

Breathing Again

a Love is an Open Road story



SOFIA GREY

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

BREATHING AGAIN

By Sofia Grey

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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Photo Description

A handsome, athletic young man working out in a gymnasium, and supporting himself on a pair of hand rings. His right leg is missing from the knee down, replaced with a skeletal prosthesis. His expression is calm and thoughtful, as though he is completely focused on his workout. His chest is bare, and displays an array of colourful tattoos.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I have been down in the dumps lately. I was injured in my last deployment to Afghanistan and lost my leg. My partner of ten years left when I needed him the most, and he took my beloved dog along with him. After months of depression, denial, and a stint in the hospital because of alcohol poisoning, my brother finally insisted I see a therapist to get the help I needed. Little did I know that my luck was about to change the moment I stepped into that office.

Sincerely,

Leah

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: veteran, disability, psychological, no sex, dog lover, established couple, hurt/comfort, PTSD, reunited, tearjerker

Content Warnings: mentions of domestic abuse, violence, suicidal thoughts, alcohol addiction

Word Count: 17,219

BREATHING AGAIN

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Prologue

I had everything planned. Goodbye letters written. Pills hoarded. My liquor of choice, to wash them down with. Soundgarden's *Superunknown* album playing in the background. I wanted "Fell on Black Days" to ease me into unconsciousness.

I was ready.

Chapter 1

The ornate clock on the wall ticked, as more of my life ebbed away, one click at a time. The therapist scratched another note with her pencil, the noise of the graphite on paper irritating yet soothing at the same time. What the fuck did she find to write about? Today, like on all previous appointments, I'd said almost nothing.

One month left. Thirty-one days. Seven hundred and forty-four hours. My brain was too foggy to calculate the number of minutes.

The sun drifted through the blinds and painted a lazy pattern of stripes across the floor. In a few minutes, they'd reach my boot. I jerked my gaze away.

"So, Travis, why don't we talk about Kyle today?"

As usual, I levelled my stare at the stand-up name badge on her desk. Dr Leah Forrester. *So, Leah, why don't we not?* I kept the words inside my head. How was she in any way qualified to understand me? She was a chick. She had both legs. She hadn't been to war. And judging by the sparkling gold band on her finger, she had a loving husband at home.

I didn't want to be here. Period. The only reason I came each week was to get my brother off my case, or Brady would continue to bust my ass. It was an extra hassle I could do without.

A stray thought snuck through the fog. "How do you know about Kyle?" I spoke without thinking, and then wanted to kick myself. I'd agreed to attend the sessions, but that didn't mean I had to participate. A petty distinction, but on the swooping roller coaster my life had become, I clung to even the tiniest amounts of control.

Her eyebrows tugged together, and she flicked back through her notebook. "You mentioned him. Two weeks ago." She glanced up at me. "You indicated some intense feelings towards him."

"He stole my damned dog." I clamped my lips together before anything else fell out of my mouth. Most of the times I came to this office, I floated on a tide of alcohol. Now I thought hard, I did remember mentioning his name. *What the fuck else had I said?*

"How did that happen?" she asked.

God damn it. She picked my weak spot with the focus of a hungry mosquito. “I had Killer since he was a pup. It was me who rescued him from being drowned. Me who took him home. My name on his paperwork. He was mine.”

“Killer?”

I grunted. “Achilles. Killer for short.” It had been a joke between us, saying, ‘Achilles, heel.’ “He isn’t a killer. He’s the softest mutt you can imagine.” A gentle giant.

“You said he was stolen?”

I ran a hand across the back of my neck. “Kyle took him. When he left.”

“Uh huh.” She made a note in her book, and then gazed at me, her face calm. “That came as a surprise? Your partner leaving?”

“Damn right, it did.” We’d argued, sure, from what I remembered. But was it bad enough for him to pack his bags and vanish from my life, when I needed him the most? “And I never thought he’d take my dog.”

“Perhaps he was attached to him too?”

I didn’t bother answering. It didn’t matter if Kyle had been attached to Killer. He still had no right.

“How long did you have your dog?”

“He’s six years old,” I said.

“So who looked after him while you were deployed?”

“Kyle.” I fixed the therapist with a sullen glare. “And how is that relevant?”

“It was just a question. Do you think it’s relevant?”

I thought longingly of losing myself in a bottle of whiskey. Later. I couldn’t see the time without turning around, but I figured we were halfway through the session. Maybe we could get to the end without more questions?

“What kind of dog is he?”

Ah, fuck it. I’d missed talking about Killer. I drew a tight breath before replying. “Part retriever, part something else. He’s a mutt, but a big one.” With soft ears and mournful eyes and a wild tail that would sweep newspapers off the low table.

“Big dogs need a lot of exercise. Don’t they?”

I refused to look down at the place where my leg used to be. I stared out the window instead, but couldn't tell you what was out there. In my head I saw Kyle, the bastard traitor that he was, bursting into the house, Killer by his side. A rattle of claws on the wooden floorboards, and the jingle of his chain. They were hot and tired from a long run in the park.

"It's glorious out there, Trav. You should have come with us."

"Yeah, right. May have escaped your notice, but I'm not up for a three-mile jog around the park."

"You could sit on a bench in the sunshine. Throw sticks for Killer. He'd love that."

"Sure." I sloshed more whiskey into my glass. "Got a blanket for my knees as well? Make sure everyone knows I'm a cripple."

An hour later, I limped into the house from the cab, a fresh bottle of whiskey cradled like a baby in my arms. The first thing I saw, as always, was Killer's Donald Duck chew toy. It lay abandoned in the hallway, mocking me. I left it there as a reminder I still had a dog, and also because tidying up was pointless. Apart from the therapist, I went nowhere, saw nobody, and had no visitors.

It had been different when Kyle was here. People gravitated towards him; they always had. The house was filled with light, noise and wonderful food smells. Kyle loved to cook.

"You're late."

I scowled at my brother, who was sprawled in the armchair by the window. "You still here?"

He grinned and lifted his half-empty bottle of beer in a friendly salute. "Love you too, bro. Someone needs to keep an eye on you. Besides, I like the contents of your fridge."

I grunted and sank onto the sofa opposite him. The prosthesis chafed at the movement, and I closed my eyes. I was sick of everything fucking hurting.

"How was the appointment today?" Brady asked.

"She wanted to talk about Killer."

"Man. Talk about rubbing salt into the wound. What did you say?"

“Not a lot.” I couldn’t be bothered getting up again to go and fetch a glass, so I cracked open the bottle and took a swig.

Brady made a disapproving sound. “You have the manners of a chimpanzee.”

“Find me a chimpanzee that drinks Old Tawney.”

He chuckled, and as I closed my eyes and lay back, I wondered if that was the first laughter in this house since Kyle left. He hadn’t just taken my dog, he’d sucked the life right out of our home. Now it was just an empty shell. Brady and I rattled around, like dried peas at the bottom of a jar.

The whiskey slid nicely down my throat and blotted out the emptiness, but all too soon, I was dreaming.

Noise. Gunfire. Shouting. One of my team telling me to get down. Stay down. A knife at my throat and the smell of pain. Blood on my tongue. I struggled with my captor. Each of us vying for control. I wrested the knife away and turned the tables on him. I held his shirt with my fist. Pressed the blade under his eye. Ignored the dog barking at my feet.

“Where is he? Where have you hidden him? Tell me,” I yelled at the top of my voice, and the man flinched.

“Travis. Trav. Wake up. Please.”

I blinked, and the man I held turned into Kyle. I held a knife to Kyle’s face. Holy fuck.

I lurched awake, sitting up on the sofa. The whiskey fell to the floor with a dull thump. My heart pounded, and sweat beaded on my forehead. For a long, painful moment, I thought I was going to throw up. I sucked in a tight breath, and then another. My lungs burned, but I forced them to inflate. What a shitty, fuck-awful dream.

It wasn’t a dream, though. It was a memory.

Chapter 2

Morning followed its usual pattern. I sank into a kitchen chair and dry-swallowed aspirin, while I waited for the coffeemaker to finish gurgling. Brady chattered about random shit. I ignored him.

“You’re not taking the meds, are you?”

I glanced up at that and scowled at my brother. “No.”

“They might help.”

“They leave a shitty taste in my mouth.” Jesus, I sounded like a little girl.

He rolled his eyes. “And the aspirin and Old Tawney taste so much better?”

I was stockpiling the anti-depressants, although I’d never admit to that out loud. In order for them to be effective, I needed a lot. I’d no intention of being found still breathing, and resuscitated for another round. When I checked out, it was gonna be permanent.

“So”—Brady was undaunted by my silence—“you’re getting flabby, bro. Let’s hit the weights today.”

Did it matter if I got flabby? Who would care if I ate enough junk to burst out of my clothes? In a month’s time it wouldn’t matter in the slightest.

Brady slapped the table in front of me. “I’m not going anywhere, until you’re back on your feet. The sooner you buck up your ideas, the sooner I’m outta here.”

“Don’t you mean on my *foot*?” I injected a wealth of sarcasm into the last word.

He sighed and ran a hand across his face. “Let’s be blunt about this. You’re one of the lucky ones.”

Acid surged in my throat, and I pushed to a standing position, gripping the table with both hands. “*Lucky*? How d’you work that out?” I gestured at the skeletal prosthesis where my leg used to be. “I’m twenty-nine years old, and I’m a fucking cripple. I used to play rugby and run marathons. Remember? I used to go surfing on holiday. Waterskiing. Mountain climbing. Now I can’t even walk upstairs properly. How the fuck am I lucky?”

“You’re still here.”

The urge to punch his lights out ebbed as quickly as it had arrived, and I sagged back onto the seat. “Don’t you have somewhere else to be?”

“Yep. We have a hot date with the weights in the garage.”

I took a deep breath and hauled myself up to the chin bar. I held the position until my arms trembled, and then exhaled as I slowly dropped again. I used to do a hundred reps without breaking a sweat. Now I was exhausted after just a dozen. Add ‘weakling’ to the inventory, alongside ‘whining bastard.’

Brady grinned, as though I’d broken the world record. “Go, man. And again.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

“Charming. Mom always said I was the polite one.”

I managed another four reps and then dropped onto the wooden bench for a rest. My water bottle was tepid, but I drank deeply. Brady lay on a rubber mat, doing stomach curls. Badly. “Bro,” I said. He paused, and I took a steadying breath. “Not like that. You’re not using your core.”

“I’m not a fucking apple.”

“Ha ha.” I took another slug of water. “Keep your back straight. Lift using the stomach muscles.”

He shifted position and did another curl.

“Yep, that’s better.”

For a few minutes, the garage was filled with noisy breaths and the creaking of the rubber mat, and then Brady groaned and lay back, arms over his head. “I have the perfect new career for you. Sadist in a kinky dungeon.” He waited a second, and then peeked up at me. “Or gym instructor. I could see you doing that.”

I didn’t need a new career. I wouldn’t be here long enough.

“Why did Kyle leave?” he asked.

Oh man. Not more questions. “I don’t know. I guess he wasn’t cut out for the long haul after all.”

“Come on, Trav. It’s me you’re talking to. Why did he leave?”

Anger simmered in my veins, ready and waiting for an excuse to emerge. I closed my hands around the chin bar and squeezed. "Maybe he wanted someone else."

"I'm ringing the bullshit bell on that one." Brady walked to stand beside me, his chest still heaving from the stomach curls. "Kyle only had eyes for you, from the day you met. Try again."

The sound of Kyle laughing in the kitchen. Clumsy and uncoordinated, every step jarring my leg, I followed the noise and found him showing his phone to Andy, his colleague from the coffee shop.

"What's going on?" My voice sounded harsh to my ears, but Kyle just smiled at me. He looked pleased to see me, the two-faced fucker.

"Trav, I'm showing Andy the clip of Killer in the park. When he was chasing the remote-control car. So funny."

"I'm just dropping off supplies." Andy stuck both hands in his pockets and grinned at me. He didn't even have the decency to look ashamed.

"Things change. Maybe he got close to someone else."

"You don't mean Andy? Dude, he's married and has two little kids. Straight as they come. Kyle told me you fought about him."

I winced at the memory. I'd yelled at Kyle. Told him to find a better prospect than me. Shoved him against the wall. He probably didn't deserve that.

"Why did he leave?" Brady asked again.

"Andy?"

"Kyle, you dumb-ass."

I hauled myself up to the chin bar again, held, and released.

"You still love him, Trav."

Up. Hold. Release.

The anger now boiled inside me. I focused on the chin bar. Up. Hold. Release.

I held and released until the breath burned my lungs and black spots danced before my eyes. "Kyle left because I drove him away. Okay?" Saying it aloud made it real.

“That’s easily fixed.” Brady’s voice was smug, and I lifted my head to glare at him. “You win him back,” he said.

Winning him back was impossible. That train had long since left the station. I listened to the blood pounding in my ears, and let another thought slip in. *Maybe this was the chance to put things straight. To apologise. While I still could.*

Chapter 3

After the workout in the garage, I hobbled into the kitchen, hungry for something other than alcohol for the first time in weeks. More out of habit than for any other reason, I opened the door of the freezer.

I gaped at the contents. Plastic tubs were stacked neatly, labels facing forwards. Beef carbonnade. Chicken-and-sweetcorn soup. Corned beef hash.

Where had these come from? I opened the fridge and found it similarly stocked. Two tubs of ready-made salad. Strawberry cheesecake—my favourite. Packets of sliced ham, cheese, and roast chicken.

Glancing over my shoulder, I noted the amused smile on Brady's face. "Did you do this?" I asked.

"Nope." He snagged a chair at the table. "Kyle organised all this. Andy pops by every couple of days and replenishes it for you. It's just the first time you've paid it any attention."

That made no sense. I stared at the cheesecake, tempted by the lavish fruit topping. Just like Kyle made it. He felt guilty; that was all. Ashamed of leaving me with no warning.

Who was I kidding here? I slammed the fridge door closed and leaned against it. No matter how tightly I squeezed my eyes shut, I couldn't block out the images that smashed into my brain.

Kyle, his eyes wide and shocked. "You need help, Trav. I know somewhere inside, you still love me. This isn't you." He stood with Killer's lead tightly wrapped around his hands, while my dog tried to hide behind him. I'd scared my dog when I kicked the coffee table over.

I limped into the lounge and bent over to examine the table. The wooden surface, once smooth and polished, was now pitted with knife marks and sticky with glass rings. Damage I'd done. The chunk missing from the edge, where it'd collided with the stones of the hearth, was ugly.

"You can fix this, bro"—Brady's voice was soft—"if you want to."

The gaps in my memory scared me. "When did I do this?"

"A month ago. Right before you drank a bottle of Jose Cuervo and ended up in the hospital."

I remembered us buying the coffee table when we moved in. Kyle had set his sights on it and dragged me to the furniture shop. He was so proud of me, just returned from a deployment in Afghanistan. We'd held hands and talked about stupid shit.

I ruined the table.

I ruined *us*.

I blew out a breath and tried to quash the tidal wave of desolation that bubbled in my gut. Kyle deserved a thousand times better than this. Than me.

"If you go and see him, you may see Killer too."

"If I were Kyle, I wouldn't let *me* anywhere near my dog." How many times had I lurched awake in the middle of the night, screaming the house down? Or fought against Kyle while I was half asleep? I'd given him a black eye once. Shame tasted sour on my tongue.

"He still loves you. He wants you back. The old Travis."

I swept a trembling arm across the coffee table, in a move reminiscent of Killer's frenzied tail. "Like that's ever going to happen." A stale glass tumbled to the floor. Tears blurred my eyes. "That Travis is gone. Somewhere in a desert in Afghani-fucking-stan." The glass pirouetted on its edge, before settling on its side. "This is all that's left. A fucking shambling wreck."

"No." Brady stepped in front of me. "You're still Travis. Still the guy I taught to ride his bike. Still the little brother that went trick-or-treating with me. The guy who stood by my side at my wedding. The two musketeers, remember?"

My leg gave way at that moment, and I sank to the floor in a crumpled heap. Brady was wrong. I could never be that guy again.

"I promised I'd stay with you." Brady hunkered down and locked his gaze with mine. "It nearly killed him—leaving—but you have to be the one to fix this. Don't you see?"

"How?" My throat was too tight for me to say anything else.

"Get your ass in the kitchen and eat some real food. Then shower and get yourself smelling nice, and then we'll walk over to the coffee shop and see if we can get five minutes with him."

"I can't."

“You *can*. Five minutes. You can play nicely for five minutes. And then tomorrow, you’ll try for ten.”

Sitting on a plastic chair in the shower was another unwelcome reminder of my fucked-up body, but I averted my eyes from the space where my leg should be and scrubbed under my arms instead. My hair was too long, and my stubble had grown into more of a shaggy beard, but I was clean for the first time in days. Weeks.

Would Killer still be afraid of me? Would Kyle? I didn’t know which question hurt more.

Five minutes, said Brady. I could do that. I was as close to sober as I got these days, and with a full belly too. Almost human.

What else had I forgotten? What other tripwires lay in my fractured memories, waiting for me to stumble over them? The alcohol might have blurred my recall, but I’d bet my entire fucking pension Kyle remembered everything.

Chapter 4

“Ready?” Brady looked up from his magazine. I nodded, and he smiled. “Let’s go.”

Once upon a time, the coffee shop had been a ten-minute walk away in this quiet Wellington suburb. Now it took closer to half an hour of stumbling on the uneven sidewalk and pausing to get my breath back. Every noise rattled my brain. Every car that drove past made me flinch. Even the sunshine was too bright. I wore fleece sweatpants, and the prosthesis was hidden from view, but I struggled to walk. The way I lurched along, grabbing at lamp posts, I looked like a drunk.

Scratch that. I *was* a drunk.

Halfway there, sweat broke out across my forehead and dizziness smacked me in the face. My lungs were tight. I was drowning. Couldn’t catch my breath.

“Come on, Trav.” Brady touched my arm, his gaze steady. “In through the nose, out through the mouth. Breathe.” He demonstrated, his hand firm on me, his touch giving me strength. “See where we are? It’s just around the corner.”

A young woman skirted past us, dragging her toddler by the hand. An old man scowled at me, and a pair of giggling teenage girls pointed and whispered. I clung to the lamp post, unable to move. What the hell did I look like?

“Travis, we’re moving now. Okay?”

I hauled in another ragged breath and tried to focus. One foot in front of the other. One step at a time. Jesus. Why was it so fucking hard?

The coffee shop was in sight, its cornflower-blue paintwork a beacon of colour in the grey street. I dug deep, and pushed on. Step. Breathe. Another step. Another breath. When I grabbed the door handle, I didn’t know if I wanted to cry like a little girl or punch the sky in triumph.

Brady lifted his hands. “I’m staying here.”

“What? You nagged me into coming, and now you’re abandoning me?”

“Bro”—he was firm—“some things you have to do by yourself, and this is one of them.”

Damn him, he was right.

Kyle was on the other side of this door. Killer too.

Five minutes. I could do that. I *would* do that.

I pushed open the door and froze. Unlike the relative quiet of the street, this was crowded. People sat at tables, drinking and talking. More customers clustered around the tall glass cabinets of food and lined up for drinks. So many people. I blinked, but they didn't go away. Noise assaulted my eardrums. Chatter. The hiss of the coffee machine. Soft jazz sounds, filtering through the hidden speakers.

I looked left. Teenagers laughed in a staccato burst like gunfire. I flinched and swung my gaze to the right. A young woman laughing into her cell phone. Two women with babies in their laps.

Panic bubbled in my chest. I fisted my hands. Too many people. Too much noise. I had to get outside.

"Travis. Hey."

With a supreme effort, I shifted my focus to the guy walking towards me. Andy. His smile was friendly, and he held out a hand as he approached. I was still clutching the door handle. Five minutes—that was all I had to manage.

"Hey." My voice came out scratchy. I wanted to ask about Kyle. To see Killer. To thank him for the food he brought me, but my throat had closed up, and I struggled to keep breathing.

"Good to see you, man. Come and sit down." He swept out a nearby chair at an empty table, and grateful, I staggered over and dropped onto it. "Let me get you a coffee." I nodded, and after another smile, he swept back to the counter, leaving me alone.

I laid my hands flat on the table and stared at them. I'd done brutal things with these. Fired guns. Used knives. Killed. Maimed. Hurt my boyfriend. They were just hands though; they weren't the sum of me. I could use them for good things too.

I picked up the long-legged pup and tucked him inside my jacket to keep him warm. "I'll take this one. My boyfriend loves dogs, and he needs the company while I'm away."

All the hours I'd stewed over Kyle stealing my dog, but the truth was he'd never been mine. He was Kyle's all along.

"You still take it black, no frills?"

I looked up to see Andy again, a mug of coffee in hand, his smile firmly in place.

“Uh, yeah. Thanks,” I said.

He placed the steaming drink on a fresh paper coaster, and the aroma hit me. I inhaled deeply. Yeah, this was good. That smell, mixed with all the other fragrances in here, reminded me of home. Of Kyle.

Wrapping my fingers around the mug, I untangled the words inside my head. “Is Kyle here? I’d like to speak to him.” I spoke slowly, with care, never taking my gaze off the man standing next to me.

He furrowed his brow slightly. “Sorry. He’s not here right now. Won’t be back until later.”

Was he lying? The idea that Kyle needed to be protected from me hit like a punch to the stomach. I sucked in a rapid breath and felt myself tense up.

Andy took a step back, the smile slipping. “I’ll tell him you came by. He’ll be pleased.”

“Don’t go,” I blurted, and then tried to moderate my tone. “Please.” I nodded to the seat opposite. “Stay a minute?”

Distinctly wary now, he glanced over his shoulder, before perching on the very edge of the seat, as though preparing for a rapid exit. “Sure. Only a minute though.”

If I couldn’t engage in conversation with Andy, how the fuck would be I able to apologise to Kyle? *Focus, Trav*. “Thank you for the food. It’s been... uh...” What? Good? Generous? “I appreciate it,” I said finally.

Andy inclined his head, and the stiffness in his shoulders relaxed a fraction. “Yeah, it’s no problem. And before you ask, Killer’s not here either.”

A random thought smacked me. I’d come out with no money. “I—um—need to owe you for the coffee.”

“No, man. It’s on the house.” He stood again, clearly eager to go. “Don’t be a stranger. You’re always welcome here.”

I wanted to believe him.

I forced myself to drink the coffee one scalding, delicious sip at a time, and then pushed myself upright. With as much dignity as I could muster, I hobbled to the door and stepped outside, the air cool on my face.

Brady was there, waiting for me, his expression hopeful.

I shook my head. “He’s not there. Not today.”

“So we do the same tomorrow. Hit the exercise, grab some food, and come back.”

I stared at my brother. So familiar. So completely in my corner. He believed in me, and maybe it was time to believe in myself. After all, I had nothing to lose. I nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

Chapter 5

Suddenly, I had a distinct goal. Short term, but something more than achieving oblivion through alcohol. The Old Tawney was still my evening companion, but buoyed up after the day's activities, I tried to drink slowly.

Brady hustled me through another workout the next morning. I showered, found a clean T-shirt to go with the sweatpants, and readied myself for the outing. I might see Kyle today. Or Killer.

The walk to the coffee shop was just as painful as the day before. Add in a light drizzle and a slippery sidewalk, and I was sweating profusely by the halfway point. I clung to the lamp post and waited for my heart to stop trying to break its way out of my chest.

Brady shoved his hands in his pockets and stared into the distance. There if I needed him, but not in my face. "You know, this isn't just the alcohol"—he flicked his gaze to me—"or the leg."

"What are you saying?"

He shrugged. "That's where the counsellor comes in. She can help you with this shit."

"Get real." So much for him not getting in my face.

"PTSD *is* real. It's not something you can just ignore. Or wash away on a tide of Old Tawney."

"And talking to a chick is going to help?"

"Talking to a trained counsellor. Yes. She's been working with vets for years. She's married to a fucking war veteran. She knows what she's talking about, bro."

My patience had worn thin. "I know you want your money's worth—"

"I'm not paying for the counsellor, Trav. Kyle is. He wants you to get better."

Somehow, I already knew the counselling was down to Kyle. He'd tried so hard to make me seek help right up to the point he left. When I made it intolerable for him to stay. He hadn't abandoned me. He'd pushed me to face up to my problems.

I squared my shoulders, lifted my chin, and nodded to Brady. “Let’s go.”

The coffee shop was warm and humid after the damp outside, and I took a moment to orient myself. Busier than the day before, the noise level was even higher, and my spine prickled with unease. *Find a seat. Don’t freak out.* I found an empty table in a corner, and instantly felt better with my back to the wall. I watched the counter staff, and waited for someone I recognised. No sign of Kyle or Andy. The girl with the long dark curls looked familiar, but that was all.

I waited until the line had dissipated, and then hauled myself to the counter. The dark-haired girl beamed at me. “Good morning. What can I get for you?”

I’d thought to bring some money with me this time. “Coffee, please. Black.” I handed over some notes, took my change, and then asked my question. “Is Kyle around today?”

Her smile never faltered. “Sorry, he’s away at the moment.”

Fuck. Had he fled when he knew I was looking for him? The idea made me want to throw up.

I must have reacted, because the girl tilted her head to one side. “Are you okay, sir?”

I swallowed hard and forced myself to return her smile. “How about Andy?”

She huffed a soft laugh and leaned on the counter. “You’re out of luck there, too. He’s away for a few days. Kyle’s back this weekend, though.”

This wasn’t the time to admit I had no idea what day it was. I thanked her and returned to my seat, and grabbed one of the newspapers from a stack by the water fountain. It was Tuesday. I couldn’t see Kyle for at least another four days. Disappointment sat heavy in my chest, but I went through the motions of behaving normally. I drank the coffee when it arrived. I even made a good job of pretending to read the paper, and then I left and went to find Brady.

“It’s not all bad,” he said, as we walked slowly back to my house. “By the time he’s back, you’ll have practiced a few more times. And you’ll have had another therapy session.”

I snorted at that, and he scowled. “She can help. Trust me on this.”

Wednesday was much the same. Another wet walk, another excellent coffee, and more forced small talk with the waitstaff. Maybe Brady was right? It was progress of a sort.

Thursday sucked. I had the mother of all nightmares on Wednesday night and woke screaming the house down. Unable to settle afterwards, I sought refuge with the remnants of my whiskey, finally surfacing with gritty eyes and a disgusting taste in my mouth.

The sparkling Dr Forrester looked as though she'd never slept badly in her life. I scowled at her, but she didn't seem to notice.

Brady's words rang in my head. It was probably against the rules, but I got my question in first. "I heard you're married to a vet."

The corners of her lips tugged upwards. "I am, yes. He's an ex-Navy SEAL, now training to be an emergency doctor. I met him when we were deployed in Afghanistan."

SEALs were tough bastards. I allowed a grudging respect for her to creep in. "Does he ever have nightmares?" Fuck. I dropped my guard for a millisecond, and my mouth went into overdrive.

She gazed at me over the top of her wire-framed spectacles. "He did, but they're rare now. Do you have nightmares, Travis?"

I felt like a bug under a microscope. Why had I said anything? To hell with therapy. I wanted to get the fuck out of her tidy little office and run as far as I could. Like that was ever going to happen. "Yes," I said finally. "I wake up most nights."

Chapter 6

I was hoarse when I left the therapist. I'd told her about my freak-out sessions, about attacking Kyle when I was half asleep, and again when I was drunk. About trashing my life so completely it was unrecognisable. She urged me to take the anti-depressants, to self-medicate with pills instead of alcohol. And she congratulated me on going to see Kyle, even if he hadn't been there.

I came away exhausted and bad tempered and in no mood to be sociable with Brady. Something worked, though. The next morning I didn't wake up in a cold sweat, the sheet tangled around my middle, and my hands itching to grab a blade.

Brady nagged me to do the weight training. After I finished and showered, we set off for the coffee shop. The walk still hurt like a bitch, but that might get easier. I claimed a seat in a quiet corner, ordered my usual black coffee, and snagged a newspaper from the stack. I could play the part of Mr Normal, even if I was a seething mass of nerves inside.

I didn't expect Kyle to appear. He stood at the counter, tugging wilted flowers from a vase and refilling it with fresh blooms.

My first thought was random. He'd lost weight. Conscious thinking kicked in. It was only Friday. Pleasure shot through me—pure delight at seeing him again. Until this second, I'd convinced myself I hated him, but the opposite was true. I'd missed him, with an ache that ran deeper than all my injuries put together. My need for Kyle was visceral.

He didn't see me at first. Meeting him here was painfully reminiscent of coming back from a deployment. I had the chance to look at him, unobserved, and to feel the happy butterflies in my stomach at that first sighting. To marvel at how fucking gorgeous he was, and get a kick of pride that he loved me. He wanted us to have a life together.

Any second now, he'd turn and see me. His green-brown eyes would crinkle in the corners, and a smile would light up his face. He'd run a hand through the shaggy dirty-blond hair and leave it mussed on his forehead.

He laughed at something I couldn't hear, and then as he moved away from me, he paused and tilted his head in my direction. Our gazes met.

As if in slow motion, I placed both hands on the table and braced myself to stand, to greet him properly. Lost in a haze of nostalgic warmth, I imagined us holding hands. Sharing a tender kiss.

Kyle's face turned milk white. As if he'd seen a ghost. Not his lover.

The beaming smile didn't make an appearance. Anxious lines raked his forehead, and fuck—worst of all—was that a flash of fear in his beautiful eyes? How could I have forgotten what a total asshole I'd been?

"Trav." His voice was choked. He didn't move. Just stood there, frozen.

The buzz of the coffee shop faded into the background. We could have been the only people in there, and I wished we were. How fucking awkward was this? I wanted to reassure him I meant no harm. I wanted to reach out and hold him. To be held. Above everything else, I needed to apologise.

"I'm sorry." The words rasped out of a throat so tight it was a wonder I could still breathe. "I just..." I ground to a halt. I just what? I love you? I know you hate me? I want you to be happy? I sifted through the options, and none came even close to the emotion clawing its way out of my chest.

My dignity had long since galloped into the sunset, but I tried to pretend I wasn't upset by his reaction. What did I expect? I wanted to kick myself down the main street and back again. I'd planned to come and make my peace with Kyle, not to shred the final pieces of my heart and scatter them on the floor.

My vision blurred, and I blinked hard. *Fake it till you make it.* That had been my mantra when I first joined the military, and it had sustained me through boot camp. I clung to it now. "Thank you for everything. Andy too." My leg shook, and I glanced down, surprised to find I was standing.

"You don't have to go." Kyle took a step closer, the flowers still clutched in his fist. A shower of red petals fell to the floor like a splatter of fresh blood, and I dragged my gaze up to his face. "Andy told me you'd been here."

If I stretched out my hand, I could touch him, but he could have been miles away. He folded his arms, and more petals tumbled to the floor. Everything about his body language screamed uncertainty, and I could only stand there, broken and hurting, eating myself up with remorse.

"Shit, Trav. You surprised me; that's all." He smiled, but it looked forced. "How are you doing?"

Okay. As conversation openers went, it was better than a lot of subjects, but still a minefield. "I'm seeing the therapist. She's helping."

"Good." His jawline softened. "That's good." He hesitated, and I wondered for one breathless heartbeat if he'd sit with me, but he made no move to do so. "I have to go. I've been up in Auckland for a few days, and we're busy."

I didn't want him to leave. "Is everything okay? Killer?"

"Killer's fine." At last. The first hint of a natural smile. "He's at Andy's place today, hanging with Jessa and the kids." He hadn't answered the first part of my question, and I was about to ask again, when someone behind the counter shouted for him. Kyle glanced over his shoulder, and then took a half-step closer to me. "If you come back tomorrow, you can see him. Okay?"

I nodded. I didn't trust myself to speak.

It felt wrong somehow, to sit and watch him work, when he was so visibly uncomfortable with my being there. He greeted customers by name, served food and drinks, and chatted with his staff. This coffee shop was his lifeblood. He'd built up the business from scratch, mainly while I fought dusty battles halfway around the world. I should have been here with him.

He deserved so much more than I had to offer.

Chapter 7

“Well?” Brady’s eager greeting felt like sandpaper on my skin.

I flinched. “I fucked up, didn’t I?”

“Bro.” His voice softened. “Let’s walk.” We set off at our usual slow pace, a complete contrast to the thoughts swirling in my head. “It wasn’t easy for him, you know.”

I glanced across at Brady and tried to ignore the prickling of anger at his words. “It hasn’t been a walk in the fucking park for me, either.”

“Stow your temper, and listen to me. Kyle took a lot of shit from you. More than most people would. He thought he’d lost you when you were caught in the IED explosion, and then during the multiple surgeries, when they put you back together. And then he had to call the paramedics to haul you to the hospital, after you gave yourself alcohol poisoning.” He paused, and I bit my tongue to stop from interrupting. “You’re like a hand grenade that’s primed to blow at any moment, Trav. So full of anger and resentment. Do you wish you’d died there? With your teammates? Kyle is fucking terrified you’re trying to finish what the insurgents failed to do.”

His words hit me with the force of a hammer. Did I wish I’d died? “How the fuck can you know that?”

“How? He talks to me, you dumb-ass. That’s what people do. Talk.”

Whereas I drank and tried to avoid talking at any cost. I didn’t want to revisit the shit lodged in my head and go through it all again. It was locked down because I was in no way ready to deal with it. Talking to the therapist had been bad enough the first time. The trapdoors in my mind just waited for the right triggers to plummet me into a maelstrom of memories.

“Trav?”

I was staring at Brady but not seeing him. I blinked and sucked in a deep breath, my nerves jangling. “I don’t know what to do. I can’t be *him* anymore. The guy I was before.”

Brady pursed his lips. He might have been getting angry, but that was nothing compared to the volcano ready to erupt in me. Talk about kicking me when I was down.

“*Trav*. What did Kyle say?” He used the calm, sing-song voice that nurses used in the hospital.

“Say? He was surprised to see me and was too busy to stop and talk. What were you expecting? He’d greet me with open arms?” *Like I hoped*.

“And that was it?”

“He said I could go back tomorrow and maybe see Killer.”

“Well, then”—he smirked, the smug bastard—“I’d say that’s a step in the right direction.”

At eleven the next morning, I paused outside the coffee shop and stared at my reflection in the window. For the first time in weeks, I’d shaved. The bare skin on my face felt cool and vulnerable. I really needed a haircut too, but going to the barber was something to think about another day.

Brady gave me a thumbs up, and I nodded. I straightened my shoulders, pushed the door open, and stepped into the warm, fragrant café. Quieter inside than the day before. I ignored the other patrons and made my way to the counter, ready to place my order. I couldn’t shake the feeling that everyone watched me, saw my uneven stride, and knew who I was. What I’d become. My stomach churned, and all my senses prickled. I closed my eyes a moment, to focus on staying calm.

“Hey, *Trav*.”

My eyes snapped open at Kyle’s voice. How had I not seen him behind the counter? I should reply, return the greeting, but I was frozen.

His lips tugged up into a cautious smile. “You look a million times better without the wild-man beard.”

Self-conscious, I touched my chin and tried to relax. It was hard with my pulse pounding in my ears. “Thanks,” I managed and was then stuck for words again.

Kyle nodded towards the side door. “Killer’s in the courtyard, if you want to go through. I’ll bring you a coffee.”

It had been a few weeks since I’d seen my dog—*Kyle’s* dog—and he might still be afraid of me. I dialled down my anticipation and walked slowly through the door to the outside seating area, digging into my pocket as I went. I’d found

a packet of Killer's favourite doggy biscuits in the kitchen cupboard, and I grabbed a few on the way out. A shameless attempt at bribing my hound to love me? Definitely.

The moment I walked into the high-walled courtyard area, I saw him. Killer sprawled in a patch of sunlight, idly scratching his belly with his back paw, and looking so damn goofy I couldn't help laughing. He looked up, scrambled to his feet and bounded over, skidding to a halt when he reached me. With his tongue lolling in his usual doggy grin and his head gently butting my good leg, he looked delighted to see me.

I blinked away the sudden moisture in my eyes and bent over to run both hands across his head, scratch the soft downy fuzz behind his ears, and smooth the rough fur on his neck. He nudged at my pocket, and I huffed out a laugh. "Hey, boy. Looking for some snacks?" I fished out a biscuit and held it to him. With a gentle mouth, he took the treat from me, then crunched, swallowed, and butted me for more.

"Killer," I murmured and fed him another treat. "I missed you, boy."

"He's missed you too." Kyle stood somewhere behind me, and I took a moment to wipe my eyes before standing up straight. I wanted to ask if he'd missed me too, but it wasn't the right time. I wasn't entitled to ask that.

I turned around and tamped down the wave of emotion that crashed into me at the sight of my lover. The sunlight backlit his head, giving him a blurry halo. It suited him. He'd been a fucking saint, to take so much grief from me. He moved forwards to the nearest table, and I realised he carried two mugs. Despite the warmth of the late morning, we had the outside space to ourselves, and I wondered if he'd arranged it this way. Were there things he had to say that he wanted privacy for?

Chapter 8

I sank into the seat and continued to fuss over Killer, slipping him another biscuit and then one more. It gave me something else to focus on, besides Kyle taking the seat opposite me. I sneaked a glance at him. He stared at our dog. I had a giant lump in my throat at this slice of normalcy.

“I can only stay for ten minutes.” Kyle broke the silence. He stirred sugar into his coffee, the spoon flashing in the sunshine. “I don’t mind if you want to sit here a bit longer, with Killer.”

“Thanks.” Brady thought I could fix this somehow, but it was beyond me. I didn’t know where to begin.

Kyle stirred his drink some more, and I realised he felt as awkward as me. You don’t share your life with a guy for ten years without picking up their visual cues.

“I’ve been talking to the therapist,” I said. “And I’m cutting back on the booze.”

“Are you taking the meds?”

What was it about those damn pills? Would they magically make me better? With an effort, I pushed back the frustration. “Not really. You know I don’t like taking drugs.”

“But you don’t mind getting off your head on whiskey?” His shoulders sagged. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that.”

I sighed. “You were right to. I wish I’d listened to you more.” Killer whined, and I fondled his velvety ears, soothing myself as much as him. “I know how badly I’ve messed up, and I’m trying to sort it out.”

Kyle’s gaze searched my face. “I want you to. And I want to help.”

“You already are. More than I deserve.”

“Don’t talk like that, Trav.”

“You sound just like my brother.” I tried to lighten my tone, but Kyle’s brows tugged together.

He stared into his coffee, as though it held the secrets to the universe. “I’ve been talking to Brady recently. A lot. It helps, you know?”

“Yeah, me too.”

We both sipped our drinks and stayed quiet, but this time it was a relaxing silence. All too soon, Kyle pushed to his feet. “You can stay longer if you like, but I need to get back to work.” He raked a hand through his hair, his gaze skittering away from me. “You want to come back tomorrow? We could talk some more.”

I settled into the chair opposite the therapist. “I’ve been talking to Kyle. I’ve been meeting him at work for the past four days.”

“And how does that make you feel?”

I ran through the options in my head. “Like we’re starting to become friends again.”

“Friends is a good place to start.”

“Yes.” I recalled the conversation we’d had earlier, in the coffee shop. “He’s coming around later, to give me a haircut.” His suggestion had caught me by surprise, but I’d grabbed the chance to spend more time with him.

“You’re making good progress, Travis. Just remember to take things slowly. Baby steps.”

That was an appropriate phrase, since I still lumbered along on my prosthesis. I kept refusing the appointments for physical therapy, but maybe I should rethink those too.

I left the therapist’s office and headed home in a cab. Brady was making himself scarce, and I’d be able to talk to Kyle freely tonight. Hope bubbled in my chest. Thanks to Andy, the fridge was well stocked, and I could make us dinner if Kyle wanted to stay longer.

Traffic was slow, and the cab paused at the lights outside the liquor store. I only had a small amount of Old Tawney left. Should I buy some more tonight? I needed a shot to settle my nerves before Kyle arrived. His voice rang in my head—his bitterness about my drinking—and I closed my eyes. If I didn’t look at the liquor store, I wouldn’t think about it.

Wrong.

I could almost taste it. The warmth at the back of my mouth. The heat as it slid down my throat. The soothing calm as it hit the spot, steadying my nerves and quieting the incessant noise in my head.

No. Not tonight.

The cab moved off again, and I opened my eyes. When Kyle went home—
that was when I'd have a drink, and not a second before.

Chapter 9

Later, he'd said. Kyle hadn't specified a time. I cleaned the kitchen as best I could, moved some garbage out of the lounge, and then sat and waited. The coffee shop would be open until six. He might go home for dinner first, wherever home was these days. I hadn't asked him, and he hadn't volunteered anything. *It should be here with me.*

The clock crept towards six-thirty, and I eyed the small amount of remaining whiskey. I could have a quick one, and he'd never notice. *No*. I shoved the bottle to the back of the kitchen cupboard and rearranged the other things to hide it. Turning around, I heard a knock at the door.

Kyle had a key. So who was it? Nobody called on me anymore. Andy most likely came and went through the kitchen door; I'd never even noticed his presence. The knock sounded again, and I hobbled down the corridor to answer it. Whoever it was, they weren't staying long. Not when Kyle was finally coming to see me.

I threw open the door, a snarl already on my lips, and saw Kyle with Killer sitting at his side.

"Where's your key?" When would I learn to put a filter on my goddamn mouth? I should have greeted him with 'Hi,' or 'Hey,' or 'Good to see you.' Instead I barked at him like a Drill Sergeant to a new recruit. I scrambled to recover, and stepped to the side to let them in. Killer nudged me as he walked past, his mournful eyes staring up at me, entranced. I scratched his ears, feeling the tension drain out of me. "I meant to say hello."

Kyle sighed. "I don't live here any longer, which is why I knocked." I flinched at the reminder of my multiple fuck-ups, but he placed a hand on my arm and pressed his fingers into my sleeve. "That's just how it is right now, Trav. But it's good to be here." I gazed into his eyes and wished again that things were different.

Killer gave an excited yip and skittered down the hallway, to pounce on something. Judging by the artificial squeal that came next, he'd found the abandoned Donald Duck chew toy. A moment later, he dropped it on the floor next to me, his doggy grin and lolling tongue looking adorable.

"Ha. I wondered where that was." Kyle smiled at me, and the tension eased. "Right. Let's go make you gorgeous again."

We settled in the kitchen, me sitting in one of the chairs and Kyle standing behind me. From the distracted fluttering of his hands, to the way he rubbed his nose, it was obvious Kyle wasn't in his happy place. I had opened the back door for Killer. He sniffed his way around the entire house, cocked his leg a couple of places in the yard, and finally lolled in the doorway, a sticky Donald Duck between his front paws. He looked happy to be home, even if Kyle didn't.

Desolation pooled in my stomach. I wanted this to be a chance for us to reconnect, to knock down some more of the barriers I kept putting up, but maybe I was just chasing rainbows. "You don't have to do this, if you'd rather not." I ground out the words. It'd kill me if he left now, but it was only what I deserved.

His hands stilled, and he dropped down to hunker by my side. "It just feels weird. Almost like I never left, but with this giant fucking elephant in the room. Know what I mean?"

Classic Kyle. He never danced around the truth. I had no idea how to reply other than begging him to stay, and my pride wouldn't let me do that. I shrugged and met his gaze, and tried to talk to him without speaking.

There was a hint of a smile on his face, his lips tugging up at the corners. "Why don't we ignore the elephant for the moment? This is about me cutting your hair, not talking about shit. Okay?"

I sought to match his good humour. "I didn't even know you cut hair. You been doing it long?"

"Nope." He smiled for real this time. "You're my first attempt." He stood again, took a position behind me, and spread a towel across my back. I felt the warmth of his hands as he smoothed them across my shoulders. It felt good. Unbidden, a surge of memories rose up, of him touching me. His arm curled around me in bed. His fingers tipping my chin for a kiss. His palm on my cheek. If I had to describe Kyle in one word, I'd choose 'gentle.'

"So, I guess this is the part where I ask you about holiday plans and what movies you've been to see?" His voice was strained, but I tried to follow his lead.

"Um, I just came back from a long trip, so I'm not planning any holidays right now," I answered. Kyle stood so close, I could smell his aftershave and feel the heat radiating from his body. He ran his fingers through my messy hair, and I had to bite my lip to hold back a groan of pleasure.

“Movies?” He repositioned the towel, his hand brushing the side of my neck in the process. Oh fuck, now I had another problem. For the first time in forever, I had a hard-on that wasn’t just the usual morning wood. I tugged the trailing edge of my T-shirt to cover my groin. He’d come here to cut my hair, not give me a blow job—and I had to think about something else pretty damn quickly.

“I saw a trailer for that new dino flick,” Kyle continued. “It looks fun, if you wanna go see it?”

I couldn’t remember the last time I went to the movies. We used to do that a lot, back in the day. “What dino flick?”

“I forget the name. But there’s a stinking great T-Rex chewing people up and spitting them out. Gotta love T-Rex movies.”

We’d had a Jurassic Park movie-marathon night right before I last deployed. I had fond memories of tossing popcorn to Killer and tangling on the sofa with Kyle. Good days. “Yeah, okay,” I said, before I could change my mind.

“Yeah? That’s cool. I’ll sort out tickets.” He shifted position behind me and lifted a handful of hair, then snipped with his scissors. “I’m only going to tidy it up a little, or at least that’s the plan. Jessa lent me the scissors and told me what to do. Their little boy screams if they try to take him to the barber, so she trims his at home.”

I tried to remember the names of Andy and Jessa’s children. I should know them, but since the IED, my brain had been messed up in more ways than one. “Chaz?” I trawled through my fuzzy memories. “And Lola?”

“Chaz and Lily. Well remembered.” He snipped some more, and in my peripheral vision I saw hair tumbling to the floor.

A spiral of panic lifted its head. “Don’t take off too much. It’s not pretty.” I had ugly lines of scar tissue along the base and sides of my skull. Another present from the insurgents.

“I won’t.” Kyle traced his fingers through my hair, and I leaned back into his touch. It was a few moments before I realised that’s all he was doing, stroking my scalp, and not cutting the hair. The first affectionate contact in weeks. It almost broke me.

Chapter 10

Kyle did a great job of tidying my hair. I gazed at my reflection in the bathroom mirror and barely recognised myself. My hair was long enough to cover the scar tissue, but not the ragged, unkempt mop it had been. I lifted my fingers to touch the back of my neck. It felt cooler without the weight of hair. I felt lighter. Slowly, he was humanising me again.

He grinned at me over my shoulder. “Wow, I’ve got hidden talents. Who knew?”

I didn’t want him to leave. “Stay for dinner?” I tried a crooked smile. “Thanks to Andy and you, the fridge is well stocked.” I pleaded with my eyes.

Kyle hesitated, and then gave a short nod. “Okay. Want me to put something together?”

The relief was sweet, and I watched as the normal-looking stranger in the mirror smiled. “Only if you want to.” In the old days, we’d cook together. Kyle would lead and direct, and I’d follow orders. Could we fall back into that pattern tonight?

Half an hour later, we sat at the kitchen table, with one of Kyle’s favourite meals, fried egg and chips. He’d grown up in England and still hankered for some of their foods. To me, pairing crispy hot fries with a runny-yolked fried egg seemed odd, but now I associated the meal with Kyle and loved it by default.

After weeks of near-solitude, I craved conversation. I wanted to show I could be civilised. “Things good at the coffee shop?”

“Yup. I’ve started supplying snacks to one of the local bars too. Spiced nuts, cashew popcorn... that sort of thing.”

“Nice. And your parents? How are they?”

A shadow crossed his face. “Dad’s not so well. You know they moved house a few months ago, and I thought it was just the stress of relocating, but it looks to be more than that.”

I’d forgotten they were moving. It was around the time I pressed the self-destruct button on my half-life, loading even more strain onto Kyle. Jesus. I was so self-absorbed, I’d never considered he was struggling too. The food

suddenly tasted bitter in my mouth, and I pushed the plate away. “Is he going to be okay?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. Every time the phone rings, I’m half expecting it’s gonna be Mom, telling me to grab a plane ticket back to England.”

I wanted to hold him. I wanted to tell him not to worry about me, because it was obvious he did. I compromised by reaching across the table and closing my hand over his. A quick squeeze. That was all I planned. But as soon as my fingers touched his, I knew I couldn’t let go.

“Trav.” His voice was pained. “I can’t lose you, too.” He turned his hand over, linked our fingers, and squeezed them right back. Up to this moment, I hadn’t realised how much I’d missed this. The elephant continued to sit in the corner, but I’d swear it wasn’t as massive as it had been.

“I want you to come home.” I held up my free hand, to stop him from speaking, and pushed on, groping for the right words. “You need to trust me again. Fuck knows, I need to earn your trust. And maybe when that happens... Will you think about it?”

“Jesus, Trav. It’s *all* I can think about.” His thumb brushed back and forth against my hand, soft and soothing. “Leaving you was... beyond hard. It was fucking impossible. It felt like I was breaking every promise I’d ever made. Like they were meaningless. Like *we* meant nothing. It broke my heart. I might look normal on the outside, but I’m just a bloody mess inside.” His gaze met mine, and I saw the pain in his eyes.

I heard the words he didn’t say. That he couldn’t go through that again.

It felt like a punch to the stomach and drove the air from my lungs. I stared at our linked hands, thoughts swirling in a mad torrent inside my brain. I’d sought Kyle out, to apologise to him. To make peace. I’d never dared to think about rekindling us, not until I spoke the words aloud and gave voice to the need I’d buried deep inside.

Breaking Kyle’s heart once was criminal enough. What kind of shit would I be, if I led him to believe we could fix this and then pulled the rug out from under him?

I dragged my hand back. Placed both palms flat on my thighs. Fixed my gaze on the table. Concentrated on breathing.

I was unfixable. My only long-term plan involved a bottle of pills and something alcoholic. Not so long ago, I’d been counting down the days until I checked out, so what had changed?

The man sitting opposite me. That was the difference.

“Trav?”

Could it be that I was planning to take the easy way out? Not being noble or brave, but a coward? Killing myself was easier than facing up to the mess I’d made.

What would Kyle say if he knew?

It was all too much to think about. I pushed to a standing position, feeling the familiar chafe of the prosthetic. “Thanks for the haircut. You need to go now.” Finally lifting my gaze, I saw the confusion on his face and the hurt in his eyes. Shame welled inside me. I broke everything I touched. “Go,” I repeated. “Please.”

Unable to settle after Kyle left—after I virtually pushed him out the door—I dug out the whiskey and set it on the kitchen table. It sat amidst the debris from our meal and mocked me. There wasn’t much of it left, and before I could think otherwise, I unscrewed the top and gulped it straight down. Scrubbing my mouth with the back of my hand, I closed my eyes and felt the alcohol flickering through my veins.

Another ill-thought impulse sent me to the medicine cupboard for my meds. How could one small brown bottle hold so much power? I spun it on my palm and watched the capsules shift and move against each other. I had enough. I could end it all now. Tonight.

Or I could drag my head from my ass and try to mend things with Kyle.

Which did I want more?

Mom and Pops would be devastated. I couldn’t begin to think about Brady. And what damage would I inflict on Kyle? I’d hurt him so much already.

Something lurked at the back of my head. Another half-forgotten memory. I’d set my check-out date as a finite point in time, not some vague, sliding event. June thirtieth. It had meaning, if I could just remember why.

Less than three weeks to go. The prospect didn’t scare me; it was a relief. No more nightmares. No more anger. What had Brady called me? A grenade waiting to go off. No more of this broken, useless body.

No more Kyle.

Chapter 11

I ignored Brady's nagging to work out in the garage, and told him to fuck off when he wanted me to go to the coffee shop. He followed me around, bitching at me, and the only place I could find any peace was in my bed.

Even then, he wouldn't leave me alone. He rapped on the bedroom door. "Talk to me, Trav. What's going on with you today?"

I ignored him.

He knocked again, harder. "Travis. What happened with Kyle yesterday? Are you gonna make me guess?"

I didn't understand the workings inside my own head. Explaining it was impossible.

"Okay. He told you he's running away to join the circus? He's signed you up for a class on Popsicle making? He's bought you a pink tutu and ballet tickets for your birthday?"

Brady didn't get the hint. I dragged the pillow over my head, but my idiot brother kept shouting through the door.

"He wants you to adopt a pet alligator? He's turned vegan? He dropped a spider down your shirt?"

"No," I roared. For a moment, there was blissful silence.

"He dropped a *mouse* down your shirt? Oh, man, I know how much you hate those little fuckers. All bitey and scratchy. I'd be pissed about that too."

I still had my prosthesis attached, and without thinking, I got out of bed, strode across the room, and ripped the door almost off its hinges.

Brady leaned against the far wall, a shit-eating grin on his face. "Wakey, wakey, bro. Time for our workout. And without all that hair falling into your face, you can do even more."

"Do you ever quit?"

His smile vanished. "When you're good to go." He held up his hand and we knocked our fists together. "Talk to me, Trav."

I chased the words around inside my head, couldn't grasp them, and had to fall back on something simple. "He was nice to me."

"And that's a problem because..."

I looked down the hallway for inspiration. Then at the floor. Linking my hands on top of my head, I sighed. "It's complicated."

"Are you scared you're gonna fuck up?" He didn't add *again*, but we both knew that was what he meant.

"I want to fix it. Really, I do." I stared up at the ceiling next, and blinked back the moisture that flooded my eyes. "I just don't think I can." Great. I'd be able to claim my weeping-like-a-chick card. "I can't see a future for us. For me."

Brady glanced at his watch. "Go and phone the therapist. See if she's got a slot free today."

"Come on, I saw her yesterday. What do you think she's going to do?"

"She's going to listen to all the shit you can't tell me."

The clock ticked in Dr Forrester's consulting room, the gentle noise soothing me into a temporary state of calm. Maybe she used it for hypnotising her patients? That and the scratching of her pen on paper.

"Have you ever lost anyone?" I watched her carefully, to see her response.

There was a pause, and she laid down the pen. Would she pretend to misunderstand me? Her gaze met mine. "Yes. I have." Her eyes were cool behind the wire-framed spectacles. "I've experienced the suicide of someone close."

I hadn't expected that. "I'm sorry," I murmured. This was crazy. She was the last person I could talk to about the jumble of ideas settling in my brain. She'd try to talk me out of it, not be an impartial ear.

"Did you have a nightmare last night, Travis?"

I shrugged.

"Did you dream at all?"

"No." I hadn't been asleep long enough. Most of my night was spent pacing up and down. I wrinkled my brow as I thought about that. All the exercise with Brady had to have been finally showing results.

"Let's try something a little different today." She picked up her pen again. "Look ahead twelve months. Give me one word that describes how or where you want to be."

"At peace." I didn't even need to think about it.

“And one word to describe you now?”

“Confused.”

“Good.” She made some notes and then looked up and smiled at me. “Believe it or not, Travis, you’re making excellent progress. Now tell me one thing that worries you.”

One? Out of a shortlist of hundreds?

She had to have seen my scepticism. “Yes, Travis. The top thing on your list.”

“The gaps.” I gestured vaguely with my fingers. “In my memory. It’s like there’s a minefield inside my brain. Places I can’t go. Great big holes everywhere.”

“That’s a great analogy.” She wrote some more. The clock continued to tick. “In real life, what do you do to make a minefield safe?”

That was easy. I’d spent years doing that on one deployment or another. “You locate the mines, place markers, and then either decommission or detonate them. Clear away the debris.”

“And after it’s all safe, what happens next?”

“The locals would plough it over and eventually plant crops again.”

“We could try something similar with you.” For the first time, she stood behind her desk and walked around, to perch on the front. If this were a movie, the pretty Leah Forrester would be in a wheelchair or walk with a gammy leg, or something, to show solidarity with me. This was real life though, and the fundamental differences between us still remained.

“When you trip over one of the mines inside your head, what happens?”

A shiver ran down my spine. “I remember stuff. Bad stuff.” For some reason, my palms felt damp. I wiped them quickly on my track pants, before tugging at the collar of my T-shirt. Just the idea was enough to make my pulse race.

“In the field, you’d clear in a controlled fashion. Right?”

“Right.”

“So that’s what we’ll do. I’ll throw words at you, and we’ll see if they detonate.” My skin crawled at the thought, but she hadn’t finished. “If anything goes up, we’ll stop and talk it through. One step at a time. Okay?”

Chapter 12

Dr Forrester gave me a half-smile. “I’ll look after you, Travis. I’m going to be prepared for you detonating something, so I can bring you back to safe ground. What we need is a neutral subject for you to revert to. Let’s think about that for a minute.”

I licked dry lips. “What do you suggest?”

“Well, something you have to think about. Your exercise routine, maybe? How often you exercise and for how long. How many reps. That sort of thing.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“Good. When I say a word, give me the first thing that comes to mind.” She quirked an eyebrow, and I nodded. “Line,” she said.

“Straight.”

“Good. What do straight lines mean to you?”

“Roads on a map. Troops marching.” I rubbed my forehead and found it damp.

“Anything else?”

“Wires. Boxes of ammunition.”

“Very good.” Her voice had dropped to a husky drawl. Without meaning to, I leaned forwards in my chair to catch the next word.

“Bones.”

“Broken.” It came out as a whisper, but she nodded.

“Tell me about broken bones, Travis.”

I swallowed, but it still felt as though I had sand in my throat. “Wounded. Hospital.” I halted and sucked in a painful breath. My lungs burned.

“Tell me what you’re thinking. If it hurts too much, tell me.”

They were just words. They had no weight, no mass—just sounds bouncing around in the room. “I lay on the sand. I saw my leg.” *Noise surrounded me. Gunfire. Thick, oily smoke. I yelled for Shaun, then Ryan. My teammates. I tried*

to get up, to grab my rifle, but I fell back down again. My leg didn't move. It was severed at the knee.

“Stop,” I whispered. “I can’t.”

“Think about your workout. How many reps do you do before you break for a rest?”

Ryan was screaming. I couldn't see Shaun. Smoke in my mouth. Down my throat.

“Travis. Ten reps before you stop for a rest?”

Dr Forrester’s voice cut through the memory fog, and I sagged in my seat. “Twenty. I do twenty reps.”

I scrubbed my face with both hands. Jesus. I’d been right back there, watching my friends die when there wasn’t a fucking thing I could do to help.

“Travis, we’re talking about your workout. Stay with me.” There was a warning note in her voice, and I took as deep a breath as I could force down.

My lungs felt too tight. “Workout. Yeah.”

“Tell me about your routine.”

Another breath. “Chin pulls. Sit-ups.” The burning ache in my chest eased a fraction. “Free weights.”

“Very good. If I wanted to increase my fitness without building up muscles, what would you suggest I do?”

Huh? I flashed her a what-the-fuck look, but she just cocked her head to one side, as though waiting for me to reply.

“What should I do, Travis? Buy a rowing machine? Or would a treadmill be better?”

I gazed at her, as if seeing her for the first time. I noted her slim legs and narrow waist. “Cross-fit would suit you. Variable terrain. It’d give you a good general workout.”

We talked about gym equipment for a few minutes, and then she returned to her seat. “I’d like to repeat this exercise for the next few sessions, if you agree?” She flicked through an old-fashioned desk diary. “I can fit you in daily at the moment, if you need it. What do you say?”

Brady's face flashed in my brain. His insistence that I come here. "Yes," I said. "Okay."

This time, I asked the cab driver to make a detour to the liquor shop, where I bought a fresh bottle of Old Tawney. I'd no idea what to say to Kyle. I still didn't know what I was going to do. I didn't know anything, and I felt as useless as ever.

I found a small white envelope pushed under the front door. My name was neatly written on the front, in Kyle's writing.

I froze. I didn't even breathe. Was that what I thought? What I fucking deserved? I wanted to throw up.

"Brady," I yelled, but he wasn't there. That meant there was nobody to stop me having a drink, and if Kyle was writing to me, I sure as hell needed one. The session with the therapist had messed with my head. I was jittery, and my scars itched, like they'd all woken up. Even my phantom leg ached.

I must have gazed at the little envelope for nearly half an hour before I had the balls to open it. I'd second- and third-guessed the contents in every possible permutation. Now to see if I was right.

Trav,

I've decided to take a couple of months off and go home to see Mom and Dad. If he's not going to be around much longer, I'd like to spend some time with him.

Killer will be fine with Andy and Jessa, so if you want to see him, just talk to Andy.

Last night was weird. I want to believe we have another chance, but we have to take it slow. That's another reason I'm disappearing now. I think we need that space, while we both get our heads together.

Please keep up the therapy sessions and the workouts. And if you can dig out your phone, charge the fucker up, and we can text. Okay?

Missing you already,

K

I scrunched the note into a tight ball and hurled it across the room. It made a soft *pffft* sound when it hit the wall, and then dropped behind the sideboard. Out of sight, out of mind.

Half an hour later, I lay on the floor, arm extended and groping for the damn note. I found dust bunnies and cobwebs before I closed my fingers around it, but at least I had it back. I smoothed out the harsh crumple zones, stared at it again and again, and tried to make sense of it. To understand what he was saying. To read between the lines.

Chapter 13

I had a new routine. Workout in the garage, visit Killer with Andy at the coffee shop, text Kyle a picture of Killer. Have a healthy lunch and then a session with Leah in the afternoon. Text Kyle, to tell him which keyword I'd discussed with Leah. Home for dinner, hang out with Brady, and one after-dinner drink. Just the one. Try not to shriek the house down in the middle of the night, and start all over again in the morning. Rinse and repeat.

I had a new plan too. Take back control of my life. Get my head straight. When Kyle eventually came home, I wanted to be ready for him, even if it terrified me.

Kyle thought we could have another chance. I wanted to believe him.

It took a couple of weeks to make the new routine stick, but as each day passed, it became a little easier. Figuring out the time difference with Kyle still threw me for a loop, but he always replied to my texts, even if I had to wait a few hours.

Sitting in the waiting room for my session with Leah, I felt almost normal. Or at least, what I remembered of normal. I'd even started the official PT sessions. The physios told me of all the programs I could take part in. Athletics. Softball. Waterskiing. I wasn't disabled, they said, just differently abled. I could do pretty much everything I did before, with some adjustments. It was a lot to wrap my head around.

I had a few minutes before my appointment, and I flicked through yesterday's text conversation with Kyle. His dad was doing okay, and they'd been working on his property, fixing the roof.

Me: *Leah wanted to talk about blood today. Man, I thought I was going to hurl, but she brought me back.*

Kyle: *You always were squeamish.*

Me: *Yeah, right. When you sliced your hand open on the new kitchen knife, it was me who bandaged you. And cleaned the mess on the floor.*

Kyle: *You sure about that? I thought you were having the vapours, while I mopped it up.*

Me: *So funny. I'll give Killer a hug from you. Talk later.*

The conversations with Kyle were just like they used to be before all the shit happened. Warmth filled my chest. Finally, it was all coming together. It had taken weeks of therapy, and more emotional pain than I thought possible, but I knew where I was going now. I wanted to live. I wanted a life with Kyle.

I exchanged pleasantries with Leah, we talked about Kyle visiting his parents, and then we settled into the session. Just knowing we might stray into another red-flagged area of my memory was enough to spook me, but I was getting the hang of it now.

“Are you ready, Travis?” She perched on the edge of her desk, while I took some deep breaths and tried to unlock the tension building in my shoulders. I nodded. “Speaking of Kyle and his family, what does family mean to you?”

Nothing leapt out and screamed a warning. “Love.”

“Do they always go together?”

I loved my parents. Had a deep, unshakeable bond with Brady. Kyle was equally close to his folks. “Yes.” I was confident.

“That’s good. No triggers there.” She smiled at me. “We’ll move on to something else.” She scratched in her notebook, and then met my eyes. “Kyle must be worried about losing his father. How do you feel about loss?”

I shivered. “Death.”

“They’re often linked. Have you experienced loss?”

“Yes.” I spoke through gritted teeth. Memories nudged at me, taunting with the pain they promised. The breath whistled in my chest, and I fought to breathe in through my nose, out through my mouth. Stay calm.

“Talk me through it, Travis, and call out if we need to back off.”

I shifted in my seat and wrapped my arms around myself. “My buddies. They were escorting me to the airstrip.” *They shouldn’t have been there. The main route was blocked, and Shaun took a back road. “We’ll get you there, Trav. You’ll catch your flight.” The last words he ever spoke to me.* “There were goats in the road. He swerved to avoid them and ran over the IED.”

Where had I been going? What was the rush? We’d been sombre, not preparing for a forty-eight-hour break.

The memory that had been lurking for weeks was tantalisingly close. I reached out to it and tried to jog it loose.

Death. I was on my way out for a funeral.

Who died? Why the fuck couldn't I remember? I dug my fingers into my hair and tugged at the ends. Maybe I could pull the memory out this way, with a side helping of pain to shock the nerve endings.

"Travis, let's pull out now." Leah's voice was soothing, but I was almost there.

I squeezed my eyes shut and groped some more. Who the fuck died? Grandma? A jagged lightning bolt of pain scythed through me. My chest constricted so hard I saw spots before my eyes, and I made a sound.

Leah was by my side instantly. "Travis, you need to come out. Tell me your exercise routine in the morning. How many chin-ups?"

I had to be mistaken. This was a false memory. The real ones had gotten messed up, and this was just a bunch of leftover images and dreams, all stirred together.

"Fuck the chin-ups. I have to go." I shivered so violently my teeth rattled together and I wasn't sure how well I could walk, but I couldn't stay. Not now.

Leah paled. "Stay where you are. I'm going to talk you down. Stick with me, Travis."

"There's somewhere I have to go." I raised my voice over hers. "I just—I *have* to." I made no sense. *This* made no sense. I stumbled out of the building and flagged down the first cab that went past. "Woodvale Cemetery. As fast as you can."

I huddled in the back of the cab and tried not to think. If I was right, I'd left the world of normal so far behind, it could be another fucking universe. I prayed I was wrong.

Chapter 14

I walked automatically on the path that led to the family graves. The Coopers were all buried in the same sunny corner, close to a trickling stream. It was a peaceful spot, and I'd been there many times as a child, when Mom or Pops wanted to lay flowers.

The newest grave still looked raw against the background, the headstone too white. I paused. I hoped I was wrong.

Someone had been to visit recently, judging by the soft amber roses in a stone vase. The florist tag dangled freely, and I reached out to read the message.

We miss you.

Kyle and Trav

I couldn't avoid it any longer. I looked up to the headstone, at the fresh engraving.

Brady Cooper

Beloved son, brother, and husband. Taken far too young.

30 June 1982 to 4 January 2015

Somehow, I got back to the house, let myself in, and then sank to a heap on the floor. I was breathing. I saw the evidence in my chest's rising and falling, but everything else had frozen.

"Bro." Brady walked up to me. He looked real. He looked and sounded like my brother, and... Fuck. I didn't believe in ghosts, so that only left one possibility.

"You're dead," I said.

"You knew. You always knew. You just didn't want to accept it."

I rubbed the heels of my hands into my eyes, but he was still there. "I'm insane. That's the only explanation." It hurt more than I would have thought. This morning, a few hours ago, I'd taken pride in my normality. I'd promised myself a future with Kyle.

Now the memories came flooding back, in full Technicolor. *The phone call from home. Brady getting shot in a liquor store holdup, when he tried to help the store assistant. My brother, the peacemaker, gone forever. The IED on the way to the airstrip. Losing my buddies.* I shuddered as a fresh tsunami of pain crashed over me.

The memories were relentless, each one smashing into me.

Being loaded onto an evac chopper. Medics shouting instructions to each other. I closed my eyes and went looking for Brady. I didn't want him to be alone. A weird fuzzy dream. He rubbed his knuckles on the top of my head, like he did when we were small. "You're staying," he said. "You've got stuff to do."

A shout, close by. "Breathing again. Lost him for a second, but he's back." The medics.

"Trav."

"Go away," I shouted, my voice cracking. "I can't do this. I can't." I pushed upright, steadied my prosthesis, and limped into the kitchen. My plan had been to end it on June thirtieth. Brady's birthday. I'd already written my letters, weeks ago.

With clinical precision, I lined up the whiskey, a heavy glass tumbler, and the pill bottle on the table. Next came the small bundle of handwritten notes, and finally I cued up the right music for the background.

God damn it, my eyes were running. I'd fooled myself thinking I could behave normally, could have another shot at life, but that wasn't gonna happen. The prospect of being confined in an institution made me want to kick and scream. That wasn't gonna happen either.

"Trav." The Brady illusion stood next to me, hands tucked into his pockets. "Think before you do this. You'll fucking destroy Kyle. And what about Mom and Pops?"

"Go away. I'm not listening." I unscrewed the pill bottle and shook out a handful of colourful meds. "Leave me the fuck alone."

"Trav, *please* don't do this. Kyle needs you now more than ever."

Clutching a fistful of pills, I used my other hand to slosh whiskey into the glass and knocked it back in one go. Had to get my throat lubricated first. Choking would be so messy.

"Aw, Christ. Brady, I thought you were real. I forgot." Tears streamed down my face, but there was no point in wiping them away. "I fucking forgot."

“You *forgot* the promise you made to Kyle. You were supposed to text him.”

I clamped my hands over my ears, but I still heard Brady’s voice telling me to text Kyle. I’d written him a letter. That would have to do. I could have one last look at his texts, though. Remind myself of what I’d hoped for. What I could never have.

Where was my phone? Pocket. Yes. I took another swig of Old Tawney, not bothering with the glass any more. Two new texts. I thumbed the touchscreen, and they were both from Kyle.

The first an hour ago.

Hope you had a good session. Give me an update when you can. K

The second was just a few minutes old.

Dad collapsed. On way to hospital. Doesn’t look good. Please call. I need to hear your voice. K

Chapter 15

I stared at the text message, the pixels blurring and reforming on the screen. I couldn't call him. I couldn't face up to my own grief, let alone help Kyle. I placed the phone face up on the table, gulped down more whiskey and tried to think. He would be better off without me. Safer.

Christ. Who had I been kidding with my ideas of being normal? Did Kyle have any idea I was clinically insane? I covered my eyes with my hand. Don't look at the Brady-ghost. I didn't know how quickly the pills would kick in when I took them, but in a few hours I might be with the real Brady again. Not sure I believed in heaven, and with all the shit I put Kyle through, they'd laugh me outta the pearly gates anyway, but I could dream.

An unfamiliar ringtone burst through the background music in the kitchen, and I glanced at my phone. Leah. It dropped to voicemail, and I let out a sigh of relief. She was doing her job; that was all. And besides, if she got a whiff of my paranoid fucking delusions, she'd wash her pristine hands of me.

The pills were getting sticky in my fist, the bright colours striking me as absurd. Did some eager graduate design them that way? Cheer up the suckers who needed 'em?

My phone rang again. Leah. I ignored her and then the next call a minute later. Her persistence was annoying, but what the hell. I might as well listen to her message. I jabbed at the screen and played it on speaker.

"Travis, this is Leah Forrester. I'm worried about you and want you to call me back the minute you pick up this message. I can help you. I'm right here and will answer immediately. Please call me back."

Not gonna happen, Leah.

"Trav. Call her back, bro." The Brady-ghost slapped both hands on the table, but I ignored him. It. Whatever.

The phone rang again. Aww, fuck. That was Kyle calling now. I just wanted to be left alone. Why wouldn't they all just get the message and fuck off?

My inner masochist demanded I listen to Kyle's message. And why not? I might as well twist the knife even further into what remained of my shattered fucking heart. Two voicemails. The first from Leah.

“Travis, I’m right here to help you. I won’t let you try to handle this on your own. Please call me back.”

“Trav, please call me, babe.” That was Kyle, his voice choked. “I need to know you’re okay. I need you. *Please.*”

I was doing the right thing. With me gone, Leah could focus on her other patients and Kyle could... He’d pick his life right up again. Yep. Find another guy. A sane one. The idea of Kyle with another man hit me like a sledgehammer. We’d been together for ten years. I’d never loved anyone the way I did him.

All the plans we had, the ideas we’d spoken about in the thousands of calls and emails while I was deployed. The trips we planned to take. I hadn’t been to England yet, and I’d promised to go with him when I quit the army. I thumbed the phone and called up the photo gallery. All the pics of Killer I’d sent him recently. That dumb dog was so easy to love.

I swiped at my eyes with the back of my hand and ended up dropping the meds. They rattled onto the tabletop, the perfect stripes blurred and smudged where the coatings had begun to dissolve. I looked at my palm, at the pink and blue streaks across it. Why was I drawing this out? Why hadn’t I taken them yet?

“Because you know it’s not right. You shouldn’t be doing this.” The Brady-ghost got right up in my face. “Because Kyle needs you. He loves you. And when you stop and think about it, you love him. There’s so much you want to do together—you, Kyle and Killer. All the time you spent in the army, thinking about a life with Kyle, and now you have your chance. This is *your* time, bro. Use it.”

“He means everything to me.” I spoke aloud, still fixated on the colours swirled on my hand.

“Then fucking call him. Now.”

“He deserves better.”

“He wants you.”

The phone rang, and Kyle’s picture flashed up on the screen. A grin on his face, as he peeked over his shoulder at me. He’d been heading for the shower at the time, after a lazy Sunday afternoon in bed with me. I loved that picture.

I loved Kyle.

As though it had a mind of its own, my thumb touched the answer button. Kyle's voice burst out of the speaker. "Trav?"

I couldn't speak. I needed to end the call.

"Trav? Are you there?"

"Yeah." I couldn't see the fucking screen any longer; my eyes were streaming. "I'm here."

"Dad's in hospital. Oh man, I'm wrecked. I needed to talk to you."

There was a lump in my throat, the size of Antarctica. I swallowed before I tried to speak. "I saw your text. I'm sorry."

"You sound strange. Are you okay?" Worry filled his voice.

I shared a table with pills, whiskey, and a pile of goodbye letters. That probably didn't qualify as okay.

"Trav? Talk to me, babe. You're scaring me."

Chris Cornell sang in the background, the lyrics way too appropriate. *Trying to live*. Could I do that?

"*Trav?*" Kyle's voice rose. What the fuck was I doing to him? He was in the hospital, watching his father fighting to live, while I was giving up. When had I turned into a quitter?

"Yeah, I'm here." My voice was rough as a barn door, after so much whiskey. "I'm okay."

"I wish I could be with you right now."

A loud knocking reverberated down the hall. "What's that noise?" It was so loud, Kyle could hear it.

"Someone at the door. I'll go get rid of them."

Leaving the phone where it was, I got up and stumbled towards the noise. When I opened the door, I found Leah and the young girl I recognised as her administrative assistant.

"Travis." A huge smile broke out over Leah's face. "Thank God. You didn't answer my calls. I was worried you might need my help and not be able to ask for it."

"I'm on the phone to Kyle." I spoke slowly. It felt as though the world shifted on its axis, things falling into new patterns. I took a deep breath and

looked at her directly. “Will you come in? There’s something I need to tell you.”

They followed me to the kitchen, and I heard Leah’s shocked gasp. I held up a finger to silence them. Not one fucking word of this to Kyle.

“Babe, you still there?” I tried to sound confident. Faking it again.

“Yes. I’m waiting to get some news.”

“I wish I could be with you. I hope he pulls through.”

“The doctor’s here. I’ll call you back soon.”

I leaned forwards, my words for Kyle alone. “I love you, babe.”

“Love you too.” He didn’t hesitate. He never had.

With the call disconnected, I hunched over the table. This was it. Time to see how good Leah really was at her job. “I need help. Can you help me?”

Chapter 16

I walked slowly through the airport concourse. I hadn't slept in twenty-four hours, and the world around me was noisy and intrusive. I wanted to snarl at anyone who came close, but I reined it in. The next few days weren't about me; they were for Kyle.

My flight had landed early. I scoped out a position in the Arrivals Hall where, with my back to a corner, I could watch people come and go. He'd be here soon.

"Good luck, bro." The Brady-illusion stepped up beside me, and I groaned. This was not the time for another paranoid fucking delusion. The intensive therapy and meds of the past few weeks clearly hadn't worked.

"I'm ignoring you," I whispered, but he just laughed.

"It's okay. I can go now. I promised to stay until you sorted yourself out."

"I've spent two weeks in the hospital, and I'm still fucking hallucinating. That's not very sorted."

"You're here, in England, and Kyle is going to appear any minute now. You're on the way, bro." He squeezed my arm. "Be happy. Stay safe."

I'd have to tell Kyle at some point how close I'd come to checking out, but not yet. All he knew was that I'd been admitted to the hospital while I got used to the cocktail of meds I needed. In some ways, it'd been a relief to finally tell Leah the truth. The burden of guilt eased from my shoulders a fraction.

"*Trav.*" I turned to see Kyle, a smile splitting his face apart. "You're really here." Just like returning from a deployment, we held tight to each other. Kyle cupped my face with his hands. "I have missed you so fucking much." His lips descended to brush over mine, the light touch igniting something deep inside me. I crushed him to my body. He tasted of home. Of everything I always wanted. Our kiss went deeper, all lips and teeth and tongue. With Kyle in my arms, I could breathe again.

He nipped at my bottom lip.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"For looking so fuckin' gorgeous, while I'm a walking zombie. You look good, Trav. Really good."

I clung to him, and he curled his fists into my jacket. Holding him now, I couldn't believe how close I'd come to throwing him away. I tried to push past the guilt before it could take hold. "How's your dad?"

"Hanging on. He should make it, after all."

And so should we. I wasn't fixed yet—not by a long shot—but I knew where I was going, and that was the same direction as Kyle.

The End

Author Bio

Romance author Sofia Grey spends her days managing projects in the corporate world and her nights hanging out with wolf shifters and alpha males. She devours pretty much anything in the fiction line, but she prefers her romances to be hot, and her heroes to have hidden depths. When writing, she enjoys peeling back the layers to expose her characters' flaws and always makes them work hard for their happy endings.

Music is interwoven so tightly into my writing that I can't untangle the two. Either I'm listening to a playlist on my iPod, have music seeping from my laptop speakers, or there's a song playing in my head—sometimes on auto-repeat.

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