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Opening extract from

Losing Lila

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Losing Lila – extract from chapter 2

'We left him. We just left him, Alex.'

Alex's grip on me tightened. His fingers went under my chin and he forced it up so I was looking him in the eye.

'We had to, Lila.'

I stared at him. *Did we?*

'It was the only thing we could do,' he said. 'If either of us had gone to help him, we'd have been shot too. We've talked about this. Jack would have done the same thing. He would have wanted you to be safe.'

A part of me knew what Alex was saying was true, but it wasn't enough to make the guilt untwist the knots it had made in my gut.

'But Alex, what if he's—'

I thought about Ryder lying dead in the dirt and of Jack at his side with a bullet wound in his chest and scrunched my eyes shut. He wasn't in a good way. That's what Key had said. He was in a

coma. He could be paralysed. He could be *dead*. And I didn't know because I was here. And Jack was there. And so was my mum. And there was no way of getting to either of them because between us and them was the Unit.

Alex put his hands on either side of my face. I opened my eyes. He was looking straight at me. 'Jack's fine,' he said, 'I know it. He's too tough not to be. And anyway, Jack has a very good reason to stay alive.'

'My mum?' It was a good reason. We had thought she was dead, but she wasn't.

'That,' Alex said, a smile pulling at the corner of his mouth, 'but I was thinking more that he'll want the opportunity to kick my ass.'

I laughed through my tears. 'Yeah, he wasn't too happy, was he?'

'No more than I deserve.'

'No, don't say that.' I scrambled to sit up. 'You can't do that to me again. You can't leave me again because of Jack. Because you're scared of what he thinks. I can't – I won't go through that again—'

I thought back to the days just before all this kicked off. To Alex's promise not to hurt me, and the way he'd left me so easily, thinking he was doing the right thing. When I thought about it, it made me feel as if the Unit had fired that weapon of theirs right at my heart.

Alex sat up too and took my hands in his. 'Lila, I promise you I'll never leave you again, ever. I promise you that I'll keep you safe and that we'll find Jack and your mum, and I promise that even if Jack does kick my ass, which one day I hope he will, I will still never leave you.'

I weighed his words, analysing their content. Alex had been known to twist the meaning of things. He'd tricked me that way before. I considered him: the arctic-blue eyes, the bruised shadows beneath them, the dark blond crew cut growing out, the soft curve of his lips, the familiar frown line running between his eyes that always made me want to reach out and smudge it away.

'I promise, Lila,' he said. 'No hidden meanings. I'm not going to leave you.'

He leaned forward and kissed me, still smiling. My whole body melted away, the muscles becoming as soft as sponges dipped in a hot bath, all the guilt and worry disappearing back into the corners of my consciousness, where I preferred them to stay.

After a few minutes Alex pried me off him. I sat up grudgingly as he swung his legs off the bed and watched as he bent to plug the light back into the socket. We had taken to unplugging electrical equipment as a precaution every time we moved to a new hotel room. When it came to proximity to Alex, I couldn't control my ability and we didn't need to be advertising our presence to the Unit with a Vegas-style sound and light show.

'Seriously, we have to focus,' he said, rearranging his T-shirt and running a hand through his hair.

'What do we have to focus *on*?' I had thought the bed was a pretty good thing to concentrate on.

'Get up,' Alex said.

I narrowed my eyes in suspicion, but slowly got up off the bed and stood in front of him.

'OK, we need to practise.'

I groaned. 'I'm so tired.'

'I know,' he said, 'but you really need to be able to defend yourself if you have to. So, don't argue, OK? We just have one more thing to do then we'll get out of the city and find somewhere safe

to wait for Demos and the others.'

I froze, looking up at him. 'We have to wait here. They're coming *here*.' I couldn't hide the note of panic in my voice.

Alex shook his head at me. 'We can't stay in Mexico City. The Unit will be looking for us here.' He softened his voice. 'Don't worry, Nate and Key will find us wherever we go.'

I hoped he was right. I hoped they hadn't been caught. When we'd left them back in California, they'd been trying to draw the Unit north, away from us. A pretty futile exercise it now turned out because the Unit had been tracking us this whole time anyway. But it had been over eight days since we'd last had contact with Demos. When I'd suggested it would have been a good idea to swap cellphone numbers, Alex had rolled his eyes and given me a rudimentary introduction to evade-and-resist tactics, which apparently called for the ditching of all electronic, traceable objects. I hadn't yet pointed out that he should also have ditched his arm. I must have been looking worried still, because Alex took my hand.

'They'll find us,' he repeated. 'They found us before, didn't they?' He tugged me to my feet. 'Now come on, practise.'

How could I resist a face like that? Anything, he could ask me anything, and I'd do it.

He turned in a flash and picked up the gun from the bed. His finger was on the trigger before I had flung it out of his grip and back onto the pillow.

'Good,' he said, reaching to pick it up. 'But you need to be quicker.'

Quicker, huh? I spun the gun out of his reach to the foot of the bed.

He looked at me with a wry smile and I smiled back. 'Quick enough?'

He considered me for a long moment and I felt my pulse start to speed up. Finally he strolled around and stood directly behind me. I stayed where I was, feeling his breath tickling the back of my

neck and trying not to let it distract me.

'So, if someone comes up behind you like this, what do you do?' Alex asked, stepping even closer, his lips brushing the edge of my ear.

'Smack him over the head with something?' I suggested, trying to focus on the question and not the feel of his lips.

'No,' he said. 'You can't let people know about your ability. Try this instead.' He put his hand on my shoulder and then, reaching over with his other hand, took my left hand and put it on top of his.

'Now twist, like this.' He showed me and I practised until I was able to extricate myself from a headlock. And then we kept practising, purely because I liked the feel of his arms wrapping round me, although I told Alex it was because I was trying to commit the move to memory.