

*Forever
in the
Light*

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A Hearts in Darkness Duet Story

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One year ago this week, Caden Grayson had gotten trapped in a pitch-black elevator. And between the darkness and the tightness and the way it triggered memories of the most terrifying moments of his life, it had been his worst nightmare come true.

And his utter salvation.

Because he hadn't been alone in that elevator.

No. Not by a long shot. Makenna James had been trapped in there with him. And it seemed impossible to him that she'd been a stranger in that moment, because now she was the person who knew him best in the world. Maybe even better than he knew himself.

Certainly, she'd changed everything about his life and what he thought it would be. Which was why he found himself staring at his own reflection with a bit of wonder. Because he was wearing a classic black-and-white tuxedo, and today was his wedding day.

Stepping out of the bedroom he shared with Makenna, he almost walked into Makenna's brothers. Wearing tuxedos of their own, Patrick, Ian, and Collin James all looked at him at once, eagerness on their faces.

"Can we get him yet?" Patrick asked, glancing at the closed door on one side of the hallway.

Grinning, Caden checked the time on his cell phone. "Yeah. I guess it's about that time."

The three James men immediately made for the door. Quietly, they all walked into the fireman-themed room with its red, yellow, and light blue color scheme. Caden and Makenna's son's room. Caden's *son*. Sometimes, the goodness of that stole Caden's breath. He had a son.

Peering into the crib, Caden felt like he shared the awe he felt with Makenna's brothers. Because they were all looking at Sean Grayson like he was the most amazing thing they'd ever seen. Three-month-old Sean lay on his back, his pudgy little limbs totally at ease, his face slack in sleep. A shock of dark brown hair stuck up in every direction from his little head. Caden didn't have a lot of experience with loving families, but all the James men—including Makenna's father—doted on the boy to no end. Jokingly fought with each other to get to do it, actually. Caden wouldn't have had it any other way. He wanted Sean to have everything that Caden had been denied for so long. And much, much more.

Caden reached in a hand to rub Sean's chest and belly. The baby's eyes flew open and he immediately stretched in a motion that was half excitement, half startle. But then Sean realized he had an audience, and the little guy graced them with one of the smiles he was giving more and more often and cooed and waved his arms. To a round of laughter and smiles, Caden picked the little man up, kissed his soft head, and marveled for maybe the millionth time at the little life he held in his hands. The life he'd made with Makenna.

It didn't take long for the four of them to change Sean's diaper, feed him a bottle Makenna had left for them, and get the baby changed so that he was wearing a long-sleeved onesie that made him appear to be wearing a tiny tux of his own.

"We clean up good," Caden said to Sean, lifting him into his arms. "We are going to knock your mom's socks off." In truth, it was the other way around—Caden's chest was tight with the anticipation of seeing Makenna walking up the aisle. To him.

As Ian and Collin left the room, Patrick put a hand on Caden's arm. The two men had gotten close since Makenna's car accident seven months before had scared the hell out of them

all. “You’re really good with him, Caden. And you’re really great for both of them. Just want you to know that. I hope you do.”

The words of acceptance and approval hit Caden right in the chest. He wasn’t used to receiving them, and maybe never would be. But he appreciated the hell out of them. He extended a hand to his soon-to-be brother-in-law. “Thanks, man. That means a lot.”

Downstairs, they found Makenna’s father, Mike James, and Caden’s captain at the firehouse, Joe Flaherty, shooting the shit.

Both men rose as they entered the living room, Mike coming right over to take his grandson. “Let me see this little guy. Did you have a good nap?” he asked Sean.

“He did. The kid sleeps like a champ,” Caden said.

“That’s because he’s such a good boy,” Mike cooed against Sean’s cheek. “And because he knows he has a great mom and dad who will always look out for him.”

Caden clapped Mike on the back, the words making it too hard to respond. How the hell had he gotten so lucky as to find Makenna *and* her family? Because family was something he’d thought he might never have again. And despite the rocky times that Caden and Makenna had weathered, her family had embraced him with both arms and the big heart that every member of the James clan seemed to have—even Ian, who hadn’t been as accepting at first.

A big smile on his face, Joe turned to Caden and held out his hand. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you in a tux before.”

“I know,” Caden said, laughing. “I barely recognize myself.”

Joe clasped Caden's hand tight. "Well, I recognize you. You're exactly the man I've always known you to be, Caden. And I'm damn proud of you."

Shaking his head, Caden worked to clear his throat. Because he knew Joe was talking about more than the clothes. He was talking about the major depression that his captain had helped him get through last winter, the one that had brought him right to the brink of losing everything. Which was why Joe was the clear choice to be his best man. "Shit," Caden whispered. "I have you to thank for that."

"You can always count on me to have your back," Joe said, giving him a pointed look. Caden nodded and scrubbed a hand over the scar on the side of his head.

"Goes for me, too," Patrick said, joining them.

"For all of us," Mike added. Meeting each of the men's gazes, Caden nodded again, the room feeling a little bit like it was closing in on him. Not out of anxiety, exactly, but because he was still new at dealing with so much raw emotion—and having it be the good kind.

Overwhelming, but good. "Now," Mike said. "We better go. My baby girl's waiting for you."

"Right," Caden said with a laugh. "And that waiting ends today."

Standing in the small room that led out to the hotel courtyard, Makenna James was a flurry of nerves. Because she'd spent her first night apart from her son. Because she was dying to be back in Caden's arms. Because she was getting married today. Well, in just a few minutes, now.

“You look so beautiful, Makenna. Your mother would be so proud of what a wonderful woman you’ve grown up to be,” Aunt Maggie said. Dressed in a teal blue dress that matched her eyes and with red hair nearly the color of Makenna’s, Maggie was the obvious choice to be her maid of honor. After her mom died when Makenna was three, Maggie had stepped in to help her dad with the four James kids, becoming the only mother-figure Makenna really remembered.

“Thank you, Aunt Maggie. That means a lot. Part of me wishes she could be here, but part of me thinks I have so much good in my life that I shouldn’t wish for even one thing more.” Makenna smoothed her hands over the full skirt of her wedding gown. Sleeveless with a sweetheart bodice and silver jewels forming a sash around the waist, the dress made her feel like a princess.

“You deserve it all,” Shima said, smiling, a bouquet of yellow roses in her hands. Yellow roses, just a small way to remember Caden’s own mother who he’d lost in an accident so many years before. Shima was Collin’s girlfriend, and with all the trips her brothers had made to visit the baby over the summer, Makenna and Shima had gotten close. Almost like sisters. And Makenna hoped they might be just that one day.

Makenna squeezed Shima’s hand. “You’re the best. The next one of these we attend could be yours, you know.” She laughed as Shima blushed.

“We’ll see about that,” Shima said, ducking her head so that her sleek black hair fell around her face.

Outside, the music changed, the wedding march marking Makenna’s cue. “Oh. It’s time.”

“Yes, it is,” Maggie said. “And you have a beautiful family waiting on you to start its forever.”

“I do,” Makenna whispered, the wonder of it all nearly stealing her breath.

The wedding planner opened a set of French glass doors that opened out onto the hotel’s outdoor, brick-lined courtyard, a little secluded garden in the middle of Old Town Alexandria. Shima stepped out and marched down the aisle, and then Maggie.

And then it was Makenna’s turn.

The moment she passed through the doors, her gaze latched onto Caden’s handsome form waiting for her in front of an arch woven with ribbon and roses. His expression went from serious to open wonder to outright happiness, his smile bringing out his dimples and making him appear young and so carefree. It made her heart feel too big for her chest. He’d always done that to her, hadn’t he?

And, damn, could her man wear a tux. Between his broad shoulders and his trim waist, the fine black suit fit him like a glove and made her giddy with excitement. This man was going to be her husband. This man was going to be her *forever*.

The next thing Makenna knew, she was standing at the top of the aisle, her eyes still locked on Caden’s even as her father gave his blessing to the couple and kissed her on the cheek. Joe Flaherty and Makenna’s brothers stood up for Caden. One of Makenna’s greatest joys was how Caden had been embraced by so many people since they’d met. He deserved that, and so much more.

Makenna’s gaze searched out Sean and found him in Patrick’s arms. Wearing a onesie that made him appear to be decked out in a little tux of his own, Sean sucked on one of his fists. She nearly laughed at how cute the baby looked as she took Caden’s hand and stepped up onto

the brick dais in front of him. Her son was going to be every bit as handsome as his father, but with her blue eyes.

“You look so pretty, Makenna. I think you stole my heart right out of my chest,” Caden whispered, his dark eyes blazing at her.

“And you looking just as freaking gorgeous as ever,” she whispered back.

The officiant’s words were lovely, but all Makenna wanted was to exchange vows with Caden and proclaim publicly that they belonged to one another forever. And then they were doing it. Trading rings and making promises that would last a lifetime. Makenna thought she just might make it through the ceremony without crying until Caden’s voice cracked on the words, “In good times and in bad.” And then her damn eyes wouldn’t stop leaking even as she couldn’t stop smiling. Because sometimes life was so good you could barely take it all in.

“May I present Mr. and Mrs. Caden Grayson,” the minister said to the applause of the small gathering. “You may now kiss the bride.”

Caden’s tongue flicked at the small spider-bite piercings on the side of his bottom lip. “I’ve been waiting for this part.”

“Have you, now?” Makenna said just before Caden’s lips came down on hers, soft but claiming, tender but full of banked heat, way too short but promising more. Promising everything.

They pulled back from the kiss wearing huge smiles. Makenna grasped Caden’s lapel and pulled him down so she could whisper in his ear, “You’re mine forever now.”

“That’s the best thing I’ve heard in my entire life, Makenna,” Caden said, his lips against her cheek.

As they stepped off the dais, Sean’s fusses turned into a cry.

“Give him to me,” Caden said to Patrick. “He can walk with us.”

When Sean settled in against Caden’s chest, Makenna couldn’t restrain herself. She leaned in and hugged her men, the three of them forming a little circle of love and family and forever.

Together, they walked down the aisle. Everyone rose to their feet, clapping and cheering for them. Her family. Most of the guys from Caden’s firehouse. David Talbot and the other men who’d saved Caden’s life fifteen years ago and who he’d found again last winter when he was fighting to find himself. People from Makenna’s accounting office and a few girls with whom she’d gone to college. It wasn’t a large gathering, but it was everyone and everything they needed.

The reception passed in a happy blur of toasts and dances and pictures and moments that quickly passed into memories. Shima caught Makenna’s bouquet. And Patrick caught the garter Caden had slipped off her thigh. Makenna was absolutely tickled at both. When someone requested Aerosmith’s *Love in an Elevator*, the party really got underway. And they danced until Makenna’s feet hurt and Caden had shed his suit coat and rolled up his sleeves, baring the tattoos she loved, and Sean fell asleep in Grandpa’s arms despite the noise.

“You ready to get out of here yet?” Caden asked, hugging her from behind.

Makenna turned in his arms and found his dark eyes absolutely on fire. Her heart tripped into a sprint. “More than ready.”

Of course, it took a while for them to say their good-byes and make their way out of the room, and it wasn't easy leaving Sean for a second night in a row. But Makenna knew he was in good hands.

And for this night, she was all Caden's. Body, mind, and soul. Because after all he'd lost, he deserved nothing less.

Caden's heart was hammering in his chest as he led Makenna into the elevator. The honeymoon suite was on the tenth floor of the hotel, but he had a stop to make along the way.

“Do you think everyone had a good time?” Makenna asked, her face bright and alive and so very pretty. The doors slid shut.

“Yeah,” Caden said. “I think they did. And so did I.”

Makenna smiled. “Me, too.”

Floor two. Floor three.

Caden reached out and pressed the *Stop* button. The elevator lurched to a halt somewhere between the third and fourth floor. Right where they'd met a year before. An alarm bell rang, then cut off.

“Oh. What are you...” Makenna glanced from the panel of buttons to Caden and back again. “Why did you do that?”

“Because,” he said, taking her hands. He’d cleared this with the hotel manager, but he didn’t have long. “I need to say something to you. Something more than our vows. And I wanted to do it here.”

“Are you okay, Caden?” she asked, a flash of worry in her baby blues.

Caden backed Makenna against the wall, boxing her in and nailing her with a stare. “God, Makenna. I am so much more than okay. Even though this isn’t the elevator we got trapped in, I thought an elevator was the best place to make some additional promises to you.”

Her expression went soft and so full of emotion. For him. “What?”

He stroked a red curl back off her face. “I promise that I’ll always believe in your ability to help me when I’m trapped—in an elevator or my own mind.”

“Oh, Caden,” she said, her head tilting as she looked up at him. “I will.”

He nodded. “And I promise to keep myself healthy so that you won’t need to help me that way.”

“I believe in you. I know you will,” she said, her words a strained whisper.

“And I promise to be your soft place to land when life gets hard or you lose something important to you. Because you’ve done that for me so many times already.”

A quick nod, and then her hands landed on his chest. “God, I love you.”

“I love you, too. And that’s why I wanted you to know. I want to make an amazing life for you and Sean, for all of us. I’m not scared anymore. And that’s why I wanted to trap us in

here long enough to let you know.” Caden gave a little smile as a tear broke free from the corner of one of Makenna’s eyes. He caught it with his thumb.

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me, Caden.”

“Hey, that’s my line,” he said.

Makenna chuckled. “You’re not the only one who found everything they ever wanted.”

Grasping her face, Caden leaned down and claimed Makenna’s sweet mouth in a kiss. Her arms rounded his neck, pulling him in harder, closer. It was a kiss full of promise and commitment and tenderness, but when Makenna moaned, heat ripped through Caden’s blood.

“Need you so much,” he said.

Makenna’s hands stroked the back of his head as she nodded. “Can’t wait to feel my husband moving inside me.”

“Christ, Red.” Caden stabbed at the *Start* button as desire lanced through him. The elevator moved again, but their kisses didn’t wait. What started sweetly was now full of scorching, demanding need. When the doors eased open, they spilled into the small lobby outside of their suite, their bodies never coming apart. When Makenna’s dress made it difficult to walk her backward toward the door, Caden swept her up into his arms.

She threw her head back and laughed. “Are you carrying me across the threshold?”

“Absofuckinglutely,” he said with a wink. And then he was pushing open the door and carrying her into the beautiful room. Though it couldn’t hold a candle to his wife. His *wife*.

It was the first time his brain had truly absorbed the gravity of that word. And it made his need for her surge until he was restraining himself from flipping up all those gorgeous white skirts. But, no. She deserved more than that. She deserved to be laid out and savored. Tonight and always.

But that didn't mean he could slow down. "Turn around," he said, turning her so he faced her back. She scooped her hair out of the way and he worked at the row of tiny buttons, kissing the peaches-and-cream skin he revealed as he opened them one by one. When he was finished, he helped her step out of the dress and laid it reverently over the chaise lounge in the corner. When he turned around again, he stopped short to find her wearing a strapless white satin bra and a tiny pair of panties with intricate light blue embroidery and piping. "God, you're stunning."

Makenna reached behind her back and unhooked her bra, then let it tumble down her arms. "And you are the sexiest man I've ever seen," she said as she came to him. As she worked his shirt off, excitement flooded into Caden's gut. Because he had another surprise for her. He knew the minute she saw it. "Caden, is this...you got a new tattoo." Her eyes flashed to his.

Caden smiled even as his cock ached for her tight heat. "For you. Another promise."

Across his heart, just beneath the yellow rose he'd gotten for his mom years before, he'd had this inked into his skin in all black:

IX.XXII.MMXII

'til death

Makenna kissed the still-tender skin. "And not a moment sooner."

Caden's heart swelled in his chest. "Love you so fucking much, Red."

She grasped his hand and led him to the bed. And then he was laying Makenna out, baring her skin, baring his own, until all that separated them were their heartbeats.

His hard cock dragging against her soft legs, Caden kissed his way down Makenna's body. He licked at her nipples. Placed playful little bites that made her squirm all down her ribs. And finally nuzzled his face against the triangle of red hair at the top of her thighs. He couldn't help but remember that first night she'd invited him in—to her home and her body. And wonder at just how far they'd come.

But now wasn't the time for memories.

Opening Makenna to him, Caden settled his shoulders between her spread thighs, needing to give her pleasure. Wanting to give her everything. He kissed up the inside of both thighs until Makenna's hand fell on his head.

"Please," she rasped.

He couldn't stand for her to beg for what he was only too happy to give. He placed firm, flat licks of his tongue from her opening to her clit. And then again. And again.

Her other hand fell on his head, desperation clear in her clutching touch.

He sucked her clit into her mouth and flicked at it with his tongue. Furiously. Insistently. One hand reached to play with her nipples while the other pressed her belly down, forcing her hips to tilt upward to his demanding mouth.

Her hips rocked as her hands held him tighter, and then she was screaming his name and coming and writhing beneath him. And it was fucking glorious.

"That was too fast, Red. I think you can do that again," he said, peering up her body.

“My heart might stop,” she said, her face breaking into a grin.

He shook his head. “Nah. And even if it does, I might know a paramedic who could start it right back up.” He winked at her.

Makenna laughed. “I want you in me.”

He kissed her clit. “Then come again and you can have me.”

“Fuck, Caden,” she said, her head falling back to the bed and her body arching.

He flipped them so that she straddled his face. “Use me. Ride my mouth until you come.”

Grasping his head with one hand and bracing herself against the bed with the other, Makenna rocked her hips so that her clit ground against his tongue and lips. He grasped her ass and helped her move, pressing her down, letting her know he could take her weight. A moan wrenched out of her that had blood pounding through his cock, especially when she ground down harder and held her breath.

He growled against her soft flesh and banded his arms around her hips so that she was trapped in place. And then he sucked her clit so frantically that the orgasm stole her breath and made her collapse on top of him.

Licking his lips, Caden turned her boneless body over so that she lay under him on her back. “That sounded good.”

“Fucking delicious,” she said, her eyes soft with satisfaction.

“Yes, you were.” He grinned and kissed her, lingering over her lips until he was nearly dizzy with desire. Taking his cock in hand, Caden stroked at his erection, his head and his fist

bumping against Makenna's core. "Don't let me hurt you." When their schedules and energy and Sean's sleeping allowed, they'd loved one another many times since their son's birth, but Caden hadn't been inside Makenna since then. They'd wanted to save their bodies coming fully together again for their first time as husband and wife.

"You won't. I'm so ready for you. Make love to me, Caden," Makenna said.

In answer, he pushed inside her, inch by scalding hot inch. And it was like coming home. "Fuck, that's good. Always so damn good."

Makenna moaned and wrapped her legs around his back, holding him tightly, forcing him into a slow, deep grind that had both of them panting until the only sounds in the room were their fevered exhales and the soft shift of skin against skin.

Caden curled his arms under Makenna's shoulders and hunched himself around her, wanting deeper, *needing* deeper. "Fuck, I never want this to end."

"Don't stop. God, don't stop," Makenna rasped, arousal straining her voice. "Gonna make me come again."

His hips ground down on her harder, faster, and he pressed his lips to her ears, knowing she loved his words. "Do it. Come on me. Show me what I do to you, Red. Fucking come on me."

A high-pitched whine ripped from Makenna's throat and her body went taut.

"Christ, that's it. Squeezing my cock so tight," he said through a groan. And then Makenna's body was fisting him over and over until Caden was nearly blind from the goodness of it.

“Want you...to come in me,” Makenna said, her voice breathy, her legs falling wide around him. “Want to feel my husband pour himself into me.”

Her words kicked him in the spine and had him driving into her, his skin slapping against hers, his arousal as tight as a corkscrew. “You’re mine, always,” he gritted out.

“And you’re mine,” she replied.

The sentiment blew Caden apart into a million pieces and reassembled him as a new man. A man who would never have to walk alone again. The orgasm went on and on until Caden got light-headed and his body shuddered. And then he settled his weight atop Makenna and embraced her in a whole-body hug. “Never gonna let you go.”

“Good,” she said, stroking his back. “Wouldn’t let you if you tried.”

“I still love that elevator, Makenna,” he said, pressing a kiss to the racing pulse in her neck.

She laughed. “I still love that elevator, too.”

They lay there like that until they eventually fell asleep. And then they found one another again and again and again. All night long.

And though their story started as two separate hearts in the darkness, their forever would be fully in the light. Well, Caden wasn’t so different of a man that he didn’t know the darkness would sometimes return. No one was intended to die with their hearts still intact. But whatever came at them, they’d get through it together.

He pressed a light kiss to Makenna’s forehead, not wanting to wake her. “You and me, ‘til the end. In the darkness and in the light.”

Her eyes opened and her whole face immediately filled with a smile. “Did you say something?”

Caden grinned and shook his head. “Just that I love you.”

~ The End ~

The Hearts in Darkness Duet

HEARTS IN DARKNESS

Two strangers...

Makenna James thinks her day can't get any worse, until she finds herself stranded in a pitch-black elevator with a complete stranger. Distracted by a phone call, the pin-striped accountant catches only a glimpse of a dragon tattoo on his hand before the lights go out.

Four hours...

Caden Grayson is amused when a harried redhead dashes into his elevator fumbling her bags and cell phone. His amusement turns to panic when the power fails. Despite his piercings, tats, and vicious scar, he's terrified of the dark and confined spaces. Now, he's trapped in his own worst nightmare.

One pitch-black elevator...

To fight fear, they must reach out and open up. With no preconceived notions based on looks to hold them back, they discover just how much they have in common. In the warming darkness, attraction grows and sparks fly, but will they feel the same when the lights come back on?

LOVE IN THE LIGHT

Two hearts in the darkness...

Makenna James and Caden Grayson have been inseparable since the day they were trapped in a pitch-black elevator and found acceptance and love in the arms of a stranger. Makenna hopes that night put them on the path to forever—which can't happen until she introduces her tattooed, pierced, and scarred boyfriend to her father and three over-protective brothers.

Must fight for love in the light...

Haunted by a childhood tragedy and the loss of his family, Caden never thought he'd find the love he shares with Makenna. But the deeper he falls, the more he fears the devastation sure to come if he ever lost her, too. When meeting her family doesn't go smoothly, Caden questions whether Makenna deserves someone better, stronger, and just more...normal. Maybe they're just too different—and he's far too damaged—after all...