



Challenging Her Protector

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Category: Romance, Adult, Thriller, Action, Suspense

Description: He vows protection. Anything more is impossible...

SEAL vet Jordan "Iron" Holt is a man torn between heaven and hell. Following the death of a teammate and his medical discharge, Iron has kept himself separate until he's asked to help his friend rescue his girlfriend's sister from a forced marriage. Iron's game, but quickly out of his depth as the sheltered heiress is unlike any woman he's ever met. Naïve, thoughtful and kind, Iron's entranced, but knows his attraction is wrong. Vivienne is young and on the cusp of freedom.

For the first time in her life, Vivienne is free to do what she wants, think what she wants and eat what she wants. For twenty-six years, every detail of her life had been meticulously mapped out and scrutinized by her controlling parents. Freedom is heady, but Iron's soul speaks to her. Her new life is a gift, but she's determined to keep Iron in it.

When Vivienne asks Iron to help find her friend that her family disappeared after she helped Viv escape, danger comes to their doorstep, and they will need each other to survive.

A thrilling blend of romance, action, and heart-stopping suspense—perfect for fans of Susan Stoker and Julie Ann Walker.

Total Pages (Source): 42

Chapter One

Vivienne Day was spoiled. Confused. Selfish.

At least, that's what her parents had drilled into her head for the past month. She didn't want to marry Scott, and once her family's insistence, and his, had turned feral in nature, she was already trapped. A determined bead of sweat worked its way down her back, which was a feat because the bodice of her dress was digging into her sides, making it hard to draw a breath. Between the beaded mermaid gown squeezing the life out of her and the rising panic closing her throat, passing out seemed like a real possibility. She wanted out. So much that she'd reached out to her sister Hannah who lived in Virginia with her nephew Collin.

Hannah had broken away from the family or pushed out, depending on how you looked at it, when she discovered she was pregnant at eighteen. Their parents wanted to sweep that dirty secret under the lid of a grand piano and slam it shut. In other words, they wanted to force her to end the pregnancy. Hannah had other ideas though and wasn't afraid to make her own way to protect her baby. She was brave and strong-willed, so she up and left. Hannah was Vivienne's hero. Strong in ways she could never be. Here she was, though. Giving it her all. This would either set her free, cost her everything, or worse, put someone she loved in harm's way.

"Your hands are ice." Concern darkened Thalia's eyes. Blades of spring grass to unripened olives.

Vivienne swallowed hard and did something she didn't do with anyone else. Told the truth. "I'm scared." It wasn't like she was a pathological liar, but when she spoke no

one cared too much what she had to say unless it was making them money, and so, she'd stopped. Thalia Flores was her best friend, though. It was a secret friendship. One that was limited by Vivienne's family and the absurd societal hierarchy between them. This was modern day, not some episode of *Bridgerton*, and still, she wasn't allowed to hang out with Thalia because she was her personal attendant.

"I know." Understanding flashed over Thalia's face, and she gave Vivienne's hands a quick double squeeze before releasing them. Thalia's hands dropped to her sides, while Vivienne curled hers around her midsection seeking warmth that wasn't there. All her skin connected with were layers of lace appliques and lines of beadwork.

"I didn't get a moment to speak with Hannah while our makeup was getting done. What if she hates me? Or her boyfriend didn't read the note?" Her voice reflected her waning oxygen levels. Breathless.

"Vivienne, stop. You're going to hyperventilate. Let's go over the plan again. I'll make a distraction—"

"No!" She hadn't meant to shout quite so loudly. She never knew when someone was sneaking around waiting to eavesdrop on her conversations. "You've taken too many risks today." First, Thalia had penned the note to Hannah for her. Vivienne's writing was nearly illegible, and getting the words floating in her head down on paper never seemed to click. Then Thalia had fallen to the floor, feigning some illness, giving her time to run past the butler who'd been instructed to guard her bedroom door. Never had she thought she'd be a prisoner on the estate where she grew up, but that was exactly what had happened.

"I love you, Vivienne. I'll take the risks. You are the one thing that eased my heartache when I was brought here."

Before she had a moment to ask what she meant by that, footsteps shuffling over the

floor silenced her words. Her father's large frame filled the doorway. The look on his face, the red of his cheeks, the flair of his nostrils, made her heart bottom out into her stomach. His eyes locked on Thalia, and she instinctively skirted between them.

"I'm ready," she announced, trying to make sense of the hostile energy that hung in the air.

"Thalia. Come here." The corner of his neatly trimmed mustache twitched.

Thalia's warm palm touched her back briefly, then she moved around Vivienne, head lowered and stopped at her father's side. His meaty palm closed around Thalia's upper arm, and she sucked in a breath, stepping forward. Thalia's face jerked quickly to the left, her eyes pleading as if to say don't. Her father quickly turned, yanking Thalia with him over the threshold and into the hallway. Her heart was pounding so hard she could feel the blood rushing beneath her skin. The tempo of her pulse jumping at her neck and wrists. Her father must've found out Thalia had helped her, sealing her friend's fate. What had she done? Vivienne couldn't let her wants override Thalia's safety, and in the clutches of her father, she was anything but safe. Especially if she had angered him in some way. Her feet were moving over the plush heirloom rug when Scott, her fiancé, and Rochelle, the wedding planner from hell, entered the room.

"Stop this." His hair was slicked back and the dark eyes that had once charmed her were cold. "Your mother told me something went on at the house this morning. That Thalia was involved. What did you do?" His voice was demanding. He got his way or people got trampled beneath his designer shoes.

"Where is he taking her?" Her bottom lip was trembling with the effort not to burst into tears.

"Thalia is in the country illegally. She's as good as gone."

His words delivered a sharp blow to her chest. How silly to think she was panicking before. Now her lungs were truly stripped bare. He crossed the room, and the sharp, spicy scent of his cologne assaulted her nostrils. She opened her mouth to demand to know more, but Scott roughly gripped her chin between his thumb and index finger. “Behave like an adult. You think I want to marry you? I don’t. This is about creating an alliance.” His wine-soured breath and an occasional fleck of spit hit her face. A burning sensation pricked behind her lids, not because of his words, though. His grip continued to tighten until she was sure her jawbone would snap. None of the things he said was new information. His proposal a few weeks ago was prefaced by a similar statement.

“You’ve gotten through life because of the way you look, but I know the truth. All beauty. Less than zero brains. You should be on your knees thanking me for agreeing to this union. No more whining or acting like you’re the one getting a raw deal here.” He released her chin, the smooth pads of his fingers leaving a tingling sensation in their wake before his palm made purchase with her upper arm. “After you my dear.” His hand swept out, gesturing to the door that would take them to the party below. She stiffened when they reached the top of the stairs. She could picture Scott roughly shoving her down them. If that mental image didn’t scream doomed marriage, she didn’t know what did. One thing she was certain of though; was this was no longer about her.

Her ability to get out of this situation and away from her family meant she could get help for Thalia. She could try to bargain. Tell Scott and her parents she’d only marry him if they didn’t do anything to harm Thalia. Maybe in a different family that would work, but not in one that would quickly agree to a deal and break it just as easily. Releasing a less than steady breath, she took the first step. The boisterous chatter faded to hushed whispers as she descended the stairs. The thick scent of lilies and wood polish hung in the air. A few women at the table closest were obviously speculating the designer of her dress. Another mumbled their approval with a swift intake of breath.

Her mother, Agatha, crossed toward her and the expression of love and concern sliced right through her. How she wished that expression was genuine. One that she saw often and out of public view. Agatha held out her arms and leaned in to kiss both cheeks, and leaned in to whisper in her ear, "Smile." Her hot breath hissed into Vivienne's eardrum, and she fought the urge to flinch. Instead, she plastered a smile on her face so their guests would assume an endearing sentiment was being shared. "Don't mess this up."

When Scott came down the stairs, he gave a politician's wave and flashed those in attendance a bright smile. Again, he gripped her arm and lead her to one of the tables without so much as a smile or a tender touch. And then she spotted Hannah's glossy red hair, curled into soft waves that flowed over her bare freckled shoulders and onto her heavily beaded dress. Her expression was real, and it was startling. If looks could cause someone to wither and die, Hannah's would've melted Scott to the floor like a coat of wax.

Hannah's anger on her behalf gave her a much-needed boost. Scott raised his glass to the crowd. "Family and friends," he toasted and warmth poured from his voice. His arm slid around her waist, and he tilted his chin to glance at her with an expression of endearment. A chill snaked down her spine. Her fiancé could make people believe anything. He could hurt her, demean her, spread lies, and no one would believe her over him. "Thank you for embracing us with love on this joyous occasion. Please take your seats for the first course."

As if waiting for the invitation to begin serving, the waitstaff suddenly appeared and circled through the room, placing salad plates on the golden chargers already laid out on the table. The course was paired with wine as were the second and third. If she was going to do this, it had to be soon. She noticed Hannah and Collin leaving their seats.

"I'm going to the bathroom," Vivienne told her fiancé. The man gave her a look that

could only be described as disgust.

“Can’t you wait until our guests leave?” He didn’t bother to hide the annoyance. Their table was mostly out of earshot. A sweetheart table so the happy couple could be displayed for all to see.

“Not unless you want me to pee my dress and make a scene.” Thinking of Thalia pushed heat she didn’t know she possessed into her voice.

“Don’t be so childish.”

She picked up her small clutch that contained her phone, charger, and wallet, then stood and crossed the room, sure someone would be following her momentarily. Her heart thundered as she glanced back into the rehearsal dinner room filled with obnoxious laughter, before closing the door lightly behind her. Like she could use the restroom in a dress that weighed a gazillion pounds. Her heels clicking over the marble floor was amplified by her anxiety. Surely, she wasn’t being as loud as she thought. If she hadn’t been practically born wearing stilettos, she’d probably sprain her ankle on the glossed floors. She swallowed down a gulp of fear. Fear that her estranged older sister Hannah hadn’t gotten her message. Fear that she’d be forced into a marriage with someone she’d grown to despise. Fear because for the first time, she was standing up to her oppressive family and making a choice for her future. One of her choosing.

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She bypassed the ladies' room and went straight past the kitchen and out the back door of the club. Even though the sun was low on the horizon, the Texas heat still blanketed the air. She looked around and her breath hitched. She wasn't sure what she had been expecting, but there was no one here. Maybe Hannah hadn't received her SOS, or maybe she planned to meet her at the Lone Star Motel like she had Thalia write in the note. No one would expect to find her at a place like that. If a rescue wasn't coming, she'd have to save herself like Hannah had years ago. She was just about to slip off her heels and run when a vehicle swerved around the corner.

The black SUV stopped, and the back door opened. Broad shoulders and a wide chest filled out the frame. She was momentarily stunned by the man's size, even more so when he stood to full height. Her heel-clad feet were glued to the pavement as the man ran toward her. His gait was choppy, as if he'd had a recent injury. He stopped about five feet from her. "Vivienne, we're here to help. We're the good guys."

Maybe she was stupid to believe him, but the way he paused to give her space and the soft expression on his face made him seem less formidable. She tilted her chin and instantly he was at her side, wrapping his arm securely around her shoulder. Now was not the time to be preoccupied by this stranger's scent, but she found herself breathing him in, unable to get enough of the light, spearmint scent. Unlike her former fiancé's expensive cologne, she had a feeling this man was content with a bar of soap in the shower. He protectively hustled her to the back seat of the car, lifting the train of her ridiculous dress. Refreshing cold air flowed over her skin, as he slid in beside her.

"Get down. Everything will be okay." His voice was low and rough without a single hint of the panic she was feeling. The car accelerated. Staying down like the man

suggested meant she couldn't see where they were going, but she really didn't care so long as it was away from her family. She angled her head to look at him and swallowed hard when she found his quiet gray eyes locked on her. "I'm Iron," he said. "Up there behind the wheel is Silver. We're friends of your sister, and we're gonna get you out of this."

There were so many things she wanted to blurt out ranging from thank you for saving me to you have the most mesmerizing, steady eyes I've ever seen, but the words were clogged in her throat.

"Nice to meet you, Vivienne." The man driving, Silver, said in a tone almost as gruff as the man sitting beside her. Still, his voice did nothing to calm her like Iron's did. She glanced to the left again, holding his intense gaze. Instead of feeling uncomfortable though, she felt grounded. Then the car swerved, Iron gripped her arm to keep her from flying, and Silver swore and slammed on the breaks.

"Jesus Christ." The driver jumped out of the vehicle, slamming the door behind him. She sat up to get a better look at why he'd stopped and gasped, ramming against her own door. "Collin!" Her nephew had nearly gotten hit by their car.

"Vivienne, wait." She ignored Iron's voice and stumbled out of the car.

"Are you okay?" she asked coming up beside Collin. His hands were moving quickly in front of his face as he rocked forward.

"Mom. Mom and Aunt Regina." He pointed toward the woods, voice high with panic. "The cards. I dropped the cards."

"Smart." Her nephew had autism, but even through what must have been an overwhelming event, not to mention whatever was happening in the woods, he'd found help. And she was certain that Hannah would need help if she was in the forest

with Regina. She didn't know what her older sister had planned but there was a sick sensation building in her belly and she wasn't going to ignore it. She took off into the woods, kicking off her heels in the first few steps, as the men shouted behind her. Collin was right about the playing cards. They were littered over the ground like a bread crumb trail.

A twig snapped behind her and she glanced back. Iron was on her heels, but instead of being scared by his presence, she was relieved to have an ally. She stopped briefly where the cards ended and tried to listen to her surroundings over her ragged breath. Then she heard it. Her sister Hannah's shout. She looked in the direction of the cry to where Regina was dragging her sister down an embankment. Iron was calling behind her, but she couldn't wait. She couldn't let Regina hurt her sister, especially after she'd come to her aid. "Regina! Stop," she screamed. Her older sister stiffened, then stood, letting go of Hannah.

"Stay where you are." Regina's voice was shrill, and she raised her hands pointing a gun in her direction. A shot rang out as something solid slammed into her side, knocking the breath out of her. Her cheek smacked against something hard, and pain radiated up her arm. She struggled to get air into her lungs, and when she was able to take a breath, she instantly relaxed. Spearmint. Iron had dived on top of her. She hadn't been shot. Chaos was erupting around them, though, as police officers arrived, shouting demands. Her eyes found Hannah, who was hugging her Navy SEAL boyfriend, Branch.

She struggled against Iron, until she twisted her body beneath him. "Are you okay?" Fear made her voice shake.

His head jerked back, and he raised his brows. "I'm the one who should be asking you, sweetheart."

Sweetheart.

It was silly for her stomach to somersault at the endearment, but suddenly she was all too aware of his hips pressed into hers. The weight of his muscled body. A pang of longing spiked through her body, shocking her. Maybe it was the adrenaline, or because Iron had saved her life without hesitation, but the elemental pull she was currently experiencing was deeper than anything she'd ever experienced. His eyes darkened, pupils expanding, as he met her gaze. "You protected me. You don't even know me. So you first. Are you okay?" she repeated.

"Fuck." He muttered and closed his eyes. No one had ever sworn in front of her before, but that word rolling off his lips seemed more like a prayer or a promise than a dirty word. "I'm okay, but you're not. I jumped on you hard. Cheek's bleeding." One moment passed, then two, until he cleared his throat and gingerly rolled off her. Suddenly she no longer felt warm and safe.

She sat up, tugging at her dress that had been pulled down dangerously low.

Iron made a strange sound in the back of his throat and whipped his shirt over his head. "Don't know how you ran so fast in that dress. Here, put this on. You'll be more comfortable." Iron didn't wait for her reply before he slipped the shirt over her head. She sighed when the soft fabric, warmed by his body, covered her exposed skin. The urge to breathe in the T-shirt to capture his scent again was strong, if not a little weird. Her reactions to Iron were unlike anything she expected but perhaps she should cut herself some slack. It wasn't everyday she was face-to-face with a man who made her mouth go dry.

She'd been pushed toward modeling at a young age and seen all types of well-honed muscles and beautiful faces. It wasn't as though Iron wasn't handsome in the traditional sense, but his body wasn't anything like the pampered and glossed individuals on her photo shoots. His form was rough, hard, and heavily tattooed. Scars and deep gauges ran the length of his torso. She wanted to ask how he'd gotten each one, but now wasn't the time. Who was she kidding, she'd probably never have

a chance to ask because once she got to safety, the man would most likely be long gone. He was helping her because of Hannah. Nothing more.

When he muttered something beneath his breath, she followed his gaze to his leg. It was bent at the knee in an unnatural position that made her stomach roll. “You’re not okay at all. Your leg. I’m going to get one of the officers and—”

The warmth of his palm right above her elbow stopped her from standing “Appreciate the concern, but this injury is old.” He lifted the right leg. Between the gap between his sneaker and ankle, a metal prosthetic was visible. She’d never seen one before, but knew they existed.

She didn’t say anything for one breath, then two. There were so many questions she was interested in asking, but instead she locked them away for the time being. “Do you want help getting up?” She moved over the dirt, getting onto her hands and knees.

She couldn’t pinpoint the expression on his face, but he stared at her for a moment. “Sometimes, too much sweat loosens the grip of the prosthetic. Rarely happens, but it can.” He rolled up the hem of his pants over his knee.

“It’s not broken, is it?” After all he’d done to help her, she’d be devastated if he damaged his prosthetic. She placed her hand on what she supposed was the calf of the device. His gaze dropped to where her palm rested.

“No. Don’t think so.” His voice was so quiet, it was almost lost among the crackle of radios and Regina’s hysterical cries.

She removed her hand, and for some odd reason wished she didn’t have to. “I’m going to check on Hannah.”

Leaves crunched beneath her feet as she stood and turned toward the hill and Hannah. Regina was being led out of the woods by three officers, and seeing her disappearing into the thick forest lifted a perpetual weight off her chest. Her breath caught when she realized Hannah was still laying down. Branch was kneeling at her side across from a paramedic taking her vitals, there was another at her feet. The smears of red marring her dress made static buzz in her ears. She rushed forward and dropped down next to Branch by her sister's head. "Oh my God, Hanni. This is all my fault."

"Absolutely not." Her breathing was shallow, like it hurt Hannah to talk. "You're not blaming yourself."

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“I—” She exchanged a look with Branch and could feel moisture welling up in her eyes. “I’m so sorry.” Twin tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Hannah’s right. You weren’t the one that inflicted Hannah’s pain. You didn’t cause any of this.”

“I asked you for help.” A sob broke from her lips.

“We would’ve been mad if you didn’t.”

How they were being so calm, she had no idea.

“I’m going to take a look at your leg,” the paramedic kneeling at Hannah’s side unwrapped the blood pressure cuff from her arm. “So we can decide how to best support your injuries during transport, but I’m going to need to cut the bottom of the dress.”

“Please do,” Hannah said, and the paramedic by her feet slowly cut along the hem. When the man got to the spot by her knee, her sister gasped, and the paramedic whispered a quick apology. Her knee was triple its usual size and blood was flowing freely down her freckled skin. Vivienne rocked back to get a better look and instantly felt woozy. She didn’t have to be in the medical field to know that something was extremely wrong with Hannah’s knee. Vivienne swayed, head light, stomach churning when two hands gripped her shoulders. Instead of slumping forward, her back was braced with strength. Sure. Steady. Iron. “Got you.” His voice ruffled the top of her head, and even though guilt and anxiety over Hannah’s injury still swarmed her chest, now she didn’t feel so alone.

The paramedic who had taken Hannah's vitals cleared his throat. "Ma'am, I'd like to give you something for the pain. Would that be okay?"

"More than." Hannah tried to offer a smile and flinched.

"Okay." The paramedic offered her sister a reassuring nod. "Do you have any allergies?"

Hannah shook her head. It was so hard to watch the way her body was shaking with pain.

"Any chance you might be pregnant?"

When her sister shook her head again, the paramedic wiped something over her arm. "Because we've yet to place an IV, I'm going to give you an intramuscular dose of morphine sulfate. That means I'll give you a shot that goes right where I just cleaned your arm."

After the paramedic administered the shot, Vivienne watched the pain medication take effect before her eyes. The line that creased her sister's brow lessened. Her expression softened. She still wasn't certain that everything would be okay, but with Iron at her back and a real relationship with her sister a possibility on the horizon, Vivienne was cautiously hopeful.

Chapter Two

Iron stole a glance at the woman seated beside him in the back of Silver's SUV, trying his damndest, and failing, to stay objective. It had been a hell of an evening, but she'd held her own. They'd been questioned at the scene and again at the closest precinct. She was still wearing her dress under his T-shirt which swamped her much smaller frame. He liked seeing it on her, but he did his best to push that thought to the

back of his mind. There was too much of an age difference between them to be thinking that way, not to mention she'd just escaped one relationship. He was going to do his best to help her, not mess up her life even further. There was so much more to the woman than a beautiful face.

After a draining two hours of questioning, she could have been complaining about her predicament or own exhaustion, instead she asked if she could take a taxi to the hospital to see Hannah.

"Hell no," Silver barked as he slowed at a red light. If he could be certain the car wouldn't crash, he'd slap Silver upside the head. He knew his friend was joking, but she didn't. Vee, which he'd taken to calling her in his head, stiffened beside him.

"What he means is a taxi is not necessary. The hospital's our next stop." He shot Silver a scathing look in the rearview mirror.

Vee looked warily at him. "You must be tired. You've both done so much for me today. I don't want to burden you with another task." He didn't like the way she dropped her voice and looked down at her hands.

"Vee." So much for keeping the nickname to himself.

Her head snapped up and she met his gaze with a surprised expression.

"You don't ask us if you can go somewhere." The words came out as a growl, and she flinched back. Okay, so maybe he was an idiot just like Silver. They were both scaring the shit out of her.

"What do I do?" Her guileless eyes, so fucking blue, searched his gaze like he held all the answers.

Christ. She was killing him. “You go.”

She gave a quick nod and looked away.

“Silver, pull over at this Walmart, yeah?” Without a word his friend put on the directional and took a right into the busy parking lot. By a stroke of luck, he found a space near the front of the store.

“I’ll run in.” Silver exchanged a look with him in the rearview mirror. One that conveyed an understanding that Iron would want to stay in the car with her. They were both concerned that Vee’s parents or her asshole fiancé were looking for her. The reception hall was locked down, and he assumed that’s where her parents and fiancé were being questioned.

“Is there anything specific Silver can grab you?” Iron leveled his gaze, studying her profile. She’d raced out of the rehearsal dinner without a single item. That, combined with the stark fear in her eyes when she exited the building told him she’d been desperate to get away.

“No, thank you,” her Southern drawl was polite as she continued to stare out the window. She’d been through a lot, so he wasn’t surprised that she’d yet to realize all she had were the clothes on her back, her tiny purse, and the ridiculously high heels on her feet.

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“The essentials.” He didn’t need to explain himself further.

“Got it.” Silver got out of the car and jogged across the lot to the store. The gentle hum of the air conditioner amplified the silence between them.

“Vee, I’m not the best with words. My employees are constantly telling me I’m going to scare away the customers. That I’m too grumbly and grumpy to work with people. If I upset you when I said you don’t ask us if you can go somewhere, I’m sorry. I’ll try to work on my delivery. I can be abrupt.”

She tore her gaze away from the window, angling her body to take him in. “Please don’t do that. You’re real. It makes me comfortable. I was only thinking how stupid I must sound asking your permission, like a child would. My parents and Scott, they—”

“Are assholes.”

She looked alarmed at first, then dissolved into laughter. “See? That’s what I mean. I like that you don’t pretend. I feel safe with you.”

Her words filled him with satisfaction and then he remembered no one should ever assume they were safe with him. He told his teammate that he’d have his back in the field. That he’d make sure the young man returned home to his bride to be. He’d failed Scooter and he’d failed himself.

Hearing her laugh resonate through the SUV, and now the weight of her soft palm on his elbow, made him long to be the kind of man who could pledge to protect her from

the world and know with absolute certainty he wouldn't fail to keep that promise.

"What is it?" Her voice was filled with concern.

It blew his mind that she was once again showing empathy toward him. Before they'd set out on this journey, he'd scoured her social media accounts to develop a picture of the woman he was going to help. She had millions of followers, campaigns with luxury brands, photoshoots at exotic locations. Everything online pointed to an entitled woman who cared more about the next designer purse than asking a stranger if something was wrong. "I'm not a great bet when it comes to being a protector."

"That's silly. You were there when I stepped out of the reception hall scared to death. And then when I ran into the woods. Instead of being mad that you were following me, I only felt relief. Not to mention you saved my life. That police officer said the bullet would have gone straight through me if you hadn't knocked me out of the way."

"And he should be fired for it. What an asinine thing to say after someone's been shot at."

"I don't think he meant any harm by it." Her full lips tilted upward, and her eyes lit with humor. "Your voice is grumbly, and you don't smile, but on the inside, I bet you're all soft."

And how the hell he was supposed to respond to that was a mystery to him. The car door opened saving him from trying to formulate an answer. Silver got behind the wheel, tossing the large bag onto the passenger seat.

"Do you want to change first or go straight to the hospital?" He still wanted to ask although he was sure he already knew what the answer would be.

“Hospital, please.”

Despite not being close with her sister, Vee was loyal, and her first thought was for her Hannah. The drive was short, but quiet. Iron couldn't help but wonder what she was thinking about. It wasn't easy what she'd done. Stepping away from a life that was familiar to her, standing up to her family, taking a big risk. It was a helpful distraction to think of Vee and not himself when they arrived at the hospital. The scents of bleach and filtered air never failed to take him back to a dark place. There wasn't an empty threadbare seat left in the waiting room, not that he wanted to sit. All these people in one place made him squirm. Someone was yelling into a cell phone over the murmur of patients in distress, still waiting to be seen. Vee was speaking with the receptionist, when a teenager in the waiting room mentioned her in a not-so-quiet whisper.

“That's Vivienne Day!”

“I want her autograph,” another voice chimed.

“Hermès paid her like two million dollars for that YouTube campaign.” The lobby began to buzz with excitement, simultaneously activating all his protective instincts. He crossed the room, moving directly behind her in line. She was asking about her sister, oblivious to the stir she'd caused.

“She's been given a room. One of the nurses will meet you at the door and bring you back,” the receptionist told Vee. Iron had picked up on the vibe in the ER waiting room and stood like a sentry in the space between the overcrowded rows of chairs and the desk. Vee turned, and he caught the scent of her hair. Something fisted in his gut as she bumped into his chest.

“Sorry.” Her voice squeaked. He watched in utter fascination as a deep blush saturated her cheeks. “I didn't hear you come up behind me.”

“We’re going to walk straight to the doors. Don’t stop, okay?”

Her nose scrunched in confusion, but she started to nod. Something behind him had caught her eyes, and he angled his body to follow her gaze to the growing crowd closing in on them.

“Not now,” she said more to herself than him. Her expression changed from confusion to fear when the chime of cell phone pictures being captured became audible.

A surge of protectiveness rose up fast and hard. Fear had no place on Vee’s face. He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, tucking her against his side. “Head down, sweetheart. Silver will take care of the crowd.” They began walking toward the back of the room, his body blocking hers. His eyes were locked on the people who presented a threat, but he didn’t need to look at Vee to feel her panic. Her heart was beating fast. So fast he could feel the pulse of it against his arm. “A few more steps. You’re doing great.”

“Those pictures...if they post them on social media, Scott and my parents will find me.”

“I’m not going to let anything touch you.” The gravity of his own words slammed into his gut, turning his stomach to lead. Fuck. He had no business saying that shit. He’d made that empty promise before and a damn good SEAL was dead because he didn’t follow through.

They reached the back door, and he held the buzzer to be let in. The vibration of the lock being disengaged gave him a sense of relief, but they weren’t out of the woods yet. He was also concerned that those photos would end up public and be used to track her. He ushered her through the door first and closed it tightly behind him.

“You’re going to room 136A,” the nurse said before rushing back to her post at the desk.

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Even though they were away from the crowd, he kept his arm snug around Vee. She was shivering and her face was too pale for his liking. He wanted to reassure her again. Promise nothing or no one would get close enough to touch her, but the words died in his throat leaving behind a painful wedge of guilt and shame. No, there was no way in hell he could make that promise. She'd be better off going with Branch and Silver. Men who were still on the Teams. Ones who were at their peak physically and mentally. And damn if that shit didn't hurt, but he wanted this woman safe at all costs, even if he was too weak to do it. They moved down the maze of halls, a blur of white and gray walls, with the thick scent of hot food mingling with bleach.

"This one," Silver murmured behind them. His friend quickly navigated the crowd in the lobby and joined them just as they approached the patient rooms.

He knocked lightly on the ajar door before entering. Hannah was in the middle of a hospital bed, her top-to-toe freckles and rich red hair a welcome contrast to all the white in the room. He wasn't surprised to see her smiling. Branch was sitting by her head looking more stressed out than Iron had ever seen him. Collin jumped up from the side of the bed. The teen, who towered over his mom and was nearly his height, bounded across the room and nearly knocked him back. Shit, he'd grown to love this kid.

His business sponsored Collin's unified baseball team, but over the past couple of days, he'd gotten to spend time with him while Branch and Hannah were occupied with her fucked-up family. He couldn't ever remember having so much fun, especially using their comm devices around the hotel.

"Jordan Iron Holt," Collin sang, wrapping his arms tighter. "Archer Silver Ross," he

said moving from Iron to embrace Silver. It was endearing to be called by his full name. The kid was like an encyclopedia when it came to people and pizza. “Aunt Vivienne Aurora Day.” He hugged Vee more gently. “You saved Mom.”

“You saved her, honey,” she whispered in his ear. “My brave and bright nephew with his trail of cards.”

“Do you like UNO?” Collin asked, suddenly sidetracked. “I played UNO with Iron and Silver at the hotel. Then I played UNO with Branch when we were waiting for you and Mom at the rehearsal dinner. Your dress is white. White like marshmallows, clouds, onions. Now you’re wearing Iron’s shirt over the dress. It looks good like that.”

Iron couldn’t agree more.

“Hey bud, why don’t you let our visitors in the room. Okay?” Hannah’s voice always softened for her son.

Collin moved back, letting them in, and started pacing the room, quietly scripting a pizza recipe.

“Hanni, I’m so sorry.” Vee broke away from him and crossed the room toward her sister’s bed and sat down in a nearby chair. “I got you all into this mess. Has the doctor come in and checked your knee? Does it hurt?”

“I feel great now that I’ve got that morphine drip and Regina is locked up. And yes, the doctor and orthopedic surgeon came in. They’re going to need to do a bit of work to repair my leg.”

“Like surgery?” Vee’s voice was high and pained.

Going to her side, putting a hand on her shoulder was as natural as breathing to Iron. She cast those huge, gorgeous eyes on him and held his gaze. He shouldn't get used to her seeking him out for comfort. That would be reckless on his part.

The women spoke quietly for a moment, discussing what had happened and why. You couldn't find a crazier scenario in a book. A family forcing an arranged marriage for political and economic gain and then the oldest sister Regina taking the plan to another level by attempting to drown Hannah in a lake and make it look like an accident.

"Vivi, I wanted you to fly back with us, but I might be grounded here for a while. I'd feel so much better if you went with Iron and Silver."

She bit her full bottom lip. "Go where?"

"Back to Virginia Beach. Even if we're only delayed by a few days, I'd feel better if you were far away from Texas. You can stay at our place. Branch will give you the key, and you can come and go as you please. If you're not comfortable staying alone, I know one of our friends would be happy to stay over with you. There's Brynn, Sam, and Addy. They won't make it weird or awkward. More like a sleepover."

"I doubt they'd be happy. They're going to hate me for what happened to you. Not that I'm blaming them. You wouldn't have been in Texas to begin with if it weren't for me."

Branch took Hannah's hand. "We don't feel that way. You are family. We wouldn't have left you behind. Trust me, Hannah has always felt the loss of the family that rejected her. You are the one good memory she has from her childhood. She told me if it weren't for your parents being the way they are, you might've remained close friends. Now, because of you, the woman I love more than anything has a chance to redefine that connection. She'll heal a hell of a lot faster if she knows you're safe,"

Branch stated openly before pinning Iron with a pleading look.

Hannah might feel better if Vee was tucked away, but ultimately that was her choice. After seeing what went down that afternoon, he could only imagine the hell that was Vee's life.

Some people might say she grew up in luxury. He'd say she'd grown up a prisoner. There was no way in hell he was making any decisions for the woman standing next to him. Too many choices had already been taken from her. Maybe he'd only spent the afternoon with her, but he didn't need to know anything else to understand she could hold her own. She had a brave spirit. Ran toward danger instead of away. Had stood strong, voice unwavering as she'd faced Regina.

Instead of looking at his prosthetic with pity or disgust she just looked curious. Without hesitation, she reached out and touched him, not bothered one bit that she was touching a mechanical device rather than the flesh and bone that should be there. Seeing her fingers curved along the metal and fiberglass frame shifted something inside him.

Vee's gaze had drifted back to his. While he might like the way she looked to him for comfort, he'd never be the type of man to tell her what she should or shouldn't do. "Your decision. You want to stay here? I'll extend our hotel room at The Ritz. You want to drive back to Virginia Beach? That's what we'll do."

Her eyes widened in shock, like she had no clue what to do with the information he'd just given her. She contemplated for one moment, then another. "I think it's best if I leave Texas."

Pride swelled in his chest. Yeah, she sure as hell could stand on her own.

Chapter Three

“Vivienne dear, whaton earth are you talking about?”

Vivienne had been basking in Iron’s approval one moment and cast into a haze of fear the next. She didn’t need to turn around to know her mother had somehow bought or pleaded her way into Hannah’s hospital room. Both sound and air had evaporated from the space. She could already smell her mother’s expensive perfume that made her eyes water.

“Texas is where you’ll stay, Vivienne Aurora.” The hospital room door clicked shut.

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Her stomach plummeted at her father's voice. How foolish to feel like she'd escaped their grasp. They were well respected and influential. Their power cast a wide net that she'd always find herself drowning in. She was about to stand and face them when Iron's warm hand gave her a reassuring squeeze.

"What you want holds no weight here." The man she was quickly coming to hero worship turned and faced her parents. What she'd done to deserve a champion like Iron she had no clue, but she wasn't going to let him fight this battle. She was done standing to the side and letting someone live her life for her. When she pushed out of the metal chair, the burning pain on the soles of her feet shocked her, nearly making her topple back onto Hannah's bed. She breathed past the pain. Earlier she'd run through the forest barefoot, but she simply stuffed her feet back in the heels when they got to the roadway and didn't think another thing about it. Maybe she'd gotten some scratches that were now deciding to activate the pain receptors in her brain. She stepped forward next to Iron. Silver closed in on her other side.

"I don't want to stay. I don't want to be a model. I certainly don't want to marry Scott. I despise posting my entire life on Instagram to get more followers. I want to delete every social media page. I just want to be free. I want to know where you took Thalia. My only friend. Scott said she was deported!" Her breath was sawing in and out. At some point during her rant, Iron had grabbed her hand, and she was squeezing it hard. Continuing to anchor herself to this man who'd shown her more concern and encouragement in the past few hours than her parents had as long as she could remember.

"Dear, we did this for you." She hated the fake concern that dripped from Agatha Day's voice. "Instead of focusing on all the things you couldn't do when we

discovered your little problem, we helped you build an empire with the things you could do.”

“I could do something else. Be something besides a model or an influencer.”

“I know you believe that.” Her mother tilted her head and feigned pity.

“You need to get out of my room,” Hannah yelled from her hospital bed.

“Out,” Branch barked. “You heard her. You have exactly five seconds to willingly walk out of here. After that, you’ll need more than an ER.”

“Now, calm down,” her father spoke, sizing up the men surrounding her. “We’ll leave when Vivienne comes with us. Look at all the problems you’ve caused. Your sister in the hospital. Collin frightened to death. Scott nursing a broken heart. The entire community spreading more gossip about the family.”

“You’ll never leave me alone, will you?” Vivienne’s eyes burned, but she refused to let her parents see her tears. She’d always wanted their love, but they were incapable of giving her that. Although they were already rich, her slight notoriety was what they cared about. Not her.

“You can’t read. You can sign your name to an autograph but not much more than that. What is it you think you’ll do?”

Collin was making agitated noises in the back of his throat as he continued to pace. The men around her were vibrating with so much anger and testosterone she was sure they were going to snap at any moment. She squeezed Iron’s hand more tightly. “Can I borrow your phone?”

He didn’t take his eyes from her parents, but without questioning her, fished his

phone out of his pocket and handed it to her. “I’ve seen a lot of messed up shit, but the way you’re speaking to your daughter is unacceptable. The way you tried to get her to marry a man she didn’t want is abhorrent. You’re no mother and father.”

Vivienne drew in a quick breath, completely touched by Iron’s willingness to defend her. She navigated to her largest social media account and typed in her password.

“I’m nothing to you. You’ll leave me alone, but before you go, you’ll tell me where Thalia is, or I will delete every money-generating account I have. You will never earn another cent from me.”

“You wouldn’t,” her mother shrieked. “You’re not going to delete twenty million subscribers. You won’t disgrace this family like Hannah did.”

“What about Regina? Is attempted murder not a disgrace?” She’d never once yelled at her mother, but the pain burning through her now was too much. They’d never cared about her. She’d never be enough. Her dyslexia and learning disability were something they considered a dirty secret to be hidden.

Her words got a reaction. Her father’s eyes hardened. His face and jowls reddened. “She was protecting this family.” He reached out to grab her, but Iron was faster. He gripped her father’s arm and wrenched it back. There was a pop, and then the man who should’ve loved and protected all his daughter instead of using them for personal gain roared in pain.

“What’s going on in here?” A security guard and a police officer stepped in. Oh God, her time was running short. If she didn’t get her father to tell her where Thalia was right now, she never would.

“This man assaulted me.” She’d never seen Donald Day look more murderous. And she’d seen him plenty angry. His nostrils typically flared wide. Splotches would

cover his face and neck. Spit would spray as he screamed. The energy surrounding him now though, was violent.

“Sir, ma’am, I need you to step outside the room. You don’t have permission to be in this wing.” The security guard and the officer were now between her parents and the rest of them, forcing them toward the door.

“I hope you’ve enjoyed being an officer of the law, because this is the last day you’ll serve in Southlake.” Her mother’s eyes were locked on the police officer who continued to urge them out.

“Wait! Tell me where she is.” Her desperate cry rose above the noise, and when her parents looked over their shoulders as they passed through the threshold of the room, all she saw in their gaze was pure hatred. They wouldn’t tell her where Thalia was even if she begged and pleaded. Even if she returned home and agreed to marry Scott and never make a scene again. They’d do it to punish her, and they’d enjoy every moment of her anguish. And with that, she deleted her main account. Years of work disappeared with the touch of a button, and she felt nothing. If she had been stronger and stepped away years ago, if she hadn’t needed Hannah to come to her rescue, her sister wouldn’t be laying in a hospital bed in need of surgery. The whole room must think her so pitiful. She certainly did.

A hush fell over the room and Silver slammed the door behind them, put one of the metal chairs in front of the entrance, and sat there. It would take a lot of force to push past any of the men in the room.

Collin had his hands over his ears, but when Branch called his name, he dropped them to his sides.

“You okay, bud?” Branch asked.

“They’re bad people.” His typical melodic voice was low and angry.

“Yeah, Collin. They are. You don’t have to see them again.”

“And Mom doesn’t either.” It was more of a statement than a question.

“Nope. I’ll personally make sure of that.” Branch held his arms out and Collin ran toward him, burying his bright red hair against his shoulder. Now that the immediate danger had seemed to pass, she was all too aware of her hand tucked into Iron’s. How could she want to be brave, yet hold onto him like a life preserver? That thought had her uncurling her fingers and slipping out of his grasp. She instantly regretted it.

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“You okay? That was a bold statement you just followed through with.” Iron dipped his chin toward his phone still in her hands.

She nodded, wishing she felt something for all the followers she just deleted. There was a time she kidded herself into believing that the people on her social media pages cared about her, something she always seemed to be searching for, but that was silly. They followed her because of the image she projected and nothing more.

“Vivi, you were asking about the maid, weren’t you?” Hannah’s question pulled her from her hollow thoughts. “The one that brought down my dress?”

“Yes.” She wrapped her arms around her waist. “She’s been my personal attendant for years. My closest...no, my only friend. She wrote that note for me to give you. Risked everything to help me. Scott said she’d been deported.”

“I doubt they could’ve acted that fast,” Iron murmured.

“I’ll make some calls.” Silver stretched back in the chair and took his phone out of his pocket. “Does she have a social media profile I can get a picture from?”

“No, none. I don’t even think she has a phone. I have a picture I can send to you though, as soon as we get back to the car. I left my purse with my phone there.”

Silver nodded. “That would be helpful.”

She let out a shaky breath. “Thalia’s twenty-two, two years younger than me.” Thalia was wise to the world in ways she wasn’t, though. “She’s worked for the family for

six years, which meant they hired Thalia when she was only sixteen.”

A few curses were muttered around the room.

“Did you ask her about it?” Hannah tried to shift in bed, and Branch was instantly at her side, repositioning the pillow behind her head. The moment was filled with so much tenderness, a pang of loneliness struck her.

“I love him for you,” she said to her sister, not caring that the room was full. Branch represented all the love and security Hannah deserved and never had growing up. Her sister’s eyes went glassy, and Vivienne continued. “I questioned Father once about why Thalia didn’t go to school with me. He told me to drop it.” She glanced away and swallowed the lump in her throat. “But I pushed too hard.”

“Vivi, what are you saying?” Hannah’s words were whisper soft, but her eyes were narrowed. The men around her stiffened. The air shifted and suddenly became charged.

“It was the only time he put hands on me.” Her mother never allowed her to cancel her modeling engagements, even if she had a one-hundred-three-degree fever and was coughing up a lung, her parents forced her to walk the runway, attend the photo shoot, or film for her subscribers. This had been different. The beating was visible on her skin. The handprints on her arms and around her neck, purple. Her mother was furious Vivienne had to stay home and out of the public eye for two weeks while the bruises faded, and even then, makeup was needed to cover them. Instead of blaming her husband though, she directed her anger at her for baiting him. Thalia made Vivienne swear she’d never mention her age or how she came to be in Texas ever again. Said that her life depended on it. She’d questioned her about that statement many times in the years following, but Thalia refused to tell her anything else.

She hated the silence that followed her statement. Hated that when she snuck a glance

at Iron his muscles were bunched so tight he looked like he might snap. His jaw ticked. “We need to get her out of here.” His voice was raw and angry. She was twenty-four years old. An adult and every person in this room was probably wondering why she just didn’t get up and leave. She clenched her teeth and breathed through her nose, trying to hold back the tears. She asked herself the exact same thing time and time again. It was hard to accept the reason, but it was there staring her in the face every time she looked in the mirror. She was weak. Iron moved to the door, pushed the chair out of the way, and looked out.

“Hallway’s clear.” He shut the door again and moved to her side. “Collin’s welcome to come with us,” Iron was saying to Branch, but she was barely listening. It wasn’t that she didn’t care about what was going on around her, but her feet were throbbing, and she was concentrating her efforts on not breaking down until she was alone.

“Thanks, man. We talked about it. He wants to stay with us.” Branch ran his hand over Hannah’s tousled hair.

Iron nodded and they said their goodbyes. As they were walking out the door, Hannah called to her.

“Vivi, I’m so proud of you. This is the start of the life you choose. You can do anything you want. Be whoever you want. We’ll be right here cheering you on.” It was like her sister had read her self-deprecating thoughts. For some reason, standing tall, not shattering in front of all of them was ten times harder when she was offered kind words over negativity. She’d taken the first step, so why did she now feel more afraid than ever?

Chapter Four

Iron muttered a curse under his breath. They were exiting the hospital, and up until now he’d been walking with Vee tucked into his side. He’d made note of her body

language when they left Hannah's hospital room and hesitated to wrap his arm around her. Now he was glad he hadn't because when she lifted her dress to walk down a step, he noticed the blood staining the satin material of her crisp white heels. Why the hell didn't he think to ask about her feet after she'd run through the woods barefoot? Her long dress had done a good job of masking her injuries. Maybe shock had hidden her pain, or she was used to physical discomfort, but her ginger movements spoke of a different story now.

"Vivienne, stop." Her pain-filled expression gutted him. Fuck, he was an idiot, but because he couldn't go back three hours and tend to her feet like he should have from the beginning, he slipped one arm around her waist. "Can tell you're hurting. I'm going to pick you up."

"You don't—"

His other arm went around the back of her legs, halting her protest and he scooped her up. She was tiny, but still, being able to hold her and walk on his prosthetic made him feel like the warrior he'd once been.

With her in his arms, her shoes were now completely visible.

"Shit," Silver said, mirroring his thoughts exactly. "I'll run ahead and bring the car around front."

Iron nodded. They needed to get her out of here and fast so he could look at her wounds. Damn, he wished she'd said something earlier. It struck him that this instant summed up what he'd learned of her life so far. She'd endured emotional and physical abuse and who knew what other unspoken hardships, but she didn't fight back. He didn't think her weak, but she had an innocence to her. Her submissive and insecure nature fired up all of his protective instincts and made him want to protect her from those who would use her gentle heart against her.

Part of him wanted to take her back up to Hannah's room and demand she be seen by a nurse. The other part was all too aware that her parents had great pull in the state and were probably doing their damndest to get back into Hannah's hospital wing. Both he and Silver had medical training from the Teams and could treat her wounds once they found a place to crash for the night. By the time he'd made it to the front of the hospital with Vee, Silver was out front waiting. The man was fast and competent. Someone he would've been pleased to have on his SEAL team when he was active duty. Silver spotted them, exited the driver's seat and jogged around the car. He opened the door and helped her get settled in the back seat.

"Thank you for everything today." Even hurting, she'd been gracious to all of them.

Silver smiled. "Our pleasure, darlin'. Whatever you need."

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Something ugly bubbled in his chest. He had no claim to this woman, yet hearing the endearment roll off Silver's tongue filled his gut with acid. She could and would find a man worthy of her when she recovered from her ordeal, and that man wasn't going to be him. He'd better face the facts now and keep objective when it came to the woman looking up at him with so much trust, he felt as though he could slay all her demons. When his friend rounded the car, he dropped his voice.

"You shouldn't thank me. Out of everyone, I should've noticed that you were hurting or at least concluded that running through the woods barefoot would've torn your feet to hell. I'm going to take care of you."

She surprised him by reaching out and tentatively touching his forearm. "Who gets to take care of you?" The sincerity in her voice had him automatically shoring up his defenses. "You're clearly in amazing shape." Her eyes drifted down his body and in the spotlights of the hospital valet, he watched in fascination as a pink blush raced up her cheeks. "But if you said your leg wasn't bothering you after running through the woods and carrying me, I'd say you were lying."

She wasn't wrong. His stump was irritated from the prosthetic despite the thick covering separating the remnants of his leg from the socket. When he'd fallen, and the prosthetic had separated from his body, he knew he'd be hurting later. That reminded him of how hard he'd landed on Vee's slight frame. A bruise was already marring her cheek from the ground's hard surface, and he was sure her hip was black and blue from when he'd landed on her. His cock twitched when he thought about the moment she'd shifted beneath him. They'd locked eyes and he'd been stripped of oxygen. The way her hips molded to his, her pupils suddenly dilating like they were laying on a soft mattress instead of mid-crisis on the forest floor.

The attraction he felt combined with the ridiculous train of thought had him speaking before thinking. “Got no reason to lie, so yeah it hurts, but what’s more is the last person who trusted me to have their back is dead. So, save your thanks for someone who deserves it.”

He closed the door shut, cursing himself for being an asshole to a woman who’d been through way too much. He sucked in a breath and went around to the other side of the SUV. When he got in and buckled his seat belt, he did so without looking at her, not wanting to witness her hurt or confusion because he was a self-loathing prick who couldn’t keep his mouth shut. Several minutes passed. The sky was dark and the highway traffic thick when her hand hit his bicep. He stilled.

“Thank you,” she murmured. The words that were meant for him and him alone tore through him like a bullet. His chest burned with her trust and the implication that she thought he deserved those words. How her fiancé hadn’t grabbed on to all her sweetness and held tight he’d never know.

Silver cleared his throat breaking up the silence in the car. “I think we should take a different route than the one we took to get here.” His statement saved Iron from formulating some kind of answer worthy of her words.

“Traffic was heavy along the coast.” He wasn’t sure if Vee’s family would have her followed, but they might expect them to take the easier, more scenic route. “We could drive through Arkansas and Tennessee.”

“Read my mind.” Silver flipped on his directional to exit the highway. “Any objections to stopping here for the night?”

“As long as there’s food nearby or room service, this is as good as any. I want to look at Vee’s feet. That okay with you?” He turned to Vee, wanting to make sure she felt like part of the decision to stop and not her own.

She gave him a dazed look. “Yes, please.” He had a feeling she’d say whatever she thought they wanted, and it didn’t sit well, but he didn’t press the issue. They’d made it an hour outside Southlake and that was more than enough travel time. Each minute that passed without checking Vee’s wounds and giving her something for the pain made his stomach knot. It wasn’t long before they pulled up to a mid-range hotel and when Silver pulled into a spot near the main entrance and put the vehicle in Park, he already had his door open. The need to get Vee settled, to take care of her injuries was almost overwhelming. Despite the phantom ache in his right leg, he moved as fast as he could into the hotel and right to the front desk. The lobby was empty and quiet. They had one room left with double beds and he swiped his card, then paced back outside. Silver had already helped Vee out of the back seat and was carrying her with ease.

He pushed down the acidic sensation in his chest. How she’d gotten under his skin so quickly was a mystery. Only a few hours with her and he was tense at the sight of another man touching her. Yet, the idea he was even thinking of Vee in any way at all was laughable and not only because of the trauma she’d just experienced. His reaction to the woman now in Silver’s arms was a shock to his system. Quite some time had passed since he’d felt this level of interest in a woman. Actually, he could pinpoint the exact moment he lost interest in a lot of things. His friend Scooter’s death. He’d formed an instant bond with the younger SEAL. The kid was like a second little brother, and he’d promised himself he’d look out for him in the field. Now, Scooter’s blood would forever stain his hands.

“I’ll run out and get us something to eat unless you need help.” Silver was glancing down on his phone with an eager expression. On the drive to Texas, his friend had pulled over more than once to take a call or send back a text message. By the dopey look on his face, Iron was guessing the text was from a woman. He was happy for his friend even as the pang of envy resonated in his chest.

“No. I’m good.”

Silver slapped his shoulder and headed out the door lifting the phone to his ear before he'd even shut it behind him.

Iron turned to where Vee was slumped on the bed with her eyes closed. He moved past the folded-up luggage stand where he'd left the first aid kit and into the small bathroom. Laying out a clean towel over the vanity, he arranged his supplies before waking Vee.

"Hey," he whispered gently, and her eyes popped open. She looked around, disoriented, but calmed when her eyes came back to rest on his. "Let's get you cleaned up before Silver gets back with dinner. You've got to be exhausted."

"I'm sorry I fell asleep." Her big blue eyes blinked sleepily, and her lips were parted, giving her an ethereal appearance.

"Don't apologize. I can't believe you've been awake as long as you have. Can I carry you?"

"Thanks, but I think I can do it on my own."

Her words were a blow to his ego whether she knew it or not. It was hard to watch her limp into the bathroom.

"I'm going to give you a local anesthetic for the pain, but I don't want to take your shoes off until we're ready to start cleaning the debris. Your feet are going to swell, so getting those heels back on isn't going to be possible. I've got some thick socks you can wear in the car tomorrow. Do you think you can sit on the side of the tub in that dress?"

There was no way he could do what needed to be done with the hem of her dress tugged tight against her body.

She winced at the thought. “Not a chance.” She turned her back toward him and lifted off the shirt he’d given her to wear. The back of the dress was closed with tiny lace buttons. “Would you help me get it off? I’m sorry I feel so useless.”

“Don’t say that.” The air in the room had thinned significantly as she took her hair and dropped it over one shoulder, revealing her bare back. He made the mistake of glancing in the large mirror above the sink as he reached for the first button. Their eyes connected in the glass as he fumbled open the first button, then the second. He shouldn’t be staring at this woman as he unbuttoned her gown, but he couldn’t tear his gaze away, and apparently, neither could she.

“I wish I could say I was able to get it on by myself at least, but Thalia...” Her words trailed off in a shaky breath.

“Tell me about her.” Anything to take his mind off the way her soft skin felt against the back of his fingers as he worked open the buttons.

“You’d never know she had a mischievous side.” A light smile played over her lips as she gazed at him in the mirror. “I started calling her Robin Hood when we were younger, because she’d always try to sneak me a chocolate from the guest room or a dinner roll from the kitchen and leave it under my pillow. She knew I was on a strict diet and took pity on me. My mother never liked me to talk to the staff they hired, but Thalia and I were around the same age. We’d exchange short notes, which added some excitement to my very lonely days. The friendship grew until she became the person I loved most in the world. She never tried to use me. Only wanted my company.”

He frowned as one of the buttons popped off in his hand. He hadn’t realized how tightly he was gripping her dress. It was the comment about Thalia sneaking her candy or bread that made the rage swell. “Shit.”

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“Don’t. I want this thing off. I don’t care if you have to tear it into pieces.” The mental image of doing just that made his hands tremble as he reached for the next button. He’d never hurt or take advantage of her, but he was still a man, and his body was reacting to something purely physical. He glanced away from the mirror and to her bare back. He was finding it difficult to draw a breath with her sweet scent in his nose and the close proximity. He was nearly at the base of her spine when the buttons ended. Her bones were too pronounced to be healthy, like a fragile bird, and for the first time in a very long time, he wanted to take care of someone other than himself.

“I’m going to step out and give you privacy to change. Silver got some loose shorts in the store that you can pull over the heels, then I’ll help you take them off.”

“Thank you for helping me.”

He quickly exited the bathroom, got the Walmart bag of toiletries and clothes, and slipped them into the bathroom before closing the door.

“I’m all set,” she called out after a moment.

He opened the door slowly to find her sitting on the side of the bath with her back against the wall. She chose to put back on his shirt instead of picking a new one from the bag. He wasn’t sure what her reason was, but the idea that she felt comforted by him in some way was appealing.

“I’m going to apologize in advance. I’m going to be as gentle as I can.” He turned on the faucet and sat opposite her on the side of the tub. He lifted her ankle and placed her whole foot, shoe and all, under the running water. If the blood had dried up,

taking the shoe off would be extremely painful. At least wet, he could ease her foot out and wash away some of the debris. “Hang on, sweetheart,” he said after a moment. He wiggled the heel, but it was stuck on tight.

“It’s okay,” she said softly. “I know it’s not going to come off easily.”

“Tell me more about Thalia.” When he’d first asked about her, he’d been trying to take his mind off his attraction. Now he was trying to take her mind off the pain. “When did you last see her?”

“She helped me get ready for the rehearsal, but before that, she’d made a scene so I could get out of my room and sneak a note to Hannah. I think my parents realized she’d helped me in some way, because just before I was supposed to enter the ballroom of the country club, my father demanded she go with him. Scott said she was going to get deported, but I don’t see how that could be possible. Surely, they’ll see that she’s been living in the country for years.”

With her foot still under the running water, he gave the heel of the shoe a sharp tug, removing it. Vivienne winced but she quickly schooled her expression. He did his best to mask his reaction, but her skin was torn to shreds, and already the tissue was swelling up even more.

“What do you know about the country she came from?” he asked turning off the tap.

“She said her family was from Mexico. That they wanted her to come here for a better life. She didn’t like to talk about them because it made her sad.”

“Do you know where she went after her shifts?”

“Until she was eighteen, she stayed in the house. Then she said she was able to buy a small place with the money she’d saved.”

He doubted that was true, but he kept it to himself. Everything about Thalia's situations screamed labor trafficking, from the age she first began working, to her lack of education. From what Vee had told him, it seemed like Thalia was trying to protect her from the reality of her situation. He had a friend, Red, who had been working to assist Mexico's military by offering training from a new special operations headquarters in California. He'd even been in the country to help take out big players in the rampant drug war. After he was done tending to Vee, he'd call him up and see what he could learn.

"How long does the deportation process take? Is there any way to stop it?" A shiver shook her slight shoulders.

"The system is backlogged. It could take anywhere from a few weeks to years if it's done legally. Silver's made some calls."

He placed her foot on a fresh towel between his legs where he was straddling the bathtub. He had one foot planted in the tub right along with hers and his prosthetic on the other side. "I'm going to put some topical medicine on your foot to numb it. Then I can work on cleaning out the wounds."

"Thank you."

He squeezed some lidocaine out of the tube and carefully swept it over the jagged soles of her feet. She flinched slightly but let him work.

"I feel like there's something you're not telling me."

She was perceptive. Whatever learning impairment her parents had suggested at was bullshit. She was smart and had proven brave and resourceful. He knew many kids, like Collin or his old teammate Ransom's brother who also had disabilities, but that didn't mean they weren't intelligent in their own ways or less than anyone else.

How many people had shielded Vee from the outside world so she could focus on doing things that made them money and strengthened their social standing? “There is but right now those things are just theories. Will you give me a couple days to get more information?”

She studied him, then nodded. “I trust you.”

There it was again. That slow burn through his chest, a mix of satisfaction and self-reproach. After he’d cleaned her cuts, he put ointment on her foot and wrapped it in gauze before repeating the process on the other side, which was just as raw and chewed up as the other, if not more so. When he was done, the bathtub was stained with blood. It took some maneuvering to stand, and when he lifted Vee, the limp in his gait was a reminder that he would never be anyone’s hero. He wouldn’t allow it.

Outside the door, there were four knocks in a distinct rhythm, letting him know that Silver was back. He’d just placed Vee on one of the beds when there was the sound of a key card being scanned and the hotel lock disengaging.

The door swung open, and Silver stepped inside with a large take-out bag in his hands. The scent of fried onion rings and grilled burgers drifted into the room, and his stomach grumbled. Silver immediately turned to lock the dead bolt, along with the chain lock. “Sorry, that took so long. The drive-thru must be the only gig in town. It was mobbed even though it’s past midnight.” Silver’s gaze went to Vee’s wrapped feet dangling over the bed. “How are you feeling, darlin’?”

“Much better now since Iron put medicine on my feet.” She offered him a smile, then looked longingly at the brown paper bag he carried.

“We’ll have to keep a close eye on them. Watch for infection.” Silver’s gaze shifted to his and Iron dipped his chin, acknowledging his friend’s warning. Feet were often hard to heal. With the amount of time she’d spent with dirt caked into her cuts in the

swampy Texas heat they could easily become infected. He'd spent time making sure the wounds were thoroughly clean, though, and Vee was young and healthy, aside from needing to add some weight to her slight frame. As if reading his mind, her stomach grumbled loudly, and her cheeks reddened. "Sorry. I guess I'm really hungry."

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“Well, let’s fix that right now.” He took everything out of the bag: cheeseburgers, chicken nuggets, fries, three shakes and several different types of sauce. “You go first; don’t be shy. Take what you want.”

Vee hesitantly reached out for one of the boxes of nuggets.

“Take some fries with that.” The box warmed his hand as he transferred it to Vee.

“One of these shakes has your name on it too.” Silver placed a to-go cup and a bottled water on the nightstand beside her. She was still eyeing the food in her lap like she didn’t know what to do with it. Her expression was like a kid who’d just been told they were spending a month at Disney World.

“I’ve never tried these before,” Vee murmured.

Silver glanced over his shoulder, brow raised. “Never tried what?”

“Any of this. Fries, chicken nuggets, definitely not a shake. I don’t know where to start.”

He crossed the small space to sit on the bed beside her and went to work opening three different flavors of sauce. “Honey mustard, barbecue, and sweet-and-sour. I like honey mustard, but you might find you like one of the others better.”

The grin that played across her lips illuminated her entire face, knocking the wind out of him. Fucking beautiful. He’d give her anything to have that expression aimed in his direction again. The sound of pleasure she made when she bit into a fry made his

groin tighten. After that, they didn't hear another sound from her until she laid back on the bed with her hands on her stomach. "That was by far the best thing I have ever eaten. Do we get to go back for breakfast?"

He choked back his laugh. "I think we can find something better, but if that's what you want, that's what you'll get."

"Can I save these? They were so good, but I couldn't finish them. It seems like such a shame to throw them out." She was eyeing the box like she might change her mind about being done, then extended the food toward him.

"Yeah. I can put them in the refrigerator." He took the container from her and frowned. She'd only eaten about three of the nuggets, half of the fries and a few sips from her shake, yet her hands were resting on her belly, and she looked uncomfortable.

"Thank you so much, Silver. That was life changing."

"You're an easy-to-please date." Silver smiled over at her. She dropped back down on the pillow and was out in seconds.

"I guess me and you are sharing a bed tonight."

Iron chuckled. "I like to be the little spoon."

Silver gave him a light punch as he passed. "How's your leg doing? I noticed the limp."

"Fine," he answered a little too quickly. As he did his best to get to the bathroom, he couldn't ignore the sharp pains in his stump. After he'd brushed his teeth, he went back to the side of the bed and removed the prosthetic. He didn't care that Silver was

laying on the other side of the bed. The SEAL had seen plenty of others with prosthetics, arms and legs, who are still able to be part of the Navy. He rubbed ointment on his raw chafed skin and noticed a bruise forming above where his knee once was. He'd be sore for a few days, but he would've endured any type of pain to get Vee out of that situation.

The simple fact that she enjoyed her mediocre fast food so much and was able to eat so little told him without a doubt her family had restricted her diet drastically in the pursuit of some fucked-up ideal. Her food intake wasn't the only thing they restricted. They'd isolated her from the outside world. At least it seemed that way if Thalia had been her only friend. Never again, at least not while he was breathing. He would delight in giving her as many moments and experiences as he could just to watch the pure pleasure on her face. What other things was she unable to try growing up? Funnel cakes at a fair? Skinny-dipping in a lake on a summer night? A bonfire on the beach? When they made it back to Virginia, if she wanted his friendship, he would willingly give it.

For the first time in a very long time, he was excited by what the future held. Yeah, he'd been encouraged when he started his business, Iron Auto Collision Center. Had been proud to sponsor the unified baseball team in town, but excitement was different than happiness. No, those weren't things that he'd felt for quite some time. The thought should've made him nervous because those feelings were directly tied to Vee. The childlike wonder she possessed with an unexpected soul of steel was a lethal combination. He fully understood that once she got on her feet and took control of her own life, those feelings would leave with her, but for now he was going to selfishly snatch up the opportunities while he could. He rubbed ointment over the tight skin of his leg before putting another protective covering over his chafed skin. Then he lay on his back and turned out the bedside lamp.

Light was starting to filter into the room through a gap between the heavy drapes. He'd been awake for the past two hours. He couldn't sleep well on typical nights, but

with Vee across the room, it had been nearly impossible to shut his mind off. There were so many questions he wanted to ask her ranging from some of the things her parents had said to everyday likes and dislikes. He shouldn't want to know about her on a personal level. Wanting to learn about her had nothing to do with the protectiveness he was feeling, and everything to do with keeping her safe. At least that was the story he was sticking with.

Silver had gotten up and left the room ten minutes earlier grumbling about the coffee sucking. Across the room, Vee was beginning to stir. Her hair was tousled around her face, and she was breathing with her mouth slightly open, but every so often she'd stretch before immediately snuggling in with the pillow. He could've been staring at her for minutes or hours, but then as if sensing him, she blinked her eyes and focused on him.

A slow smile spread over her lips and his chest tingled. "Hi," she whispered. The sweetness of her voice hung in the small gap between the queen-sized beds.

With only the two of them in the room the moment seemed more intimate than it probably was. Christ, a simple greeting was all it took for the image of them tangled in bed together to jump into his mind. Shaking off the inappropriate thought, he propped himself up on one elbow. "Hey."

She drew in a breath, eyes gleaming. "I'm going to eat my food from last night." She smiled huge and sat up in bed, throwing the comforter to the side. When her feet hit the floor, she winced visibly, but it didn't stop her from gingerly tiptoeing to the refrigerator and retrieving her leftovers. She started carrying it back to the couch. "Want to heat those up?" She tore her gaze from the box, shifting it to Iron like he held all the answers. Maybe in this case he could help. "There's a microwave."

"Will you show me how to use it? I've never cooked anything before."

He didn't have the heart to tell her using the microwave was a far cry from cooking but to each their own. "Yeah. Give me a sec." He grabbed the silicone liner off the nightstand and rolled it over his limb. It took him longer than he would've liked to get the prosthetic secured and when he looked up, Vee was staring.

"Does it hurt today?" Once again, her expression didn't reveal an ounce of pity. Simply curiosity and perhaps a bit of guilt if the way she was biting her lip was any indication.

"No," he lied. "But even if it did, it's insignificant compared to keeping you safe."

"Keeping me safe?" She let out a shaky breath and stared at him with disbelief. "Iron, you saved my life." He could feel himself closing off. Gratitude was goddamn painful, bringing him back to a time and place when reality slammed home that he'd failed so fucking badly he'd never claw his way out of the darkness he'd created. "And now you're going to teach me how to use a microwave? Someone should cue up Mariah right now."

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He had no clue what she was talking about, but shit, she was cute. “Okay.” He stood and took a few steps across the room toward the microwave, and she came to stand at his side. “Usually when you heat up something small like that, thirty to forty-five seconds will do it.” She didn’t move to open the appliance. It was like she’d never seen one before, and maybe she hadn’t. “Did you have one of these at your house?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t allowed in that part of the house. The show kitchen, yes, but it didn’t have one of these and the space wasn’t for actual cooking. More a spot for guests to mingle. Then there was the kitchen the chef used, but I never stepped foot in there.”

The fact that her family had an unusable kitchen just for appearances shouldn’t surprise him. If only people who had so much could see how most of the human population lived, there might be more generosity and appreciation in the world. “So, if you wanted a late-night snack?”

She shook her head slowly. “I didn’t have one on the schedule. My last meal was at six.”

“Vee.” She was killing him. He drew in a long breath. “Got good news. You now live in a world where you can have a late-night snack. You can have anything you want, when you want it. The only person who knows when you’re hungry is you.”

She blinked quickly and looked away. Her home had been a prison, plain and simple. “First, you open the microwave door and put your food in the center.” Her movements were hesitant, like anyone doing a task for the first time. “That’s right. Hit these buttons here, three, zero for thirty seconds. Then start.” The microwave

plate began to rotate, and Vee glanced up at him. Her sunny expression, the pride filling her eyes caught him off guard, as did the feel of her arms wrapping around his waist. Before he could stop his forward motion, he returned the hug, wrapping his arms around her back. Natural as breathing. Her sweet scent was tinged with a hint of sweat and pine.

He'd been so preoccupied with her injuries, he hadn't thought to offer her a shower or bath. She didn't let go and he didn't either. For the thirty seconds her nuggets and fries were warming up they stood there, soaking up the comfort from one another. He told himself she needed it after her ordeal, but he wasn't ready to process how good the physical contact felt for him too. It had been a long time since he'd accepted a hug. Touch of any kind. He'd isolated himself, creating distance between his surviving teammates and friends. Men like Silver's partner, Ransom, who had once been as close to him as a brother.

His visits with his parents were sporadic despite their constant invites to Sunday dinner. Maybe he did it to avoid the questions of how he was doing. If he was okay. He knew his withdrawal had hurt his family, but he couldn't bring himself to truly live after coming back from that mission. His moment of hesitation. The explosion. Scooter's final scream. So much fucking blood. So much waste. Six of them were on that mission, and six of them should've come home breathing. Scooter's sacrifice had given the others the chance to extract the hostages they'd come for, but they could've found another way that didn't involve his death. The microwave beeped, jolting him.

Vee leaned back slightly and looked up. "I like how your hugs make me feel."

Even though her words were purely platonic, a jolt of unwanted lust quivered in his gut. What scared him the most though was the desire to take care of her. To witness her discovering herself and the things that brought her joy. He shouldn't ask, but the words rumbled out anyways. "And how is that?"

“Warm and steady, but not like when I hug Thalia. Like my insides are humming. I think it feels like hope.”

Her words burned into him. The heart he’d fought to harden to stone heated, warming the blood pumping through his veins. All he could do was stare at her for one breath, then two, rendered speechless by her honesty. Then the hotel room door opened, and he lost the chance to respond. For the better. She was feeling indebted to him, that was all. Once the shock of her escape wore off, she’d stop seeing him as the man who’d help rescue her and move on with her life.

Silver shot him a questioning look. “Everything good?”

“Yes.” Vee popped open the microwave door. “Iron taught me to cook.” Oblivious to the way she’d just shaken the ground beneath him, she carried her food to the corner couch, tucked her legs beneath her, and began to take small, quick bites.

“I spoke with Branch and Collin on my coffee run.” Silver placed the drink tray on the small table by the window. “Hannah is doing well. Just wants to get the hell out of Texas. Can’t blame her. She’s scheduled for surgery tomorrow morning, but she’s healthy and fit so they don’t expect her to be there long after.”

He glanced over at Vee to gauge her reaction. The crestfallen expression on her face made him want to wrap her up in another hug. “This isn’t your fault, remember that. Regina is responsible. Tried to kill you both.”

“And we know Hannah. A leg surgery isn’t going to set her back for long,” Silver said carrying a whipped-cream-topped espresso drink of some kind over to the couch where Vee was sitting. “Wasn’t sure if you drank coffee. Thought you could use a little extra sweet this morning.”

Her eyes softened. “Thank you.” She placed the container she’d been holding on her

lap and took the drink with both hands. “That was nice of you.”

His body tensed at the look of surprise on Vee’s face. Had him fantasizing violence toward the people who left her feeling moved over being handed a coffee. “I’m going to grab a shower.”

“May I too?”

Silver made a choking sound. At least the bastard was trying to suppress his laughter. If he embarrassed Vee, he’d be pissed. It was obvious she meant she wanted to shower after him, not with him, but that didn’t stop the twinge in his groin.

“Course. I won’t be long.” He shut the bathroom door behind him, prepared to take the coldest shower of his life.

Later, when the car was packed with their minimal supplies, Vee still hadn’t come out of the bathroom. The sound of the shower had long since dissipated, though, and he was starting to get a twinge in his gut. Maybe she was having second thoughts about leaving her family or felt sick. He wanted to respect her privacy, but she’d also been in there a long time.

Silver was sitting on the edge of the bed waiting when his phone rang. “It’s Ransom. I’m gonna take this outside. Check on her, yeah?”

“Vee?” He lightly wrapped on the bathroom door. “Everything okay?”

“I can’t go anywhere right now.” Her voice sounded small. Almost ashamed, and that didn’t sit well with him.

“Are you sick?” She’d eaten food she wasn’t used to having last night, and again this morning.

“No, I just...” Her voice wavered.

“Talk to me, sweetheart.” He braced his hand on the door frame.

“I don’t look like I usually do.”

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“Open up.” It took a few seconds, but the lock clicked, and the door eased open a crack. The scent of whatever shampoo Silver had picked up in Walmart clung to the steam still lingering from her shower. Her back was to him, and he had to force his eyes away from the leggings that clung to her. She was too damn thin. If the way she’d dug into her chicken nuggets last night was any indication, her mother and the chef had half-starved her. When she was only able to finish a few before filling up, anger had welled up in his gut. Now, he was certain she was having some kind of hangup from her fucked-up family. They’d only loved her for what she brought them—more money, which they had plenty of, and her fame.

Growing up, his parents had pushed him. They’d been strict at times, but he never once questioned the fidelity of their love for him. Love that didn’t waver if he struck out at the plate. Love he didn’t question even when he messed up big time, like crashing his dad’s vintage T-bird after taking it on the road without permission to impress some girl. Didn’t remember her name, but the call he’d made from the police station was as clear as yesterday.

“I don’t know why I thought I could do this.” A small, self-deprecating laugh bubbled from her throat. “I can’t even seem to make myself leave the bathroom because I don’t have a full face of makeup. I know some women don’t wear it. Deep down I know it’s perfectly okay to walk down the street with your hair still damp from a shower and not blown out and styled. So why can’t I accept that it’s okay for me too?” She sniffled and before he thought better of it, he crossed the room and placed his hands on her shoulders. Her muscles instantly relaxed under his touch, and fuck, if that didn’t feel good.

“Because you’ve had it hammered home that your value is tied to your appearance.

That your success and the way others perceive you rests on your shoulders alone. That others will accept you only if you look a certain way or live up to some ridiculous standard that isn't worth shit. That's not healthy. You should demand respect whether you're decked out in an expensive dress or wearing a paper bag. If someone doesn't like you because of it, you drop them out of your life. Those people are superficial and fake. They're not worth building relationships with because when shit gets tough, they're going to bail. You're so much more than how you look, Vee." He gently encouraged her to turn toward him.

His breath caught and his fingers tingled with desire to reach out and trace her soft skin. The lack of makeup only sweetened her. Glowing skin, rosy cheeks, big, gorgeous eyes that he could stare at for hours. Then there was the dusting of freckles across the bridge of her nose. Freckles that hadn't been visible beneath layers of powder or whatever it was she used.

"You're beautiful, Vee, just like this, but it's not your appearance that makes me want to get to know you better."

"You want to get to know me?" She jerked her head back and scrunched up her face, like it was inconceivable that he had any level of interest in her. He hated that for her. Vee's family had piled so much insecurity on her that she questioned everything from her worth to daily decisions she encountered.

He had to tread carefully here. The last thing he wanted to do was lead her to believe his interest was sexual.

"I do. I want to know the woman who had the strength to walk away from a marriage she didn't want. Who stood tall and demanded to know what happened to her friend. Whose first thought was for someone else after she'd been shot at. Who found so much pleasure in a simple drive-through meal. The woman who's going to square her shoulders and hold her head high going into the world just as she is when she wakes

up in the morning. That's the Vee I want to get to know. I like and respect that woman. I want her friendship. I want to watch her bloom as she recognizes that she needs no one's approval but her own. Who recognizes her worth and doesn't feel the need to do a goddamn thing to earn anyone's loyalty."

"Iron, that's not who I am." Color washed her cheeks.

"It is and it'll be my pleasure to help you discover that person. She's already part of you."

She flung her arms around his waist, shocking him for the second time that day. "What you described?" Her breath tickled his chest through the thin fabric of his shirt. A shiver of pleasure rippled over him. "All those beautiful things? I want to be that person."

"You already are. You just have to embrace it." He stepped back, giving her shoulders what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze, before dropping his hands to his sides. He wasn't immune to her sweetness. Her total innocence was like breathing in the earth after it'd been drenched in rain. He didn't deserve to experience that. Not when there was a family who would always mourn the death of their son. Not when he'd had the power to reach out and stop Scooter from doing the unthinkable.

Chapter Five

"Ransom, one of our teammates," Silver began as they were flying down the freeway, "reached out this morning. He's contacted some resources to help track Thalia."

Vivienne closed her eyes, her chest expanding with relief. "Thank you so much." There was nothing she'd done to earn these people's kindness and yet they were helping her all the same, just because she was Hannah's sister. Hannah, who belonged to their teammate Branch. That type of loyalty and love was completely

unfamiliar to her.

“We don’t need your thanks. You’re one of us now,” Silver rumbled, and Iron nodded in agreement. He’d been quiet since they left the hotel.

Hannah had left home and made something of herself. She was a hero just like the men sitting in the car with her. Vivienne had to push down the flood of inadequacy. Just because she hadn’t done anything meaningful with her life—helped others like those surrounding her—didn’t mean she couldn’t start. She’d bet the cozy socks protecting her injured feet that Hannah had never been frozen in fear, terrified to leave the bathroom because of her appearance. Maybe that was why Iron wasn’t interacting with her like he had last night and this morning. Despite making her feel as though she shouldn’t be ashamed of her reaction, maybe he’d concluded she was shallow and insecure. She wanted so badly to be everything he described, yet so afraid she was going to fall short.

“Ransom also spoke with the police sergeant about your situation. He suggested filing a restraining order against your parents and Scott when we get home.”

Home.

Did these men have any idea of how moved she was by their easy acceptance? She was going to do everything in her power to become a person who deserved their goodness. “Will that stop them from trying to contact me?”

Iron shifted next to her. “They’ve already tried to get in touch with you?” His expression was unreadable.

“I’ve gotten some calls. A few texts.” Her insides turned. She didn’t want to talk to them, but she also didn’t want to put anyone in danger.

“How many?” Iron’s eyes bore into hers and she swallowed down the wedge lodged in her throat.

“I don’t want you to be upset.” She didn’t like the uncertainty in her voice.

Iron’s expression softened and he reached out taking her hand. He hadn’t touched her since their hug in the bathroom, and she wasn’t sure why that bothered her so much. Sure, he represented safety and escape, but it was more than that. Not that a man like Iron would look twice at her. He was a warrior and deserved someone just as strong and fierce as him. She’d been the one needing rescuing—something she should’ve done years ago.

“I’m not upsetatyou, Vee. I’m upsetforyou. They’ve piled enough shit on you. Put you through hell. Now they won’t leave you alone.”

“They didn’t put me through hell.” She wasn’t sure why she was protesting. They’d made her feel like less her entire life. She’d been told over and over that her dyslexia and learning disability was something to be hidden. That she had to rely on her looks and a good marriage to be of any worth. “Anyone would be lucky to be me. I have a beautiful house. I went to the best schools. Designer clothes. Priceless jewelry. Trips around the world. Parents who made me into something because I’m nothing.”

“Vee.” Iron’s hard voice snapped her out of regurgitating everything her parents ever told her. Shame’s tattered threads wrapped around her until she wanted to hide beneath its thick covering. She saw him exchange a look with Silver in the rearview mirror. They both looked furious. God, she was messing everything up. Making herself out to be a spoiled, ungrateful brat, and maybe she was. Maybe her own inflated sense of self-worth made her think she could be more, do more, when she should’ve been grateful to Scott and the people around her.

“Vee,” Iron repeated. “Stop. Whatever is going on in your head right now is bullshit.”

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“How do you know?” Her eyes burned. She was almost desperate for the answer. Part of her wanted him to be truthful. The other wanted his words wrapped up in a pretty ribbon of lies.

She wasn’t sure how she would know either way. Had her parents intentionally broken her down only to build her up into their ideal of what they wanted her to be? Or was she so unwilling to accept her own flaws she’d made them out to be worse than they really were?

“I know.” His grip was firm and steady. “How many times did someone tell you exactly what you just scripted to us? Think about it. How many times has your mother or father told you how ungrateful you were because you had all those things? How often did they make you feel dependent on them? Christ, did Scott?”

She fell silent. He was right. Scott had also said similar things to her, some worse. In a way, her ex’s betrayal hurt more than her parents’. He’d acted like he cared about her. She truly thought Scott was on her side until he started acting like he had his own agenda. In retrospect, all the signs that he was just using her were there, but she so desperately wanted to be loved, she convinced herself everything was fine. Until he started berating her and sleeping with other women. She looked down at her lap, before meeting his gaze. “Yes.”

“When you start thinking and saying those things, I want you to remember that. I know it’s not easy. It’s going to take time.” When his thumb slid over the top of her hand in a slow, back-and-forth motion, tingles fizzed over her skin. “Have you listened to or read any of the messages?”

She tilted her chin up, trying not to dwell on the hateful texts and calls. “I glanced at the first few this morning.”

“Is that when you got out of the shower?” Silver asked, looking back at her in the mirror.

“Yeah. I guess it contributed to my early morningnot-good-enough episode. I forgot to apologize for keeping you both waiting.”

“No more apologies.” Iron’s voice was hard, yet soothing at the same time. How was that even possible?

“Or thank-yous,” Silver added.

“We wouldn’t be here if we didn’t want to be.” Iron gave her hand a quick squeeze and released it. She missed his touch and comfort immediately.

“If I can’t apologize or say thank you, what am I going to talk about?” Her joke fell flat, but Iron saved her yet again.

“How about I’m hungry and want to pick where we stop for lunch?”

“I could get behind that.”

“Good idea,” Silver said from the front seat. A text had popped up on the navigation screen and he quickly swiped it away.

“Who was that?” Iron punched the back of his seat. “And why are you so jumpy about their messages?”

She’d noticed Silver grinning when he glanced at his phone over the past few hours

in the car.

“Fuck you.” There was no heat in his voice, and he turned on his directional to pull off into a gas station. “While you’re debating lunch choices, I’m filling up.”

“There’s half a tank left.” Iron smirked. “And last time I checked we weren’t headed toward a wasteland void of gas stations.”

Silver unbuckled his seat belt and got out of the car, slamming his door without a word to Iron.

“How many times do you think we’ve stopped today?” She couldn’t stop the smile from forming on her face. Nearly every time Silver’s phone pinged with a text, he was pulling over and jumping out of the SUV.

“Each time the person with the initials A.D. texts him. He was like this on the ride down too. I don’t spend much time with Silver’s team, so I was surprised when he was getting all flustered over answering his messages in the car.”

“It’s definitely a woman.” The excitement in her voice was audible. “Look.” She tilted her chin toward the window.

“Yeah, the only time I’ve seen him smile like that is when he’s answering one of his messages.”

“Maybe we could get two hotel rooms tonight.”

“Shit. We should have thought about that yesterday. You would’ve been more comfortable bunking on your own I bet. Silver and I can share a room tonight. Try to get one connecting for you.”

She laughed, feeling freer than she had in a long time. “I meant we’d stay in a room so Silver could have some alone time to talk with his girlfriend.”

His eyes darkened and her stomach felt weightless under his heated gaze. She blinked and the expression was gone. She was probably seeing what she wanted to and not what was there—just like she had with Scott. She’d only spent a day and a half with Iron, but the crush she’d started to develop on the man who’d selflessly jumped in front of a bullet for her was no joke. Still, she was determined not to go chasing love again, she needed to discover who she really was and lovethatperson first. When they delivered her to Hannah’s house, she’d probably never see Iron again. The thought made her heart hurt, and she ruthlessly pushed it down.

He cleared his throat. “Will you let me go through the messages? If there is anything remotely threatening, we need to report it to the authorities so there’s documented evidence of their harassment.”

“Of course.” Her clutch was in the bag from Silver’s Walmart trip yesterday. If she had any idea they’d planned to buy things for her, she would’ve insisted on paying. She had no shortage of money. When she closed her hand over the plastic phone case, she paused. Because of her early modeling career, her parents had insisted on being co-owners on her bank account. When she wanted to have them removed at eighteen, her parents refused. Her father was friends with the branch manager. She’d secretly opened another account through an online banking company, but she’d had to slowly funnel money there. Only a few hundred or thousand at a time. Enough that she could brush it off as a shopping trip or a spa day. Her private account didn’t have nearly the amount as the joint one.

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“Talk to me.” The weight of Iron’s hand was on her shoulder, but she could barely process his words. Her heart was pounding. Mind racing with the possibility that every single cent she’d made through her modeling and social media network was simply gone.

“My bank account. My parents can withdraw money...” she trailed off.

“Are you able to check your account from your phone?”

“Yes.”

He handed the device back to her just as Silver was getting back into the vehicle. “What’s going on?” She ignored his question and tapped in her account password with shaky hands.

“Her parents are co-owners of her bank account.”

She vaguely registered that they were talking. If they took everything, she’d have enough money in her secret account to support herself for a little time at least, but not long. By the time she purchased and furnished a place to live, she’d need to find a full-time job. She took a deep breath before opening the financial institution’s mobile banking app. Her heart sank. “The bank has frozen this account due to a fraud alert.” She stared at the inaccessible funds. Her parents had thought ahead, freezing her assets so they couldn’t be used or moved. It looked far less suspicious to report a missing debit card or flag a charge as fraudulent than moving huge amounts of money.

“They’re not going to win this,” Iron practically growled beside her.

“Even if the shared account was still open, I have a cap of ten thousand that I can withdraw per day. Once my parents got the alerts about money being withdrawn, they’d start removing it too.”

“An account hemorrhaging money is likely to get reported.” Silver pressed a button on the console and the engine hummed.

“I don’t know what to do.” She shook her head, continuing to stare down at her phone.

“I do.” Iron leaned back to reach into his pocket and pulled out his own phone. He swiped the screen and started typing. “Ransom has a top-notch legal firm.”

“So do my parents. That’s their typical style. Throw money at a problem and it will go away.”

“The Godfreys are the Boston equivalent of the Days. Not quite as disgraced, but close. I asked Ransom to connect you. In the meantime, you don’t have to worry about money. Silver and I might not be sitting on millions, but we have enough to comfortably take care of things.”

Maybe watching the way these men lived would help her make the most of that money and spend it wisely, or at least slowly.

Over the next five hours, they covered miles of highway and roads, ending up in Tennessee. Dark trees and flat surfaces lined the roadways as they all kept their eyes trained for a hotel. The sun had sunk below what Iron had pointed out as the Blue Ridge Mountains. Iron had been otherwise occupied transferring the messages and texts she was still continuously receiving from her parents and Scott. The messages

had started out with apologies and remorse, but quickly deteriorated, accusing her of ruining Scott's life, the family, and everything in between. Every so often Iron would stiffen or mutter a curse under his breath when her phone chimed, so she could only assume the messages were getting increasingly aggressive. They changed routes as well after Iron had removed two tracking apps from her phone.

"There up ahead. Let's stop there." She had spotted a hotel in the distance. Even though the men would have inevitably noticed the signs for overnight accommodations, being somewhat useful made her feel more like part of the team. At the front desk she insisted on paying for the rooms. Despite their protests, it made her feel like she was contributing something. There was a comfortable amount in her private account, especially if they weren't frequenting five-star hotels and restaurants.

She'd gotten two rooms, wondering if the men would be more comfortable with her in another space. Silver and Iron would share a connecting door with her. She hated to admit it, but there was a sense of camaraderie and safety with them that she didn't currently feel on her own. Logically she knew they were right on the other side of the door but that didn't stop her from jolting at every little sound. She closed the shades tightly and triple-checked the door locks. A knock on the door made her heart leap into action, pounding furiously. She tiptoed over to the door, not only because her feet were killing her, but she wanted to be as quiet as possible moving across the room. She looked through the peephole to find Iron standing in the hallway. Her shoulders instantly relaxed and she quickly undid the locks to let him in.

"May I come in?"

"You don't have to ask, Iron."

"We need to talk about some of the messages you're receiving." Iron passed through the room to the couch and sat. His legs were planted wide, and his lips were downturned into a grim expression. She sat next to him, curling her legs up and under

her.

“I don’t see any reason you have to read every nasty text or listen to the messages they’re leaving, but I do have some questions for you. My priority is keeping you safe, not prying into your private life.”

“Fire away. I trust you, and if you need me to talk about how things were before, I’ll do it. You’re the ones rescuing me, remember?”

“You rescued yourself, Vee. If you didn’t have the courage to leave the rehearsal dinner, then we wouldn’t have been able to help you.”

“I was scared.”

“That doesn’t mean you weren’t brave. You were more so because you were afraid.” He held her gaze for a moment before resting his elbows on his knees and clasping his hands together. “One of Scott’s texts references a charity gala. He wrote, If you return, what happened after the charity gala will never happen again. You can live your life, and I’ll live mine, but you need to come back and fulfill your obligations to your family. What is he referring to when he says after the charity gala? What won’t happen again?”

Her heart hammered and bile rose in her throat. This wasn’t something she’d even told Thalia, afraid her friend would react and get in trouble. “You asked me if Scott made me feel dependent.” She threaded her fingers together. “I confronted him the first time I caught him cheating. He said what he did in his spare time was none of my business and although I was wife material, I wasn’t enough to satisfy him, both intellectually and physically. He told me to expect him to have other women around and if I ever breathed a word of his infidelity, he’d ruin me. After that, he didn’t seem to care who I saw him with. We didn’t live together. Mostly we came together for social engagements where we needed to be seen together to uphold an image. When I

did go to his place, he'd flaunt the fact that a woman's bra was hanging in his bathroom and make a point to tell me all the ways she was better than me. Most of that included the bedroom."

"Asshole. Did you have sex with him after you found out he was cheating?" He frowned. "Shit. That's none of my business."

"There were a couple times after. I know that makes me seem so cowardly. I didn't want to even more than I usually didn't want to. He said he owned me and therefore I owed him."

"He forced you?"

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“The first time after the charity thing, yes. After that, I didn’t fight it. I didn’t want to prolong what I knew was going to happen.” She straightened on the sofa, placing her feet on the floor.

“Fuck.” He stood up and paced. Anger poured from him in pulsing waves. He stopped by the wall. The muscles in his back rippled with each breath he sucked into his lungs, then he returned to the couch, slowly kneeling on the floor with his prosthesis first.

“I’ll never think less of you for doing what you had to survive. Real men don’t force a woman. He’s a rapist and a narcissist.”

“You’re shaking.” The strong man kneeling at her feet was substantially larger and stronger than Scott. He could easily overpower her. Hurt her. All she felt in his presence, though, was comfort.

“Yeah, sweetheart.” The muscles in his neck were corded. “I’m fucking furious someone took something from you that wasn’t offered freely. I might not be the best bet as a protector, but you never have to worry that I’ll take advantage of you. I’d die before I hurt or disrespected you.”

“You don’t have to tell me that. I already know.” His hands on her knees and the close proximity had something fluttering in her belly.

She moved her hands from the top of her thighs and linked her fingers with his. “My first thought when I saw you get out of the SUV at the country club was your sheer strength and size. I was intimidated, but also appreciated the way you hung back and

explained who you were and why you were there. Your eyes are so steady. Makes me feel less alone.”

“You’re not alone. Not anymore. We should be back to Virginia tomorrow. I’ll make sure you know how to use the security system at Hannah’s house so you feel comfortable before I leave.”

She removed her hands from his and wrapped her arms around her waist. Iron leaving was something she was becoming increasingly concerned about. “How far are you from Hannah’s house?”

“It’s a ten-minute drive. We’re going to keep your phone to monitor the messages, but we’ll pick you up a new one and I’ll program my number in, that way if you need anything at all, you can get in touch with me. If you need a ride somewhere, need to talk to someone in the middle of the night, you call. If you ever feel threatened or worried, no matter what time it is, you’ll call. Right?”

She nodded past the painful lump in her throat. The only other person who treated her with such kindness was Thalia, and she’d repaid her by letting her family take her.

“I have an auto collision center downtown, so if I’m not at my house, I’m mostly there.”

“Can I come see it?”

His head jerked, like he was taken aback by her question. “You want to see the shop?”

“Yes,” she smiled. “This morning you said you wanted to get to know me better. That we could be friends. I want to be friends with you, Iron, but I also don’t want to overstep, if you have a girlfriend or wife or just need space—”

“Vee, I never would’ve held your hand. Hell, I never would’ve held you period if I had a woman waiting for me at home.”

Her heart thumped and her blood seemed to roar to life. “I thought you wanted my friendship.”

“I do, but I wouldn’t want that if my heart belonged to someone else. I would be spending time supporting her because it would be disrespectful as hell and wrong to share my time with another woman. Maybe that’s an archaic way of thinking, I don’t know. Doesn’t matter either way because there’s no one in my life.” He stood, making it look easy with his prosthetic, and sat beside her.

“Why?” She smoothed her hands down her legs.

His gray eyes were unreadable. “Why what?”

“Isn’t there a woman in your life.” She angled her body to face him, tucking her legs beneath her.

“There are things about me, Vee. Things that can’t be fixed. I like my privacy. Being alone suits me.”

“Are those things you tell yourself because you’re afraid? Because sometimes I do that too. Tell myself that no one will love me for who I am. That once they find out I’m dyslexic, they’ll think something’s wrong with me. I think that’s why I’ve only ever engaged in the things I can understand, but at the same time, I want more. Does that make sense? I’m constantly trying to be someone put together and polished on the outside, when inside I feel so inadequate.”

“Just because you’re dyslexic doesn’t make you less intelligent, less kind, less of anything. If I’ve learned anything from working with kids who have disabilities, it’s

that they might learn and communicate differently, but there's not a damn thing about them that needs changing. They don't need to limit their goals to things that are easily achievable."

"You work with kids?"

"I sponsor and coach a baseball team. Your nephew is on it along with a bunch of his friends from school and kids from neighboring towns."

There was a lightness in her chest and a push of excitement within her. "I want to help!" She rose up to her knees and clasped her hands together "Please let me?"

Chapter Six

Vee was vibrating with excitement over the idea of helping with the baseball team. Between her wide grin and sparkling eyes, there was nothing he could deny her, and fuck if he didn't secretly love the idea and the enthusiasm pouring off her.

"Sure, you can," he chuckled, surprising himself. He wasn't sure when the last time was he'd spontaneously laughed. "Welcome aboard."

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“Thank you!” He wasn’t sure if she lost her balance or simply launched herself at him, but her body was suddenly flush against his. Her hands were wound around his neck, supple breasts pressed into his chest. His hands found her hips, steadying her. “Sorry about that.” The breathless note in her voice had him hard as a pike.

When she leaned back and those depthless blue eyes trained on him, the pulse at the base of his erection pounded and blood rushed in his ears. Her cheeks were flushed and the longer she continued to stare at him, the larger her pupils became until black nearly eclipsed the blue. He moved his hands from her hips to her arms and gently pushed her back, standing up from the couch so fast he nearly lost his own balance. She’d just told him her fiancé had violated her and expressed how much she trusted him. He wanted her to continue feeling safe around him and that meant he needed a moment to walk off this sudden, intense attraction.

“I want to check out your feet. Let me grab the first aid kit.” He walked directly out of the room, releasing a long breath when he was out in the hall. He scanned his key card and opened the door.

Silver was leaned back against the head rest, his cell phone pressed against his ear. “Hey, I’ve got to get going. Be safe and we’ll talk soon, yeah?” The other man tossed his phone down on the bed and sat up. “You okay?” he asked. “I thought you were checking on, Viv, but you’re breathing like you’re halfway through Hell Week.”

“Getting the first aid kit. Gonna check her feet.”

“Want me to do it?”

His question was innocent enough but the thought of Silver's hands on Vee burned in his lungs. He fought to keep his voice steady, even as his breath became coarser. "I've got it. Call your girl back." Before Silver could make any other comments, he left the room, pausing in the hall to get his shit together. He'd never been a jealous man, so why was he now over a woman who wasn't even his? A woman who saw too much of what he was trying to hide. When she'd asked if he told himself lies to make himself feel better, he'd been disappointed, thinking she was judging him. Solitude was his companion for good reason. He bottled his feelings about Scooter's death up tight and locked that shit down, but it was always part of him. The turmoil of his failures a bitter coating on his tongue.

When something triggered him, a sound, a memory, a nightmare, and he couldn't take anymore, that bottle burst open, and it took him weeks to recover. She hadn't been forming her own opinions of him though, she'd been sharing a part of herself. Recognizing the insecurities she felt were present in him as well. She was far braver than him. Admitting what she felt instead of closing herself off. Offering him comradery in his thoughts. She was wrong though. The lies he told himself weren't to protect his heart and soul, they were to safeguard others against getting close. Of thinking he could offer them something when he was only a shell of his former self. He released a long breath and walked up to Vee's door. It opened before he had a chance to knock.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to hug-attack you." She stepped back allowing him room to pass.

"Hug-attack?" He'd never heard those two words used together in the same sentence.

"Sometimes I get so excited, I just kinda..." She made a jumping motion, arms outstretched, but didn't move from where she was standing. Why does she have to be so damn adorable? "Anyway, I didn't mean to cut you off from answering my own question. Do you want me in the bathroom?"

Fuck, she was killing him. “Yeah, Vee. Up on the countertop.” She boosted herself up, so her legs were dangling off the side. It was then he recognized his error in judgment. Their reflection made his mouth go dry. He was standing over her. All that thick pale hair cascading down her back beckoned him to fist his hands in deep. If this was his reaction to her after a couple days, he needed to work on removing himself from her life as quickly as possible. He sat on the closed toilet and lifted her ankle, so her heel was resting on his thigh. Her bare legs were smooth as glass, and he had to force his gaze to her wrapped feet. He removed the sock first, then the gauze he’d wrapped them up in this morning after her shower. The score marks from branches and sharp rocks looked unnatural on her soft skin.

“You didn’t answer my question earlier because I rudely interrupted. What things can’t be fixed, Iron?” she asked while he applied more medication to the bottoms of her feet. “Why deem yourself beyond repair while being so open to differences in others?”

“Because differences aren’t what I struggle with.” He placed new gauze around her foot, then slipped on a clean sock. His fingers lingered against her smooth ankle as he waited for her next question. Vee was curious about everything. Not in a nosy way, but as someone who was engaged and interacting with the world around them.

“Then what?” Her fingers rested on his bicep. The way they’d held hands from the start, offered each other comforting touches wasn’t lost on him. There was a connection there. One he would have to sever. He gathered his thoughts as he wrapped her other foot and slipped on the sock. She wasn’t going to stop pressing until he told her. Wasn’t going to stop looking at him like a hero if she didn’t know what he’d done. If anyone deserved the truth of who and what he was, it was her.

“Demons. The kind that never leave. I’m responsible for the death of my teammate. A man I promised to protect. I can’t live with it, so I don’t. I go through the motions. I also can’t live without it, because that would be too much like forgiveness when I

deserve none.” He stood up prepared for her rejection. Maybe he was hoping for it. He looked away, focusing on the door, anything but her sweet, vulnerable face.

Then her palm was against his turned cheek, angling his gaze back toward her. She added her other hand to frame his face. Her steady gaze soothed something acidic inside him. “I’m so sorry that happened to you. That you carry that guilt. But you should know it doesn’t make me want to get to know you less. The man I want to know is the one who feels that emotional weight. Who loved his friend so much, he doesn’t want to live a full life because the man he lost doesn’t get to.” Her fingers slowly traced his cheekbones, moved down his jaw. “I want to know the man who believes he deserves isolation yet is brave enough to care for a woman he barely knows.”

“I know you.” His voice was so hoarse, the words barely made it past his lips. Her eyes were currently trained on his chest, but her thick brown lashes lifted, revealing eyes glazed with tears. She’d made his pain her own. Feeling that turmoil right along with him. “I might not know the small things, but I know you’re far more courageous than you think. I know you have a high level of emotional intelligence by the way you speak. The way you treat others. I know I feel a connection with you, and I’m going to do everything in my power to help you get on your feet.” What she didn’t need to know was that she was a threat to him. She’d already gotten under his skin. He’d failed Scooter, but what if he ended up failing her too? That would leave his soul so fucking bleak he’d never recover.

He slipped one arm around her waist and the other behind her knees, lifting her off the counter. She felt so right tucked into his chest. He brought her to the bed and set her down on the plush mattress. “Night, Vee. I’m going to open the connecting door, so when I go to the other room, I can come in here and lock the dead bolt and door stopper.”

“I don’t mind doing that.”

“I just cleaned your cuts. They’re going to be sore as hell. I can lock the connecting door when I’m done.”

“Actually, I’d prefer to have it open.”

“Okay.” He started to turn when Vee reached up and grabbed his hand. “Will you tell me about him someday?”

He closed his eyes and nodded, unable to speak with the thorns of regret pinching off his airway. Releasing her hand, he stepped away. He could feel her eyes on his back as he left the room.

*

Branch called them at noon the next day. They’d been on the road since the break of dawn. The closer they got to their small Virginia Beach suburb, the more the ride seemed to drag. Or maybe that was because Silver had offered Vee shotgun, complaining he was tired of his own company.

“Hey,” Silver’s voice boomed through the interior of the SUV. “You’re on speaker. How is Hannah?”

“She did great in surgery. They expect to hold her for two to three days, and then we’re out of here.”

“Any more trouble?”

“The Days haven’t come to the hospital again. Hannah filed a restraining order. We did hear from Iron’s friend from the special ops task force in California.”

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“Glad he reached out.” Red had texted Iron to let him know he’d be in touch.

“Wasn’t a phone call though.” The speakers crackled as he spoke. “He’s here in Texas.”

“I had no idea he’d be making a trip.” He hadn’t mentioned going in person to contact Branch, but he appreciate that Red was there.

“He said he just happened to be crossing the border when you messaged him. Spent nearly three months in Mexico infiltrating a new drug ring. His teammate, Sully, is here too.”

“Sullivan Carter?” There was a tingling sensation through his chest and shoulders and the hair on the back of his neck rose. After his last mission when he’d been honorably discharged from his role as a SEAL, he never expected to cross paths with so many of his former brothers from that fateful mission. They tried to keep contact with him, but he just wanted to be forgotten. He was a coward and facing them was like reliving his mistake repeatedly. He’d met Red in a military hospital after his amputation. Was his roommate when they both left the ICU for the recovery floor. Red had been shot multiple times on a core mission to the US embassy in Sudan. Unlike Iron, Red had returned to active duty when he recovered from his injuries.

“Yeah, introduced himself as Sully Carter. Said he’d served with you and Ransom.”

Branch let the words hang and for a moment the car was silent except for the slow thud of his heart. “Not only that but they’ve had us in contact with a former SEAL who runs the special task force for the Department of Homeland Security dedicated to

human trafficking specifically from Mexico to the United States. The three of them are going to investigate Thalia's entry into the US and her disappearance. Right now, it looks like ICE has no record of an adolescent coming into the country under that name."

Iron reached his hand through the gap between the passenger seat and the door and gave Vee's arm a quick squeeze from his seat behind her. She was worried about her best friend, and he couldn't imagine how the wordshuman traffickingalong with the absence of records were making her feel. There was an uncomfortable twinge in his gut. One that told him they'd uncover more secrets when they began digging into how Thalia came to work at the Day estate. Later he wanted to ask Vee about the other staff her family employed.

"Branch, please tell Hannah and Collin I love them. I promise not to trash the house."

"I will and stay safe, Vivienne. If one of you guys wants to stay at the house, too, as an extra precaution, feel free to use the couch."

He wasn't sure if Branch was making the offer because he sensed an elevated risk of danger or if he was thinking about the comfort level of his woman's sister. By the time they ended the call he could smell the saltwater air from along Virginia's coast. He'd grown up in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and had been stationed in Virginia after BUD/S. When he left the military, he stayed in the state, needing the reprieve of his small oceanside bungalow. He wondered what Vee would think of it if she ever visited. It was small but it was right along the coast. So close he had trouble keeping sand off his deck. One of the biggest transitions of having a prosthetic was learning how to walk along the uneven surface of the beach. Sometimes he'd sit in his Adirondack chair and watch the ocean for hours. He could picture sitting out there with Vee. The thought jarred him. Bringing her to his home would only draw him deeper.

“This is Hannah’s street,” Silver was telling Vee as they took a left onto a quiet residential road with small but well-maintained ranch-style homes. They pulled into the driveway and Silver turned off the engine. “I’m going to do a walk through, then you can get settled while one of us picks up groceries.”

“You don’t have to do that.” Vee’s voice was overly bright, like she was trying to convince them she was okay when she really wasn’t.

“Gonna do it anyway, darlin’.” Silver unbuckled, and the seat belt retracted into the interior siding. “I’ll be right back.”

“Are you okay?” Iron asked the moment the car door slammed shut. He unlatched his own seat belt and moved into the middle, so he could see her.

“How do you know I’m not?” Her voice was a low whisper.

“Because I know you, remember?”

“The important stuff,” she said softly. It pleased him far too much that she recalled his words from the night before.

“Your voice is shaky, but your body is far too still. Your skin is paler than it was at the last rest stop. I’m not going to leave you. Not until you’re 100 percent comfortable or Hannah gets back, okay?”

“I feel so weak. I don’t know if I’ll ever stop needing other people’s help. Hannah left home at eighteen, pregnant with Collin and alone. Did you know that?”

“I didn’t,” he answered and reached out to touch the thin sweater covering her arm.

“She put herself through school. Became a flight medic. Cared for Collin. She’s

amazing, and I'm not sure I'll ever measure up."

"No one in our circle is going to be measuring anything. No one expects you to be Hannah because you're Vivienne. You've gotten through a lot more than you give yourself credit for. An emotionally and physically abusive childhood that turned into an equally abusive adulthood. A sexual assault from someone who should've cherished you. You escaped, too, Vee. Don't forget that. Tomorrow we can start the process of filing restraining orders against your parents and Scott. Then we can contact the bank and Ransom's lawyer."

When Silver began pacing down the driveway, he instantly recognized something was wrong. "I'm going to talk to Silver. Hang tight, okay?"

She nodded and he got out of the back seat and shut the door. "What is it?"

"Door was open. Nothing looks out of place on the inside, but there are scratches around the keyhole."

"Fuck. Someone broke in. This can't be a coincidence. Her family is looking for her and Hannah's place would be a logical starting point. They knew the direction we started heading because of those tracker apps."

"They might've heard more than we thought at the hospital too. We were talking about Viv leaving Texas when they let themselves into Hannah's room."

Iron's gut clenched. "Change of plans, then. She'll stay with me. I have no connection to your team unless they dig deep. If they do come looking, I'll be the last stop."

"You have no connection to the team? You know that's bullshit right?" Silver stared him down, searching his eyes with an incredulous stare. "You're part of our team. We

might not be actively serving together, but that's where it ends. You stepped up for Sam, my teammate Joker's fiancée, when she needed a car that wasn't going to leave her stranded. You didn't hesitate to go to Texas to help Branch. You're less isolated than you think. I don't know everything that went down during the mission that took your leg, but when you pushed Ransom and the other men on your team away, they all felt that deep. Not only did they lose Scooter, brother, they lost you too."

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The burn in his chest scorched through his entire body. He'd never meant to hurt his teammates by withdrawing. They didn't know the entirety of what he'd become when left to his own devices. He'd become an amputee and an addict.

He'd hid it well, but it took him two years to admit he was taking opioids even when the phantom pain in his nerves had dulled to a point where a few Advils might've cured it. He'd layer the pills with alcohol and sink into oblivion. No one knew about his addiction because he'd pushed everyone out of his life. No one knew when it started, and no one knew when he sought treatment to help pull him from that dark place.

"Are you sure you want her in your space?"

"What do you mean?" He wasn't sure what Silver was insinuating. He just knew he didn't like where this conversation was leading them.

"I haven't missed the way you hold hands sometimes. How she looks at you while you're looking away. Reaches for you the minute she feels uncomfortable. Then there was last night when you came back into the room to get the first aid kit. Something happened, didn't it?"

"I needed to put some space between us." He stared off toward the house, imagining what would've happened if he had kissed her.

"Right." Silver leaned his hip against the car and crossed his arms over his chest.

Iron's gaze snapped back to Silver. "She's safe with me."

“Don’t doubt that. Don’t think there’s anywhere safer for her now, but I’m not thinking about Vivienne. I’m thinking about you. You’re the first person to admit you like your space. That woman in there is bright and beautiful and if you let her, she’s going to turn your world upside down. You ready for that?”

“No, because it’s not going to happen. Every person in her life has used her. I won’t be one of them. I’m fucked up, and I’d never let that bleed onto her.”

“So, what’s your plan then? You going to let her walk away?”

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do.” And fuck it was going to hurt when she left. He knew every word Silver was saying was the truth. At first, he thought Silver was insinuating he was going to take advantage of Vee. He wasn’t sure how he felt about Silver looking out for him instead. For some reason, the SEAL looked almost disappointed in his answer. “Look, I’ve seen the way you react when you get a text message. How you pull over to the side of the road and smile like an idiot when you respond. Maybe you shouldn’t letherwalk away either.”

“Shit,” he muttered. “That’s fair.” Silver’s response only made him more curious about the woman he’d been communicating with. “Guess we’re two fucked-up peas in a pod.”

They got back into the car, but this time, he got behind the wheel and Silver took the back.

“Everything okay?” Vee’s eyes darted around the property before landing on him.

“Looks like someone tried to pick the lock.” He reached across the console and took her hand. Her skin was cold and clammy to the touch.

“Do you think it has something to do with me?” She was looking all around again,

squeezing his hand.

“Viv, we’ve got your back,” Silver said. “But part of that is being honest about what is going on so you can make the best decisions to protect yourself.”

“That’s a yes then.” Her shoulders were so tight, she looked fragile enough to shatter.

“It’s too much of a connection to write it off as random. Maybe it’s nothing, but we want to proceed like there’s a threat so we can prepare for anything.” There was a pang in his heart when she shut her eyes and dropped her chin to her chest. “If it’s okay with you, I’d like you to stay at my place until Hannah gets back. That work?” Her eyes slowly opened, and her body relaxed, melting back into the seat. He didn’t deserve the faith she placed in him, but for whatever reason, staying close to him comforted her.

“I’d like that, as long as you really don’t mind.” She leaned back and closed her eyes. Absolute trust and it scared him to death. He kept glancing over at her during the ride. She was so still, she might’ve fallen asleep, but he wasn’t sure. Even if it had looked like she was taking the news okay, it didn’t mean she was. She’d had a lifetime of learning how to mask her emotions. Regardless, he’d make sure she felt safe at his house. Make sure she was safe with him.

Chapter Seven

Someone shook her gently. “Vee, we’re here.” She blinked and glanced around her. They were in Silver’s SUV, only Iron was driving. She hadn’t meant to fall asleep, or maybe it was her mind letting her shut down after learning that someone might’ve tried to break into her sister’s house. Most likely because of her. One of the last text messages from her parents was that she had no idea the trouble she’d caused for the family. She didn’t care too much about messing up her parents and Scott’s plans, but her stomach twisted at the danger she was bringing down on everyone else around

her.

She straightened from the awkward position she'd fallen asleep in against Iron's arm. She probably drooled on him or something equally embarrassing. She'd never felt safe enough to fall asleep in the presence of someone else before. She'd never slept over at her fiancé's house, and before that, she wasn't able to go to birthday parties or sleepovers because of her modeling. After Hannah had gotten out from beneath her parents' thumbs, they'd gotten even stricter with her. There wasn't anywhere she could go without their knowledge. The part that bothered her the most was that their overbearing nature wasn't a result of love, but control.

She glanced out the passenger side window toward Iron's house. The weathered gray cottage surrounded by soft sand instantly loosened some of the tightness in her muscles. The sun was high in the sky, highlighting the strip of ocean visible behind the property. The seclusion suited him, as did the way the home mimicked the surroundings, seamlessly fitting into the seaside landscape.

"If you think you'll be more comfortable in a nearby hotel or—"

"It's so peaceful," she said, quickly cutting off his words. This was where she wanted to be. Here with the man who'd rescued her and given her an incredible amount of kindness. She'd made him doubt himself when she remained quiet for too long, soaking in the view that already was a source of comfort if only because of the man who lived there.

"That's what drew me too." He got out of the vehicle and rounded the front, opening the door for her. Silver was there, too, holding a couple of the shopping bags they'd accumulated with toiletries and changes of clothes. The driveway was constructed of crushed shells marked by coastal shrubs and flowering plants that grew on either side of the property. Iron's gait changed as he walked up to the front door. It was hard to move across the loose shells and doing so in his prosthetic must be challenging. Had

he owned the property before the explosion or had he purchased it to challenge himself against his injuries, or worse punish himself? Iron wasn't a man who did things because they were easy or convenient. She breathed in deeply, letting the fresh salt air coat her lungs. The roll of waves sounded in the distance.

"I'll get in touch with everyone. Let them know Viv is staying here for now and that you're settling in." Silver said more to Iron than her as they walked up the front steps. "If there are questions about Thalia or new updates, I'll be in touch."

"Appreciate it." Iron reached into his pockets and pulled out a set of keys. "When we get inside, Vee can program everyone's numbers into her phone." He unlocked the dead bolt and opened the door. There was a quick beep from a wall mounted security system in the entryway, and he punched in a series of numbers before turning to Silver. "In case she decides I'm a poor host."

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She quickly masked her frown at Iron's comment. Maybe it was said as a joke, but there was an undertone of self-depreciation, like he was going to fall short of her expectations. Something she was constantly worried about doing herself. The other morning when she almost had a panic attack over leaving the hotel bathroom makeup free with wet hair and casual clothes, Iron told her she needed no one's approval but her own. That in time, she'd recognize her worth and not feel as though she needed everyone's approval. Maybe he was concerned she'd think he was a poor host because despite everything, he still expected her to want all the luxury she'd been raised in. Thought she was a self-absorbed snob.

Silver's arms coming around her broke her thoughts. She hugged him back tightly, the way she might a brother if she ever had one. Being close to Silver was nothing like being near Iron when her body responded by simply buzzing. Everything was heightened when he was close—her heartbeat, the breath entering and leaving her lungs, even the air around her seemed to fizz and bubble like Champagne. Despite all the affirming words and advice, the men had shared on the road trip, they were becoming hard to recall as Silver descended the steps and crossed the short distance to his SUV. She wasn't nervous about being alone with Iron. She was worried about being in his home and not knowing his rules or expectations. Of him believing she needed something more than he could share.

"Come on in." Iron stood back so she could enter. "Make yourself at home."

She paused next to him. "I'm not sure I know how to do that. Or how to act right now. What you expect of me while I'm here?"

His frown deepened. "There's nothing I expect of you. You don't need to act, dress,

or do anything to make me pleased that you decided to stay here.” He started to open his mouth, then shut it. “Come on. I’ll show you around.” He gestured down the entryway. She wanted to know what he’d planned to say and then thought better of it. The home opened to the kitchen and flowed into a living room. She stepped toward a breakfast nook in a recessed area of the kitchen. A built-in bench lined the wall in a horseshoe shape framing a round table in the center. “I love this. It feels like the kitchen is right on top of the ocean.” She supposed it was. Wide bay windows offered unobstructed views of the sandy dunes leading to the sea. Off to the left, there was an ancient cedar pergola. One of the legs of the structure had suffered a blow at some point, leaving it splintered and pitching toward the ocean. Thick ivy wrapped around the structure, choking the frame. Despite the labyrinth of vines and scarred wood, the gazebo was oddly beautiful. It felt almost familiar. “I could sit here for hours.”

“Sometimes I do.”

She followed him into the living room and like the kitchen, the space was tidy, but sparse. There were no pictures or decorations. No blanket on the back of the couch or decorative pillows. The space was a testament to how far-removed Iron had made him himself from his friends and family. Another way he punished himself. He’d told her he couldn’t live with the pain of his friend dying, but he also didn’t want to live without it either. She would do anything to help him with that guilt and self-reproach. To see him smile and lose himself in laughter over something silly.

“You mean what you said earlier, don’t you?”

“About what?” His brow furrowed as he angled his chin down to meet her gaze.

“Having no expectations.” She could feel her cheeks heating, but the concept was so foreign, she couldn’t stop herself from asking.

“Yeah, I do.” His expression softened. “If you want to wear shoes in the house, fine.

If you want to stand up at the counter eating dinner or lock up tight in your room, you can do that too. This isn't a showplace. Far from it. Put your feet on the coffee table in the living room, take a walk down the beach and track sand back in, doesn't matter. We're not in a heavily populated area here, but I'll set the alarm at night, and no one will get near without us knowing about it. My only goal is to keep you as safe as I can. That includes giving you the numbers to all my contacts. If you need anything at all, you can reach out to any one of them. If something makes you uncomfortable, hell, if I do something to make you uncomfortable, I expect you to call them. The spare room is this way."

Vee followed Iron through the living room, past a deep couch that looked like you could actually sit on it opposed to the pristine white furniture in her family's estate. There were three doors down another hallway. One was a simple bathroom with a soaking tub and shower. He paused in front of the next door. "I know this isn't the type of place you're used to, Vee. It's minimalist at best."

She searched his face, trying to decide if he was insulting himself or her. "Who was it that told me I didn't need anyone's approval but my own?" She'd stopped next to him by the threshold of the door. It suddenly struck her just how alone they were, and instead of the fear she often felt with Scott, something warm unfurled in her belly and spread through her. The urge to step into his space, to be closer was nearly magnetic. Her fingers ached to touch the soft material of his T-shirt. To breath in his fresh, spearmint scent.

"For some reason, I seem to need yours." The low rumble of his voice and the flicker of heat in his eyes made her nipples tighten beneath her shirt.

"You have it and then some." Before she recognized what she was doing, she gripped his forearm. "Shiny, new, expensive. Those things don't equal what I want out of life."

He glanced down at her hand against his skin. “What is it you want?”

The word popped in her head. She could admit her body reacted to him in a way she couldn't control. She'd never met a man more rugged from his wide shoulders and chest to strong arms that could scoop her up with ease. Large, rough hands that were incredibly tender when he touched her. A voice that sounded like distant thunder and eyes that calmed the storms swirling within her. Maybe she was being irrational. She wasn't the type of woman to run from one man to the next. Not that she could really call what she had with Scott a relationship. It was contrived from the start by two powerful families. She knew now that her feelings for him weren't love, but did she even know what that felt like? Had she ever been loved without an expectation? Maybe by Hannah. “Something real. Something that's just mine.”

The anticipation mounted with each second they stood there. Her pulse began to pound when his eyes dropped to her mouth, but just as quickly, he took a step back and pushed open the door to the guest room. She shoved away the pang of disappointment. Iron hadn't asked her here because he was attracted to her. He was trying to be her friend. She walked inside, breathed in the scent of whatever laundry detergent he used, and felt one thing. Security. That was what she needed right now, and she had a feeling Iron could use a friend just as much as she did. Here there were pictures hanging on the wall, in the sealed-off room within a nearly empty house. Like his heart, he still carried the people he cared for inside, but he shut them away. Maybe it was because he was trying to protect them from the failure he perceived himself to be. Maybe it was because if he let himself feel one emotion, all the others would come pouring out with them.

“Are these your parents?” She walked over to the far wall and stopped in front of a picture of a man and a woman, maybe in their early sixties. The man was tall and broad, much like Iron, with light brown hair and eyes. He was holding the woman in his arms, one with straight blonde hair and the same luminous gray eyes as the man standing behind her. She could feel his presence mere feet from her without even

glancing over her shoulder.

“Yeah. Taken a couple of years ago.” There was a profound longing in his voice that made her eyes burn.

“And this one?” Two men in casual suits clearly exchanging vows beneath a rustic arbor framed with roses. Iron was standing to one side of the trellis with a wide grin on his face. This must have been before the mission. Before everything changed for him. Seeing how proud and carefree he appeared underscored the darkness he now carried.

“My older brother Milo and his husband Ezra. I was his best man. Been nearly fifteen years since that photo was taken, and they’re still very much in love.”

“Do you ever see them, Iron?” She turned and looked up at him. “It’s clear you care about them a great deal.”

“I see them at Christmastime. Thanksgiving if I can manage it.” His voice sounded strangled.

“Do they live far away?”

“Not anymore. When I was injured, my parents moved from Pennsylvania where we grew up to Richmond. It’s about a two-hour drive from here. They wanted to be closer to me. Still can’t fathom why. Ezra and Milo live in Charlotte, North Carolina.”

“Because they love you. Why do you keep them at arm’s length?” She knew Iron blamed himself for what happened, but he had the gift of a family who so obviously loved and supported him, yet he only saw them once or twice a year. It didn’t make any sense to her.

“I was the reason Scooter’s fiancée received a folded flag at her door. I didn’t want to be around anyone. Hell, I didn’t want to be around myself. Had no idea how I was going to live. Thought I couldn’t take anymore. Death seemed like the only way out, but I knew even though it would bring me peace, I’d destroy my parents and my brother. The irony was, I didn’t deserve peace. I knew Scooter was impulsive. That his level of risk acceptance was too damn high. I had the split-second thought of pulling him back, but instead I let him walk to his death. It wasn’t instantaneous. I can still hear the explosion. His screams. I’m messed up, Vee. I’m not going to let that drag everyone else around me down.” He turned, leaving her staring at his back. His shoulders rose up and down as he tried to catch his breath.

She did the only thing that came to mind. She wrapped her hands around his waist and hugged with all her might.

Chapter Eight

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 8:27 am

An hour after Iron and Vivienne had returned from filing restraining orders against Scott and her parents at the local precinct, then grabbing dinner ingredients at the grocery store, he could still feel her tears on his back. The result of her overwhelming emotions brought on by his pain had soaked into his cotton shirt and scored his skin. Her silent tears were the single most comforting reaction he'd ever received when sharing his story about Scooter. There had been no unwanted comments about how God only gave us what we could handle or how his teammate was responsible for his own actions. How tragedy happened, even to the best people. She'd simply offered sadness for the loss of a good man.

Her silence acknowledged his grief. His guilt. He'd never felt closer to another human being than in that moment he turned his back on her, prepared to put space between them. Her arms had come around him tightly and held on. They must've stood there for a good ten minutes as he soaked in her quiet comfort.

Usually entering the guest room with the people he loved posted on the wall, the ones he wanted to protect from what he became the most left him feeling down for days. Combine that with his thoughts about Scooter and it was enough to send him into a full-blown episode of depression. So later when Vee was practically dancing down the aisles of the grocery store, bright eyes twinkling with excitement over every damn thing, the lightness he felt shocked the shit out of him. Maybe it was the passage of time. Maybe it was the woman standing beside him as he showed her how to chop a tomato for a salad. Either way he had never recovered so quickly emotionally to thoughts of all he had lost.

"Careful, Vee," he said, reaching around her to straighten the cutting board, bracketing her in. This close, he could feel her warmth radiating toward him. He

desperately wanted to rub his cheek against all that soft blonde hair loose around her shoulders. “Hannah will kill me if you lose a finger on my watch.” His voice had dropped an octave—a constant problem around her but being physically attracted to her didn’t mean he had to act on it.

“That would be difficult, seeing you’re only trusting me with a butter knife. This might be the first time I’ve cut a vegetable, but I certainly know this is not the tool you typically do it with.” His arms were still steadying the cutting board, so when she leaned back and angled her face to smile at him, her back was up against his chest. A liquid pull rushed to his groin. It had been so long since he experienced this type of searing attraction to a woman, and still, he didn’t think his desires had ever been so sharp and acute.

“Alright. You’ve got me, but I would feel better if we worked our way up to the sharps.”

Her laughter filled the kitchen and slammed into his chest. Had him instantly hardening beneath the thick fabric of his jeans. Such a carefree sound had never resonated through the walls of his cottage. Not while he had been living there. It had been a while since he noticed the glow of the early evening sun filtering through the windows. Or the way it made the space golden and warm.

He took a step back and turned so she didn’t see or feel how appealing he found her. His throat grew thick, and he grimaced at his wayward thoughts. Vee was ten years younger than him. Under his care and protection. Imagining her positioned on the counter while he devoured her was the furthest thing from okay.

“Let’s eat outside.” The suggestion surprised him. He liked to watch the wild ocean before a storm. The choppy, foam-topped waves brought on by a cold autumn day. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d enjoyed the sunset on a clear evening.

“I’d like that, but probably not as much as I like cutting tomatoes.” Her triumphant smile over learning to do something new lifted a layer of weight off his chest. A layer he wasn’t sure he wanted removed.

“Might be a little late in the season, but I bet if we got you a plant, you could still grow a few of your own before it gets too cold.” He took a lemon from the bowl on the counter and opened the silverware drawer to keep his hands busy.

“I never thought about trying to plant something myself but now that you’ve brought it up, I can’t wait to learn more.” She bounced up on her tippy toes.

“You’re welcome to use my laptop after dinner to do some research if you’d like.” He cut the lemon into thin slices to garnish the salmon he planned to grill.

“Really?”

He was torn between basking in that wide-eyed expression of pure joy and hating it. Her family’s money should have allowed her opportunities and experiences to discover the things she enjoyed but instead of financial success making her world large and limitless, it had narrowed it significantly. Her parents had used her funds to imprison her, not to let her grow into her own person and thrive.

A chuckle left his lips. Another surprise. “Yeah, really. I’ll go out and fire up the grill so we can get started with dinner.” It didn’t take him long to cook salmon fillets and clean the grime of the long-unused outdoor table. When he came inside, he simply grinned at the eclectic mix of vegetables Vee had chopped up and put in a large bowl. Chunks of carrots, tomatoes, broccoli and raw mushroom caps tossed with Italian dressing.

“I got a little carried away.” She grinned holding the bowl in both hands. “So much I couldn’t fit any actual lettuce, but I tried it and it’s so good. Salad dressing is my new

favorite thing.” She was practically vibrating with happiness over what she’d made by herself. Her feelings were so contagious, it was like a layer of light was cast over the cottage. He was enjoying witnessing all her new favorite discoveries from cotton T-shirts to fast food and now dressing. He knew asking why she’d never had something so simple would only upset him, so he left it alone and carried her creation out to the deck. The sun was sinking closer to the horizon, washing the sky in colors of the peach and raspberry tarts his mother would sometimes bring home from the bakery she worked at. He closed his eyes against the memory. It had been too damn long since he’d let himself see them.

When he opened his eyes, the slouched pergola tangled in vines came into view. He’d been trapped for a long time too. The vicious cycle of addiction had nearly killed him. The shame of being weak enough to find himself shackled by his vices had brought him to his knees. Keeping his family out of his life had cost them, but he had paid the price too. He hoped they knew, deep down at least, that he loved them despite only knowing about half of his struggles.

“I was thinking earlier how pretty that is.” She angled her head toward the structure he’d just been staring at.

“You’re joking right?”

“No.” She set her fork down on her plate. “It reminds me of strength. Broken but standing. Restrained by all those tangled vines, whatever those might be. Maybe they’re choices. Maybe regrets or mistakes. It hasn’t fallen yet, though. I wouldn’t be surprised if it stood a decade more.”

She had no idea how close her description of the pergola summarized what he’d been thinking. It was almost unnerving how close. Maybe that’s why he hadn’t yanked down the old structure yet. Maybe it deserved to stand another day, even if toppling over would just be easier.

“Your parents were so fucking wrong, Vee. You can be anything you damn well please. You’re resilient and resourceful. Not just anyone would’ve pulled off squirreling away money into a secret account. Knowing just how much or how little they could get away with. Not just anyone could’ve spit out poetry about a dilapidated gazebo. Not anyone would lend comfort to a stranger.”

“You don’t feel like a stranger to me.” She stared at him over their near empty plates as the sun dropped from view. Her eyes were as luminous at the color-drenched sky.

“Neither do you.” He shouldn’t have said that, but something about being in this sweet woman’s presence loosened his tongue.

“It’s only been a few days, but I feel safe with you. Not just physically. I feel safe to be myself, or at least begin to discover who that is. To do what feels right and not what everyone else wants me to do.”

Fear crept into his chest. “Vee,” he said stopping her before she could say another word. “I don’t want you making me out to be something I’m not.”

Her eyes narrowed. “And I don’t want you downplaying everything you are.”

If he wasn’t careful, he could lose his heart to this woman. He loved the subtle tilt of her chin as she threw his words back at him and stood her ground. She was wrong about him, but that didn’t matter when she was holding her own.

“There are things you don’t know. Things that would make you change your mind.” He leaned back in his chair, more to put some distance between himself and her searching gaze.

“Will you trust me with it?”

He hesitated. That wasn't the reaction he'd been expecting but Vee continued to catch him off guard. Maybe that's why he found his mouth opening, intent on revealing secrets he never wanted shared. “I'm not strong. When I lost my friend, my career, my leg I couldn't cope. I wasn't some unbreakable SEAL, just a man broken by his own choices. I became an addict, abusing opioids and alcohol until I could forget everything and everyone. I cut myself off from a loving family to hide my substance abuse. Five years ago, I finally got clean. Have stayed that way. I don't want a second chance, though. My family, my old teammates all deserve better than the man who cut them out of his life. Who took every kindness for granted. They were here nearly every waking hour when I was released from the hospital. I severed those ties as brutally as I could, so they'd give me some fucking peace.” He looked out at the dark ocean, not wanting to see disgust or pity on her face.

“Was it peace you wanted or isolation to punish yourself in a way they never would have let happen?” Her voice was soft, melting with the water slapping in a soothing rhythm against the shore.

“They'd been so proud when I completed BUD/S and became a SEAL. Constantly were telling me how I was making a difference in the world. I didn't want them to have a front row seat to my devastation. My destruction. I still don't.” He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and lowering his chin to his chest.

“How long are you going to make them suffer?”

“I'm not trying to punish them. I want them to remember me as the man they were

proud of, not the one I've become."

"You're not dead, yet you've made them live for years as though you were."

She was right and he knew it. "Exactly." He cleared his throat and straightened. "I don't want you to lose sight of who I really am. Someone selfish enough to hurt his own parents and brother for solitude and space to self-destruct. Don't let me do the same to you."

He stood up, doing his best to ignore the twinge in his limb. The past few days he'd tested the strength left in his body. As a result, the stump of his leg was bruised and irritated. He needed to massage the area with ointment to help with circulation. "Take your time out here and thanks for making the best salad I've ever had. From now on, lettuce is optional." He gave her a forced smile, then went inside to deposit their dishes into the washer. A quick look out the window told him that Vee was still sitting out there, maybe to call one of the many contacts he'd put in her phone for an escape. The thought soured his mood, but did he deserve any less?

He shook his head and limped to his bedroom. He needed to remove the prosthetic and take care of his damaged skin, otherwise, he'd end up in the hospital with an ulcer and that was the last place he wanted to be. Ten minutes later, he'd traded his jeans for athletic shorts and washed his limb with a cleanser designed to help the area retain moisture. He sat on the bed, a jar of ointment on the nightstand, when there was a soft knock on his door.

He fought against the shame. His leg was collateral damage. It wasn't his physical appearance that bothered him, it was the choice that led him there. "Come in." He'd already told her all his flaws, there was nothing else to hide. He busied himself opening the jar and looked up when he felt the mattress dip. She moved like a little ghost.

“I’m sorry. I was quick to judge your choices to separate yourself from your family. I think maybe I felt strongly because all I’ve ever wanted was to be loved for me, despite the choices I make. I don’t know how it feels to be held prisoner by drugs though. To feel so hopeless, I want to drown in them. That wasn’t fair of me.”

A self-depreciating laugh bubbled from his throat. “Sweet Vee. Do you ever not think of how everyone else is feeling? You don’t owe me any kind of apology. I was an asshole earlier. You make me question every terrible choice I’ve ever made. I loved seeing you push back at me. So brave.” He shouldn’t look at her when she was this close, sitting on his bed no less, but he couldn’t stop himself from turning his head to meet her gaze if he tried. Tension thickened in the space between them. The flash of heat in her eyes hit him like a bolt of lightning, rendering him momentarily stunned.

When she reached over and took the ointment from his hands, he was powerless to stop her. Nor when she dipped her fingers into the jar and warmed it with her hands. She slid off the bed and onto her knees. Her actions weren’t sexual in the least, but they were sure as hell sensual. Maybe intimate was a better word. Her touch was light, almost hesitant.

“Tell me if I hurt you,” she murmured. She massaged slow, soft circles into his scarred skin. It felt amazing, like acceptance he didn’t deserve. Her hands worked up to midthigh and back down, kneading with a gentle touch that left a pang of longing in his heart. She didn’t just have a beautiful face. She had a beautiful soul too. Once the ointment had dried, she stood, kissed his cheek, and walked out of his room, leaving him feeling like he was on the hazy edges of a dream. Too bad Vee was a dream he could never have. She deserved so much more than a man like him. Regardless, her actions had touched a hollow, shattered place inside him that he wasn’t even aware existed, bringing back feelings he preferred to keep buried. His brother’s stupid pranks. His father teaching him to drive, with white knuckles spread wide on the dash. The feel of his mother’s hugs. He tugged his cell phone off the nightstand and opened an old family chat. He wasn’t sure what to say, only that he

wanted to say it.

“Hope all is well. Love you.”

Three dots immediately popped up on the screen. His mom was typing.

“We love you, too, Jordan. Is everything okay? Do you need us?”

His eyes burned. He rarely made time to see them because it caused him so much pain to see all the pictures on the wall of the boy and man he’d once been. Yet they responded to him in seconds, still worried for him after all these years.

“Love you, Son.”From his dad.

“Hey, bro. Ezra and I think of you often. All our love.”

The first tear dropped over his lower lid.

“Everything is fine. I was just thinking of you all.”

He plugged in the phone and rolled to his side. He’d gone to Texas to help Vee, not the other way around. In the last few days though, she’d softened something inside him, made him feel more alive than he had in years, and had him questioning which one of them truly needed rescuing.

Chapter Nine

Vee snuggled deeper against the pillow and smiled. Whoever said it was hard to sleep in unfamiliar places had never experienced the bed in Iron’s guest room. She blinked her eyes, catching the time on the digital clock out of the corner of her eye, and drew in a quick breath. It was nearly ten o’clock in the morning. She rubbed her eyes and

threw her legs over the side of the bed. Iron's low voice was muffled beyond the closed bedroom door, but he was speaking with someone, and that someone was most definitely female.

Her first thought was that Hannah had arrived home early or maybe somehow Thalia had found her. She jumped up and raced down the short hall, wincing at the way her feet still ached from running barefoot through the woods. Still, she moved quickly through the living room, anticipation tingling in her chest, then slid to a halt when she saw the three women at the door. None of them were familiar. The thick socks Iron had loaned her had no traction and she crashed right into Iron who stopped her forward progress by wrapping one arm around her waist.

"I told you she was going to wake up," Iron muttered. He dropped his hand from where he'd stopped her from sliding across the floor but remained close.

"Sorry." A woman with straight black hair and bold blue eyes offered her a sheepish smile. "I'm Brynn." There were several large shopping bags at her feet.

"We were really excited to stop by and meet you." A petite woman with a sleek blonde bob rubbed her rounded belly. "I'm Sam."

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“And I’m Addy.” The willowy woman with round glasses and rich golden hair moved into the entryway and hugged her. “Welcome into the fold. We are all so thankful you’re here and safe.” Addy gestured toward the other women. “We’re friends of Hannah. Brynn is engaged to Ransom and Sam is with my brother, Julian, or Joker, as everyone else calls him.”

“Are you with Silver?” Maybe this was the woman who had her other rescuer grinning down at his phone.

A furious blush pinkened Addy’s pale cheeks. “We’re just friends. My connection to everyone is through my brother.”

She couldn’t stop the smile from forming on her lips but nodded politely. Silver would totally fall for a woman like Addy. “Why don’t you all come in?” She glanced at Iron. He probably didn’t appreciate her offering up his house. “If that’s okay?”

“Course. If that’s what you want, that’s fine.”

The women moved farther inside and shut the door behind them. Brynn shuffled forward with the shopping bags and placed them to the side. “We wanted to bring you some supplies to hold you over until you’re able to go shopping. Hannah said you couldn’t leave with much.”

There was a tingling sensation behind her lids. “Thank you,” she whispered softly looking from the bags to the women and back again. These people didn’t even know her. They knew of her from Hannah alone, and yet they’d gone out of their way to help make her comfortable. Everything about Iron’s world seemed so surreal. She

was almost afraid it was too good to be true. She hadn't encountered any hidden agendas, demands, or malicious intents since running away from her rehearsal dinner. Well, except for her parents' visit to the hospital in Texas and the constant text messages that were no longer a problem because Silver and Iron had taken that burden off her shoulders.

Iron's cell phone started ringing and he fished it out of his pocket. "Iron Auto," he answered and turned toward the kitchen, listening. "Of course. I'll have two tow trucks meet you a quarter mile from exit twenty-three. If there're no injuries, we can drive the car owners and passengers right to the shop. Okay. They'll be enroute in no more than five minutes." Iron ended the call and started another.

"Danny, we've got a three-car crash on exit twenty-three. All cars and passengers need a tow back to the center." A frown settled on his face. "Shit. You'll need another set of hands then. I'm home. I can be there in fifteen. Right. See you then." Iron tucked his phone back into his side pocket and scrubbed his hands over his face.

"Vee, I hate to do this, but I need to go into the shop." He touched her arm tentatively, searching her face. "My team is up to their ears in crashes and body work today. You can either come with me or stay at the house if you're comfortable. I don't want to leave you stranded here, though, without a car."

"We can stay here." Sam's face lit up.

Brynn tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear and sauntered into the kitchen. "When we've worn out our welcome, we can bring Vivienne by the collision center."

She wasn't sure how Iron would feel about the women staying in his home while he was gone. The last thing she wanted to do was take advantage of his hospitality. It was bad enough that he felt responsible for her.

“Can I have a minute?” Iron asked, offering her his hand. His rough palms shouldn’t feel so good against hers, so gentle.

“Of course.” When they turned toward the living room, his fresh scent caught her off guard and made her want to bury her face in his soft cotton shirt.

“I wanted to talk to you privately to make sure you were comfortable with Sam and Brynn’s suggestion. You’re welcome to come with me to the shop or you can stay here with them. I also have no problem telling them to get lost if you need some peace and quiet.”

“No, please don’t. If you’re okay with us being here alone, I wouldn’t mind them staying. I’d like to get to know Hannah’s friends.”

“All right. I trust them. They’re nice people. I wouldn’t leave you in a bad position, stuck with women who weren’t being genuine.”

“I know that.” She gave him a soft smile. Despite what he thought about himself, he’d shown her with his actions that she could trust him. “Would it be alright if I took them to sit out on the deck?”

Iron let out a chuff. “Vee, while you’re staying here, this is your space too. I don’t give a shit what you do.”

“Thank you for trusting me too.” Her parents wouldn’t have dreamed of saying something similar about their own home. “I promise we won’t snoop through your closets or put our feet up on the furniture, or—”

“First, you want to go through my drawers, have at it. Same with the furniture. I don’t know if you’ve looked around, but this isn’t exactly a showplace. I have the basics. Haven’t had the need for much more. If there’s something you want to help you feel

more comfortable though, you'll tell me, right?"

The uncertainty warring in his eyes had her grabbing his hand and giving him a quick squeeze. "I'm more at home here after one night than I ever was in the estate." She reluctantly released his hand.

"Pleased to hear it. You're welcome to stay as long as you'd like."

She really believed he meant that. At least for right now. "If you decide it's not working though, or you'd be more comfortable having your space back, you'll tell me, right?"

"I don't do anything I don't want to, Vee. You wouldn't be in my house if I had doubts about you staying here. Have fun with the girls and if you get sick of them, don't be afraid to show them the door. I'm sure that they're going to talk your ear off."

"I can't wait, and I'm excited to see your business later too."

"Looking forward to giving you the tour." Iron turned to walk away, but she reached out and grabbed his arm.

"What you're doing for me isn't typical. I want you to know how much I appreciate it. You've given me a place to stay where I feel safe. Honestly, the thought of staying in Hannah's home by myself was terrifying. The thought of being away from you at all is a bit scary. You've made me feel comfortable here. So much that I got a full night of sleep and didn't even wake up once. My stomach was full, and I was content and cozy, so thank you."

A wave of emotion filtered over his face before he masked his expression. "No need for you to thank me. I certainly never mind helping a friend."

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She wasn't ready to unpack why her stomach clenched every time Iron put her in the friend zone. He was the first to help her when she left that reception, not to mention saving her life. Both of those things, not to mention countless others, were impacting her feelings. Still, the connection she felt with Iron, the urge to be close to him wasn't anything she'd ever experienced before.

As they walked back toward the other women, Iron cleared his throat. "Lock the door behind me while I'm out. I'm going to get you a spare key. That way you can come and go as you please."

She stared at him, then realized her mouth was hanging open. "You're gonna give me a key to your house?"

A ghost of a smile made his lips twitch. Watching the rare expression had her heart rate picking up. "Yeah. I am. See you in a bit."

Iron grabbed his keys from a holder on the wall and quickly said goodbye to the women, making them promise not to make her uncomfortable.

Once Iron's SUV had backed out of the driveway, it suddenly occurred to her that she was still in Iron's shirt and sweatpants. She'd jumped out of bed and raced to the door without brushing her hair or teeth. She cringed and started to excuse herself when Brynn spoke.

"You're good for him." Brynn's eyes twinkled. "I've only met Iron at Jacob's baseball games, that's my fiancé's brother. He has cerebral palsy, and I was his nurse. That's how Ransom and I met. Iron coaches and sponsors the team Jacob and Collin

play on. Wait until you see Jacob's smile when Iron pushes his chair around the bases." A wide grin spread over Brynn's face.

"Iron was telling me about the team. I'd love to help." She smiled, keeping her lips closed tight as she remembered she'd failed to brush her teeth. "If you don't mind waiting in the living room, I'm going to change. Then maybe we can go for a walk on the beach?"

"That sounds great." Sam moved toward the couch. "I don't think I'll be taking strolls for much longer." She chuckled and sat with her hands clasped lovingly over her belly. How must it feel to find a partner to go through life's challenges with? To carry their baby? She nearly sighed with longing watching Sam, but then remembered they were waiting on her. She started to turn down the hallway, but Addy called her name. "You might find some useful things in here."

She blinked quickly. "That really was so thoughtful of you."

"We take care of each other," Brynn said softly.

"And as we might've mentioned," Sam said, "we were very excited to meet you and want you to feel welcome here. Like you have people you can lean on."

"It must be something in the water here, because I've never been surrounded by so much kindness. Thank you so much."

"Now go change so we can see Iron's amazing beach." Addy handed her the bags and raced down the hall to her bedroom. No, not hers, but Iron's. She was just lucky enough that he was sharing it with her. Everything in Iron's world seemed so liberated, not without its challenges, but like a hazy dream that she might wake up from at any moment. She'd made more decisions and choices in the last few days than she ever had in her whole life. It was a privilege to be so free, and even though

she was far from independent, she was intoxicated by her newfound freedom. If this was a cruel dream, if the people weren't as genuine as they seemed, it would break her heart.

She closed the bedroom door behind her and put the bags on top of her unmade bed. She'd have to work on that later. She didn't want Iron to figure out that she was secretly a disaster. Not that she'd ever had the opportunity to pick up or clean by herself. God, what would Iron think if she told him she'd never done her own laundry before? He'd show her how. That was exactly what he'd do, and she really wanted to learn.

She tucked the thought of asking Iron to help her learn some basic skills away and started to sort through the bags. Her throat constricted with each thoughtful item she removed. Shampoo, conditioner, lotion, and clothing items. There was a pair of butter-soft jeans in her size. She pulled them on immediately, loving the way they clung to her body like a hug. Next, she put on a sports bra, T-shirt, and a hooded sweatshirt. After brushing her teeth and quickly washing her face she went back to the living room. She didn't want to keep Hannah's friends waiting.

"I can't believe you bought all of that. For me. This is the coziest outfit I've ever worn. I might never take it off."

"We're a very casual group of people." Addy smiled and took her hand. "Lead the way." They walked out onto the back deck and the second she opened the screen door, a gust of saltwater air greeted her. She breathed the refreshing ocean mist deep. Sighed when the wind tangled and threaded through her hair. The path to the water was lined with swaying seagrass and the occasional piece of driftwood. She led them along, consciously trying to keep her pace slow for Sam.

"Let me know if I'm going to step on a crab or something, I can't see my feet anymore," Sam said, and the rest of the women laughed.

Being with them felt good and comfortable, but she also wanted to know how Iron was doing at the shop.

“So, if you’re going to help Iron coach the baseball team, does that mean you’re staying?” Brynn slipped off her sneakers and left them by the dunes as they moved closer to the bright, blue water.

“I want to be close to Hannah. I want to have a chance at a normal life. I don’t know what that will look like, but I guess I’ll figure that out as I go.”

“I think it’s fantastic,” Addy said. “Do you want to continue your career? Hannah mentioned you were a model and a social media influencer.”

“I don’t think I ever wanted that career. It was just something attainable. I want to find something that feels...more.” Putting her desire to do something meaningful into words was difficult, but the women around her were nodding readily, as though they understood just what she meant.

“This is incredible,” Sam sighed and looked out at the water.

“It’s beautiful,” she agreed. “And approachable, which is even better.”

“So are you.” Addy slipped her hand into Vivienne’s again. “I’m ashamed to admit I judged a book by its cover. I’ve never met someone famous before, and your social media profiles and ads made me make assumptions that just aren’t true. You’re warm and open. Beautiful, yes, but you’re also approachable. I owe you an apology.” Addy’s eyes swam with shame.

“You don’t owe me anything.” Vivienne laughed and tilted her head to the sun. “I’ve been judged by my looks my whole life. No one’s ever apologized for it, but I’m touched you’d consider my feelings.”

“We’re going to be great friends.” Brynn reached down to pick up a shell. “Ransom and I are getting married three weeks from now and I’d love for you and Iron to be there. Nothing fancy. Just a big, fun party surrounded by friends.”

“I... You would? Of course, I’d love to. Thank you for the invitation,” she stammered, caught off guard by the kind gesture. A wave lapped the shore and tossed a butterscotch-speckled shell at her feet. She instantly bent to lift it up and clasped the treasure in her hands.

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“Oh my God. I’m so sorry. What a stupid, insensitive thing to bring up.” A look of pure horror dampened Brynn’s expression of joy.

“What is it?” Vivienne asked. “What’s wrong?”

Brynn stopped and turned to her. “I shouldn’t be mentioning my upcoming wedding when you had to make such a difficult decision about your future. It must’ve been hard to make that decide to leave.”

“It wasn’t easy, but not because I was in love with my fiancé. Our marriage was arranged by our families. Once he started showing his true personality, I was scared, not excited by the prospect of marrying him. Leaving my rehearsal dinner with Iron and Silver is the best decision I ever made.” She sunk down on the sand, so the tips of her toes touched the water when it rolled up the beach.

“Hannah said you were incredibly brave standing up to your sister Regina. That by distracting her, you saved Hannah’s life. Thank you for being strong enough to do that.” Sam dropped down beside her.

“She really said that?” Goose bumps raced down her arms and pain lodged in the back of her throat. That was by far the kindest thing someone had ever said about her. “Hannah, Collen, Branch, Iron, Silver—they were the brave ones. I wouldn’t be here if Iron hadn’t jumped on top of me to shield me from a bullet.”

“What do you think about Iron?” Addy rolled up the hem of her pants, until they were mid-calf and stepped into the water.

“I think he’s the kindest person I’ve ever met.” Flutters filled her stomach. She shouldn’t have such an infatuation with her rescuer, but Iron was appealing to her in every way.

The women said nothing, simply smiled. “What is it?”

“Well, our men are very similar. They fall fast and hard, so watch out.”

“Oh, it’s not like that. I’m sure he feels very much responsible for me. He’s just helping a friend. He’s said so himself.” Maybe someday, though, when she was settled into her life here, standing on her own two feet, she’d enjoy trying to change his mind.

Chapter Ten

“Holy shit.” One of his guys, Rick, drew out the words. “I’m handling this next customer.”

A low whistle came from one of the mechanics who was going out on break. “I wouldn’t mind working behind the counter for a few minutes.”

Iron glanced up from the papers he was trying to organize and did a double take, then scowled. “That’s Vivienne, a friend of mine. Make her uncomfortable and you’ll be on bathroom cleaning duty for a month,” he grumbled.

The men went silent, but a stab of jealousy punctured his chest. They were both young and fit. Good guys with no vices tying them down. Vee was free to date whomever she wanted. She was in a T-shirt and jeans that hugged her body from her hips to her ankles. Her hair was loose and wavy around her shoulders, and she clutched something in her hands as she moved through the parking lot. He spotted Brynn’s accessible van and appreciated that she was waiting for her to get safely

inside.

He stood up and walked to the door. His limb felt surprisingly good today, or maybe it was remembering how open and caring Vee was as she massaged ointment into his tight, bruised skin. She had no idea that she was the only person aside from him to touch his amputated limb. At first, he was uncomfortable as hell when she knelt on the floor and took the lotion from his hands, but he relaxed when there was no revulsion or disgust on her face. For someone who had been raised by extremely wealthy and judgmental people, Vee's acceptance and big heart were a gift. When she said she wanted to move away from that lifestyle, he believed her. She had too soft of a heart not to share it with others. He stepped out of the collision center and waved to Brynn and the other women in the car, before turning his gaze to Vee.

"Hey. Did you have an okay time?" He felt the weight of his shitstorm of a day lift off his shoulders when she grinned at him.

"I did. They're all so nice. I can't believe they came over to meet me and bring me supplies. I was wondering how you were doing here the whole time, though. I finally asked if they would drive me here."

Her concern for him had him drawing in a long breath. He'd been blessed with a family who cared for him, but it had been a long time since someone else had expressed that they were thinking of him. Coming from Vee, it meant even more. He shouldn't embrace the warmth spreading through his chest. Shouldn't be stepping closer to her. "Good timing. I'm just wrapping up."

She held whatever was in her hands close to her chest. "Don't rush because of me."

"What do you have there?" He tilted his chin toward her hands.

"I found the most beautiful shell today. It's for you." She opened her palms and

gazed up at him with eyes that sparkled brightly.

“For me?” He was aware of the beat of his heart and the woman in front of him. Everything else seemed to fade into the background. What he’d been doing at the shop, his irrational jealousy, and the guilt over being a shit son and brother seemed to dissolve.

“Yes, silly.” She gave him a gentle nudge and chuckled, like it was every day he received a thoughtful gift. “A treasure that appeared unexpectedly. Just like you.”

If only for this moment, he was completely immersed in what Vee was showing him and the way her gesture made him feel. She’d plucked this pretty shell from the ocean and thought of him. Her smile was so fucking bright, so endearing, he wanted to kiss the hell out of her right in front of the shop. Instead, he placed his hands under hers and stared down at the shell.

“Vee.” His voice was brimming with emotion, but he couldn’t have cared less. “I’m going to keep this forever.” He was worried he wanted to keep her forever, too, but he kept that to himself.

“You should keep it here, so you have a little piece of your ocean inside your office.” A glossed strand of her pale hair fell forward, skimming over the cream and orange shell. He looked up from where their hands were connected around the shell, but her eyes were already fixed on his face.

He held her gaze as blood pounded through his body. “You know, that’s a damn good idea.” He couldn’t help it if his voice had dropped a few octaves.

“Will you show me around?” A cloud parted above them, and a stream of sun highlighted the light dusting of freckles over the bridge of her nose.

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“Of course. We’ll go to my office first so we can find the perfect spot for this.” He closed his palm around the shell, warm from both of their hands, and grasped the door handle with the other. He held the door for Vee and aimed a pointed look at his employees over her head. He was pleased when they quickly looked away. The shop was something he’d built from the ground up. To him, it was more than just a business, but a symbol of clarity and hope from the future as he fought his addiction steadily having more wins than loses. For years, pouring himself into making the collision center successful had helped to center him. If he woke up at night with phantom pains in his legs, he’d get up, come to the shop, and work. Even in the dead of night, he could often be found here.

Once again, he found himself seeking her approval, something he didn’t love the feel of. He’d been confident, edging on cocky, before he let his friend walk to this death. A blow like that though, knowing you could’ve stopped a tragedy, but instead watched it happen, was soul-stealing and humbling at the same time. He’d made sure the waiting room was always comfortable and clean, remembering the night when his mother was driving him and Eli home from a birthday party and their car died. The man who helped tow their car was nice enough to give them a ride back to the shop, but the paint-peeling walls, and the scent of stale menthol cigarettes wasn’t exactly welcoming. Neither was the chipped linoleum floor and lack of chairs. They’d had to wait there, either standing or sitting up against the wall for their dad to come pick them up.

He studied Vee as she surveyed the space, first landing on the stacked stone reception desk. Two of his employees waved and smiled, then picked up what they’d been doing. Wide, soft-cushioned armchairs in gray and warm red faced a wood-planked feature wall with a flat-screen television beneath recessed lighting. Large potted

plants, a throw rug, and a central coffee table gave the space a living room feel. At least that's what he'd been hoping for. He rubbed his thumb back and forth over the shell.

"Iron, this waiting room is amazing. All your colors and furniture choices are so warm and relaxing. I love how you made space for kids too." She wandered over to the other side of the room. Gaming chairs were sitting on the floor in front of an Xbox system. There was also an ice hockey table and a pinball machine.

"I've never played a video game before, but this looks like so much fun."

"Got a system at home we can play on." Home.Shit, he was playing house with Vee and liking it far too much.

"Really?" Her eyes widened again, something she did when she was bursting with anticipation over something others might take for granted. He didn't think he'd ever get enough of her enthusiastic grins.

"It's a beautiful day and I bet the water is warm." The thought popped out of his mouth without warning. "We could grab you a bathing suit on the way home and spend the rest of the afternoon on the beach. Later we can order pizza at home, and I'll show you how to play?"

"The girls brought me a bathing suit in what they called my emergency supplies. That sounds like so much fun." As soon as she said the words, her smile died. "I shouldn't be so happy when Thalia is still missing." Her look of distress pulled at him, and he offered her his hand, leading her toward his office. He closed the door behind them and pulled her against his chest. The gesture of physical comfort was for her, but he felt himself melting into her embrace. The muscles and shoulders in his neck loosened, and drawing a breath seemed more fluid.

“We’re going to find her, but it might take some time. I know it’s not easy, but Thalia doesn’t seem like the type of person who would want you to be suffering. We have some of the best helping with the search.” Her chest rose and fell, and he did his best to focus on her breathing and not the way her body felt against him. A few minutes later, they left his office, and he showed her to the main garage where several cars were in the process of being repaired. Instead of her eyes glazing with boredom, they lit inquisitively as she asked questions all about the process of collision repairs. His front desk team was once again polite as they said their goodbyes and headed out to his vehicle. She’d no sooner buckled her seat belt when his cell phone rang, lighting up the vehicle’s display screen with the incoming call. A wide grin lit her face. “It’s Hannah!”

“Go ahead. You can answer it.” He backed his SUV out of the parking space as Vee took the call.

“Hanni, how are you feeling?”

“Surprisingly good. I wanted to check to see how you were feeling. Are you with Iron?”

“Yes, he’s sitting right next to me. You’re on speaker. We’re driving back to his place now.”

“Hey Iron. Thanks for letting Vivi crash at your place. We should be home the day after tomorrow.”

He was relieved to hear how steady Hannah sounded after surgery. “Send me the flight info and we’ll come pick you up at the airport.”

“That would be great. Thanks. Viv, why don’t you bring your things with you to the airport and then Iron can drop us all off at my place.”

His stomach plunged. Logically, he knew once Hannah returned home, Vee would go back to her sister's place. Their living arrangement was only temporary. Still, the grinding in his gut told him he'd already gotten way too emotionally involved.

He stole a glance at Vee when she said nothing in response to Hannah's suggestion. She'd tugged her bottom lip in between her teeth and was holding her breath. He reached over the console and gave her leg a squeeze.

"Right. Of course," she said on a rush of breath.

"Awesome. Collin wants to make you his famous pizza the first chance he gets."

In the background, Collin's voice was audible. "Aunt Vivi for pizza." His excited laughter echoed through the car and Vee smiled.

"I'm looking forward to it, Collin!" She angled her chin, glancing over at him and offered what was probably meant to be a reassuring grin. It struck him that despite everything that had gone on in her life, she cared about his well-being too. He certainly didn't want her feeling sorry or responsible for him, but what was reflected in her expression wasn't pity. It was simply an unspoken connection. One they'd had from the start.

"I'll have Branch send over the flight information and thanks again Iron."

"My pleasure. Rest up."

Hannah and Vee exchanged goodbyes before she leaned forward to hit the red button on the display to end the call. They were both silent for a moment or two, then he cleared his throat and spoke.

"How do you feel about going to your sister's house?" Part of him wanted to tell her

she could stay with him as long as she wanted. The other, more sensible part of him, understood that Vee was eager to please those around her. Had probably been doing so her whole life seeking the love and acceptance of a family who just didn't give a shit. He didn't want to lead her answer in any way or worse, set off some internal battle between being with him or Hannah.

"I..." She trailed off and looked out the window before taking a breath. "What do you think?"

He should just tell her going to Hannah's would be best, but he couldn't make himself say the words. "I think you've taken a huge leap toward independence in a very short amount of time. It's okay not to have all the answers right now."

"I wish I could be decisive and confident like Hannah. She always knew what was right for her and fought for it."

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“Didn’t you do the exact same thing when you left the rehearsal dinner?” He glanced over to the passenger seat. She was still nibbling her bottom lip. How he wished he had the right to pull over to the side of the road and kiss the worry right off her face.

“I feel so ashamed, Iron. Why’d I wait so long? Why didn’t I say enough is enough years ago?” Her eyes focused on her clasped hands in her lap.

“It’s easy for the what-ifs to take over once a situation has passed. You can’t go back. Only forward.” The irony of his words wasn’t lost on him. Those what-ifs still kept him up at night. Sometimes he’d dream that he’d made a different decision and pulled Scooter away from danger and they’d all come back to US soil as a team of six. Then he’d wake up to reality, the nightmare, and realize he’d never get the chance to amend his mistake.

“I know. I just let myself become trapped for so long. I don’t want to waste the rest of my life making decisions that won’t bring me what I want.”

“What is it that you want, Vee?” His voice drifted through the vehicle like smoke.

“Home. A family. Somewhere to belong.”

Up in the distance, his bungalow came into view and there was a pang in his chest. She’d shaken him up and he wasn’t sure things would ever completely settle back into place when she was gone. “No matter what happens, no matter where you go, you have a place with us here in Virginia.”

He pulled into the driveway, parked the car, and turned off the ignition. The interior

of the SUV was silent without the hum of the engine.

When she directed her gaze at him, his heart caught in his throat at those wide, innocent eyes glazed over with unshed tears.

“Thank you,” she whispered. They sat there, eyes locked. Thoughts he didn’t dare speak joined the crackling energy snapping in the space between them. He released a long breath, willing himself not to do something stupid like lean over the center console and kiss her. She had healing to do and needed all her strength and attention focused on one thing. Finding herself. “Ready to hit the beach?” he asked, tone lighter than it had been in a long time.

“Let’s go.” She grinned at him and opened the car door.

*

After Iron dug a pair of swim trunks out from the back of his drawer and pulled them up over his hips, he took off his prosthetic. Vee had already seen him without it. Maybe that’s why he’d been so comfortable suggesting they spend the afternoon on his private stretch of beach. He wasn’t embarrassed by his lack of a leg. He just hated the potential for awkward questions or comments and then people either distancing themselves or being too helpful because they assumed he wasn’t capable. For Vee, it just simply was. If she asked a question, it was out of simple curiosity. Him being an amputee didn’t seem to affect her one way or the other, so he’d made the decision to do something he hadn’t in years. Spread a towel out on the sand and swim in the sea. He stood, positioning the cushioned top of the crutch beneath his arm, and moved across the room. When he got into the living room, Vee was waiting with two towels and one of those radiant smiles on her face. If he hadn’t come to know her, hadn’t watched the transformation before his own eyes, he might’ve thought her frequent grins were disingenuous, something for the cameras. This fresh-faced, bright-eyed woman’s joy was addictive, though. He didn’t miss the way her eyes roamed his

body, pausing on his chest. When a pretty blush colored her cheeks and burst of heat speared through him. She already looked far healthier from when they'd stolen her away from Texas. She'd been beautiful before, but watching her blossom over the past week and embracing her new life made him realize how her smile, which didn't reach her eyes at first, now radiated. She stood up from the couch and he nearly swallowed his tongue. The bikini she wore was conservative but did nothing to hide her full breasts or the flare of her hips. She was a decade his junior. His friend's sister. The last thing she needed was to have the man who'd committed to protecting her, gawk at her.

"I got some towels from the bathroom closet."

"Thanks. Lead the way." He recognized his mistake the moment she turned around. The flirty ties on either side of her bottoms danced against her hips as she walked out to the deck. Once they hit the beach, he had to focus on not faceplanting in the loose sand. She was already opening the towels, the wind tugging at the bright-blue edges of the fabric, when he joined her by the water.

"It's beautiful here. I can see why you love it."

"Haven't been out here in years." When she just stared at him, he continued. "I watch the water from the deck, but it's been a while since I've experienced it up-close-and-personal like this. Even longer since I've been in the water." He tossed the crutch onto the sand beside him and crouched down, bracing both arms in front of him. The terry cloth towel touched his hands, and he walked them back, easing into a sitting position.

"Why?" She sat next to him and opened a bottle of suntan lotion that must've been concealed between the towels.

"At first, I was too busy healing, then hating what I'd become." His gaze

inadvertently moved to the overgrown vines on the pergola. “After that I threw myself into making the shop work. I’m not lying when I say the last few weeks have reminded me of how I used to feel before the explosion that killed my teammate. Before I lost my leg and gave up my career as a SEAL. The first time I’ve felt a flicker of purpose outside my collision center or the baseball team. Don’t get me wrong, I love both of those things, especially time on the field with the kids, but meeting you has made me see things in a different way.”

Vee poured some lotion between her hands and smoothed it down one long leg. Jesus. Why had he thought this was a good idea? The surf crashed against the shore, then receded. The bold sun overhead glinted against the water, making it gleam silver.

“At the shop when you said you shouldn’t be so happy while Thalia was still missing, well, that hits hard for me. I feel the same way about Scooter. I don’t know how I’m supposed to let him go.”

“Maybe you’re not supposed to. Maybe he’d want you to hold him right here.” She reached over and placed her hand over his heart. “You might have space for the memories if you let go of the guilt. I don’t think he’d want you to feel responsible for his death. He made a choice too. Knew the stakes were high, right?”

“Yeah, of course. There were three hostages.”

“What happened to them?”

“They were saved because Scooter diverted the attention by rushing toward the terrorists.”

“He died a hero, Iron. And despite what you want to believe, you’re one too.” She dropped her hand but not her gaze, holding him hostage with eyes as silvery blue as

the ocean.

“I’m no hero, Vee. I’m broken.” His words were rough and low, blending with the wind and surf.

“No Iron.” She shook her head, face more solemn than he’d seen before. “You’re unbreakable.” She touched his face, almost reverently, then got to her knees and moved behind him. “I’ll do your back. You do mine. Then we hit the water.” He wasn’t sure if she’d changed the subject abruptly because she sensed his distress. It felt like she was slowly chipping away at his pain, taking some of it to hold on her own. Her hands started in the center of his back and spread across his shoulders. She wasn’t just applying lotion but kneading the tight muscles of his shoulders and neck.

The scent of coconut swirled with salty air and made his stomach clench. He dug one hand into the sand beside him and fisted it into the tiny granules, trying to temper the intense physical response he was experiencing. He wasn’t going to fuck this up by doing something stupid, but each time the little beauty queen stroked his skin, the sensation made his cock swell. He stifled a curse when she stood up and circled around him, sitting between his legs. She lifted her thick hair, dropping it over her left shoulder. He should be thankful. If she’d sat any closer, there’d be no mistaking the result of his attraction against her back.

His hands trembled when he squirted lotion into his palms, more when her sun-warmed skin was beneath his fingertips. He swallowed hard as he applied lotion to the back of her neck and over the delicate slope of her shoulders. Was it his imagination, or had she leaned back into his touch? He couldn’t shake the mental image of cupping her lush breasts, of dipping his fingers beneath the hem of her bikini bottoms to bring her to climax as they faced the sea, just like this, with her back pressed against his chest.

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He worked to slow his breathing and smoothed more lotion over the backs of her arms. He'd never felt this way about a woman in his life and not just the physical desire. He loved talking to her and having her close. It would be all too easy to hold onto her too tightly, but that wouldn't do. Not when she was just learning to be free. Not when she was meant to fly.

Chapter Eleven

Viv stifled a groan as Iron's large palms moved over her back. He'd rubbed the suntan lotion between his hands, warming it before letting it touch her skin. Waves crashed into the shore, and she breathed in the salty mist tinged with the coconut scent of the lotion, willing the fast clip of her heart to slow. Heat from Iron's body was rolling off him. One heavily muscled leg bracketed hers, the other stopped just above the knee, covered by the hem of his swim trunks. She leaned into his touch as he kneaded her shoulders. She'd been shocked by her own suggestion to help each other with the lotion. Yes, she craved his touch and wanted the chance to touch him in return with a motive that seemed relatively safe and productive, but she'd never been so bold. The suggestion was a testament to how comfortable she was in this man's presence. Another wave broke on the shore, and she was curious how he'd navigate the rushing water. The question was on the tip of her tongue, but she didn't want to insult him. He was strong and knew what he was doing. If he asked her to help, would she be strong enough to assist him?

"What are you thinking?" His voice so close to her ear sent a thrill spiraling through her.

"If I say, promise you won't be upset or annoyed with me?"

“Vee.” His palms worked over her shoulders and down her outer arms. She loved the feel of his rough hands against her skin. “I’m not going to be upset or annoyed if you share what’s on your mind.”

“Okay then. I was thinking how rough the waves look and wondering if I could help you in some way. Not that you want it or need it. Your muscles have muscles for Pete’s sake. I can imagine the logistics are still challenging, though. How will you get into the water safely? And what about getting out?”

He’d stopped applying the lotion, his hands resting gently just below her elbows. When he didn’t immediately respond, worried thoughts started to bombard her. He must’ve sensed her unease because his chuckle rumbled through the afternoon air.

“Slow down, sweetheart. It humbles me that you care about my safety. You can ask me anything. If it’s coming from you, knowing what a kind and curious heart you have? It’s not going to bother me in the least. It feels pretty good that I’m able to talk freely with you. Like I mentioned, I haven’t spent too much time in the water recently, so I don’t know how smooth my transition is going to be. I have no qualms about asking you to be my crutch if I need some help.”

“Okay. I’m happy to be of service.”

He chuckled again and tossed the lotion on the blanket and stood. She watched in fascination as he moved closer to the waves, dropping the crutch as he got closer. He hopped into the water until the waves lapped just below his hip, then jumped with his arms outstretched. Vee scrambled off the towel and ran into the surf. The refreshingly cool water rushed over her toes and ankles, and she followed his lead, leaping into a cresting wave and slipping beneath the surface. When she came up for air, another strong wave crashed over them. A breathless peal of laughter left her lips as Iron’s hands gripped her hips, so she didn’t go tumbling over. Her nipples pebbled beneath the material of her swimsuit, not because of the cold water but from having Iron’s

hands on her body. The ocean was so vast, they should've had plenty of space to float apart, but they drifted together, treading water inches apart. There was a flutter of pain in her chest when she put her hands right above his heart. His pupils were dilated, eyes nearly black. She wasn't the only one affected by lotioning each other on the towels. He glanced down at her chest, and she knew he was staring at the way her nipples strained against the wet fabric of her bathing suit.

"Iron." She wasn't sure what she wanted from him, but his name felt right moving past her lips. The tension between them thickened, and with his gaze penetrating hers, the breath whooshed out of her lungs. She wanted to find out if his lips were as soft as they looked. Taste the salt water on his skin. Earlier she'd been thinking that once she got her life straightened out and learned to do more on her own, she might be worthy of Iron. A woman who was sure of herself and confident enough to reach out and grab what she wanted. Now though, with Iron staring at her with an expression of wonder, all those insecurities seemed so far away. With Hannah coming home the day after tomorrow, her time with Iron was growing short. The Vivienne she wanted to become would recognize that life was too short. That she'd just taken a huge leap by leaving a situation that wasn't bringing her joy. Iron though? He calmed the jitters in her stomach and the small voice that kept whispering she couldn't make it on her own. Just being near him soothed her mind while making her midsection buzz with excitement. If her goal was to explore experiences that brought her happiness, what was she waiting for?

"Yeah, Vee?" His voice was as rough as the ocean waves and a warm, liquid pull flowed through her stomach and settled between her hips.

She was still staring at his broad chest when she asked the question on her mind. "May I kiss you?" Her voice wobbled as heat rushed up her cheeks. She glanced up at him quickly, embarrassment flooding her. What had she been thinking? Self-doubt warred with her lustful request until the heat searing in his expression registered.

He raised his hands to frame her face, the pads of his fingers against her cheeks leaving her breathless. He leaned down, brushing his mouth against hers once, then twice. A strangled sound caught in the back of her throat, and she gripped his wide shoulders. His pulse pounded against her fingers and there was a slight tremor in his hands where he touched her cheeks. He hesitated for a brief moment, then teased apart her lips with a gentle stroke of his tongue.

She pushed her toes into the wet sand and wrapped her arms around the back of his neck to draw him closer. Her teeth scraped playfully over his lower lip, and a shiver tingled through her when he groaned in pleasure. She swallowed the rough sound, the vibration of it going directly to her strained nipples. A wave rocked them closer together, and every touch was electrified. Iron's palms moved up her cheeks and his fingers speared into her wet hair. She loved how the muscles of his chest rippled under her hands, the defined planes of his stomach and the indents of his hips. She whimpered when he pulled back and stared at the dazed look in his eyes. They were both panting, but she wanted to jump back into the wild kiss.

"Guess we should come up for air." He rubbed his thumb over her swollen bottom lip.

"Who needs air? Not me." She smiled and reached for him, but instead of kissing her like she wanted, he pulled her into his chest. She wrapped her arms around his waist and clung tight as they swayed with the waves.

"Thank you, sweetheart," he murmured with his lips against her forehead. "Hands down the best kiss of my life. I won't ever forget it."

An emotion she couldn't quite name took up space in her chest. She must've taken too long to respond, because he held her back slightly and searched her face. "Are you okay?"

“No.” She shook her head, not completely able to catch her breath. “Moved. Speechless. Ruined. Those are the things I’m feeling right now. But okay? I’ve left okay behind. Whatever that was? It was extraordinary. I’m feeling greedy, Iron.” His eyes held so much heat, it nearly knocked her back. “I want more.” The words coming off her lips sounded nothing like her own, but they were the truth.

A ragged breath left his lips as he continued to hold her tightly. “And I’m feeling weak. One kiss and I’m having a hard time hanging onto control. I’m not a man who deserves you, Vee. Not the kind of man who can drown in everything that’s you and still be sharp to his surroundings and protect you.”

“The security cameras at the houses nearby didn’t pick up on anything near Hannah’s house. Maybe I’m not in danger at all. And if push comes to shove, I know you’ll do your best to protect me, but sometimes things happen that are unavoidable.”

“Maybe it’s because I recognize how precious you are and I’m being paranoid, but I don’t want to write off the break-in at Hannah’s house as simply an unlocked door.”

Movement on the shore caught her eye and his gaze followed hers. His body tensed and he froze in place.

Recognition struck her. “Iron, are those your parents?”

The breath whooshed out of his lungs. “Yeah.” His voice, so filled with emotion a moment ago, was now remote. She had no clue how Iron was feeling about his parents dropping in or what they potentially just witnessed. Vivienne stared at the couple standing on the shore. As surprised as she and Iron seemed to be, they appeared even more shocked. She inwardly cringed wondering how long they’d been standing there and how much they saw of the kiss that turned her world upside down. The man who was in the picture was still tall and broad, but his shoulders were more slumped, like life was weighing down on him. His mother was looking from Iron to

her and back again.

By his own admission, Iron's relationship with his parents was strained, and as kind as she knew Iron to be, he said he cut them off brutally, thinking they'd be better off without him in their lives. Iron's sense of honor and the standards he held himself to were detrimental to his well-being. She had no doubt if one of the SEAL teammates had been the one standing beside Scooter when he made his final decision, Iron would give them grace. There was no way he'd give that forgiveness to himself though. His mother took a step back and looked like she was going to turn away. Vivienne looked up at Iron who was making no moves to get out of the water.

"We have to get out and greet them." They were still hanging onto each other as the waves rolled around them.

"I don't know what to say to them, Vee." He clutched her more tightly, like a drowning man might cling to a life preserver.

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“How about starting withhello, it’s good to see you.” She cupped his face, forcing him to meet her gaze. “You can do this Iron, if not for you, then for them.”

“You’re right.” A sigh left his lips, still reddened from kissing her breathless.

“I’m proud of you.” She dropped her hands from his face and offered him her hand, but he shook his head.

“I, uh, can’t get out quite yet.” He glanced toward his parents.

“Why not?” She couldn’t force him to go talk to his parents, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t going to try.

“Because five seconds ago I had you in my arms, your body pressed up against mine, and I haven’t recovered from that.”

The realization dawned on her and she smiled. “I’ll grab your crutch.” She ran out of the water and gave what she hoped was an enthusiastic wave and her brightest smile at his parents, then turned back to where Iron was moving toward the shore. She met him halfway and passed him the mobility aid before bounding out of the water to get a towel. She wrapped it around her shoulders and dashed up to where Iron’s parents were retreating.

“Wait! Lilly, Bill.” They turned around, confusion stark on their faces.

“You know our names?” Iron’s mom had paused, clutching her husband’s forearm.

“You’re Iron’s parents.” She smiled trying desperately to diffuse the uncomfortable situation. “Your picture is hanging in my bedroom.”

His mother rapidly blinked then stared openly at her. His dad raised a single brow.

Shoot. She was messing this up. “I shouldn’t call it my bedroom. More the room I’m staying in. It’s so good to meet you both. I’m Vivienne and your son saved my life. Twice actually.”

When they said nothing, she stepped forward to embrace Iron’s mom, hesitating when she remembered she was still soaked from the ocean. Lilly caught her hands as she started to step back and yanked her into her arms.

“Get in here. I don’t give a hoot that you’re wet.” Lilly’s sweet, warm scent and quick acceptance made her eyes prickle. The woman squeezed her fiercely, and she gave up on trying to keep her damp body away from Lilly’s dry clothes and melted into the hug. She couldn’t remember her mother hugging her if it wasn’t for a camera, but this felt different. This was a woman holding tight to a link to her son. She forced herself to let go of a hug charged with love belonging to Iron and not her. Iron’s father silently held his arms out and she wrapped her arms around his waist. Like Iron he was far taller than her. He also hugged her hard.

She’d been taught to be a proper hostess at a young age. One whose manners and appearance were expected to be flawless. She quickly pushed thoughts of what would be served to their guests, interesting talking points, and their perception of her aside. She was just going to do what felt right. “Why don’t we go inside? Iron will catch up.”

Bill cleared his voice as they walked toward the screen door. “How long have you known our boy?”

“About five days. It’s kind of a long story.” She could only imagine what was running through their heads. She held open the door for them and led them through the kitchen and into the living room. “Please sit. Make yourselves comfortable.”

“It looks the same as when he first moved in,” his mother murmured looking around the bare space. She didn’t think Lilly was being judgmental, just concerned for her son.

“He doesn’t like giving himself soft or pretty things, does he?” She wasn’t sure what made her say that, maybe she was trying to allude to his internal struggle, his guilt. She wanted them to understand that Iron didn’t push them away because he didn’t love them.

“I know.” His father wrapped his arm around Lilly, and they sat on the couch. “That’s why we were surprised to see you here.”

A blush heated her cheeks. She could still feel their son’s lips branded against hers. It was the most beautiful, intimate moment she’d ever experienced. “I’m not...We’re not...” She wasn’t exactly sure how to handle this situation and Iron was taking longer than she expected. The thought of him being so aroused because of her made a small sound squeak in her throat. God, Iron’s parents probably knew exactly what she was thinking. Her face burned as she rushed to tell them why she was here in their son’s home. “I ran into some trouble. My parents wanted me to marry a man for the wrong reasons, and Iron and his SEAL friend Silver helped me get away to start fresh.”

“I’m so sorry you had to go through that.” The expression on Lilly’s face was sincere and the woman reached out and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

“I talk with Jordan’s former lieutenant commander every now and then when he emails to see how he’s doing. I never have much to say, because even though he’s

been on US soil for more than five years, we don't know about his life. I was always under the impression that he wanted nothing to do with his former team, but maybe it's just us he doesn't want in his life."

Bill's pain nearly broke her. "It's not that. Iron—I mean Jordan—keeps to himself. He only came to help a friend. My sister, who was supposed to be a bridesmaid in my wedding, asked him to come. The plan was never for me to stay with Jordan, but we had to leave Texas without my sister. She got really hurt trying to help me and needed surgery."

"Oh no." Lilly leaned forward, grasping her hand once again. Vivienne swallowed past the tightness in her throat at the kind gesture. "What happened?"

"Like my parents, my eldest sister, Regina, had a stake in making the marriage come to fruition. When she discovered I was gone, she tried to kill Hannah."

There was an audible gasp from both parents and Lilly's grip on her hand tightened.

"Everyone's going to be okay," she reassured them. "And Regina is awaiting trial to be charged with two counts of attempted murder. She shot at me, but your son pushed me out of the way. He saved my life. When we returned to Virginia, the plan was for me to stay at Hannah's house, but it looked like there might've been a break-in. Your son was kind enough to open his home to me. I know he likes his privacy, so I'm doubly grateful that he let me stay here. You raised an amazing man, and I hope you know how much he loves you." Lilly let go of her hand and covered her mouth as her eyes filled. She didn't bother to swipe away the tears.

"I feel like we failed him in so many ways," Lilly choked out, voice thick with emotion.

"No," she said too sharply, shaking her head, before continuing in a softer tone. "The

reason he pushed you away was because he failed himself. Or at least, that's what he believes. It's not my story to tell, but you should know keeping you both and Milo at arm's length is just as much punishment for him as it is for you."

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Bill stared at her, gray brows furrowed together. “He’s not usually forthcoming, but you seem to know a great deal about him.”

“I suppose we bonded because of the intense situation.”

Lilly’s expression changed and the woman’s loud gasp startled her. “My God. You’re the famous model. I saw your story on the news. You’ve been through so much. First the terrible things your sister did and now your parents being investigated by the FBI. So much to cope with.”

Her heart started hammering in her chest. She hadn’t watched the television since leaving Texas, but now, it made sense that a city official’s wife being held on bail for attempted murder would cause a stir. A shiver snaked through her, raising the tiny hairs on the back of her neck and arms. A chill seeped through her skin, straight down to the bone. She hadn’t known her parents were under investigation by the FBI. What other secrets were they harboring? God, what if they really had trafficked Thalia into the country? Her stomach twisted at the thought of her friend and others employed by her family being coerced into the country. She had first-hand experience with just how persuasive they could be.

“This is a high-profile case in Texas. Your family is quite influential.” Bill’s expression was unreadable.

“Your fiancé’s made quite a stir on social media. He must know he let a good thing slip through his fingers. It’s been so long since we talked to Jordan that when he texted us out of the blue the other night, we were extremely concerned.” Lilly released a shuddery breath. “We weren’t sure what to think, so we decided to just

drive up. Seeing him with you was such a relief.”

Her lids burned, and she closed her eyes to gain control of her emotions. She wasn’t sure if Iron had reached out to his family because of her words, but the idea that he might trust her enough to consider her advice was something she’d never experienced before. Maybe, just maybe, she’d helped him too. “My parents are not nice people, and neither was my fiancé. Your son is the furthest thing from them. He might appear rough around the edges but he’s kind and giving. I can see the same compassion from both of you. I can see how much you love him. Don’t let him push you away. The memories of what happened have haunted him and he doesn’t want that to touch your family. He’s wrong, though. I have a feeling you’re both more than strong enough to shoulder his pain.”

Bill dropped his head and pinched the bridge of his nose while silent tears rolled down Lilly’s face. “We should have done more,” she whispered, voice choked.

Vivienne knelt on the floor next to Lilly, putting a hand on her knee. “He wouldn’t have let you. What matters is you’ve kept trying to connect with him and you’re here now.”

A heavy hand lay on her shoulder, and she looked over at Iron’s father. “You must be nothing like your family, because all I see is compassion and understanding in you too. Trying to ease our distress from the first moment. Encouraging us. You haven’t known Jordan long, but I have a feeling you’re important.”

“He was looking at you like you were a miracle.” Lilly gave her a tear-soaked smile. “He might’ve saved you, Vivienne, but I have no doubt you’re doing the same for him right now.”

Tears escaped her lower lids, and she bent forward to give them both a hug. The angle was awkward, but their words had touched something deep in her heart and she

relished the opportunity to be close to these people. Real parents who stood by their son, even if it was from a distance. It struck her that she loved the feeling of comforting others. So much more fulfilling than holding a designer bag for the cameras or walking a runway. Perhaps she could explore a job that had something to do with helping people. There were so many possibilities she could explore now that she'd broken free of her previous life.

"Is everything okay?" Iron's voice was sharp and edged with concern. She wanted to respond to him, but the words were locked up in her throat.

Iron cast a pointed look at his parents, then brought his attention back to her. "Let's get you into some dry clothes." One arm was braced over his crutch, and he stretched the other out to her. "Wait here," he said to Bill and Lilly. Iron grasped her hand, locking their fingers together as she stood. Once she was up, he let go, and she missed the contact immediately.

"We'll be right back." She sent them a watery smile. Iron must've misconstrued her tears because he narrowed his gaze at his parents.

"Everything's fine." She cast him a smile, trying to reassure him, then turned to Bill and Lilly. "It'll take me no time to change." Warmth enveloped her as Iron looped his free arm around her shoulders and led her down the hall. He let go of her when they entered the bedroom she'd stayed in last night, and the door clicked shut behind them. Her body reacted to Iron's presence as he approached slowly behind her.

She was glad she was facing away from him as she took a few steady breaths. She'd be lying if she said she wasn't shaken by the information that her parents were being investigated by the FBI or that she wasn't moved by the obvious love Bill and Lilly had for their son. Iron shifted behind her and his crutch clattered to the floor. She was about to turn to see if he was okay, but then the weight of his rough, warm palms landed gently on her shoulders and offered a reassuring squeeze. His lips

fluttered against her neck, kissing her softly. Heat kindled in her belly as his tongue tickled the sensitive spot right behind her ear. She squeezed her thighs together, trying to rid herself of the ache that began in the ocean when she was kissing Iron.

Iron groaned. “Baby don’t do that. Not when you’re in that sexy as fuck bikini and we’re alone behind closed doors. Not when I’m desperate to ease that ache you’re feeling.”

She glanced over her shoulder as warmth flushed her cheeks. “How did you know?”

“The way your legs are clenched so damn tight.”

“Oh.” She looked away, wanting desperately to hide her face.

A soft chuff puffed over her neck. “Don’t be embarrassed. It took me way longer than it should’ve to get my body under control back there on the beach. Sorry I left you with my parents for so long. I want to know what they said to upset you.” His hands rubbed up and down her arms.

“Nothing.” She answered too quickly and an honest-to-God growl of frustration tore past his lips. “My parents are being investigated by the FBI. I shouldn’t be surprised, but what if they really took Thalia and made her work at the estate? How could she even look at me, let alone befriend me?” She let her chin drop to her chest. “Why do I still want to believe that they did nothing wrong?”

“Vee,” his voice soothed. Her name rolled off his tongue like a caress, sending a delectable shiver through her. “They’re your parents. Of course, you don’t want to think that they were doing bad shit.” He shifted his body to sit on the side of the bed, pulling her onto his lap. “Ransom got us an appointment with his lawyer tomorrow. We’ll talk to him about securing your finances and how to proceed with the legal stuff, so you don’t have to worry about anything.”

“You know, I forgot your real name was Jordan.” She leaned into him and could feel the beat of his heart pounding against her back.

“I’ve gone by Iron since my SEAL days, but my parents wouldn’t know that because I’ve kept them out.” His lips were so close to the sensitive curve on her neck. Maybe it was wrong, but she wanted to know what it would feel like if he scrapped his teeth against her skin.

His hands left her arms, as he wrapped them around her waist. A shiver coursed through her body. “You’ll always be Iron to me. Strong. Steady. Unbreakable.”

“You know I’m not those things.” He dropped his forehead to her shoulder blade. They were both taking comfort from each other. For her it meant so much more. Her heart stuttered in her chest. She wanted this man. Wanted to be connected to him on every level.

“You are to me.” Her voice was breathless, but she didn’t hide it from him. “Your parents care so deeply for you, Iron. Reach out and take every ounce of love they’re offering. Despite what you might think, you deserve to be loved and cared for. Your parents deserve to have both their sons.”

His body tensed behind her and after a few moments he let out a long breath and spoke. “Fuck. I’m scared shitless to face them, Vee.”

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She stood and turned so she was standing between his hips and framed his face. “I know.” She pressed a kiss to his lips.

“I don’t think now is the right time. There’s so much I’ve done. So much they don’t know.” She could feel his lips still against her hair. Could feel him breathing her in deep.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. We all cope in different ways. You’re missing the point though. You. Are. Worth. It. They love you and they’re here now. Talk to them.”

“I don’t know if it will be any use or how to make them understand. I don’t even know if I want them to understand.”

She moved her hands from his cheeks and up into his hair. “You can do this.” Leaning closer, she gave him another chaste kiss on the lips, and when desire raced through his gaze, she wished they were alone.

“I don’t deserve the faith you have in me,” he murmured, expression turning stark.

“I’m the one who gets to decide who and what I believe in.” She stepped away from the bed and turned to the drawer where she’d stored the new clothing Brynn, Sam, and Addy had given her. As her hand clutched the bathroom doorknob, she looked over her shoulder to find Iron staring at her. “And Iron, I do believe in you.”

Just like he believed in her. She shut the bathroom door, not bothering with the lock, and pushed her bathing suit bottoms over her hips. When she asked Iron if she could

kiss him, part of her was expecting him to say no. To tell her she was vulnerable and didn't want to take advantage of her. Despite what others thought of her, she knew what she wanted. Maybe she didn't know exactly what she wanted to do with her life, but she wasn't following a plan unless it was her own. She was going to follow her intuition, and it included a plan. One that kept pointing her to Iron.

Chapter Twelve

Iron had gotten dressed, attached his prosthetic, and started toward the living room. It shamed him to admit he hoped his parents had left, especially after Vee told him she believed he could repair the damage he'd caused. He still wasn't so sure. For half a decade, he'd stood alone. The decision was his choice. He'd missed birthdays and anniversaries. He'd gone months without calling home or hearing his mother's laugh. It was moments like these, when he was faced with his own decisions, that bitter regret scalded the back of his throat.

"Jordan." His mother was standing by the couch, her hands clasped together. His father remained seated but facing him. "Vivienne is lovely." There had been a time when she'd rush to him and hug him so tightly, he thought she'd crack a rib. Now she hesitated and held herself back.

"She's been through a lot, but yeah, she's got a beautiful personality. One of the rare times the outside is just as pretty as the inside."

"We should leave." His mother's chin tremble was a punch to the gut. "When we got your text message, we were all so worried about you. Then we got here and saw the car in the driveway, but you weren't answering the door and we thought—" Her shoulders shuddered and she covered her face.

He closed the distance between them and wrapped his arms around his mother. "I'm sorry." His voice broke, and the woman that had always been there for him, the one

he turned his back on, clung to him. Sobs racked her small frame. “I’m so damn sorry, Mom.”

“Shhh,” she hushed, trying to soothe him even when she was breaking.

“I don’t—”

“Stop it, Jordan. I don’t want your apologies. I just want my son back.” He’d never heard his mother yell before, but the pain resonated in her words.

“I don’t deserve your forgiveness. I hurt all of you, and it was intentional.” He glanced at his father from over his mother’s head.

“And you didn’t deserve the hand you’d been dealt. You didn’t deserve to lose your teammate, your leg, your hope. Isn’t that enough?” She was still hugging him, her hands gripping his shirt tightly.

A hand landed on his back, and he realized his dad had risen from the sofa to join them. “Your mother’s right. We all have regrets. All wish we did things differently. We never should’ve listened when you told us to leave and never come back. We thought space and time would help you heal, but it just created more distance.”

“I didn’t want you to see how far I’d fallen.”

“Don’t keep blaming yourself. I’ve kept in touch with your lieutenant commander. He made the same mistake as us and gave you your space. Your teammate made a split-second decision. He knew he was going to die that day. Traded his life for those hostages. Don’t spit on his sacrifice. Live your life, Jordan.”

“His fiancée—”

“Has found happiness. She’s married and has a son. Theo.”

Tears burned his eyes. That was Scooter’s real name. Theo. He was damn pleased that she’d found love again and married a man who embraced someone she’d once loved by naming their son after him.

Maybe he’d punished himself long enough. He’d needed himself to suffer for what happened that afternoon. Lived that way so long, he wasn’t sure he could let go. Now, he had some incentive though. If he was able to finally let go, he could be there for Vee in the way she deserved. It was far too early to think of their relationship progressing. For all he knew her request to kiss him in the ocean was born out of curiosity.

Regardless, he’d seen the hazy shock in her eyes when they’d broken apart. The heat between them was boundless and all consuming. The creak of Vee’s door opening made him glance over his shoulder. She had traded her bathing suit for another pair of jeans and a T-shirt. The casual look suited her, although he was sure any type of clothing would. He found that he liked how comfortable she looked. She didn’t need makeup to enhance her true beauty.

His mom released him and rushed over to Vee, gathering her into an embrace. “Thank you, honey.” Watching his mother encompass Vee in all the nurturing warmth he’d grown up with made his eyes sting. That motherly connection was something she deserved but had never really had.

“I should be thanking you. I wouldn’t be standing her if it wasn’t for Jordan.” Vee’s eyes lifted and she held his gaze. He could feel the electric pulse between them stirring through the air.

After a moment, his father cleared his throat. “We should go, Lilly. If it’s alright with you, maybe we could take you and Vivienne to lunch tomorrow and catch up. We got

a hotel in town.”

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“Don’t leave.” Vee looked up at his father. “We were going to have pizza delivered. Stay.” She wrapped her arm around his mother’s shoulders.

Fuck, this woman. Iron took a cleansing breath, closing his eyes before exhaling. She was so open and welcoming despite everything she’d been through. She brought a sense of calm to his life, but also a lightheartedness that was lost years ago.

Maybe he was setting himself up for heartbreak, but he could see her fitting in with his family. He could imagine her laughing with Milo and Ezra. Sitting out on the porch having a glass of wine with his mom. His family would embrace Vee and give her what she’d always wanted. A family who would love and cherish her. He’d only known her five days, but where he pushed other women away, he wanted Vee close. When he thought about how his house felt before she arrived, it struck him that he’d never made it a home. He knew it was bare as hell, but Vee somehow warmed the space. She’d only been here for one night, but her joy and sunny personality had permeated his walls and had already brought so much healing to him and to his family.

If he decided to pursue a relationship with Vee, he needed to take it slow. The only type of love she’d ever known was conditional, centered on what she could do or bring to others. If something started between them, he wanted her to know bone-deep that she was cared for. That he would never ask anything of her except for her love, if she was willing to give it. Their gaze connected again, and he smiled.

“Been a long time since I’ve seen that expression,” his father said, clapping his back. “I missed it. We’d love to stay for pizza, but we’re buying.”

He looked up at the man who taught him so much. How had he ever stayed away from his parents? “You’d never let me or Milo pay for a damn thing.”

“That’s right, because if I did, I’d never hear the end of it from your mom.” His eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled. “Do you want to go with me to pick it up or have it delivered?” His father wouldn’t have asked unless something was on his mind that he wanted to discuss.

“We’ll go pick it up,” he said, then turned to Vee. “If you’re alright with that?”

“Of course. Your mom and I can talk.” He searched her face, looking for any sign that she was just agreeing because that’s what she thought he wanted.

He asked what everyone wanted on their pizza and placed the order, tugging his keys off the counter. He liked the control of driving, but when his dad walked directly to a four-door sedan and got behind the wheel, he figured he’d have to be flexible.

“How well do you know Vivienne?” his father asked as he started the engine.

“I know enough of the important things. She ran barefoot through the forest to try to save her sister. Tore her feet all to hell and didn’t complain even hours afterward.” He paused and then added, “She brings me a sense of peace.”

His father backed out of the driveway and started in the direction of the main road. “You’re falling for her.”

He stared out the window, looking at the long stretch of beach and the bright water. From the car, the waves appeared almost turquoise. He wouldn’t forget the way Vee looked when she asked if she could kiss him, or the first taste of her lips, so uniquely sweet. His father was right. His feelings for Vee were strong. He couldn’t deny that, but at the same time, there were a lot of obstacles. “She’s young, and she’s lived a

very sheltered and controlling life. I don't want to be the next person she feels like she owes something to."

"I don't think you're giving her enough credit." His father turned on his directional and took a right onto the main roadway. There was more white threaded through his hair than Iron remembered. A few more wrinkles around his eyes and mouth. He was grateful that Vee had asked him some difficult questions about his parents the night before, because if she hadn't, he wouldn't have ended up texting them, and this opportunity to reconnect might've been lost until it was too late. "Maybe she already understands the type of man you are and the freedom she has with you."

"She grew up a multimillionaire." Even as he said the words, he knew he was playing the devil's advocate. Maybe he was even waiting for his father to tell him to let her go. That a woman like Vee would have a difficult time living a simpler life, even though he knew that wasn't true.

His dad scoffed. "That woman in there doesn't give a damn about money. She's not the same person they portrayed on television. You must know the way she looks at you. I was surprised when she told me you've only known each other for five days. That's how it was for me and your mom. Move-in day at college. I saw her carrying a box she could barely see over. She'd gotten lucky and was assigned a single dorm room, but she wasn't without a roommate for long. It wasn't a full two weeks before I hauled my stuff across the hall to her room and never left. What I'm saying is, when you know, Son, don't fight it. Don't assume that woman wants anything more than you can give her." They drove in silence for a few minutes, and traffic got thicker as they neared the more populated area of town where the public beach was always packed.

"There are reasons why I kept you and Mom away."

"I know that." His father's eyes left the road briefly to look at him. "But we don't

need to talk about them right now unless you need to get it off your chest. What's important is that we're mending things. You look healthier and happier than you have in years."

"I think the happy has only come about in the past five days. I've been working on my health for a while now. Hasn't been easy."

"No." He sent him a look brimming with understanding. "I can't imagine it was, but here you are. Still a warrior."

Iron was too choked up to respond, and part of him wondered if his parents already knew about the time he spent in detox and recovery.

His dad pulled into the pizza place and turned off the engine. "Her parents and fiancé seem real nasty. If you run into trouble, it might be safer if you got out of town. They'll expect her to follow her sister. You can always lay low at our house."

"Thanks for that offer. Trust me, if I think for a second she's in any danger, then I'll get her somewhere safer." His father nodded and placed a hand on his shoulder.

They grabbed the pizza from the store and headed home. When they walked in the door, the scene in front of him made his stomach tumble. Vee had her head tilted back, laughing at something his mother had said. The two of them had unearthed a pack of UNO cards from God knows where and were playing at the kitchen table. The relief on his mom's face when she looked up and smiled, gave him a jolt. There was a pang in his heart, a feeling of rightness as they crowded around the kitchen table. Vee slid onto the bench beside him, so they were nearly hip to hip. If he had his way, they would've eaten in the living room with her on his lap. The sunset was a brilliant display of gold and red, making the sky look as though it had caught fire.

Vee was just as enthusiastic about the pizza as she had been about their other meals.

She only had one slice but stared longingly at the remaining pieces in the box. He sucked in a breath, anger at her parents swarming in his chest. They had no right to control her and while she was in his house, she'd do as she pleased. He slid the box closer and lifted the slice she'd been eyeing onto her plate. He noticed her watching him with wide eyes, then felt her hand squeeze his own under the table.

When his parents left after dinner, Vee cashed in on his earlier promise of teaching her how to play a video game. He couldn't recall the last time he had so much fun or felt more at ease. Some of that had to do with seeing his parents again and having the opportunity to apologize for his actions. A lot of it though, was Vee. She concentrated on the direction of Mario Kart like she was about to enter a high-stakes test. If he didn't know she'd never held a controller in her hand, he would've thought she was a regular player. By their fourth race she'd moved her previous tenth-place score to third, now she was lapping him. When they rounded the last corner of Luigi's Mansion and she launched a blue shell at his kart, taking him out of the race, she flew by him and let out a victory whoop.

Iron grinned and lowered his controller. He glanced over, wanting to see her smile. It didn't disappoint. Prettier than the sunset. Her thick blonde hair fell in beachy waves over her tanned shoulders, a reminder of the afternoon they'd spent on the beach soaking in the sunshine before his parents had surprised them. Without a swipe of makeup, she was the most beautiful creature that ever graced the Earth. Some people might think it was odd that the former model, pageant queen, and prized daughter of one of wealthiest families in Texas had holed up with a man like him, but he didn't give the first fuck. His father was right, every decision Vee made from this point forward was hers and hers alone.

No one truly understood how sheltered Vee had been or the emotional abuse she'd endured. So, what if he was becoming obsessed with giving her new experiences and watching her delight in things she'd never tried, like eating a greasy cheeseburger and fries from a drive-through, going grocery shopping, or indulging her request to tour

his collision center. He loved watching the world through her eyes. Loved the excitement that every little experience brought. Hell, maybe his dad was right. Maybe he just plain loved her.

“One more game? Please?” Her big blue eyes knocked the wind right out of him, just like they always did.

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Who was he to deny her? “Sure.” He smiled, happy to indulge her newfound obsession of Mario Kart. Right now, he was her safe haven, but once she got her feet beneath her, he had no doubt she’d move on to bigger and better things, whether that included him was yet to be determined, but he hoped it would. She deserved to lead a life of her choosing, not one designed for her since birth. She had too much light, too much love to offer the world.

There was a sharp pain in his chest at the thought of her leaving. He knew he was taking a risk by opening his heart and it might come back to bite him, but he’d never ask her to stay. Doing so would go against every moral instinct he possessed. He was rough where she was soft. Broken where she was whole. He’d brought darkness to the world where she only cast light. Vee’s life could be anything she wanted it to be, and damned if he’d be the shadow dimming her sunlight. One way or the other, he planned to soak up every ounce of time spent with her.

Chapter Thirteen

Vivienne inched close to Iron on the kitchen bench and looked at the computer screen positioned between them. Even though her meeting with Ransom’s lawyer was over video conferencing, she had asked Iron if he could join her to take notes. If he thought the request was odd, he didn’t show it. He simply nodded and retrieved a notepad and pen from a drawer in the kitchen. Maybe she was leaning on him too much, relying on him like she’d relied on others without question in the past. She wanted to be independent, but at the same time this was an important meeting. Vivienne was aware of her strengths and weaknesses well enough to discern that jotting things down while trying to listen would be hard.

“What are you thinking about?” Iron’s deep voice wrapped around her, and she had the sudden urge to lean closer. She craved more of yesterday’s heated kisses and soft touches, but both seemed to have woken with a renewed sense of caution surrounding their physical relationship. If she pushed her insecurities aside, she recognized that it was smart to slow things down, especially when her life was in such an upheaval. Hannah would probably think she was crazy, but she needed to talk to her sister about her feelings for Iron. It was strange to have someone aside from Thalia who cared about her best interest. People who wouldn’t just tell her their advice based on the money she’d earn. Her stomach churned when she let her mind think of all the terrible things Thalia might be going through.

“Vee?” he asked again, this time his voice was softer.

“Sorry.” She sighed and folded her hands together in her lap, giving herself something to do. “I was thinking of Thalia, and if I’m being honest, I was second-guessing myself. Wondering if I’m being dependent on you like I was with my parents and Scott.”

He was quiet for a moment, then spoke, gaze boring into hers. “I know it’s hard to wait for info from Red and Sully but know there’s no rock they’ll leave unturned. As soon as they have some new information, we’ll be the first to know. As for the second, there are different types of dependency. Could be learned helplessness. Maybe lack of confidence or anxiety that leads a person to look to others for help. What you had, though, that was forced dependency. Holding tight to your finances, cutting off your relationships and choosing who and what you could spend your time on. By controlling when you could eat and how much, when you could cancel a job, even when you were sick, stripped you of your freedom. They took away your sense of autonomy. The things they expected of you were not normal or healthy, Vee. Whatisokay is asking a friend for help. That’s not only okay, but smart, especially when you don’t want to miss something important.”

Friend. Out of all the reassuring words Iron had just spoken, that was the one that resonated the most. She wasn't going to think too deeply about the hollow ache in her chest when he spoke the word. The gravity of their ocean kiss had shocked her, but it wasn't like they had a real relationship. No promises had been given. No future to discuss. A question was on the tip of her lips when the face of a mature woman filled the screen. Her eyes were warm and sincere that matched the color of her hair, a riot of curls that stopped just above her chin.

"Good morning. I'm Linda Salazar of Salazar & Stone Attorneys at Law."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Vivienne Day and this is my friend Jordan Holt. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me."

"The pleasure is mine." The woman gave her a genuine smile. "Despite our digital connection, I want to assure you that this is a safe and secure space to discuss your concerns. Why don't you tell me what has led you to seek counsel, and we'll go from there."

For the next half hour, Vivienne explained how she came to be a model and influencer in her teens. That her parents had insisted on a joint account for her funds, and when she approached them several times as an adult to remove them, they refused. She'd also kept track of the amounts they removed from the account, in addition to how she'd set aside small amounts of her own funds in an online bank.

"In most situations, both parties on a joint account must sign an agreement for one person to be removed from the account. However, there is nothing stopping one party from removing the funds into a personal account."

At the lawyer's words, muscles Vivienne hadn't even realized were clenched tight, loosened. "I can help move your money to another bank, if you'd like," she said, leaning to the side to note something down.

Iron had been writing on his pad of paper since the meeting started. She could imagine how different the meeting would go if it were Scott sitting next to her instead of Iron. Her ex would've taken control of the meeting from the get-go and belittled her if there was something she didn't understand. Iron sat silently, lending his quiet support and helped by taking notes like she'd asked. He didn't assume that just because she'd asked for help in one area that she needed it in other parts of the call too. Iron made her feel respected and confident, like he believed she could make positive decisions on her own behalf—something she'd never experienced before. She had a feeling Iron wouldn't dream of interfering with what she wanted, unless she was in danger.

“Yes, please. My parents always told me there was a withdrawal limit of ten thousand per day.”

“I'll look into it, then we can start moving the funds.” The woman offered an encouraging smile.

The next part was something she'd been considering since she left the rehearsal dinner. He'd threatened her and Thalia, and she had no doubt that Scott and her family had everything to do with Thalia's disappearance. While Scott's text messages to her had started as almost pleading, they'd quickly turned furious. “There's also the matter of my ex-fiancé. I'd like to take legal action against him for harassment and sexual assault.” She glanced at Iron; nervous she was doing the wrong thing.

At first, she'd thought it was enough to just escape their clutches, but in a few short days, she'd come to see how much she'd been abused by the people who should have had her best interest at heart. If Scott mistreated her, what was stopping him from doing it to someone else? Iron dipped his chin, though, and something that looked a lot like pride swam in the silvery depths of his eyes. “He has continuously sent threatening text messages since I broke off our engagement, which my friends have been monitoring for me.”

“Please send me those messages, and I’ll get the paperwork started so we can have a summons served. We’ll need to file an order with the local court.”

“My personal attendant Thalia is missing since the rehearsal dinner after she left with my father. Scott said she’d been deported. The police are investigating her disappearance, but when she’s found...” Her voice broke. She refused to say the word if. Iron put down his pencil and rested one of his palms on her leg. “I’d like to cover all of Thalia’s legal fees for whatever she might need.”

“Of course. I’m happy to represent you, and I’d be more than happy to work with Thalia if my services are needed.”

They spoke for several more minutes before ending the video conference.

Once the computer screen was closed, Iron turned to her. “I couldn’t be prouder of you. It took courage for you to decide to stand up to Scott. I bet once he receives a summons and has to appear in court, it’ll help other women. It’ll be a hit to his ego, and a man like Scott doesn’t have more than his inflated sense of self to hang onto. Once the summons is delivered, I want you to be extra cautious.”

She nodded, swallowing the tightness in her throat before she spoke. “Thanks for being here.” She placed her hand on top of Iron’s before he flipped it, lacing their fingers together. With his other hand, he gently brushed a strand of her hair behind her ear.

“Whatever you need. I mean that.” His voice was no more than a whisper, but those words wouldn’t have been any more profound if he’d shouted them.

She glanced at her small hand tucked inside his much larger one. “I hope you know that the same goes for you. I’m not just saying that because I think it’s the right thing or what you want to hear. I mean it.”

“More than proved that yesterday. You gave me the nudge I needed to reach out to my family. Something I haven’t done in a long time. You did again when they came here yesterday looking to talk. You had no problem being my strength when my courage faltered. Thank you for encouraging me to take those steps toward mending things with my parents.”

She blinked quickly, taken aback not only by his words, but also by the thick emotion in his voice. She’d never been someone’s strength before, but she was honored to be Iron’s.

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Hannah's flight arrived at four o'clock in the afternoon the next day. She and Iron had left for the airport at noon and had lunch at a café on the way. They'd driven back to Hannah's home and Branch had gotten her sister situated on the couch. Hannah was now tucked in with a velvety throw blanket and surrounded by pillows, making her look like she was in a giant nest. Her nephew had immediately gone to the kitchen to see if his pizza dough was rising, and she and Iron sat on a love seat by the couch talking to Hannah and Branch. She was so thrilled to see everyone, she forgot the worry that had knotted her stomach over leaving Iron. It probably wasn't healthy, but she wanted to stay with him. Packing the duffel bag Iron had loaned her earlier had felt a lot like her old life—going through the motions not because she wanted to do something but because someone else expected it of her.

Just then, Collin bounded into the room, a wide grin on his face. He snapped his fingers in front of his eyes, gazing at the movements of his hands. "Who's making pizza?" he sang out. "Collin and who else?"

A smile quirked Branch's lip. "That's my cue," he said and stood. "Collin and Branch. Here I come."

Iron cleared his throat and slowly stood. "Make that Collin, Branch, and Iron." Her heart skipped a beat as he turned to her and smiled. "You two catch up. I'm going to get some tips from the pizza pro in there."

As the three of them walked down the hall toward the kitchen, Collin's melodic voice echoed "Branch, is it safe or unsafe to touch a hot oven?" Collin questioned as they

walked toward the kitchen.

“Unsafe.”

“That’s correct,” Collin answered. “Iron, safe or unsafe to ask an adult for help handling sharp knives?”

“Safe.” Iron answered and ruffled Collin’s bright red hair.

When they disappeared out of sight, Hannah’s low chuckle caught her attention. “It’s easy to tell what Collin’s working on at school. He’s on a safety kick.” Her sister’s smile, so full of love, made her heart swell. The guilt that had swamped her when Hannah had been hurt trying to help her was overwhelming. Even though it was Regina who had hurt Hannah, she was the one who asked her sister to come to the wedding and help her get away. Iron had lived with that kind of guilt since Scooter died and survived. Despite what he thought, she knew how strong he was. Unbreakable.

“What are you thinking about, Vivi?” Hannah’s soft voice pulled her from her thoughts.

“I was thinking about the loving family you’ve created and how guilty I’ve felt since you’ve been hurt. Then I was thinking about Iron and everything he’s been through. How strong he is.” She met her sister’s gaze and shouldn’t have been surprised to see her eyes filled with understanding.

“I don’t know him well, but I do know that when my friend Sam was struggling, he had no problem loaning her a car free of charge. He’s a great coach and sponsor for Collin’s baseball team. All the men on Branch’s SEAL team have a deep respect for him.” The clang of metal pans and Collin’s laughter echoed from the kitchen.

“He said I could help with the baseball team.” Vivienne couldn’t stop the smile from breaking over her face or the warmth creeping up her cheeks.

Hannah tilted her head slightly, resting her cheek against a pillow. “It sounds like you both grew close.”

She was silent for a moment, wondering how much Iron would want her to share. It struck her that Iron would be more concerned with her sharing what she was comfortable with, not him. “We have. When I’m with him, I feel confident and respected. Like I really can build the life I want. I’m worried that I won’t be able to feel those things away from him, though,” she murmured, embarrassment sweeping over her at her final admission.

“And you’re learning how to stand on your own.” Hannah’s nonjudgmental tone made her comfortable to continue.

“Yes. But Iron gives me the space I need to grow. It’s just nice having him by my side while I do it.” Emotion slammed into her and heat prickled behind her eyelids. Until now, she hadn’t realized how deeply Iron had touched her or how far he’d worked his way into her heart. Her feelings for him far surpassed anything she ever felt for Scott, and those were fleeting and fell away once she realized he’d been playing her all along.

“You want to stay with him. Don’t you?” Hannah’s brows raised.

“Is that crazy? Am I jumping from one situation where I got too comfortable to make changes to another?”

“Vivi, that’s not true. There was nothing comfortable about your situation at the estate. I know it’s hard to think of all the reasons you did stay, but I’m sure comfort wasn’t one of them. Conditioning, manipulation, fear, a sense of responsibility perhaps. Even

though this was the time you were able to get away, looking back, think of all the times you bought a ticket to come visit me and Collin and then canceled. I bet Mother and Father did their damndest to coerce or force you to stay.” Hannah leveled her gaze and Vivienne swallowed hard.

Her eyes tingled once again as she remembered all the last-minute reasons why she couldn’t board those flights. Sometimes she’d find her license missing when she knew she’d securely placed it into her wallet the night before, only to have her mother or father find it a few days later and call her careless. Or they’d conveniently find a work engagement to fill her schedule and tell her she’d just forgotten. Then there were times they did force her to stay. She didn’t like to think of those times. She had hated being so out of control in her own life.

Hannah held out her hand, and Vivienne took it, scooting closer to her on the couch. “I’m not going to be another person who tells you what to do. I can offer my advice, which you’re welcome to take with a grain of salt, but at the end of the day, gaining back autonomy and making your own choices is the only way you are going to trust yourself.”

The breath rushed from her lungs, and she gave Hannah’s hand a squeeze. That was at the core of everything she was feeling, wasn’t it? She didn’t trust herself to make the right decisions to support her own well-being, afraid that she’d end back up in a situation where she lacked all control. “That’s exactly it.” She nodded and wiggled closer, still. “And my feelings for Iron are so huge, I don’t trust myself to know if what I feel is real or if it’s a result of our intense time together.”

Hannah nodded and released her hand with a quick squeeze to pull up the blanket around herself. “I was afraid to let Branch in, scared to lose my hard-won independence. Sometimes though, when you’re with the right person they don’t limit you, but help you be the best version of yourself.”

Vivienne tucked her legs up under her on the cushions, angling her body to rest one arm along the back of the couch. “Iron makes me feel like the best version of myself.”

“Then all I can say is whether you choose to stay with Iron or with me, I’m happy you’re here. My house is yours anytime you want it to be.” Hannah smiled and laid her hand on top of hers.

A blur caught her eye, just in time to see Collin bouncing into the room with a large tray. “Who’s going to eat pizza? Collin, Iron, Branch, and who else?” The men trailed behind him, carrying drinks and napkins. The scents of garlic and cheese filled the room, making her stomach growl.

“Definitely me.” Vivienne raised her hand, and Collin let out a shriek of delight. Her chest warmed and she stood up to clear some space on the coffee table for Collin’s tray. Iron moved to her side, taking the items out of her hand. When his fingers brushed against hers in the exchange, goose bumps popped up over her skin.

Collin set down the tray and gave her a wide smile. “Collin’s Pizza Delivery.”

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She returned his grin, another rush of emotion moving through her at how easily her nephew accepted her. “Can I give you a hug?” she blurted to Collin.

“Yes. Hugs for Aunt Vivi.” Collin wrapped her in a bear hug. “You’re in my Blue Circle.” She wasn’t sure what a Blue Circle was, but from the way he said it, that was exactly where she wanted to be. If she hadn’t made her escape, she would be missing out on moments like these.

“Welcome to the Blue Circle, Viv.” Branch’s low chuckle came from behind Collin.

“You can give big, loving hugs to the people in your Blue Circle,” Collin scripted. “Because these are the people you love and trust the most.”

Collin’s words touched her heart and her eyes prickled. “Thank you, Collin. I’m honored to be in your Blue Circle. Will you be in mine too?”

“Yes.” Collin sat on the floor, shaking his hands in front of him several times before taking a slice of pizza. “Part of Aunt Vivi’s Blue Circle. Blue like blueberries, sky, water.”

Vivienne sat on the rug next to Collin and Iron lowered himself to the floor next to her. Despite having a prosthetic, he was able to maneuver smoothly, and she wondered how long it had taken him to be so adept in his mobility. Branch served everyone a slice of pizza and passed out drinks before sitting beside her sister. Her eyes connected with Iron’s and a warm expression crossed his face. She loved the way his eyes seemed to soften whenever his gaze landed on her.

After a moment, she broke his gaze and focused on the conversation around her. She took a bite of the pizza Collin, Branch, and Iron had made and closed her eyes, savoring each bite. Pizza was one of the things she'd never experienced growing up, and it was quickly becoming her favorite food. If Agatha Day could see her now, on her second loaded slice, she'd probably faint before dragging her to the nearest scale. She lifted the pizza to her mouth, then paused.

Her whole life, she'd been told that her value as a person was tied to her appearance. It was difficult to steer her thoughts away from what Iron might think if she did gain some weight. She glanced in his direction, and he was already staring at her, jaw tight, his eyes a flinty gray. He leaned closer to her. "Whatever just put that worried look on your face, forget it." His breath tickled her hair and despite being in a room with her sister's family, a warm tingle swept over her. "Enjoy your pizza, Vee. Collin makes a great one."

Iron was naturally perceptive, at least when it came to her, but it was like he'd heard her exact thought and sought to soothe her worry. Maybe it was silly to think Iron wouldn't accept her as she was, because from the start he'd been in her corner. After they ate, Collin went to play on his iPad, and she briefed Hannah on the call with the lawyer and how Scott would be receiving a summons to court. Tears trailed down Hannah's cheek when she told her about the sexual assault, not going into as much detail as she had with Iron. Branch sat, his face like stone, as he comforted her sister. She could feel the anger pouring off him, not directed at her, but at her confession and what had happened to her. Like always, Iron's steady support grounded her.

"Vivi, I'm so sorry. Anything you need, we're here for you." Hannah hugged her hard.

"I know that and I'm grateful." She gave her a small smile.

Beside Hannah, Branch cleared his throat. "When Scott receives the summons, I think it makes sense for all of us to be more cautious. He might be upset and try to

retaliate, or he may do nothing at all, but tightening up security never hurts,” he said.

“Agreed.” Iron’s rough voice reverberated around the room, sending a shiver through her, but not of fear. She trusted Iron and felt completely safe with him.

“It’s getting late, and you need to rest,” Vivienne said. Her sister’s eyes were heavy and if the tight lines around her mouth were any indication, she needed some pain medication.

“Do you want me to get your bag out of the car?” Iron looked at her, his gaze intense. The question expanded in the space between them. Unspoken wants and desires sparking in the air around them.

“Not today,” she said softly. “If that’s okay.”

“You know it is.” Even though Hannah and Branch were sitting in the room, she knew the words were for her alone and she felt them steep into her heart. With her wishes now out in the open, a weight lifted from her shoulders.

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Throughout the evening, Iron had soaked in every moment with Vee, knowing he’d wake up tomorrow morning and she wouldn’t be in his house. The thought bothered him far more than it should. Having her in his space was just...right. His house felt like a home when she was there. The problem was, now that she’d been there, he couldn’t picture the place without her. A day, a week, even five years down the road, the oceanside bungalow was exactly where he wanted her. The type of feelings growing inside him were dangerous, but when she told him she didn’t want him to remove her bag from the car, his heart jumped in his chest. Maybe this was the start of something. The start of them.

“Iron?” Vee’s sweet voice was barely a whisper.

“Yeah?” He glanced over at her, only seeing her shadowy silhouette in the dark car.

“Is it okay that I’m coming back with you? I didn’t mean to put you on the spot.”

He hated the uncertainty in her voice and berated himself for not doing a better job at voicing his pleasure at her decision.

“It’s more than okay. With me is exactly where I want you to be.” He extended his hand and nearly sighed in contentment as her fingers slid perfectly into his.

“You didn’t mention that earlier.” Her voice didn’t hold any anger, just curiosity.

“I know how important it is for you to make your own decisions right now. I’m not going to be the person who holds you back.”

“You wouldn’t hold me back when you’ve been doing everything you can to support me in moving forward. I trust you.”

His heart shifted. She was always telling him that he had her trust, something he didn’t deserve but made him feel whole again. The ride from Hannah’s house was a short one and soon they were pulling into the driveway of his house. He parked the SUV and stopped the engine, turning to Vee. “Are you tired?”

“No, are you?” He opened his door and the overhead light illuminated the spark in her eyes.

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“Not at all. There’s something I haven’t done in a long time, but I think you might enjoy it.”

“Lead the way.” Her grin was wide, and without makeup, he could see the light dusting of freckles over the bridge of her nose.

A low chuckle left his lips. “Don’t you want to know what it is?”

She shrugged. “I suppose I’ll find out soon enough. Besides, you’ve never once disappointed me.”

There it was again. Her pure, unwavering trust. Something he wouldn’t take for granted.

“Alright then.” He smiled, leaning forward to give her a quick kiss on the forehead. Although they’d shared a far more intimate kiss in the ocean yesterday, they’d both seemed to be tiptoeing around each other. If he got time with Vee, he’d take it in any form it was offered. He didn’t want her to think the only reason he wanted her here was to get her into bed. His cock twitched, growing hard as he remembered the heat that had crackled between them on the beach. He quickly unbuckled his seat belt and slipped out of the driver’s side, adjusting himself as he walked around the back of the vehicle to open her door. God, how he wanted her. He wasn’t going to go there though. He wanted to offer her his support, not his physical advances. “I’m going to grab a few things in the house, and then we’ll head out to the beach.” He took her hand, guiding her down to the sandy driveway.

“I want to help. Just let me know what to do.”

He nodded and took her hand as they walked to the house. On the porch he had an old bundle of wood. He had no recollection of when he'd bought it, and for all he knew it would be too damp to light. When they stepped inside, he set the bundle down. "Be right back," he said and went to the hall closet where he stored extra linens and a camping lantern for times he lost power during a storm. When he returned, she took the blanket from him and the lantern. With the logs in one hand, he snagged a lighter from the kitchen on their way out to the back porch.

"I'm excited," Vee whispered in the dark, squeaking when she walked into his back.

He chuckled and fumbled with the lantern. When he found the button to power it on, light streamed around them, lighting the path up to the beach. It took him additional time to walk through the sand with his prosthetic, but Vee said nothing as they made their way through the dunes. The rush of waves was amplified in the dark and moved toward the old fire pit he'd created years ago. The spot far enough away to be dry, but close enough to the shoreline that they could watch the water crest and roll through the sea. Large rocks encircled the remnants of old, charred driftwood. He set the firewood on the sand and took the blanket from her hands, spreading it out and gesturing for her to sit. He followed her, settling down on the fabric.

"Want to learn how to make a fire?"

"Yes," she grinned. "It'll be like camping." She tilted her chin to the sky and gazed at the stars above. "I've never been to the beach at night. It's beautiful."

He wondered if she knew how beautiful she was with her delicate nose and high cheekbones lifted toward the stars. He said nothing, keeping that thought to himself. "If we were camping in the woods, we'd probably position the wood to be a tent shaped structure, but with the sand, it might be more stable if we make a square."

"Can we? Go camping sometimes I mean?" A gust of wind blew her long, blonde

hair and it whipped against his skin. He shouldn't have been surprised by her question; it seemed his girl loved trying new things. It was hard not to think of her as his, even if it wasn't forever. Shaking off the thought, he showed her how to position the logs and where to light it. Soon, the fire crackled to life, and she smiled wrapping her arms around him.

"We did it!" she cheered, nearly toppling him over in her enthusiasm. She moved back, attempting to sit up, but her hands landed on his chest, and he sucked in a breath. He straightened, lifting his hand to caress her soft cheek. The light from the fire played over her face, the highlights and shadows dancing over her skin with the sway of the flames.

"Vee." Her name sounded like a groan as the word tore roughly from his lips. "Would it be okay if I kiss you?"

"Yes." Her voice was equally breathless as he leaned in closer to her. He inhaled her sweet scent, caramelized, as it mixed with the smoke of the bonfire. Warmth surrounding them and with the stars glinting overhead and the sound of waves breaking against the shore he moved his mouth against hers, and sighed in pleasure, loving how she tasted. How right she felt in his arms. Warnings of self-preservation rang out in the hazy edges of his mind but was quickly replaced by the sensations of the beautiful woman in his arms.

Chapter Fourteen

Vivienne screamed as she smacked the wood floor with a thud. She glanced around the room and her shoulders relaxed with the familiar surroundings. The sheets and comforter were tangled around her legs and had cushioned her fall. It had been two weeks since she'd been at Iron's house. A week since Hannah, Collin, and Branch had returned home from Texas. Pounding footsteps sounded down the hall and her bedroom door flew open.

“Jesus, Vee.” Iron’s deep voice thick with concern had warmth filling her chest. No matter how many times she woke him up with the reoccurring nightmare he always rushed to her side. No one had ever treated her like Iron did. Iron would tell her the bar wasn’t set very high because she’d been raised by a gaggle of abusive assholes. She’d say he was dead wrong. Iron listened when she talked. Took her thoughts into consideration. He cared about her feelings and had even helped her find a therapist to work through what he told her was a childhood controlled by two narcissists. She hadn’t realized how twisted her upbringing was until she’d entered the real world. Iron’s world. A place where she could say, eat, and act exactly how she wanted with no fear of repercussions.

“Was it the nightmare again?” Iron asked, scooping her up.

“Yeah. I’m sorry to keep waking you up. At least this time, I fell before Regina pulled the trigger.” Regina had been arraigned and was awaiting trial on two counts of attempted murder.

“You know I don’t give a shit if you wake me up.” He placed her in the center of the bed and began untangling the sheets, covering her neatly and tucking the fabric in at the sides. It was another thing he did that made her feel cared for. He had no idea how nurturing and gentle he was. No, the hardened SEAL veteran would not care for that description. She smiled at the thought.

“What’s that smirk for?” The mattress dipped with his weight. He would sit on the edge and talk to her when she awoke from a nightmare, but despite their frequent heated kisses, he’d never once tried to lay down beside her.

“Just wondering if you know how generous and kind you’ve been to me.”

A familiar crease formed between his brows and the corners of his lips fell into a scowl. He really disliked being thanked or getting compliments.

“I’m neither of those things, Vee.” He shook his head, eyes solemn. “I don’t do a thing I don’t want to do.”

“Okay.” He still didn’t believe all the goodness she saw in him—but he seemed to be opening up. She wasn’t stupid, despite what her family said of her. Iron had deep-seated issues. Some he’d overcome by himself, like his addiction. Others she wanted to help him overcome, or at least live more peacefully with those demons, just like he’d had done for her.

“Think you can fall back asleep?”

“Not a chance,” she sighed. If she was a better person, she would’ve told Iron she was fine and let him go back to bed, but lately she’d been craving more time with him.

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The corner of his lips twitched. “Want to watch the sunrise?”

“Yes, please.” She threw off the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

“If you don’t mind. I know it’s super early, and—”

“Vee.” His voice was more of a low growl.

“Right. I forgot. You don’t do anything you don’t want to do.” She suppressed the smile that wanted to creep over her face.

He nodded. “I’ll make the coffee while you get ready.” The bed creaked as he stood.

“Vanilla caramel or coconut crème?”

Iron had introduced her to the magic of coffee creamers, and she was addicted. No oat or almond milk here. Not that Iron wouldn’t have gotten it if she asked or taken her to the market to get it herself. “Surprise me.” She stood up as he shut the door with a soft click. The grocery store was another new experience for her. Her family had a cook make all their meals. Every calorie she consumed was calculated meticulously by someone else to ensure she was the perfect size for the modeling agency, the pageant dresses, the perfect angles on social media. She hadn’t wanted or chosen to do any of those things, but she did want to please her parents who were constantly disappointed in her lack of academic success.

She opened the top drawer and removed clothes for the day. Jeans, a T-shirt, and a hooded sweatshirt in case the beach got uncomfortable. Sometimes, a company wanted her to do a social media campaign or model casual clothing, but they were never allowed to be part of her home wardrobe.

Thinking of her wardrobe made her think of Thalia, which made her stomach sink. The two SEALs Iron knew had been gathering intel about her possible whereabouts. She'd spoken with the men over Zoom, where she learned both of her parents had been brought in for additional questioning, leading to a raid of their estate. Several undocumented employees they believed were part of a labor-trafficking ring were given a haven to apply for legal citizenship. It was hard to believe her family had so many dark secrets. Red and Sully were going back into Mexico at the end of the week, and she hoped with everything she had that Thalia would be found.

She shed her night clothes and pulled on the denim and cotton, relishing the feel of the cozy fabric against her skin. In Iron's world, she could wear these things without a complaint from anyone. After she'd dressed, she brushed her teeth, washed her face, then ran a comb through her hair. No one came to primp the strands into an elegant style with curlers and straighteners. No one applied a flawless application of makeup. She was simply...herself, and that felt really good. She frowned. Thalia would want her to be happy, but it was hard when she didn't know where her friend was or what she was going through.

She left the bedroom and walked down the short hallway to the kitchen, feeling more at home in Iron's space than she ever did at her family's estate. From the gray-washed wood floors to the deep, comfy couch in the living room, everything in the house was meant to be used. No formal sitting room, no crystal waiting for the slightest movement to make it fall and shatter. Iron was standing in front of the coffeemaker, twisting the lid onto a thermos.

"All set?" he asked, putting the drink down on the counter. When Iron turned and directed his gaze at her, something sparked in his eyes. The way his expression lit and softened at the same time made flutters erupt in her belly. She wanted him, but each time he started to lose control, or she started to take things further, he held back. She felt such a strong connection to him that it stole her breath. Where she felt breathless excitement when it came to Iron, she wasn't sure what he was feeling right now or

why he kept putting on the brakes in their physical relationship—something that was beginning to weigh on her shoulders.

“Yes.” Her voice was a bit too high pitched, and chipper, and Iron’s eyes instantly narrowed. It was difficult to hide anything from him.

“What’s wrong?” He unplugged the coffeemaker and moved toward her.

“Why do you think something’s wrong?” Her therapist had encouraged her to talk to Iron about her growing feelings, but she was afraid of losing him all together.

“Because whenever something bothers you inside, you try to deflect it on the outside,” he grumbled.

“Oh.” She bit her bottom lip between her teeth, and Iron hissed out a breath. He was grumpy this morning, not that she blamed him. It was the before sunrise on the weekend, and they were attending a wedding tonight for Hannah’s good friend Brynn and her fiancé Ransom. She’d met some of the other men on Branch’s team last week at a barbeque and had fallen head over heels in love with Ransom’s brother, Jacob, whose sarcastic quips on his AAC device had her relaxed and laughing well into the evening.

“You don’t need to hide from me Vee. If you’re upset about something, I want you to tell me. If you’re uncomfortable here and want to make a shift, I’ll help you do that.”

He had no idea how close his statement was to the thoughts rambling around in her head. The problem was she didn’t want to leave. She had already started to think of him as her best friend. She’d never been so free to share anything about herself as she did with Iron. Still, she wanted more.

“Don’t think I want you to leave. My house has felt more like a home since you’ve

been here but if you wanted something different, if you wanted to move in with Hannah or look for an apartment you have to tell me, Vee.”

She nodded past the lump in her throat afraid if she'd open her mouth, he'd be tempted to probe further. She wanted him to want her to stay, but she also didn't want to become the roommate he couldn't get rid of. Iron moved to the side door that attached to the kitchen, flipped the dead bolts and held the door for her. The world was dark and quiet. The deck boards creaked slightly as she walked toward the beach. The planks were laid against the ground and soft sand spilled over onto the wood making it look like part of the landscape. Tall seagrass swayed against her legs as they walked up the narrow path to the top of the sand where two Adirondack chairs sat.

One was gray and weathered with age, and next to it was one fresh and brand new, yet to be tested by the elements. Iron had gone out and bought the chair so she would have a spot to sit when they watched sunrises and sunsets. Just another reminder of how he'd made space in his life for her. They sat down wordlessly, and he passed her a thermos. She breathed in the salty air dragging the briny mist into her lungs. A hint of brilliant gold was centered just above the dark velvet waves, and on either side a stroke of deep red painted the horizon. The way the colors faded into pinks and lavender reminded her of a melted Popsicle only twice as pretty. She unscrewed the top of the thermos and let the warm steam seep over her chilled skin. The sweet aromas of vanilla and coconut fragrancd the air. She took a sip and sighed. No one made better coffee than Iron and he always made it a little extra sweet just for her.

“Can you guess what flavor?” Shadows played over his face making it difficult to see his expression, but she could hear the smile in his voice. She loved that his smile was coming more quickly these days.

“All of the above, and nothing has ever tasted sweeter. Except maybe the milkshakes we got with Hannah at the burger place the other day.”

“Those are pretty hard to beat.”

She smiled remembering the happy afternoon where they shared greasy burgers and fries at a picnic table outside of the restaurant. Collin had filled them in on the progress of the new pizza place his school was opening to give the students with disabilities a meaningful way to practice employment. She'd been thrilled when her nephew had invited her and Iron to help paint. Hannah had told her that the space for the shop had been rented—free of charge—by Iron. Apparently, he'd invested in real estate to expand his auto collision business. Another way Iron was far kinder than he made himself out to be. He lived for others.

They sat in comfortable silence, drinking their coffee and watching the sky become more saturated with bold and brilliant colors.

“Do you miss it?” Iron was staring out at the water.

She didn't need to ask what he was talking about. He had asked her before if she missed her old life. “How could I when I'm getting to see the world in a totally different way? All I ever knew were stages and cameras and pretty dresses. Life is just so much more in your world.”

“So, no regrets?”

“Only that I didn't make a stand sooner. I should have been brave and left like Hannah, but I didn't know where to turn. She's always been resourceful in ways that I'm not.” After another sip of her coffee she added, “And I've decided to wear a dress to the wedding tonight. Something that makes me smile. Something I choose.”

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“Proud of you, sweetheart.”

Her stomach fluttered at the endearment. “Thank you,” she said softly. It was on the tip of her tongue to ask him to help her pick something out at one of the shops downtown but decided against it. This was for her to do. To pick something that brought her joy, and not someone else, even if that someone was Iron.

“There was another big crash on the interstate last night. I’m going to go into the shop for a few hours to help with all the insurance claims and paperwork, then we’ll head to the wedding. That okay?”

“Sounds good to me. Are you sure you won’t need the rental car today? It sounds like you might have some customers who need it more than me. You could drop me off at the shops and I could walk to Hannah’s after.” She’d been touched when Iron had insisted she have her own car at the house, so she didn’t feel trapped. To her, the cottage was a haven, though. A cozy nest away from all of life’s troubles. One she practically had to force herself to leave.

“No way you’re walking down that busy street. I want you to take the car. We have enough rental vehicles to keep us covered.” He stood up and stretched, then offered his hand. “Want to go inside?”

“I think I’m going to stay out for a few more minutes to finish my coffee.” She shot him a smile that she didn’t quite feel and looked out at the water. Leaving the security of Iron and the home that was a sanctuary left her limbs weighed down. Still, if there was any hope of having a relationship with him in the future, maybe he needed to see her as an independent woman who could stand on her own.

“Vee. Talk to me.”

She startled, sloshing coffee on her leg. Thankfully the liquid was warm, not hot.

“Are you okay? Did that burn?” He knelt at her feet, looking at her with concern. “I’m sorry. I thought you knew I was still here.”

She blew out a breath, annoyed with herself for being so preoccupied. “It’s okay. I’m fine.”

“Vee, you’re scaring me, sweetheart. What’s going on?” Concern flooded his luminous eyes, and he sank down on his knees in the sand before her.

“I’m just thinking.” She tugged at her bottom lip, then soothed the pinch with her tongue. She directed her stare to him, but his eyes were already preoccupied with where she’d just licked her lips. He removed the coffee from her hand and twisted the cup into a spot on the sand. The warmth of his palms landed behind her knees, pulling her forward until her legs framed his body. He dragged her close, angling his head to take her mouth. His lips were slightly sweet from the coffee he just drank with a hint of salt. His tongue slid against hers, teasing, tempting. He swallowed her groan, taking the kiss deeper, before his hands gripped her hips and he pulled away.

“I can tell there’s something weighing on you.” His voice was low, eyes pleading with her.

“I’m afraid I’m misreading things between us.” She didn’t want to pressure or push him, but after being surrounded by so many people who tried to control her, she knew Iron was special. He accepted her unconditionally. Now that she’d acknowledged how unhealthy her relationships had been in the past, she had no hesitations about embracing what she found with Iron. She just needed to know he was with her.

“Like what?” His throat bobbed as he swallowed. He made quite a picture against the backdrop of the sunset. His light brown hair was tousled from her fingers running through it. His broad chest and shoulders blocked out where the sun had risen on the horizon, but she’d rather look at Iron’s masculine form over the sunrise any day. His eyes were steady on hers, waiting for her to continue.

“Like maybe one of us wants something different.” That hadn’t been exactly what she wanted to say, but it gave him an opening to discuss what she prayed he wouldn’t. That he was having second thoughts about taking their relationship further. That he wanted his space back but was afraid of hurting her feelings, so he kept it to himself. Over the past few days, she’d fought the urge to fall back into a cycle of making decisions based on what she thought Iron might want rather than her own desires. Of being positive and agreeable so she didn’t make waves. With Iron and the life she wanted at stake, she’d fight through a raging storm if only to get to the truth.

He rubbed the middle of his forehead and closed his eyes. There was a sinking feeling in her stomach. Oh God, maybe they were on different pages. He’d just kissed her like he couldn’t stand to be apart from her, but now she wasn’t sure. Old insecurities raced to the surface as much as she tried to tamp them down.

He glanced up and met her gaze, but a pained expression had darkened his silver eyes to storm clouds. “I understand you might need space and time to decide what you want, but you should know that the past few weeks have been the best of my life.”

“Help me understand, then.” She shook her head and looked into his eyes. “The way you kiss me makes me feel like you want so much more, but every time I try to take things further, you step away. One second, I feel like you want me as badly as I want you, and the next you’re kissing me on the cheek and wishing me good night.”

He released a shuddery breath. “It’s been torture falling asleep knowing you’re just steps away. That even if we weren’t having sex, I could have your sweet, warm body

tucked into mine. Make no mistake Vee, I want nothing more than to make love to you. To bury myself deep. Hear the sounds you make. Feel the way we move together. But know I also love having your lips on me. Making out with you on the couch is my new favorite pastime. I love coming home at the end of the day, because I know you're here. I love talking to you about your day and the new things you've experienced. Everything about being with you feels right, but I know you have a whole world available to explore. People you've yet to meet. You deserve the chance to do that."

A cool morning breeze caught the ends of her hair, tousling the strands. Maybe she was beginning to understand. This had nothing to do with Iron not wanting her, of her not being enough, and everything to do with his own insecurities. Being afraid of holding her back.

She took a deep breath. "Sometimes exploring what's out there is more about recognizing the things you don't want, when you find the one thing you absolutely do."

A spark of light reentered his eyes. "What are you saying?" He took a breath and held it.

"I want a relationship with you, Iron, and I'm not willing to settle on half of you. If you still need time to work things out, I'll wait as long as it takes, but I need to know if you feel this too. I want all of you. I don't want to pretend anymore. Not in the life I live for myself or the one that's intertwined with others." She traced the sharp line of his cheek.

"Fuck." The breath rushed from his lungs and his chest caved as he rested his head on her knees. "I was trying to give you time. Trying to make sure this relationship was what you wanted." He released a breath. "And I can't pretend those are the only reasons. I never thought I'd have a chance. I've been struggling to feel worthy of you."

Afraid to connect only to possibly lose you.”

“It is what I want. You’re what I want. And as far as having the world to explore, I can’t imagine doing that without you by my side to enjoy it with.”

“I never meant to make you doubt what you’ve come to mean to me. I was trying to take things slow. I don’t want to hurt you, but I also know the power you hold. Be sure, Vee. Please, for my sake.” Having this strong warrior at her feet, pleading with her not to crush his heart was humbling.

“I’m sure, Iron. I’ve never felt this way before. About anyone. I’m not going to hurt you.”

He nodded and stood up. The wind whistled off the ocean, the strong gust catching a seagull beneath its wings and pushing it higher into the painted sky. Iron put his hand in his pocket and drew out his phone.

“Hey, Danny. I’m running late. See you around eleven.” He hung up the phone, tucked it back inside his pocket, and held out his hand. His gruff words over the phone had given her as much of a thrill as the way his gaze never left her face as he said them. She placed her palm against his and their fingers intertwined. She stood and he pressed a kiss to her forehead. She closed her eyes, savoring Iron’s acceptance. His lips brushed her eye lids then the tip of her nose. Together, they started to walk down the path, her heart hammering with each step.

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The house was warm despite the brisk end-of-summer morning. Light was glowing golden through the bay windows and those over the sink. The door clicked shut behind them and Iron twisted the dead bolt before turning into her. His pupils were blown out, only leaving a glimpse of gray fringing the edges. His hands quivered as he reached out to touch her face. He stared at her for one moment, then two, before his mouth crashed down.

His lips moved against hers, their tongues colliding in a rush to get closer. Her breasts felt swollen and heavy, aching to be touched. He picked her up in one fell swoop and began carrying her past the living room and down the hall, reminding her how powerful he was and how much he'd worked to adapt to his prosthetic. Iron was so much stronger than he knew. He passed by the bedroom she'd been staying in and went straight to his, placing her down on the comforter.

Before joining her, he tore off his sweatshirt and T-shirt, revealing the tattoos etched over his scarred skin and the hard muscle beneath. His biceps bulged as he held his weight above her, kissing her breathless. Bracing against one forearm on the mattress, he used the other hand to caress her stomach and ribs. He pushed the material of her bra up over her breasts, not bothering to fully remove it. When his lips closed over one hard point, she arched toward him. A slow smile built on his lips as he continued to tease her, grazing his teeth over her tight, sensitive skin before soothing it with his tongue. He sucked hard, drawing her deep into his mouth. Heat flooded her body, and she could feel wetness coating her. He released her with a popping sound and turned his attention to her other breast. She couldn't concentrate on anything but the way his tongue continued to flick and tease. She wriggled beneath him, trying to ease the uncomfortable ache between her legs.

His hand worked beneath the fabric of her jeans, pushing them down over her hips. She struggled to help him, drawing them down with her feet before kicking them off.

“Are you still with me?” he growled against her skin.

There was a fluttering sensation in her chest. “Yes.” As soon as the word was out of her mouth, he flipped them, so she was straddling his torso. She’d seen some of his scars the few times they’d gone into the ocean. Each gouge was a sharp reminder of how close he’d come to dying on his last mission. He’d lost his leg, but he’d suffered other terrible injuries in the blast. She leaned closer, breathing in the fresh scent of his skin. Her hair curtained around his sides as she kissed over every old scar. His breath was coming fast, and once again, he put his hands behind her knees and dragged her forward until she was in an intimate position where all he had to do was lift his head to taste her.

“Hands on the headboard.”

She gripped the wooden frame and closed her eyes. His hands found her breasts, then stroked down her body, and in between her thighs. “You’re so fucking beautiful.” He stroked her gently, gathering moisture from her center and teasing it over her clit. “It’s more though. The way you brighten up every space you enter.” He urged her forward and lifted his head, replacing his fingers with his tongue.

“How easy you can make me laugh,” he murmured, his lips against the sensitive nerves at the apex of her thighs. He flicked and stroked his tongue over her until she was rocking against him, too far gone to think about anything other than the tremble in her thighs. Something built and grew inside her, suspending her over the edge of some insurmountable feeling, then snapped. She hung onto the headboard as her body shook and Iron drew out every ounce of pleasure crashing through her.

“Beautiful, Vee.”

Instead of feeling tired from all the goodness he'd just wrung out of her, she wanted more. Her bare skin dragged over the rough material of his jeans, as she worked her way down his body. His pants were tight, the zipper of his jeans pressed outward. She stroked her hands over the taunt material, trailing over his hard length before fumbling with the button and zipper.

He helped her push off his pants and boxers, and his cock sprang forward. She leaned down trailing the tips of her hair over the leaking tip. He hissed out a breath and she lowered her mouth, swiping her tongue over the swollen head. She smiled when his hands fisted the comforter as she took him deeper, loving the hint of salt on her tongue. He groaned when she dragged the flat of her tongue up his shaft and circled the sensitive tip.

“Vee. I’m never going to make it inside you.”

She smiled around his length, and he swore, then laughed as he hauled her up over his hips. He tugged open the nightstand drawer and ripped open a foil packet. “Tell me if you don’t want this, Vee. We can stop at any time.” He looked to her face for reassurance as he slid the condom down.

“I want you, Iron. Everything you’re willing to give.”

“I want you in control. Anything you want, sweetheart.” She positioned him at her opening, slowly taking him until he was buried to the base. Each time she rolled her hips, she felt him filling every hollow place inside her. His pubic bone ground against her clit as he massaged and stroked her breasts.

She rode him faster, her movements choppy and erratic as she fought for more pressure, more friction. Her breath was rushing in and out as the shivers stole over her body, bearing down, she hung on as the orgasm pulsed through her with blinding pleasure. She watched as the muscles in Iron’s neck corded. He gripped her hips and

drove himself inside her over and over. His body went taunt as he arched his head back and stilled inside her. She collapsed on his chest, and she could feel the press of his heart beating rapidly against her cheek.

“That was...” She searched through her muddled brain trying to find a word to describe what they’d just shared.

“Everything,” he said stroking both hands over her hair.

Tears pricked her eyes, and three words were on the tip of her tongue but she bit them back.

“Everything,” she whispered back.

Chapter Fifteen

Fairy lights twinkled around the white tent erected in Ransom and Brynn’s backyard and music pulsed out into the open air. The women and kids were out on the dance floor, and Iron couldn’t help the smile that spread over his face watching the two reunited sisters dancing. Even with Hannah’s leg in a full cast, she used her crutch to move around with Vee.

He didn’t make it into the shop until much later in the afternoon, and when he arrived home again, he found Vee back from her shopping trip and already wearing the dress she’d chosen.

He’d always thought the line about someone stealing your breath was just an expression, but in that moment, as she rushed up to hug him, the sweet pink dress fluttering around her calves, he understood it was more than a simple saying. It wasn’t just the dress that had him tongue-tied. It was the strength of the woman wearing it. She’d been brave enough to take what she wanted, setting the course of

their relationship, then again when she went to pick out a dress she liked—to hell with everyone else.

“You okay, man?” Branch had snuck up on him and was grinning as Collin pushed Jacob around the dance floor. “You look like you’ve been hit by lightning.”

“You could say that.” His eyes were still trained on Vee as he uncapped his bottle of water and took a sip.

“You and Vee, huh? Who didn’t see that one coming?” An easy chuckle escaped Branch.

He glanced over at Hannah’s boyfriend, trying to mask the surprise he felt from the man’s statement. “What made you think that?”

“Hannah called it in the hospital room. Said there was an undeniable connection between the two of you.” Branch rocked back on his heels and smiled.

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“Turns out she was right.” He hoped that meant he had Hannah’s blessing, but when the redhead waved and shot him a wink across the room, he figured he had it.

“Damn.” Branch shook his head. “Guess I owe Collin a twenty.”

The teen in question kept rolling Jacob’s chair past the dessert table. They were both shrieking with laughter as Collin not so slyly grabbed a treat each time they went past. If their howling didn’t give them away, the frosting on both of their faces was a dead giveaway. “How does Hannah feel about you gambling with her teenage son?”

“Probably about the same as when you and Silver played hide-and-seek with him around the hotel wearing the communication devices.”

“Yeah. That was fun.” He had no clue when he was running around the hotel, using the SEALs’ state-of-the-art equipment to entertain Collin that his life would change so rapidly by the end of the trip.

Branch rolled his eyes, but there was no heat behind it.

“Have you and Hannah been back to the house?” Iron asked.

“Once. Hannah was freaked out at the thought of someone trying to break in, and I don’t blame her. She and Collin have pretty much moved into my place, which is what I was hoping for.” The SEAL kept glancing out at Hannah with a soft expression on his face.

“You gonna marry her?” Iron heard himself ask. A few weeks ago, he would’ve

steered clear of a conversation like this, but the more time he spent with Vee, the more he couldn't picture a life without her.

"Ring's in my nightstand drawer."

"Congrats."

The DJ announced another song and applause and shouts went up around the dance floor. Apparently, whatever the song was, it was popular.

"What about you?"

"Things are still new, but I expect that's where we're headed." Iron wasn't going to waste any time claiming Vee. When the time was right, he'd broach the topic of their future.

Branch nodded and smiled. "Hannah will be pleased as hell."

"You don't think it's too soon?" He glanced around the dance floor, searching for Vee. She looked up as though she sensed him and smiled. Warmth hit his chest, his heart expanding.

"If it was anyone else, I'd say to put on the brakes, but you'll take care of her, cherish her." Branch placed his empty bottle on a nearby tray stand. "You've punished yourself for a hell of a long time. I'd say you deserve someone sweet and kind."

"I've felt a lot of guilt for years." He rolled his shoulders. "Don't know if I'll ever be able to let go of it all."

"Guilt?" His former teammate, Ransom, came to stand beside him. It was the man's wedding day, but for the first time that night his expression changed from happiness

to something else entirely.

“For letting Scooter die.” He had to push the words past the thickness in his throat.

Ransom rounded on him. “Thefuck?”

Pain pressed against his chest like a weight. “I knew he was going to do something reckless. I should’ve anticipated it. Could’ve stopped it. Instead, he went home in a goddamn box.”

“Fuck, Iron. Is that why you’ve kept to yourself so long?” Ransom shook his head. “The rest of the team thought it was because you blamed us. Any one of us could’ve stopped him. We all knew his affinity for risk. Hell, I was on his other side. I could’ve reached out and grabbed his arm. We all know that mission would’ve been fucked if Scooter hadn’t made the decision to distract the terrorists. Those hostages wouldn’t have had a prayer.” Ransom turned to him and pulled him into a brotherly hug. “We should’ve been there for you instead of thinking you hated us. Fuck, Iron. We messed up.”

Iron sucked in a stunned breath. “I can’t believe you felt that way. That all of us have been taking the burden of that guilt.”

“No more. We need to remember him and honor the decision he chose. He knew not all of us were getting out of there that day. He did that for every one of us, not just the hostages.” They hung their heads for a moment, feeling the weight of their teammate’s sacrifice and the mark it left on each of them. The cost was too damn high.

“Your girl is coming.” Ransom grinned after a moment. “Happy to see she’s swept you off your feet. Welcome to the club.” Ransom crossed the room to his wife Brynn, picking her up in his arms.

“You look like you’re having fun out there.” He smiled at Vee.

“I love that,” she said softly, looping her arm around his waist. “The way you smile. I’ll never get tired of seeing it.”

“I have a lot to smile about since you came into my life.”

“So do I.” She rose up on tiptoes and planted a kiss on his lips. “I had no idea escaping my old life would bring me so much joy. That it would bring me you.”

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A slow song hummed through the open space, and he wrapped his arms around Vee drawing her close. She brought her arms around his neck and pressed her cheek to his chest. He loved this woman with every fiber of his being and planned to tell her that soon. She'd never truly understand the light she'd brought him. The second chance at a full life. She'd reunited him with his family and spoke to his mother frequently over the phone. They were planning to spend a few days visiting over Thanksgiving. They swayed slowly to the music. Content in each other's arms and the knowledge that each of them was exactly where they wanted to be.

Chapter Sixteen

Vivienne tucked her phone between her ear and shoulder as she unloaded a few bags of groceries into her trunk. She'd been researching recipes and wanted to try to make something to surprise Iron when he got home. Her salads, minus lettuce, were becoming a regular staple and a joke they shared between them. Hannah had called just as she was checking out her purchases to tell her their parents had been taken into custody. The relief in her sister's voice matched what she was feeling. Her old cell phone had been strangely silent for the past week with Scott stopping his messages all together, according to Iron. Now she could breathe easily knowing her parents were being held on bail, and hopefully Scott had slid into hiding out of fear he would be somehow linked to their labor-trafficking crimes.

"Watching you and Iron dance last night gave me butterflies, Vivi." Hannah sighed.

"Do you think it's too fast with everything that's happened?" She put her foot on the grocery cart to keep it from rolling away as she straightened one of the reusable bags in the back.

“Everything that’s happened might’ve fast-tracked your relationship, but the chemistry between the two of you makes me think it all would’ve happened regardless. If it feels right, don’t question it. Just enjoy. Branch and I moved fast too. It feels like just yesterday when I was pushing him out of my house, afraid of having a life of my own outside of raising Collin and being a flight medic. Now that I think of it, Ransom and Brynn, Sam and Joker, and even Jacob with his girlfriend Cora didn’t waste much time. I guess our guys just know a good thing when they find it and hang on tight.”

“I certainly plan to.” She grinned thinking of how they’d barely gotten in the door before Iron had her stripped out of the dress she wore to the wedding.

“I really love him for you.” Hannah sighed happily on the other end of the phone.

“I really love him too.” She stepped back, then closed the trunk, turning to push her grocery cart toward the return corral.

Her breath caught and the phone slipped from her grasp, clattering to the pavement. Time seemed to slow as she stared at Scott, who was waiting just out of sight at the side of her car. He must’ve snuck up when she was distracted on the phone. A cruel smile formed on his lips.

“Who do you really love, Vivienne?” From afar, his grin might seem friendly, but she knew better. Her heartbeat was sluggish, and it was difficult to draw in a breath. She should scream, run, anything besides standing here staring blankly at a man whose eyes promised revenge. “It’s not me. I was left at my own rehearsal dinner. Imagine my embarrassment when the caterers had to be canceled. The venue. The goddamn priest!” He kept his voice low, almost conversational until those last few words.

He chuckled, pursed his lips, and blew out a long breath. “You sure know how to make a man feel appreciated.”

There was a break in the parking lot traffic, and she slowly moved her foot to the right. She would shove the cart in his direction and run.

“Oh, and I wouldn’t do anything rash. Unless you want Thalia to die. She’s in the trunk, where she’ll remain safe if you come with me.” He moved his shirt to the side and sunlight glinted off the pistol at his hip. “In the car.” He jerked his head toward the vehicle next to hers.

Vivienne swallowed hard. The last thing she should do was get into his car, but if Thalia got hurt, she’d never forgive herself. Then again, would she be more useful to her friend if she ran and called for help? Once Scott had her in the car, she had no delusions that he would let either of them go. Plus, he could be lying about Thalia being in the trunk. Iron’s friends had gone over the border into Mexico because they believed they had enough evidence that suggested Thalia had been unofficially deported.

“What are you waiting for?” Scott questioned with a bored expression on his face. One that was all too familiar when they were running late for an event, and he was sick of waiting for her. Iron’s precious face flashed through her mind. If she went with Scott, Iron wouldn’t stop searching until he found her. Imagining Iron discovering her lifeless body and what it would do to him solidified her decision. She gripped the cart and drove it forward into Scott, then she ran.

*

Iron stared at the butterscotch-colored seashell Vee had given him and smiled, remembering his shock when she handed him the ocean treasure she’d discovered on his beach a couple of weeks ago. He couldn’t wait to get home and give her a surprise of his own—one that came in the form of good news. He had just finished debriefing with Sully and Red, and they’d located Thalia in Colima, Mexico. They were devising a plan to get her out of the country, but she was safe with the two SEALs.

He'd just hung up when his cell phone vibrated in his hand. He glanced down at the screen to see Hannah's name on the caller ID.

"Hello?" he answered with a smile on his face. She was probably calling to grill him about his relationship with her sister, but the winks and thumbs-up she kept giving him across the dance floor at the wedding made him confident she was at least partially accepting of the relationship.

There was muffled breathing on the other end of the phone, and he was instantly on alert. "Hannah?"

"Iron, something's wrong. Vivi's in trouble."

He grabbed his keys off his desk and sprinted out of the collision center. He heard his name being called behind him but didn't stop.

"She was at the grocery store, there was a crash. I don't know if she dropped the phone, or something hit her."

"What grocery store, Hannah?"

"She said she was at Maritime Market. I think that's Central Street, right?"

"Yeah." He yanked open the door to his SUV, jumped in, and started the vehicle. "I'm driving now, probably about ten minutes away."

"Oh, thank God. Iron, maybe this is my imagination—"

"What is it?" He didn't know what Vee's sister was about to say, only that the blood pumping through his veins had run cold.

“I thought I heard Scott’s voice.” A whimper broke from Hannah’s lips, and he heard a male voice in the background.

“You’re somewhere safe?” he asked, fighting a wave of dizziness at the thought of Vee being in a dangerous situation.

“Yes. Branch just walked in.”

“Give him the phone.” He tightened his hand on the steering wheel, loosened his grip, then clutched it again. He laid on his horn as the person in front of him slowed to let someone out in front of him. His skin was crawling with the need to get to Vee. To see for himself that she was alright.

“What’s going on?” Branch’s tone was rarely serious, but it was now.

“Hannah was on the phone with Vee, and something happened. She thought she heard Scott’s voice.”

“Fuck,” Branch cursed. “I’m on my way. I’ll call the others.”

“Maritime Market. Central Street.”

“Got it. Be safe.”

Iron ended the call and dropped his phone onto the seat beside him, breaking every driving law known to man in his desperation to get to Vee. A block away from the store, chills swept over him, and he broke out into a cold sweat. Blue and red lights flashed from emergency vehicles that were crowded into the lot of the store. Police officers with bright jackets were directing traffic outside of the store while others were blocking a crowd of onlookers. He pulled his car up on the curb, ignoring the shouts of the officers.

“My wife’s here.” He wasn’t sure why that was the first thing to come to mind, aside

from wanting it to be true. Law enforcement would be more willing to let him see his wife than if he said girlfriend. Two police officer exchanged glances.

“Name, sir?”

“Iron, erJordanHolt.”

“She’s been asking for you.”

“Is she hurt? What happened?”

“Our medics are checking her out now, and we’re trying to piece that together.”

“Iron!”

He heard his name and watched as Vee broke away from a paramedic and raced across the parking lot toward him. She crashed into him at full force, and he wrapped his arms around her. She was alive. He let that sink in as he held her. Everything else was secondary. She was still with him. He’d never felt more fucking grateful than he did right now, holding Vee close in the parking lot of a grocery store. “Everything’s going to be okay,” he whispered into her hair.

“It was Scott. He was standing there when I closed the trunk of my car. He said he had Thalia in his trunk, and if I didn’t go with him, he was going to kill her. I didn’t know what to do.”

His whole body was trembling with the release of adrenaline.

“I decided once I got in his car, I would be no help to either of us, so I-I hit him with the cart and ran to get help. Then he shot up his trunk and I thought—” A sob broke from her lips.

“You were so smart, Vee. I’m so fucking grateful you didn’t get into his car. This day could’ve ended so differently if you had.” The situation had been too damn close. His throat was thick with emotion as tears prickled behind his eyes. He didn’t give a shit who saw him cry. Vee was with him and that was all that mattered. “And Vee, Thalia was never in his car.”

“I know. The police opened the trunk once they had Scott detained. Wait. How did you know that?”

“I just got off a call with Red and Sully. They located Thalia in Mexico. She’s with them and unharmed.”

A wide smile broke out on her face, even as tears streamed down her cheeks. “This has been a really good day.”

“I know you’re relieved to hear about Thalia, but that might be an overstatement.”

“Nope. Thalia’s safe. Scott is in police custody and will be facing a slew of charges since he opened fire in a crowded parking lot. And the man I love rushed to my side yet again.”

He looked at her stunned. Did she know what she just said? He wasn’t sure if her words were from heat of the moment, relief, or something more.

“And before you start analyzing what I just said, I love you, Iron. I love you so much.”

He lifted her into his arms, taking her feet off the ground. “I love you, too, Vee. I’m never going to let you forget it.” He set her down and kissed her hard and deep right in the center of a crime scene.

“You know what?” he said when he pulled back.

“What?” she asked smiling.

“It has been a pretty damn good day.”

Her smile grew brighter, and she gripped his shirt, dragging him back down for another kiss.

Epilogue

Asmile built on Vivienne’s face as she looked around the table. She and Iron had joined Bill and Lilly and Milo and Ezra for Thanksgiving.

Shortly after Scott had tried to abduct her, Milo and Ezra visited them in Virginia Beach and stayed with them for two days. Watching Iron and his brother reconnect was just as nice as getting to know Ezra and all the things they had in common. He was also thrust into modeling at a young age and struggled to leave their careers. He, too, was estranged from his parents, because they didn’t accept his lifestyle or the man he loved. The two of them had become fast friends and frequently talked on the phone or texted. As much as she loved the friends she met through Hannah, it was nice to know she could form strong bonds on her own as well. Added to that, Red and Sully had returned to the country with Thalia.

Their first stop had been Virginia Beach. They both cried as Thalia told her story about how she came to be employed with Vivienne’s family. Both women planned to testify against the Day patriarchs at their upcoming trial. When it was time for Red to return to his base in California, though, Thalia had decided to go with him. As much as she’d hoped Thalia would stay close, she understood her connection with Red, and they still video chatted every day. She was thankful Thalia had Red’s friendship and loyalty. Her bond with Hannah and Collin was growing strong, and she’d started

volunteering so often in Collin's classroom that they offered her a paid position as a teaching assistant. She never imagined a job could give her so much joy and satisfaction.

Lilly's laughter rang around the table as she responded to something Iron had said before she passed him the butternut squash. Vivienne had eaten every delicious food on the Holt's table from turkey to mashed potatoes and glazed carrots. She was full, content, and so happy with the life she was developing for herself. She linked her hand with Iron's on the table and he angled his chin toward her, a full-fledged smile transforming his face. The wind rushed out of her. She wasn't sure if she'd ever get used to all the beauty that was Iron's unrestrained grin. Her pulse ticked up as he leaned in and kissed her forehead.

"I love you, Vee." Those words, paired with the expression of joy and gratitude on his face made her heart expand.

"I love you too." She leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his cheek.

Suddenly he pushed his chair back, rose, and cleared his throat. "I have something to say." The room instantly went silent. "I haven't been the best son or brother. You didn't deserve the way that I cut you out of my life. The physical and emotional pain I was facing seemed so bleak, I didn't want the people I love most in the world to experience it right along with me.

"Then I met someone pretty smart." Iron turned to Vee and smiled. "Who told me I was punishing you as much as myself. She reminded me I had a family who loved me. I know words can't fix everything, but I'm sorry for every minute of anguish I caused. Thank you for giving me a second chance. Thank you for always being there for me when I needed it most."

Vivienne's heart started racing when Iron turned to her and knelt at the side of her chair. "Vee, your compassion helped piece together what was broken. Only you, the

woman I love and adore, could do that. You brought light back into my life. A sense of peace and happiness I never thought I'd find again. I never want to let you go. I want you to be my partner, my best friend, and my wife, always." Iron removed a box from his pocket and opened it to reveal the glimmering ring. "Vee, marry me?"

"I haven't had the opportunity to make many decisions in my life, but I know this will be one of the easiest and best choices I ever make." She placed her hand against Iron's face. "You've given me your honesty, encouragement, and love. Made me recognize the strength and goodness my life had been missing."

Taking back her independence had brought many beautiful things into her life, but the man on one knee before her, who had faced unimaginable physical and emotional pain yet still dedicated himself to others, was the person she wanted in her life. A decision she would make over and over again.

A smile lifted the corner of Iron's lips. "Is that a yes?" His brows raised in question.

"Yes." She smiled, framing Iron's face with her hands and kissed him soundly while the rest of the table cheered them on. She closed her eyes, absorbing the joy, the family, and the love surrounding her.

The End