

Before the fire, there was silence

Before the war, there was love.

And before the betrayal, there was us- burning, reckless, unstoppable.

They stole what we never got the chance to protect.

Now, we're coming to take it back.

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To the ones who cheered me on even when I doubted every word your belief lit the way. You know who you are, and I hope you feel how much of you is in this.

To the quiet nights, the stormy ideas, and the scenes that demanded to be written thank you for haunting me in the best way.

And to every dreamer holding a story close to their chest:

Write it. Even if it scares you. Especially if it does.

With all my heart,

Elise Walton

PROLOGUE

Before the Fall

Location: Northern Syria, Near Aleppo | Time: Seven Years Ago

Olivia Reyes knew three things when she parachuted into Syria: the war wasn't just about oil, the files she needed were buried under Blackwatch's nose, and Noah Kael was her only way out, even if he didn't know it yet.

She had heard whispers about him. Former special forces. Went dark after a mission in Tajikistan. Now operating independently, hired as muscle by rebel networks but always operating two steps outside any known allegiance.

She found him bleeding and smoking a cigar under a shredded tarp, radioing for supplies he knew wouldn't come.

"You're Noah Kael," she said. "You saved a UN convoy near Mosul. Left a trail of bodies like bread crumbs."

He didn't look up. "And you're the American journalist who thinks war is sexy." She smirked. "No. I think the truth is. I'm here for it."

He finally looked up. Eyes like steel caught in a thunderstorm. She saw something flicker the recognition, maybe interest. But mostly a warning.

"You shouldn't be here," he said. "I could say the same about you." That was the first time they met.

One Week Later – The Bond Forming

They fought like fire and fuel. She accused him of hiding classified intel. He accused her of romanticizing trauma. And yet, every night, they ended up back at the same fire, shoulders brushing, silence thick with everything they didn't say.

One night, she asked, "What's it like to kill someone?"

He answered, "Depends if they deserved it." She didn't flinch. "And if they didn't?"

He took a slow drag of his cigarette. "You spend years dreaming about the look on their face."

She nodded. "Then we both have ghosts."

The Night That Changed Everything

It wasn't gentle. It wasn't planned. But it was real.

After a mission gone sideways and half a platoon lost, Olivia dragged Noah, half-shot, into a bombed-out clinic

to patch him up. Her hands trembled as she stitched him.

"You should hate me," he rasped.

"I should," she whispered, "but I don't."

Their mouths met furious desperation. Clothing peeled away. They collided like tectonic plates, two broken souls searching for something human.

Afterward, they lay together on the cold concrete floor. Her fingers tangled in his hair. His hand pressed flat over her bare stomach.

He whispered, "You feel at home."

Neither knew in that moment, Lucia had begun.

The Extraction – And the Lie

Two weeks later, Olivia woke in a military-grade facility, restrained and drugged. Her memory? Hazy.

A voice: "The fetus is viable."

Another: "She can't remember this. Wipe her clean."

When she woke again in a Red Cross tent weeks later, a woman gently told her she'd suffered a miscarriage after an IED blast. The child hadn't survived.

She screamed. Then went silent.

Noah was gone. No body, no word. Just... vanished.

Present Day – The Gala | New York City | 7 Years Later

The ballroom was a monument to opulence. Crystal chandeliers. French jazz. Politicians in tuxedos pretending the world wasn't burning outside.

Olivia Reyes adjusted her emerald-green silk gown, her press badge tucked just out of view. Her heels clicked like a metronome of purpose. She wasn't here for champagne.

She was here for names. For Blackwatch donors. For revenge.

And then she saw him.

Across the ballroom. Black suit. Shoulders broader than she remembered. That same storm in his eyes.

Noah.

Alive.

Their eyes met like lightning splitting the sky. She moved toward him without thinking.

He stepped forward, but didn't smile. "Reyes." "You're supposed to be dead."

"You're supposed to forget me."

Her slap cracked louder than the jazz band's cymbals. And still... his jaw didn't move. But his eyes burned. "You left me," she hissed.

“They took you,” he growled. “They took everything.”

They stood nose-to-nose, raw and exposed in a room full of masks. She asked, barely above a whisper, “Did you know?”

Noah’s voice trembled, just once. “Know what?”

She opened her clutch, slid a flash drive into his hand.

One word glowed on the screen: **LUCIA**.

Noah stared. Time stopped. Then she walked away.