Chapter One

Caleb

No matter what time of day it is, the Double Tap bar in the French Quarter always seems busy. The cool interior is a welcome relief from the sweltering August heat as I step inside, shutting out the loud cars and the bluesy tune played by the busker on the corner.

Double Tap is somewhere between a classic English pub and dark American bar. Lots of black with brass accents, an antique wooden bar that fills one wall, and classic rock playing in the background. Since I left the military, this bar is as much home as anywhere. Keane and Sol, the owners, were part of one of my past units, and they, along with some of my other buddies, settled in this part of New Orleans. Between them, they run Double Tap, Arcane Brew, the coffee shop next door, and Citadel Securities.

Coming here was a lifeline. It kept me from spiraling into that dark place so many warriors do. These men are family and they have given me a purpose. Not just a job with Citadel but a way to put my skills to use and help people. A way to keep my mind off the one thing I can't ever have.

Scanning the lunch crowd, I spot my buddy Gideon sitting in a booth at the back, hunched over his cell phone. He gives me a chin lift as he spots me threading my way through the tables, a pinched frown on his face.

"Thanks for coming, Caleb."

I slide into the seat across from him. Lines crease the corners of his green eyes, and his dark brown hair looks like he's run his fingers through it. His muscles are tight, like he wants to spring into action. "You said it was urgent."

Gideon takes a sip of his microbrew and then waves Winter over to order another. She's one of the best waitresses here, and if Keane has anything to say about it, she'll never leave. The man watches her like a bird of prey with his next meal.

"Hey, Caleb. Your usual?" she says as she leans a hip against our table, a smile on her face. She saves all her sass for Keane.

"Yeah. Thanks, Winter."

"Another for you, Gideon?"

He heaves a hard sigh and gives a short nod.

"See if you can't get him out of this funk, Caleb. He's been moody for the last hour." She winks at me and saunters to the back of the bar, her swaying hips more pronounced the closer she gets. Behind the counter, Keane's eyes are locked on her.

"Think he'll ever make a move on her?" Gideon murmurs.

I shake my head. "Fucker's too stubborn for his own good. He thinks he's being noble."

Gideon chuckles. "Better him than me."

A sly grin tugs at my lip as I turn my attention back to my best friend. "You're next. Some woman is going to sweep you off your feet like a goddamn princess. Just wait."

"Fuck you." He flips me off, but his words don't have any heat. We've known each other since grade school, so he's used to my bullshit.

"Okay, then tell me why I'm here. If it's so urgent, why are you avoiding the conversation?"

A muscle ticks in his jaw. "I've got a job protecting a Senator's daughter. Leaving in two hours."

Gideon and I work for Citadel Securities, protecting high-profile clients, and doing everything from rescuing kidnapping victims to intercepting assassination attempts. Maybe something about this assignment has him rattled, though I've never seen Gideon unsettled like this, even during deep deployments. "Need help?"

"No. I'm going to tuck her away until the threat is cleared. Should be pretty simple."

Saying that is like begging for trouble. I sit forward, ready to hear more.

Gideon runs his fingers through his hair again and stares at the ceiling. Then, as if he's resigned himself to something, his shoulders slump, and he pushes his phone across the table. There's a text message from an old friend we knew back home.

Trish: Gideon, I gotta talk to you about Harmony right away. Call me.

My gut tightens just seeing her name. I clear my throat and try to ignore the feeling.

Gideon: What's up?

Trish: I think there's a guy causing trouble but Harmony won't tell me anything. I wouldn't worry but… there's too much to explain. Please call me.

There's nothing more. "Is Trish still in White Falls?"

"Yeah. Harmony moved back last year to open her own bakery. Thought I told you."

He hadn't. I would remember. Not a single detail about her slips my memory. "You called Trish back. What did she say?" The tightening in my gut has crept up to squeeze my chest, and it's all I can do not to sprint out the door and head to the airport. Harmony. I swear my heart beats only for her, and I can never let her or Gideon know.

"Some guy Harmony went on a couple of dates with is always hanging around or showing up. There's nothing outright threatening, so Harmony won't call the police." He takes his phone back, and his dark brows slant down. "You know my sister. She stubbornly refuses to see the bad in people. I'm sure she thinks he's harmless. Maybe he is."

"You and I have seen far too much to believe that." What humanity does to one another will never make sense. I stopped trying to understand it during my second tour with Delta Force when we infiltrated a prison camp to extract fellow soldiers. The horrors we witnessed still haunt me.

Shaking off the dark thoughts, I focus on Gideon. Growing up in a small town, we spent all our time together, usually with Harmony tagging along. As the oldest, Gideon often had to watch her while his parents worked. For years, she was like a little sister to me.

Until she wasn't.

"Harmony is too trusting. I love that about her, but it's also her biggest flaw. I need to know that she's safe. I'd go myself, but I just committed to the Senator." Gideon looks at me, and there's concern mixed with the frustration in his eyes. "Will you go check it out, Caleb? She knows you. You're the only man I can trust to do this. Anyone else, and I'd worry about them keeping their hands off my sister. I know *you* won't break your promise to me."

Guilt slashes at me like a sharp knife, making it hard to breathe through the pain and my thumping heart. I manage a nod. I'd do anything for Gideon. Even push away the only woman I've ever wanted. "I'll keep her safe and find out more about this guy."

He exhales, visibly relaxing, and a smile tugs at his lips. "Thanks, man. It means a lot to know that you'll be there. I'll check in when this other situation is resolved. It should only be a couple days."

Winter returns with our beers and sets them down, striking up a conversation with Gideon.

While they're talking, I work through the details of what I'll need to take on the trip. My brain stalls on an aspect I skipped past in my concern for Harmony. She moved back to White Falls last year.

I lean back against the booth and drag in a slow breath. Shit. Looks like I'll not only have to face Harmony and pretend that I don't have feelings for her, but return to a place that I never wanted to see again. The need to punch Gideon for this shit rises up fast. He knows how hard this will be, and he asked me anyway. Fuck.

With a final glare at him, I throw a few bills down for Winter and stalk out into the oppressive heat, leaving my beer untouched.

I don't want to go back to Montana, but if it means seeing Harmony and keeping her safe, I'll do it. I'd do anything for her. Even deny myself the love I know we could have together for the sake of her relationship with her brother.

I swallow past the lump that's formed in my throat and stomp toward my apartment. My mission is Harmony's safety. Nothing else matters.