



# Unforgettable

FORGET - ME - NOT  
*series*

LEIGH ADAMS

*Unforgettable*

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## **Dedication**

To those we have loved and lost.

May the memories we have  
always bring us comfort and joy.



# Chapter 1

*Hailey*

K

I

A

Three measly letters that made up one acronym you'd never want to hear when it came to your loved one.

Your best friend.

Your husband.

Your soulmate.

And your child's father.

Even worse to hear was, "We weren't able to recover Vince's body."

So now, not only had I lost the only man I ever loved, but I didn't have a body to bury. To visit. To remember.

It was stupid to be mad about it because Vince never wanted to be buried. He wanted to be cremated. He didn't want me to feel obligated to visit a grave or headstone at a cemetery. He wanted me to remember him and our life together. To always keep our love alive in my memory.

The Saturday sky was bright blue and filled with fluffy white clouds. Hudson sat in his playpen while I tended to my vibrant garden. Bright pops of color fluttered in a dance under

the spray of water. A sense of hope filled me when a tiny rainbow formed as the sunlight hit the spray. I finished up and walked toward my pride and joy.

“Hudson,” I sang, opening and closing my hands in greeting. I pulled him into my arms and kissed his cheek with a loud kiss. “Mama,” I coaxed, trying to get him to repeat the word. One tiny hand cupped the side of my face as his chubby fingers of the other patted my lips. I kissed his fingers, then nuzzled his neck, inhaling his sweet baby smell. “Mama loves you so much. Yes, she does,” I said, squeezing him tight with a tickle.

His giggle was music to my ears. “Let’s go inside and get you a snack,” I told him. He smacked his lips.

I settled Hudson into his highchair and gave him his toy lion and giraffe. I popped my cold cup of tea into the microwave, then poured some Cheerios onto his tray. I laughed as he scooped some into his hand and brought them to his mouth. “Mama’s tea is ready,” I told him. I ruffled his hair and kissed the top of his head before turning to the microwave. When I sat down next to Hudson, I accepted the Cheerios he wanted to feed me. “Mmm,” I said. “Thank you, Hudson.”

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway caught my attention. I walked to the front door. My breath caught in my throat when I looked through the open screen door. The last person I expected to see was Pete Dinsmore, one of Vince’s and my best friends. He’d only left three weeks ago. Before he left, he told me that depending on how things went, he might be gone for a couple of months. My stomach dropped when he



climbed out of his car. Even from where I stood, I could tell something was off.

Dread settled in as awful memories of that fateful day almost two years ago flashed before me. The harrowing chime of the doorbell. A military car in the driveway. Sorrowful-looking officers standing on my stoop. And the words I would never get out of my head. *There's been an accident. I'm so sorry. We lost Vince.*

I remember dropping my hands to my swollen belly as they told me. Vince was dead, and they hadn't been able to recover his remains. They wouldn't tell me anything more—I wasn't privy to the details of the operation or what went wrong. I didn't know anything more than something went terribly, terribly wrong. It didn't matter in the end. The only thing that mattered to me was that Vince wasn't coming home, and he'd never meet his son.

I opened the door before Pete had a chance to knock.

“Hailey.” My name was a rushed whisper, and the way he said it shook me to the core. All breath left my body as the blood drained from my face. The room was spinning. I couldn't deal with more bad news. Nothing could be worse than losing Vince, but if we lost someone else we loved, I didn't know how I would handle it. “Hey, hey,” he said as he caught me in his arms. I would have fallen to the floor if not for his quick reflexes.

I inhaled deeply, letting oxygen seep back into my system.

“How's Hudson?” Pete asked as he helped me to the kitchen, his arm secured around my waist to keep me steady.

I perked up at the sound of my son's name. "He's amazing," I said.

"Of course, he is. Look who his mom is." I could hear the smile in Pete's voice. "And there he is," he said when his eyes landed on Hudson. Excited but garbled toddler noises arose as Hudson saw Pete. "Hey, little man," he said, laughing as he attempted to meet Hudson's pudgy hand, still clasping a fistful of Cheerios, for a high five.

"Can I get you anything?" I asked. I moved around the kitchen with no idea what to do with myself. "Lemonade?"

"You know I can't say no to your lemonade."

I smiled tightly, feeling like a fish out of water. "I made it fresh yesterday." Like he cared when I made it. I was making small talk with one of my husband's best friends. The guy who kept me afloat during the most devastating time of my life. The one man who came through when my entire world fell apart. Pete stepped in and helped me during my pregnancy and delivery. But I couldn't shake the feeling that he was about to drop another bomb on me.

"So," I said, "you're back earlier than expected." I handed him a glass and leaned against the counter.

"I just wanted to ..." He took a sip and set the glass on the table. I watched as he turned it round and round. "How's everything going?"

"I'm okay." I looked past him and then back to where Hudson was. "We're good." I painted a fake smile on my face.

"Good. That's good," he said. His voice was shaky, his smile tense. "Do you have a few minutes? There's something I

need to talk to you about.”

“Sure.”

“Hailey, I need you to sit down.”

My hand automatically reached for my necklace as I collapsed into the chair. The cool metal of Vince’s and my wedding bands clashed against the heat radiating out of my palms. “No,” I whispered. “Not again. Please, God, no.” I couldn’t breathe. I couldn’t think. Every worst-case scenario played out in my mind as I stood there waiting for him to tell me the bad news.

Pete reached for my hands. “This isn’t bad news, Hailey.” He squeezed my hands to bring my attention back to him. I looked into his eyes.

“We found Bacca. We got him back.” Were my ears deceiving me, or did he sound choked up?

“What? Who?” Even though he was using Vince’s call sign, the words made absolutely no sense to me.

“Vince is alive, Hailey.” His eyes brimmed with unshed tears. “We found him. He’s alive.”



## Chapter 2

*Vince*

“Stay with us, Bacca.” Hearing my call sign was surreal. I would have thought I was dreaming if it wasn’t for the pain slicing through me. My body was a two-hundred-pound sack of potatoes, but somehow, I was floating. My arms were cement bricks hoisted in the air, my shoulders like cinder blocks. My legs were lifeless entities. I could not move.

“Please,” I whimpered, swallowing the metallic tang of blood. I wanted to cough, spit, drool—anything to get the taste out of my mouth. The desire to lay on the ground and go back to sleep tore through me.

“Don’t you give up.” The voice was loud and commanding, even over the gunfire and explosions.

Pow. Pow. Pow. Another series of shots behind us. Shouts and more gunfire. Complete chaos.

My inherent training wouldn’t kick in. There was nothing I could do to fight back.

“I got these fuckers. Keep moving.” I knew that voice, but I couldn’t place it. My body continued floating. It was hard to open my eyes. No way in hell I could keep them open. The ground was black and hazy, but I knew it was the earth. A foreign floor, nothing recognizable or familiar.

“Hailey,” I croaked out in a prayer. Blurred vision made it impossible to concentrate. It was too difficult to keep my

eyes open and focused.

“Get him in,” the voice roared over the deafening whirling overhead. I surrendered to the incessant drowsiness; my lids closed as my body was pitched forward.

Every cell in my body ached—excruciating pain. Endless exhaustion. I surrendered to the darkness around me, inside me.

“Fight, goddammit. C’mon, Bacca. Fight you stubborn asshole.” That was the last thing I heard as my body started floating again.



## Chapter 3

*Hailey*

My chest tightened and constricted so tightly. If it weren't for the shock of hearing Pete's words, I would have sworn it was the beginning of a heart attack. "I don't understand."

Pete's sigh was bereft. "I can't go into everything about it. But there was some chatter. We received some promising intel, and after digging into it, we put a team together."

I scrunched my brows together. "A team?"

"A rescue mission."

"But how? I don't—"

"Hailey,"—Pete shook his head—"I wish I could tell you more, but I can't." He sighed. "I didn't want to get your hopes up. The intel was good, but until we had solid stuff to go on, I was asked to keep it under wraps. You have to understand. I didn't want to put you through it all over again. All I can tell you is that we found him and took him to a hospital until it was safe to transfer him. He is in transport now. He should be here by morning."

Fresh tears streamed down my face. "Safe? I don't understand."

"He was in bad shape, and until we got him stable, we had to keep him there."

"But ... Why didn't you tell me? Or say something?"

"Orders were to keep everything under wraps until we got back."



Twenty minutes of asking questions and getting the runaround. It wasn't that Pete didn't want to answer me—he just couldn't. Legality, security, and clearance levels prohibited anyone from telling me anything other than surface-level information. I was just the wife. This fact should matter, but it didn't when it came to the government and protecting our nation. All that mattered to me was that I was going to see Vince. Hudson was going to have his father. His parents—"Shit!" I said. "We need to go. We have to tell Renee and Daniel."

Pete nodded. "I can drive you and Hudson."

I stood up, sat right back down, and stood up again. "I don't know what to do, Pete." I ran my hands through my hair, looked at my son, and then back at Pete. "What do I do?"

"Grab your keys. I'll grab Hudson. Come on." He stood and helped me to my feet.



My visit with Daniel and Renee, Vince's parents, was unlike any of our visits since finding out Vince had been killed.

To say it was emotional would be an understatement. I was thankful that Pete came with me. Even though he shed tears with us, he was resilient and steadfast.

By the time Pete drove me home, I was exhausted. My eyes were bloodshot, my nose was red, and my face was puffed up like an overinflated balloon. Still, I smiled. So many emotions filled me, but joy was at the top of the list.

I thought I'd fall asleep as soon as my head hit the pillows. But no. I tossed and turned all night. No matter how much I cried, my emotionally shot nerves made it impossible to fall asleep. So did the adrenaline high. I still couldn't believe Vince was alive.

Hudson woke me at five o'clock. I was semi-awake already. I cried while I fed and rocked our son in my arms. The shock of his rescue was still surging through me. "You're going to meet Daddy," I told Hudson. He smiled and babbled in response like he knew what I meant.

After I settled him back into his crib, I hurried to my bedroom and got ready, keeping the baby monitor within reach in case he woke up again. I slipped into a jade green dress. Green was Vince's favorite color. I didn't know what to expect or how much interaction I would get—if he'd even be awake or coherent enough to talk to me—but I wanted to look my best.

I turned toward Vince's half of the closet, and my breath caught in my throat. His clothes still hung pristinely on his hangers. I always told myself if I left them where he kept them, that he would come back. As long as I kept them, he was still alive. My fingers shook as I reached out, gently stroking the fabric of his shirts hanging in the closet. His sweatshirts were still perfectly folded and stacked on the shelves. Dress pants and jeans. Each article held a special memory, a moment shared. Our laughter echoed in my mind. I could almost feel his kiss on my lips. Here hung the threads that wove the tapestry of our love story.

They hung where they always had. I never had the heart to take them down or donate them. A thankful tear slipped down my cheek. I enfolded myself into Vince's clothes. It had to be my imagination because I could still smell his cologne lingering. It was like an invisible hug from him, a familiar embrace keeping us tethered together. I inhaled deeply, closing my eyes, etching his essence into memory. I picked up the bottle from the shelf where it

sat and spritzed it into the air. Vince's scent, a blend of sandalwood and citrus, enveloped me, wrapping me in a cocoon of love. I wiped the dust away and placed the bottle back in its dedicated space.

It was almost time to leave. In less than two hours, I'd see the man who had defied the odds and come back to me. I'd be that much closer as soon as Ashley, the babysitter, and Daniel and Renee got here. My heart fluttered at the thought. I checked on Hudson and then made my way to the kitchen. I drank some tea and flipped mindlessly through a magazine without reading any of the words. My heart felt like a jackhammer. Time ticked by at a snail's pace. All I wanted was to get to the hospital and see Vince. I checked the clock. Again. Only eight minutes later than the last time I looked.

When the doorbell rang, I about jumped out of my skin. The moment I'd been waiting for was finally here.



The silence in the elevator was deafening. The ding startled me. The doors whooshed open. The floor was eerily quiet. Nurses sat behind the desk and huddled around the station. A few doctors stood checking over what I assumed were patient charts and reports.

Walking down the sterile white hallways with Renee and Daniel flanking me on either side made me feel protected. Still, my heart pounded in anticipation. When we reached Vince's room, I paused, taking a deep breath and willing myself to stay strong and keep the tears at bay.

Nothing could have prepared me. It was Vince, but it wasn't the Vince who left me almost two years ago. My breath hitched as

my eyes landed on his lifeless form in the hospital bed. His eyes were closed, his cheeks seemed hollow, and his skin pallor. He had a serene expression on his face, but the bruising and scarring could not be mistaken. My stomach rolled, and I did everything I could not to throw up from the nerves. Renee clutched my hand as she brought her other to her quivering lips. “My baby,” she whimpered, her voice a fragile tremor.

Daniel held onto her. His lips were pressed into a tight, thin line. He was holding it together for both Renee and me. “Hailey?” He cleared his throat, then smiled. It was a nervous smile, but it gave me a bit of hope.

“I’m fine. I think.” I chuckled as my insides churned with happiness, nervousness, and all-out fear. “I never thought I’d see him again.” We moved together as one unit, then split up. I took the right side, and Daniel and Renee moved to the left.

Tears filled their eyes. They weren’t sad tears but happy ones at seeing their son alive.

“Talk to him,” Renee said.

It took every ounce of strength not to blubber as I began speaking. “Vince, honey. It’s me. It’s Hailey.” I willed myself to be strong for him, but the tears fell anyway. I’d never seen him look so helpless, so lifeless. Yellowed bruises covered his face and arms. His head and face were shaved. Pete told me they cleaned him up to run some tests and check him over from head to toe before transferring him here, but I knew he’d hate it.

The urge to touch him was too strong. I want to caress him, hold him, kiss him. His chest rose and fell, and all I could do was watch him breathe as the monitors beeped.

“Can you hear me, Vince? Baby, can you hear me? It’s Hailey. I don’t know what to say, other than I missed you. We missed you so much, baby. Losing you was like losing a part of myself. I was

empty, hollow. I had nothing left.” I shook my head. “No, I shouldn’t say that. I did have something. The best part of you. And I can’t wait for you to meet him.”

Vince’s hand pulsed in mine. “I swear you can hear me. Can’t you, baby? You’re so fearless and strong. You’re the most determined man I know. You’ll come back to me, baby. I know you will. You just need to rest. You’ll wake up when you’re ready. And I’ll be right here. Okay? You never give up ... no matter what you’re up against. You’re a fighter, Vince. Remember that. And know that, good or bad, I am here for you. We will face whatever comes. Hand in hand.” I looked down at our joined hands, willing him to squeeze mine again to let me know he heard me. All I wanted was for him to wake up so I could look into his eyes and tell him all of this.

He remained stoically still. Steady beeps from the monitors and the monotonous whoosh of the machines hooked up to him filled the air. I didn’t want to lose hope, but that’s how it felt. Hopeless. There was no way I would survive losing him again.

Renee and Daniel started talking to him. I tried to catch my breath while I listened to them. I chuckled at a few of the funny antics they told him about Hudson and being grandparents. Their voices were filled with pride and love. I never would have made it without them stepping in to help me. I reached for Renee’s hand as she continued talking. I clutched Vince’s in my other.

My ears perked up at the sound of the door opening behind us. A tall, lanky, good-looking man in a white lab coat walked in. A stethoscope hung around his neck. He held an air of authority even though he had one of the kindest faces I’d ever seen. “I’m Dr. McGuire, Vince’s neurologist.”

“I’m Hailey. These are Vince’s parents, Renee and Daniel.”

Dr. McGuire smiled and shook our hands. “It’s a pleasure to meet you all. Quite a miracle, I’d say. To say you’re relieved would

be an understatement, but I know you all must be ... well, relieved.” He chuckled nervously, clicked his pen, and referred to the clipboard in his hands.

“We are all very relieved,” Renee agreed. “And happy. And thankful. We’re just—” She burst into tears. “I’m sorry.” Her words were muffled with her hands covering her face.

“It’s all right,” Daniel said, wrapping his arm around her. She tucked herself into his body.

I looked at Dr. McGuire. “It’s been quite a crazy couple of hours,” I said. I was surprised I wasn’t the one crying at the moment.

He gestured to the hallway. “Would you like to talk outside?”

We all followed him out.

Renee was the first to speak. “Can you tell us what’s wrong with him? I thought Pete said he was fine. Why isn’t Vince awake yet?”

“Mr. Weber hasn’t sustained any serious injuries. Recently, that is. The bruising is healing, and his vital signs have improved significantly since his rescue. He suffered from severe dehydration, starvation, and abuse.”

“But he’s getting better?” Renee and I asked in unison.

“Yes. What he went through took a toll on his body and his mind. He is extremely weak still. And it will take some time for him to rebuild his strength. But rest assured, from the tests we’ve run, we don’t think there’s any cause for alarm.” His smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Mrs. Weber. What your husband went through was very ... difficult. We are hoping for the best and remain optimistic.”

“But?” It was the only word I could utter because it sounded like there was more he hadn’t gotten to yet.

“You need to prepare yourself. Vince may not be the same man you remember.”

“What does that mean?” I held up my hand before he spoke again. “And please, doctor. I need you to level with me. I’ve been through hell and back. Don’t give me some sugar-coated spiel.”

He gave me a curt nod. “According to his charts, Vince has suffered some memory loss. He has trouble remembering what happened and ... various parts of his life. His doctors in ... where he was taken after his rescue, were able to put some of the pieces together for us. His commander and his team also spoke with him over the weeks he was there. They determined that Vince is mostly aware of what happened, but ... the extent of his memory loss is pretty extensive.”

I listened as he continued, knowing I was only getting part of the story. Once again, I wasn’t at liberty to know the specific details. When he paused, I asked, “Do you know ... Does he remember me?”

His eyes pinged to each of us in turn. “He remembers you,” he said to Daniel and Renee. But—” His eyes suddenly seemed to go cloudy and dark. “Mrs. Weber, I need to forewarn you ...”

“Oh, my God.” All breath fled my body. Renee seized my hand in hers. “He doesn’t remember me?”

“He does remember you, Hailey.” Never in my life had I seen a doctor look so sad. “He just doesn’t remember that you’re married.”





## Chapter 4

*Hailey*

My world turned upside down.

“He doesn’t remember that we’re married? Oh, my God. No. This can’t be happening.”

“Of course, he remembers. That was the happiest day of his life,” Renee defended.

“Mrs. Weber?” Dr. McGuire’s voice hit me.

“What?” I snapped. I immediately recovered. “I’m sorry, please, doctor, just help me to understand.”

He sighed. “Vince remembers you. I want you to understand that. He knows your name, was able to describe you in vivid detail, and even recalled some events from when you first met. However, he referred to you as *girlfriend*. Not *fiancé* and not *wife*.”

His words cut me to the core. I couldn’t believe Vince didn’t remember we were married. “What does that mean? What do I do?”

“Mrs. Weber, I think the best thing for you to do is to wait for Vince to wake up and take it one step at a time. There’s no need to—”

“What about Hudson?” I blurted.

Dr. McGuire’s features softened, and he shook his head. “I’m sorry.”

I knew from his softened voice and misty eyes that his apology was genuine. But we both knew there was nothing either of us could do about it.

“Can’t we just tell him about Hailey and Hudson?” Renee asked. “If he remembers all of us, why not just fill in the blanks for him?”

“You can, yes. From his charts and the initial reports we received, Vince is cognitively aware that he is missing bits and pieces.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Everyone’s head whipped around to me. I felt like a goldfish in a tank, frozen in place, while three pairs of eyes waited for me to do something extraordinary.

“I understand what you’re feeling, Mrs. Weber.”

“Doctor, please call me Hailey.” My smile was forced because of the horror show I was in, but the formality of being called Mrs. Weber was grating on my nerves and made me feel uneasy.

Dr. McGuire returned my smile. “It’s difficult to hear that Vince remembers things but not others. Especially something as special as your wedding and being a father. Perhaps the three of you would like to talk and try to come up with a plan for telling Vince.”

When we nodded, Dr. McGuire shook our hands and left.

“I think ...” My mind wasn’t working.

Noticing my distress, Renee wrapped her arm around me. “I’m right here,” she said.

I clutched her hand tightly in mine. I was forever grateful to have her and Daniel here with me. Their strength and presence fortified me.

I nodded, unable to speak. She rubbed circles on my back. It was the kind of thing a mother did for her child.

“Maybe we should get some coffee,” Daniel suggested. Renee and I followed silently to the visitor’s room.

The coffee burned. It was an unfriendly reminder that this was all real. Too real. Still, I welcomed the intense warmth. I was chilled to the bone and couldn’t stop shivering. We sat in silence, all wondering what to say, all uncertain what words would be the right words.

“He doesn’t remember that we’re married.” I shook my head in disbelief.

“He will remember. Just give him time.” Daniel’s words were meant to comfort me, but I didn’t believe them. Still, I nodded.

“Maybe he regrets getting married. Do you think he regrets it? Like maybe he feels like he made a mistake, and that’s why he doesn’t remember. Maybe he had doubts or something.” I looked at Renee. “Do you think he did?”

“Oh, honey. That’s a silly thing to say. He couldn’t wait to be married to you.”

“Then what’s going on? I don’t understand how he could forget.”

“I don’t know either, Hailey. But trust me when I say he would never forget the happiest day of his life on purpose.”

“There has to be an explanation.”

“The only thing he cared about was starting a life with you.”

“Let’s wait and see what he says when he wakes up,” Daniel said. “The good thing is that he does remember all of us.”

I nodded again. Daniel did make a good point. If he remembered us, then hopefully, he would remember everything else. I twisted and turned my hands together.

“We’re all nervous, Hailey,” Daniel said. “We’re gonna figure this out, okay? Try not to get lost in worst-case scenarios. We’re a family, and we will work through this together.”

“Thank you.” My words were meek, but they were sincere.

“Maybe he’s suffering from a breakdown because of everything. Or his mind is overwhelmed. Maybe he is subconsciously protecting himself. Or you.”

“Me?”

“Perhaps not remembering certain things helped him survive. I’m not sure we’ll get any answers. Brains are complex.” It was funny to hear Daniel talking like a doctor. What he said made sense, though.

When I finished my coffee, we returned to Vince’s room. Each of us took turns talking to him.

It was weird to me that time passed so quickly. Before I knew it, it was midafternoon. Dr. McGuire and a couple of nurses came in to check on Vince. After checking in on Hudson, we went to the cafeteria. We didn't want to leave Vince, but we were all hungry, and the room was crowded with all of us in there.

We'd only been back a few minutes when Pete walked through the door. "Hey," he said. Even though he smiled, I could see that he was just as overwhelmed as we all were. His eyes were bloodshot and rimmed with dark circles, heavy with weariness. "How is he?"

"He's stable but still unconscious. They say it's normal and not to worry. But that's all I can do. They've run some more tests, but at this point, they don't think there's any cause for alarm. Probably just tired from everything he went through and severe dehydration." I hated talking about it. Worse, I hated thinking about what Vince had gone through. I wiped my eyes.

"It's been a rough day," Daniel said.

"The doctor's hopeful but says we have to give it some time." I sighed.

"So, no real progress?" he said.

"Not really. But he's hopeful." I sounded like a parrot as I rocked back and forth on my feet. Even without Hudson in my arms, the movement was ingrained in me now. "I guess—" I sighed—"I didn't expect this."

He grunted, then sighed heavily. "I truly can't imagine what you're going through, how you can focus at a time like

this. I'm sorry."

"For what?" Daniel asked.

"I just hoped things would be better when you saw him."

"You knew about the memory loss? Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

He nodded and dropped his head. It reminded me of Hudson when I scolded him for doing something naughty. "I thought maybe he'd snap out of it."

I reached out and touched his arm. His eyes were watery when he looked at me. It broke my heart because he saved my husband, and I knew everything he did was to protect me. Me and Hudson. "Pete," I said.

"I'm sorry I couldn't—"

I hugged him tightly. "There's nothing to be sorry for," I whispered. He sagged against me. I understood the weight of everything he was feeling. I pulled back and cupped his face in my hands. "You're the best friend we could ever ask for."

"You put your life on the line," Daniel said. "You brought our son home. You are a hero."

"We could never repay you," Renee said, her voice shaking.

Daniel dragged another chair over for Pete. We resumed our positions, sitting sentry around Vince's bed.

When Pete headed out a couple of hours later, I noticed the time. I needed to head home to Hudson. As I gathered my things, Renee came to me and stopped me. She placed her

hand on the side of my face. “You stay here. Take as long as you need.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. You need to be here. We’ll go to your place. Hudson will be fine.”

I fiddled with my hands. “Do you think that maybe you could stay the night?” I stole a glance at Vince, who had yet to wake up. “Then I can spend the night here. I don’t want him to be alone.”

Renee’s smile was soft. “You do that, sweetheart.”

“If you need anything, anything at all, you just call,” Daniel said before wrapping me in a hug. “Try and get some sleep. We’ll be back in the morning.”

“I need to call Ashley and make sure she’s okay with coming back tomorrow. I don’t remember if I asked her or not. So much going on. I don’t know where my brain is at.”

“Don’t worry about that. We’ll check with her. If she’s not available, Daniel and I will take shifts.”

I sighed. “Thank you.”

“Hailey, you have your husband back. Hudson has his father. We have our son. It’s a glorious day.”

I choked on a sob.

“Honey, what’s wrong?”

My words were a whisper. “He doesn’t remember that stuff.”

Strong arms engulfed me again. Daniel's sandalwood scent of aftershave comforted me. Renee's hand tenderly stroked my head as I cried softly against Daniel's chest. "I know it seems hopeless now. But honey, you have him back. And we never thought we'd see him again. It's a miracle. Right?" I nodded against Daniel's chest. "We'll figure everything out. One step at a time. Together, okay?"

I put the other chairs back in their spots and used the bathroom inside Vince's hospital room. I looked affright. I was a complete wreck. A puffy, splotchy face with garish raccoon eyes from smeared mascara looked back at me. I shouldn't have worn any makeup. Vanity won out in the end, though. I didn't want to look like a haggard wench the first time Vince saw me. I primed and prepped all morning. A lot of good it did me. *Haggard wench* it was.

I took my seat next to Vince. "I never thought I'd see you again," I whispered as I stroked his cheek. As I looked upon my beloved, it didn't matter anymore what I looked like.

All that mattered was that Vince was home. My heart was whole.





## Chapter 5

*Vince*

An angel's voice called to me from somewhere far away.

I was stuck in a shitstorm, wading my way through mud-like quicksand. I clawed at the dirt wall, my fingertips bloody and raw.

I felt the angel's lips. A lungful of heaven breathing life back into me.

I forced myself through the hurtling hell I was in. Clawing my way out of this nightmare. Desperately reaching out to find my way back. Back home. Back to my angel.

“But that was the past, and we can't live in the past. No matter how good or how bad it was.” I could hear her words. I had no idea what they meant, but I knew I wanted her to keep talking.

I managed to force my eyes open. I squinted against the brightness I wasn't used to.

“Hai—” I couldn't get her name out before she leaped up.

“Vince? Baby. Oh, my God.”

My eyes fluttered open, and I turned my head toward her. The moment our eyes met, a surge of emotion overwhelmed me. She was here. I was alive.

“I thought I was dreaming.” My voice sounded like gnarled gravel. Tears streamed down Hailey’s cheeks. “Hailey,” I whispered. “You’re here.”

“Yes, baby. I’m here.” Her voice was strained and hoarse. But even so, it was the most beautiful sound in the world.

“Do you know where you are?”

“Hospital.” I motioned to my mouth, which felt like Death Valley on the hottest day of summer. She brought a cup of water and held it for me, angling the straw toward my lips. “San Diego.”

“Yes, that’s right.” She smiled like I had just answered the million-dollar question on a silly game show.

“Am I okay?” I winced as pain spiraled through my body.

“Not too fast,” Hailey said, grabbing the remote. She pushed, and the bed inclined a little. She helped me to sit up, propping several more pillows behind my head.

“Do you remember being transferred here?”

“No. I just remember getting here and them telling me where I was.” She furrowed her brows and chewed her lip. Her face contorted into disappointed confusion. “How long have I been here?”

“Early this morning.” She looked at the clock. “Well, yesterday morning. We were here all day.”

“Who?” Worried fear flashed in her eyes.

“Me, your parents, and Pete.”

“Where are they?” Her body sagged when she sighed with relief.

“They’ll be back. Let me call them. And”—she pushed the nurse’s button—“the doctor.” She turned to leave.

“Hailey?”

She whipped back around. “Yeah, baby?”

“I love you.”

I wasn’t expecting her to burst into tears. She ran to me and latched on, hugging me tightly and burying her face in my neck. She shook as the tears continued. I winced as pain rippled through me. I hugged her as tight as I could. “Oh, my God. I love you too, Vince. So much. So, so much.”

When the door whooshed open, Hailey lifted herself. “He’s awake,” she said. Her words sounded grateful and full of pride.

While the nurse did a quick checkup, Hailey called and texted my parents and Pete. The nurse looked satisfied at a cursory once-over and left to page my doctor.

“They all send their love,” Hailey reported, taking her seat again. Something in her tone made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Aside from my recovery, I couldn’t fathom what I should be worried about, and Hailey’s smile concealed any worry she might be having.

“Everything all right?” I asked.

“Yes. They’ll be here soon.”

Alone with Hailey again, we started talking. I may have gone through hell, and my senses might be shot, but my

ingrained training made it impossible not to pick up on her surface-level questions and answers.

“What’s going on, Hailey?”

“What do you mean?” Her words were innocent enough, but my ears zeroed in on the crack in her voice. One look at my face, and she broke. Tears streamed down her face as she trembled.

“Come here,” I said. Maybe I was broken and damaged, but my voice still commanded. I moved over and patted the space next to me.

She climbed carefully into the bed and snuggled against me. She pressed her face into the crook of my neck. I encircled her body, holding her close. I could feel her heartbeat. I clung to her, wanting to hold onto her forever.

“Hailey, I can’t make any sense of this. I know I’m awake, and this is real, but it all feels like I’m dreaming. I don’t remember my mission except for prepping and getting there. No one will tell me anything. And I’ve been debriefed and questioned ad nauseam. I’m so sick and tired of feeling like a lab animal. If I could get out of this bed, I would. I need some fresh air and to think. And clear my head. But I can’t. I need you to tell me what you seem so worried about. I can see it in your eyes. Hear it in your voice. Hell, I can feel it rolling off you you’re so tense.”

She sniffled against me and played with an invisible piece of lint on the blanket covering me.

“We’re married, and you don’t remember.” She spoke so quietly that I wasn’t sure I heard her correctly.

“Married?” I hoped the surprise in my tone didn’t offend her.

She lifted her head a fraction. “Mm-hmm,” she murmured. “Married. And—”

Screw the pain. I snatched her as close as possible and kissed her. She squealed and kissed me back. “This is the best fucking news I’ve ever received,” I said, coming up for air.

“Really?” Her lashes fluttered, and her cheeks reddened.

And then it hit me. “Goddamnit!” I roared. Hailey reeled back. When I registered her shock and, albeit, fear, I pulled her back and held her. “I’m sorry. I’m not mad at you.”

“I’m sorry, too.”

I chuckled. “What are you apologizing for? I’m the idiot here, not you.”

I felt her hands rubbing up and down my back. It instantly calmed me. “You’re a hero, Vincent, not an idiot.”

“Mm, I can remember a couple of instances you vehemently called me an idiot.”

It was the first time we laughed at the same time.



## Chapter 6

*Hailey*

When I looked at Vince again, I knew he wasn't just in physical pain. The emotional torment was written all over his face.

Careful not to inflict any more discomfort, I touched his face ever so gently.

I leaned forward and kissed him. Our wedding kiss flashed in my mind. The day we promised to love, honor, and protect—forever. I thought I'd lost him. I thought I lost him forever. But here he was. Vincent Daniel Weber was in my arms. He was my *forever*. Relief flooded me, and a tear slipped down my cheek.

“Why are you crying?” he asked, wiping it away with his thumb.

“I'm just so happy. This all seems impossible. Like I'm dreaming. I'm scared to wake up and find out this isn't real.”

“I know,” he said.

“I know you've been through hell, baby. And I don't want to dwell on the past. But—”

Our conversation would have to wait. I hopped out of bed and Vince's arms. The temptation to ignore everything and crawl back into his embrace was strong.



“Sorry it took us so long,” Renee said, rushing forward and swooping in to hug her long-lost son. I couldn’t blame her. New tears brimmed my eyes. Seeing her relief and knowing exactly what she was feeling, I was overcome with happiness.

Daniel had tears in his eyes when he looked at me from the head of Vince’s bed. He hugged Vince so tightly that Vince winced. The smile on his face said the pain was worth it. Seeing Vince reunited with his parents overwhelmed me in the best of ways. If only Hudson could be here. Then everything would be perfect.

I knew the days and months ahead would be the fight of our lives. I’d do anything to help him. I’d do anything for the man I loved. I’d bend over backward and walk through the fiery gates of hell to get our life back.

Dr. McGuire came around after breakfast. He checked Vince over and looked at his charts again. “You’re healing up nicely,” Dr. McGuire said. “We’re very pleased with the results. Things are definitely looking up.”

“Just glad to be alive, Doc. And back home with my family. My wife,” he added, grinning.

Renee’s sucked in a huge breath of air. “Oh, thank God, you told him.”

“Yes!” I exclaimed, giving her a look that warned her not to say anything else.

Her quick nod and nervous smile told me she understood I hadn’t told him about Hudson yet.

Dr. McGuire must have picked up on it too. “Well, Vince, you’ve endured a lot. Your x-rays show that everything

has healed. You haven't suffered any new broken bones.”

“What?” I screeched.

“Hailey,” Vince sighed my name. “Don't worry about it.”

“Broken?” I stammered.

“Shit, Hailey. I didn't want to freak you out. Doc, I'm sorry. Um, I uh ... Damnit!”

“Vince, it's quite all right. We are all here to support you,” Daniel said.

“Baby,” I said. “I know you've been through so much. I'm just shocked to be hearing about this for the first time.” I looked at Dr. McGuire and nodded for him to continue.

“You were severely dehydrated. That has been taken care of, and it looks like it isn't an issue anymore. According to your charts, you've lost a significant amount of weight, much of which is probably loss of muscle. And that means ... your strength has depleted. But physical therapy will help you regain ... get back to a place where you can begin training and working out like you're used to.”

“He'll be back on top in no time,” Renee said. “I know my son. He's not one to sit around and be idle.”

“Well,” Dr. McGuire sighed, “he's going to need to take it easy for a while. You can't just go back to what you were doing before. Not if you want to heal and do things right.”

“He'll take it easy and do what he's told,” I added, giving Vince a *don't argue with me* look.

“We also need to focus on your mental health.”

Vince's heavy sigh told me he did not want to have this conversation. Knowing him the way I did, it wasn't because he expected different news but because he already figured all of this out and just wanted to go home.

More tests and more time healing meant a longer hospital stay.

Vince, the noble, dependable, determined, and focused man he was, would never give up without a fight. But he was itching to get out of here. And he would do whatever it took to make it happen as soon as humanly possible. My heart ached for him. Only because whether he admitted it or not, we both knew the road ahead was not going to be easy.

It wasn't just the physical stuff we needed to worry about. He'd have that nipped in the bud in no time. The daunting part of everything was the mental and the emotional. Who knew what happened to him while he was held captive? And even if Vince could remember, could we trust those memories? Or did he also forget bits and pieces of that as well?

"Hey, Hailey?" Vince's words broke into my thoughts, which were starting to spiral out of control.

"Yeah, baby," I said, moving up to his head.

"I feel like a complete shitbag for forgetting."

My chest rose and fell with giant breaths. All I could think was that when I told him about being married, he must have remembered my being pregnant when he left. I stroked his head and looked into his eyes.

"How's Chewie?" he asked.

My perfect balloon deflated on my exhale. While it wasn't the question I hoped for, I couldn't fight my smile. "Chewie's fine, honey." I looked at Dr. McGuire and explained, "Chewie's our dog. Vince is a huge Star Wars fan."

Dr. McGuire chuckled as I pulled out my phone and showed Vince and him a picture of Chewie after he got groomed. And true to form, Chewie was sporting a Star Wars-themed bandana around his neck.

We spent the rest of the day focusing on the good memories. There would be plenty of time to talk about everything else. For our first day together, we just wanted to be happy.



## Chapter 7

### *Hailey*

The sterile hospital walls closed in on me. Time stood still, but the second hand on the clock, ticking ever so slowly, reminded me that time was just an illusion. Life was still going on outside these walls.

Vince sat with his gaze fixed on the opaque walls. A cocktail of emotions churned inside, eating away at our last shreds of sanity. Fear mixed with anxiety, which mixed with frustration. But there was a smidgeon of optimism, and hopefully, we'd receive some good news any second now. It was the tiniest morsel, but we hoped and prayed for some encouraging and positive words.

Vince's hand was clammy in mine. But I held tight, my fingers interwoven with his. It was a silent offering of support that he desperately needed. If we didn't receive some shred of good news, I knew it would break him. Dr. Hopkins, a middle-aged man with a calm demeanor, entered the room carrying a clipboard filled with papers and a warm smile. He was the chief medical officer and was in charge of everything that pertained to Vince's recovery.

"Vince, Hailey, it's good to see you both today." Dr. Hopkins stood at the foot of the bed. "I know it's been a long and challenging journey for you, Vince, but I promise we're here to help you every step of the way."

Vince nodded, his eyes now fixated on the clipboard in Dr. Hopkins' hands. The stack of documents attached was overwhelming. My husband was a strong and proud man, but I knew his time as a prisoner had left deep scars, both physically and emotionally. He cleared his throat, but his voice still quivered when he finally spoke. "I just want to get back to normal. I want to go home."

"Then you'll be happy to hear you won't have to wait much longer. And you won't need any surgery. The steroid and cortisone injections helped to reduce your inflammation. And since you said the pain is better, we know they're doing their job. Now we just need to work on getting you up and moving."

Even though the words perked Vince up, his voice held uncertainty and reluctance to take the doctor at his word. "I hate feeling so helpless and weak."

Understanding Vince's frustration, I squeezed his hand and met Dr. Hopkins' eyes. Concern for Vince's well-being and determination to help my husband get back to his old self laced my words. "We'll do whatever it takes to help Vince get better, Doctor. Just tell us what we need to do."

Dr. Hopkins sent us a reassuring nod and tapped his clipboard. "Your frustration is completely normal, Vince. You've been through a traumatic experience, and your body and mind need time to heal. It won't happen overnight, but you have a strong support system. You will make progress, but remember that getting back to what you're used to will take time. You will no doubt be frustrated at times. And that's okay. It's a marathon, not a sprint."

I breathed slowly, trying to find some semblance of calm amidst the storm of emotions inside me. *In through your nose and out through your mouth*, I reminded myself. Dr. Hopkins' smile offered a slight reassurance.

Vince squeezed my hand and said, "All right, Doc, I hear you. Marathon. Not a sprint. What are we looking at?"

"You'll start off with a series of gentle exercises to test your balance and coordination, improve your range of motion, and a few things to build your strength back up. Your therapist, Sarah, is one of the best, and she'll be with you every step of the way." His eyes ping-ponged between us. "As you progress, she'll add in resistance and more rigorous strength training exercises."

When he glanced at me, a hint of determination replaced some of his frustration. "I'll do whatever it takes."

My eyes glistened with pride. "That's the spirit, baby." I knew physical therapy and exercise would help him regain his strength and mobility. I just hoped he didn't overdo it and end up doing more damage.

"There is one catch—"

"Shit," Vince grumbled. I gripped his hand in warning. "What?" He looked at me. "I knew this was too good to be true."

"Let me reassure you, Vince. It's nothing regarding you leaving the hospital."

I released the breath I'd been holding. "Thank God."

"Vince cannot drive until we can guarantee that he will not be a hazard to himself or any other drivers on the road.



With his symptoms and the results of his most recent tests, he'll need to have someone drive him to and from his appointments.”

“I'll take a fucking Uber if I have to,” Vince said.

“Vince!” I could feel my cheeks heat.

“What?” Vince shrugged. “Baby, nothing is going to keep me from getting my life back.”

“Don't cuss at the doctor,” I admonished.

Dr. Hopkins' chuckled. “It's quite all right, Hailey. We're quite used to cursing around here. Especially from Labor and Delivery.”

My cheeks continued to burn, remembering all the profanity that flew out of my mouth when I delivered Hudson. I could feel Vince's eyes on me but couldn't meet them. I still hadn't told him about Hudson. After talking with his doctors and parents, we felt that we should take a couple of days to get him settled in before springing more new news on him.

“Let's talk about the most important part of your healing regimen.” Dr. Hopkins turned his focus to the emotional and psychological aspects of recovery. “It's essential that you don't just focus on the physical healing. Your mental and emotional well-being are just as critical, if not more so, considering what you've been through. Traumatic events like you endured can wreak havoc on your mental and emotional recovery. It's natural to have flashbacks, nightmares, and anxiety.”

Vince's jaw tightened, his muscles ticking with the thoughts I was sure were involuntarily flooding his mind. I would do anything to keep him from drifting back to those

horrors he experienced. I blinked back my tears, not wanting to show weakness. My vulnerability made me feel pathetic. After all, I wasn't the one who'd endured suffering day in and day out. Losing Vince felt like a part of me had been cut out. But Hudson had filled that void.

"Hailey?" Vince's voice came to me through the fogginess of emotions. I felt him squeeze my hand again. I couldn't hide my worry—it was written all over my face.

"I'm okay. It's just ... a lot." I squeezed his hand back, silently reassuring him. "Once we get you home, I'll be better."

"I know this is all a lot to take in, Hailey."

I nodded as tears welled in my eyes. I looked at Vince and tried to smile as best as I could. "I'm just so thankful to have you back."

"Me too, baby." He kissed the top of my hand. "Me too."

Dr. Hopkins smiled before he continued, "As I'm sure you've been told, we have an excellent team of therapists who specialize in PTSD and trauma recovery."

"I don't think—"

"Vince, let Dr. Hopkins finish."

"Yes, ma'am," he said in response to my no-nonsense tone.

"We have a highly skilled team to help you work through things and develop coping strategies. I'm sure you're quite familiar with the process, but remember, Vince, seeking help is a sign of strength, not weakness."

“We’ll do everything we need to get him better, right?” I looked at my heroic husband and implored him to agree.

Vince closed his eyes and nodded. His voice was softer when he said, “Yes, baby. I’ll talk to them if it helps me—us—get through this.”

My heart swelled with love and pride.

I stood up and leaned over him, placing a gentle kiss on his lips. I cradled his face and said, “We’ll do it together, Vince. We’re a team.” Our next kiss lingered a little longer. I peeled myself away, wanting to immerse myself in Vince’s touch. The sound of pages turning caught my attention. Doctor Hopkins was trying to give us a moment to connect and appreciate the second chance we’d been given. His presence was a minor interference, but I appreciated him being patient with us and not interrupting our moment. “I love you, Vince.”

“I love you more, Hailey.”

Dr. Hopkins was smiling when I took my seat again. He seemed encouraged by our determination—and affection. “This is exactly what I was hoping to hear.” He tucked his clipboard under his arm. “Now, as for your release from the hospital, Vince. We’ll be arranging for home healthcare to continue your physical therapy and provide any necessary medical assistance. Hailey, you’ll play a vital role in Vince’s recovery as his primary caregiver.”

My commitment was unwavering, and I nodded. “I’ll be with him every step of the way.”

“Vince, it’s important to understand the challenges you might encounter during recovery. You will more than likely

experience setbacks. There will be days when you feel great. And times when you get extremely frustrated. Don't worry if your improvement seems slow."

Vince grunted. "Easier said than done."

Dr. Hopkins chuckled. "*Try* not to worry." When Vince nodded, he began again. "Your memories might surprise you. They may overwhelm you and make you emotional. Or even angry. But that's normal and all part of the process. It's essential to communicate with your therapist, your support system, and me when you're facing difficulties. We can adjust your treatment plan as needed. We all need to focus on setting small, achievable goals. Every step forward, each goal achieved, no matter how small, is a victory. It's about progress, not perfection."

"Like I said, Doc, I'll do anything to get my life and memory back. All I want is a future with Hailey. It's all I ever wanted."

I smiled through my tears. I wanted to tell Vince about Hudson right then and there, but knowing how much he'd already been through and his frustration at not remembering that we were married, I just couldn't bring myself to break him down when he finally found hope and confidence.



## Chapter 8

### *Hailey*

I sat behind the wheel, my heart fluttering like a thousand butterfly wings. Crisp air drifted through the open windows as I eased onto the next street. A heavy sense of anticipation hung heavy around us. The sun's descent cast a warm, golden light over the neighborhood. It had been almost two years since Vince was home. Two years since I held him in my arms. Two years of aching emptiness and sleepless nights, hoping and praying for this very moment—one I thought I was foolish for believing would ever come.

It was an odd change, me behind the wheel instead of Vince. He was always the one behind the wheel whenever we were together. It wasn't anything macho, but just because he enjoyed driving. And I hated it. I much preferred looking out the window. Since Vince's disappearance, I'd gotten used to it, and Hudson loved to ride in the car. It was part of our routine to drive around the neighborhood while he sat in the back, and I narrated the happenings going on outside.

"Here we are," I said as I turned onto our street.

"Home, sweet home. Finally."

"You remember it?" I asked.

"Mm-hmm. Blue house, white trim. Three up on the left."

I sighed with relief when he pointed it out.

I hustled to his side of the car after I parked. “Here, let me help you,” I said when Vince opened his door.

“Hailey, I got this. I’m hurt, not an invalid.”

“Right,” I said, clamping my mouth shut. I winced as he pulled himself to his feet. He didn’t want help, but his strained face told me he could have used it. I wrapped my arm around his waist to hold him steady.

“Hailey, I can do this.”

“I know you can. I’m not helping you. I’m holding you. Are you going to deny me that?”

“No.” We both knew I was lying. But neither of us was going to call me out on it. “It feels good.” His words made me smile.

A chorus of barks rang from inside the house. Chewie, our loyal chow-chow, knew I was home. His mixture of howls and yelps was his way of begging me to come inside. I knew what waited for me on the other side of the door. He would jump and prance around me in circles until I patted his head and called for him to follow me to the back, where he would go outside, go potty, and receive a treat for being a *Good Boy*. It was our normal welcome-home routine.

“Do you want me to let him out?” I asked.

“Yeah. Don’t forget his leash.” His words were music to my ears. It was something he always told me whenever we let Chewie out. I didn’t need Vince to remind me, but it felt good to hear.

I steadied my shaking hand as I slipped the key into the lock. I expected Chewie to jump and dance around in greeting

when I opened the door. He always welcomed me home with *hello* barks and kisses between his prancing. “I’m here, Chewie,” I said. “Just a second.” I held the screen door open with my foot as I unlocked the deadbolt. Chewie flew past me like a bolt of lightning. “Chewie!” I yelled, fearful he would run down the street and I’d have to chase after him. He’d never run past me before. Vince had trained him to always stay inside when we came through the front door.

Masculine laughter thundered from the driveway. It was good to hear him laugh like this.

Chewie yelped and whined as he lunged at Vince. He leaped onto his hindquarters and wrapped his front paws around Vince’s waist. From where I stood, it looked like he was hugging Vince. Chewie’s tail was a propeller whipping around in excitement. Chewie shoved his head against Vince’s side, his tail wagging furiously as if trying to communicate his own relief at being reunited with his master. He sniffed and licked Vince every place he could as Vince patted and sweet-talked his furry best friend.

“I’m home, buddy,” he said. His words were music to both Chewie’s and my ears. As if knowing what Vince meant, Chewie yelped three times, lowered himself, and nudged Vince’s hand before he licked it. He let loose three more barks and then held up his paw. Vince took it and shook it.

When Vince’s eyes met mine, an instantaneous whirlwind of emotions stormed through me—love, desire, fear, and hope. I saw them reflected in his eyes, too. Despite feeling overwhelmed by everything, Vince’s gaze still held the same tenderness that captivated me the first time we met.



It ripped me apart to watch the man I loved with every fiber of my being struggle with his own emotions. My brave Navy SEAL finally broke down. As his emotions burst through, he leaned against the car for support. He wasn't steady on his feet yet. He was weaker, more vulnerable.

Wanting to play and not understanding Vince's condition, Chewie jumped up again.

I rushed forward as Vince pushed Chewie off of him with gentle hands. His hands trembled as he continued to pet Chewie. Whether it was from pain or emotional turmoil, my heart clenched as the man who had always been my pillar of strength currently fought to stay strong. Our eyes met again as I rejoined my guys. I willed Vince to feel and accept my support.

When Vince opened his arm, I leaned in. Me, my man, and his dog. Chewie was technically his dog. I chuckled at the thought.

"What?" Vince asked as I approached.

I couldn't help but smile as I ruffled Chewie's fur. "Remember the fight we had about him?"

Vince chuckled. "You mean about how you didn't want a dog because you'd end up taking care of it when I was gone?"

"That's the one." We both stopped smiling and laughing.

"Hailey, don't do that," Vince warned, his tone serious.

"I'm sorry." My eyes filled with tears. "As soon as I said it, I ... it's stupid."

“Hailey, we’ve been together for a long time. Of course, we’ve had fights.” He lifted my chin for me to meet his eyes.

“I just hate that that’s the first thing I asked you.”

He kissed me tenderly, our fur baby nestled between our legs. I held on tightly, afraid that this perfect moment would disappear the moment I let go.

Chewie must have sensed something different about Vince. He whined softly and nudged his master’s hand. I reached down to soothe him and ruffled his fur. “Everything’s going to be okay, buddy,” Vince said. He cupped my face. I nodded. Yes, everything would be all right.



## Chapter 9

### *Hailey*

Vince's steps were steady. The ache in my chest was nothing compared to the anguish on his face. I saw the effort it took for him to stand tall, to keep moving forward despite the pain he was in. He was courageous—a man determined to face everything head-on.

When we finally reached the porch, his gaze locked onto mine with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine. He paused momentarily as if gathering his strength before enveloping me in his arms. I buried my face in his chest, joy and worry colliding within.

Chewie pressed his head against my leg, his tail wagging furiously as if trying to communicate his own relief.

Vince brushed his lips against my hair. "We're home." His voice was a low, soothing rumble, grounding me in the reality of the moment.

Hand in hand, we stepped over the threshold together, Chewie right there with us.

We'd only reached the living room when Vince stopped dead in his tracks. Chewie healed at his side. "Is something wrong?" I asked.

"No. I don't know. I don't think so." Vince shook his head. "It's weird. I have memories of this room. Of the house.

But ...” he trailed off as his eyes darted to every corner of the room.

“Let’s get you settled in. I know it’s a lot to take in and get used to again. Maybe I was too optimistic. We can go somewhere else for the night if you want. Try this again tomorrow.”

Vince’s brows drew together in a scowl. “Why? It’s not going to help. It’s not like if I wait another day, everything’s going to come flooding back.” He smacked his head. Frustrated tears welled in his eyes. Vince wasn’t an overly emotional man. At least he wasn’t before ... before ... I didn’t even know what to think of the time he was gone. It wasn’t an accident, even though he was in an accident. He was tortured and abused. Physically, mentally, and emotionally, day in and day out for so long.

“Tell me what to do, Vince. What do you need?”

His voice was hollow and despondent when he said, “I don’t know. I just don’t fucking know.”

“We can make some sandwiches and sit out back with Chewie. Would that be okay?”

He nodded softly. He looked so lost as he patted his leg. “Come on, boy,” he said.

I followed behind, wishing there was something I could do to make this an easy transition for Vince. I wasn’t used to him like this. He was strong, resolute, and determined. That was the man I remembered.

He surprised me when he turned down the hallway instead of heading into the kitchen. “Vince?” I asked, unsure

of what was going on.

“Let’s just ...” He stopped at the collage of us through the years. The years before we got married. “God, we look so young.” He chuckled softly as he touched the glass tentatively. He tapped one of my favorite pictures of us—the one of him holding me up in his arms as we kissed. It was right after he got back from his first tour. “I remember this day.” He sounded hopeful and happy. “And this one was the day we moved in here.” He tapped another picture. “And this was our very first Christmas together.”

“Remember this one?” I asked, pointing to one of us on the beach.

“Yeah, we were down in Coronado for the day.”

“That’s right,” I said, laughter etching my words. “Oh my God, and then you stepped on that dead fish. I’ve never heard a grown man sound like such a little girl.”

He belted out a laugh. “Oh, jeez. Don’t remind me.”

He pulled me to him in a tight hug. “So many good memories of us, baby.”

I sagged against him. He was right. We had so many wonderful memories. And even the not-so-good-ones—I wouldn’t trade them for anything.

His words were soft and tender when he spoke next. “I’m sorry there are cracks in my memory. I wish there weren’t.”

I squeezed him tightly. “It’s not your fault. You didn’t forget on purpose,” I said. “Like the time you brought Chewie home as a surprise.”

His chest vibrated with a loud laugh. “You’ll never let me live that one down, will you?”

“Never,” I said.

We stood together, wrapped in each other’s arms, willing this moment to last forever.

Vince’s loud, heavy sigh told me he was ready to continue his tour of the home he’d been away from for far too long.

As we turned the next corner, I hoped and prayed he would ignore the closed door and walk straight to the bedroom. *Our* bedroom.

Luck was not on my side.

“This is your office,” he said. “I remember you wanted this room because it faced the garden.”

“Vince, um ...” I was about to pounce and forbid him to enter when his hand touched the knob. “Don’t,” I said, hoping he’d listen.

Just like seconds before, luck was not on my side.

“You hiding something in here?” he asked, laughter lacing his question.

Before I could stop him, the door whooshed open, and there before us was the one thing I’d yet to tell him.

His eyes went wide. The blood drained from his face. His grip on the doorknob tightened.

“Oh, fuck. Oh, my God. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Vince, I’m sorry. I’ve been trying to figure out how to break this to you. I didn’t know how to say ... what to say.”

“You have a baby?”

His words hit me like a Mack Truck.

Then they reversed and ran back over my heart.





## Chapter 10

*Vince*

Holy shit.

My worst nightmare just came true.

The love of my life gave up on me.

She took her time grieving me but had found someone else to make her happy. And to boot, they had a baby.

I couldn't believe my luck. "Why did I live?" I asked, taking three steps into the room. It smelled sweet, like lavender and baby powder. "I can't believe I survived that fucking hellhole just to lose you all over again." Tears blurred my vision.

"What?" Hailey asked from behind me.

"I don't blame you for moving on, Hailey." A tear slipped out. I forbid myself to break apart in front of her. "I don't blame you at all."

The woman who stole my heart so many years ago was suddenly standing in front of me. And if I wasn't mistaken, fire was shooting out of her eyes.

"It's okay, Hailey. I don't want to hold you back anymore."

Her palm connected with my chest. "How dare you!" Tears streamed down her face as her chest heaved up and down. "You, Vincent Daniel Weber, are one colossal moron. Like seriously, you are the biggest idiot I've ever laid eyes on."

I was shocked into silence. I didn't understand what was going on.

“When I said I would love you until my dying breath, I meant it. You ... you ... asshole!”

“I—what?”

Her eyes softened, and a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Vince, *we* have a baby.”

The world stopped and fell from beneath my feet. “What? How?”

“How do you think, dummy?”

My eyes zipped around the room. “We have a baby,” I said in awe. I looked at Hailey again. “*We* have a baby?”

“Yes.” Her lips turned up into a gigantic smile. “Hudson Vincent Weber. Born September fifteenth. Seven pounds, four ounces.” She chuckled. “And let me tell you, he one hundred percent takes after you.”

“He does?” I took her hands in mine.

“Yeah. His head is as big as yours.”

That made me chuckle. “Wow.” I was awed. Not at the size of my son’s head, but the fact that I had a son. “I’m a father.”

I became a blubbering idiot in the blink of an eye. Hailey wrapped her arms around me, running her hand up and down my back. It reminded me of when we were at the hospital. Once again, it calmed me and settled my nerves. “I can’t believe we’re parents.”

When she whispered, “Yeah.” I could hear her happiness, and it echoed what I was feeling inside.

We pulled apart and smiled, giddy and overcome with joy. “Hudson,” I murmured as I looked around what used to be Hailey’s office.

Hudson’s room was a vibrant sanctuary of adventure and wonder. It was like stepping into the heart of the jungle—an

enchanting blend of soothing tranquility and wild imagination.

The main wall was a lush green canvas, alive with hand-painted trees that seemed to stretch endlessly upwards. Their branches reached out like welcoming arms, decorated with dancing leaves that ranged from forest green to deep emerald. Bright chartreuse accents highlighted the darker colors of the foliage. Mischievous monkeys hung from the trees, and majestic parrots perched on the branches. They were playful and looked ready to leap and fly off the wall. A giraffe and elephant stood on the left side, while a lion and lioness sat to the right.

A white crib sat against the wall. Soft, plush vines cascaded down like curtains of ivy over the bars. The sheets were covered with animals, and the comforter had more prominent depictions of the same giraffe, lion, elephant, alligator, and monkey.

Overhead, a mobile hung. But instead of the animals suspended from the delicate strings, there were flat squares. I turned one over, and my breath caught in my throat. New tears stung my eyes. I don't know what I expected to find, but I wasn't prepared to find pictures of me. As I turned each one over, a different image hung for my son to look at while he lay in his bed.

"I wanted him to know you," Hailey said from behind me.

"Thank you," I whispered. When I turned to look at her, I was stunned again. In her arms, she held a blanket emblazoned with our picture on it. "Is that from ..."

She nodded with tears in her eyes. "Our wedding day."

I covered my face with my hands and shook as my emotions took over again. Not only did I not remember our wedding, but I didn't remember Hailey being pregnant. Worse, I had never met my son.

I uncovered my face and took a deep breath, so my next words wouldn't come out like a blubbering fool. "I want to meet him."

A tear slipped down Hailey's cheek as she nodded, gripping the blanket tightly to her chest. "He'd love that."

"I can't wait."



I sat in Hailey's glider chair, and she sat in Hudson's armchair. When I laughed, she looked at me wildly perplexed. "What?" she asked, glaring at me.

"You just look so damn cute down there," I said.

She smirked and chucked a stuffed monkey at me.

A chandelier with leaf-shaped lights hung overhead and cast a warm, golden glow across the room. After the sun went down, the room became a magical oasis. I could imagine Hailey sitting and reading bedtime stories before Hudson went to bed.

"So, what do you do during the day?" I felt weird asking such superficial questions, but I was nervous about meeting Hudson. We'd already done a tour of the house, and we were both floundering.

"Normally, I have the baby. I work a couple of days a week. We have a little routine. It's nothing exciting, but it's the best thing in the world. You'll see."

"I hope I'm good at it. Do you think I'll be a good dad?"

“You’ll be the best dad.” She sighed and looked around the room. “It feels weird.”

I was nervous to hear her answer but asked anyway. “What?”

“Not having him here. I miss him.” Thank God she didn’t say it was having me here that felt weird. She must have picked up on the relief I felt. “You’ll be great, Vince. I know you’re nervous. I can’t tell you how long it took me not to be a nervous wreck twenty-four hours a day. I still wonder if I’m doing the right thing. Or am I a good mom? According to your mom, that feeling never goes away.” Her laugh was etched with nervousness.

“I’m glad they were able to help.”

“They’ve been a blessing. I couldn’t have gotten through everything without them. They babysit him ninety percent of the time. And then we have Ashley, our babysitter, who fills in when they can’t.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about Hudson at the hospital?” My question came out of nowhere, but it was eating away at me.

“Your parents and I talked. We didn’t know how to tell you. I was about to right after I told you we were married, but then you kissed me ... and then your parents showed up. And then ...” She flitted her hands in the air. “I just didn’t want to spring it on you out of nowhere. We thought it would be best to get you settled in here. We knew coming home would be a lot to take in and get used to. I don’t know ... Did I screw up? Should I have told you earlier?”

I could sense her anxiety rising. “Hailey, it’s okay. I have no idea what would have been better. I was just wondering, is all.” I wanted to reassure her that there was no right or wrong way to deal with this. “We—this all is a mess. I don’t know what to do. I know you’re doing the best you can. We have to be patient, like the doctor said.”

“You’re right. We had a life before all of this. And I know it’s weird and awkward.”

“Only because I’m missing parts of it.” She didn’t find sarcasm humorous.

“We will have it again, Vince.” Her smile told me she believed this beyond a shadow of a doubt.

I wasn’t as optimistic. I hated feeling so helpless and hopeless.

The sound of the front door opening stopped my heart, and all my negative thoughts dissipated. I had an acute sense of hearing. I didn’t know if it was my training or the anticipation of meeting my son.

When my mom walked in carrying Hudson in her arms, I was frozen with fear and excitement. My son. I couldn’t believe it.

He was sleeping and looked like an angel. “He’s perfect,” I said.

Mom looked down at him and swept his hair back. Her lip quivered. “He certainly is.”

“He looks just like you did,” Dad said, sounding as choked up as I felt.

As we stood together, tears filled all of our eyes. Mom nudged me and settled Hudson into my arms. I looked down at him. This was too much, and I couldn’t breathe. But everything was so perfect. I was alive. My parents were here. I was standing with the love of my life. And my precious son was in my arms.





## Chapter 11

### *Hailey*

The tension in the air was palpable. Hudson spent the night with his grandparents last night. Vince picked at his scrambled eggs. I nibbled on a piece of toast. Swallowing that last bite was like eating a spoonful of sand. I tried to wash it down with my morning tea, but it was useless. I traced the rim of my mug, not meeting Vince's eyes, which I knew were studying me, trying to get a read on how I felt about our upcoming appointment. He'd been home for almost a month now. Things were going okay, but I wanted them to be better—like they used to be. We were scheduled to meet for couples' counseling later today, something I'd been pushing for but something Vince wasn't exactly thrilled about.

He followed me to the sink.

"I can't believe you think we need counseling," he said. Even though the idea of needing help from Dr. Farris for couples counseling cut like a knife, Vince's words tore me apart. I couldn't help the tears that fell. "Hailey, baby, please don't cry."

I turned to face him, and the look in his beautiful blue eyes broke the dam even more. "I'm sorry," I wailed. Vince wrapped me in his arms. He'd lost weight and muscle mass, but his touch was a fortress, and the strength of his hold made me feel safe. "I just feel like I'm doing everything wrong."

"Honey, how do you think I feel? Hmm?"

"I know." I sniffled. "It's just that the doctor said it might be something for us to think about if things got rough."

"Do you think there's something wrong with us?"

I shook my head, my face still buried against his broad chest. I lifted away as he inhaled a deep breath.

“But you think we need professional help?” His eyes were full of warmth and adoration.

“I think Dr. Farris could help. I don’t know, baby. I just feel like it wouldn’t hurt, you know? You said he’s been helping you so far.”

“Hailey,” Vince’s voice was low but tinged with frustration. “It’s bad enough I have to go through this. There is something wrong with me. And yes, he has helped. But I thought everything was fine between me and you.”

I shook my head and sighed. “Vince, there’s nothing wrong with us. But there are things we could use some help with.”

“Babe—”

I held up my hand to stop him. We both knew we would benefit from meeting with a counselor. But admitting that something might be wrong felt like opening Pandora’s box, and I was scared to look inside. I knew he was too. “I love you, Vincent. But you have to see that we could use some outside help and support.” And I definitely needed outside help and support bringing up the one issue that kept plaguing me ... our lack of intimacy.

He rolled his eyes and groaned. “As if my parents aren’t supportive enough.”

This made me giggle, because I certainly couldn’t use his parent’s help with our sex life. “I love your parents. And I know you do, too. But it’s not about help from your family. It’s about getting some outside perspective from someone who isn’t in ... this.” I moved my hands between our bodies in reference to the two of us.

Vince leaned forward, his sapphire eyes searching mine. “Hailey, you’re holding something back. I don’t know what it is, but

if something's bothering you, we need to talk about it, not run to a therapist."

His words stung. We'd always been a strong, united couple. We were unbreakable. But I'd been to hell and back. So had he. Being held prisoner and tortured for as long as he was had done major damage. And it wasn't just him who suffered, but me too. And now that I knew what he'd been through, I didn't know how to approach him about certain areas. Here I was, suggesting we needed help, and here he was, just trying to get through another day and acclimate to being a husband and a father. He didn't understand the torment I'd been through while he was away. All the loneliness and fear that I'd lost him forever. And I didn't understand the agony and suffering he'd been through.

I finally met his gaze, fresh tears brimming my eyes. And I could see the pain in his. "Maybe I'm being overly sensitive, but I thought it might help us communicate better, that's all. I want us back on the same page. And I just don't think we're there yet."

"You're not being too sensitive, honey." Vince sighed, his shoulders slumping. "We used to talk about everything. There wasn't anything we couldn't share with one another. What's changed?"

"Nothing's changed. But everything's changed."

"I know," he whispered.

I didn't know how to put it into words. I was so happy to have Vince back. I was so thrilled to watch him be a father. But I missed the man he used to be, the one who would hold me close and whisper sweet nothings in my ear. That man had been replaced by someone haunted by the horrors of war and torture, and I didn't know how to get our intimacy back without causing him more pain.

"Please, Vince. Let's just try."

He framed my face in his hands. “I’d do anything for you. I hope you know that.”

“I do.” Two simple words sliced through me, threatening to reopen an old wound. The words echoed in my mind, and our wedding day flashed before me. We’d stood just like this right before he kissed me. I searched his eyes for some kind of recognition. But there wasn’t any.

He pressed his lips together and nodded. “What time is our appointment?”

“Right after your physical therapy.”

“Let me grab something to change into. I’m not wearing shorts and a t-shirt.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Of course, Vince would refuse to look anything less than his best for a therapy session. He gave me a quick peck on the lips before retreating to the bedroom. Relief that he’d give couple’s counseling a try wrestled with the disappointment that he still didn’t remember our wedding day. Would he ever remember our most perfect, precious day? I wasn’t sure. If we could figure out how to move forward and get the physical intimacy back, that would be a start.



“So, you’ve been married for four years and have a baby,” Dr. Farris said. He was Vince’s therapist and agreed to see us for couples counseling. He studied us, his dark eyes silently probing through his wire-rimmed glasses.

I wrestled with the tissue in my hands. “Yes, that’s right.”

The light sage green walls were probably meant to be soothing, but I was rattled inside. Nothing about being here did anything to ease my nerves. I could feel Vince’s tension rolling off him next to me. We sat knee to knee on the leather couch. No matter how close we were, it felt like there was an ocean between us.

“Hudson,” Vince said, stretching out his legs. “That’s our son’s name.”

“Hudson Vincent Weber.” I didn’t know why I felt the need to tell Dr. Farris Hudson’s full name. He probably already knew since Vince had several visits with him already.

“Great name.” Dr. Farris’s eyes were kind and understanding.

“I’m just so thankful to have him back. We’ve been trying to find our rhythm, you know. Not much has changed in our lives. Except for Hudson. It’s been mostly easygoing so far. He’s been home for almost a month now.” I spoke quickly, my words tumbling out like a bunch of gumballs falling from a machine. I took a breath and looked at Vince, who simultaneously shrugged and nodded.

“And how are you feeling since our last session, Vince?”

“I’m a little sore. Physical therapy today was a bit brutal.” He was attempting to ease the tension of the situation. “Sorry, I know that’s not what you meant.” He sighed when Dr. Farris remained silent and waited for his honest answer. “It’s good to be home. I’m happy to be alive.”

“In that sense, you are both on the same page.” Dr. Farris tapped his pen on his notepad. “From what you’ve both said so far, it’s clear that you have a healthy commitment and love. You’re both wanting and willing to do whatever it takes to get back to what you used to be.”

Vince squeezed my hand and gave a light chuckle. “I can feel a *but* coming.”

I yanked on his hand. “Vincent!”

“What?!” he asked playfully. “Trust me, babe, I know that tone all too well.” He kissed the top of my hand to ensure I didn’t take his words too personally. “We can cut to the chase, doc. What’s the *but*?”

Dr. Farris chuckled. “I don’t want to cause any alarm, but I can sense that something’s off between you two. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but it’s like one, or both of you, are holding back.”

“But,” I started and stopped when I met his eyes. I could see the seriousness in them. I clamped my mouth shut because I wanted and needed his help.

“And that’s okay,” he began again. “All relationships go through ups and downs. The important thing is that you’re here, willing to work on it together.”

Vince leaned forward. “What do you mean about holding back?”

“As I said, it’s nothing to be alarmed about, but it’s something I noticed. Is there an underlying issue that is troubling either of you?”

Vince looked back at me. “Hailey?”

I began twisting and turning the damn tissue in my hands again. I pulled my lower lip between my teeth. “Um ...” I hated that my fear overtook my words. I wanted to fix things, not make them worse.

“Sometimes,” Dr. Farris began softly, “it can be difficult to express what is bothering us. Admitting that something is, or might be bothering us, might feel like you are placing blame or pointing fingers.” His eyes seemed to bore into the darkest recesses of my

brain. “Both of you are coming from a place of love. If you remember that, perhaps it will help you to say what you are *concerned* about.”

“It’s about sex!” I blurted out.

Vince whipped around so fast, his eyes wide in disbelief. “Sex?” He repeated the word in a hushed voice, like we were conspiring against Dr. Farris and didn’t want him to hear.

I took a deep breath, fidgeting with the tissue. I stuffed it into my purse. Vince took my hands in his. I lifted my head slowly, afraid to look him in the eyes. He cocked his head to the side, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Hailey, honey, why didn’t you say something?”

“I got you back. That’s all I wished and prayed for other than anything regarding Hudson. I felt selfish worrying about sex when my prayers were answered. But now that you’re back ... well, it’s been almost two years since we’ve ... you know?”

Vince’s laughter surprised me. “Oh, thank God.”

“What?” I was dumbfounded.

“I thought it was going to be something bad. Something really bad.” He huffed out a breath and ran his hands through his hair. “I’ve been trying to figure out what’s been bothering you all morning.”

I felt heat radiate to my neck and face. I must have been a bright shade of crimson. I looked down at my lap, unwilling to look at Vince or Dr. Farris. “It’s not your fault. I know you went through a lot, and I didn’t expect us to just pick up where we left off as if nothing happened. But I didn’t think ...”

Vince lifted my face, his fingers tenderly holding my chin so I would look into his eyes. “Hailey, I just thought ... after everything

that happened, me being gone ... that maybe you needed time. That you weren't ready."

"I thought maybe you lost interest or something."

"Are you kidding me?" His eyes went wide. "Look at you, baby. You're freaking amazing. I've been fighting day and night to keep my hands to myself."

"Really?" My voice bordered on the edge of shrieking.

We both turned to look at Dr. Farris, who was trying hard as can be to hide his laughter. Vince and I looked at one another, the biggest smiles on our faces. Dr. Farris's clap snapped us back to attention. "Well,"—his voice was overly cheerful—"I think we'll conclude this session for today. I'd give you some homework to work on, but I think you both have a handle on what steps to take next."

"Yes, Dr. Farris. Thank you so much," I said.

"So, so much," Vince added, clasping his hand with Dr. Farris's in gratitude.

"Should you need a follow-up appointment, don't hesitate to call the office." Dr. Farris's words were hurried as Vince and I rushed out the door.





## Chapter 12

*Hailey*

“Hailey, you’re speeding. Slow down.”

I laughed and looked at Vince, who was grinning from ear to ear. Even in the dimming light, I could see his megawatt smile.

I grinned. “Sorry.”

He knew I wasn’t *sorry*. His chuckle filled the empty space around us. He patted my leg, leaving his hand on my knee. “I just don’t want to get pulled over and have to wait any longer.”

His words pulled at every fiber of my being. His touch—even a simple act—had my loins heating up.

We pulled into the driveway, looked at one another again, and opened our doors.

My heart began pounding as I climbed out. The reality of everything hit me.

I met Vince’s eyes. Hunger filled them. His entire body seemed coiled and ready to strike. The look he sent me made me weak in the knees. His stance reminded me of a hunter stalking its prey. But I didn’t feel like a victim. I felt alive. Every synapse and neuron fired, electrifying my entire body.

Vince’s smile, growing larger and larger by the second, was infectious. Before we even started up the walkway, he

grabbed me around the waist and pulled me in for a kiss. He crashed his lips to mine. A new zap of electricity coursed through me. The trees in the yard might offer some coverage, but the lit-up driveway didn't really hide us—or what we were doing. Any of our neighbors driving by could see us. As well as his parents, who were right inside with our son. He hadn't kissed me like this since he'd come home. As his hands moved over my body, one settled onto my hip and the other at the base of my neck, all thoughts of anyone else slipped away. His lips consumed me, drowned my worry, and erased anything but me and him—here and now.

When his tongue touched mine, we groaned in unison. The slow, passionate union of his mouth and mine made me quiver. It was a sexual awakening. The sound of his groan was familiar, yet different. It was almost like hearing a new sound, and when it hit your ears, it was the most beautiful sound you've ever heard.

His broad chest under my hands immediately brought memories to mind of how his naked skin felt. I couldn't help but fist the fabric in my grasp. Vince's lips on mine, and his touch filled me with an intense desire. My whole body seemed to be vibrating. I was on the verge of rubbing up against him when he pulled away. I immediately wanted to yank him back to me. But his words, "Let's take this inside," stopped me.

"Okay," I whispered, practically out of breath.

As he reached for the knob, he met my eyes and said, "Shit." The look on his face was a mixture of amusement and confusion.

“What?” I asked, wanting to open it myself so we could get to the bedroom as fast as possible.

“My parents.”

“Shit,” I echoed. “I completely forgot about them.”

We shared a chuckle as we looked one another over to ensure we didn’t look like teenagers who just got done making out in the car.

“I’ll tell them I’m tired and want to go to bed.” Vince’s excuse might work, but we both knew better than to assume it would get them out of the house at lightning speed.

“Maybe we should—” Vince held up his hand to silence me.

“Something’s off,” he whispered, stepping inside. “Shh.” The sound was so quiet only I could hear him.

“You’re worrying me,” I mouthed, my eyes darting to the kitchen. Every light was off except the one above us in the entryway.

He moved me behind him and pulled an umbrella—the only thing available—from the coat rack.

Even though I held my breath, the sound of my heart hammering in my chest echoed off the walls. I thought maybe Renee and Daniel took Hudson somewhere. I probably should have told Vince, but now it was too late. I probably should have noticed the light wasn’t lit up from inside when we pulled up. But I’d been too engrossed in Vince and the idea of sex to notice.



## Chapter 13

*Vince*

My pulse jumped as shallow breaths filled and exited my lungs. I was breathing so lightly that my chest was hardly rising. My training kicked in. Poised for attack, I moved forward with light steps, careful not to make a sound. I wasn't sure how sturdy this damn umbrella was. But if someone was trying to attack my family, they were about to find out.

I used myself to shield Hailey behind me. She was so tiny in comparison, and I was glad that, at least in this case, I could protect her.

An ominous chill ran through my veins.

My mind jumped to the vehicles on the street outside. Everything seemed normal and familiar. A few of the neighbor's houses were lit up inside. Everything was normal.

So why did the hairs on the back of my neck prick up? Something was off *inside* our house. I was so fixated on Hailey that I'd lost my focus.

Other than the refrigerator humming in the kitchen, it was eerily quiet. A quick snap of sound hit my ears. I surged forward right as the lights flicked on, and a chorus of people yelled, "Surprise!"

"Holy shit, Bacca!" Pete shouted, lunging forward and releasing the pink umbrella from my hand.

Mom's face flushed crimson as she clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Hey, everybody." Hailey's words mirrored my surprise.

"You didn't know about this?" I asked as she moved to my side. We stood as one unit.

"No, I didn't."

"Only me, your father, and Pete," Mom said. Hudson smooched her mouth together with his tiny hands. Mom made a loud kissing sound before adding, "And of course, little Hudson. Isn't that right?" she crooned in baby talk.

"I tried to talk her out of it," Pete mouthed to me and Hailey.

"We—your father and I—wanted to have a little get-together to celebrate your homecoming."

"Little?" I asked, looking around the room. I laughed nervously, hating that I didn't immediately recognize several of the people here.

"We wanted it to be a surprise. Do something nice for you and Hailey."

"You certainly surprised us," Hailey said.

"Mom, this is too much," I said, gesturing to the large spread of appetizers and snacks on the countertops and tables. I couldn't believe how much food there was.

"I'd like to make a toast," my dad piped in. Thank God for his ability to *read the room*. It was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with each passing second.

“Here you go, sweetheart,” Mom said, handing me a flute of champagne, then Hailey.

“Thank you,” we said together. Hailey sent me a tense smile.

“We are so happy to have you back, Son. We know you are happy to be back. Your family and friends wish you a happy return, a speedy recovery, and every ounce of love in our hearts.” Dad choked up a little at the end.

“To safe returns, family and friends,” Pete said, holding his glass in the air.

“Cheers,” Mom added with a shaky voice. Everyone clinked their glass with their closest neighbors. Everyone was full of smiles and laughter.

I felt anything but.

Still, respect and gratitude won out in the end. I held my glass up again. The room quieted down. All eyes were on me. “I’d like to thank you all. Mom, Dad, Pete ... my amazing wife, Hailey.” I stopped for a second. “I’m still getting used to that concept. Wife,” I repeated. “But damn, it feels good to say it.” Hailey’s eyes were misty. “The last couple of weeks haven’t been easy, but I thank you all for your support and understanding. Especially, you”—I turned fully to Hailey —“the love of my life. I can’t imagine life without you. And I’m so thankful for you and Hudson.” I met her lips for a quick kiss. “To coming home,” I finished.

We clinked glasses again, and I kissed Hailey once more, detesting the nervousness I felt deep down inside.



I picked at the food on my plate. Mom had catered the get-together from some of my favorite places to eat. We had chicken wings, various pasta salads, pizza, and submarine sandwiches from a place I could picture in my mind but couldn't remember the name of.

Being cordial and trying to talk to everyone who came overwhelmed me. A guy named Curtis came over. And for the life of me, I couldn't pinpoint how I knew him. I made a mental note to ask Hailey later, but then started stressing about forgetting to do so and going through this whole rigamarole again with him the next time we saw one another.

I slipped away from everyone without saying a word. Sequestered in the back of the house, I sat on the edge of the bed and closed my eyes. I used the box breathing technique. It was supposed to help in high-stress situations, but there was no managing the pressure I was feeling.

"Baby?" Hailey's sweet voice came to me as the door squeaked. "Hey, there you are." Quiet as a mouse, she stepped into the room. Her hand moving over the top of my head soothed me. I'd seen her do the same thing to Hudson. Now I knew why it had a calming effect on him.

"I wasn't ready for all that," I admitted. "It's all ..."

"Too much?" she asked.

I nodded. "I hate feeling like this, Hailey. And I'm pissed that my parents did this without even asking. Why can't they just leave me be?"

She sighed. "I understand what you're feeling. And I also understand your mom and why she did this. Being a mom

is the most rewarding yet heart-wrenching thing I've ever done. Losing you tore us all apart. Getting you back was a gift. And I hope you know she had the best of intentions. Hmm?" I nodded silently. "Maybe the execution of the plan wasn't the greatest idea, but you know it all comes from a good place. A place of love. Yeah?"

"I know she meant well, babe." I hated feeling like a chump. But here we were. My mom wanted to surprise me. But I still felt really lost, and I didn't want any extra attention. When the knock came, I knew it was my mom. "Come in," I said.

"Hey," she said, peeking in.

"It's okay, Mom. Come in."

Her eyes whooshed from me to Hailey. I cleared my throat. "I'm sorry, Mom. I'm just not ... I'm tired." It wasn't an outright lie. I was exhausted. Not too exhausted to have sex, but too tired to deal with a houseful of people.

"I'm sorry, Vince. I wanted to do something nice for you and Hailey. And I wanted the people who care about you most to celebrate you."

"I know. And I appreciate it."

"I didn't mean to overstep, honey."

"It's complicated. I don't know how to explain it."

"I feel awful."

"No, Mom, don't. I just need some time to deal with this on my own."

“You don’t have to come back out, okay? Just ... whatever you need. They’ll understand.”

“No. No, just give me a couple of minutes. Okay?” I hoped she took my smile as I meant it.

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” She kissed my cheek, squeezed Hailey’s hand, and returned to be the gracious hostess I knew her to be.

Hailey rested her head on my shoulder and placed her hand on my thigh. Even that simple act turned me on. She kissed my neck and whispered, “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” I said.

I groaned when she removed her hand. I slapped my thighs and huffed. “All right, let’s get this over with.” I stood and held out my hand for her.

She took it and stood, placing her lips on mine. The kiss quickly turned into a fiery one that promised tonight would be a night to remember. “I’m so happy to celebrate you, baby.” She smoothed my shirt and lifted a brow. “But as soon as the last person leaves, we’re gonna pick up right where we left off.”

She yelped and giggled when I smacked her ass as we walked back out to the party.



## Chapter 14

*Vince*

I shouldn't have felt anxious.

Hailey and I were finally alone ... in our bedroom ... but the bed seemed like an enigmatic entity instead of the cozy space we'd shared countless nights before. She was my wife, and I knew her more intimately than anyone in my entire life. We'd done this thousands of times before. I knew her touch and her smell. I knew how she felt in my arms and the sounds she made. That I remembered. I also knew how well we fit together and how being with her wasn't just an emotional, but spiritual connection.

But not like this.

Not after losing parts of me. Not after forgetting we were married or had a kid. How could things get back to where they were before I left?

"I'm nervous." Hailey's whispered words pulled me out of my head.

"Me too," I said. She stepped into my arms.

"I don't know why my stomach is in knots."

"Because we've never been here before. Normally when I come home it's a happier reunion."

"I am happy."

"You know what I mean."

“Yeah,” she sighed.

“Maybe ...”

She looked up at me. “I love you. There’s never been anyone I wanted more.”

“Standing here with you, wanting you so bad ... I’ve wanted this moment for so long, and now that we’re here, I don’t know what to do.”

She giggled. “I doubt that.” Her innocent smile reminded me of the day we met.

“You’re being funny and cute to try and—”

“Shut up and kiss me.” I tightened my arms around her and fused my mouth to hers. The moment our lips touched, it was electric, a slow dance as we refamiliarized ourselves. But then it was like someone flipped the switch. We were both panting, touching each other over the tops of our clothes.

Hailey pulled away. My stomach dropped. Maybe she wasn’t into this as much as I was. “Did I do something wrong?” I asked.

“No,” she panted, ripping her shirt over her head and tearing her jeans off.

“Oh.” I was in awe of the beautiful woman in front of me. She smiled as she pulled free of her bra and dropped it to the floor like a woman might with a handkerchief she wanted her suitor to pick up. I ran my eyes from the top of her head down to her feet and back up.

“Vince, hurry up. I can’t wait anymore.”

“Oh,” I repeated. I gave my head a quick shake to reconnect the synapses in my brain. All the blood moved to my dick. Her laughter boomed, and she lunged forward.

“Let me help you.” She unbuttoned my shirt, and I shrugged out of it. Her hands were velvety smooth as they traveled over my shoulders and down my chest. “You are so sexy, Vince. God, I’ve missed these abs.” Her fingers danced over the planes of my stomach.

“I’m out of shape,” I said. “I was way bigger before.”

She shocked me when she cupped my dick. “You’re sexy as hell, and big in all the right places.”

My bark of laughter bounced off the walls. “Let me show you how much I want you.” When I stood stark naked in front of her, Hailey’s mouth opened. Her intake of breath was audible.

“Oh, my God.” It wasn’t the scars and imperfections marring my body that elicited her reaction, but her desire. “I need you, baby.” She shimmied out of her panties and moved onto the bed.

Her body was flawlessly perfect. Her rosebud nipples were perky little beacons calling for me to flick, taste, and savor. I moved over her body, her tiny whimpers and moans making it so hard for me to hold off feeling her wrapped around me. My nose and lips were my instruments of pleasure as I kissed, licked, and nipped at her creamy flesh. Her decadent yelp made me smile when I grazed her clit with my tongue. She arched and bucked, grabbing the blankets beneath her. “Holy shit! Oh, my God!”

I continued teasing her, tasting her, and savoring every drop of her. Within seconds she was crying out as an orgasm, several weeks in the making, ripped through her. “Vince, baby, don’t stop,” she begged. I sank two fingers inside and repeated, from memory, the process of licking and thrusting I knew would make her come again. “Right there. Oh, my God. Don’t stop, baby. Don’t stop.” Her legs shook and her overzealous gasps and grunts were music to my fucking ears.

“I need you, Vince,” she begged, breathlessly. “Need to feel you.”

She moaned in frenzied delight when she tasted herself on my lips. Our tongues were thrashing, her nails dug into my skin. I relished the stinging bite of her latched onto me. “I love you, Hailey,” I said as I pushed inside.

She winced. I was only an inch deep and had several more to go. “I’m okay,” she said. “More, Vince. Give me all of you.”

I pushed deeper, pulled out a little, and pushed back in deeper. I groaned and grunted as I sank deeper into her. “Hailey,” I whispered, pulling back before driving all the way into her. My eyes rolled back. Joining with her was so incredible. And it was like it was our first time. The memory hit and took me back in time as the heat of her pussy wrapped around my cock. She was so tight, so wet. Her groans of pleasure as I began moving were all I needed to know that she was okay. My name fell from her lips as she closed her eyes on a loud moan. Hearing her like this was beyond beautiful. She threw her head back and moaned long and low. Her



fingers latched onto me as she started to shiver. “Vince, come inside me. I want to feel you.”

We both groaned as I moved rhythmically in and out. In and out. As her moans grew louder, I sped up my thrusts. I could feel the warm tingle in my balls as she flexed and squeezed around my cock, exploding again.

Every muscle in my body tensed. I kissed her deeply, thrusting one last time as the most exquisite pain ricocheted through my body. I couldn’t help but thrust one more time as every drop shot through my cock. Hailey and I were still kissing. I didn’t want to stop but was too exhausted to hold myself up anymore. I rolled to the side and collapsed.

“Are you okay?” Hailey asked after several moments of silence.

“I’m sorry I didn’t last longer.” I sighed and reached for her hand. “I knew I wouldn’t. As soon as I felt you, I knew I’d blow because it’s been too long.”

“I didn’t last long either. I don’t know that I’ve ever come so fast.” She giggled.

“I wish I would have taken my time with you. You just got to me.”

She snuggled into my body and hooked her leg over me. “We have all night, baby.” I turned to look at her in the darkness. “All night,” she repeated, her words throaty and sexy.

“Turn over,” I said as my dick twitched back to life like a horny teenager.

“Already?”

“We’re making up for lost time,” I said as I lowered her hand to prove how hard I was.

She moaned with delight, squeezing her hand around me as her lips found mine again.



## Chapter 15

*Hailey*

“Thank you for meeting with me, Dr. Farris.”

“Of course.” His smile and sympathetic eyes exuded comfort and acceptance.

“I feel weird being here by myself.”

“As I told you, I see couples all the time together and separately. It’s not unusual.”

“Vince doesn’t know I made this appointment. I feel guilty like I’m going behind his back or something.” I shook my hands back and forth. “I’m n-not. That’s not what I’m doing. Everything is going great. After our last visit, I mean.” I blushed crimson, feeling my chest, neck, and face heat with embarrassment because, without saying it, Dr. Farris knew that Vince and I had sex. We’d been like wild rabbits unable to keep our hands off one another. Vince had been right; we were definitely making up for lost time.

He smiled and said, “I’m glad to hear that.”

“I-I need some help with something else now.”

“Why don’t you tell me why you are here, and we can go from there.”

I chewed my lip and dropped my head for a moment. “I don’t know what to do about ... well, I want to help Vince. His memories, well, they’re kind of hit and miss, you know?”

“That’s normal and nothing to be too concerned about.”

“Yes, I know. And his physical therapy is going well. He even got clearance from the doctors to start driving again. He’s really

happy about that. And his parents are helping him with Hudson when I'm at work, so he gets to see them every day, too."

"And there haven't been any regressive anomalies?"

"No. Sometimes, he's more tired than other days. He takes naps when he needs to. And sometimes, he has trouble sleeping. But they told us that was normal. His latest visit with the doctor was good."

"This is positive news. I know it has been difficult for both of you. Sometimes, things get so overwhelming it's like we're stranded on a boat in the middle of the ocean. The good thing here is that you both are committed to one another and to Vince's progress. We talked about small steps, taking things as they come, and one step at a time. I have no doubt that you'll both come out of this experience stronger. And with time, Vince will improve mentally and physically."

"It's not the physical that I'm worried about, Dr. Farris."

"So, it's the mental."

"Yes and no." When confusion clouded his face, I explained, "I want to help him remember us. I was living a nightmare for so long. And it's a dream come true that we got him back. But I want my life back—*our* life. I know we have an unusual situation and an unusual request. Is there any way you can help me do that?"

"What you're going through right now is difficult. Vince's memory might come back. It might not. He may only get bits and pieces, and he might lose some of them forever."

"I know that, Dr. Farris. And I'm trying to prepare myself for whatever happens without losing hope."

When he smiled, I felt hopeful. "If there's anything at all that I can do, I will do it. I don't care what it is. I know he feels just as lost as I do. But it's worse for him. I have all of these wonderful

memories. And he's trying to remember them." I shook my head, feeling like a babbling buffoon.

"I would suggest that you and Vince get to know each other. You have a rare opportunity to fall in love all over again." I must have looked as confused as I felt because he didn't wait for me to ask anything. "You've known each other a long time. He has memories of you, but for some reason, not about you getting married or your son. My idea might work, but you need to know and prepare yourself that it might not. All you can do is try."

"I want to. If it helps him remember, I'll do whatever it takes."

"Might I suggest recreating your first moments, special moments that connected you? Think back—your first date, your first kiss—anything you feel was especially significant to creating Vince and Hailey."

"Okay, I can do that."

"Don't put too much pressure on yourself. Or on Vince."

"Of course." We talked for a few more minutes about the ideas already starting to percolate in my mind. By the time we finished, I had tons of options. "What if he doesn't remember them, Dr. Farris?"

"As I said, don't put too much pressure on either of you. Just go out, have date night, and have fun. Hold hands, have a romantic dinner, or do anything special or unique for you guys. And if all else fails, create new moments, new memories."

By the time I left Dr. Farris's office, my earlier bleakness and frustration were replaced with a glimmer of hope and a sense of excitement. Vince faced many challenges, physical, mental, and emotional, and he was getting better with each passing day. He was a pillar of strength and tenacious determination, but I knew his

greatest difficulty was not being able to remember some of the most important parts of his life.

With Dr. Farris's suggestions, I finally felt like there was a light at the end of this very dark tunnel. As I drove home, I decided that tonight would be pizza night at one of our favorite spots.



When I got home, the contents of the cabinet under the kitchen sink covered practically every square inch of the counter. "I'm home," I called, walking to Hudson and giving him a series of loud smooches. His gleeful giggles made me so happy. Chewie lifted his head and thumped his tail. He yawned and padded over to me. "Hey, buddy."

Vince popped up, and the sight of him bare-chested stole my breath. His skin was marred with scars, and he had indeed lost a lot of muscle mass, but he was still sexy as sin. "Hey," he said, wiping his hands on a towel and flinging it onto his shoulder.

"What's going on in here?" It was then that I noticed the new stainless-steel faucet. "Oh, wow," I said, "it's so shiny."

"And it has a sprayer." He turned on the water and pulled the sprayer wand from the spout.

"Very nice," I said.

"I think we might need a new garbage disposal, but I can do that another time."

"Eh, it works fine."

He shook his head. "It's old as shit. Oh, and let me show you something else." He lifted Hudson from his highchair and held out

his hand. Hudson wiggled in his arms, then started crying and reaching for me. “I swear he hates me,” Vince said as he handed him to me. Hudson immediately settled down.

“He doesn’t hate you.” Vince stopped at the doorway to our bathroom and scowled. “Whenever I hold him, he cries.”

“Really?” I pursed my lips together. “Because he was perfectly fine when I came in.” When Vince rolled his eyes, I asked, “Has he been crying all day?”

“No. But my parents barely left before you walked in.”

“There, see? He doesn’t hate you, Vince.”

“He does when you’re around.”

I raised a brow and smirked, swaying with Hudson on my hip. “Oh, so I’m the problem?”

“No. Gah! You know what I mean, Hailey.”

I stepped forward and kissed Vince. “He’s just used to me. That’s all. Right, Hudson? We love Daddy, don’t we.” As soon as I said *Daddy*, Hudson reached for Vince. “Mm-hm,” I murmured as Hudson snuggled into Vince’s hold.

Vince kissed Hudson’s head and sighed. “Check out the shower.”

I kissed him and whispered, “We can’t do that with Hudson in here.”

Vince rolled with laughter. “Not what I meant. But now you’ve got me thinking.” When I pulled back the shower curtain, I gasped. My amazing husband installed a brand-new showerhead, waterspout, and handle. “I thought we could go shopping this weekend and get a new shower curtain, mat, rugs, and towels.”

His excitement surprised me. “You want to go shopping? What on earth is going on with you, mister?”



“I’m fucking bored, Hailey.”

“And you want to go pick out new stuff for the bathroom.”

“I don’t care what we do as long as we get out of the house.”

“Well, you’re in luck. Take a shower and get dressed. I’m going to change and get Hudson a snack.”

“Where are we going?”

“Out of the house.” I kissed him.

“You sure you don’t want to try the new showerhead with me?” His words shot straight through me and stirred up delicious memories from the other night.

“You can show me how it works after we put Hudson to bed.” We locked lips again. Hudson squirmed between us. “Hurry up, Vince. I’m hungry.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I walked away, chuckling as I thought about how happy I was to be home with my men.



Vince’s excitement about driving was electric. I had to direct him where to go, but finally getting clearance to get behind the wheel was one thing I knew that made him feel a step closer to life getting back to normal.

Dinner went differently than I had planned. I took Vince to our favorite pizza place. For me, tonight was all about recreating our first date. It wasn’t the same place, but it was so similar it might as

well have been at Vito's back home. Sitting across from Vince at Luigi's brought back so many great memories for me. Vince didn't remember it at all.

I hid my disappointment, heeding Dr. Farris's words. We ordered a pepperoni pizza with sausage, olives, and extra cheese. With our root beers, the checkered tablecloths, and loud noise, it was just like our first date—and several other date nights we had over our time together. The only difference was our mini companion sitting in his highchair at our table.

Our conversation flowed easily, but it wasn't the night I hoped for.



## Chapter 16

*Vince*

Hailey's disappointment wasn't lost on me.

I couldn't hide my own either.

I pet Chewie as I thought about last night. When Hailey finally told me what she'd been trying to do, taking me to get pizza to see if I remembered our first date, she cried. It was emotional for both of us because all we wanted was for my memory to come back.

While we lay in bed, Chewie asleep on my side and Hudson in his crib, I told Hailey that her idea was good and we should keep trying. If she could help recreate these memories with me, maybe something would spark.

We went to a frozen yogurt shop the next night. Apparently, that's where we went on our third date after going to see a movie. When I asked Hailey what movie, she didn't remember. We laughed when I made a joke about probably dragging her to see a *Star Wars* movie.

I raked my hands over my head. The buzz cut reminded me of Boot Camp, and I hated it. I couldn't wait for my hair to grow in. It was the least of my worries, though. I'd keep my head shaved for the rest of my damn life if it meant I got my memories back.

Lost in my own thoughts, I jumped when the laundry machine buzzed. Another load done. Another chore

completed. I folded Hudson's clothes and put them away. I went through Hudson's baby book again. I looked at every picture on the wall for the thousandth time. I was a zombie walking through this damn maze, trying to recollect one single shred from my past. All I did was think, think, think. The fragments that were missing didn't take away from my life, but my mind was like one of those pickleball toy balls Hudson loved to play with. They were just regular kinds of balls except for the holes in them. That's how I felt—a man with holes in his brain. I was glad Mom and Dad had taken Hudson to the park. I didn't need them to see me surly and feeling sorry for myself again. I knew they'd be back soon. And Hailey would be home from work in a couple of hours. I needed to snap out of this funk before that. I didn't want more questions or counseling. I got that enough from my physical therapist and Dr. Farris.

Figuring some fresh air might do me some good, I headed out front. The swing on the front porch was in bad shape. It went unnoticed because this was the first time since being home that I chose to sit on it. The chain showed signs of rust. It would need to be replaced. I disregarded the dust covering the seat and back. The paint was chipping away in several spots. I flicked at several lifted flecks and watched as they fell like confetti.

As they flitted to the ground, a vision of Hailey flashed like a movie playing in my head. She was wearing a bright yellow top and was smiling. It was the day I had installed the swing. She thought it would be the perfect addition to the porch and told me how we could sit out here and watch the sun set. The movie panned out. Now, she was sitting where I was

currently seated. She was talking animatedly, gesticulating with her hands and laughing at something.

I looked up at the bolts and screws holding the swing in place. The movie was over, but the memory remained. “Holy shit. I remember.” I couldn’t wait to tell Hailey that something finally clicked.

I was overjoyed that I finally remembered something new. Even if it was an old memory, it meant there was hope after all. I swayed in our swing and tried to recall something—anything else. Ten minutes must have passed without another memory coming to mind. Still, I was happy.

Noticing the lawn, I realized it could use some attention. I fired up the lawn mower and set to work. As I rolled over the green blades, enjoying the engine humming as I walked back and forth, I remembered I would mow the lawn every weekend while Hailey worked in her garden. She took pride in her little space and loved looking at it from her office window when she was inside. Now, that room was Hudson’s, but I still caught her looking out of it whenever she had a chance. Only now, instead of holding a book, she held our son. Ecstatic bliss flowed through me as I mowed our lawn. Not only was a smile plastered on my face, but I caught myself whistling. If this was the track I was on, even the most menial tasks would bring me pleasure.

I worked up a good sweat by the time I finished. Mom, Dad, and Hudson arrived just as I emptied the mower’s bag into the green waste bin.

“You seem happy,” Mom said.

“Couldn’t be happier. It’s a glorious day.” I bent down and smiled at my son. “Hi, Hudson. Did you have fun with Grandma and Grandpa?” I asked.

He waved both hands and said, “Hi. Bye-bye.”

I laughed with my parents as I plucked him up. “Hi. Hello.” Mom and Dad’s upturned smiles and expectant eyes greeted me when I looked at them. “What?” I asked, suddenly feeling like an animal at the zoo.

Mom shrugged, and Dad cleared his throat. “What’s got you in such a good mood?” Dad asked as he prompted me to head into the house.

“I remembered something. A memory I forgot about.”

“What?” Mom’s voice rose an octave. “What was it?”

“The swing,” I said, jerking my head to the porch where it hung. As I settled Hudson into his playpen, Dad put on some cartoons, and I told them what happened when I was sitting on the porch swing.

“Well, that’s great,” Mom said.

“It’s something, that’s for sure.”

“Anything else?” Dad asked.

“I remember mowing the lawn.” I chuckled at their confusion. “I don’t mean right now. I meant I remember that I would mow the lawn on the weekend while Hailey worked in her garden.” We stood for a moment, admiring the garden my wife adored. It was her private sanctuary of beauty and serenity.

Everything was thoughtfully arranged. Succulents sat in pots at either corner. Neatly trimmed birds of paradise etched against the wall. In the center, a large stone birdbath stood. Sun-kissed snapdragons, cosmos, lilies, irises, zinnias, and alyssum burst with vibrant pops of color all around it.

“She made it exactly like she always said she would.”

“Hmm,” Mom murmured. “She spent almost every day out here after Hudson was born.”

“She did?”

“Mm-hm. I think it was her way of working through her grief. It kept her busy. So did Hudson.” She laughed as she ruffled his hair.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. When I met Dad’s eyes, they were misty. He turned to head into the house. Mom followed behind me as I carried Hudson, holding him close to my chest—close to my heart. I took a quick shower to rinse off and met everyone in the kitchen. “You’re going to stay for dinner, right?” I asked, pulling some of the ingredients out of the refrigerator. “I’m making chicken parm.”

“Maybe we should let you and Hailey have some time together. I’m sure you have a lot to talk about.”

My eyes ping-ponged between her and my dad. “Why?”

“Don’t you want to tell her about your memory coming back?”

“Well, yeah. But ...” I sighed. “When it happened, I was so damn happy. And I can’t wait to tell her. But when I was showering, I just thought ...” They studied me as I tried to gather my thoughts. “I guess I just expected more.”



“Patience, son,” my dad started, “is hard to hold onto in a situation like this. I’ve been reading up on this stuff, and I gotta say, it’s the one thing everyone says is the most difficult.”

I wrinkled my nose and shrugged. “I know you’re right, but I’m so damned frustrated.” A brief moment of silence stretched as my parents looked at one another.

“I know it’s been rough,” Dad began again, “but I think the important thing is to stay positive.” I should have kept my mouth shut because they both started talking to me about the doctors and everything we’d already discussed over and over again.

As they talked, I interjected every now and again. They were doing their best to be helpful and supportive. Everyone was. Exasperated as I was with this conversation, I stayed engaged so I wouldn’t hurt their feelings.

When Hailey arrived, I breathed a sigh of relief. She was the buffer I needed. One look at me, and she knew what I was feeling. Hailey was good about reading my mood without me having to spell it out for her. One quick kiss from her and I immediately relaxed. She gave me a wink and asked, “What can I do to help?”

“Thank you,” I whispered so my parents wouldn’t hear. “If you wouldn’t mind setting the table, everything should be ready soon.”

“You got it.” She kissed me again and smiled.

I wanted to tell her right then and there about what happened earlier but decided to wait until dinner. What I

needed was ten minutes alone with my wife. She'd be able to get my mind off of the doctors.



## Chapter 17

### *Hailey*

Vince and I stood looking over our precious son tucked safely in his bed. The fairy lights overhead offered a comforting glow. Vince pulled me into the crook of his arm. He turned on the mobile, and the sweet tune of “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” began. When Vince started singing, I held my breath. Usually, I was the one who sang to Hudson, and hearing Vince’s deep baritone voice singing a lullaby completely floored me.

With our son asleep in the other room, Vince and I lay in bed, facing each other. “I love you so much, Hailey.” His voice was as soft as his eyes.

“I love you, too.”

“What are you thinking about?”

“You. And how lucky I am.”

“I’m the lucky one. I am married to the most wonderful woman in the world. And I’m a dad. Sometimes I still can’t believe it.”

“Me either.” When I sighed, Vince’s brows furrowed together.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“Hailey?” His intonation told me my white lie didn’t fool him.

“I don’t want to fight about it.”

“About what?”

“You’re overdoing it.” When he grumbled, I sat up and pulled the blankets over my lap. This might just lead to an argument. “I don’t want you to get upset.”

He propped up onto his elbow. “Hailey, I had a pretty big breakthrough today. I’m not overdoing it.”

“But the doctors said—” He grunted and rolled his eyes.

“I get enough of this from my parents, Hailey.”

“I know you do. But listen, all of the laundry, and fixing things, and making dinner. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it. Not having you here was a lot of work for me, so I know how much time you’re spending doing all of this stuff. Then there’s your PT and therapy sessions. Not to mention how much work it is taking care of Hudson.” He snorted. “What?”

“I take care of Hudson while my parents babysit me. Do you know how that makes me feel?” He rolled onto his back and closed his eyes. “I get it. But seriously, I feel like an idiot who can’t take care of his own fucking kid without supervision.”

“If you want to watch Hudson on your own, all you have to do is say so.”

“You’re joking, right? You know my parents would freak out.”

“No, they won’t.”

“Uh, yes, they will. They’ve been here every day to check up on me under the façade that they want to spend time with Hudson.”

I chewed my lip and considered his words as he regaled me with much detail about everything that happened this past week. “I hate to break it to you, baby, but they’re not over here every day to hang out with Hudson. Maybe that’s part of it. But that’s not all of it.”

“Then why do they feel like they need to babysit me?”

I leaned over and cupped the side of his face. “They’re making up for lost time, Vince. They come over to be with you. Hudson’s just a bonus.”

His eyes went misty as he considered my words. “Damn,” he sighed. A minute of affectionate silence passed as he let that information settle in. “Now I feel like a jerk.”

I patted his cheek and sat back. “If you want some time with just you and Hudson, just talk to them.”

“I don’t know how to say it without hurting their feelings.”

“Why don’t you try something like, ‘I can’t tell you how much I appreciate everything you’ve done. You’ve helped me settle into a routine, and I couldn’t have gotten to where I am without you. I’m a little nervous about this, but I think you’ve prepared me. Do you guys think I’m ready to spend the day alone with Hudson? But also, can you be on standby in case I need you?’”

“Damn, babe, that’s really fucking good. I can’t believe you came up with that right on the spot.” I couldn’t hide my laughter, and he was confused with my reaction. “What?”

“Don’t ever repeat what I’m about to tell you.”

“Okay. I promise.”

“I-I had to have a similar conversation with them.”

His eyes went wide. “Seriously? When?”

“After Hudson was born. Don’t get me wrong, they were amazing. I wouldn’t have made it through those first few months without them and Pete. Your mom stayed with me every single night. Your dad stayed a lot too. Pete stopped by every chance he got. But eventually, once I started feeling more confident, I wanted some time alone. Just me and Hudson, you know?”

“I understand completely.” His grin was infectious. “I’m grateful you had them.” He stopped smiling, and his eyes grew solemn. “I hate that I wasn’t here for you and Hudson.”

“I know you do.”

“You know I’d do anything for you, right?”

“I do.”

“Thank you for being patient with me. I know it’s been a lot. And sometimes I’ve been difficult to deal with.” He was referring to a few of the spats we got into about his physical therapy and my comments about pushing himself too hard.

“Mm, maybe just a teensy bit,” I teased. “But the benefits of having you around far outweigh any of the bad.”

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Let me show you one of the best benefits.” His lips met mine in a sizzling kiss. We were completely naked and just about to get to the good stuff when Hudson’s cry broke through the monitor. We both groaned.

“I’ll get him.” I slipped out of the warmth of our bed and my husband’s arms. “I’ll be right back,” I promised as I pulled my robe closed.



Vince was sound asleep when I returned fifteen minutes later. The lamp on my side of the bed glowed softly. Looking at him, I realized how much Hudson took after him. “Thank you,” I whispered, looking up to the heavens.

I slid out of my robe and climbed back into bed.

“Mmm,” Vince sighed, “I was just dreaming about you.”

“You were, were you?”

“You were wearing ... well, pretty much nothing.”

I giggled. “I was naked? You dirty, filthy man.”

Vince squeezed me. “You weren’t quite naked. You had on some lacy, green lingerie. You looked amazing.”

I froze, wondering if it was the same stuff I had tucked away in the back of the closet. “Did it have little straps over my shoulders and a velvet band across the middle?”

“Yeah.” His surprise at my very detailed description was adorable. “Did you have the same dream or something?”

“Not quite.”

“That’s kind of spooky. How’d you get into my brain like that when I can’t even seem to?”

I turned over. In the dark space, it was difficult to read his expression. All I could make out was the sparkle of his eyes. “I think you were remembering again. I don’t know for sure, but I’m pretty sure that lingerie you dreamed of was what I wore on our wedding night.”

“Really?” His question sounded gloomy instead of excited.

“It’s okay you don’t remember it. You probably only looked at it for five seconds before you ripped it off of me. I barely remember it either, and I’m the one who picked it out.” I kissed him. “Really, baby, don’t read too much into this. Now, where were we?”

He answered me with a kiss instead of words. As we picked up where we left off, the heat of his body instantly warmed me as he wrapped me in his embrace.

“I want more of you.” The way he whispered the words in my ear made me shiver. I breathed a deep breath, filling my nose with



his cologne. The air turned electric with a vibrating sexual charge.

When my eyes met his, there was a mixture of want and need, impatience and restraint. The hunger in his eyes told me he wanted to devour me right then and there. But the warmth of his words spoke about his unending desire. “You make me feel all tingly,” I said, shivering slightly under his touch.

“You make me feel alive.” His words made me feel like Superwoman. “Your face is the image I held onto every hour I was away.” He looked down, and I knew he was omitting the words “held” and “prisoner” for my benefit. The thought of what he went through wrecked me. “You are my angel, my saving grace.”

My breath hitched as his blue eyes met mine. “You are my hero.” He shook his head dismissing that idea. “And the love of my life.”

His eyes were intense as they pinged back to mine. The tiny vein in his neck pulsed. “I love how you look at me when you say that.”

“How do I look?”

“Unforgettable.”

As the single word hit my ears, goosebumps erupted over my entire body.

He smiled and said, “It makes me want to kiss you again. All over.” His smile turned to a grin, playful and sexy.

“Is that so?” I asked as heat flushed my chest, neck, and face.

“Oh yeah.” His gravelly tone was full of sex. My thoughts turned wicked and sinful as his lips captured mine. “Hailey, oh, God, I love you so much.” He pulled me tighter to him, holding onto the back of my neck and over my ass like he didn’t ever plan to let go.

“Touch me, baby,” I begged. His tongue touched mine, beginning his slow seductive dance. I moaned, as his hands moved over my body, lighting up every cell within.

He began undressing me. He threw my tank to the floor. Now we were both bare-chested. As Vince’s fingers trailed over me, my skin pricked with goosebumps. He dipped his head, kissing my right shoulder, following the path of my clavicle, and moving his lips across and over to the left. Our mouths merged for a few hot and heady seconds before he dipped his head, sucking a nipple into his mouth. His tongue taunted and teased, pulling another moan from me.

I hoped this feeling never went away. “Kiss me and make me come for you,” I said.

He pulled my shorts off and grazed his tongue against my clit. He groaned and said, “Fuck, Hailey. I love how you taste.” He didn’t wait for my response as he buried his face between my legs, spreading them further apart and holding me open. As exposed and vulnerable as I was, the way he sighed and moaned as he tasted me made me feel gloriously beautiful.

I hoped this feeling never went away.

He slid his fingers inside and he instantly took me to the edge of the cliff. “Baby, don’t stop. Faster. Just like that.” I kept talking, getting louder and louder until finally I fell over, screaming his name.

He sucked at me, then kissed my inner thigh before climbing up my body. I could feel him poised and ready to take me and make me his. “Fuck, I love that pussy,” he said as he pushed inside, stretching me open, and filling me inch by pleasurable inch. His lips met mine, and the way I could taste myself on his lips was sexy and heady, and turned me on all over again. The way I connected with

Vince was powerful. Our love was indescribable; we cherished one another like no other.

As we moved together rhythmically, like we were dancing to our own song, I moaned as Vince rolled his hips, hitting my spot in a deliciously wicked way. “Touch yourself,” he said. He lifted himself up so there was room between us. I reached down and slid my fingers over myself as he pressed my legs back, using his shoulders to hold me open wide. As he thrust, like a maniac, my tits jiggled, and my movements sped up.

“Fuck, baby! Just like that. I’m so close!” I screamed. “Right there! Harder! Faster! Holy shit, Vince. Oh, my God!” My eyes rolled back in my head, and I squeezed my eyes shut as stars exploded all around me.

“Keep rubbing your clit,” he said. My sensitivity made me want to stop, but his words were too enticing. I opened my eyes and was so aroused by watching Vince watch me. He pounded me a few more times before throwing his head back and groaning so loudly it shook the walls.

He collapsed on top of me, breathing so hard, I knew it would be a few minutes before either of us could speak. He was still buried deep inside me as we lay together. I wrapped myself around him, holding onto him and wanting to keep ourselves linked as long as possible. Vince has always been the only man for me. He owned every part of me—mind, body, heart, and soul.

Life may have thrown us for a loop, but the one thing I knew for sure, Vince and I were meant to be. Our love, our life as parents, and our beautiful son were the most important things in the world. Luck was on my side with bringing Vince home, and what we had—right here, right now—was worth fighting for.

There was nothing I wouldn’t do to help Vince. Even if he didn’t get all of his memories back, I would find a way to create

more moments like this so that moving forward, the sting of his loss would eventually fade.



## Chapter 18

*Vince*

Explosive diarrhea was no joke.

Hudson was constipated. We were going on day two of no number twos, and he was cranky as all get out. We tried water with a splash of juice instead of milk. We fed him oatmeal and apples and pears, which were high-fiber choices that should aid in helping him “go.”

When all else failed, Hailey used Vaseline. “The doctor told me that it’s a good lubrication.”

“TMI, Hailey, TMI,” I said as I watched her method for applying it. If he didn’t shit soon, I would have to do this all on my own tomorrow.

“How is it TMI?” I could hear the roll of her eyes. “You SEALs talk about much more graphic stuff than this.”

She had me there. “I get the gist.”

“Whatever.”

“I just prefer not to have the word lubrication in a sentence regarding my son, is all.”

She snorted. “I never knew you were such a prude.”

“When it comes to my kid, yeah, I guess I am.”

She grinned at me as she finished up. “Stimulating the anus—”

“Oh, my God. Would you stop?”

She rolled with laughter until her eyes were wet with tears. She fixed Hudson’s clothes and handed him to me. “If you only

knew what I've been through with him."

I held up my hands in surrender. "I'll take your word for it."

"I've got two words for you." She held up her fingers. "Explosive diarrhea."

"You've gotta be kidding me," I said, turning away from her in hopes I could forget what she just said.



Two hours later, shit really hit the fan. "I can't believe how much crap can come out of one person! Oh, my God! Hailey! Make it stop!"

If our situation wasn't so gross, I'm sure we would have been laughing. Instead, both of us were grunting, groaning, and doing everything we could not to hurl our lunch all over our son's bedroom floor.

Hailey turned and high-tailed it out of the room. "Don't you leave me alone in here with all of this!" I screamed after her. "Come back here! Hailey!" I looked down at Hudson, who was crying. "I'm sorry, buddy. I know this isn't fun for you either." I felt awful. There wasn't a damn thing I could do for him. After Hudson launched a stream of crap a foot and a half out of him, we cleaned up as best we could. But then he scrunched his little face, and Hailey's only word was, "Uh-oh." We kept placing new diapers under his clean hiney, only for him to start up all over again.

When Hailey returned, she was a frazzled mess. She tossed an old towel at me. "What am I supposed to do with this?"

“Shove it under him and pray that this madness ends soon.” I did as she instructed and turned to her with a proud grin. Hailey shook her head and fixed my poor attempt to diaper my own kid with an old towel. “If you don’t secure it like this, he’ll blow right through it.”

She met my eyes, and both of us roared with laughter. I mimed Hudson blowing through that towel like an exploding rocket. When we finally caught our breath, I asked, “I’ve never seen anything like that in my life. Did you accidentally feed him jet fuel or something?” She tried to cover her laughter but couldn’t. We started laughing again. Luckily, our laughter was infectious. We heard a tiny giggle from Hudson.

We stayed put in his room and hoped we had seen the worst.

We hadn’t.

But thankfully, there was only one last extreme attack.

Satisfied that Hudson didn’t have another one for over an hour, we bathed, clothed, and consoled our baby boy. Hailey headed to the kitchen while I cleaned up. She was baffled that I was willing to clean everything up myself. But I told her, “Not only do I owe you, but I’m happy to do it. I missed out on so much. What’s a little poo?”

She laughed, saying, “Little?”

I chucked the old towel into the diaper bin, double-bagged the garbage, and took it out to the bin outside. I shuddered with disgust as I let it go. I already loved my son more than anything, but that was a pretty rancid experience. Still, I was glad to be a part of anything ... of everything.

When I walked into his room and saw him looking up at my pictures hanging from the mobile, my heart melted. “Hi, buddy. How you feeling? Is your tummy all better?” He watched me with



expectant eyes. He looked back at the pictures, then back at me again. I felt like I could read his mind. He was wondering how I was everywhere all at once. “I love you, Hudson.”

He smiled and giggled. He looked at the pictures, then back at me before cocking his head in wonder. He lifted his little hand toward me. “Dada.”

“Oh, my God.”

“Dada,” he repeated in the most precious voice.

I lowered my hand, which he promptly grabbed onto. “That’s right.” I patted my chest. “I’m your dada. I’m your dada.” I said it over and over as his little eyes tried to stay open. My heart soared. It was filled with so much pride and joy. My heart had never felt so complete. I waited for a few more minutes and watched him sleep.

When Hailey entered, I didn’t even hear her. I was so absorbed in Hudson a rocket could have launched, and I wouldn’t have batted an eye. My eyes were misty as I told her what happened. She wrapped me tightly in her arms and whispered, “It’s the best feeling in the world.” Too choked with emotion, I squeezed her tightly. She pulled away and looked into my eyes before kissing me. “I don’t want to spoil the moment, but what do you say we go and clean ourselves up?”

I stole one last look at Hudson and let Hailey lead me to the shower.



Fucking incredible. We were surrounded by foggy steam. Hailey's body was fan-fucking-tastic. I watched as she washed her hair, rock hard and ready to feel her wet and slippery under my hands. I had the loofah soaped up and in hand, ready to wash her all over.

"Are you going to just stand there?" Her words were tainted with humor.

"No."

Her eyes dropped to my cock. "Vince?" My name was a cross between a moan and a plea.

"You are sexy as fuck." I bent so I could suck on her nipples, tugging them between my teeth until she whimpered sweet sounds. I swirled my tongue around her nipples, slowed, and nipped at them with my teeth.

"Harder," she begged.

Without hesitation, I did as she asked. I bit harder until she moaned so loud it made my dick twitch.

"I want to lick every inch of you until you can't breathe. I want you to beg for my cock."

I didn't have to wait. "Please, baby. Give me your cock. Fuck me as hard as you can and don't ever stop."

I moved into her. Her dripping body slick against mine. I pushed her until her back hit the wall. I slid the tip of my cock against her, pressing against her clit. Her head fell back in ecstasy. Our lips crashed together. I devoured her like a starved man. She moaned into my mouth as a low, carnal growl rumbled in the back of my throat.

With my dick heavy in my hand, I slammed inside her. I pumped, pulled, and pushed as deep as I could. She cried out as I thrust deeper and deeper, harder and harder. She latched onto my

shoulders, holding on with all her might. “I won’t let you fall,” I told her. She twisted and thrashed with me.

I wrapped my hand around the back of her neck. “Fuck, Hailey, you feel so good.”

She exploded so fast, her words came out in a tangled, garbled mess. She cried a series of unintelligible words.

We fucked rough and wild, two crazed fanatics wet and wild under the spray of water. I tightened my fingers around her neck as I kissed and licked, sucked and bit.

“You’re so sexy, Vince. You fuck me so good. Your big fucking cock. Yes!”

I pumped inside harder. “Oh, God, Hailey, I’m gonna bust.”

She pulled me tighter against her, coaxing me to “fuck her like there’s no tomorrow.”

“I’m coming again!” she screamed.

I kept pounding, relishing the feeling of her pussy clamping around me until I couldn’t hold off any longer. I shot my load into her with such force I shivered under the hot water. I settled her onto the floor and, still buried deep inside, kissed her roughly.



Hailey was wrapping her hair in a towel when she said, “I called your parents. They’ll be here in about an hour.”

“Okay.” I exaggerated the word because I didn’t understand why she did that.

“They’re going to watch Hudson for a couple of hours. We need a break. Or at least I do. That was a lot today.”

“A lot of shit, you mean?”

“Yeah. Too much.” She shuddered at the memory. “We’re all cleaned up. Hudson is doing so much better. And I figured we deserved a little reward. Plus, if he gets fussy ...”

“Hailey, look. You don’t have to defend yourself. I think it’s healthy that you are okay with spending an hour or two alone with your husband.”

She cocked a brow. “Sometimes he gets whiny too.”

“Only when I’m hungry or horny.”

“Well, horny has been taken care of. But we should probably get you fed before you start whining about food.” She giggled as I snatched her around the waist and tickled her.

“When it comes to you, I’m always horny.”

“We have a lot of time to make up for.” Her eyes clouded with regret. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

“It’s okay, honey. I know what you mean. I’m sorry, too.”

“Are we ever going to get past this?”

I didn’t know what to say to make either of us feel better. “I hope so,” I answered honestly. “I hope we can put all this behind us very soon.” In hopes of keeping us from focusing on the negative, I turned her around and wrapped my arms around her waist. “Look at us,” I said, staring at our reflection in the mirror. “If we can survive what we went through today, we can survive anything.” That got a laugh out of her. With Hailey back to smiling, I kissed her shoulder and said, “I’m starting to get hungry.”

“Me too,” she said.

“And seeing you covered only in a towel is making me horny.” I grinded against her ass so she knew what she did to me.

“Me too,” she whispered. I was speechless when she untucked her towel and let it drop to the floor. Her beautiful breasts were plump, her nipples perky and hard from arousal. Her skin was satiny-smooth and velvety like fresh cream.

“Bend over.”

Her lust filled eyes dilated with excitement. She leaned onto the countertop.

“Your ass looks perfect like this,” I said, kneeling to the floor. I stroked over her backside, from the middle of her back, and down, down, down. Her breathing increased and a moan escaped as my fingers dipped between her legs. I inched my face closer, spreading her ass apart in the process. Her little whimper made me smile. I kissed her smooth skin, licking and biting as I moved from one side to the other. “Fucking beautiful,” I said before I licked from bottom to top. I circled my tongue against the forbidden spot as I sank my fingers into her pussy. I licked her most sensitive part as I pumped in and out of her. I ran my fingers over her lips, spreading her wetness over my palm. I pulled my mouth away from her ass and ran my glistening fingers over her backside, admiring how it glistened in the light. She cried in ecstasy at the sensation of me touching her in the most intimate way. Then I sucked at her juices again, savoring the flavor as I fingered her again while licking her ass. Hailey started shaking. “That’s it, baby, come for me.”

She jerked and moaned. As she called my name over and over, I dipped lower. “Come in my mouth,” I said. I sucked her off as her orgasm came in a rush. She did it again. I knew as soon as I sank myself balls deep into her that I’d be done for. I was so fucking hard and wanted to take her and never stop.

“Please, Vince. I want to feel you.” She was out of breath like she’d just run a mile.

I kissed her ass one more time, stood, and kissed her shoulder. “You’re so fucking beautiful.” Her hooded eyes met mine with a small smile.

“Baby, please,” she begged.

I watched as I lined myself up, slicking my cock with her juices. She was dripping wet. I looked up. Our eyes locked in the reflection of the mirror. I latched onto her hips, slammed into her from behind, and shut my eyes against the glorifying pleasure as I made animalistic love to my wife from behind.



## Chapter 19

### *Vince*

I sat in the backyard, the morning sun warming my face as the wind rustled through the trees. Chewie was asleep next to me. I watched a trail of ants scurrying in a line a few feet away and thought how simple their life must be. The world around me pulsed with life, a stark contrast to how I felt because of my memories—or lack thereof. They were far away in the recesses of my messed-up mind. Even when I did happen to get glimpses of anything significant, they were hazy. I felt even more disconnected than before. The funny thing about life right now was that even though I was happier than I had been in a long time, I felt like things were crumbling around me. The twists and turns that brought me to this very moment, a quiet morning contemplating the beauty of love and life, were not filled with wonder and awe but brutal agony.

I focused on the pots of drought-tolerant herbs here and there. They were interesting arrangements and completely practical. The small garden out here differed from the magical oasis Hailey created out front. Our backyard was a mishmash of flowers and plants she had strewn in with vegetables and herbs. We had an avocado tree that had yet to produce any fruit. There was a lemon tree in one corner and an orange tree in the other. A tomato plant, peppers, and various fruits and vegetables sat in tidy rows. Apparently, since her pregnancy, Hailey found enjoyment in growing organic and homegrown fruits and vegetables that were at her complete disposal.

A bird was singing in a nearby tree. Its melody reminded me that even though I was by myself, I wasn't alone. He was my companion. The gentle whisper of leaves and my friend's cheerful chirps were a pleasant distraction from everything colliding together



in my head. I focused on the soft sounds and let them carry me away. I closed my eyes and remembered Dr. Farris's words about meditation. *"Regular meditation increases blood flow to your brain. This can help to strengthen blood vessels in the cerebral cortex and reinforce memory and your ability to remember. I read about a study in a cognition journal that suggested meditating for twenty minutes a day helps to boost memory, concentration, and cognition. It also can help in lowering stress."*

Even though his suggestion about meditation sounded a bit unorthodox, I was at my wit's end. I'd give anything a try at this point.

I heard Hudson's rumblings over the baby monitor. "Chewie, get up. Let's go inside." I stood up too fast. Feeling dizzy, I grabbed the back of the chair and hung on. Deep breaths in. Slow breaths out. I didn't know how long I'd been meditating, but the sun was now at high noon. "Come on, boy," I said. Chewie stood to my left, his head lifted, watching me. Instinctively, he knew I wasn't feeling confident. I stepped tentatively. The last thing I needed was to lose my balance or pass out on the first day I was alone with Hudson. I did precisely as Hailey suggested when I spoke with my parents, and it worked like a charm.

Inside with my boys, I got Hudson some fruit and grabbed myself some carrots, celery sticks, and a bottle of water. I silently thanked Hailey and her organization. She was a stickler now about having prepped snacks on deck. Having a kid changed a few of the day-to-day things around here. Laundry, food prepping, and cleaning weren't the same as I remembered. It was a change for the better, I thought as I looked at Hudson.

After our snacks, Hudson and I played with his toys. After an hour of playtime, I turned on the television and sat with my boy. I flipped through the channels until I came to a cartoon network. I settled in, happy as a clam to watch the silly antics of *Tom and Jerry*,

*Woody Woodpecker*, and *The Flintstones*. As his eyes became droopy, I noticed I, too, was in the mood for a nap. I lay back on the couch and settled Hudson into the crook of my arm. When I woke up, Hudson's eyes were open and watchful. He reached out with his tiny hands and patted my face. "Dada," I said. When he repeated the word with a giggle, I smiled.

Hailey arrived home like clockwork. We went through our "welcome home" routine. It was an easy and natural groove we settled into.

"Babe, you don't have to make dinner every night," Hailey said as I pulled things out of the refrigerator to barbeque some hamburgers.

"Yes, I do."

"Why? Are you having a Susie Homemaker contest with someone?"

I snorted. "No. I'm just trying to be consistent and dependable."

"I appreciate that."

"I haven't been around. It's the least I can do to help."

"Having you home helps. Having you back is all I hoped and dreamed for. But seriously, this is a lot. I know how much work it is, Vince. Why don't you take a night off?"

"I can't!" I didn't mean to yell at her. I turned around, shame written all over my face. "I know you're trying to help. I'm sorry. It's my frustration. It's my problem."

"You're not alone in this, Vince." I appreciated her words and consideration. But they were just words. Saying things wouldn't solve my problem. Words wouldn't bring my memory back. I wasn't a puzzle to be solved or a magic trick to be explained.

I lifted my hands and let them fall. “I don’t know what else to do with my time. *I have to take it easy.*” I mimicked the doctors’ words I’d heard for far too long. “I can’t work out like I want. I can’t go running because everyone’s afraid I’ll forget who I am. Or where I live. Or how to get back home.”

“If you want to go running, go running, Vince. No one’s going to stop you. Certainly not me.” I heard Hailey’s frustration.

“But the doctors said it might not be a good idea.”

“Doctors don’t know everything.” Her eyes were big and bright. “Damnit, Vincent. Stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I’m not.” I knew I was pouting. “I’m tired of standing around and doing nothing.”

“Ugh!” she roared. “You are getting on my last damn nerve!” I tried to contain my laughter but couldn’t. “What?!” I shrugged. She started laughing because I was. “I don’t know what’s so damn funny, Vincent. But—”

I crashed my lips to hers. When we pulled apart, I sighed. “Do you realize this is the first time we’ve actually argued or raised our voices at each other?”

“No, it’s not.”

I cocked my head. “You sure about that?”

“Well, no. But—”

“It feels good.”

“Vince!” she yelled and swatted at my chest.

“I don’t mean it feels good like I enjoy it.”

“Then what the hell do you mean?”

“See? That right there,” I said, pointing at her. “Doesn’t it”—I motioned between us—“feel normal? Like, Jesus Christ, it feels like

we're a normal couple.”

“Well, I’m not sure I’d call you *normal*.”

I smacked her mouth with a kiss. “I love you, too, baby.”

“You better!” she called after me. I laughed and headed to the backyard to fire up the grill, whistling a happy tune.



A soft rustling from the bushes nearby drew my attention. A small, furry figure wandered out and sat. The gray and white ball of fur, its green eyes curious and cautious, watched me. It yawned, licked its paw, and regarded me with a mixture of cautious hope.

“Well, hello there,” I said, keeping my voice low so I wouldn’t spook it. The cat took a few steps and stopped a few feet away. I squatted and extended my hand, palm down. “Come here,” I coaxed, letting the cat approach on its own terms. We eyed one another for a few moments before it took those last few steps forward. I smiled as it sniffed, then nuzzled my hand. “You’re lucky Chewie’s not out here,” I told it. “I’m not sure how he’d feel about having you in his backyard.”

I pet the soft fur, careful in case this seemingly docile creature freaked out and took a swipe at me. It meowed and then started purring loudly. An odd warmth spread through me as I marveled at the trust this creature placed in me. “You’re a brave one, aren’t you?” I said as I scratched behind the cat’s ears. I smiled as it leaned into my touch.

I turned as the door behind me creaked open. “Oh, um,” Hailey said, her eyes wide.

“It appears we have a new friend,” I said, smiling, still petting the cat.

She blinked in surprise, her mouth opened in the shape of an *O*. “That’s Jawa,” she said quietly.

“Jawa, huh?” I picked Jawa up and sat in the nearby chair, continuing to stroke it. “Is Jawa a girl or a boy?” I asked.

“Uh, girl,” Hailey said. She blinked in rapid succession as Jawa settled into my lap.

“She sure is friendly. I wonder who she belongs to.”

“Well, she’s kind of ours.” Hailey’s eyes darted here and there. “No one’s claimed her. I asked around. But no one I talked to owned her. I just feed her. There’s water and food over there.” She pointed to the place around the corner of the yard.

“Why do you feed her over there?” Jawa’s eyes were closed, and she was purring like a maniac. “She’s so sweet.”

“Well, uh, um.” She stood next to me and joined my hands in petting Jawa. “Vince, you hate cats.”

I looked up at her with astonishment, my brows furrowed in confusion. “I do?”

“Yeah. I’ve always liked cats, but you didn’t. You always said you were allergic to them. Sensitivity to their fur or something.”

“I’m not allergic to cats,” I said. “I know that for a fact. There was this stray cat in Uzbekistan that we kind of adopted.”

“Oh, my God,” Hailey squealed, slapping my arm.

“What?”

“You mean you lied about being allergic to cats?”

I looked up at her again. Her eyes weren't filled with anger but humor. "I'm not quite sure. I don't remember telling you that."

"Uh-huh," she grumbled.

"Well, I like her," I replied as I looked down at Jawa, who met my eyes with her soulful green ones. When I looked at Hailey, her lips curved into a small smile.

"I've never seen you like this before except with Chewie."

"I may not be able to remember telling you I don't like cats, and I might have gaps in this big head of mine, but I can tell you honestly, I like this little girl."

"You sure it's not because she's named after a Star Wars character?" Hailey's tone was playful.

"Jawas are actually a furry humanoid species. It's not the name of one character but a group of beings from Tatooine. They were scavengers."

"Glad you could clear that up for me," she said.

I ignored her sarcasm. "I like the name," I said. "Chosen well, you have," I added in my best Yoda impersonation.

She laughed loudly. Jawa lifted her head, peered at us through barely opened eyes, and, unimpressed, lay her head back down.

Hailey pulled a chair over. I placed Jawa in her lap and went to the kitchen to wash my hands. I checked on Chewie and Hudson before heading out back again.

"Why do you like her?" Hailey asked as I slid the patties on the grill.

"You chose an endearing name." I turned on my mental timer and considered Hailey's question as I watched the furry visitor in her lap. I shrugged. "I suppose when I really think about it, I like her because she reminds me of something I recently learned. Life is full

of surprises. Some of them good, some not so good. But I guess mostly it's because sometimes the things we thought we didn't like actually turn out to be the very things we need."

Hailey nodded and beamed with a beautiful radiance I would never get tired of seeing. At that moment, Chewie pawed at the door. "Is it okay for him to come out?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. They get along just fine." I let Chewie out and watched as he headed over to Hailey, sniffed at the cat in her lap, and settled his head on her knee. I looked in on Hudson, who must have just woken up because his eyes still looked sleepy. I lifted him and headed to the backyard again.

As I stood with Hudson, Hailey, Chewie, and our new furry feline, Jawa, my heart swelled with love. As the sun's warmth touched our skin, I was comforted by the simple joy that sometimes the most unexpected things bring you the most incredible happiness.





## Chapter 20

*Vince*

*“I can’t wait to get the fuck out of here. This place is one hot ass motherfucker.”*

*“No shit.”*

*“We’ll approach from the north, enter here, bing, bang, boom, and leave here.” A faceless man pointed to the image on the screen.*

*“And exfil?”*

*“Ready when we are.”*

*Everything went dark, and then it was like an explosion of fireworks.*

*“This is not a drill. We clear on that? You’re a go! You’re a go! Get the fuck in there!”*

*Heavy footsteps running, trampling. Banging from doors being blown through. Explosions. Gunfire. Grenades. Smoke everywhere.*

*“There’s another one! On your six!”*

*“Kill ‘em and get out of there!” a voice boomed.*

*“These motherfuckers are everywhere!” Another loud voice bellowed over the bullets spraying all around us.*

*I pulled the trigger on my gun, but nothing worked. I try and try to fire, but my fingers are like taffy. I have to find safety. We need to retreat.*

*“Bacca!” I heard someone calling for me. Someone else called my name, and the world started to go black.*

*When things came back into focus, I was on my knees. There's a syringe in someone's hand and a gun to my temple. A pair of dark eyes watched me in silence.*

*I attempted to return the hostile stare. I did fine until that shithead stuck me with the needle.*

*I heard the voices. I wanted to open my eyes. I couldn't. I tried to move. I was frozen—no, strapped down. I did my best to remain still even though I was panicking. I take my mind to my training. I have to focus. I have to survive. I have to make it through this hellhole. "Motherfucker!" I yelled, but only in my head. Now came the throbbing agony I remembered. Everything fucking hurt. The pain was everywhere all at once. Every square inch of my body was on fire. My mind could process the pain but nothing else.*



I woke up drenched in sweat. Again. I opened my eyes, gasping for breath and hoping I didn't wake Hailey. I turned my head. Still asleep, thank God. I tried to stay quiet and still as I allowed my heart to calm and settle down to a normal rhythm.

The rain outside fell in a torrent, pounding on the roof and against the glass. The rhythmic sound might have been calming for someone else. For me, I was a jittery ball of heightened energy. I looked out the window to assess the situation. Everything was dark except for the light bouncing off the blacktop from the streetlights.

I tiptoed through the house, checking all the windows and doors. My paranoia was from my nightmare, not the rain. Maybe I

was overzealous and a little obsessed, but my family's safety was the only thing I cared about. I would protect them at all costs.

The nightmares came on over a week ago. My dreams and daydreams were filled with grotesque images, ghoulish faces, and garish words. I couldn't shake the feeling that something big was about to happen. Good or bad, I needed to be prepared. No matter what, nothing could happen to my family. They were the only ones who mattered.

I opened the medicine cabinet and read each bottle until I found what I wanted. I downed three headache relievers with a bottle of water. I walked out to the kitchen and stared out into the night. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Everything was exactly as it had been moments before.

Soft footsteps fell behind me. I turned. Hailey padded in on quiet feet. She watched me for a moment. Concern was written all over her face. This wasn't the first time this had happened. "What are you doing out here?"

"I'm okay. Everything is fine. I just have a headache."

"Again?" She hurried over, pressing the back of her hand to my forehead. "You're burning up."

"It's okay. Just a headache. I just need these pills to kick in."

"This isn't a headache, Vince."

"Hailey," I sighed, exasperated.

"Talk to me." She snuggled into my arms. "I worry when you get like this. Please, baby. Talk to me."

"I had a dream." She stayed latched onto me, quiet as could be. "A nightmare."

"I know you did. Don't lock me out. I worry when you try to ignore it. Was there anything new?"

“No. It’s just flashes here and there. Bits and pieces that I can’t make out. I can hear voices, but I can’t see any faces. I’m not sure if it’s real or not. I try to stay with it, but ... I can’t. No matter how hard I try, I can’t make sense of any of it. I keep thinking it really happened. I remember all of my other missions. Just not this one.”

“Maybe it is just a bad dream then.”

“It feels too real. Like it happened. Really happened. And I keep thinking it has to be my last mission. Everything about it feels like I was there. But I can’t remember where I was or who else was there. Except for the guys who died, I can’t remember them.”

She took a small step back and looked at me. Even in the dark, her eyes bore into mine. “I think you should write this stuff down.”

“Hailey, I’m not keeping a journal.”

“Lots of people write down their dreams.”

“Yeah, and they hang dreamcatchers and read their horoscopes because they think that stuff means something.” She narrowed her eyes at me. I held up my hands. “Look, you want to do that stuff, that’s up to you. I prefer to deal with the tangible.”

“You are such a skeptic. I swear, sometimes it’s like I’m married to a blockhead. You can believe in starships and wars in space, but when it comes to other stuff, it’s a hard no for you.”

“I don’t believe in *Star Wars* stuff actually happening.”

“Then why are their pictures of you in costumes holding lifesavers?”

“They’re *Lightsabers*, Hailey. And I was a kid.”

“Um, I’ve seen the pictures, and you had facial hair.”

She had me there. I smiled at the memory. “Fine. I surrender.”

“So, you’ll keep a journal?” She looked so proud, standing in her fuzzy robe and matching slippers.

“No. I’m not keeping a journal. But I’ll write it all down in a notebook.”

“That works, too.” Her words may have been approving, but there was a hint of smugness etched into them.

“I don’t like the idea of dwelling on the bad stuff. My dreams are always bad, and now it’s like I’m just reliving the same thing over and over again.”

“Maybe we can look at this as part of your healing process. If you write them down, maybe new stuff will come to the surface. Or perhaps you’ll stop having bad dreams.”

“I just don’t want to jinx it. My brain is fucked up enough as it is. And lately, my dreams are always bad, and I never remember anything but bits and pieces anyway! I don’t want to make things worse. You don’t worry about that?”

“Vince, it’s been happening for over a week.”

“Two weeks,” I admitted.

Instead of berating me for keeping this from her, she touched my face softly and stroked my cheek with her thumb. “We will keep a journal ... um, write them down just as a way to monitor what you’re dreaming of. I like to think that the process of getting them out of your head and onto paper will help to rid your mind of it. Maybe you keep dreaming about it because it’s still lodged in there. Maybe once you write it down, you’ll start to dream about something good.”

“I don’t need to dream about anything good, Hailey. All I have to do is think about you and Hudson.”

She pressed her soft lips to mine. I drank in her kiss and sank into her embrace. We made our way back to bed and made love. The tenderness of our union almost brought tears to my eyes. Hailey stood right by my side. With each struggle and setback, through my

memory loss and the challenges it brought, Hailey had been nothing short of amazing. It was moments like this that reminded me of her resilience and capacity for unconditional love. “I would walk on my knees to hell and back for you. Thank you for loving me,” I whispered.



A few days later, I was back at Dr. Farris’s office. Since Hailey and I were doing much better, we agreed we could drop our couples counseling sessions to once a month. I was still coming in at least once a week. This was my second time coming in this week, though. I was feeling particularly vulnerable and like a complete chump.

“How are things going?”

“Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Well, clearly not since I’m coming to see you so soon. I guess after remembering a couple of new things, I just expected it to keep happening. I should be better by now, shouldn’t I?” My question was rhetorical, but I asked it anyway.

“I know it’s not what you want to hear, but the brain is a complex thing. It takes time.”

“Hailey said I should write everything down.”

“Writing it down won’t hurt.”

“But it won’t help.”

“Is that what you think?”

“I don’t know anymore. I guess I should give it a shot.”

“From what you’ve said, your dreams appear to be memories from your time away.”

“They have to be because it’s not any mission or anything I remember. I’ve gone through everything, top to bottom, and that’s the only thing that seems plausible. And it sucks because the one person I can talk to about this stuff can’t talk to me about it.”

“You mean Pete?”

“Yeah. Everything’s still classified, and since I’m going through all this, he’s not at liberty to discuss anything with me unless ordered to.”

“I get how frustrating that can be.”

“It’s not his fault. I just think if I could talk to him, maybe it would help.” I shrugged. “Then again, maybe it wouldn’t. So here I am, just kind of in limbo.”

“Let’s talk about these dreams of yours.”

“It’s just the same thing over and over. It always ends the same way. I just want to focus on moving on. I want to wake up from this nightmare. Got any way to make that happen?”

“Perhaps the repetition is the significance of the dream. There’s no easy answer here.” He steepled his fingers. “You can’t let the people who harmed you have control over you or blame yourself for what happened.”

“I don’t.”

“Nothing will be fixed miraculously. It takes time and patience. And I know you understand that.”

“I do.”

“Have you considered hypnotherapy?”

“You mean hypnotizing me?” I snorted.

“Hear me out?” he asked. I nodded. “Maybe trying to confront your memories with a different approach might help.”

“I’m not sure I can do that,” I said.

“After everything you’ve survived, of course you can. The only question is, do you want to give it a try?”

“I’m not sure it’s going to help.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because ... isn’t it all a little woo-woo? I mean, meditation is one thing. But hypnosis? I just don’t know.” Dr. Farris sat quietly. It was a surefire way to ensure I considered my own words. “I guess the bottom line here is, what if this all shows how truly fucked up I am?”

“What if it offers you relief?”

“I want to go back to work. And if I can’t prove I’m not screwed up in the head, they won’t ever let me come back.”

“I’m not going to sugarcoat this, Vince. That is definitely a risk. I know you’re under a lot of pressure. But at the end of the day, you should make your decisions based on whether or not you think it’s truly the best thing for you to do.”

When I chuckled, Dr. Farris remained stoically still. I couldn’t read him. I held up my hand. “I’m not laughing at you. I can literally hear Hailey in the back of my mind telling me to stop being such a skeptic and try it your way.” I cleared my throat and shrugged.

“We will do whatever you’re comfortable doing, Vince. This is your body, your mind, your memory. It is not my intention to push you into any decision but to provide you with options. There has been success with hypnotherapy for many people. But this is a decision you need to make.”



“You’re right. And I said I’d do anything to get my memory back.” Dr. Farris gave a slight nod. “You aren’t suggesting you hook me up to some electrode machine and zap my brain.”

That got a chuckle out of him. “No, I’m not. Hypnotherapy is completely safe, and we can do it right here whenever you’re ready.”

I looked around. Hailey’s voice was clear as a bell. “All right, let’s give it a go.”

Dr. Farris checked the time. “If time runs over, are you okay with that? I don’t want to start if there’s someplace you need to be. My next appointment cancelled yesterday, so I do have an extra hour in case we need it.”

“I don’t have anywhere to be. But let me just text Hailey so she doesn’t worry.”

“By all means,” he said. As I sent a quick text to Hailey, Dr. Farris went about his business. From the looks of it, there wasn’t anything different for me to do. He told me to sit back, close my eyes, and focus on my breathing. I listened as he talked, did as instructed, and soon he was counting.

When I came to, thirty minutes later, Dr. Farris didn’t have anything to report that was different from what I’d already told him. I was hoping for a miracle that apparently wasn’t going to happen. At least not today. “What I do is not an exact science,” he told me when he saw my disappointment.

“I wish it were. What do you think’s going on in here?” I tapped my head.

“The good thing is that you don’t show any signs of psychosis or disillusionment of reality. Nor do you appear to have cognitive deficits other than the inability to recall everything from your mission or your abduction. From what I’m seeing now, and what I have witnessed since our first session, your symptoms could be the

result of emotional trauma rather than physical. Emotional trauma can trigger memory loss. Or perhaps you're subconsciously not ready to face it all yet. For whatever reason, you only remember fragments of an entire memory."

"What does that mean for me?"

He shrugged and pressed his lips together. "You were gone a while, Vince. That's no small feat to overcome. If you're willing, we can try this again. But for now, I think Hailey's advice of writing things down might benefit you."

I chuckled and shook his hand. "Hailey will be so happy to know you agree with her."

"I don't think there's any harm in trying. Let's see how things go over the next week."

"You got it."

"I know you're dealing with a lot, Vince. Remember, you have an excellent support system: Hailey, your parents, your friends, your team of doctors. Everyone wants the same thing you do. It's easy to get lost in everything and focus on the negative. Remember how far you've come and use that strength to pull you through the darkness."

As I headed home, I replayed my session with Dr. Farris. Life was a rollercoaster right now. At least, that's how I felt inside my own thoughts. He was right about the negative and the darkness. It was easy to feel sorry for myself when things weren't happening the way I wanted. The motto, *Slow and steady wins the race*, held merit. But for a Navy SEAL like me, who wasn't used to failure and had countless successful missions under his belt, it was a hard pill to swallow.

When I pulled into the driveway, the gloomy cloud that was following me around like I was a cartoon character, disappeared. Hailey and Hudson, the lights of my life, were reading a book under

the shade of the tree. Maybe it wasn't so bad that I couldn't remember every detail of the worst time of my life. Right here in front of me were the two people I lived and breathed for. Maybe my brain was a little imperfect. That I could learn to live with, but I would never be able to survive without Hailey or Hudson. Maybe I'd never get the answers I needed, but I would never take it for granted that I was safe and sound with *my* family in *our* home.



## Chapter 21

*Hailey*

I was smiling from head to toe. It was a beautiful day, and I was in my garden.

The past several weeks flew by without one single hiccup—no bad news from the doctors and no nightmares. Work was good for me. Vince’s physical therapy was going well. He was getting stronger with each passing day. His visits with Dr. Farris helped, and he was considering dropping to every other week soon.

Hudson was doing great.

And our sex life was phenomenal. I mean, out of this world, spectacular!

I was working in my garden. Vince was taking a mid-day nap with Hudson. We were planning his upcoming birthday party. Vince wasn’t here for his first birthday and only got to relive it through the pictures and videos. This year, I was going all out! Even more than I had for his first birthday. With Vince home, I wanted him to experience everything he missed out on last year. We were either going to do an airplane or construction theme. Hudson was obsessed with airplanes and dump trucks at the moment.

“You look like you’re having a good time,” Vince said.

I screamed, clutching my heart. “You scared me!”

“Sorry. I thought you heard the screen door.”

I shook my head. "I was lost in my thoughts."

"About?"

"Work. Hudson's party. You." My cheeks flushed with a warm heat.

"Oh, yeah? Anything good?"

"Very good," I said, feeling the heat spread through me.

Vince waggled his brows. "Do tell."

"I was thinking I might show you."

He rubbed his palms together with a Cheshire grin.

"Later!" I squealed when he came close enough to snatch me up.

"Later," he said. His flirty intonation made my chest, neck, and cheeks flare up with desire. "I'm off to Dr. Farris," he said.

"Are you doing hypnosis again?"

He shrugged and avoided meeting my eyes. "Probably. I don't know."

"Okay. See you when you get home."

He kissed me and headed to the car. I ran inside to Hudson. Vince was bashful about hypnosis. He wasn't embarrassed for me to know, but I knew he didn't want it to get out to his friends. I didn't think they would make fun of him, but he was adamant about it staying between us. Dutifully, I kept the information to myself.

I read Hudson a story, fed him lunch, and settled onto the couch with him for a movie. When he finally shut his eyes,

I took him to his room and tucked him in with his favorite monkey. I restarted the movie and closed my eyes. I wasn't asleep for very long when I heard the sandpapery sound of Vince sanding something outside.

"What's this?" I asked, clutching the baby monitor in my hand. The porch swing was on the garage floor, and Vince was sanding it like a man possessed.

"This thing has seen better days." He grunted between his words.

"Vince, it's fine."

"Are you kidding?" His voice rose to a shout. "The paints chipped. The wood needs to be properly sealed. That chain! Have you seen it? Rusted and disgusting."

"I should have taken better care of it. It rained a lot last year, and I never covered it. I'm sorry, baby."

"Why the hell are you apologizing? You're not the fucking idiot who left! Left you with this mess. Left you to take care of every fucking thing in this house. And on top of that, you were pregnant. You went through all of that by yourself. Because I wasn't fucking here! And you had to be a single mom and do everything on your own. Because I had to leave. I wasn't here. I wasn't fucking here for any of it."

I wanted to break down and cry when he lashed out. But I knew he wasn't mad at me. He was angry with himself. I didn't utter a peep during his rant. His chest heaved up and down with heavy breaths. He threw the sander down and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. When he finally

looked at me, his eyes were full of shame and regret. “I’m sorry,” he choked out.

“Oh, Vince, baby.” I knelt on the floor, dropped the monitor, and wrapped him in my arms.

He sniffled. “I’m so sorry, baby. You don’t deserve an asshole like me.”

“For better or worse, remember?”

I felt his nod. “Yeah,” he sighed. “I didn’t mean for you to take the brunt of it.”

“I think maybe ... this was long overdue.” I leaned back and looked at my strong warrior, who was breaking apart in front of me. “You’ve been wound up too tight, honey.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Did something happen with Dr. Farris?”

“No. Same shit, different day.”

“It’s been a long, tough road. And you’ve fought hard. You got me. You have your parents ... Pete ... and ... Hudson. I know he’s just a baby, but he loves you to the moon and back. We all do.” I stroked the side of his face with my fingers.

“I just feel so lost sometimes. Why’s it so damn hard, Hailey?”

“I don’t know, baby. But it’s gotta get easier from here, right?” When he shrugged, I imagined him when he was a little boy. “We are all here for you. When you’re feeling lost, hurt, or angry, remember we’ll help you find a way out of it.”

“I know you will.” His blue eyes shimmered brightly. “Thanks.”



“I just want you to be okay. I don’t know everything you went through over there. I’m not sure I want to know. You know what I mean.” He looked at me with hooded eyes. “But if it’s on your mind or weighing you down ... if you want to talk, I’m here for you. I will *always* be here for you. I don’t want you walking on eggshells or trying to dance around telling me that everything’s fine if it’s not. I know you’ve seen things and done things. Things that you might be scared to talk to me about. But nothing will make me feel any different about you. I fell in love with you the moment we met. And I know what’s in your heart. You are the best man in the whole entire world.”

A smile pulled at his mouth. “Who got lucky enough to marry the best woman in the whole entire world.”

“Oh, baby.” I wrapped my arms around his neck. “I wish there was more that I could do to help.”

“You do help,” he whispered. “Every time I get like this, you’re the one person who pulls me out of the depths of my despair.”

As we hugged one another on the garage floor, surrounded by sawdust and tools, Vince relaxed, completely at ease.

“I’m gonna get us some lemonade,” I said. Vince picked up his sander, and I went inside to get us drinks and peek in on Hudson. He was still dreaming away. “You know, this is totally unnecessary,” I said when I returned. “Maybe we should just get a new one.”

“Uh-uh.” He shook his head. “No way. This is the one you picked out. This is the one I hung. And even if my hands

get covered in blisters and calluses, I'm fixing the fucker."

I laughed and held his glass out for him. He slapped his hands on his legs, dusting the sawdust off. He swallowed the entire glass of lemonade in one gulp. "Glad I brought the pitcher." I refilled his glass and handed it over.

"I left you with all of this to deal with. The least I can do is fix your porch swing."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just buy a new one?"

He huffed. "Hailey, please."

I held up my hands. "Okay, okay."

"We could buy a new one, yes. But it won't be as special as this one."

"Aw." Vince's sentimentality melted my heart. "I can help." He raised a brow. "I'm serious, Vince. Show me what to do. Something easy, though."

He chuckled and handed me a piece of sandpaper. "There are several different grades of sandpaper. This one here is designed for smoothing the wood. Can't have you getting splinters on your ass." I giggled as he squeezed my side. "Feel," he said, taking my hand under his. He guided our hands over the wood he had scraped and sanded already. "It's still a little rough, but your sandpaper is a finer grit and will smooth out all that roughness."

"Hmm," I murmured. With his hand on mine and his body so close I could breathe in his manly scent mixed with the smell of wood and sawdust, I was getting turned on. "Vince?" I said.

“Yeah?”

“I think it’s *later* now.”

“Huh?”

“Later, as in I told you *later* when I was out here earlier.”

“Hailey, I’m a mess,” he said, looking at his shirt and jeans covered in dust.

“That’s what the shower’s for, Vince.” I took his hand, and we ran into the house.



## Chapter 22

*Hailey*

Vince and I sat on our newly refurbished porch swing with Hudson.

“Isn’t this fun?” I asked as we swayed.

“It is,” Vince said.

“I was asking Hudson,” I teased.

“And since he doesn’t know that word yet, I was answering for him.”

“Thank you again for making it so perfect,” I said.

“You’re welcome.” After a moment of silence, he said, “I’m sorry for last night.”

“Sorry? For what?”

“I know you took us to *Submarina* on purpose. And I know you know that I don’t know why.” *Submarina* was the place we were at when I first suspected I was pregnant.

“It’s okay. Dr. Farris told us to keep trying, so that’s all I’m doing. Do you want me to tell you why it’s significant?”

He puckered his lips, considering. “Can you give me a hint?”

I smiled and looked down. “It has to do with Hudson.”

“Was it where you told me you were pregnant?”

“No.”

“Where you found out you were pregnant?”

“Vince!” I squealed. “No! I did not take a pregnancy test in a sandwich shop.” He laughed so loudly Hudson looked up at him.

“Well, I’ve heard about women taking them in weirder places than that.”

I scoffed. “Well, I didn’t. But you’re close.”

He became thoughtful for a moment. When he shrugged and guessed, “You got sick there and realized you might be?” I grinned.

“Yep. We were eating turkey sandwiches and *Doritos*. Out of nowhere, I got queasy and ran to the bathroom. After we left, you took me to get a test, and that’s when we found out.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember.”

“It’s okay.” I kissed him. “It was pretty funny. When I told you I thought I might be pregnant, you kind of freaked out. You actually looked more sick than I felt.”

“Because it came out of nowhere. And we said we were going to wait another year or two.”

Our eyes met. “You remember that?”

He looked as surprised as I did. “Yeah.” He chuckled. “I don’t know where that came from. But yeah, I remember us talking about starting a family. You were ready. I wasn’t quite there yet.”

“As soon as we saw that the test was positive, you forgot all about that, though. I swear, you were a man on a mission. We scheduled the soonest doctor’s appointment to confirm. And after our first checkup, we went for ice cream. You were so excited.”

He looked at Hudson, then back to me. “I may not remember all of that, Hailey, but I do know that I love you guys with everything I got. There’s nothing more important to me than the two of you.”

Our conversation turned to Hudson’s upcoming birthday party. We were a few weeks away, and I wanted to finalize things. “Are you sure you’re okay with the headcount?”

“Hailey, I’ve already told you, don’t worry about me. Do what you would normally do. I don’t want you to change things because of me.”

“I’m just worried. It might be overwhelming.”

“Hailey, I appreciate it. I know it’s going to be overwhelming. And I’ll probably get emotional. I missed his first birthday, and that makes me sad. But I’m here for this one, and that makes me really happy. I want to celebrate with him. And I want it to be fun. I’ll be fine. Really. If I need a break, we can use a codeword.”

“Ooh, like a safe word?”

He barked a laugh. “Something not too sexy, though.”

“Hmm, how about *bananas*?” When he raised a brow, I explained. “It has many meanings. Does the cake have bananas in it? Are there any more bananas for the fruit plate? Gosh, this party is bananas.”

He laughed again. “Bananas it is.” He kissed me. “I’m bananas for you, Hailey Weber.”

I giggled against his lips. I couldn’t wait for Hudson’s birthday party. I *really* couldn’t wait until later tonight when I could show Vince how bananas I was about him, too.



Midnight, and I was wide awake.

But I was blissful as could be.

I kept true to my word and showed Vince how crazy I was about him. And I was having fun working on Hudson's party decorations and favors.

Just as I was gluing the last orange cone together, an odd sound broke my concentration. When muffled groans hit my ears, I was up and rushing to the bedroom. Vince was talking incoherently and groaning in pain. Even in the dimmed lighting from the bedside lamp, I could read the hurt and anguish all over his face.

Vince's eyes were screwed shut. He was dreaming. But this was unlike any other dream I'd witnessed so far. My heart was jumping out of my chest. I touched his shoulder and gave him a small shake. His arm flung out. I barely missed being coldcocked by my own husband. "Vince! Vince, wake up! Baby, wake up!"

He latched onto my wrist as his eyes flew open. Red-hot rage flamed his eyes.

"Vince! Vince!" I screamed. "It's me. It's Hailey!" His hand around my wrist was like a vice. And it hurt like hell. "Baby, please!" I cried.

His eyes focused on me. His entire body was coiled tight like a viper. He blinked a few times, then sucked in a lungful of breath. His chest heaved with each inhale. His grip loosened, and as realization hit him, he sank back into the mattress.

"Oh, my God. Oh, my God." He said it over and over again. He was drenched in sweat. So were the sheets and his pillow.

"Are you okay?" I asked, holding onto my aching wrist.

"No. I don't know what's happening. I think I'm having a heart attack."

"Oh, my God!" I didn't wait another second before I ran to the phone and dialed 911. I rushed back to Vince. "Vince? Vince!" His eyes were closed, and the only thought I had was that I just lost him



while calling the fucking paramedics. Tears streamed down my face. “Oh, Vince,” I cried.

“Hailey?”

I yelped. “Oh, my God. I thought you died!”

“I think I am. I can’t breathe.” He tried to move.

“Stay still. Tell me what’s wrong. What are you feeling?”

He took a quick breath. “My chest is tight. I don’t know. I think I was dreaming, but I don’t remember.” I took my tank top off and wiped his forehead and chest.

When I caught him staring at my bare chest and ogling me, I knew it wasn’t a heart attack. Or at least I was pretty sure. “How do you feel?”

“I think I’m okay.” He couldn’t stop staring at me.

“Oh, my God, Vincent Daniel Weber. Even on the brink of death, you’re a pervert.” The smile on my face didn’t relay my anger or frustration.

“I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“Oh!” I smacked him playfully and rushed to get a fresh tank top. Knowing a team of medics would be here any second, I opted for a sports bra, too. I rushed out to the knock on the door and informed the medic about what just transpired.

After talking to Vince and asking some routine questions, they determined that he probably had a panic attack.

“I want you to take him to the hospital,” I said as they finished up.

“Hailey,” Vince sighed. “I’m fine. I feel a lot better.”

“Uh-uh.” I shook my head. “You’re going to the hospital,” I said to Vince. “And you’re taking him right now,” I told the medic.

“Yes, ma’am,” they said in unison.

I looked at Vince. “I don’t know what just happened, but that was scary. And I’m not going to get any sleep until I know for sure you didn’t just have a heart attack.”

“Ma’am,” the medic said, “it wasn’t a heart attack.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,”—I bent forward to look at his nametag —“Jason. Are you a cardiothoracic surgeon? Or a cardiologist?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Then I think you’re on your way to the hospital with my husband. I’ll be right behind you. I have to get our son out of bed.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

I left in a huff, but not before I heard Vince tell Jason, “She’s not normally such a ball buster.” When I heard Vince’s laugh, I smiled.



We were still at the hospital, and it would be a while until Vince was cleared. They took his blood, made him pee in a cup, and already did a series of tests. The good thing was Vince didn’t have a heart attack. They were now going through a series of tests. Renee and Daniel picked up Hudson and took him back to their house.

After confirming that Vince didn’t have a heart attack, they did another series of tests. I was asleep in Vince’s bed when they rolled him back in. I shouldn’t be in his bed, but his nurse knew who I was from before, and she felt sorry for me.

“It was a panic attack,” Vince told me. “Coupled with PTSD,” he said.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“I always knew it was a possibility. I knew the risks I was taking with being in the military and going to hostile territories. But anyone can get PTSD. It’s not a death sentence, and it’s more common than most people think. The good thing is that I’ve been doing exactly what I need to help deal with it. It’s a minor setback, but I’ll be fine.”

“That’s good news.”

“Yeah. What the fuck, Hailey?” His voice rose to a shout as his eyes, big as saucers, landed on my wrist. “Did I do that?”

“Vince, honey. It’s okay.”

“No, the fuck it’s not. Oh, my God! I can’t believe I did that to you. Come here.” He held his arms open. I climbed into his lap.

“Vince, it was an accident. I know you didn’t mean to hurt me. I was talking to the nurse earlier, and she said it might be PTSD, so I read up on it while I was waiting. If this happens again, I’m not supposed to wake you up.”

“Right. That’s a common misconception. You think it works like a typical nightmare, but they are different.”

“It was automatic. I guess with Hudson, I’m used to waking him up if I know he’s having a bad dream. And I never saw you like that. I just reacted.”

“Hailey, I know. I probably would’ve thought the same thing. But we’ll talk with the doctor together and make sure we understand what to do and all of that moving forward.”

“Together,” I said, placing my hand in his.

“God, I love you.” As our lips met, I knew this moment was a testament to our unforgettable, everlasting, and unconditional love. Miracles were possible. This night took an unexpected turn, but we would make it through this just as we had everything else.



## Chapter 23

*Vince*

Celebrating Hudson's second birthday was better than anything I imagined. Our day was filled with family, friends, love and laughter. Hailey had gone above and beyond.

Thankfully, there hadn't been any repeat night terrors since I was rushed to the hospital a couple of weeks earlier. It was scary for both of us. Even though she reassured me that she was okay, I was worried about having another dream like I had that night. Even worse was the terror and guilt eating away at me that I hurt Hailey in the process. I would never forgive myself for causing her pain. It was bad enough she had to worry about me. She should never have to worry about me hurting her.

"Are you almost ready?" I asked Hailey. She was standing in front of the full-length mirror.

"Almost." Her beautiful smile reflected back at me.

"You look gorgeous."

She twirled around, causing the fabric of her dress to flare outward. "It's new." She gave me a kiss and laced her arms around my neck. "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise," I said, wagging my brows at her.

"Ooh," she crooned, unlatching herself.

"I'm gonna get Hudson's stuff together."

“I’ll be right there.”

Soon, we were driving away from my parents’ place. They were taking Hudson for the night, so Hailey and I could have a date night. I wanted to make this a night to remember for Hailey. After everything she had done for me and everything I had put her through recently, she deserved a night dedicated to her.

“I think we’re a little overdressed for pizza,” she said after I placed our order at *Salerno’s*. It was a great restaurant, but we did look kind of fancy. Hailey’s deep green dress made her look even more beautiful, if that was even possible. I wore one of my suits. Hailey said I looked like a stud. And the way she was looking at me right now made me hungry for more than pizza.

“I ordered a fancy bottle of wine. And I know that pizza is a special meal for us. Right?”

“Absolutely. I’m not complaining. You know I could eat pizza morning, noon, and night.”

I chuckled. “Yes, I do.”

After our wine was poured, I held my glass up. “I’d like to make a toast,” I said. “To you, Hailey, my love, my wife, my life. I love you. And I love our life. Even when I was missing parts of it, you always made me feel whole.”

“Oh, Vince,” she whispered. “I love you too. So much.”

We clinked glasses and ate our complimentary house salads. When we left, we had some leftover pizza boxed up. When Hailey sat down in the passenger seat, I handed the box to her and said, “Here’s your breakfast.” Her howl of laughter

had me chuckling as I rounded the car and slid behind the wheel.

“Thank you for tonight,” she said.

“The night’s not over yet.” I kept my eyes forward and drove to our next stop for dessert.

“Frozen yogurt, huh?” she asked as I pulled into a parking space.

“It’s your favorite,” I commented. After we ordered, I led her to a bench outside. White lights lit up the trees above us. They gave the appearance that we were covered under a blanket of stars.

I waited for her to finish her third bite. Before she could take her fourth, I stopped her. She blinked in rapid succession. “Are you okay?” she asked.

I kissed her with just a hint of tongue. Her lips were cold, and she tasted like lemon cream. “I’m more than okay,” I said. “I just couldn’t wait another second to kiss you.”

A familiar recognition flickered in her eyes. She smiled softly and replied with a simple, “Okay.”

Thirty minutes later, back in the comfort of our home, we changed into our pajamas and went to the living room. “You want to watch a movie?”

“Okay,” she said.

I was relieved she said yes. I thumbed through the movies we had and found the one I wanted. “How about this one?” I asked, holding up *Notting Hill*.

“Sure.”



“I know how much you love this movie. And Julia Roberts.”

“Don’t forget Hugh Grant.”

“How could I?” I joked, lighting a few candles. I dashed to the kitchen and returned with a massive bowl of kettle corn and Hailey’s lemonade. We settled in and snuggled up on the couch. It was the perfect way to end the night.

When the movie ended, I turned off the television. The glow of the candles flickered around us. “You look so beautiful, Hailey. I need you to know how much you mean to me.”

“Vince, you’re scaring me.”

“I’m fine, Hailey. More than fine. I promise.” She looked utterly lost. “I know I’ve caused you a lot of hurt and worry. I can’t take that away. But I can try to make up for it. Thank you for your support and believing in me. Thank you for staying by my side through thick and thin. Thank you for making me a dad. Thank you for giving me Hudson. Thank you for marrying me on St. Patrick’s Day and making me the happiest man on Earth.”

“Wh-what? W-wait a second.”

If my smile were any bigger, it would have split my face in two. “Hailey—”

“You said St. Patrick’s Day.”

“I did.”

“Oh, my ... you remember St. Patrick’s Day.”

I enunciated each word as I said, “I do.”

“Hailey, baby, I remember it all. I remember everything about you—about *us*.”

“Holy shit,” she whispered.

“About damn time, right?” I asked.



## Chapter 24

*Hailey*

Just as I thought this night couldn't get any better, the familiar melody of Nat King Cole's *Unforgettable* came through the speakers behind me.

"It's our wedding song," Vince told me.

"I know. I remember."

"I do too." His smile was wistful as he wrapped his arms around my waist.

A tear slipped down my cheek. Vince was quick to wipe it away. Then we began slow dancing.

As Nat sang, Vince whispered, "You have made my life more extraordinary than I ever imagined. From the moment we met, you have had my heart. You have allowed me to be my true self, and you love me anyway. Every moment, every single kiss, and each new memory we've had together has created a love that, like you, is truly unforgettable. You are the best thing that ever happened to me, Hailey, and I promise to spend every day for the rest of my life showing you how much you mean to me. I promise to love you forever."

When he looked at me, we both had tears in our eyes.

"I love you," I said.

As his lips married mine, I melted into the kiss.

This whole night, and this moment with Vince, was perfectly and truly unforgettable.



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**To my friends and family:** Thank you for ALL you do! I love you all so much!

I love you with all my heart.

My (wine) cup runneth over.

I am eternally grateful to everyone who is and has been a part of my journey! If I missed someone, please know your love and support did not go unnoticed!

XOXO,

Leigh





## About the Author

Leigh Adams resides in sunny southern California. As an avid reader and English major, she's

always been passionate about literature. She is never without a book in her hand and never leaves the house without something to read.

Growing up, she always planned to be a writer. That was until college and the adult world locked her into a role and career she came to love. With writing on the backburner, Leigh worked hard honing her skills, creating her life, and focusing on helping others to find their passion and pursue their dreams.

After several years of working hard at her day job, she decided to redirect her focus onto her

personal passion and picked up the pen to write. While she still loves her day-job, Leigh also

enjoys creating worlds and characters for readers to utterly fall in love with.

Her novels contain a mixture of sweet, sass, and a whole lot of sexy. She writes heroines who are smart and snarky; and while some of them have been broken and bruised, they still have a backbone. Her heroes are strong, sexy alphas who are sometimes sweet and sometimes brass; but they always win

the heart of their leading lady. While some of her characters may be damaged, as a hopeless romantic, Leigh's stories contain no cliffhanger endings because she firmly believes in giving each of her characters their own Happily Ever After ...

When she's not writing, Leigh can most often be found laughing and living it up with her family and friends, trying a new recipe, or simply relaxing with a good book or movie.



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