck, along my shoulder and followed the line of my arm until it settled on my own. He interlaced our fingers and gave my hand an encouraging squeeze. His rough, strong fingers shared their warmth with mine and something else too. This battle-tested warrior gave me some of the strength that had seen him through skirmishes and firefights I couldn't even imagine.

When he slowly dragged his thumb up and down the back of my hand, I smiled. Maybe I had something new to fight for now.

Chapter Three

Finn stood silently next to Hadley as the elevator swiftly climbed to the top floor of the downtown high-rise. He fought the urge to take her small hand in his again. In the truck, when she had revealed her heart problem and all she had survived, he had been gripped by the sensation of *knowing* her.

There had been the barest hint of fear in her voice as she had talked about another surgery. After the pain she had already known, he could only imagine how daunting it was to wait for another brutal surgery that would require separating her sternum and wiring it back together. The need to comfort her had been so strong, but he couldn't think of the right thing to say. Thankfully, he knew words weren't the only way to show concern.

Standing next to her now, he quietly breathed in her perfume and admired her profile. Long, thin earrings dangled from her ear. The diamonds glittered against her honey-colored skin and tempted him to stroke her skin. He wanted to tangle his fingers in her black hair and pluck free the knots of fabric holding together the open back of her dress. Maybe bend down and nibble on that spot where her neck curved into her shoulder. Would she shudder? Would she sigh? If he was lucky, she would do both and maybe invite him to keep going.

Control, he silently reminded himself.

The elevator bounced just a bit as it slowed to a stop. The doors opened into a foyer and a single door. He liked that the elevator didn't simply open right into her living room like they did at some penthouses. At least this gave her an additional level of security.

He hadn't been the least bit surprised to find out she lived in the most exclusive building in the city or that she owned the penthouse or a private elevator access. She might seem laid-back and down to earth, but Hadley came from extreme wealth. A one-bedroom walkup would never suffice.

But this? Finn experienced a moment of shock when he followed her into the penthouse. It was like walking into one of those shiny covers of the decorating magazines he saw while waiting in line at the grocery store. Everything was modern and sleek, from the gleaming wood floors to the smoky gray color on the walls. White drapes with a faint silvery pattern on them guarded the floor-to-ceiling windows that gave her a beautiful view of the city. The furniture in the living area was mostly white except for one bright purple chair and a handful of yellow patterned throw pillows.

There were two balconies that he could see from the living area, one just in front of him and another right off the dining area to his left. Sizing up the portion of the penthouse he could see and guessing at what he couldn't, he estimated the place at three thousand square feet—minimum. The house he shared with Jack and their father and sometimes Kelly was about half that.

"It's a bit of a mess," Hadley said anxiously and swept up an armful of soda cans and a bag of chips. "Coby had some of her musician friends from Sweden staying in Bee's old room for the last couple of days. They cleared out this morning to head off to a music festival in Austin, but we're running a bit behind on housekeeping."

"I live in a houseful of men. This," he gestured to the crumbs on the coffee table, "is nothing."

She smiled gratefully for his understanding and carted her armful to the kitchen. After sorting out the recycling and washing the sticky residue from the soda cans off her hands, she kicked off her high heels and pushed them against the wall and out of the way. "Would you like something to drink? I'm pretty sure those Swedes cleaned us out of beer and vodka, but I've got a few bottles of nice wine that I hid away in the locked cabinet of the bar."

Realizing the moment he dreaded most was upon them, he joined her in the kitchen but kept the granite island between them. His finger idly traced a black vein in the stone. "Look, there's something you need to know about me."

"Okay."

Meeting her inquisitive gaze, he said, "I'm an alcoholic. I'm in recovery, but I am and always will be an alcoholic."

"I see," she murmured gently. "How long have you been sober?"

She was taking it better than anyone else ever had. "Thirty-one months."

"That's really fantastic, Finn." She leaned across the counter to rub his hand and squeeze his fingers. "It's quite an accomplishment. I can't imagine it's been easy."

"It's not supposed to be," he replied, suddenly missing the warmth of her fingers atop his when she leaned back. "If it was, everyone who struggled with addiction would get clean and stay clean."

She nodded and then turned to face the refrigerator. "So sweet tea, water or a soda? I can make some lemonade if you would prefer that."

If the size of her upscale penthouse had surprised him, her reaction to finding out he was a recovering alcoholic damn near knocked him off his feet. Was she really that okay with it? He narrowed his eyes at her back and wondered what she wasn't saying. "You don't mind?"

"It's just some lemons, sugar and water."

A snort of laughter escaped his throat. "No, Hadley, I meant the alcoholic thing."

She glanced back at him. "Finn, we've all got problems."

He didn't know why he couldn't let it go at that. "This is a big problem."

Pivoting slowly, she leaned back against the refrigerator. "It is a big problem. It's huge, really, but you told me the truth about your alcoholism up front. That means a lot to me. I trust that you've got it under control. Sobriety is a journey, right?"

The words were so familiar to him. "You know someone that goes to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings."

"Yes."

Not wanting to push for more information, he decided to let it go. "I'll have that iced tea, if you don't mind."

Her sweet pink lips curved upward. "Not at all." She tugged open the refrigerator door and rummaged inside. "Make yourself at home, Finn. My draft board and studio are down the hall to your left. The door is probably open. You're welcome to go inside."

"Thanks." Wanting to see where she worked, he followed her directions to a spacious studio with the same floor-to-ceiling windows as the living area. One wall was covered with magnetic strips placed two feet or so apart. Drawings hung from the strips, tiny magnets holding them in place. He investigated them and realized it was her next book, laid out page by page from left to right, top to bottom. She had drawn and colored about one hundred pages of the graphic novel so she was halfway done.

Unable to help himself, he started reading from the first page, hungry to find out if the half-demon Ellaria survived the fall from the cliffhanger ending. She had sacrificed herself to save her true love Raphael, the warrior angel who had fathered the child she lost in a prior book when his archangel brethren attacked her. In the final panel of the last book, she had jumped off the tallest building in the city, sacrificing and condemning herself to an eternal life in hell to free Raphael from God's wrath and Lucifer's curse.

Finn ate up the words and the images, his heart actually racing a bit as he moved from page to page. Hadley had a real talent for storytelling and her gift for drawing was just as good. The vivid images on the page drew him into the world she had created.

Even so entranced by her work, he didn't miss the telltale pitter patter of her bare feet coming down the hall. He greeted her with a grin. "This is fucking fantastic, Hadley. The wait was worth it."

She laughed and handed him a glass of sweet tea. The ice cubes tinkled against each other as they knocked around in the dark liquid. "The next two pages are on my draft table."

Curious to see how she actually put together her books, he wandered over while sipping his tea. It was sweet and cold and so much better than the watered down tea from the restaurant. He stood close to the elevated and angled desk where she created her masterpieces and stared at the images she had been coloring.

It was a powerful scene in front of him. Raphael was choosing to return to his place among the archangels even though Ellaria had been freed from Hell as a mortal human. The grief on Ellaria's face punched Finn in the gut. He felt her betrayal and heartache at the way the man she had trusted and loved and given her maidenhead—and a source of power—turned his back on her now.

He rubbed his chest. "That's just—ouch."

"I know." She sounded sad as she stared at the page. "This one hit me right in the feels when I was writing it. I sobbed for, like, five hours after I finished the first sketch."

"They get back together, right?" He couldn't believe how badly he needed to know that Ellaria got her happily ever after in the end. After everything the poor woman had gone through, she deserved a bit of fictional happiness.

Hadley's mouth quirked in a teasing way. "You'll have to read the book and find out."

"Tease!"

She pinched his arm. "You know you love it."

I'm starting to, he thought wickedly. Turning his attention to her work, he said, "So we talked about me trying to do my own comics that day we met at the arts center."

"I remember."

Did she remember the encounter the same way he did? "Tell me how you do it."

She placed her glass on a stack of magazines on a bookshelf and joined him at her workspace. "I write the story first." She reached across him to grab a stack of printed pages bound together with a big clip, and when she did, her arm brushed against his chest. The slight touch set him on fire. "Here."

He took the manuscript from her and saw that she had plotted out the story like a screenplay. He put his glass of tea in a safe spot and thumbed through the pages. "This is where I screw up, I guess. The comics I've attempted always stall halfway through and then I give up because it's too frustrating to keep fighting with it."

"I used to do that when I was drawing in junior high. Dom took me to a comic convention that summer, and I got to sit in on a panel of my favorite writers and artists. They shared their tips and tricks, and I bought a whole bunch of how-to books and started studying how my favorite comics and graphic novels were structured and drawn."

"I should try that," he said, feeling a bit dumb for not taking that approach. Trying to ignore the flare of jealousy licking at his chest, he asked, "Who is Dom?"

"One of my older brothers." She reached for another bound stack of sheets, these thicker and covered in black and white sketches. "These are the basic thumbnails I do to design the book page-by-page before I do the real sketches and then the coloring."

He exchanged the manuscript for the thumbnails. Wanting to squeeze in some recon, he asked, "How many brothers do you have?"

She cast an amused glance his way. "Why? The big, tough Marine worried he might be outnumbered at the next Rivera barbecue?"

Her smile did crazy things to him. His brain told him to wait, not to do it just yet, but his heart screamed for him to take a chance. She had that sweet look on her face that dazzled him. *Fuck it. I'm going for it.*

"Depends on how many big brothers I have to dodge if they found out I did this." Taking a step toward Hadley, he closed the space between them and slid his arm around her waist. He gave a little tug, and she came willingly into his arms. Cradling the back of her head, he lowered his face and peered into those startling gray eyes of hers. *I'm lost.*

And he was. The moment his lips brushed hers, he was gone.

With a little whimper of need, Hadley gripped the front of his shirt and tilted her head, letting him have whatever he wanted to take. The touch of their lips was gentle and tender at first, but she lit a fire in his belly with that soft, kittenish noise. It had been a long while since he had kissed a woman, and he intended to make up for that tonight.

You're only kissing her. That's it. That's all.

That first year he had been sober, there had been so many empty one-night-stands and miserable, stilted, angry fucks. He had been searching for anything and everything to replace the craving he had for another beer or a shot of bourbon. He hadn't found it in any of those hotel rooms or strange bedrooms with women he barely knew because it didn't exist. There was no replacement for that craving. There was only acceptance and peace.

Only kissing Hadley proved to be more than enough. It was more than he deserved. She was such a good woman, all sweetness and light, and too damned good for him. He eased his tongue into her mouth and felt the shy flick of hers. Smiling, he chased her tongue and made contact again. Her grip tightened on his shirt, and she pressed toward him by lifting on tiptoes. Her breasts rubbed his chest, and heat streaked right down to his cock.

Deepening the kiss, he claimed her with as much intensity as he dared. A triumphant thrill raced through his chest when she wound an arm around his waist and tried to get even closer. The desire to lift her up and deposit her on that tall chair she used for drafting nearly topped him. He wanted to shove her dress up around her waist and see what sort of dainty little panties she was wearing. He would dip his fingers under the fabric to find her wet heat—and probably his tongue too.

Flirting with danger had gotten him in trouble too many times in the past. He refused to ruin the start of something beautiful with Hadley by giving into his reckless

impulses. There was plenty of time to do all the wonderfully dirty things he wanted do with her.

But not tonight.

As tenderly as he could manage, he lessened the power of their kisses. His tongue finally left her mouth, taking with it the sugary sweetness of her tea. He sucked on her lower lip and teased his teeth against the plump, soft flesh of her pout. Their noses nuzzled together as they shared a chaste, simple kiss, their lips lingering until he finally gathered the strength to pull away from her. They were both breathing hard now.

"Four," she said in a huskier voice. "I have four older brothers."

He grimaced with exaggeration. "Not good odds for this Marine."

"Well," she toyed with the point of his shirt collar, "you probably wouldn't have to worry about my two oldest brothers. Carlos has never been a hothead, and Marco would be so enamored with those green eyes of yours that he wouldn't even care that you took a kiss from his baby sister. But...Dom and Tres? No promises there." She abandoned his collar and played with a button now. "Dom was kicked out of three private schools and a public school before he was sixteen and ran away to join a doom metal band as a bassist. Tres went straight into the Marines after high school. He did eight years and then left to be Dom's bodyguard."

"Not good odds," he murmured, thinking that a Marine and a doom metal bassist could probably whip his ass from sunup 'til sundown if they got ahold of him.

She playfully patted his chest. "Luckily for you, they both adore me and wouldn't do anything to make me cry."

"Then I had better be on my best behavior and keep you happy."

"Sounds like a smart plan," she whispered, rising up to kiss him one more time. Caressing her cheek, he asked, "May I see you again?"

"I'd like that."

"What are you doing tomorrow night?" *Slow down. You're moving too fast.*

"I have this event thing," she said, biting her lip. "You wouldn't happen to have a tuxedo in your closet, would you?"

"Actually, I do." He traced her jawline with his thumb. "A friend of mine got married at Christmas, and I decided to buy a good tux and have it properly tailored." He gestured to his prosthetic leg. "It's hard to get a nice fit off the rack."

Her gaze lowered to his foot. "I bet."

"Why do I need a tux?"

"It's a fundraiser for the children's hospital. I go every year. It's my main charity," she explained. "The arts center is my passion and the way I help people directly, but fundraising for the hospital is hugely important to me." She smiled shyly. "I'd like it if you came with me."

He couldn't imagine a worse way to spend a Saturday night than cooped up in some ballroom at a stuffy fundraiser, but he couldn't tell her no. She looked up at him with those big puppy dog eyes, and he would have promised her the moon. "I'd love to go with you."

Because that was the point, wasn't it? He wanted to be with her. The where wasn't important.

"Meet me here tomorrow night around seven?"

"I can do that." Unable to help himself, he tasted her mouth again. She stroked his neck and rubbed his earlobe between her dainty fingers as he kissed her long and hard. Touching his forehead to hers, he exhaled roughly. "I really need to go."

She swallowed audibly. "That's probably a good idea."

Ask her if you can stay...

He batted away the unwanted thought and moved away from her. Holding her hand, he followed her to the front door of her home. When they reached it, he laughed. "We still didn't talk about insurgency battle plans."

"There's always tomorrow or Sunday or..." She pressed a kiss to his cheek. "I'm sure we'll get to it eventually."

Something told him they would probably keep getting sidetracked by more interesting things, but he liked the excuse of helping her with her book to maintain an open invite to see her. "Good night, Hadley."

"Night, Finn." She stood in the doorway until he was inside the elevator. "Bye."

"Goodbye." The doors closed, and he rode down to the garage level where he had parked. She had given him a strange look when he had chosen not to valet park, but he didn't like the thought of other people driving his truck.

Still on a high from kissing Hadley and making a second date, he didn't even notice the man leaning against his truck until it was too late. He stopped abruptly, but he had already been seen. A shock tore through him at the sight of that fucking Russian mobster smoking a cigarette. He didn't know Kostya's last name. He only knew that the man was dangerous and deadly and probably the darkest soul he had ever had the misfortune to meet.

"Finn." Kostya stubbed out the cigarette on the bottom of his shoe and flicked the butt across the garage.

"Kostya." He sized up the mob henchman he hadn't seen since the night he had shot that cartel assassin to save his brother and Abby. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

The Russian inclined his head toward the truck. "Let's take a ride."

"Let's not."

Kostya's icy glare chilled Finn to the bone. "I wasn't asking."

Gritting his teeth, Finn stormed to the driver's side door and wrenched it open. He started the truck and waited for Kostya to fasten his seatbelt. He glanced at his uninvited passenger. "And where would his majesty like to go?"

"Head toward Hobby Airport," the cleaner instructed.

"Why?"

"Because the boss wants to see you, and you don't want to make him wait any longer," Kostya stated matter-of-factly.

Pissed off but preferring not to get on the wrong side of the most powerful man in Houston, Finn left the parking garage and drove toward the airport to meet Nikolai Kalasnikov. He had never actually met the Russian mob boss, but he had seen him a few times. He had watched the silent, brooding man during the underground bare-knuckle tournament Kelly had been forced to fight in to clear their father's debts to the Albanian mafia. Kelly had gone up against the Russian's champion, a great big bear of a man called Sergei, in the final round.

The silence grated on Finn's nerves. "So, how have you been?"

Kostya made a sound that was close to a laugh. "Oh, you know, busy, busy, busy."

Finn thought of the news stories about the cartel war happening south of the border. He had a feeling the Russians had one of their dirty fingers stirring that pot. "I bet."

They settled into silence again. Eventually, Kostya spoke. "So, you and the Rivera girl, huh?"

Finn's fingers tightened around the steering wheel until the tips went numb. "Don't."

One word. A warning.

Kostya kept his gaze focused on the windshield. "She's not the type of girl we would ever use as leverage. She's too high profile. Besides, her father has friends in interesting places."

Finn hadn't been expecting that. Interesting places? He wanted to know more, but he wasn't about to ask Kostya. There were other ways of finding those answers.

"Take this exit. We're headed about three miles from the airport."

Ten minutes later, they turned down a quiet, mostly dark street in a sparsely populated area. He hadn't driven out this way much. He had gotten so used to houses being packed in tightly together that the acreage attached to the rundown houses and mobile homes surprised him.

"That one," Kostya said and indicated a white house with a large building looming behind it. "Kill your lights."

Finn did as told and pulled up to the building. There was already a black SUV and a luxury sedan waiting there. He turned off the engine. "Now what?"

"Now we meet the boss."

Finn didn't want to meet Nikolai, but he wasn't stupid enough to refuse. He didn't have a weapon on him, but he was certain Kostya had at least two, probably three, hidden away under his clothing. When they were out in the dark, damp night, Kostya gestured toward the door. Finn didn't like being followed, especially not by a man as dangerous as the Russian, but there wasn't much choice.

When he stepped inside the building, he scanned the space for enemies and possible weapons. A pipe against the wall looked like a good bet, but that was only if these assholes didn't shoot him first. His gaze slid to Nikolai Kalasnikov and the two men who flanked him. The guys behind him were unremarkable looking goons, but the boss was dressed as immaculate as ever, his charcoal gray suit tailored perfectly to his tall frame. He wore a wedding band on the wrong finger, but Finn assumed that was something to do with their customs. He tossed a gold lighter between his hands and raised an imperious eyebrow. "You're late."

"Blame that on the invitation I never received," Finn coolly replied. His focus shifted briefly to the long table next to Nikolai and the suspicious lump covered by a blue tarp. "What the fuck is that?"

Nikolai pocketed his lighter and retrieved a small jar from his jacket. He held it up for Finn to see in the dim lighting of the metal barn. "Do you know what this is?"

Oh, Finn knew exactly what it was. He eyed the crunched round rolling around in the jar. "It's the bullet I put between the eyes of that cartel bastard who tried to shoot my brother and his girlfriend." He cast an angry glare at Kostya. "The one your man there promised Jack he would dig out of the wall and toss."

"To be fair," Kostya interjected, "I said I would take care of it. I didn't say I would destroy it."

Nikolai moved to the lump on the table and jerked back the tarp. Finn's disgusted gaze settled on the frozen corpse of the assassin he had killed. "The Ghost," the boss said, his voice strangely distant. "He's not nearly as terrifying as I had expected. His name was Erwin Goode, in case you care. He was forty-four and lived in Mesa, Arizona when he wasn't killing people for the cartel."

Finn's brain worked overtime to piece together the dog and pony show before him. Why the hell was the mob boss pulling out all the stops? "Is there a point to this?"

"Just one more thing," Nikolai said and gestured for one of his men to get something. The shorter, younger of his soldiers retrieved a rifle from a worktable along the wall. Wearing black leather gloves, he held it up, and Finn went rigid. It was his gun, the same one he had used to fire that fatal shot. They had all the evidence necessary to have him found guilty of murder.

"You broke into my storage locker to steal my rifle?"

Nikolai gestured for the kid to put it back. "I needed you to know the score, Finn. You need to understand your position."

"And what position is that?" His chest tightened so badly that his jaw started to ache.

"You're going to be contacted by a representative of the Guzman cartel. He's going to offer you a job as a way of repaying your debt for killing their man here." Nikolai covered up the frozen corpse and tucked the bullet back into his pocket. "You're going to take that job."

"Like. Fucking. Hell." He ground out each word between clenched teeth. "I'm not some puppet on strings you can yank whenever you feel like it."

The Russian didn't say a word. He crossed the distance between them in deliberate steps, each one slow and carefully placed, and his movements disturbingly fluid. Finn had thought that Kostya was the most dangerous man in this room, but now he wondered if he hadn't been wrong. The intimidating tattoos covering the man's hands and neck warned Finn not to push too hard with this one. He was outmanned and outgunned. This wasn't a battle he could win.

Nikolai stopped a few feet from him and clasped his hands behind his back. "Do you love your family?"

His eyes narrowed with irritation. The voice inside his head urging him to be careful was snuffed out upon hearing that subtle warning. "I will tell you this once and only once. Don't threaten my family." He noticed the two soldiers move forward fractionally, their expressions taut, but he paid them little attention. "You might scare the piss out of everyone else, but I spit in Death's face when a bunch of coward terrorists blew me up on the side of some shithole road outside Gardez. Don't think for one fucking second that I'll hesitate to spit in yours."

The Russian's eyes flashed. "You say you've seen war. Well there's a war coming to Houston. Unless you want to see it rage on the streets of this city where your family and mine live, I need your help."

The tension left Finn's shoulders. "What kind of help?"

"The cartel is fractured. Lorenzo Guzman is scrambling to stay in power. There's word that he's going to order a hit on someone important in the city. I need to know who that person is."

"So you can save them?"

Nikolai waited four long seconds to answer. "If saving their life furthers my position and keeps the city quiet? Yes."

At least the Russian hadn't lied to him. "So you want me to betray a fucking cartel?"

"I want you to survive, Mr. Connolly. If you tell the cartel no, they'll kill you, your brothers, their girlfriends, their girlfriends' families and everyone who ever made you happy. If you say yes, you feed the information to me, and I'll protect you and the people you love."

His final words spoken, Nikolai nodded and exited the barn. The bigger of his two soldiers hefted up the body while the other one gathered the rifle. Left alone with Kostya, he eyed the man with distrust. Kostya extended a plain business card with a phone number printed on it. Finn reluctantly accepted it.

"When you've heard from the cartel, call me. I'll arrange meeting spots for us to discuss whatever you learn. Buy some burner cells. Get rid of them after we talk."

"And if you need to contact me?" Finn didn't know how he would do that if he tossed a phone every time he finished a call.

"That won't be a problem. I can find anyone in this city." Kostya said it with a ghost of a smile, but it sounded like a thinly veiled threat.

Left alone at the barn, Finn didn't dally. He slid behind the wheel of his truck and got the hell out of there. His mind raced in five different directions. Agree to take a job for a cartel? Betray a bunch of bloodthirsty narco-bastards? Say no to Nikolai Kalasnikov and bring the fury of the Russian mob down on his head?

Finn still hadn't made up his mind when he reached the house. He let himself inside, locked the door and reset the alarm. He passed by the living room on his way to the stairs but backtracked when he felt his father's presence there. The old man had taken to sitting in the dark late at night to stare out the front window. The reasons why evaded Finn.

"You all right, Pop?" He leaned against the door frame and waited for his father's answer.

"Just thinking, boy."

"About?"

"Nothing that you need to worry your head over," Nick Connolly gently shot back. "How was your date?"

"Fine."

His father made a rumbling sound. "You headed to bed?"

"Soon," Finn said, coming into the living room to take the chair next to the old man's. "Jack is staying with Abby tonight. I went ahead and set the alarm." He thought of the threat against them. "We should probably be more diligent about using that thing."

"Why?" He couldn't see his father's face, but he could hear the curiosity in his voice.

"We pay a lot of money for that service. We should use it."

"Bullshit. What aren't you telling me?"

Finn rubbed his hand back and forth over the upholstery stretched across the arm of his chair. "What if you were given a chance to save your family, but it meant you had to go against everything you believed in?"

"I'm the wrong man to ask that question, son. I'm a selfish old bastard who put the bottle, cards, whores and horses before my family." His father rose from his chair, his arthritic knees creaking and popping. A strong hand settled on his shoulder. "But you? You're just honorable enough to get yourself killed doing the right thing."

He listened to the old man shuffle out of the living area and slowly climb the stairs. Gazing out the window into the darkness of the night, Finn blew out a rough breath. There would be no sleep tonight, but he was sure of a beautiful sunrise.