

LAURA GOODWIN

One Last Mission

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To my thirteen-year-old self.

You did it.

Life isn't linear, neither is recovery, but you got there.

It's getting better every day.

*Hold on; because darling,
you're going to achieve wonderful things.*

“Forever is the sweetest con.”

Taylor Swift, (2020)

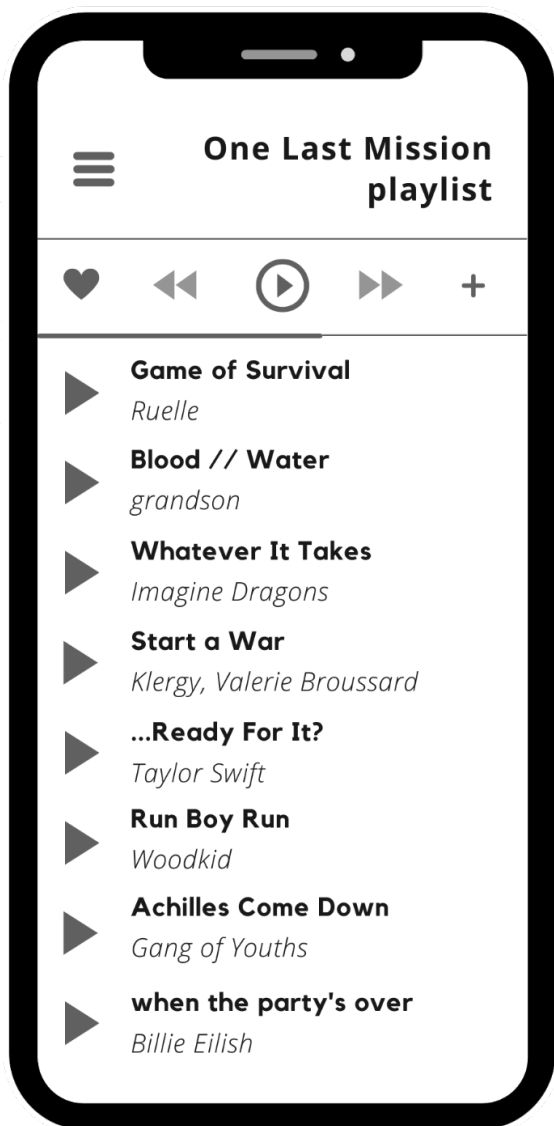
TRIGGER WARNINGS

The following novel contains moderate to graphic descriptions of sex, violence, death and grief. Mentions of adoption, the occult, cult activities, child sacrifice, human trafficking, child murder, self-harm and mental illness.

*Proceed with caution if any of these can be a trigger for you. Please know that your mental health is worth more than a silly piece of fiction. So please; first and foremost, look after **you**.*

Also... go drink some water. xx

Laura Goodwin, author



Prologue

FILE NAME: Last_Mission_DH

AUDIO LENGTH: 00:03:10

DATE: Monday 7th November 2022

DH: *What is your biggest regret? [scratch in recording] Was it choosing to stay in that dead-end job instead of pursuing your dreams? Did you choose 'Mr Safe' over 'Mr Right'? Or was it as deadly as taking that left turn and ending up in a ditch? [pause] That's the thing about regrets, everyone has 'em. I have never met someone that doesn't live without regrets. In my line of work especially, regrets are part of the job, but you gotta learn to lock 'em up. Regrets get you hurt; regrets get you killed.*

Fuck [REDACTED] and his fucking shit ass decision to let [REDACTED] do this again!

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] I don't believe in God but if I did, she has a pretty shit sense of humour. [indistinct shout]

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[inaudible] I should probably tell you my biggest regret since I'm making you guys think about yours. I've got a lot of 'em, so give me a minute. *[shuffling of chair]* I think my biggest, and the one that's gonna haunt me till the end of my days, is losing her. God, she's the love of my life and I fucked it up. I lost her. I can't even be there to tell her that everything's gonna be okay, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] *[distant thump]* [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] *[distant crash]* [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] *[distant shouting]*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] *That's my biggest regret. [pause] Mistakes happen, [sigh] and, of course, accidents happen but you can't fix a regret.* [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

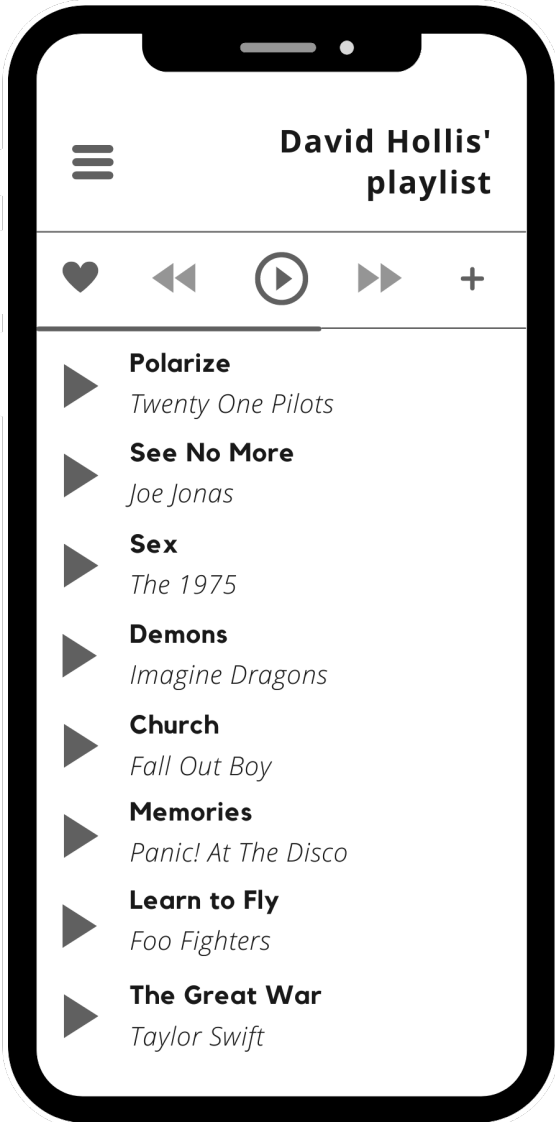
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] *all you gotta do is learn to live with 'em, regrets that is. Personally [pause], it's easier said than done.* [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

END OF RECORDING



Chapter One

David

It was 6am when he got the call. In normal circumstances, he would have been partaking in his morning run through Kensington Gardens. Joining the rest of the idiots who got up at the arse end of the morning to get in their daily set of endorphins before they started their 9 to 5. Bankers, Lawyers and even a few Politicians all in their gym gear running like their lives depended on it.

In actuality, they have no idea what it is like to truly run for your life. 90% were Oxford or Cambridge wankers with daddy's money to play with. Swimming with the sharks in their little Tory circles. David hated them and everything they stood for.

Hypocritical, in retrospect, considering he himself was a Harvard alum. Not that he had actually graduated. David had escaped and joined the army. It wasn't that he didn't love Harvard, because he did. Going to University had been something he had always wanted to do and had he not, he would never have met his best friend, Colin Black.

ONE LAST MISSION

He had to leave Harvard to honour his parents, something in him just snapped one day and he made the spontaneous decision to leave.

This morning though, was different. He had specifically taken the day off, had done every September 29th since 2019. His plan had been to sleep until god knows when, watch Disney movies because they were *her* favourite, spend between 1 to 2 hours drafting a text to Colin before promptly deleting it and then head to the florist and pick up flowers and make the hour and a half journey to Brookwood cemetery in Surrey.

From there, he would spend a good few hours just sitting at the grave. He would talk, clean, and just stare. Stare at the words engraved on the marble before him.

ELLIE BLACK

BELOVED DAUGHTER, SISTER AND FRIEND

31st October 1992

29th September 2017

“There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” – Hamlet

It was his fault. He had been too cocky. He believed her when she said that she had it under control, that he should focus on the others. He didn't know she had fallen into the ice until it was too late. Colin was unconscious and she was nowhere to be found. She wasn't the only one that was drowning that day. The minute he pulled her out of the ice; holding her freezing body in his arms as the blood sluggishly escaped her wounds; he found himself drowning alongside her on solid ground.

He had escaped relatively unscathed whilst Colin and Ellie both needed surgeries. He had been in the private waiting room, head in his hands as he tried to control his breathing. As their superior he should have known better. Ellie was only 24, a month shy of turning 25. Far too young to have been seven years into working with MI6 but he supposed that was what happened when your adopted father is the head of the organisation.

David knew Ellie Black as a firecracker, his beautiful badass second in command. From the moment he laid eyes on her, he knew she was going to have him wrapped around her little finger. Her eyes were the first thing that drew him in, and then she opened her mouth.

The last thing he was expecting was the Scottish drawl that escaped. To say he was confused was an understatement when it was revealed that Colin and Ellie were brother and sister.

Colin had been a year under him at Harvard, with a concerning attachment to a bulky ass computer that he had lugged the 200 miles from his adopted parent's brownstone in Brooklyn to Harvard University in Massachusetts. It turned out they had been separated back in 1997 after their parents untimely death the year prior.

Ellie being adopted by Thomas and Sophie Wright and Colin by Carrie Turner and Annie Swift. They had both ended up in separate countries with Ellie in England in the beautiful countryside and Colin in the United States earning his Brooklyn boy status.

When they were teamed up in 2013 as part of a taskforce

that joined both MI6 and the CIA, all three knew it was the perfect fit. They had chemistry. They worked seamlessly together as a team. It was ideal; until it wasn't.

Until David watched as Thomas Wright, head of MI6, his boss, Ellie's 'old man' walked into the private waiting room and knelt beside his cradled head. Plopped a fatherly hand on his shoulder and said the words that would break his heart beyond repair.

"They did everything they could David, I'm sorry. She didn't make it."

He can say with the upmost certainty, that he truly doesn't remember anything that happened after that. One minute he was looking at Thomas through wet eyes and the next minute he was standing in the apartment all three of them had shared in Soho with his bags packed and a resignation letter in hand three days later, if his phone was to be believed.

He left.

Upped sticks and travelled the world in hopes of finding himself. Instead, he found; Tracey, Natasha, Laura, Beatrice and, on one memorable night, Antonio. In tandem he, of course, found his way to the bottom of any bottle with an alcohol count higher than 12%.

In early 2019 he was in Thailand in a bar, three very strong and fruity cocktails in, when the bartender handed him the phone. Thomas, once again, flipping his world upside down. This time telling him that there was an opening at MI5, and it would be in his best interests to 'apply'.

Drunk as he was, telling Thomas that he was retired from the CIA which, by extension, meant he was no longer liaising

with MI6 so therefore Thomas could 'shove it where the sun don't shine', was on the tip of his tongue. He didn't get as far as even slurring a single syllable because Thomas broke his heart with a simple sentence.

"It's what she would've wanted Hollis."

Which leads, quite neatly, to now - his designated day off.

Even though Thomas was not technically his boss at MI5, back in 2020 he did, stupidly, agree to start doing occasional freelance for MI6. Only if it was as a strategist, working through the comms unit, with his feet firmly planted within the SIS Building and not out in the field.

Of all days, it had to be today. Thomas should know better, and David planned to tell him as much when he answered.

"The fuck you want?" He growled to whatever poor secretary Thomas had enlisted to start his morning with the 6am call.

"Well, aren't you a happy bunny this morning?"

The whine that escaped his throat was clear, even as he placed a pillow over his head. It had to be important if it was Thomas' personal assistant on the other line.

"Maisie, always a pleasure." He grunted, accepting his fate by placing his phone on speaker as he groggily pushed himself into an upright position.

He was also, just a tad, hungover which wasn't helping the situation.

"This couldn't have waited till tomorrow?"

"Afraid not handsome. Boss man needs you in as soon as you can get that sweet little arse out of bed."

Sighing, he tugged on his old joggers and an old Harvard

sweater. There wasn't a chance in hell that he would even contemplate trying with his appearance.

"Your better half know you try to seduce me every time we converse?"

"She encourages it." A dry chuckle left his throat.

"Of course she does. I'll be there in half an hour."

Hanging up, David went straight to the kitchen to make himself a travel mug of coffee.

It took mere seconds for David to ultimately decide it was his personal mission to do everything in his power to clearly show how pissed off he was about being called. There was no way Thomas had forgotten what today was, therefore this had to be big.



Arriving at the SIS building, David had already anticipated the looks he would get from security regarding his state of dress.

His eyes nearly fell from his skull due to the number of times he had rolled them at every guard that had triple checked his badge. It wasn't like he had shaved his beard or cut his hair; it was just joggers and a sweatshirt.

They were acting as if he were naked, which to be fair, had been his back up option.

He was not wasting a single second from the moment he arrived on Thomas' floor. Stalking past the main receptionist and then Lizzie, Thomas' personal secretary, who was not pleased to see David.

Not that she ever was, especially after he accidentally walked in on something he shouldn't have at the Christmas drinks last year.

Ignoring her shouts, he went straight for the double doors. Pushing them open with force because he wasn't fucking around. He was tired, hungover and, above all; royally pissed off.

“Ah, Agent Hollis thank you for-“

David wasn't here for pleasantries. Slamming his 'Princess' travel mug, on the table he got straight to the point.

“Cut the shit Sir. What could possibly be so important that you had to bring me in today. I mean, I know you're getting on in years, but I didn't think your memory was that shot.” Maisie struggled to cover her laugh with a cough, purposely avoiding Thomas' gaze.

“Would you like to take a seat?” The other man in the room said.

Simon Knight, also known as Cap, second in command to Thomas. If the rumours were to be believed, Simon was being groomed to be the next head of MI6 when Thomas ultimately stepped down.

David had become close with Simon back in 2014, a year after David joined the joint taskforce.

Simon was their leader on missions, the one they reported to for debriefs. Thomas would assign the mission and Simon would do the clean-up, tie everything up into a neat little bow. David had a ton of respect for the man.

When he retired from the CIA and the joint taskforce was disbanded after Ellie's death; Simon always kept in touch. Always checked up on him. He appreciated it, even though

he himself could admit he was a dick over the phone.

Most people would have given up after a year, as it is common to lose someone in this line of work, but Simon never did.

He still called David every September 30th, the day after. In the last two years the ‘aftermath’ day, as Simon liked to refer to it, calls had become lunch. The older of the two said it was easier to judge how David really was.

“Not particularly.”

David muttered, moving to lean against Maisie’s desk instead in an act of defiance.

Simon wasn’t a man of many words but the eye roll he sent his friend, spoke more than words ever could, causing David to begin to fidget against the desk.

“Hollis, sit your ass down. I would like to keep my assistant’s desk in one piece after this.”

Now it was David’s turn to raise an eyebrow.

He looked to the other two in the room for at least a crumb of what was going on, but Maisie just shrugged; and Simon avoided his eyes.

This couldn’t be good.

“I’m not going to break anything.” David spoke like a petulant teen as he trudged over to the seat that Simon had offered.

“Wouldn’t judge you if you did, to be honest.” Maisie mumbled.

David didn’t like where this was going, not one bit.

“David,”

Yeah, this definitely had to be bad if Thomas was using his first name.

“They’re back.”

“They’ could be a lot of people. Could be a lot of the world’s most wanted individuals that Thomas was referring to.

David instantly knew that Thomas was being intentionally vague for a reason.

It was pretty sadistic in David’s opinion, making him ask the age-old question to a statement of that caliber.

“Who?”

“Hecate’s Haven.”

He wished he hadn’t fucking asked.

David’s heart stopped. Spots started to dance across his vision. Shaky hands gripped the arm rests.

Impossible.

There was absolutely no way they could be back. Ellie got rid of their leader, De Bris, she had to have; or else her death had been in vain. Hecate’s Haven being buried six feet under was the only thing that helped David get at least an hour of sleep a night.

Shaking his head, he slowly rose from the chair, highly aware that Simon had moved to hover behind him; more for David’s safety than the furniture.

“No.” Simple and definitive.

“It’s them Hollis, I have personally done my research. I wouldn’t bring you in, especially today, for anything less than this. I can promise you that.”

Thomas tried to reassure him, but it only made David’s blood pressure sky rocket.

“Copycat.”

His heart was pounding in his chest, he could barely breathe let alone get out more than a single word.

“Davey, it’s them.” Maisie rested a sympathetic hand on his arm.

David sometimes forgot that he wasn’t the only one affected by Ellie’s death.

“I don’t understand. I thought El-“

He stopped, shaking his head. He couldn’t even bare to say her name.

“Seems to use that she was unsuccessful.” Thomas stood. “No enemy body was ever recovered by our team-“

“And this isn’t information you could have passed on sooner?” David snapped.

Something didn’t sit right but it wasn’t like he could air that grievance since Thomas ignored him and just continued on.

“...but even if she had Hollis, you know the old saying.”

“Cut off one head, two more will take its place. Yeah, I know that old chestnut.” He growled, finally getting to his feet. “I’ll do it.”

“David, you don’t even know what he was gonna ask. Take a minute and breathe for me yeah?”

Simon’s attempt at soothing was not what David needed right now; in fact, it just boiled his blood even more.

“I want them gone! They were meant to be gone five fucking years ago!” Raising his voice because his anger was always there, simmering close to the surface ready to explode.

“So, you would return to the field?” Thomas enquired.

That was the question, wasn't it? David had made it perfectly clear that he had sworn off field work. No chance of him ever heading back into the field.

Then again, he had been under the impression that Hecate's Haven were gone so there was no need for him to ever even entertain the idea of going back into the field.

"Yes."

Running a hand through his hair, slowly starting to come back to himself.

"This is it though, one and done."

"Understood."

David continued to ignore Simon's concerned stare as he paced.

"We'll assemble a team for you—" Thomas began.

"No team. I'm going in alone." David was adamant.

"Like hell you are!" Seemed like Simon had finally had enough. "Hollis that's a suicide mission and you know it."

Although, that was kind of the point.

David had always assumed he would go down fighting and what a way to go. Taking down his greatest adversary and avenge his love's death; it was the stuff fairy tales were made of.

"I'm not wasting precious time training some rookies."

Which translated to *'I refuse to get attached to anyone else and lose them at the hands of the scum of the earth.'*

"Maybe it's time to bring in the old team." All

heads whipped to Maisie.

"Well, if we're bringing David out of retirement maybe we should drag—" She was interrupted by Thomas before she

could finish.

“I’m sure Colin Black could be persuaded.”

David watched as Thomas rummaged around in his desk.

“This is his file; his most recent address is in there along with known acquaintances.”

Taking the file from Thomas, David flicked through. Clearly,

Colin had done well for himself since leaving MI6.

He had gone back to his first love, computers, and in the last year had even opened his own cyber security firm.

“What about—” Maisie went on to say.

“That is enough to be going on with don’t you agree?”

Thomas quickly slid in whilst David was preoccupied flicking through the file.

It wasn’t a large file, no missions, or assignments to bulk it up; but it was enough to start with.

“I would like you, and Black, back in on Tuesday. Please do let us know if we need to assign you a team because Simon is right Hollis. You can’t do this alone.”

His words were attached with a poignant look which clearly said, *‘because that’s not what Ellie would have wanted.’*

It was getting a bit old, this chokehold Thomas had over him when it came to Ellie.

“Yes Sir.”

Saluting the man was an old habit but it always got a twitch of a smile out of Thomas. It didn’t appear today but that was to be expected.

Picking up his tumbler, which had been Ellie’s favourite, he headed out the doors.

David got as far as the elevator before a hand on his arm

stopped him. Turning around, a post-it-note was thrust at him by Maisie.

“You won’t find Colin at home; he’ll be at a video game convention over the weekend. Phone this number and tell them ‘kitty_cod_xx’ sent you. That’ll get you an all-access pass.”

Looking down at the note with a furrow in his brow.

“Do I even want to know why you have this connection?”

David muttered.

“I got hooked in my first year at uni, ‘cause there was a very pretty girl-“

David snorted, covering it with a cough.

“Yeah, laugh it up asshole. So now, I’m a major video game nerd, but that’s not the point.”

He watched on as she subtly checked that the coast was clear.

“A lot has changed in the last five years and not for the better so just be careful, okay? And listen to Colin, please David just bloody listen to him and don’t fly off the handle.”

“Why would I fly off the handle?”

Maisie had already disappeared by the time he asked, leaving him there with just a post-it-note and an uneasy feeling sitting in his stomach.

Something didn’t add up but right now, he didn’t have the energy to figure it out.

Once he had arrived back at his apartment, he immediately went back to bed in hopes of restarting his day. Ultimately, he couldn’t shut his brain off so, he just lay in bed and stared at the ceiling until 11am when he finally relented and pried himself away from his cocoon of blankets and went about

his day.

He followed his routine to a T.

Disney movies, the drafted text to Colin, the florist, the cemetery. Unlike previous years, this time there was a sense of finality to it.

The feeling just sat there like lead in his gut throughout the whole day.



The following day he phoned the contact Maisie had given him and gotten himself something called a ‘creator pass’.

The gaming expo was in Birmingham. Setting up his hotel and train he then moved onto doing what he had been paid to do for the last two years; strategize.

He couldn’t just go in there, out of the blue, and ask Colin to join him after five years of no contact. David had to be smart about this, he was going to have to produce a miracle to even have a chance of convincing to even get the man to consider it.

Colin had lost his sister and been injured himself; it was only natural that he would have trepidations about returning, but David hoped Colin would join him, especially because of who they were up against. Colin had to want justice too, right?

Once David had a plan in place, he hopped on the first train to Birmingham.

His plan was simple.

Get to Birmingham and check into his hotel, go pick up his

pass at the venue then try and find his best friend. Maisie's contact had mentioned that Colin was on the list for a creator pass so, backstage was his first port of call and if he wasn't there then he would go booth to booth.

When he found him, he would make up some bullshit excuse about recently starting gaming and wanting to go to his first convention. From there he would catch up with Colin, small talk and then he would, somehow, casually slip into conversation about Hecate's Haven and gage the man's reaction.

Depending on that result, he would then ask Colin to join him. It was fool proof, just like all his plans had been in the last two years. It's why they paid him the big bucks.

The first half of his plan went smoothly. He had managed to pick up his pass and get backstage. A glance at the creator sheet showed that the room marked 'Johnny Evans' also had 'Plus one: CB' below it, on the sign, so what better place to start.

He could hear music playing from within, so he thought it was a bit redundant to knock.

Pushing open the door, he quickly realised that regardless of the person being able to hear the knock or not, you should always extend that simple common curtesy because you never know what's happening on the other side of the door.

Like say, for example; your best friend, who you haven't seen in five years, getting practically railed through a sofa.

"Oh Jesus!"

David didn't even realise his voice could hit that octave as he threw a hand over his eyes.

"I'm so sorry!"

“How the fuck did you get in here?” The other naked fellow shouted.

David’s hand dropped because the Scottish accent caught him off guard. It was the little things that always made him think of Ellie.

“David!?” Colin exclaimed.

David closed the door behind him, grinning as he recovered from the sight he will never be able to unsee.

You can learn to unsee a decomposing corpse, but your best friend getting railed? You need therapy for that.

“Hey pal, s’been a while huh?” Rocking back and forth on his toes with a grin on his face.

“You know this pervert?” David assumed this was the Johnny Evans, and the main occupier of the room.

He liked to think he knew Colin pretty well and the man was never one for casual sex so this also had to be the boyfriend that was mentioned in Colin’s file.

“Uh yeah, long story.” Colin muttered as he grabbed his clothes and throwing Johnny his clothes. “We should... y’know-“

“Oh, don’t mind me. Nothing I ain’t seen before.” David winked at Johnny.

David lived for nothing more than embarrassing Colin and from the blush starting to blossom over his cheeks it would be fair to say; he’s still got it.

“Long story huh?” The Scot growled, pulling on his t-shirt and storming towards David.

He quickly sidestepped the charging Scot who was heading for the door.

“No! Johnny it’s not- we were roommates in-“

The door slammed before Colin could finish.

The brunette turned to David exasperated.

“What the literal fuck dude!?”

“Oh, come on, I was just making a funny!”

David smirked as he headed over to the chair next to the sofa, plopping himself down and sticking his feet on the coffee table. Watching as Colin fumbled to pull on the rest of his clothes.

“You’re not as funny as you think you are Hollis.” Colin mumbled, still blushing.

“I’ll have you know, I’m the funniest person I’ve ever met.”

Colin groaned, running his hands over his face.

“That tells me everything I need to know.”

Fully clothed, Colin began to pace the small room. David slowly took his feet off the table, waiting for the other man to speak.

“Why are you here David?”

“I missed you.”

It wasn’t a lie, David really had. It killed him that he couldn’t text Colin, couldn’t confide in him. Even in the army, David used to send Colin ‘sweetheart letters’ as a joke. There hadn’t been a day from 2006, all the way to 2017, that there hadn’t been some form of contact between the two.

“You missed me? You fucking- god I could fucking kill you, you know that?”

Well, this wasn’t exactly how David had hoped it would go. He thought there would be a lot more hugging involved. Looks like David would have to accelerate his original plan. “I’m sorry I haven’t been in contact. I’ve tried so many times. Your birthday, *her* birthday, every September 29th. I spend hours crafting a text or just having my finger hovering

over the call button but I... I can't."

David explained, playing with his fingers.

"You just left David! Like who the hell does that? What Captain leaves their ship when it's sinking, and their crew are still on board?"

Colin pushed at the man sitting in the chair, causing David to get to his feet and reach for his friend.

"That- I didn't! I stayed at the hospital till I was sure you were okay. I was at your bedside but, I left the next day. You were getting better and I--"

Colin interrupted David, his face flushed.

This really wasn't going very well.

"What about Ellie huh?"

David flinched at the mention of her name, something that didn't go unnoticed by Colin.

"Hit a nerve huh? You left her man. You just fucked off and left us all to pick up the pieces. She fucking loved you and you didn't even go and see her!"

"I couldn't." David whispered.

"Leaving us on the field? I could live with that, I understood that. Ellie told you to go, none of us knew what was gonna happen next. So, yeah, we can both forgive you for that... but leaving when she needed you most?"

Colin's voice wavered as he finished. David gulped, continuing to avoid Colin's eyes.

"I couldn't... I couldn't see her when she... Thomas offered to take me but I couldn't not when she was--"

David's words were jumbled. He never expected it would be this hard to discuss.

"Fucking say her name you coward!"

Colin punctuated his statement with a hard push, sending

David tumbling back. Catching himself on the desk behind him, he roughly wiped at his eyes.

“I can’t. Colin, please I-“ He pleaded, but once again was interrupted by Colin.

“Say. Her. Name.”

Pushing him after every word, unlike how David was trying to hold in the tears, Colin’s tears were coming out uninhibited.

“*Ellie!* You fucking happy now? I left Ellie. I left the love of my life because-“

“Because what? Go on, what’s your shitty excuse for leaving her? It better be fucking good.” Colin spat.

David exploded.

“Because she was *dead*. That’s my excuse.”

Silence.

“I left because I couldn’t bare being led down to the fucking morgue and having to look at her on that slab. I refused. I stayed to make sure you were okay because you were all I had left but seeing you attached to all those wires...”

Colin had a hand over his mouth before backing up several steps.

David lowered his eyes to the floor, letting his own tears fall now that he could hide it. “I couldn’t stay any longer knowing Ellie was down there, alone and cold. So, I left. I went home and left the country. You’re right, I am a coward. I ran away Colin and I’m so fucking sorry.” He sobbed, itching to reach for his friend.

As David watched the floor, furiously wiping his tears, a pair of socked feet came into view.

That was when he felt the arms wrap around him and that was the moment David broke. It had been a long time coming.

He fell into his best friend's arms, openly sobbing, because they had both lost a part of themselves on that mission.

They were nicknamed 'The Fearsome Threesome' and they were known worldwide. They were not to be messed with. Breaking down in Colin's arms was a long time coming but it felt right, to grieve together, something they should have been doing from the moment they lost Ellie.

Colin's hands came up to cup his cheeks, wiping the tears there and forcing David to meet his eyes.

There was something in his eyes that David couldn't quite put his finger on. It felt similar to the uneasy feeling he had after speaking to Maisie the day before. Colin's mouth opened and closed a few times as he tried to figure out how he was going to phrase whatever he needed to say.

David could practically hear the gears turning in his head.

"Davey, I need you to listen to me, okay? I just need you to do that."

David frowned at his friend, it was unlike him to be this serious or even have the confidence to do so.

David watched on as Colin closed his eyes and took a deep breath. There was a headache incoming, and he just wanted Colin to spit it out because this tension was squeezing at him making it harder to breathe.

In the silence, all he could hear was his heart beating steadily.

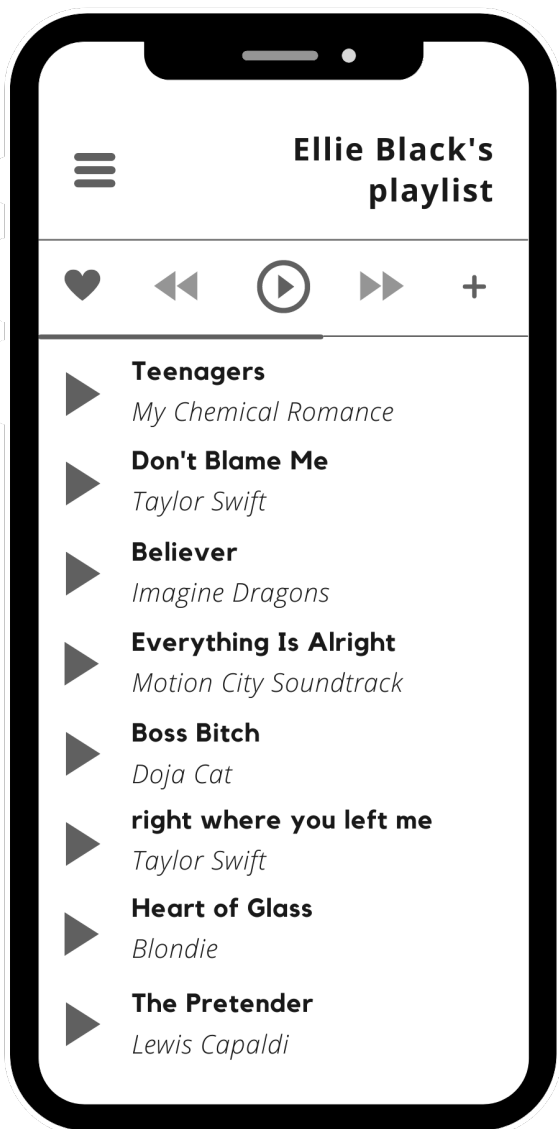
“Just spit it out Colin!”

It got louder as the silence continued to drag but then it stopped.

“She’s not dead David.” Colin whispered.

David’s heart stopped.

Ellie’s alive.



Chapter Two

Ellie

The shrill sound of the alarm had Ellie Black shooting up in bed, knocking her head off the bedside cabinet due to the position she had found herself in.

Rubbing at her head with one hand, she used the other to blindly scramble around the cabinet looking for her phone to snooze the damn alarm. 6am.

What heathen thought that was an acceptable time to wake up?

Oh yeah, it was her.

Hungover as she was, she knew she had to get up. Sadly, today she didn't have the luxury of sleeping it off since she had a class of thirty-five bright eyed students to teach at 10am.

If she wanted to be there at a decent time, she realistically needed to leave within the next 45 minutes so she could make the 110-mile journey from her family's home in Oxshott to the University of Bath where she was a Professor of Criminology.

Normally, she wouldn't have as much of a commute to work but she had come back to her family home the week prior to spend some time with her sister, Caitlin, before she went back to University in Canada.

It took Ellie a good twenty minutes to even just get herself into the bathroom and shower, and that was her rushing. Her leg injury made life difficult when it came to even the most menial of tasks.

After five years, she had found a way to make everything work quicker but she will never forget that first year. She was in a coma for four months after the 'incident'.

That was how it was referred to by her friends and family, no one wanted to call it what it really was; a mission gone wrong.

It was the family business; she had been adopted at age four and her new mother and father were both agents within the business of British Intelligence. Her mother, Sophie, had just quit when they adopted Ellie as she was pregnant and Thomas, her father, was climbing the ranks at MI6, aiming for his dream position.

So, in 2010, a year after Thomas had been promoted from second in command, to head of MI6; she joined. Not even 18 and she was on her first mission, which had to be illegal, but she had excelled in training and was the top of her class. Years of watching Thomas and using the gym to work out amongst the plethora of agents had come in handy. In the end, she had ended up beating the scores of agents who had been in the field for years.

That first mission was how she bumped into her brother who she hadn't seen since they had been separated back in 1997. The mission had been pretty simple, infiltrate a human trafficking ring running out of a bar close to Harvard University in Massachusetts.

Little did she know, her brother was in that bar celebrating graduating with a BSc honors degree in Computer Science. Shots were being fired from both sides and Ellie nearly fucked up the entire mission when she ended up under the table with Colin and they instinctively knew who the other was.

It would take another two years of constant begging and annoying Colin, for him to join her at MI6.

They were both put on a joint taskforce with an agent from the CIA, David Hollis. The love of her life. At the time, she was in a relationship with her best friend Maisie but David, well; he just had her from the first 'hello'.

When the 'incident' happened, she expected David to be the first thing she saw when she woke up. The day of the 'incident', September 29th, had been their one-year anniversary. They had awoken in Alberta in Canada, in a beautiful log cabin, ready to celebrate their one-year in style; essentially fucking multiple times in front of the roaring fire and then ordering takeaway, but then they had gotten the call they had been waiting for. Hecate's Haven had been spotted.

Jasper National Park had been locked down and they went in, just the three of them. The Fearsome Threesome. Athabasca Falls, the place that haunts her nightmares.

She knew she was stupid for sending David away, telling

him she could handle it; she paid the price in the end.

She didn't see the first shot coming, it went straight through her shoulder. She was on the ice for Christ's sake, and it wasn't as dense as it could have been if they had been a few months later.

She had managed to get a few shots in of her own, but they weren't perfect. She had just been shot in through the back of her shoulder, she was in shock. It was just the two of them. Ellie had assumed the leader, De Bris, had some weird obsession with her because whenever they met, he always went for her or Colin – on occasion, but never David.

Something didn't sit right with her, why wouldn't the leader of the opposition attack the captain?

Ellie's shots had done nothing but anger De Bris. He wasn't the only one pissed off, she was livid. Who the fuck shoots you in the back? It's the cardinal rule of shooting, no matter how much you hate them; it's simply a dick move to shoot the person if their back is turned.

Ellie's hope for the second wind, the adrenaline, were short lived. De Bris shot her in the top of her right thigh, just as the ice broke beneath her sending her into the freezing water.

The shock of the bullet being in her thigh and the ice water combined, paralysed her.

As hard as she tried, she couldn't get herself to push, or even try, to get herself out of the water.

The last thing she saw before it went black was De Bris, peering down at her. He wore a venetian mask; it was different to the ones his followers, and goons, wore though.

They all wore full face masks whereas De Bris wore a half one.

Although her nightmares always consisted of that mask

peering down at her, the worst nightmares were when the face of De Bris morphed into David's.

She would watch on as he peered down at her, reaching his hand out towards her, only for him to snatch it back and leave her there.

She wasn't proud of it, but she had entertained the idea, right after she first came out of the coma, that David had been working for Hecate's Haven.

It hurt to entertain it, but Ellie's brain liked to fuck with her.

Luckily, Colin was very quick to snap her out of that idea altogether. David wasn't a bad guy; he just obviously wasn't as committed to their relationship as she had once believed him to be.

With her mind elsewhere, primarily thinking of David, it only took her fifteen minutes to get ready.

Their anniversary had been on Thursday, and she had spent the day watching stupid comedies that were David's favourite.

She missed him, like a limb.

It was painful.

She wanted to see him again, one more time. Even if he was married with kids, she just had this selfish need to be in his arms one last time.

Ellie hadn't even realised she had made it into the kitchen until she felt the kiss on her cheek from her mother.

"Think you can stomach some food before you leave?" Sophie smiled; her chin still tucked over Ellie's shoulder.

"Possibly, what's on offer?" Ellie enquired.

“Your sister’s favourite.” Ellie chuckled.

That meant croissants smothered in butter and fresh fruit. Caitlin, her younger sister, had been an au pair in Paris for two years and was obsessed with everything French. It was one of the main reasons, Ellie had assumed, she had picked a university that had French as its first language.

“I think I might be able to manage that.”

Moving over to take a seat at the breakfast bar, Ellie hooked her pastel blue cane over the side of the marble countertop and watched her mother dance around the kitchen, getting everything set up on the plates.

“How are you not hungover?” Ellie whined.

Ellie’s killer hangover was all Sophie’s fault. The older woman had induced the absolute drunken chaos the night before since both of her ‘angel pies’ were leaving her.

“I’m too posh to get a hangover dear.” Sophie winked as she set down the breakfast in front of the red head.

“Bullshit.” Ellie muttered around a chunk of flaky pastry.

As if on cue, the blonde ray of sunshine glided into the room in her signature sky high heels.

Ellie couldn’t help but wince at the height of the heels Caitlin was wearing. Ellie can’t quite remember a time when her little sister didn’t wear heels.

With five years between them, Ellie distinctly remembers when they were at the boarding school together in Scotland. 11-year-old, Caitlin, would wear heels to class and no one batted an eyelid. Whereas Ellie’s 17-year-old self was wearing converses and doc martins.

“*Bonjour ma famille chérie!*” Caitlin quipped as she trotted over

to her mother and sister to peck them both on the cheek.

“Please God, you’re too bright. Tone it down.”

Ellie whined as she made grabby hands for the coffee Sophie was walking over with.

“Tone down my brightness? However, would I manage that?” Caitlin teased.

“Turn off your settings or something I dunno, it’s too early for this shit.” Ellie muttered around her coffee mug.

“Someone’s got a *petit* hangover hmm?”

The blonde bombshell giggled as she ran a manicured hand teasingly up her sister’s arm. The red-haired sibling swatted at the offending hand.

“Piss off. Need I remind everyone that I don’t have the magical Wright genes that stave off hangovers.”

Grunting, Ellie got to her feet, grabbing her cane in the process.

“Good morning my darling girls!” Thomas called as he walked into the kitchen. Ellie bit her lip to hide her disdain.

Ellie and Thomas had been close when she joined MI6, she was pretty sure Caitlin got a little jealous as she had always been a daddy’s girl and Ellie had screwed with that dynamic which caused resentment and an incredibly tense atmosphere in the rare moments that they all managed to get together as a family in those seven years.

Then the final mission happened, and Thomas took a step back from Ellie. She had assumed, at the time, it was because she had messed up the mission but after heading into his office the day she was discharged from the hospital, she realised why he had taken a step back.

He was cheating on Sophie.

From that moment on, the two didn't speak. It killed her that she couldn't tell her mother that Thomas was cheating on her, but she was too selfish and needed to save her own ass. There was far too much that the head of MI6 had on her, for her to be able to run her mouth.

"Daddy?" Ellie watched as Caitlin ran into her father's arms. From an outsider's point of view, it was beautiful to see how their relationship had blossomed in the last five years but when you knew the man's true colours; the ugliness bloomed brighter than Caitlin's smile she was currently gracing her father with.

"Darling, I'm sorry I didn't get here sooner. I wanted to make sure I caught you before your flight." Ellie rolled her eyes and gently tapped Sophie on the shoulder.

"My little mermaid, you tapped?" Sophie beamed, her smile never waned for Ellie, and it had always reminded her of her birth mother.

"Could you help me with my suitcase?" Her voice was quiet.

Regardless of spending seven years travelling the world and dealing with the scum of the earth; the thing that scared her the most was asking for help.

Especially asking for help on the most minimal of tasks. After everything, it just felt degrading.

You would think after five years of living with the cane, the phantom pain, waking up in the middle of the night screaming over every PTSD induced nightmare, that she would be used to it. She wasn't. She didn't think she ever would be.

Asking for help was one of her limited kryptonite's.

“Of course, sweetheart!”

And just like that, it was simple.

Within ten minutes, she was in her car and driving away from the family home. She had her music blasting from her radio to keep her awake over the two-hour drive.



Ellie managed to park in her designated spot with five minutes to spare, so now she had to rush in and get set up before the students arrived.

Her phone blaring loudly made her jump six feet in the air.

Struggling with her briefcase and cane she somehow managed to wrangle it out of her pocket and up to her ear, not having time to look at the caller-ID.

“Professor Black speaking, how may I help?” Ellie’s professional voice escaped.

“Jesus, you sound like an old lady.”

She groaned inwardly at the sound of her brother’s voice.

“Also, are you that much of a grandma that you can’t even return my calls or texts? Is technology too hard for you?”

“Well, you’re in a terrible fuckin’ mood this morning. I was gonna wait till it was a decent time to phone you back. We had drinks last night, ergo, I got absolutely wasted.”