

**KIERA JAYNE**



# Restoration Hearts

AN MMF MÉNAGE ROMANCE

# Restoration Hearts

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**Kiera Jayne**

Skye High Publishing

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## About The Book

When Perie Miller and Flynn Brewer arrive in their hometown to restore an old Queenslander home, neither of them anticipated Vaughn being back. A bloke from their past who turned their world upside down, Vaughn is a man who caused a four-year rift in their rock-solid, lifelong friendship.

While Perie welcomes him back with open arms, Flynn is more cautious, though no less attracted to him. What will happen when they both realise they still harbour feelings for him?

Vaughn Forester is a man with many problems. His haunting memories of Afghanistan and war wounds are the least of his worries when the two greatest loves of his life return to Granite Ridge and drag him back into their lives. Can he love two people at once? Can they both love him? The past says no. But together, can they forge a new future?

# Foreword

Dear Reader,

This book is set in Australia and, therefore, is written in Australian English. As such, there will be variations to spelling throughout the novel. Please be assured these are not mistakes.

Happy reading!



*Dedicated to the people who have helped me  
become brave in the past few years.*

# Chapter One

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## Flynn

**L**eaning my heavily tattooed arms against my Volkswagen Amarok's steering wheel, I peered through the windscreen at the rundown Queenslander house in front of me. "It looks like we've got a lot of work ahead of us."

My beautiful passenger turned her head and studied the rusting verandah railings, the peeling paint, the crappy old shutters—basically, the never-ending list of problems noticeable with a fleeting glance. Her cute, button nose wrinkled, and her sexy, pouty lips contorted in disgust. "If this is the outside, I shudder to think what it will be like inside."

"Whatever it is, Perie, we'll handle it." I ruffled her brunette hair and laughed when she pushed me away with a huff. I knew what was coming next, but I caught her arms as she lunged from her side of the front seat in retaliation. "Hey, you know not to mess with my hair! I spend a lot of time making it look good!"

Laughing, we grappled with one another as she fought to break free and complete her attack. She finally gave up and flopped against her seat. "You're such a girl." Perie unclipped her seat belt, and it zipped back into place beside her left shoulder. She opened the passenger door and slid out of the vehicle, her heeled boots hitting the firm ground. "God, the

place is so overgrown. What were you thinking, Aunty Denise?” Perie grumbled as she stepped past the skip that had been delivered that morning and began to navigate towards the rickety steps.

As she gripped the crumbling railing, I placed my hand on her arm. “Careful. They don’t look safe.” I studied the brittle timber with my trained carpenter’s eye. “This will be my first job.”

“Building new stairs?” Perie guessed.

“Yup.” I held her arm tightly as we ascended to the verandah.

The house would have been beautiful in its heyday. The fretwork was outstanding, and the timber decking—although worn now—was made of high-quality ironbark. Whoever had originally built this place must have had a fair amount of money behind them.

I was a bit pissed at Perie’s aunty for letting the place get to this state. Sure, she’d spent the last six months of her life in Brisbane fighting ovarian cancer and had no children to take care of things, but this was more than six months’ worth of decay.

“Aunty Denise left me a dud.” Perie pouted.

“Don’t be like that,” I said, nudging her. “With you and me on the case, we’ll have this beauty glowing like she did in her heyday.”

“Hopefully, even better.” After appreciating the view across the paddocks for a few moments, Perie turned to face the front door. She peeked at it out of the corner of her eye. “Dare we go in?”

“Well, we came all this way.”

Perie dug a key out of her jeans pocket and pushed it into the old lock in the timber door. The door opened with a loud creak, and we stepped into the entryway. Perie shivered as the cool air of the house brushed her skin, and I saw goose bumps rise all over her.

I rubbed my hands rapidly along Perie's arms to warm her as we turned left into the lounge. With all the furniture gone, the room felt cavernous. We had auctioned it off when Denise relocated.

"This isn't too bad. It might be a bit sparse, but it's nothing a few licks of paint and the Perie Miller flair won't fix," I said with a proud grin.

Perie continued into the next room. I followed her and saw her staring at the large, unmade bed. Its frame was wrought iron, and the mattress had an obvious indentation, a powerful indication of the exact spot Denise slept. When she sniffled and blinked back tears, I immediately hugged her. She burrowed her face into my blue muscle shirt.

"I know it's been three months, but I still can't believe Denise is gone."

"It sucks, Per. But she clearly loved you and appreciated everything you did for her... taking her to appointments and helping her through her illness. This is her thank you to you. So, let's do her proud, hey?"

Perie nodded and mumbled, "Okay." She looked up at me. "I don't think I can sleep in here. Do you mind if we camp out somewhere else in the house?"

"Luckily for you, I've still got our swags in my ute from when we went camping. We can sleep on the lounge room floor."

Perie grinned. “Perfect.”

“Come on, we’ve still got the rest of the house to inspect.”

Perie wiped her tears away and followed me through the rest of the house. We covered three more dated bedrooms, the bathroom, and the laundry, containing dodgy fittings, loose tiles, and mildew. Then there were the tired kitchen, dining and family rooms, and finally, the back verandah, from which we could see the rickety old shed and overgrown garden.

“We’ve certainly got our work cut out for us,” Perie said.

“Three months, right? That’s our time frame?” I asked, flicking up three fingers.

Perie nodded. “November until the end of January. That’s the longest I can afford to take off work.”

“Me too,” I sighed and folded my arms. “We’ve got the entire summer. I reckon we can do it if we don’t fuck around.” When I realised what I had said, I backpedalled and dropped my voice to the low rumble I knew turned her on. “Let me rephrase that... with *minimal* fucking around. Because, Perie... we’re all alone in this big, old house in the middle of nowhere. You can guarantee there will be at least *some* fucking.”

A smart-arsed expression flashed across Perie’s face. “What makes you think that?”

“It’s our thing.” I shrugged. “We like to fuck on occasion.”

“You cocky bugger.” Perie laughed, but I knew her trying-not-to-ignore-her-desires laugh. “I’m going to get our stuff.”

I took off after her. “Watch those stairs.”

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*Perie*

We found a spot in the middle of the lounge room to put our swags down, and then I made coffee. The drive down from Brisbane was long, and we'd left early to arrive at a decent hour. Now that we were here, my body was beginning to wind down. I didn't want that. Flynn was right. We didn't have time to fuck around.

As I sipped the invigorating hot beverage, Flynn silently went through some of my notes and papers. I watched him for a few moments. "What are you thinking about?"

"I'm figuring out a plan of attack," Flynn responded.

"I think I want to turn Denise's room into a big, fancy, luxurious bathroom and make this the main bedroom. I want to make the entire house a mixture of modern and country rustic." The word vomit spilled out of my mouth so quickly it caused Flynn to raise his eyebrows at me. "What?"

"Duly noted. We should go into town and organise materials."

"Probably hire a mower man, too. I feel like we're camping out in the deep jungle."

"We also need food."

With a roll of my eyes, I flashed him a smirk and said, "Always thinking with your stomach."

"A guy's gotta keep his strength up." Flynn turned up one corner of his mouth slightly, making my insides shiver with

desire. Desire that I pushed down.

“I intend to stop by the bottle-o for some wine too. I think we can enjoy ourselves once a week, right?” I asked.

Flynn’s voice dropped an octave. “You know where wine leads us, Per.”

“Where’s that?” I averted my gaze and played with the tip of my boot.

Flynn suppressed a chuckle.

I always pretended I wasn’t attracted to him, but Flynn knew me well enough to know that wasn’t true. Our countless sexual encounters since puberty had attested to that fact. We even practiced kissing with each other, for Christ’s sake.

Flynn and I had been friends since birth. We were born around the same time and had even shared a room in Granite Ridge’s hospital back in 1987. We went to the same kindergarten, primary school, and high school and were inseparable growing up.

But at sixteen, we were stupid enough to allow someone to come between us, and we didn’t talk for four years. After drifting apart, we rediscovered each other in Brisbane while I was studying interior design at the Queensland University of Technology.

Now we were rock-solid again and had been for five years. Best friends for life, that was us. We loved each other more than anyone else and couldn’t bear to be apart, yet we were. We lived independent lives in houses twenty minutes away from each other. However, in a way, our lives were inexplicably intertwined, and so were our careers.

With the success of my interior design business, I’d been able to help Flynn find work when the bottom fell out of the



building industry. It was tricky for an independent, small-time builder like Flynn to stay afloat in those days with all the land leases and housing estates going up all over the place. So, with my help, Flynn rebranded himself as a specialist renovator I hired for jobs my clients wanted done. Flynn took care of the building side of things, then I came in and made their places look pretty.

Our arrangement worked well. We were both more than happy with how things were.

Flynn leaned over and placed a kiss beneath my jaw. “You know exactly where wine leads us.”

My breath hitched at the feel of his lips on my skin. Instead of giving in to him, I made another suggestion. “Let’s head into town.”

“Okay.” As we got to our feet, he said, “Food first.”

“Honestly.” I giggled, patting Flynn’s hard abs through his shirt. “No one would ever believe what you have under there, given your appetite.”

“That’s a secret I keep for special people.” Flynn winked suggestively at me.

I felt a blush covering my cheeks, so I spun away from him. “We’re going now.”

I took off towards the front of the house, but Flynn grabbed my arm and guided me to the back door. “Front stairs are off-limits for the foreseeable future.”

I quietly agreed, and we left via the back staircase.

# Chapter Two

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## Flynn

“Well, this is going to be interesting,” I mumbled as I drove into our old hometown. “I haven’t been home in years.”

“Are you nervous?” Perie asked.

“Sort of. As soon as we step out of this vehicle, I’ll be bombarded with questions. ‘Hey, Flynn, where have you been all this time?’ ‘You should come home more often.’ ‘How’s business?’”

Perie giggled. “That’s not as bad as what I get. ‘Hi, Perie. Nice to see you, dear. Oh, you haven’t settled down yet, I see.’”

“Settled down?” I flashed her a questioning frown.

“You know, marriage and babies. People in this town aren’t convinced you’ve succeeded as a woman until you’ve chained yourself to the kitchen sink, 1950s-style.” She took a breath. “But it will be even worse now with Aunty Denise’s passing. Everyone will want to give me their deepest sympathies and condolences and offer what they think are words of encouragement. They will think they are helping, but they’re not, and it will be shit, Flynn. Shit!” Tears began to well in Perie’s eyes.

I hated seeing Per upset. I quickly pulled into a parking space, turned to my friend, and squeezed her hands tightly. “It’s going to be alright, okay? Per, look at me.”

She managed to lift her eyes to mine as she blubbered.

“I know this will be hard, but you’ve got to tough it out for an hour, tops. I’m here with you. Remember that.”

Perie nodded. She brushed the tears from her face and checked herself in the mirror under the sun visor. I wasn’t sure why. She was gorgeous even when she was crying. “Okay, let’s get this over with then.”

Together, we made our way along the footpath to the town’s only supermarket. It began before we even entered the shop properly as we were pulling a shopping trolley out of the bay.

“Well, if it isn’t Perie Miller and Flynn Brewer.”

Perie and I froze and glanced knowingly at each other. Then, with a deep breath, we turned to face a woman in her fifties. We had known her all our lives, and she’d seen Perie and me at our best and worst.

“G’day, Mum,” I said with a quirk of my mouth.

Mum hugged me tightly. “Hello, darl. Did you just get in?”

Unable to deny the needs of the little boy inside me, I held Mum as a sense of warmth and familiarity washed through me. “Yep.” I kissed her cheek and stepped back.

Perie took my place without hesitation. “It’s good to see you, Brooke.”

“You, too, sweetie. I’m sorry about Denise.”

Perie went to answer, but I broke in, “Mum, leave it.”

Brooke studied Perie's sad face. "Right. It's probably too soon to talk about it. But if you need to, you know I'm all ears."

Perie nodded and averted her gaze.

"Mum," I repeated, sharper this time.

Brooke held up her hands in surrender and changed the subject. "Do you need help getting some groceries?"

"I think we can handle it."

Perie glared at me. "No. Brooke, please help us. It'll be great to catch up." She grabbed hold of Brooke and linked her arm through the older woman's.

"Oh. Well, if you're sure..."

"Absolutely. I heard Izzy had a baby recently?"

I meandered behind the two most important and complicated women in my life and tried to keep up with Perie's mood swings. She wasn't usually like this. All I could put it down to was grief, so I let it go.

"She did. Max is the most adorable little thing," Mum gushed. "Having a baby in the family again is wonderful."

By the time we made it around the supermarket twice and then to the check-outs, Perie and I were filled in on all of the Granite Ridge goings-on, and it almost felt like we'd never left.

"Will you both come around for a barbecue tonight?" Mum asked.

I hesitated, thinking of what I would have to face. Or, more accurately, *who*. "I don't know, Mum. We have a lot to do."

“Oh, come on. It’s your first day back. It’s one evening of family. Please, Flynn? Come and meet your new nephew.”

“Step-nephew,” I corrected her.

“That doesn’t matter. He’s still your family. I’m still your family, aren’t I? You haven’t been home in ages, and I’d like to have my son and his best friend over for a meal.” Brooke frowned at me. “Do I have to beg you?”

Confusion ran through me, and I squeezed the handlebar on the trolley. “No, I’m sorry, Mum. What time would you like us there?”

“Six o’clock seems like it would be perfect,” Brooke decided.

Perie grinned. “I can’t wait.”

With a look of triumph on her face, Mum said, “See you then.”

I sent my mother a tight-lipped smile and watched her turn and walk to her car with a significant bounce in her step.

Perie punched my arm hard. “What’s your problem?”

I was surprised at her somewhat violent outburst. “What do you mean?”

“You’re acting like you want nothing to do with your mum.”

“It’s not her. It’s the rest of them. I don’t like my stepfamily. I never have. You know what those big property owners are like, the bloody snobs. I’m the son of a lowly mechanic, and they own a three-thousand-acre winery, cattle, and sheep property. I’m the type of person who would work for them. They’ve always made me feel like I don’t fit in.”

Perie tossed a bag of toilet paper into the back of the Amarok. “Swallow some cement.”

I set a bag full of groceries safely in the back seat and glared at her. “What was that?”

“I said swallow some cement and harden the fuck up, Phlegm.”

I was surprised at Perie’s use of the old nickname schoolyard bullies used to use.

“Brooke is your mum, and you never come home to see her. It must hurt her so much to know that her son can’t be bothered with her just because you don’t like the family she’s chosen for herself. She’s your mum. She gave birth to you. She raised your arse, so show her some fucking respect,” Perie shouted.

“Whoa, Perie, calm down,” I demanded, throwing my hands out towards her.

“No, I won’t calm down. You know Aunty Denise was an outcast in my family. My mother’s family shunned her because she was a little bit out there, a little different. Everyone asked me why I bothered to help her. They couldn’t understand why I wanted to look after ‘crazy Aunty Denise.’ They couldn’t see the kind lady underneath the kookiness. She soldiered on, but I could tell it hurt her. She was so sweet, you know? Your mum’s sweet, Flynn. She deserves to be treated better, and for you to take an interest in her life. We’re going to her barbecue tonight, and we are going to have a great time. You got that?”

I stared at Perie as her small breasts heaved with every heavy breath she forced out, her anger colouring her ivory cheeks. There was no way I was going to argue with her. I didn’t bother reminding Perie how Mum treated my sister and

me after she left Dad. What would be the point? I ought to try to be the bigger person for once. Stuffing the cold food into the cooler, I grumbled, “Got it.”

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### *Perie*

Flynn and I headed to the industrial estate off the town’s bypass road when we finished at the supermarket. While Flynn searched for timber, I made my way across a narrow lane to the mower shop, hoping they knew someone I could hire to tame the overgrown yard.

I was a little embarrassed about my outburst at Flynn and wasn’t exactly sure where it had come from. But I truly hoped Flynn would give Brooke a chance to make things right with him.

As I pushed the glass door open and stepped inside, a blast of cool air hit my clammy skin, making me realise it was actually fairly warm, just not Brisbane warm. Granite Ridge was gloriously humidity-free for the most part, which would make our summer restorations much easier to handle.

A quick glance around the foyer revealed the front of the shop was abandoned, so I hit the bell on the counter. When no one turned up after a few minutes, I hit the bell again.

A tall, burly guy bowled through the back door, which appeared to lead out to the repair workshop. “Hey, sorry about the wait, ma’am. How can I help you?”

The voice was familiar, which shouldn’t have been a big deal in my tiny hometown. But I hadn’t heard this particular



voice since high school, and I'd never forgotten it. It sent shivers through my entire body. "Vaughn?"

The man stopped in his tracks. His dark brown eyes widened, and his handsome face was a picture of shock as he realised who was standing before him. "Perie Miller? No way!"

I leaned my hands on the bench and grinned. "Yes, way. You'd better get your arse around this counter and hug me."

Vaughn hung his head and chuckled before making his way around to me and pulling me into his arms. I laughed as he lifted my tiny frame off the ground and swung me about. His huge arms held me tight against his muscular body, and I struggled to fight the desire that shot down my spine as he buried his face into the crook of my neck, his full lips brushing against my skin. "I've missed you, Perie."

"Aw." I lifted my head off his shoulder and studied his face. His square, stubble-covered jaw, the full lips I remembered the feel of even after all these years, the eyes I always lost myself in. There was a sadness reflected in them now, and I wondered why. "It's good to see you," I said as he set me back on my feet.

Vaughn flashed a bashful smile. "Yeah?"

"Yes, it's been so long." I gently stepped out of his embrace. "What have you been up to?"

The smile faded somewhat. "Oh, not much. Helping Dad out." He indicated the shop.

"But you just got back from somewhere, right?"

Vaughn studied me carefully. "How do you know that?"

“I’ve been back and forth between here and Brisbane for the last year or so.” I did my best to act nonchalant.

“Oh yeah, your aunty. I heard about her.”

I lowered my eyes to the floor.

“I’m sorry. Were you close?”

“Yep.” The word caught in my throat. “It’s, um... why I’m here, actually. She left me her house, and I need a mower man. Do you know of someone I could hire?”

“Yeah, sure.” A slow smile curled its way onto Vaughn’s lips. “He’s standing right in front of you.”

My mouth fell open. “You?”

Vaughn chuckled. “Don’t look so surprised. I work in a mower shop. I think I can mow a lawn.”

“It’s three acres of jungle.” I knew he wouldn’t expect such a huge job, so I thought it was important that I warn him.

“So, I’ll bring the line trimmer as well.” He sent me an exaggerated wink.

“And maybe a hedge trimmer, if you have one,” I added.

Vaughn leaned in close. “I think I can handle it. Besides, I’m trying to start up a garden care business. You will be my first customer.”

I couldn’t believe it. Here I was talking to Vaughn Forester all these years later, after everything that happened, and we were falling straight back into flirt-mode. Not that I minded. Not one bit. The guy was sexier than ever. “Well, okay then. Could you come by tomorrow?”

“Yep. I’ll see you then,” Vaughn agreed.

Feeling like I'd already accomplished something significant, I practically skipped out of the mower shop and reached Flynn's vehicle as he stepped out of the timber store.

"You look happier," he observed. "Does that mean you're not angry with me anymore?"

I narrowed my hazel eyes. "Only if you behave tonight. No sulking. Promise?"

"I don't sulk," Flynn scoffed.

"You're sulking right now," I pointed out.

Flynn huffed, and all I could do was laugh.

I wrapped my arms around his arm in a weird kind of hug. "Let's go home and get ready for your mum's dinner."

# Chapter Three

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## Vaughn

**T**he spanner I was using slipped and dug into my finger, breaking the skin. “Ah, shit!” It was the second time I’d done something stupid, only this time, I hadn’t avoided injury.

“Oi, what’s wrong with you?” Dad demanded from the opposite bench, where he was pulling apart a whipper snipper. “You haven’t been able to concentrate for more than five minutes this afternoon.”

“I’m fine,” I lied as I threw the spanner to the cement floor and made my way to the first-aid kit.

I was distracted, alright. I hadn’t been able to stay on task ever since Perie Miller appeared in the shop. As soon as I recognised her, the feelings I had when we were an item back in high school resurfaced. The feelings we had before Flynn and I had—

“Fuck,” I cursed under my breath.

I’d ruined things with her and had regretted it ever since. I cleaned and covered the small wound I’d inflicted on myself, then shuffled back to the mower repair I was working on. Sinking heavily onto the wheeled stool, I got back to work, aggressively tinkering with the machine’s innards.

“Will you have that thing done before we close?” Dad asked.

“Yeah, Dad, easy. Give me another forty.”

“Righto.” The old man entered the air-conditioned office, sat at his desk, and opened up his old costings book.

With a sigh, I thought, not for the first time, that I needed to set the old mate up with a computer and internet connection. It would make everyone’s lives much easier, and repairs would be completed faster if he ordered things online and used a proper booking system. As I pondered ways to improve the business, I got caught up in my mind again while I worked.

“Hi, Vaughn.”

I glanced at the woman hanging over me and inwardly groaned. “G’day, Vicki.”

Vicki Simmons was the younger sister of Dad’s employee, Robert. She had taken a liking to me and wasn’t shy in her flirtations. The thing was, I didn’t feel the same way.

“Aren’t you going to finish up for the day? It’s getting late.” She twirled her platinum hair around her finger and cocked her head.

To avoid her flirtatious gaze, I glanced at the clock on the tin wall. Suddenly, it was close to five p.m. Where had the time gone? I turned back to the mower. “I’m pretty much done here. You lot go. I’ll close up.”

“I was hoping you might come to the pub for a drink.” Vicki tried to act as innocent as possible, but I knew there was nothing innocent about it.

“I can’t. I’ve got an early morning tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“I’ve got my first client for my yard maintenance business.” I closed the cover on the mower’s engine.

“Oh. Well, good for you. But one drink isn’t going to hurt,” Vicki whined with a pout.

The woman was annoying.

I got to my feet and stepped away from her. Making myself busy, I placed a tool back into the chest and wiped my hands on a cloth. “See you later, Vicki.”

She stormed out of the workshop with a huff, her denim shorts clinging to her round arse.

I cleaned up and headed out the doors half an hour later. I walked the four-point-six kilometres I took to and from work every day and headed home to my unit on the other side of the creek that ran through the southern side of town. In the driveway, I walked past the battered old Subaru that I almost never drove to get into the old art deco building. I set my backpack on its hook by the door, grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, and settled into my armchair.

Thoughts of Perie clouded my mind again. Why couldn’t I get her out of my head? Usually, all I could think about were the horrors I’d seen while I was on deployment in Afghanistan, but now Perie was drowning all that out. This might not be a good thing. I didn’t know if she was married or not. Did she have kids? Would she still be interested in me after all this time? Could she handle a returned soldier who was prone to brooding?

To drown out my thoughts, I turned on the television. When that didn’t work, I set aside my half-finished beer and went to my wardrobe. After changing into workout clothes, I made my way to my car and drove to the gym.

As I pulled into a car park, I caught a glimpse of a familiar woman. It was Perie again. My heart thudded in my chest as I took in the short, black dress and silver heels that showed off her shapely legs. She was still a slip of a thing. *Damn, she looked sexy.*

She laughed as she lifted a bottle of wine, waving it in the air triumphantly before climbing into a fancy new Volkswagen Amarok.

It couldn't be...

My mouth dropped open when I saw Flynn Brewer lean across to open the door for Perie.

We were all back in town for the first time in years. I wasn't sure the town was big enough for the three of us.

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*Flynn*

“Well, I guess this is it.” I turned the vehicle off the road and stopped by the open gate.

Perie glanced at me, then back down at the fancy, large, rendered house nestled among the green and brown paddocks. “Well, not quite. Not until we actually pull up in front of the house, go in, and say g'day.”

When I glared at her, she simply pursed her lips and shrugged.

“Just look at the place, would you? A traditional weatherboard farmhouse wasn't good enough for them? They had to have a fancy rendered house with a cemented driveway and landscaped gardens,” I grumped.



“Oi. I intend to landscape Denise’s gardens. What’s wrong with that?” Perie demanded.

Scrunching my nose at her, I asked, “Why don’t you put in something useful like a veggie garden?”

“Um, because I don’t plan to stay here permanently. It’ll be like my holiday house. Remember those lives we have back in Brisbane?” When I sighed, she said, “Take my hand.”

I looked down at her outstretched hand dubiously.

“Do it,” Perie ordered.

“Fine.” I dropped my hand into hers, and she wrapped her fingers around it.

“Now squeeze.”

What on earth was this all about?

“I want you to remember how this feels... how my hand feels in yours. Because tonight, even if I’m not physically holding your hand, I’m by your side. You’ve got my support, no matter what, but you need to promise me one thing.”

“What’s that?” I murmured, my voice growing husky as I enjoyed the sensation of her hand in mine.

“Please try to make your mother happy.”

After a moment, I reluctantly nodded. “Yeah, alright.”

Satisfied with my answer, Perie faced forwards in her seat once more. “Drive on.”

I steered the Amarak down the long, meandering dirt road to the house and parked under the single, fat-trunked palm tree. We got out of the car and surveyed the place. I automatically reached for Perie’s hand again. She gladly gave it to me as she tucked the bottle of wine under her arm.

She glanced at the nearby rows of vines along the edge of a small hill, and her steps faltered. “Seems kind of redundant to bring a bottle of wine to a vineyard, doesn’t it?”

“It’s the thought that counts,” I assured her.

“Hi, you two,” Brooke yelled as she stepped onto the front patio.

“Into the belly of the beast,” I grumbled through gritted teeth.

Perie elbowed me and whispered, “Be nice.”

When we reached my mother, I pulled her into a hug. “Hey, Mum.”

“Hello. Welcome.” She turned to my companion. “Perie.”

“Hi.” Perie smiled big as she received a cuddle as well.

“Come in.”

We were led past a study and formal lounge room into an open-plan kitchen and family area with a long, timber dining table situated between the kitchen and a brown suede lounge suite. Double sliding doors led to an outdoor area with a top-of-the-range outdoor kitchen. Brooke’s family was gathered around the outdoor timber setting.

My hand tightened around Perie’s in an almost crushing grip as we approached the group.

“Flynn,” my stepfather said by way of greeting.

“Chris.”

Sean, my stepbrother, held his hand out. “Hey, Flynn. Good to see you.”

Reluctantly, I dropped Perie’s hand to shake Sean’s. “Sean. Back from Europe, hey?”

Sean nodded. “For a few weeks. Had to come home and meet my new nephew.”

I nodded back. “Yeah, right.”

Sean buried his hands into his pockets. “Are you coming to the christening?”

“When’s that?”

Sean frowned. “Haven’t you received an invite?”

Why wasn’t I surprised I hadn’t gotten one? “No, mate.”

Sean shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Oh. Well, maybe it got lost in the mail.”

“Right.” My quiet laugh was humourless.

“Papa,” a little girl shouted as she launched herself at Sean and wrapped her arms around his legs. She mumbled something in French as she peered up at Perie and me with her large, expressive azure eyes.

Sean responded to her in kind and added, “Anglais, bébé.”

“Oui, Papa.”

Perie knelt down so she was on the little girl’s level. “Bonjour, mademoiselle. Je’ m’appelle Perie.”

“Bonjour. Je suis Margot,” the girl responded.

“Lovely to meet you!” Perie glanced up at Sean. “Sorry, that’s about the extent of my high school French retention.”

“Well done,” Sean praised.

Perie stroked the girl’s short brown hair. “How are you liking visiting your gran and grandpa?”

“Mémé and pépé,” Sean corrected.

Margot's face lit up as she nodded. "We went on the motorbike today to see cows and... mouton?" She glanced up at her dad.

"Sheep."

"Sheep."

"Wow, that sounds awesome, sweetie," Perie exclaimed in an over-exaggerated way.

"Come and meet the family." Sean waved Perie and me towards the outdoor dining table. "Flynn, Perie, this is my wife, Juliette, and our son, Olivier. He's two." Sean's chest puffed out ever so slightly with fatherly pride.

"Bonjour," Juliette said with a smile. Her hair was just like Margot's, but her eyes were the colour of chocolate, and, like Perie, she was a rake of a woman. "Lovely to meet you."

"How's the business going, Flynn?" Chris asked as he turned the food on the barbecue. "I heard you were doing it tough?"

With a shrug, I replied, "I was for a while there, but I came up with a new strategy, and now I'm back in the black again."

"Oh, right. What strategy was that, if you don't mind me asking?"

"He works with me," Perie piped up.

"I specialise in renovations now," I jumped back in quickly.

Perie took up the explanation. "Then I come in and help my clients bring their new space to life better than they'd imagined."

"Sounds like a good partnership," Sean said.

Brooke smiled. “Flynn and Perie have always had that. They were inseparable from birth.”

“You two make a beautiful couple,” Juliette gushed.

Perie blushed, and we glanced at each other uncomfortably.

As a sense of discomfort washed over me, I shifted in my chair and said, “Oh, we’re not a... *that*.”

“Aah, I understand. That is commonplace in France.”

“What is?” Perie asked.

“A relationship such as yours. How do you say...”

“Shag buddies,” Sean said, careful of his language around the little ones.

Brooke shrugged. “Part-time lovers?”

“That’s a Stevie Wonder song, isn’t it?” Chris asked.

“Certainly is,” Brooke replied.

My cheeks filled with warmth, and I knew I was blushing. All I wanted to do was hug Perie, but that would feed the gossip, wouldn’t it? Instead, I simply ran my hand along her back. “We’re just friends.”

“Who like to shag,” Sean insisted with a teasing smile.

Perie ducked her head as she bit back a laugh. It wasn’t as though we could argue the point—after all, it was true.

“He’s finally awake.”

A cacophony of coos filled the air as the beautiful, curvy Isobel Cooper stepped out onto the patio with her new baby in her arms and her handsome husband, Michael, by her side. His straight nose, perfect hair, high cheekbones, tidy, cream-

coloured capris, and Ralph Lauren polo shirt screamed upper crust, as did Izzy's dusky pink garden party dress and pearl drop earrings. It was like the royal family had arrived with the fanfare they garnered. As though they were presenting baby Max to the public.

The family parted like the Red Sea as the pair made their way to the table. Michael pulled a chair out for his wife so she could sit without disturbing her son, who was snuggled against her bosom.

It was certainly quite the display.

"Is he happier now, Izzy?" Brooke asked the redhead.

"He is, Mum," Izzy responded. "He desperately needed that nap."

The way Izzy so easily called Brooke 'Mum' made my proverbial hackles rise. I couldn't bring myself to call Chris 'Dad' because I already had one, and no matter how deadbeat he was, he had always tried his best. Ned Brewer may have been a drunk, but he never did anything bad to my mum or me. He simply didn't do *anything*, except fix cars and watch the racing channel all day. The drink killed him in the end. He died a year after I reconnected with Perie, and I was so grateful she went to the funeral with me. Afterwards, she comforted me in the best way possible. It was the first time we'd done anything more than oral.

"Hello, Flynn." Izzy's light voice wafted over to me.

"G'day, Iz."

"Nice to see you. It's been a while."

"So it has. Congrats on the little fella," I said with a forced smile.

“Thank you. He’s everything.”

As Isobel gazed down at her son, I was surprised when Perie teared up. I didn’t think she wanted children—they got in the way of her busy career. Was I wrong about that?

Isobel turned her attention back to me and indicated my arms. “I see you got some new tattoos.”

I lifted my arms as I glanced down at the new ink. “Yeah, I did. Ink therapy is great.”

“Is that all you’re going to get?” Her so-called curiosity was marred by a slight sound of disapproval in her tone.

“Dunno. I never say never.” I could feel my walls beginning to go up.

It was subtle, but there was certainly the slightest upturn of her nose. “Well, it certainly suits someone in your line of work.”

“In my line of work?” I repeated, challenging her.

“You know...” she smirked, “... a tradesman.”

“Right.” I dragged the word out as far as it would go. Then I gritted my teeth as I rubbed the back of my neck.

Perie cleared her throat and hastily held out her offering for the night. “So, I brought a bottle of wine to share.”

Everyone paused, and I swear I heard cicadas somewhere off in the trees.

Isobel sniggered. “You brought wine to a vineyard? A lot of thought went into that, huh?”

Perie deflated.

“It’s the thought that counts,” Mum told Perie with a smile that was too forced to feel natural.

“Sure,” Izzy said. “Even when not much thought’s gone into it at all, it still counts.”

My desire to go in to bat for Perie meant I needed to push down the need to punch the new mother hard. The only things stopping me from doing so were the innocent baby in her arms and the fact that I was an old-fashioned guy who didn’t hit women. It was my turn to squeeze Perie’s hand as my best friend glared daggers at Iz.

Chris pointed to the bottle. “That’s a Jacob’s Creek. It’s a good bottle of wine. Perhaps you should save it for a special occasion?”

Perie gritted her teeth as she looked at me, and I gave my head the slightest shake. If I was forced to play nice, Perie had to as well. In sync, the two of us pulled out a chair and sank into them. Perie hid the bottle of wine in her bag and sulked.

“Have you heard from Megan lately?” Mum asked me as she took the chair between Izzy and me at the end of the table.

The mention of my sister made me relax. “Not in a few weeks.”

“That’s more recently than me. What’s she up to? Where is she?”

“Last I heard, she was still in Bali.” I linked my long fingers together and sat back.

A pained look crossed Mum’s face. “I worry about her going to those places by herself. Your little sister is too brazen sometimes.”

“I think she’s brave,” Perie said. “But she’s not alone.”

Mum gasped, and her eyes lit up. “Has she met someone?”

“A guy from somewhere in the UK,” I informed her.



“Tell me about him.” An excited smile crossed Mum’s perfectly aged features.

“Aah... from what I remember, he...” I honestly didn’t remember much of what I’d been told.

“Oh, for goodness’ sake, Flynn.” Perie took over the details for me. “His name is Innes, and he’s a big, redheaded Scottish bloke who’s been backpacking around Asia. They met in the fair-trade artisan store she runs there.”

“What is she doing?” A confused frown crossed Mum’s face. Gee, she truly hadn’t spoken to Megan for a while if she didn’t even know about my sister’s project with the local women.

“She’s helping local women make some money from their wares,” I explained. “Chinese knock-offs have flooded the market. Megan decided to help the locals sort of fight back.”

Mum’s mouth hung open.

“That sounds incredible,” Juliette gushed.

“I have to get in touch with her. I’d love to see what she’s doing up there.” Mum fiddled with her gold bracelet. “Do you think she’d mind us visiting?”

“Not sure.” It was a slight fib. While I knew Megan would love to see Mum, I doubt she’d feel the same way if Chris went along, and Mum tended to do everything with Chris.

“Dinner is served,” Chris interrupted and set a dish of lobster tails in the centre of the table beside a garden salad and bread rolls. “Courtesy of Sean and Juliette. They brought them home fresh from the Gold Coast this morning.”

“First catch of the day,” Sean added as everyone took their places.

There was silence as everyone got stuck into the meal.

“C’est magnifique,” Juliette hummed through her mouthful.

“Yes, these are simply delicious, Sean. Thank you.” Mum placed a tail onto her plate and got stuck into it.

Sean glanced across from placing Margot in her booster seat. “Not a problem.”

“So, Megan is in Indonesia, Sean is visiting from Paris, Isobel is about to move to London with Michael, and you two are stuck in Brisbane. When are you going to venture out and see the world?” Chris asked. “There’s a lot out there that would probably inspire your interior design, Perie.”

“Says the man who still lives in Granite Ridge,” I mumbled.

“I’ve travelled a bit,” Perie interrupted, quickly talking over me.

I pointed my fork at her. “She did six months of uni in Auckland.”

“And an internship in Melbourne.”

“Going to Auckland is like going to Sydney.” Izzy giggled as she handed baby Max to her husband, who placed the newborn in his pram. “They’re different, but not that different. You should come and visit us in London or Paris sometime, perhaps find some inspiration there.”

“You would be most welcome,” Michael said.

“My inspiration is fine, thank you. Just because I haven’t been far doesn’t mean I don’t have a great imagination or ideas.” Perie became a little defensive. I knew she didn’t mean it, but knowing how passionate she was about her business, I

understood her need to protect her reputation. She'd spent so long building her company from the ground up before she'd even left university. "I don't have the time to travel. I have a business to run."

"It sounds fantastique. Australian design has always been at the forefront on the world stage. I think it is cutting-edge. Perie, you should be proud to be a successful businesswoman."

"I am. Thank you, Juliette."

Well, at least there was one decent person at this dinner aside from Mum.

"I'm glad you've done so well for yourself, Perie. You too, Flynn. I'm incredibly proud of all of you. I only wish you'd call me more often, Flynn. You and Megan. I miss you both very much," Mum admitted.

"At least you've got us." Isobel primly patted Brooke's hand. "Your grandson and I will keep you good company for as long as we can."

"He's not her grandson," I grumbled. Perie silently warned me to shut my mouth, but I railroaded her. "Megan and I aren't supposed to be replaceable. We're her *actual* kids."

"So are we," Izzy exclaimed.

"No, you're Chris' kids." I spun on my mother. "You want to know why Megan and I don't stay in contact? It's because we've never been good enough for this lot. Nothing's changed since we were teenagers."

"Hey, that's not true," Sean broke in. "I've always gone out of my way for you, Flynn."

He was full of shit, as always. “You might pretend to be a nice guy looking out for a mate, Sean, but whenever you’ve helped me in the past, it’s been because you didn’t want me to sully your family’s reputation.”

“Is that so wrong? You were trouble with a capital T when we were teenagers. I didn’t want you to drag the rest of us down with you.”

“Whatever happened to doing something for someone purely out of kindness with no benefit to yourself?” I questioned.

Mum reached over and patted my hand. “Let’s forget about that and enjoy this lovely meal instead.”

“Listen to your mum, Flynn,” Perie chided.

Closing my eyes, I took a deep breath. “Sorry.”

But Sean didn’t take the hint. “Let me understand what you’re saying, Flynn. Because I wanted to protect my family from your destructive ways, you think I was selfish?”

“He wasn’t that bad,” Perie said.

“He was a moody dickhead who did drugs and was always rude to Mum,” Sean countered, indicating Brooke.

Perie scoffed at Sean. “He was a teenage boy who smoked a bit of weed when his parents divorced. Everyone smoked weed, Sean. Even prissy Miss Izzy would partake on Friday afternoons with Eddie McDonough down behind the maintenance shed.”

Isobel gasped. “That’s not true!”

Perie rolled her eyes. “It was so obvious, Izzy.”

Isobel pouted.

“I’ve known Flynn since the day we were born in that cold, old maternity ward at the Granite Ridge Base Hospital. I saw him go through his parents’ break-up and saw him and Megan have to fend for themselves because Ned was pretty much useless. I can’t count the number of times they came to my place for dinner or when Flynn came to hang out because he didn’t feel comfortable in this house. He was moody and pissed off, and I’m sorry, Brooke, but he had every right to be.”

Mum sniffed back some tears as she stared into her dinner.

“I think we’d better be going,” I decided as I got to my feet.

“I think you might be right.” Chris’ scowl was deep and disapproving. “We don’t need the likes of you in this house.”

I bit down the cutting remark threatening to slip from my mouth as Perie and I left the property.

# Chapter Four

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## Flynn

**P**erie apologised profusely for her tirade all the way home, despite my assurances that it was fine. We made our way through the treacherous overgrowth of weeds to the safer back stairs, using the torch lights on our phones to guide us.

Perie moaned once again, “I can’t believe I fucking did that. After wanting nothing more than to make your mum happy, I’m the one who went off. Flynn, I’m so sorry.”

“Jeez, Perie, enough. I said it was fine.” I wished she’d chill out.

“But it’s not fine. I was such a bitch.” She thumped up the stairs behind me.

“No, you weren’t. You showed that sack of shit just what a pussy he really is. I was proud of you.” A big grin crossed my face.

“Sean’s not that bad. He’s just—”

“A pussy,” I finished for her as we stepped inside the house. I switched on the overhead light and was relieved when it worked.

“I upset your mum.”

The sound of the sadness in her voice made me go to her. I cupped her fallen face in my hands and made her meet my

gaze. “My mum made her choices a long time ago. She has to stop expecting everything to be happy as Larry because they’re not. Per, she abandoned Megan and me for a perfect, shiny family who lived in a perfect, shiny world that people like you and me will never be privileged enough to experience.”

“I refuse to believe that.” Perie arched her eyebrows in defiance. “Have you seen my Paddington house? Also, one day, I *will* find the time to get to Europe.”

I could imagine Perie fitting in well over there. “Will you take a broke old builder along with you?”

“You’re not broke,” Perie told me, pulling away.

“Not since you came to my rescue,” I responded with a wink.

Perie giggled as she set her bag on the old kitchen bench and pulled out the bottle of wine. “Well then, you old codger, will you join me for a glass of French champagne?”

With a frown, I pointed at the bottle. “Isn’t that the rejected bottle of Jacob’s Creek chardonnay?”

Perie slumped her shoulders. “Roll with me here, will you? It will have to do until we get to Paris one day. Preferably before your heart gives out.”

With a laugh, I jabbed my finger at her. “Promise me we won’t stay with Sean, the pussy.”

“I do solemnly vow.” Perie rested her hand over her heart. She cracked the wine open and took a long drink from the bottle before offering it to me. I slowly took it from her grasp and drank some. Perie pressed her body against mine, and my body responded. She hooked her arms around my shoulders



and began to sway with me. “Just so you know, I love your tattoos.”

I groaned when Perie nibbled my neck, and she felt my cock jerk in my pants. My hands fell to the swell of her arse. “Are we really doing this?”

Perie gulped at the husky tone of my voice, and I saw how it turned her on. “We are.”

“You’re sure you don’t want to save this for a special occasion?” I took another mouthful of wine.

“Positive.” Perie took another swig and set the bottle on the counter.

My eyes glinted with desire. “Not even twenty-four hours, hotness, and here we are. You and me, wanting each other.”

“It’s the wine,” Perie murmured.

“I’m sure it is,” I agreed as our lips fell upon each other.

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### *Perie*

When I slowly awoke the next morning, I realised I was curled up tight in my swag and Flynn’s arms and was one hundred percent naked. Sex with Flynn was becoming a much more common occurrence. It was stretching beyond the odd, casual hook-up into an any-excuse-is-a-good-excuse type of thing, and I wasn’t sure what that meant.

I lifted myself onto my elbows, and Flynn groaned, “Don’t get up yet.”

“Why not?”

“Because I like it in here.” Flynn tightened his arms around my waist, pulled me back down, and kissed my shoulder. “I like snuggling with you.”

That was new. I frowned at him over my shoulder. “Since when?”

“What do you mean?” Flynn seemed offended by my question.

“You don’t usually like to snuggle after we have sex,” I pointed out.

“Maybe I’m going soft in my old age.”

I snorted out a wry laugh. “Right. The ripe *old* age of twenty-five.”

“I’ve hit my mid-twenties. It’s serious business,” Flynn confirmed to the accompaniment of my laughter. “No, but in all seriousness... the way you stood up for me last night was epic, Per. I appreciate it.”

“You appreciate it so much that you’re snuggling with me in your senior years?” I teased.

“Yes, I am.”

“Well, I appreciate that.” I rolled onto my back and stared into his bright blue eyes.

The tip of Flynn’s nose brushed against mine as he muttered, “Do you?”

“Uh-huh,” I squeaked as a lump formed in my throat.

The way he looked at me, and leaned towards me, made me crave him again. Exhibit A for more and more frequent Perie-Flynn sexual encounters.

A loud motor echoed in from outside, interrupting the moment.

Flynn lifted his head with a frown. “What the hell is that?”

“Sounds like the mower man. Upsy-daisy, Flynn.” I pushed him out of the way and crawled out of the swag. I went to my suitcase and pulled out a pair of jeans, underwear, and a purple camisole top with Peruvian beading on the front. “Pop the kettle on while I’m in the shower, will you?”

Flynn was silent as I left the room.

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After my shower, I joined Flynn out on the front verandah with a cup of coffee in my hand. “Thanks for being a gentleman and making me a cuppa,” I teased. The deep scowl on his face made me pause. “What’s wrong?”

“Did you see the mower man?” Flynn asked.

“No, why?”

“Take a look at who it is.” He jerked his chin towards the tall, dark mountain of a man zooming around the yard on an old ride-on mower. The way his arm muscles flexed as he worked the gears got me hot under the collar as I remembered what it had felt like to be hugged by them the day before.

“Vaughn bloody Forester. Last I heard, he was serving overseas in the army,” Flynn muttered as he stared down at Vaughn.

“He was in the army?” I never knew that.

Flynn nodded. “He was apparently stationed in Afghanistan.”

Now I understood the sadness I'd seen reflected in Vaughn's eyes. He must have seen some awful things. "He didn't say."

Flynn turned to me. "You knew he was back?"

I nodded. "I hired him yesterday at the mower shop. He actually offered to do this."

"You knowingly hired him? After everything that—" Flynn gritted his teeth as anger flashed across his face. "After everything that happened, Perie, why would you do that?"

"Because we're adults now. That's behind us." Surely, everything that happened in high school was of zero importance now.

"I lost you for four years because of what happened between us," Flynn said through gritted teeth.

"That's not going to happen again." When he didn't appear convinced, I nudged him. "I promise nothing can come between us anymore. We're stuck with each other, Flynn."

Flynn pulled me into a quick, rough hug. He sang a few bars of "Never Tear Us Apart" by INXS.

"You are definitely no Michael Hutchence," I teased as I rolled my eyes.

"Hell no, I'm way sexier." Flynn's mouth quirked up into a cocky half-smile.

"You wish." I smacked his chest.

"I *know*. How else would you explain our continued sexual attraction to each other?"

My fucking goodness, he could be arrogant. I refused to stroke his ego. "Familiarity?"

“My irrepressible charm and sexy body,” Flynn stated with a lopsided smile.

“You know what would be *really* sexy?” I pressed my lips to the shell of Flynn’s ear. “That body in the shower.”

“Shower sex? Bring it on.”

“No, no.” I took a couple of steps away from him. “You in the shower, alone, getting ready for the day so we can start work on this baby.” I lifted my hand into the air and indicated the house. “She’s not going to restore herself.”

“I hate it when you’re right,” Flynn grumbled. “Alright. See you in a few.”

I watched Flynn walk inside. As soon as he was gone, I set my coffee mug aside, pulled on some work boots, and slowly descended the out-of-bounds front steps. I forced myself to get busy, tearing away at the weeds surrounding the verandah’s supports. Whenever Vaughn came close enough, I stopped to admire him. It had been nine years since the big bust-up that had caused the rift in the friendship between Flynn and me. Nine years since Vaughn and I were in a relationship. I’d dated guys since Vaughn, but no one could ever compare. It seemed he still affected me, even now.

So much for the whole *adult* theory.

Forcing my overthinking mind back onto the task at hand, I cursed when my hand came into contact with something unpleasant. Yanking my hand back to inspect the damage, I noticed a red mark on my palm, accompanied by a burning sensation unlike anything I’d ever felt. It wasn’t long before I was howling, the pain so bad that I fell to my knees as I tried to shake the sensation away. There was nothing I could do. Tears streamed down my face, and I barely noticed when

Vaughn raced over to find out what was happening. When he tried to take my hand, I jerked away from him.

“No! No, please don’t touch!”

“Perie, let me look. I need to look at it.” Vaughn’s dark-eyed gaze connected with my soft hazel eyes, full of pain and fear. Gently, he said, “Come on.”

Chewing on my bottom lip, I slowly extended my arm and lay my affected hand in his.

Vaughn looked at the bumps that had begun to rise on my skin. He turned to the weeds I’d been working in and cautiously parted them. “You grabbed a stinging nettle, Perie. But don’t worry, where there’s stinging nettle, there’s—”

“Dock weed,” I recalled, managing to get the words out through the pain.

Vaughn smiled. “Right. I’ll be right back.”

He searched for the natural remedy while I tried my hardest to calm down.

“Found some,” he called. He yanked some leaves out of the ground and rushed back to me. I couldn’t help but jump slightly when he took my hand again. “It’s okay, Perie-Berry —” he caught himself, “I mean, Perie. Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I mumbled. I watched Vaughn gently rub the sap from the leaves onto my irritated skin and was amazed at how much it lessened the pain.

“We’re not done yet. Do you have a first-aid kit in the house?”

“No.” I shook my head.

“I’ve got one in my car. Go and wash your hand with some warm, soapy water. You need to dislodge the hairy fibres stuck in your skin. I’ll be right up.”

My mouth dropped open. Vaughn was going to come into the house? The place looked like a squatter’s hideout. How embarrassing.

“Perie?”

I snapped out of it. “What?”

Vaughn narrowed his eyes at me. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Oh. Yeah, right.” I got to my feet and placed a foot on the first step of the front stairs. The whole staircase rattled under my slight weight.

“Jeez, careful there. That staircase doesn’t look safe. We don’t want you hurting anything else,” Vaughn said with a concerned frown. “See you in a minute.”

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*Vaughn*

The large first-aid kit was in the back of my car. It was a huge thing, filled with everything you could ever need, including a thermal blanket and freeze-dried trekking food. One of the key things I’d learned in the army was to always have a good supply of gear.

All I needed was the squeezey bottle of cortisone cream and a sticky patch, so I grabbed them and returned to the house. I steadily climbed the rickety stairs to the verandah and searched for Perie. This place was massive. Rundown, sure, but with some tender loving care, I knew it would shine again.

“Perie?” I called as I made my way down the entry hallway. “Where are you?”

I stopped in my tracks when a familiar blond-haired man stepped into the hallway.

Flynn Brewer.

As the two of us squared off, I tried to mask my reaction to him. I hadn’t seen Flynn since high school. The guy was fit as fuck and still had such a youthful appearance. The cockiness was there too.

I tightened my suddenly clammy hand around the sticky patch. “Hey, Flynn, I didn’t know you were back.” Okay, lying, but that worked for now.

“Likewise,” Flynn replied. “I thought you were in Afghanistan?”

“How did you know that?” I narrowed my eyes.

Flynn shrugged. “You know my mum. She likes a good bit of gossip. Seems you’re the hometown hero.”

The snigger that came out of my mouth was wry. “Not really, mate. I’m just the only bloke from town who was in the army. The oldies go a bit crazy over that.”

“Is that Vaughn?” Perie asked as she joined us in the corridor. “Did you find something?” She dug her nails into her palm.

“Don’t scratch it.” I dashed forwards and pulled her fingers away. “Here. This will do the trick.” I was hyperaware of Flynn’s blue-eyed gaze boring into me as I applied the cream to Perie’s sting.

“What happened?” Flynn asked.



“I got stung by a stinging nettle,” Perie answered.

“She was pulling weeds without gloves,” I said with a disapproving shake of my head.

“Perie!” Flynn let out a frustrated sigh. “Jeez, woman, we’re not even here a whole day, and you’re already being careless. How will we get through three months if you’re already hurting yourself?”

“Yeah, alright, I’m sorry. I’ll remember to break out the PPE next time,” Perie grumbled.

With a chuckle, I said, “Nothing’s changed between you two.”

I pretended not to notice the glance that passed between the two. Okay, so maybe something *had* changed between them. Were they a couple now? How long after their blowout did they find each other again? Oh, shit, were they married? To get some answers I wasn’t sure I wanted, I checked Perie’s fingers as I positioned the sticky dressing on her hand. No ring.

“All done.” I peeked at Flynn’s hands too, but I couldn’t see a thing since Flynn’s hands were buried in his pockets. “Did you say you’re both here for three months?”

“Yep. That’s how long we’ve got to restore this place.” Perie patted the wall.

“Three months? Is that all?”

“I’m afraid so. We’ve got jobs in Brisbane to get back to,” Flynn explained.

“Who’s helping you?”

“Aside from a plumber and electrician, no one,” Perie said.

“No one?” I couldn’t believe my ears. “You think you’ll have it done in three months?”

“It’s what we do,” Flynn retorted with a smirk.

“What do you do exactly?”

“I’m an interior designer, and he’s my contract builder.” Perie indicated Flynn. “We’ve worked together for a long time now.”

Of course, they had. Because no one kept Perie and Flynn apart. They were inexplicably connected. No matter what happened in life, whether they fought, said they hated each other or swore they’d never speak again, it never lasted. They needed one another. It took a long time for me to understand that, but age, wisdom, and distance had helped me come to terms with their bond.

“I’m glad you two resolved your differences,” I said sincerely. Their averted gazes were my cue to go. “I’ll get back to work.”

“Good idea,” Flynn replied in a snarky tone.

“Flynn!” Perie quietly snapped. She turned back to me. “Thank you, Vaughn.”

Perie’s cheeks flushed, and Flynn kept staring at me. The other man’s bright eyes had darkened. Whether they admitted it or not, they were still attracted to me. I felt the same way about them. Before things became more awkward than they already were, I left the building.

# Chapter Five

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## Flynn

**T**hankfully, Vaughn had taken the time to clear out the area under the house. The jungle that stood there only hours before was now stripped away, leaving a clear path for me to inspect the footings and the verandah's underside.

Thinking of Vaughn and seeing him again brought up feelings I'd rather leave dead and buried. They were the very things that forced Perie and me apart back in Year Twelve, and I didn't want that to happen again. A case of serious blue balls would be preferable to being without her. I was crazy about her.

Hanging my head and squeezing my eyes shut, I pushed those feelings down too. My chest felt like it was about to explode from all this repression, so I took my frustration out on the overhead decking boards, bashing my hand along them in search of weak spots. Given what it would cost to rebuild the entire verandah, I hoped I would only have to replace parts of it.

"There you are." Perie poked her head under the verandah from the spot she had taken up on the steps. "So, what's the verdict?"

I ducked my head as I stepped out from underneath. "Mostly good. It's weathered, but the beauty of ironbark is that

it stands the test of time.”

“I don’t understand why Denise would get an outdoor staircase built with pine,” Perie said with a shake of her head.

“It’s cheap, Per. Many people don’t think long-term, and she was probably on a budget. Don’t be mad at her.”

She fiddled with the dressing on her hand. “I’m not.”

I sat beside her and lightly traced my fingertip over her palm. “How’s it feeling?”

“Numb. Still a bit sore, but not as bad.” Perie glanced at me. She watched me play with her fingers for a few moments. “You were weird about Vaughn.”

“You weren’t,” I observed.

Perie continued to stare at my finger, tracing over her dressing. “No. I was excited to see him.”

“Were you?” I caught her gaze. “Is that why you hired him?”

Perie nodded. “I think I’d like to ask him to help us with this place.”

My mouth fell open in shock.

“It would be good to have an extra set of hands helping us out,” she pointed out.

“After everything that happened, you’re willing to let him back into our lives?” I questioned, concerned Perie’s emotions were getting in the way of logical thinking.

“It wasn’t his fault. Not his alone.”

Gritting my teeth, I glared at her. “Do you think it was my fault?”

“I think the fault lies with us all. We should’ve been honest with each other, and we weren’t.”

I laced my fingers through hers, desperately trying to hold back my feelings. But Perie was perceptive. “Like this. What’s happening here, Flynn? What is this between us?”

“I don’t know, Per,” I answered honestly. “All I know is my feelings for you are changing. If you want to ask Vaughn to help us, then do it. I’m fine with it.”

Perie studied me closely as though she wasn’t convinced. “Are you sure?”

“Positive,” I said with a nod.

Her hazel eyes searched my blue ones.

Leaning in closer to her, I whispered, “I promise.”

She angled her lips towards mine, and my heart pounded as our lips brushed together. We were interrupted when a truck pulled into the driveway.

“Timber’s here.” Hiding my frustration once more, I got to my feet and led the way towards the delivery truck, doing my best to ignore the wood inside my pants.

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### *Perie*

We spent the rest of the day rebuilding the front steps to the new specifications. I researched the house’s history and found pictures from the original owners. These showed the original staircase used before the plainer, more modern set had replaced it. I loved the landings placed halfway up the stairs,

allowing people to easily enter and exit horse carriages in the old days.

We were doing things somewhat backwards. Usually, renovations begin from the inside out. But a new set of front stairs was needed more than anything.

It was well after dark by the time we finished, and Flynn and I were exhausted. It didn't stop me from jumping up and down on the new landing like a nutter. "Feels sturdy enough."

Flynn laughed. "It's not going to topple underneath you, you wisp of a thing." He jumped with me. "I think my craftsmanship passes the test."

"I think so too. Does that mean we can go and chill out now?"

Flynn rested his large work-worn hands on his slim hips. "What did you have in mind?"

"It's Friday night. Let's go to the pub. Maybe they'll have a good live band," I suggested. Country pubs were a big drawcard at the end of a long working week.

Flynn wasn't so sure. "A *good* live band? This is Granite Ridge, not Brisbane. They'll probably be a bunch of hillbillies who've come down from the scrub for the first time in a month to sing twangy hick music."

"Don't be such a killjoy." I pouted. "Let's go have some drinks and food and maybe play a round of pool."

"The pub sounds like fun. Let's go and get ready."

As I trailed up the stairs behind him, I couldn't stop thinking once again about the way the dynamics between us were shifting.

We went our separate ways to freshen up, then Flynn drove us to the Commercial Hotel in the middle of town.

“Country rock!” I shouted over the din as we pushed our way into the packed pub. As the only source of entertainment for the town and surrounding properties, it was a hopping place on the weekends.

Flynn smirked at me. “No twangy hick music, then.”

Amusement danced in my eyes. “Are you disappointed?”

“Very. I have certain expectations, you know.”

We laughed, but I gulped as Flynn’s hand slid into mine. I enjoyed how his rough hands felt against mine, and I found myself hugging his arm as we squeezed through the crowd to the bar. It was getting to the point of me wanting any excuse to touch him. It was so strange.

He ordered a white wine for me and a Tooheys New beer for himself, and we turned to watch the band. We sang along to a few songs, danced, and laughed together while sharing a couple more drinks. Around an hour into the set, the band started a new number—a twangy country song. Flynn and I looked at each other in disgust.

“Well, that didn’t last long,” Flynn said.

“They’re melting my eardrums,” I quipped, plugging my fingers into my ears. “Why do they do this to us?”

“They probably knew we were in town. I’m off to take a leak,” Flynn shouted into her ear.

“Righto,” I responded as I watched him make his way to the toilets.

Pushing off the bar, I crossed the pub and went out to the beer garden. I released a sigh of relief when the glass door



swung shut behind me, blocking out the music that was a bit *too* country for me. I searched for a spare table, but by the looks of things, I was out of luck.

“Perie?”

His voice alone got me going. Drawing in a breath, I held it as I turned to see Vaughn rise from his chair. “Hi.”

“Hey,” I said on the release of said breath. As I stared up at the beautiful man before me, I hoped he couldn’t tell how much his presence affected me.

“It’s good to see you again. I mean, since this morning.” He chuckled. “I know it hasn’t been that long, but—”

Gosh, his rambling was adorable.

Vaughn cleared his throat and waved a hand in my direction. “How’s the sting?”

“It itches,” I whined and held up my dressed hand.

Vaughn flashed me a slight smile. “I’ll bet. Just remember not to scratch.”

“I’ll try.” I glanced around the beer garden again.

Vaughn cleared his throat. “Are you looking for somewhere to sit?”

“Yeah. But it might be wishful thinking. I forgot how packed this place gets on a Friday night.”

“You can join me.” Vaughn indicated the spare space opposite him.

Thinking about Flynn automatically made me hesitate. “You don’t mind?”

“Why would I mind?” Vaughn asked with a chuckle.

“Because I’m here with—”

“Flynn?” Vaughn finished for me. “Yeah, I figured. You two are still attached at the hip, I see.”

“Are not.” I sounded like a petulant kid.

“You always were. But I think it’s good you two made up. There’s something off-kilter in the universe if you and Flynn aren’t together.” So, Vaughn still knew us better than I remembered.

“We’re not *together*, together,” I assured him.

“You know what I mean. You two belong together.” Vaughn wriggled his head from side to side. “Even if it’s not *together*, together.”

Vaughn moved back to his table as I considered this statement. He gestured to the spare seats. “The offer still stands.”

After a moment, I took the seat opposite him. “Thanks.”

Vaughn folded his arms on the table, and we leaned towards one another.

Twisting my fingers together, I anxiously looked over at him and did my best to hide my attraction to him as I asked, “What did you get up to the rest of the day?”

“I helped Dad at the shop for a while, then went to the gym. What about you?” He slowly turned his glass of beer this way and that as his dark gaze held my own.

“I helped Flynn build a new set of front stairs.”

Vaughn baulked. “Already?”

“We don’t muck around,” I said, grinning proudly. “Flynn’s an excellent builder. He went through a tough time a

while back when he couldn't find work. But he rebranded, and since we decided to work together, everything is good again. It was nothing to do with a lack of ability and everything to do with the market."

"So, you decided to share a company?"

I shook my head. "No. Our companies are separate, but we outsource to each other."

"Smart thinking, Perie-Ber... Perie," Vaughn stammered

A smile fought its way onto my face, and I averted my gaze.

"I don't know why I keep calling you that," Vaughn muttered.

I did. "Old habits die hard."

Our eyes met again and burned into one another. Even after all this time, after everything that had happened, I wanted him so badly that it was hard to contain myself. Vaughn had always been a quiet guy who liked to help others and stepped in to stop shit from continuing if it started. A born protector and peacemaker. No wonder he had joined the army. What a perfect fit for him. It was what caused me to fall for him back then. Clearly, I still harboured those feelings for him.

Then there were my feelings for Flynn. That man was so much a part of me and always would be—Vaughn was right about that. What he didn't know was how our bond had progressed. How we were closer than ever. How we couldn't get enough of each other. Even now, at the mere thought of Flynn, need coursed through me, and an old confusion arose.

My desire for two men.

It first presented itself when I was younger, but most of the time, I managed to suppress my strange thoughts. Thoughts that I could have it all. But that was ridiculous. That wasn't how things worked, and it was pointless of me to ever entertain the idea that they could.

“Perie?”

With a slight shake of my head, I looked at Vaughn in a haze.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Where'd you go?”

“Oh. Sorry, did I zone out?”

“Yeah.” Vaughn laughed. “What were you thinking about?”

“It doesn't matter,” I said quickly as I rubbed my eyes.

“There you are.”

Flynn's voice made me start. Guilt washed over me as he made his way over to us, his third beer for the night in his hand. It looked like I'd be driving home.

“Did you ask him yet?” Flynn asked as he occupied the seat beside mine.

“Not yet.”

Vaughn spun the cardboard drink coaster in his hands. “Ask me what?”

“Perie was wondering if you could help us with the house.”

With a few ums and aahs and a questioning glance from Vaughn, I stammered, “I mean, you were pretty much spot on about the big job we have ahead of us, and I thought if you needed some work... well, I'd appreciate the extra hand. I'd

totally pay you, but I know you're working for your dad and starting up your mowing business, so if you don't have time, I completely understand."

Vaughn glanced at Flynn. "She's babbling."

"You know what that means," Flynn said with a smile.

"She really wants me to help," Vaughn observed with a deep, rumbling chuckle.

"Yes, she does," Flynn confirmed.

Why were they talking about me like I wasn't there?

"What do you want, Flynn?"

Vaughn's question was blunt, and it caused Flynn to stop with the beer halfway to his mouth. Flynn's eyes grew wide. "Aah, yeah. It can't hurt."

Vaughn nodded slowly. His mouth narrowed into a thin line before he answered, "Alright, then. When should I rock up?"

"Seven a.m. tomorrow?" Perie suggested.

Vaughn shook his head. "I have some yard maintenance bookings over the next couple of days, and I need to give Dad some notice."

"Monday, then?" Flynn queried.

"I'll be there," Vaughn replied with a nod.

Flynn attempted to make his posture appear as chilled as possible. But I knew it was his false bravado. "Are you sure it'll be alright with your dad?"

Vaughn smirked. "I'm sure it won't be. But I'm not officially his employee, so he'll have to deal with it."

“Whatever you get paid there, I’m willing to better it. I’ll make this worth your while,” I reassured.

“Perie, as long as you give me enough to cover my rent and bills, that’s all that matters. I’m not an extravagant man.” Vaughn’s voice dropped an octave as he spoke to me.

A small smile touched my lips as his deep voice did sexy things to my insides. “Fair enough.”

“I’m off for another drink.” Vaughn got to his feet. “Are you two good?”

“Yeah. I’m driving, and I’m cutting him off.” I jabbed her thumb in Flynn’s direction.

Flynn frowned. “Oi.”

Vaughn chuckled. “Righto. See you soon.”

Flynn and I stared at the tall, muscular man we both had the hots for as he strode to the glass door and disappeared inside the pub.

“Everything is going to be fine,” I mumbled, unable to pull my gaze away from the door even once Vaughn was out of sight.

“Yeah. Of course, it will be.” Flynn sounded exactly as convinced as I was.

Which was not at all.

# Chapter Six

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## Vaughn

“**H**ow’d you get on with your jobs this morning?” Dad asked when I returned to the shop after lunch.

“Easy enough,” I replied. “Two small lawns for a single mum and old Sam, then some gardening at the nursing home. Pretty straightforward after Perie’s big job the other day.”

“Are you charging enough? You don’t want to undercharge anyone. You need to think of your overhead.”

Resisting the urge to roll my eyes at my father, I answered him in a droll voice. “I’ve got it under control, Dad.”

Dad paused, a frown crossing his wrinkled face. “Wait. Did you say Perie?”

“Yep.”

“That Miller girl? Isn’t she some arty-farty person now?”

I sighed again. “She’s not arty-farty.”

“Doesn’t she do that house design stuff?” Dad queried.

“Interior design, yeah.” I was pretty proud of her, to be honest. I loved that she was a successful businesswoman.

“Arty-farty,” Dad confirmed.

“Okay, Dad.” That wasn’t the end of the discussion I needed to have with him, though. How would I break the news



that I couldn't help out around the shop as much anymore? What could I do other than simply come out with it? "I've been offered some work a little bit out of town, Dad."

"What kind of work?"

"A house restoration. I know it's a lot more than yard work, but I could use the money."

"Fair enough." Dad turned his back on me and busied himself with a push mower repair.

That was it? End of discussion? "Are you sure you'll be alright here without me?"

Dad turned back to me, that dour expression still on his face. "What do you think I did when you were deployed?"

Dad's callous words brought a stab of hurt. That was that, then. I clearly wasn't needed around these parts, which meant I was even more excited to help Perie. At least I knew she wanted me.

There was a spring in my step when I walked home later that afternoon. I was feeling more positive than I had in a long time. As I headed up my driveway, I dug my keys out of my pocket. Someone was lurking near the bush by the door. My hands curled into fists, and I stuck a key out between my fingers. The muscles in my body wound tight like springs then the person stepped forward. She pushed her dark, shoulder-length hair behind her ear and smiled up at me.

"Perie!" My body relaxed when I realised it was her, but my heart still raced at a hundred miles per hour. Fuck, she ought to be more careful. I could've done some proper damage to her.

"Hey, Vaughn." Perie pulled me into a hug, and the flowery smell of her hair wafted to my nose. "Sorry to drop in

unannounced, but you forgot something yesterday.”

I wanted to tighten my arms around her, but I did the respectful thing and pulled away. “What did I forget?”

“Your payment.”

I’d completely forgotten about my money on account of being too distracted by Perie and Flynn.

“How much do I owe you?” she asked as she pulled some cash from her purse.

It wasn’t right to simply take Perie’s money and see her on her way. I indicated my unit. “Would you like to come in?”

Perie nodded. “Okay.”

The shy smile and blush that crept across Perie’s face as I led her inside were precious. Perie’s eyes darted around the room immediately upon entry, from the painted brick walls to the threadbare carpet. The way she ran her hand over the couch and tapped her fingertips against the old Formica tabletop instantly revealed the interior designer inside her.

“It’s not much,” I admitted.

Perie pulled her hand back and flashed me a sheepish grin. “Sorry, it’s a bad habit. But I could do so much with this room.”

“What would you do?” I asked, my curiosity getting the better of me.

Perie paused and looked at me in surprise.

“Go on. Tell me,” I encouraged.

“I’d pull up the carpets and lay down some grey floating floors with underfloor heating. Then I’d put in a low-backed, white leather lounge and a small glass coffee table and tie it all

together with a brightly coloured shag rug. I'd redo the kitchen with light grey cabinets and a black splashback behind the stove and create a breakfast bar, so you wouldn't need to have such a tiny table cramped up against the wall there. A light colour palate would give the place the illusion of being bigger." Perie rattled everything off so easily, and her passion for her craft shone through in her voice, how her eyes lit up, and how animated she instantly became. Most importantly, her confidence shone through.

I sat on the arm of the lounge and smiled at her. "You know your stuff."

"I should hope so. My career depends on it," Perie responded, growing self-conscious again.

"I'm impressed."

Perie's hazel eyes grew wide. "Are you?"

"Yeah. If you can instantly walk into a room and envision improvements within seconds, I can't begin to imagine what you can do with an entire house. I'm looking forward to working with you."

A smile lit up Perie's face. "Thank you."

"Care to join me for a drink?" I asked, waving my hand at the refrigerator.

Perie narrowed her eyes playfully. "Only if you tell me how much I owe you for the gardening work."

Her perceptiveness of me trying to distract her made me chuckle. "A hundred dollars."

Perie couldn't believe her ears. "A hundred dollars?"

"Yep." I was massively undervaluing myself, but I wanted more from her than money. The idea of reacquainting myself

with her was digging into my brain, and I wanted to try my luck.

Scrunching up her mouth, Perie pulled out three fifty-dollar notes and put them in my hand.

I pulled one of the fifties off the pile and held it back out to her. “I believe I said a hundred.”

“I think that job was worth one-fifty,” Perie countered.

“I don’t think it was,” I told her with a shake of my head.

“You had a jungle to deal with, so I think I owe you more.”

“You don’t owe me anything, Perie.” It was me who owed her everything, honestly. The thought sobered my ambition. “Nothing more than a hundred bucks, anyway.”

Perie folded my hand over the money. “Call it a tip. You did an amazing job.”

The feel of her hand on mine gave me goose bumps. Her touch and lingering gaze were enough for me to accept the money. Perie’s bottom lip fell open as I brushed my thumb across her knuckles. “I’ll get those drinks,” I decided. I got to my feet and went to the refrigerator. With a question in my eyes, I held up a bottle of beer.

“That’ll do,” Perie said.

We sat at the tiny, two-person table, and I handed her the beer. An oppressive silence fell between us, and I flashed Perie a small smile as I sipped my beer. Where had the flirty, outgoing woman from the other day gone? This shyness was uncharacteristic of her. Mind you, if she could feel the sexual tension between us as much as I could, then I couldn’t exactly blame her. So, I decided to take the lead. “So, what’s it like being back?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Perie replied.

“I asked first.”

Perie shrugged. “It’s fine. Not much has changed, except there are a few more fancy food places. I haven’t been bombarded with sympathy shit, but that might be because I’ve been avoiding the main street for the most part.”

“I know what you mean. That happened to me when we lost my mum. Some people would smother me in empty words, and others would avoid me, but I could feel their pitying gazes.” Thinking of my mother left a painful pang in my chest.

Perie sighed and sent me a pitying gaze before quickly squeezing her eyes shut. “Sort of like I just did? I’m sorry.”

With a chuckle, I whispered, “Perie, open those pretties up, girl.”

She opened one of her eyes only a crack and squinted at me.

With a smile, I ducked my head to try to catch her gorgeous hazel orbs. “More.”

Perie slowly lifted her eyelids. Carefully, she said, “I heard about your mother’s cancer. Cancer’s a bitch.” I saw tears well up in Perie’s eyes, and she dropped her gaze to the tabletop.

I reached across the table and squeezed her hand.

Perie squeezed back and sniffled. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I murmured as I lifted my hand to brush the tears from her cheeks. I silently revelled when she leaned into my touch. My desire to protect her from the harms of the world surged within me. I’d carried a similar instinct in the army, but it had always been tenfold when it came to Perie.

Even after nine years apart, I'd do anything for this woman. Once again, I couldn't help but think that old habits died hard.

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*Perie*

The next Monday, I stood at the edge of the verandah as Vaughn arrived for his first day of work. I was a thousand shades of nervous about him being here again. In an effort to still my nerves, I'd spent all morning fidgeting and dashing about doing unnecessary things like tidying up what few belongings I'd brought with me.

"Hey, Vaughn." A stupid smile broke out despite my attempts to keep my cool.

Vaughn's returning grin was just as stupid. "Hi, Perie. The stairs look good. Sturdy."

When he bounced on them, I laughed. "I did that test too."

"Flynn's talented."

"He is...." I rested a hand on my hip and arched my eyebrows. "But so am I."

"I'm sure you are," he said, his deep voice causing my breath to hitch. After climbing the last few steps, he rested his hand against the railing within a millimetre of mine once again. His deep voice washed over me. "Where do we start?"

"W-What?" I muttered as though in the middle of a dream.

"Are we beginning with the inside of the house or the verandah? Just asking since you've got a brand-new set of entrance stairs."

“The inside first.” I backed onto the deck with Vaughn following closely. “The verandah only needs patching up. It’s a hundred-and-thirty-year-old ironbark.”

“Holy shit. Definitely something we should restore carefully.” Vaughn inspected the decking.

“I agree. Come in. I’ll give you the tour.”

He followed me through the entryway and took in the old worn walls. The wall panels were as sturdy as the verandah, making our restoration much easier.

“This is the lounge room. Through that door is the master bedroom, and the dining room is through there. I’m thinking of making that bedroom into a large master bathroom and making this room the master. Then we can use the dining, kitchen, and family room out here...” I led Vaughn to the dining room, “... as the main living area.”

“That would work well,” Vaughn agreed. “That room is northwest facing, so if you installed large windows, you’d capture the afternoon warmth and have a great view while you bathe. Assuming you like baths?”

I blushed as the thought of having a bath with *him* entered my mind unbidden. “I love them. I’m putting in a claw-foot bath. Early Settler stores have some beautiful ones.”

“There’s none of those here in Granite Ridge.”

“I know. That is why I ordered from a shop in Brisbane. I’m getting a heap of other stuff from them too.”

“You’ve got this completely planned right down to the last bolt, don’t you?” Vaughn seemed highly impressed with my organisational skills.

“I always do. Home design is my passion, Vaughn. I’ve built an entire career around it.” A career I loved more than nearly anything else in my life and I’d strived hard to achieve.

“Show me the rest.”

We crossed the family room to the bathroom, laundry, and the three other bedrooms. The mildew on the walls and the ugly fittings made Vaughn cringe, but I told him my specific ideas for each area. He liked the idea of each room having its own identity and style that integrated nicely into the home’s overall theme.

We ended the tour in front of my laptop, which sat on the kitchen bench. Opening up my design software, I pulled up an animated video. “This is what I hope the finished product will look like.”

We leaned in close to the screen. The 3D graphic moved from a version of the house sporting a navy-blue exterior, warm muted interiors with a mix of modern and character features, and everything updated.

“I’m pleased to see you’re not going the white-on-white route, Perie. I hate that.”

“That whole look is so overdone at the moment. Period homes were full of colour, and I wanted to make the period attributes the main feature of the home. This home needs to feel warm and welcoming, especially during the winter months.” I inwardly shivered. “Remember how bitterly cold this place gets?”

Vaughn laughed. “Absolutely. The desert is like that too, you know? During the day, it’ll get to forty degrees Celsius or more, then at night, it’ll drop way down below the twenties.”



My mouth dropped open. “What the fuck? How does your body even cope with that?”

“You acclimatise,” Vaughn responded with a shrug.

Sadness filled my body. “I’m sorry you had to go to Afghanistan.”

“Don’t be. I chose to serve.”

“Still, it isn’t something I could do. I’m a wuss.” I lowered my gaze to my feet.

“You’re not a wuss. You’re good at other things, that’s all. Like decorating houses,” Vaughn countered.

With a small smile, I said, “Would you like to help me rip out the carpet and vinyl?”

“Sure.” Vaughn took the pair of pliers I offered him, then looked around with a frown. “Where’s Flynn?”

“He went to town to get some supplies,” I answered. “It’s just you and me.”

“Right.”

My breathing became short again as Vaughn moved closer to me on our way to the lounge room. The warmth radiating from his body made me want to wrap my arms around him. I joined him in the corner, where we squatted. Vaughn dug the pliers into the threadbare cream material and yanked up. With a yelp, I fell back as his elbow connected with my face.

“Perie,” Vaughn exclaimed, spinning around to find me sprawled on my arse and holding my nose. “Are you alright?”

“You got me a beauty.” I tried to shrug it off because I knew it was an accident.

But Vaughn caught me blinking my eyes rapidly to disperse my tears. “Here, let me look.” His thumb gently brushed across the bridge of my nose, and my eyelids fluttered closed. Vaughn’s fingertips moved across my face until his hand cupped my cheek. “Does it hurt?”

“Yeah.” I nodded dumbly.

“First, you hurt your hand. Now I nearly knock you out. You’re not having much luck, are you?”

“I guess not. Luckily, you’re here to help.”

Vaughn flashed that beautiful smile, and suddenly, I was pressing my lips to his. It took him a moment, but Vaughn began to move his mouth against mine, and it didn’t take him long to tease my lips open with his tongue, deepening the kiss. He was everything I remembered and more—more mature and skilled. Vaughn’s arms made their way around my body, pulling me closer as I locked my arms around his neck. He nibbled my bottom lip, making me want him badly.

“Vaughn,” I whispered involuntarily.

His large hand moved into my hair, where his fingers tangled through my dark strands, and cupped the back of my head. He grabbed a handful of my hair and pulled my head back so he could devour my neck. A growl emanated from him as his teeth grazed my throat before his tongue soothed the sting.

My hands found their way to the hem of his shirt, and my fingertips brushed his sun-kissed skin. It was amazing to feel him after so long apart, and I wanted more. So much more.

The front door opened, and Flynn’s voice echoed through the house. “Hey, I’m back.”

I didn't want to let Vaughn go—he felt so good. But as Flynn bellowed my name, I hastily pulled myself away. Straightening my hair and clothing, I turned towards the door just as Flynn appeared. “Hey. We're tearing up the carpet.”

The sound of tearing carpet met my ears, indicating that Vaughn had gone back to work as though nothing had happened.

“Sweet. I've got a truckload of materials out there. A literal truckload,” Flynn said with a smile.

I got to my feet. “What did you buy?”

“Structural timber, decking oil, base coat, timber for a new shed, some garden soil. You know, *stuff*.”

“Flynn, some of that stuff could wait,” I told him.

“It's cheaper this way.”

“Okay, then. Come and help us.”

Flynn and I joined Vaughn on the floor and got to work on the carpet. “G'day, Vaughn,” Flynn muttered to our new helper.

“Flynn.” Vaughn sent him a curt nod.

“Thanks for coming to help.”

“No worries.”

The guys tore the carpet into strips, and I picked a couple up. As I carried them out of the room, I licked my lips, which still felt like they were pressed against Vaughn's. Surely, I was losing all sense. What was I doing kissing Vaughn like that? Obviously, my feelings for Vaughn hadn't changed since high school. I simply pushed them down and ignored them instead. But then, I'd ignored those types of emotions in general,

choosing to concentrate on my business over my love life. Those couple of flings I'd had were nothing. They didn't compare to Vaughn. Or, come to think of it, Flynn.

With a sigh, I stared up at the house. "Three months, Perie. Three months is all you have. Don't fuck around."

Flynn came down the stairs and made his way over to the skip. More strips of carpet joined those I brought out. "You alright, Perie? You look a bit flushed."

"Yeah, I'm alright," I said, rubbing my cheeks self-consciously.

Flynn nodded towards the house. "There's a good timber floor under that carpet. I think it will look great polished up."

My eyes lit up. "I can always put some rugs down."

Flynn chuckled. "Rugs-A-Million must love you."

"Flynn. The perfect rug pulls a room together." When I put my hands on my hips and gave him the stink eye, Flynn couldn't hold back his laugh. "Oh, fuck off, Flynn." I was emotional enough with what had just transpired between Vaughn and me and everything else that was going on in my life. I was feeling pretty bloody fragile.

"Perie." Flynn gathered me into his arms and said, "You know I'm just mucking around. Hey?" He frowned and cupped my cheek much in the way Vaughn had done.

"I know. I'm sorry, I'm all emotional right now." I slumped my shoulders and leaned into Flynn's cuddle.

"Are you thinking about Denise?" Flynn asked.

"Yeah, and us. Flynn, about us—" I lifted my head from his chest.

He gazed into my eyes as he caressed my back. “What about us?”

“Why am I feeling like this?” My fingers dug into the front of his T-shirt as the need to kiss him grew powerful.

“You’ll have to be more specific, Per. I can’t read your mind,” Flynn murmured.

“It doesn’t matter.” I drew in a deep breath and pulled away from him. “We have to get these floor coverings up by lunchtime.”

He called after me, to no avail. I couldn’t keep running from this, from them. Sooner or later, I would have to confront my growing feelings for Flynn. But then I would have to tell him about what occurred with Vaughn. The entire thing frightened me, and I didn’t know what to do about it.

# Chapter Seven

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## Vaughn

“I’ll see you both tomorrow.” My gaze lingered on Perie as I made my way to my beat-up Subaru. “I thoroughly enjoyed today.”

Perie nibbled her lower lip. Shit, that turned me on. I wanted to be the one to nibble that lip. She was sexy without even trying.

And the way Flynn was eyeing me... holy fuck.

Despite the tent in my pants, I managed to get in my car and drive away. I wanted both of those gorgeous people more than anything, so I tried to think of horrible things as I drove along the narrow back road to make my erection drop. But I couldn’t get Perie or Flynn off my mind.

It wasn’t until steam started pouring out from under the bonnet that I noticed my old Subaru struggling.

“Oh, shit! Fucking hell,” I cursed as I pulled off to the side of the road as far as I could.

Dragging my large frame out of the driver’s seat, I grabbed a towel from the back seat and moved to the front of the car. With a deep breath, I quickly whipped the bonnet up, careful not to burn myself. There was too much steam. I would have to wait for it to cool before I inspected the engine.

Pulling my phone from the pocket of my jeans, I checked for a signal. Unfortunately, out here in the sticks, there wasn't much hope. I could always lock up and make my way back to Perie's, but I wanted to see what the problem was first. Besides, I'd had enough sexual tension for one day.

So instead, I did the only thing I could think of. I grabbed an old copy of *National Geographic* from the glove box, settled into the driver's seat, and started reading. I had always appreciated the intelligent and honest journalism of this magazine. It never pussyfooted around important issues. After reading a story about Papua New Guinea, I moved towards the front of the car again. I took my time investigating the engine until I discovered the problem was a cracked radiator.

"Fuck!" I needed a tow. Slamming the bonnet closed, I stormed up the closest hill in search of a phone signal. After pushing my way through the overgrown grass, while keeping an eye out for snakes along the way, I eventually reached the top and held my phone in the air. I spun in a circle, marched this way and that. "Come on," I grumbled. "There's gotta be something."

Nope. Not a single bloody bar. With a huff, I slumped against a tree. What the fuck else could go wrong? Resisting the urge to throw my phone into the undergrowth, I instead tucked the useless thing back into my jeans and made my way back to the vehicle. When I saw Flynn bent over the engine, I stopped in my tracks. Where the heck had he come from?

With a scowl, I snapped, "What are you doing here?"

"I was on my way to get some firewood from a neighbour when I saw your car. I thought I'd try to figure out what the issue was," Flynn replied.

"I know what the problem is."



“You do?”

“I’ve got a cracked radiator. I went up the hill to call for a tow, but there’s no signal out here.” My scowl deepened when Flynn kept fiddling with the hoses. “Don’t do that. It’s not the hose.”

“Just checking.”

“I told you, it’s the radiator.” I snatched Flynn’s hand away from the hose before he could stuff the vehicle up further. My large hand wrapped around Flynn’s wrist, and I pulled him away. But, for some reason, I didn’t release him. I realised I didn’t want to.

Flynn’s crystal eyes pierced mine. “I only want to help.”

“I don’t need your help,” I growled, but I still didn’t let Flynn go.

Flynn’s gaze travelled to my pants. “Are you sure about that?”

“You’ve been an arrogant dickhead to me all day.” Finally, I tossed Flynn’s wrist out of my hand, feeling beyond annoyed with him.

“And you’ve been a brooding bastard,” Flynn threw back.

My chest rose and fell as my breathing quickened. Flynn Brewer was still a smart-arse and a sexy son of a bitch, and he played into both descriptions easily. Gritting my teeth, I fisted the front of Flynn’s green and blue Rip Curl T-shirt. I wasn’t sure whether I wanted to throttle Flynn or...

Flynn pushed forwards, his lips finding mine. My hands fell to Flynn’s arse, and I pulled him flush against me. I moaned when my hard cock bashed against Flynn’s. Flynn spun me around so I was leaning back against the rim of the

bonnet, and my arse dug into the engine. But I wasn't going to let Flynn be so pushy, so I grabbed him again and lifted him off the ground. I drove him backwards until we smashed into a stringybark gum. Our tongues tangoed. I was vaguely aware of the pressure in my pants being relieved, then hissed as Flynn's hand wrapped around my cock.

"Fuck," I moaned as Flynn rubbed and tugged the length of my shaft.

"You like that, don't you?"

*Wasn't it obvious?*

I opened Flynn's khakis and returned the favour. We stared into one another's eyes as we jerked each other off.

Flynn's fingers dug into my shoulder as his hips began to dry hump my hand. "Holy fuck. Yeah, jerk me off. Oh!" His eyes rolled back as his head tipped back against the tree.

"Oh, I'm gonna come," I groaned.

"Yeah," Flynn agreed.

I stiffened in Flynn's hand and released myself.

Flynn followed suit. "Yes. Fuck, yes," he moaned.

Fighting to catch my breath, I stared down at the mess we'd made.

Flynn pulled me into another passionate kiss. "I know you've wanted that all day. I couldn't resist any longer."

"Is that why you chased after me?" I asked, eyeing off the blond man.

Flynn grinned. "No. I was honestly going for firewood."

I dug out the cloth from behind my belt and wiped myself off before tucking my spent cock back into my jeans.

Flynn pushed off the tree, fixed himself up, and then gestured to his ute. “Jump in. I’ll give you a lift. You can call for help from the house.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” I countered.

“Why not?”

“Because I want to do more with you.” It was a confession I wasn’t comfortable making, but it was true. When Flynn flashed his fucking cocky smirk, I took a deep breath. “The thing is, I want Perie too. I’m still crazy about that woman, and I don’t want to come between the two of you. You remember what happened last time.”

The smile faded from Flynn’s face. “Crystal clear. It was four years of hell without her.”

“Case in point.”

Flynn huffed. “Well, it’s bloody stupid for you to hang out here in the middle of nowhere. Come back to the house. I promise to control myself.”

“I’m not sure I can. I almost had sex with Perie this morning. If you hadn’t walked in...” I shook my head at myself as my body remembered how amazing it was kissing Perie again after so long.

Flynn frowned. “When this morning?”

I avoided Flynn’s question. “I still have strong feelings for both of you. I don’t trust myself around either of you.”

“So, you’d rather sleep in your car on the side of a country road? Isn’t that how crazy murders happen?”

My laugh was dark and humourless. “I’d like to see them try.”

Flynn shrugged. “Suit yourself, Vaughn. I need to get firewood.”

My stubbornness warred with my desire to follow as I watched Flynn walk to his Amarok. I glanced at my useless car—it wasn’t going anywhere in a hurry—then turned back to Flynn. The other guy was right. It was stupid to stay abandoned out here in the middle of nowhere. Making up my mind, I followed him to the Amarok, pulled the passenger door open, and climbed in. “I can’t promise to keep my hands off Perie,” I warned as I did up my seat belt.

Flynn pulled onto the road. “I don’t keep my hands off Perie.”

“You mean you and her—”

“We’re off and on. Nothing official.”

I let this information sink in. “Then what was this? If you’re with Perie, why did you get off with me?”

Flynn sighed. “I’m not *with* Perie, and I can’t seem to keep my hands off you, either.” He took hold of my hand and laced our fingers together.

“You’ll have to tell her,” I replied as my heart pounded.

“No question.” Flynn planted a kiss on my lips and teased my mouth with the tip of his tongue.

After a short moment, I thought better of it and pulled back abruptly. “No more. Not until we talk to Perie.”

“Right.” Flynn took a right turn onto a different road.

I pressed up against the door and stared out the window, wondering exactly what we would tell Perie.

# Chapter Eight

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## Perie

**D**ismantling the old kitchen was hard work, and every muscle in my body ached. With Vaughn gone home for the night and Flynn off buying firewood from the neighbours, I eventually began to feel isolated. I wasn't used to such silence and pitch-black darkness. Growing up, I'd always been a townie, always had neighbours and a streetlight outside my bedroom window. I wished Flynn would hurry back.

Once I'd gathered all the bits and pieces into a pile, I collected an armload and trudged downstairs to the skip. As I tossed away the junk, I noticed a vehicle turn into the driveway and held my breath. It was Flynn. It must've been. Who else would be visiting at this time of the night? This seven-thirty time slot? Okay, not so late, but still.

But it wasn't Flynn's Amarak, nor was it Vaughn's beat-up old Subaru. Fear crawled through me, and I ducked underneath the verandah and hid behind the new set of stairs. A Land Cruiser pulled up in Flynn's spot, and a long leg clad in canvas pants stretched out the door. A long, lithe body followed, but from my hiding place, all I could see was the silhouette of a man. God, I wished I could race upstairs and quickly lock the doors, but fear glued me to the spot. Fear that the stranger would see me.

In desperation, I tried to quiet my heavy breathing, and when the man walked towards the stairs, I backed further under the house. Peering up between the gaps in the decking, I kept the feet in my line of sight as best I could.

“Hello?”

The man’s voice travelled to my ears, and I paused, hoping he would speak again.

“Anyone home?”

Another vehicle pulled up, and I sighed with relief when I recognised Flynn returning with the load of firewood for the bonfire we’d randomly decided to have. I was even more relieved when I saw Vaughn accompanying him. I didn’t bother to wonder what Vaughn was doing back. I was just glad he was. No unwelcome intruder would mess with the towering ex-soldier!

“Who’s here?” I heard Vaughn ask.

Flynn’s handsome face contorted into a frown. “Dunno.”

I snuck forwards as quickly and quietly as possible as the pair reached the steps. “Vaughn,” I hissed.

The guys glanced at me.

Ducking his head as he stepped beneath the verandah, Vaughn moved closer to me. “Hey. What are you doing under here?”

I hurriedly pressed a finger to my lips. Vaughn noticed my fear and grabbed me immediately. “There’s someone here, and he’ll hear you.”

“Who is it?” Flynn asked.

“How should I know? He showed up out of nowhere.” I shivered, and Vaughn rubbed my shoulders. “Vaughn, go up there and scare him.”

Vaughn pulled back in surprise. “What?”

“You know, with your big muscles and military training,” I explained.

“What are you talking about?” Vaughn shook his head in exasperation.

The footsteps came back. “Is someone down there?”

With a gasp, I shooed the military man, flapping my hands incessantly.

Vaughn sighed and glanced at Flynn. “Stay with her.”

“I’m coming with you,” Flynn argued.

“No, stay put,” Vaughn hissed.

We heard the stranger descend the stairs again, and Vaughn quickly met him. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah, I’m looking for Perie,” the man responded.

This time, I heard the voice more clearly, and realisation finally dawned on me. “Wait a minute... I know that voice.”

Flynn looked down at me. “It does sound familiar.”

“May I ask who you are?” Vaughn demanded.

The two men stared each other down. “I’m her—”

“Dad?” I dashed up the steps to the landing. “Is that you?”

“Holy shit balls.” Flynn and I took in the sinewy, wrinkled old man in front of us. Time hadn’t been kind to my father. His skin was tanned and leathery from the sun.



Jack Miller had never been a big part of my life since he travelled extensively across the country chasing shearing and farm work. My mother, Mary, juggled her job as a nurse with raising me as a single mother, more or less. Both of my parents were unfaithful. In their case, absence did not make the heart grow fonder. Despite their flaws, though, I loved them both to bits. Still, I never had any misconceptions about them being perfect, unlike most children who were raised to believe their parents' shit didn't stink.

"Hi, Dad," I said as I lunged forwards and threw my arms around the old man.

"Hi, Miss P," Jack replied. "How are you?"

I leaned back so I could look up into his face. "Where have you been, and what are you doing here?"

"I just got back from Moree and heard you were in town." He lifted his gaze to the house. "Denise's old place, hey?"

"Yeah." My reply was demure as I thought about the aunt only I loved. "Dad, you remember Flynn and Vaughn?" I turned to the two younger men.

"Fellas." Jack shook both men's hands.

"You gave Perie quite a fright, mate," Flynn said.

"Sorry about the intrusion. I meant nothing by it."

"It's alright, Dad. Would you like to stay for dinner?" As though to make sure he was real, I grabbed his arm.

"That sounds nice. You don't mind?"

"Not at all." With a shake of my head, I led him into the house.

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*Flynn*

Perie was perched on the edge of the verandah, peeling vegetables over a bowl in her lap. Every now and then, she glanced in the direction of her dad and Vaughn. They were getting the fire started and were getting along alright. As much as Per was happy to see Jack, history showed he never stuck around for long. Though she tried to hide behind a smile, I knew Jack's nomadic life hurt her. Lowering myself down behind Perie, I slid my legs forwards on either side of her body and rested my hands on her shoulders. "Hey, Per."

She smiled up at me and rested her head against my shoulder. "Hi."

Our legs dangled over the edge of the verandah and eventually linked together. "You need a hand?"

"Nuh-uh." Perie shook her head. "But you can hang out with me if you want."

"I'd like that." I picked a bean out of the bowl and bit into it with a crisp crunch. "What's it like seeing him again?"

"It's good." Perie couldn't disguise the tentative tone in her voice.

"But?"

"But it's Dad. We both know what he's like." With a shrug, she flashed him a half-smile.

Locking my elbow around her neck, I pulled her back against me and planted a sloppy kiss on her forehead. "You know I'll never do that to you again, don't you?"

“I know.” Perie lowered the peeler and the carrot into the bowl and closed her eyes. Strange new feelings towards her took hold of me once again. I breathed in her scent while she turned into me and lightly brushed her lips over my collarbone.

My breath hitched. “What are you doing, Per?”

“I don’t know. I never know anymore, at least not when it comes to you.” She pulled away, and there was a guilty glint in her hazel eyes. “Sorry. I shouldn’t be starting anything in front of Dad.”

The lack of a mention of Vaughn in that sentence didn’t go unnoticed. While I didn’t entirely ignore it, I did feign indifference. “These’ll taste good on the fire,” I said as I picked up the carrot and peeler and finished it for her.

“Yep,” Perie agreed.

“Up you get.” I got to my feet and offered my hand to Perie.

Perie let me lead her down to the backyard just as Vaughn and her father put some lamb chops on to cook. My mouth began to water at the thought of wood-fired lamb and vegetables. Nothing could be better. Once the food was on, we sat on the grass together, beers in hand.

“How long are you in town for, Dad?” Perie asked.

“Just for the night, sweetheart. I’ve got a job up in Roma for a month helping a mate get some camels ready for the overseas market. It’s becoming a big business, and the fewer camels out there, the better.” Jack waved his hand in the general direction of the Red Centre.

“The feral population is out of control up there,” Vaughn recalled as he lifted his beer to his mouth.

“A few people are starting to farm them now. There’s a big market for them in the Middle East and a fair bit of money in it, too,” Jack continued.

“Roma will be a change for you, won’t it?” I asked.

“No, not at all. I’ve been way up to the Top End a few times now. Done all sorts of things.”

“You can’t even stay for a couple of days?” The disappointment in Perie’s voice was subtle, but I heard it and ached for her.

Jack shook his head. “I wish I could, but Brett and I are heading out tomorrow night. If I get an early start, I should be up there around lunchtime.”

“Oh, right.” Perie nodded nonchalantly and tried to hide the hurt expression on her face.

I narrowed my eyes at the old man. “Can’t you tell this Brett you’ve been delayed? That you need to spend time with your daughter?”

“I can’t, mate. It’s good money.”

“You haven’t seen Perie for years,” I exclaimed.

Shock registered on Vaughn’s face. “How many years?”

“Guys, it’s fine. Dad made a promise to a man. I can’t expect him to simply drop everything,” Perie interrupted.

“Thanks, Miss P. I knew you’d understand.”

Perie chewed the inside of her cheek. When the tears threatened to spill down her cheeks, she excused herself. “I forgot to get some plates. Silly me.”

She pushed herself up and raced off.

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*Vaughn*

Leaving Flynn to have a go at her flighty father, I dashed after Perie and caught her by the arm before she could race into the house. “No. Vaughn, stop—” She squeezed her eyes shut in an attempt to stop her tears.

“How long has it been since you’ve seen him?” I jerked my chin towards Jack.

Perie sniffled. “Five years.”

My mouth fell open. “Five years?”

“The one and only time he came to Brisbane. He avoids cities like the plague. He says they do his head in.”

I couldn’t handle cities, either, but if I had a daughter in the picture, I reckoned I’d damn well deal with my issues. “What a bullshit excuse.”

“I guess so. But there’s no changing his mind. Dad’s a stubborn old coot, and he always has been. Mum could never get him to stay in our lives long, and she eventually got sick of that, so she left him.” Perie pushed her hair behind her ear and stared at the grass beneath her boots.

I gently touched my fingertips to her chin and angled her gaze back up towards mine. “Where’s your mum now?”

“England. She’s doing this nursing exchange thing. She was only supposed to be gone a year, but she met a man, and I don’t know when or *if* she’ll ever—” Perie let out a strangled sob and rolled her eyes. “God, I must look like such a needy idiot. But it was always me, Mum, and Flynn, you know?”

“I get it. You’re feeling abandoned,” I observed.

“I clung to Aunty Denise. I know I did. Probably too hard, but I needed a mother figure, and she was there. She filled the spot willingly, and we became so close in the end. And now that she’s gone, sometimes I feel so alone,” Perie confessed.

“Perie, you’re not alone. Flynn sticks to you like Velcro.”

Perie managed to laugh through her tears. It was a truth that had existed for their entire lives.

“I want to be like that, too,” I whispered, cupping her cheek. She closed her eyes as my thumb traced her lip, and I brought my other hand up to cup the other side of her face. “I feel like I’ve never been away from you, Perie-Berry. Like nothing ever changed.”

Perie stroked my stubbly jaw, and I enjoyed the softness of her palm. “I wish it hadn’t. No one’s ever come close to you, Vaughn.”

This time my own eyes closed as I rested my forehead against hers. I begged myself to stay in control.

“Except maybe one,” she admitted.

“Flynn.”

“We have sex a lot. It’s not new, but lately, something has changed.”

“You’re in love with him.” Based on her gobsmacked expression, I added, “I can tell by how you are around each other. He loves you too. I think I’m intruding.”

Perie shook her head, her eyes widening into saucers. “No, Vaughn, I... I want you—”

She what?

“Here,” she quickly finished, “I want you here.”

“Perie.”

Although my body screamed in protest, I stepped away from her as Flynn joined us.

He squeezed her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

Perie took a deep breath and sent him a reluctant nod.

“I know it’s not fair, and it’s not easy, but your dad’s only here for a night. Come and have dinner with him,” Flynn suggested.

Perie puffed her cheeks out. “I have to get plates.”

“I’ll get the plates. You go and freshen up.” Flynn brushed his thumb across Perie’s cheek and wiped away a lingering tear.

Perie’s gaze flitted between us. Being in the presence of them both was becoming more confusing for me. But at that moment, I could also admit how comfortable I was. Two feelings that ought to have contradicted each other seemed to melt easily together, and I wasn’t sure what to think. One thing was certain, though—the three of us would have to sit down and have a serious discussion. I didn’t want a repeat of Year Twelve. I didn’t want to betray Perie again and didn’t want to lose either of them.

# Chapter Nine

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## Perie

**D**inner was a difficult affair. The conversation was generally one-sided, filled with nothing other than Jack's adventures. I found that I had little in common with my wayward father. His stories were wild and fantastic, and I'd found them wondrous as a child. But now, all I heard were the stories of a man who had never found his place in life.

Jack Miller was lost, eternally lost. He was a man who would never stay put because he was a man who could never fully commit. Not to anything or anyone.

*Remind you of anyone?*

I glanced at Vaughn, my high school sweetheart, the boy I couldn't get over, the boy I gave up on much too easily. Instead of dealing with the situation, I ran away.

*The same happened with Flynn, too,* I thought, as my gaze flitted to my hot, blond friend. I'd been stringing him along our entire lives without admitting my true feelings for him.

I was Jack's daughter, alright.

Gnawing on the bone of a lamb chop, I focused on tearing every last scrap of meat off with my teeth. I was going loopy, sitting here squirming internally while Dad prattled on and on.

Once the bone was clean, I threw it into the fire with some force. “Well, as fun as this has been, I’m about ready for bed. We’ve got a big day tomorrow. I want to rip that bedroom wall out to make way for the windows.”

“Which bedroom? Denise’s?” Jack asked, leaning forwards on his elbows.

“Yep. I’m turning it into a bathroom.”

“It’ll be a bloody huge bathroom.” Jack scoffed.

“That’s the plan. There will be a claw-foot bath, a fireplace, and under-tile heating. It’ll be magical.” I smiled dreamily at Flynn and Vaughn but shifted uneasily when they sent me their own smiles. My body shivered as sudden thoughts of sharing the bathroom with them entered my mind.

“Where are you sleeping, Dad?” I asked as I got to my feet.

“I’ve got a swag in the back of my ute.” Jack jabbed his thumb in the direction of his vehicle.

“Good to hear. Goodnight.” The coolness in my tone was unavoidable at this point.

“ ’Night, darl.”

Tiredly, I climbed the stairs and took myself to the old bathroom for a shower. Standing under the spray, I allowed the hot water to wash the tension from my body. It massaged my muscles and cleaned away the grime from the day’s work. When I stepped out of the stall, I realised I’d come in without thinking to bring my towels and pyjamas with me. Normally, I wouldn’t care about parading around nude if it was only Flynn about. But with Dad and Vaughn in the vicinity, things were different.

Opening the door a crack, I listened for sounds of nearby activity. Hearing nothing, I took a tentative step out of the bathroom. And took another. Then another. Then I broke into a jog and dashed into the living room, soon-to-be master bedroom. I grabbed one of my towels off the wire chair it was hanging over and wrapped it around my body. As I dug through my suitcase for a set of PJs, I was alerted to some strange sounds echoing softly from Denise's old room. I snuck over to peer through the crack of the door and saw Flynn bent over Vaughn's naked crotch. Although I didn't have a direct view of Vaughn, I knew exactly what was going on by the motions and the groaning.

With a loud gasp, panic swelled within my chest, making it hard for me to breathe. I tried to hold back the sob in my throat, but it echoed loudly through the cavernous old room. *Damn the acoustics of these old houses.*

"Perie?" Vaughn's voice echoed out.

As I backed away from the door, I tripped over my suitcase, and when I tried to get up, I tripped a second time.

It was happening again. It was all happening again.

Tears blurred my vision as Flynn's familiar hands gripped my arms.

"Perie," he murmured. "Are you alright?"

Quickly and violently shaking him off, I pushed myself to my feet and hightailed it out of the house, ignoring them calling my name. As I made my way along the back verandah, echoes of their footfalls followed me.

"Perie, stop!" Flynn demanded, his sharp voice piercing its way through my anger.

When I finally spun around, angry tears burned my eyes, but I refused to let them fall. “What the fuck, Flynn? All this talk of not letting Vaughn get between us, yet you somehow can’t keep off him?”

Flynn shook his hanging head. “I’m sorry, Per.”

“And you!” I waved my finger at Vaughn. “Why are you so...”

“So?” Vaughn queried.

“So fucking irresistible? Why can’t either of us keep our hands off you?”

Vaughn tried to hide his smirk by scratching his thumbnail across his top lip.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “See, even that’s sexy. You should be illegal.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said with a chuckle.

“So, what is it with you guys? I know you aren’t gay for obvious reasons.” My hands flew between myself and Flynn.

“I’m not gay, Per.” Flynn glanced at Vaughn. “Well, not entirely. A teensy bit, maybe?”

Vaughn shrugged as his gaze passed between Flynn and me. “I’m equally attracted to both of you. Always have been.”

“Does that mean you’re bisexual?”

With a single nod, Vaughn said, “Yeah, I guess so.”

Flynn took a careful step towards me, his pleading gaze powerful. “This doesn’t change my feelings for you, Per. You’re everything to me. But for some reason, my feelings for Vaughn haven’t died.”

“The stuff that happened back in school, this same stuff, isn’t because I’m trying to cheat on anyone or ruin your lives. I’m not that kind of guy. I never was.” Vaughn sent me a sad glance and took a step back. “But if I’m getting between the two of you again, I’ll leave tomorrow as soon as I can get my car back to town.”

“Please don’t.” The way I dashed towards him was such a rapid response.

Flynn looked at me in surprise. “Perie?”

“Well, do you want him to go?” I demanded.

“No, I don’t,” Flynn replied quietly. Desire-filled looks passed between the three of us.

“Stay, Vaughn. Please?”

A slow smile grew on his face. “How can I refuse a beautiful woman in a towel?”

The husk in his deep voice sank to my core, making me squeeze my legs together. Oh, this was ridiculous. I peered over the verandah to the backyard, where the fire was now out. “Where’s Dad?”

“Passed out in his ute,” Flynn answered.

“Good.”

Both men’s jaws dropped as I opened my towel, exposing my pussy and perky breasts to them. I dropped the towel onto the deck, leapt at Vaughn, and groaned in surprise as my lips pressed against his. He quickly scooped his hands under my arse cheeks and carried me back towards the bedroom. Vaughn responded to my searching tongue, brushing his own against it. I relished the delectable thing jiving in my mouth. He broke

away from me long enough to yell over his shoulder, “Brewer, get your arse in here!”

With a giggle, I nibbled Vaughn’s ear.

He shuddered. “God, woman.” The desire was thick in his deep voice.

He dropped me onto the old bed in Denise’s room, and I froze. “Not in here.”

“What?” Vaughn queried.

“Not in here, please.”

“It’s her aunt’s bed,” Flynn explained.

Understanding spread across Vaughn’s face as Flynn extended his hand to me. “I get it. Where, then?”

With a devilish smile, I took Vaughn’s large hand in mine and pulled the men into the living room. Vaughn watched me as my fingers worked the buckle of his belt.

Flynn came up behind me and slid his fingers over the slick lips of my pussy, causing me to moan and automatically arch my arse towards him. I was already so wet that he could easily slide two fingers inside me. Vaughn’s pants hit the floor, revealing his hard cock. As I stroked Vaughn’s eight inches, I slowly lowered my mouth onto him. He tasted salty, a little sweaty from the day, and smoky from the fire—he was delicious.

I was well aware of Flynn watching me intently as I worked my mouth over Vaughn. He wanted Vaughn’s cock too. But then he squatted behind me and spread my arse cheeks. “As much as I want to share Vaughn’s cock with you, this pussy is just as delectable,” Flynn said before he buried his face into my pussy, his tongue delving into its depths, his

lips teasing me. I released a long groan around Vaughn's dick but managed to keep my rhythm going.

"Oh, yes. That's the way, baby," Vaughn moaned. Gathering my tresses of dark hair in his hands, he fucked my mouth gently, relishing the suction I gave him on the out pull.

Eventually, the pleasure Flynn was giving me made me pull off Vaughn when a tiny spark of passion zinged through me. The blond hottie drove me to a small orgasm, just enough to whet my appetite.

Kneeling beside me, Flynn took over Vaughn's cock. I watched in dumbstruck awe as he devoured Vaughn's cock. When I wasn't sure what to do next, Flynn pulled down his shorts and rested my hand on his dick. He pulled off Vaughn for a moment and begged, "Make me harder, Per." He tenderly stroked one of my boobs as he returned his attention to Vaughn. "Mm-hmm." His approval came out in a low moan when I began to pump him with my fist.

I kissed Flynn's cheek. "Share," I whispered.

Flynn smirked. He shifted his mouth to the side so I could also taste Vaughn. Vaughn groaned. His fingers slipped into the hair on our heads as we shared his cock. Tongues and lips slid along his shaft, popping him from one mouth to another.

"I've never been so hard in my life," Vaughn growled, his voice nothing more than a growly rasp. "I need to fuck someone right now."

"Who?"

No sooner had I asked the question than Vaughn was spinning me around and laying me on the floor. He kicked his boots and pants off, then knelt before me. He rubbed the tip of his cock along my opening, and a pleased moan emanated

from his chest when I arched up to meet him. He let me guide him inside at my own pace, and it only took a few moments for me to start fucking him.

Flynn pulled Vaughn's arm around his body and captured Vaughn's mouth with his, kissing him sloppily, his tongue toying with the ex-soldier's. Sometime during the moments when Vaughn and I were focused on each other, Flynn had shed every piece of his clothing, leaving his tatted-up body open for my viewing pleasure.

Hopefully, for my using pleasure too.

When Flynn began to lift Vaughn's shirt, the ex-soldier lifted his arms, and the garment joined the growing pile of clothes.

Flynn grinned and licked Vaughn's nipples. "Much better."

"Fuck, yeah," Vaughn groaned.

They kissed again as Vaughn's hips seemed to take on a life of their own. His large hand gripped one side of my waist while Flynn held the other.

"Oh, yes, fuck my pussy." The words came out of my mouth in a slow, languid fashion.

"You're slowing down," Vaughn whispered.

"Don't worry, you'll enjoy this. She's explosive," Flynn answered and nipped at Vaughn's ear.

"Are you boys talking about me?" I purred.

"Flynn's singing your praises, sweetheart." Vaughn sucked in a breath as I bashed against him, making his crotch shudder. He looked at Flynn in surprise, and the builder winked in response. I bashed again. Once. Twice. Three times fast, then slow and deep.



Flynn repositioned himself near my mouth, stroking himself as he watched the show. He offered himself to me, and I instantly accepted.

Vaughn was clearly done waiting. Taking control of the situation, he arched his entire body over mine. He took hold of my hands and pinned them above my head, curling his fingers between mine, and drove into my pussy, pounding me deep and rough. He rammed his cock deep inside me. His grunts echoed through the cavernous old house, mingling with my cries.

“Oh, fuck, yeah. Do it, guys,” Flynn growled as he tugged himself faster.

My orgasm hit me like a freight train. My body shuddered uncontrollably as my cries reverberated around his cock while Vaughn continued to drive into me. Vaughn’s hands gripped my body, and his cries were deep and sexy. When he began to come, he pulled out of me and sprayed on my belly. I admired the way Vaughn’s seed glistened on my fair skin, showing his claim on me.

“I’m gonna come, too,” Flynn moaned as he unleashed his load. He sprayed the back of my throat with his seed, pumped my mouth, and I didn’t let him go until I’d swallowed every last drop.

This was what satisfaction felt like. Warm. Satiated. Comfortably numb.

# Chapter Ten

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## Vaughn

**A**s usual, I was the first to awake the next morning—early, of course. It was a habit I’d picked up in the army and was difficult to break. After our sex session, we curled up in the swag together. It was a tight fit, but none of us minded sleeping practically piled on top of each other, not after the night we’d shared. With a smile, I gazed at Flynn and Perie’s sleeping faces. Flynn was spooning Perie in his sleep, holding her tight like a teddy bear. It was adorable. So was the way Perie’s head rested atop my bicep like I was her own human pillow. These two people were everything. I felt alive again. It was the first time I’d had anything other than pain in my system since returning from my tour of duty in Afghanistan.

Careful not to disturb Perie, I brushed my fingers through Flynn’s light hair. The other man’s eyes fluttered open, and I was greeted with Flynn’s bright blue irises. Flynn was such a pretty boy, not that the cocky builder would ever admit it. One corner of Flynn’s mouth curled up in a smile, and I returned it. We lifted ourselves up onto our elbows and shared a kiss. Perie groaned sleepily, forcing us to pull apart with a shared chuckle, so we laid back down.

I pressed my lips to Perie’s forehead and murmured, “Shh.”

She quickly fell back into a deep slumber. My heart skipped a beat when she snuggled deeper into my chest, her arm sliding across my middle.

“We have to get up. There’s work to do,” Flynn whispered.

Suppressing a groan, I begged, “Not yet. Please.” I didn’t want this moment to end, not with her sleeping on me like this.

Flynn must’ve recognised this desire in my expression because a knowing smile spread across his face. “You want to hold her, hey?”

“Is it that obvious?” I pressed a kiss to Perie’s hair.

“Pretty much. Plus, it’s Perie. She’s irresistible.” Flynn gently stroked her back.

“You both are,” I corrected him.

“Not as much as Per.” Flynn pecked Perie’s bare shoulder and slid out of the swag. “I’m making coffee. You’ve got ten minutes of snuggle time.” When I scowled up at Flynn, he said, “I mean it.” He scooped up his jeans, shook them out, and stepped into them.

Tucking my right arm under my head, I watched Flynn wander away. I tried to ignore the dull pain in my ankle and focus on the last few lazy moments I had with Perie.

---

*Flynn*

“You got some of that for me, mate?”

With my coffee halfway to my mouth, I paused as Mr. Miller joined me on the back verandah. I pointed to the small coffee pod station I’d set up, and Jack made himself busy.

“Sounded like you had quite a night last night,” Jack observed as he placed a mug underneath the extractor.

“What?” I spluttered, almost choking on my hot drink.

“This is a quiet area. You didn’t think I’d hear the late-night shenanigans from my ute?” Jack faced me head-on. “Look, I guess it’s none of my business, but—”

With a frown, I interrupted him. “You’re right. It’s not.”

The older man picked up his coffee mug and stood beside me. “That’s my daughter in there, my only kid. If you’re having sex with my girl, then as her father, I should warn you to look after her, or I’ll—”

“Or you’ll what?” I snapped. “You don’t know anything about your daughter or me. You don’t understand our relationship. You’ve spent most of her life away on your grand adventures. But me? I’ve been by her side forever.”

“Don’t lie to me. I know about the rift between you two. Four years is a long time not to talk to someone,” Jack said.

“Four years? So, what’s twenty, hey?” I retorted.

Jack reared back in shock. “I visit her all the time!”

He couldn’t pull the wool over my eyes. “For a few hours, here and there. You don’t know a thing about her. You’ve never been a part of Perie’s life. Yeah, she and I had an estrangement of sorts. But she’s back in my life now, and I’m in hers, and that’s never going to change. I’ll stick by her until the day I die. I promise you that.”

“Do you love her?”

There was no way I would let that slip to Perie’s father before I told her. I wouldn’t fall for that. “That’s none of your business.”

Jack glanced at the early morning sun and set his barely touched coffee on the railing. “As much as I’d like to continue this conversation, I need to get on the road. I’m already behind schedule.”

I glared at Jack. “Don’t you think you should wait until Perie’s awake so you can say goodbye?”

With a shrug, Jack said, “She’ll understand.”

My body trembled with anger as the old man took his leave and proved my point. He said he cared about his daughter, but this proved how much he didn’t.

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### *Perie*

Sleep slipped away, and I began to stir. I’d slept like a rock. When I realised I was sleeping against someone, I slowly opened my eyes and peered at the gorgeous, naked man beside me. I knew I should get up. We had work to do and a house to restore. But that would require dragging myself out of Vaughn’s arms, and I didn’t want to do that yet. Instead, I traced my fingers across the tiny number tattooed on his chest—a date—and wondered what it meant.

“Morning.” His deep, husky voice poured over me, sending a chill of excitement to my bones.

Shifting my gaze to meet his, I basked in the loving expression he sent me. “Hi.”

Vaughn pulled me into a deep, gentle kiss that made my toes curl. Boy, could this man kiss. His lips moved from mine to kiss on my forehead, and I could have melted. To me, a forehead kiss was a kiss of protection, of dedication. Only one

other person had ever kissed me there, and apparently, he was already up.

My heart pounded in my chest, and I knew I was falling fast for Vaughn all over again. But that wasn't a hard thing to do. How could any woman resist a man like him?

"You're quiet," Vaughn observed.

"I am," I confirmed.

"What are you thinking about?"

Suddenly self-conscious, I replied, "Oh, nothing."

A wicked glint flashed in Vaughn's eyes. "If you say so." He rolled over so he was on top of me.

Draping an arm over his shoulder, I quirked up my eyebrow as I traced his tattoo again. "I was wondering what this means."

"You were?"

"Uh-huh."

Vaughn's face grew dark and brooding.

"I'm sorry if I'm prying." I allowed my fingers to fall away.

He captured my hand in his, brought it up to his lips, and gently kissed my knuckles. "It's okay. It's hard to talk about, that's all."

"Does it have to do with Afghanistan?"

Vaughn nodded. "It's when my mate died." He closed his eyes as I stroked his cheek. Vaughn swallowed deeply. "We were out scouting, just a normal routine thing, when we thought we were under fire. We took cover behind the wreckage of a bombed-out car before we realised it was only a

pair of local kids being silly. Terry recognised the kids, so he stepped out to talk to them. We didn't want them to hurt themselves. As soon Terry stepped out, he stepped on a cheap landmine. It injured us both. He lost his leg, and I lost my foot. He should've survived, but he died in the field hospital from an infection."

"You lost your foot? How did I miss that?" I instantly pushed the covers off our naked bodies and moved to investigate.

Vaughn laughed at me. He leaned back on his elbows as I inspected the prosthesis attached to his ankle. "It's a bit sore this morning. I usually take the foot off to sleep, but I was preoccupied last night."

"Oh, Vaughn." I covered my mouth in shock. "Vaughn..." Words seemed to abandon me.

"Hey." He sat up and pulled me into his arms. He pressed his forehead to mine and murmured, "It's alright, Perie-Berry. I'm okay. This tattoo is to commemorate the day we set off the landmine. It's a memorial to Terry and my foot." He touched his fingers to the numbers.

My fingers joined his. "I'm sorry this happened to you. I'm sorry about your friend."

His gaze was intense as he whispered, "Thank you. You make me feel better."

A small smile touched my face. "You're a smooth talker, Vaughn Forester."

"It's not smooth talk if I mean it."

"Yes, it is!" I laughed, then squealed as Vaughn flipped me back into the swag and leaned over me again. "That was a smooth *move*, soldier."



“I suppose it was.” He breathed against my lips as he stretched my arms over my head.

As I arched into him, I noticed he was becoming hard again, and I could feel him against my opening. My breath caught in my throat when he lowered his mouth to mine. *Morning sex? Hell yes.* I was totally down for this.

At least until I was alerted to the sound of a vehicle starting up outside. With a gasp, I disentangled myself from Vaughn and slipped from the swag. Throwing on the first item of clothing I found, I raced out onto the front verandah. I was just in time to catch sight of the brake lights of Dad’s ute as it reached the end of the driveway and turned onto the narrow country road. My shoulders slumped.

Vaughn came up behind me and wrapped his arms around me. “I’m sorry,” he whispered into my ear before he pressed a kiss to it.

“It’s for the best.” I gritted my teeth as I stepped out of his embrace and stormed back into the house.

---

My father was already gone. He’d left without bothering to say goodbye. Frustrated and angry, I put my emotions into stripping the existing bathroom and laundry to their bare bones. Flynn worked on tearing apart the main bedroom, and Vaughn sanded back the walls of the family area.

“Selfish, as always,” I grumbled to myself. “Let’s not think of others. No, bugger their feelings! The next great adventure is the most important thing, especially if there’s money involved.” I watched the old tiles and gyprock fall to the ground, exposing the copper pipes that had begun to

deteriorate. I heard chuckling from the doorway as I tried to yank the pipes from the wall with my bare hands.

There was Flynn, tatted arms folded across his chest, barely covered by his navy singlet. “They’re not going to come out like that, Per.”

“Why not? I’m a strong, powerful woman,” I grunted, even though I knew he was right. “Why can’t some copper pipes budge for me?”

“You know better than that, Miss Interior Designer Extraordinaire.”

In defiance, I grabbed hold of the pipes and pulled as hard as I could. When I ended up literally hanging off them, Flynn intervened. Stepping up behind me, he wrapped his arms around my tiny body, pressed his face into my hair, and whispered, “Let go.”

“No! I... I can—”

“Let. Go,” he repeated softly.

Slumping against him, I released the pipes and curled into him. Absently, I traced my fingertips along Flynn’s tattoos. Beautiful things, they were, accentuating his stunning body.

“Talk to me,” he murmured, kissing my hair over and over again. “Is this about your dad?”

“No, I’m trying to get this restoration underway, that’s all,” I exclaimed angrily.

When I squirmed, Flynn held me tight. “Don’t lie to me. I know him leaving without saying goodbye hurt you.”

“Why should it be about Dad?” I scoffed. “Nothing he does is ever about me, so why should I waste my energy on

him? Why should I feel this way? It isn't like anything has changed with him."

"You're upset because you love him. You love your family. You'd do anything for the people you love, even when they don't deserve it," Flynn pointed out.

"I don't get it, Flynn," I sighed. "Why don't my parents have time for me? I mean, I know they have their own lives, but shouldn't I be a part of them?"

"Don't take it personally. It's their loss. Just know that they love you, especially your mum."

I rolled my eyes at the mention of my mother. "So much so that she's ditched me for an Englishman."

Flynn brushed his fingers along my jawline, and my breath faltered when he lifted my lips towards his. "You don't need them right now."

My mouth came alive as he kissed me slowly and passionately, igniting a slow-burning fire in the pit of my stomach, a flame that wouldn't ever be easily extinguished. His tongue was tantalising, dipping into my mouth for mere moments, offering me the tiniest taste before disappearing again. Wanting more, I pushed my tongue into his mouth, eliciting a low moan.

When we parted, I muttered, "I love you."

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, panic set in. With a gasp, I tried to step away from Flynn, but he held me fast. Something in the way he looked at me made me freeze. Silently, he leaned me up against the half-destroyed wall and kissed me again, more intensely than ever before.

"I've always fucking loved you," he growled against her lips. "My whole life, Per, no one else has ever come close."

With a whimper, I kissed him again. It felt so good to get this out in the open. I was so tired of pretending we weren't more than lifelong friends. I broke away from the kiss to stare into his blue eyes. "Flynn?"

"Hmm?"

"Do you mean it?" I whispered.

"Yeah, Per, I mean every word."

"What about Vaughn? Last night with him was—"

"Fantastic," he finished for me. "My feelings for him are growing. Last night was lust, but waking up with him this morning, with both of you, was everything. He was stroking my hair, and you were snuggled between us. It was something else." Flynn pressed a kiss to my neck.

With a pouty scowl, I said, "You weren't there when I woke up."

"Sorry, hotness." Flynn gave me one last comforting kiss before he pulled away. "Come on. Let's get this bathroom gutted."

"Are you two just starting? Jeez, get your arses in gear."

We laughed at Vaughn as he entered the bathroom with his own violent-looking tools.

"Joining us for another threesome, then?" Flynn joked.

Vaughn smirked and leaned against the wall. "Anytime."

I attempted to hide my desires by getting back to demolishing the walls and floor. Flynn got to work on extracting the bathtub, and Vaughn focused on the mildewed ceiling. We moved to the laundry not long after to give it the

same treatment and were soon left with just the bare bones of both rooms.

“Denise’s room next,” Flynn decided.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I followed behind him but stopped in the doorway, causing Vaughn to bump into me. I watched, distraught, as Flynn lifted the mattress off the old metal frame. This was it. Once this bed was out of there, the last piece of Denise would be gone.

“I need a hand here,” Flynn grunted as he flipped the mattress onto its side.

Vaughn’s hands wrapped around my upper arms. “Are you okay?”

Flynn’s brow crinkled as he moved his focus from the balancing mattress to me.

“It’s fine,” I said before he could say anything. “Just do it.”

Vaughn stepped past me and took hold of one end. “You ready?”

Flynn nodded. I stepped to the side and watched the boys lug the mattress out of the room together.

“Bye, Aunty Denise,” I whispered, wrapping my arms around myself and looking around the room at nothing in particular.

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*Vaughn*

Outside, we hoisted the old mattress into the skip and dusted off our hands.

“She’s taking this hard,” I said, staring up at the house in the direction of Denise’s room.

“Yeah, Perie has a few abandonment issues. She’s tough, but losing her aunt has brought everything to the fore,” Flynn explained. “It isn’t just Denise’s death, though, or her dad’s inability to stay put.”

“What else could it be?” I asked.

“Her mum moving to the UK was hard on her, and our four-year-rift still has its effects. Everything with you... well, she never got over you, mate.”

This revelation hit me hard, knocking out my breath. I knew how I felt about Perie—always had. I also knew how I felt about Flynn. Memories of both of them were what helped me through the toughest times in Afghanistan. Now we were all here in this place, together at last.

“Do you think we can make this work between the three of us? Can we all be in one big, successful relationship?” I asked as I rested my hands on my hips.

Flynn shrugged. “Why not?”

“You know why not,” I sighed.

Flynn cocked his head to the side, a silent question.

“We’re in a safe little bubble here, Flynn.” My gaze wandered towards the gate at the end of the driveway. “But out in the world, in society, we’re sure to get judged.”

“Fuck society.” Flynn threw his head back in a cocky and nonchalant gesture.

“It’s not as easy as that, and you know it. God help me if anyone tries to hurt Perie because of us.”

The protective glint in Flynn's gaze reflected my own. "I know one thing. Perie can take care of herself. She's a businesswoman, remember?"

"Even more reason to be careful about this," I said.

Flynn cupped my cheek and whispered, "You're so sexy when you worry. But *don't*." Flynn kissed me for a few moments, and I drew him to me, my hands pressing into the small of his back.

"You don't have to stress about me, Vaughn."

I snapped my head towards the young woman who'd snuck up on us. She'd startled the shit out of me. Flynn held me steady and placed a lingering kiss on my cheek when I tried to pull away.

Perie wrapped her arms around both of us. "This is fine. More than fine, it's *right*. We were always supposed to be together like this. We just didn't realise it before."

"That was our problem. We were trying to conform," Flynn added.

With a deep breath, I initiated a kiss with Flynn this time. When Perie pressed her ear to my chest, I knew she was sure to hear how fast my heart was beating. Flynn stroked Perie's hair as I kissed her too.

"This is us," Perie decided.

"Right. Well then, 'us,' which one of you wants to help me sort out my shit box of a car?" I asked.

# Chapter Eleven

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## Flynn

**P**erie looked gorgeous in her large, wire-rimmed sunglasses as she leaned against the side of my ute. Her tiny body was clad in denim shorts and my white singlet top she'd been wearing all day. There was something deeply sensual about a woman wearing a man's shirt the morning after they'd had sex. Even if I hadn't been the one to fuck her this time.

She looked bored. Cars were never Perie's thing. She had never understood the obsession some guys had with their cars. Frankly, I didn't, either. Even though I took exceptional care of my vehicle, I'd never been into hotted-up things.

I walked over to her and rested my hands on either side of her head. Her eyebrows arched behind the rims of her sunnies.

"What are you doing?"

"Perving on my new girlfriend," I replied.

"I'm not exactly new."

With a grin, I said, "No. But it's new that I can call you my girlfriend."

With a smile, Perie draped her arms around my neck. "I like the way boyfriend rolls off my tongue. Flynn Brewer, my *boyfriend*."

"Two boyfriends, you lucky girl," I hissed.

“Shh!” Perie gasped. “I want to keep that to ourselves for as long as possible.”

“Well, that’s a bummer because I want to kiss you so badly right now.” I gathered her into my arms and allowed a hand to travel to her arse.

Perie leaned into me, losing herself in my kiss. It was the first time we’d ever kissed openly in our hometown, and it was so amazing.

“See? Not so bad, is it?” I told her.

Perie huffed at the cockiness in my voice. “Stop it.”

“Why?”

“Because your mother’s coming.”

“Bullshit,” I said with a chuckle.

“Flynn, she is,” Perie exclaimed and smacked me.

I jumped and turned around. Sure enough, Mum was wandering along the footpath, an expensive cream handbag hanging from her right shoulder.

“Got it. Let’s get this show on the road,” Vaughn bellowed as he lugged a radiator over to the Amarok.

Brooke slowed and looked at the three of us, her mouth slightly agape.

“Hey, Mum.” My voice shook slightly at the sight of her. I put my arm around Perie’s shoulders and rubbed my fingers over them in a circular motion. As though that would let me draw confidence from her.

“Hi, sweetheart.” Brooke glanced up at the auto shop. “Car trouble?”

“Not me. Vaughn. Cracked radiator,” I said as I jabbed his thumb in the tall bloke’s direction.

Vaughn set the new radiator safely into the back of my vehicle and straightened up to give Flynn’s Mum his attention. “Hi, Mrs. Brewer.”

“Actually, it’s Mrs. Cooper,” I corrected through gritted teeth.

“It’s... nice to see you, Vaughn.” Brooke turned a confused and partially suspicious look towards Perie and me.

“You too. I hope you’re well,” Vaughn responded.

She flashed the ex-soldier a cautious smile and nodded, then turned back to me. “I’m pleased to run into you. I wanted to talk to you about the other night. I don’t like how we left things. Could we try again?” When I scoffed, she added, “Not dinner with the family. Just us. I want to be included in your life, Flynn. Yours and Megan’s. You’re my children, and despite what you might think, I do care about you.” She sighed. “I know I’m not always good at bridging the gap between you two and Chris’ family, and I’m sorry for that. Will you give me another chance?”

Every time I tried to let her in, the snobby stepfamily got in the way. Mum was always too timid to stand up for herself, Megan, or me, so I wasn’t sure how many more chances I wanted to give.

When Perie nudged me forcefully, I sighed. “Yeah, okay, Mum. But only you. Leave the rest of them out of it.”

Brooke pressed her hand to her chest. “I promise.”

“You could always come out to my place sometime. Lunch one day, maybe?” Perie suggested.

Brooke's smile was full of relief. "That would be lovely."

Perie and Vaughn both nudged me this time, urging me forward. With a sigh, I pulled my mother into a hug. When she relaxed into me with a sigh of relief, I relented. "It'll be nice to spend some time with you, Mum."

It was the truth.

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### *Vaughn*

After spending a few hours sitting by the road in the heat while we installed the new radiator, I slowly rolled my car to a stop beside Flynn's snazzy ute and turned off the ignition. The car was a shitbox, alright, but I was relieved to have it home safe.

### *Home.*

Was I beginning to think of Perie's place as home? I felt a smile stretch across my face as I watched Flynn and Perie walk, hand-in-hand, towards the front stairs. When she set foot on the first step, Flynn tugged on her hand, urging her past the house instead.

"Vaughn! Come, come on, mate!" Flynn shouted.

My smile grew as they waved their hands in the air, begging me to come along. I climbed from my car and followed them to the back of the property. Hidden at the bottom of a small incline, behind some bottle brush bushes and young gum trees, was a creek I hadn't even realised was there.

As I saw Perie and Flynn disrobing, I hesitated. "Skinny dipping?"

Flynn squinted against the sun so he could look at me.  
“You up for it?”

“Uh, I don’t have my cover,” I replied.

“For what?”

Perie understood immediately. “For your foot?”

When I nodded, Flynn looked between us in confusion.  
“His foot? What are you talking about?”

“He... has a prosthesis, Flynn.” Perie’s words were careful, but they didn’t need to be. It wasn’t a secret.

Flynn tried to hide it as best as possible. However, his jaw dropping open was a dead giveaway of his surprise. “Oh.”

“Is that a problem, Flynn?” I asked in a snappier tone than I meant to use.

“No way. I don’t understand how I didn’t notice it last night.” He ran his fingers through his hair.

“We had other things on our minds,” I said, and we smirked at each other.

Perie hugged me. “We’ll help you.”

“Alright, then. Give me a minute.” I sat down on a rock and started to undress, beginning with my shoes and working my way up. I shamelessly checked out Perie and Flynn’s naked bodies. “You’re both way too attractive for your own good, you know that?”

“Back at you,” Perie replied with a wink.

I removed my prosthetic foot and set it aside. I slowly lifted my gaze to them, nervous about their reactions. Usually, I didn’t give two shits about people’s opinions, but these two

weren't any old sods on the street. They were people I deeply cared for and always had.

Perie held her hand out to me without hesitation. I placed my hand in hers and let her pull me up. Flynn hooked my other arm over his shoulders, and we made our way into the creek together. The water was lovely and cool on my clammy skin, and once we reached the deeper section, I could tread water. We paddled together in a small circle, glancing at each other. I basked in the comfortable silence that fell between us, simply enjoying being in one another's presence.

"This is nice," I said, breaking the silence after a while. "I've never skinny-dipped before."

"You *what*?" Flynn couldn't believe his ears.

"We didn't do this when we were dating?" Perie asked.

"No." I chuckled, trying to avoid staring at her breasts bobbing beneath the water's surface.

"Fail, Perie," Flynn teased.

"Agreed. I'm bloody useless."

"Better late than never, right?" The wink I sent her caused her to blush. "Wait a minute. Are you telling me you do this regularly?"

"Once upon a time, sure. Not so much now that we live in Brisbane. We'd get arrested," Flynn answered.

"City people are great, but some of them can be kind of prudish," Perie said.

"Am I a prude, too, then?" I flashed them a teasing grin.

"No, Vaughn. I think you're a bit shy, is all." Flynn brushed his hand over my broad shoulders.

“I don’t think I’m shy.”

“Not shy,” Perie mused. “Introverted. Strong. Protective. With a powerful sense of duty.”

Duty? When she said that, I frowned. “Because I’m a former soldier?”

Perie nodded.

With a shake of my head, I said, “Perie, I didn’t join the army because of a strong sense of duty. I didn’t give two hoots about serving my country at first. I joined because I was floundering.”

“You were? Why?” Flynn asked.

“Do you honestly need to ask me that, Brewer?” I said with a scoff.

A cautious glance passed between Flynn and Perie.

“I lost you both at the same time. You and me, Flynn, we went about things the wrong way, and I ruined what we had, Perie-Berry. We both hurt you. Then I lost Mum to melanoma, and I couldn’t handle being in this town with all its memories. I couldn’t think of a way out until I saw a recruitment ad in the paper. I joined the following week.”

Flynn’s mouth hung open. “You joined because of us?”

Perie gasped. “You lost your foot because of us?”

“What? No,” I exclaimed. I took in Perie’s distraught expression and waded over to her. She would never be to blame for my injury, and I needed her to understand that. “I lost my foot because of the bastard who set the landmine. Our falling out led me to the army, but never, ever blame yourself for my injuries.” I lifted her chin and peered into her hazel eyes, my gaze catching the gold flecks in them. “Promise me.”

Perie twisted her mouth up. “Alright.”

I threw my arm around Flynn’s shoulders and drew him closer to ensure he understood the same thing. “You, too. You got it?”

“But I didn’t—” Flynn started.

“You got it?” I repeated more forcefully.

“Yeah, righto.” Flynn’s breath hitched as he caught my gaze. His hand cupped my cheek, and he captured my lips in a kiss. My fingertips dug into Flynn’s shoulder as I responded.

Not one to be left out, Perie snuggled into my body and kissed my tattoo, making my heart trip inside my chest. Her tiny sigh was so beautiful when I turned to her and kissed her deeply. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Flynn bury his fingers into her hair to massage her scalp.

The more I kissed, touched, and was intimate with them, the harder it became to hide my feelings for them. So, I took a chance and came right out with it.

“I’m falling in love with both of you again,” I mumbled. “I hope that’s alright?”

Perie laid her palm over my heart. “I was hoping you were.”

Flynn’s blue eyes were heavy with desire. “I didn’t want to admit anything at first, but I’m all in.”

Wow. What the heck did this mean for all of us?



# Chapter Twelve

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## Vaughn

**W**e became so busy over the next couple of weeks that we barely had time for anything but work and sleep. Perie and Flynn were on a schedule they had to adhere to, and time was getting away from us.

Knuckling down was good for us and the project, and we'd soon made the needed basic changes. The new bathroom and Perie's master bedroom were coming along nicely, as was the kitchen, which I took on as my personal project, working to Perie's specifications. She wanted a modern country kitchen, and that was what she would get. I had spent the day installing white, French-style cabinetry, light brown timber bench tops, and matching white wall-mounted cupboards. The sunken farmhouse sink and fancy Victorian-style taps would be installed when the plumber visited the next morning.

Once I was done, I checked on Flynn's progress with Perie's bathroom. The massive window was fantastic and offered uninterrupted views of the bushland behind the property. The position for the bath was a stroke of genius on Perie's part. She would have a beautiful view of the bushland from the tub but enough privacy that no one could peek in too easily. Perie certainly had a knack for this work, and I was looking forward to seeing the finished product.

Flynn expertly installed the wool insulation and covered it with waterproof green board sheeting, using his trusty nail gun to hold it in place. The ease with which he moved was like nothing else. This was second nature to him, and he was in his element.

Sure, I was handy in some ways. I could fix the mowers that came into Dad's shop, tinker with my car, and help in the yard and around the house, but I didn't have a specific skill set. Not like Flynn and Perie, who had built their businesses from the ground up. The things I knew how to do well were more military-specific like radar, weapons knowledge, and missions. If you needed someone for a peacekeeping mission, I was your man. Coming back to civilian life wasn't easy because I'd never been much good at it. But I had to trust in this—in Flynn and Perie. I believed they could help me simply by being themselves and loving me just as I loved them.

Then again, should I rely on them for my happiness?

With a concerned frown, I crept closer to Perie, who was arguing with someone on her mobile phone. With a concerned frown, I watched as she hung up in a huff a few moments later and threw the phone down onto the card table beside her laptop.

“Hey. What's wrong?”

Perie peered at me as I pulled up a chair and sat before her. “The air-con guy just bailed on me. He was supposed to come at the same time as the electrician and plumber tomorrow so they could coordinate the setup of the reverse cycle system I want installed.” She slumped back in her chair and rubbed her forehead.

With a shrug, I said, “So, let's find someone else.”

“Who’s going to be available on such short notice?” Perie threw her hands up in the air.

“You never know until you ask around.” I spun the laptop around to face me. “Who did you have?”

“A local guy.”

“From Granite Ridge?”

“Yup.”

“Right. So, let’s check the surrounding towns then... maybe even Toowoomba. I bet there are plenty of guys there,” I said as my fingers flew over the keyboard.

“Like who?” Perie queried, her mouth pouting.

“We’ll find *someone*, Perie.”

Perie rested her elbow on the card table with her chin on her hand and watched me, pouting.

“Why did the other guy quit, anyway?”

“He broke his wrist playing football,” Perie grumped.

With a blank stare, I muttered, “How dare he.”

Perie sniggered. Then she did her best to hide her smirk and keep her stink face firmly in place.

“You might be in for a slightly higher fee, but if we’re persistent, we’ll find someone for the job, I’m sure.”

We called a long list of people but found no takers. With a groan, Perie leaned on the table and hid her face in her arm. “Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“Hey, come on,” I reassured her as I patted her on the back. “We’ll sort it.”

“I know you’re trying to be supportive, but I’m honestly not sure we’ll have any luck.” With a dramatic sigh, she glanced at the computer screen, and a name caught her attention. “Hey, wait, Stop scrolling.” I did so immediately, and Perie slapped the table in triumph. “That’s who will help us.”

“Who?”

She tapped the screen. “Sam Hardy.”

As she got up from her seat and headed out to the back verandah, I noted the distinctive skip in her step and frowned.

*Who the heck was Sam Hardy?*

---

*Perie*

The tradesmen rocked up the next morning with a knock. I had just finished breakfast and hadn’t even gotten out of my pyjamas when they arrived. When I swung the door open, there he stood—my ex—who I still thought was a cutie if the giddiness inside me when I saw him was anything to go by.

“Hey, Sam,” I said, trying to act cool and collected.

Sam patted me on the back when I drew him into a hug. “G’day, Perie. Been a while. How are ya?”

“Yeah, alright.” I took in the middle-aged man with a smile. His salt and pepper hair was slightly longer than I remembered, but he still looked as fit as a fiddle.

His olive-coloured eyes passed over my grey tank top and blue flannelette pyjama bottoms. “Did I get you up?”

“No, not at all. I was eating breakfast. Come on in.”

Sam stepped through the doorway.

“Sorry about the short notice,” I said as he followed me inside. “I was in a bind after my previous tradie cancelled on me. I know this is a big job, but I’ve already got the materials. With the electrician doing his bit today, I thought having you both here would be best in case you need to coordinate anything.”

Sam held a hand up to me. “It’s no bigger than my usual jobs. It’ll be fine, Perie. I might need more than a day, though. The place will need to be fully fitted out.”

I understood. “That’s alright. There are plenty of spare rooms if you need to stay overnight. It would be on the floor with nothing more than a blanket and a pillow, but the offer’s there.”

Sam waved away the offer. “That’s nice of you, but you don’t have to do that.”

“I brought you all the way down here from Toowoomba. It’s only fair that I offer you something.”

Sam shook his head. “I’ve booked a room at the pub in town.”

“Okay, then. Excuse me while I get dressed for the day.”

“Righto. And Perie?” Sam stopped me as I stepped towards the entrance of my soon-to-be bedroom.

“Yeah?” I asked, turning back to him.

“You look good.”

With a shy smile and noting Sam’s lingering gaze, I replied, “Thanks. You do too.”

I made my way to my suitcase in the next room and rifled around for a set of clothing.

“How’s your old boyfriend going?” Flynn said from where he leaned against the door jamb to the new bathroom, arms folded firmly across his chest. “How many ex-boyfriends will you hire for this project, Per? Are you collecting men now?”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “We need him to install the reverse cycle system. Besides, you seem to approve of hiring Vaughn.”

Flynn avoided the Vaughn comment and jerked his chin in Sam’s general direction. “I bet he’s still sweet on you.”

“I doubt it. We haven’t seen each other in ages.”

“You didn’t see Vaughn for nine years, and now look at you,” Flynn retorted.

“You can talk.” After a moment, I tucked my clothes under one arm and moved over to my gorgeous boyfriend. “Please don’t be jealous.”

“You can’t deny what you had with Sam was pretty full-on.”

“It burned bright and fast like an asteroid,” I agreed. “But Flynn, he never had anything on you or Vaughn. It was a fling, that’s all. You know that’s not what we are. I’m not collecting men, by the way. So, you can shove that comment where the sun don’t shine.”

Flynn smiled and pulled me into a quick kiss. “You’re a classic, Per.”

He jumped in surprise when I jabbed him in the ribs and shut him out of the bathroom while I changed.

# Chapter Thirteen

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## Flynn

**W**hile Sam  *fucking*  Hardy and his electrician mates worked in the house, we decided to make ourselves useful by building the new garden shed. With a scowl, I looked up at the greying bastard, who was assembling something on the verandah. The guy looked even better now, with his premature salt-and-pepper hair. The farther I kept Perie away from him, the better. Turning my anger to the work in front of me, I flicked on the saw, pulled down my protective mask, and started cutting timber to length. Vaughn and Perie assembled the shed—a rustic thing we would paint a lighter, rustic blue, offsetting the dark colour she planned to paint the main house.

“What’s he got against that Sam bloke?” I heard Vaughn ask Perie.

“It’s silly,” Perie said, shaking her head.

“Is it?” I grumbled, throwing a length of timber onto the pile with some force. “If it’s so silly, why don’t you tell Vaughn instead of avoiding the subject?”

Perie glared at me but turned back to Vaughn. “Sam and I had a thing a couple of years ago when I was still at uni.”

“A thing?” Vaughn repeated, raising his eyebrows at her.

“A fling... thing...” Perie clarified with a shrug.

“Oh, right. I thought it might be something like that.” Vaughn picked up another piece of timber, and Perie helped him get it into place.

“What? Is that it? Simple as that?” I exclaimed as annoyance flowed through my body.

Perie sighed. “Yes, Flynn, simple as that.”

Vaughn turned his line of sight to the visitor. With a low whistle, he said, “I can’t say I blame her, to be honest.”

“Not you too.” I groaned with a frown.

“Chill out, Flynn. There’s no harm in looking. It doesn’t mean either of us will jump his bones. All that’s in the past, right, Perie?” Vaughn looked at her.

“Yes!” she said, exasperated.

Vaughn rubbed her shoulders. “Good. End of story, okay? Now, let’s leave it be and get this shed finished.”

I saw the pain on Perie’s face and regretted letting my jealousy get the better of me.

“Hello!”

At the sound of the familiar feminine voice, we all turned to see my mother making her way across the backyard. She had a black purse hugged to her side and a couple of shopping bags in hand.

“Mum! What are you doing here?” I asked, my mouth hanging open in surprise.

“I came for lunch like I said I would,” Brooke replied.

“We have a fair bit to do, Mum,” I said as I glanced down at the timber surrounding them.

Perie and Vaughn glanced at each other, then Perie whipped her hat off and wiped her brow. “I could do with a break.”

“Me too.” Vaughn tossed his gloves to the ground.

It looked like I was outvoted. “Righto,” I mumbled, trying to sound as cheerful as I could.

Brooke smiled. “Great. I brought lots of goodies.”

Vaughn quickly relieved Mum of her shopping bags and led us to some logs we had salvaged from the bush to use as edging for the garden bed. Perie sat between us guys, and we all took comfort from the shade of the bottlebrush tree above our heads. She watched Brooke fish out small bottles of Italian lemonade, fresh sourdough bread, Hungarian salami, and all the trimmings needed for the most epic salad sandwiches ever. Finally, she set down a packet of biscotti for a sweet after-lunch finisher.

Perie’s face lit up. “I’m already salivating over this spread.”

“Well, don’t just look at it. Dive in,” Brooke ordered.

No one hesitated.

Brooke laughed and looked up at the house. “So, tell me, how’s it all coming along?”

“It’s taking shape,” Perie said with a nod.

“It seems to be a big job.”

“It is, Mum, but it’ll be worth it in the end. Old houses look amazing when they’re restored,” I answered.

“I agree. How are you doing, Perie?” Brooke glanced cautiously at me. “Am I allowed to ask that yet?”

“You are,” Perie answered before I could jump in. “I’m doing better. I think it helps that Denise’s bedroom is all but gone.”

Vaughn squeezed Perie’s knee in a subtle show of comfort.

Brooke cocked her head to one side. “It is?”

I nodded and proceeded to explain how. “It’s the main bathroom, now. I mean, it’s the bones of the main bathroom, but you get the idea.”

“It’s going to be so fancy.” Brooke’s eyes lit up at the idea.

“The whole place will be. You should see the virtual tour Perie designed on her computer. It’s incredible. I reckon it’ll be even better in real life.” Pride filled Vaughn’s voice.

“I do the same for my clients. It helps to visualise the space as it could be, instead of just looking at a two-dimensional plan. It’s fabulous software,” Perie explained as she pressed her leg against Vaughn’s.

“Great idea.” Brooke fell silent. She shifted in her spot and wrung her hands together.

“What’s wrong, Mum?” I asked as I cocked my head at her.

“I’ve decided to go to Bali,” she blurted.

My mouthful of sandwich nearly launched itself from my mouth. “What?”

“I need to see Megan. I need to see that she’s okay and happy.”

“She is,” I assured her firmly.

“You don’t know that.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“How? From a phone call or two? That’s not good enough. I want to see her life and maybe meet her fellow... um...” Brooke rolled her hand in the air as she tried to recall his name.

“Innes,” Perie offered.

“Thank you. Yes, Innes.” Brooke gave a single nod.

A laugh erupted from my throat. I knew exactly what she was up to. “You want to give him the once-over, hey?”

“It’s not like that,” Brooke snapped.

“Sure, sure. You’re her mum. How could you resist? Plus, it’s a good excuse for a holiday.” I chuckled and wiggled my eyebrows.

“Now, about you two...” Brooke gestured to Perie and me.

Mum’s tone made me suddenly suspicious of her. “What about us two?”

“When are you and Perie finally going to make it official? You’ve been off and on for a decade now. Are you going to make a commitment to each other or not?” Brooke demanded.

“Aah, yeah, about that...” I scratched an invisible itch on the back of my neck.

“Oh, no more excuses, please! Just... just admit it. You’re soulmates. You have been since birth. It’s time to stop pretending.”

“The thing is, Brooke, it’s a bit complicated,” Perie said.

“Only if you allow it to be.”

I rested my hand on Vaughn’s shoulder and took Perie’s hand while Vaughn squeezed Perie’s knee. If we were going to

do this, we would do it properly and not leave anyone out.  
“We’re *all* soulmates.”

Brooke stared at the three of us blankly.

Vaughn studied her. “Are you alright?”

“Brooke?” Perie asked.

“Say something, Mum,” I almost begged.

“You’re *all* soulmates?” Brooke slowly repeated.

“Yeah. It actually started in high school. We didn’t understand it then, and we went about things the wrong way. It was why Perie and I didn’t talk for those few years.” I rubbed Perie’s arm.

“I thought something like that had happened between you, but I didn’t think it was this. I thought perhaps Vaughn was gay and inadvertently cheated on Perie,” Brooke asked.

“I did. I didn’t mean to. But like Flynn said, we didn’t understand what was happening,” Vaughn reiterated. “But I’m not gay. I’m bisexual, which means I’m attracted to Perie *and* Flynn.”

“*We* are bisexual,” I added, indicating the sexy former soldier and myself.

“You all love each other?” Brooke asked.

I swallowed nervously.

“Yep.” Vaughn’s succinct answer made me snap his surprised gaze back to him. “I mean, I love these two and know they love each other. Maybe they love me. I don’t know for sure yet. I can only speak for myself.”

Perie wrapped him up in a giant hug. “Vaughn, I do love you. So much.”

With a nervous gulp and the realisation of my feelings fully enveloping me freely for the first time, I cupped the back of Vaughn's head. I swallowed once again, the emotions were strong. I wanted to do things to this man to prove how I felt. I wanted no doubt to be left within the ex-soldier. I gazed into his dark, soulful eyes. "There's no question, Vaughn. No question."

I saw tears well in Vaughn's dark eyes. Before I knew it, my vision went blurry too. Fucking oath, I loved this man and didn't care if Mum witnessed it. Squashing Perie between us, I kissed Vaughn fiercely for a few moments. When he broke away, I stared directly into the man's soul. "I love you with my every breath."

Brooke clasped her hands in front of her heart and beamed. "I suppose that answers my question. Congratulations."

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As was typical of a Queensland summer's day, a wild thunderstorm arrived that afternoon, bringing a downpour that sent Perie into a panic about potential damage to the new bathroom. Although I attempted to reassure her that it was protected by the external flashing and she was overreacting, she insisted on standing guard in the room, just in case.

Vaughn was nowhere to be seen, and that concerned me. Maybe he hadn't believed my declaration at lunchtime? I finally found Vaughn sitting on a sawhorse underneath the house, peacefully watching the rain come down with a beer in hand.

I paused under the edge of the verandah.

Vaughn swallowed his mouthful of beer and looked over at me standing there in the rain. “You’re getting wet.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?” I asked, ignoring Vaughn’s comment.

Vaughn frowned.

“When I told you I loved you earlier, I didn’t think you believed me. You haven’t said a thing about it since.”

“What do you want me to say?” When I stayed silent, Vaughn continued, “I was overwhelmed, Flynn. Sometimes I get like that. I’m not always sure how to express myself.”

The tension in my shoulders eased. “So, you do believe me?”

Vaughn set his beer down in the dirt. He got to his feet, crossed to me, and cupped my face in his hands. “Beyond a doubt, Flynn. I love you too.”

Vaughn pulled me closer and kissed me deeply. As I responded in kind, passion flared inside me. Vaughn’s lips were firm against mine, taking command and showing exactly how much he desired me. My hands grappled with Vaughn’s shirt, and I drew it over his head. My shirt soon joined Vaughn’s in the dirt. Vaughn moaned as I nibbled down his abs while undoing his pants. His hard cock busted loose, begging for attention, and I was more than happy to provide it.

Vaughn leaned back against one of the house stumps as I drew his thick cock into my mouth and worked him in and out in a strong, steady rhythm. “Oh shit, Flynn.”

“Mmm, I love how you taste,” I muttered. “I love how you smell.” I brushed the tip of my nose across Vaughn’s stomach and kissed it. “I love the sounds you make when I do things to you.” I sucked on one of Vaughn’s balls.



“Fuck.” Vaughn shuddered.

“I love how you look out for Perie and treat her like she’s the world’s most precious treasure.”

“She is,” Vaughn told me firmly.

Chuckling, I grazed my teeth ever so lightly along Vaughn’s shaft. “I love how you always put me in my place. It’s the fucking sexiest thing in the world. One minute you’ll be grouchy with me, then the next, you’ll kiss or stroke me and hold me close. You’re gruff on the outside, but I know what lies beneath is soft and gooey. I love it all.”

Our gazes connected as I licked the tip of Vaughn’s cock.

“I wanna fuck you,” Vaughn groaned. “Ugh, so bad!”

I was on my feet and dropping my pants in a flash. Vaughn smashed his mouth against mine in a desperate kiss before he spun me around to lean on the sawhorse. Vaughn eased his fingers into my arse, slowly working me open.

“Aah, just fuck me, will ya?” I snapped.

“Calm down, you impatient bugger. I’m trying to prep you,” Vaughn responded as he introduced more fingers.

Vaughn lathered his cock with loads of saliva, and I hoped that would be enough for what we were about to do. He slowly pushed his length into my arse, and we both took a deep breath. Fuck. I was so tight, and he was so thick.

Slowly, he pushed in farther, easing himself inside slowly, allowing my body to adjust to his girth. Eventually, Vaughn broke through the tightness and settled himself up to the hilt, his balls dangling against mine.

The burning sensation eased and gave way to pleasure. “Oh God, that feels good,” I moaned and rocked gently against

Vaughn, who moved gently within me.

“Oh, yes. Please fuck me.”

Vaughn didn't have to be asked twice. With his fingers digging into my hips, he dragged his cock almost completely out before driving into me again. Slowly but surely, he picked up speed. Eventually, all thoughts fell away, and an animalistic instinct took hold. We became slaves to Vaughn's dick as he fucked me hard, and we both revelled in one another's cries of pleasure.

“Oh, yeah, Vaughn. Keep fucking me.”

Vaughn growled a loud, guttural sound so primal it was like fucking magic to my ears.

“I'm gonna come,” I announced moments later.

That was like a permission slip for Vaughn. He gave himself over to his orgasm as he reached around and fisted my cock. Our cries echoed off the timber decking above us, and I stiffened in Vaughn's hand. A moment later, I shot myself all over Vaughn's fingers and the dirt below. Vaughn joined me, filling me with his seed.

Vaughn was fierce when he came. It was the only time he seemed to let go of his quiet personality, and I saw the wildness within him. It was the hottest thing ever. I was privileged to be one of only two people who saw Vaughn during his most intimate moments.

Vaughn slouched over me, and we rested our spent bodies atop the sawhorse, huffing and puffing as we caught our breath.

Vaughn kissed my back, and I smiled. “Perie missed a good time.”

“We’ll make it up to her.” Vaughn slowly removed himself from my body.

When I turned around and peered up at the muscular man towering over me, Vaughn bent down and kissed me slowly, deeply, and so passionately that my heart threatened to break out of my ribcage.

“Fuck, I love you, Flynn,” Vaughn gasped against my lips.

“I love you.” I carried on the kiss. How could I ever get enough of this guy?

# Chapter Fourteen

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## Perie

“Let’s go for round two.”

Intrigued by Flynn’s voice, I pushed away from the wall I was sitting against in the new bathroom. This storm was bothering me, and I welcomed the company. We were so close to finishing the new bathroom, and I didn’t want the wild weather to set us back. Logically, I knew how good Flynn was at his job and that the place wouldn’t leak. But this was my baby, my pet project, and I was probably a little overprotective.

“Round two of what?” I mumbled and looked up curiously as Flynn and Vaughn stepped through the door, completely naked. Despite the rush of desire that shot straight to my core, I tried to act nonchalantly. “Aah, what’s going on?”

“We’re here to distract you,” Flynn told me.

“Distract me from what?”

“Not distract you. Put you at ease,” Vaughn corrected.

“You need to forget about this storm and relax, Per,” Flynn informed me.

“What did you have in mind?” It was a pointless question, of course. From the sexy sight before me, I knew exactly what they planned.

Mouth agape, I watched as Vaughn dropped to his knees in front of me and slowly drew down the fly of my jeans. When he kissed my belly, I shivered in delight.

Flynn squatted beside me and drew my T-shirt over my head. He slipped his fingers under my bra strap and nibbled my shoulder. My eyes fluttered closed as I sighed.

“Is this working?” Flynn whispered as he unclasped my bra and slid it slowly from my shoulders, exposing my nipples to the cool air.

“Yes,” I whispered, gasping at how tight my nipples became.

“Good,” Vaughn said as he pulled my jeans and underwear down my legs and tossed them to the side. He parted my legs, hooked his arms around my waist, and tugged me towards him.

“Yes,” I whispered with a gasp of anticipation.

Vaughn’s mouth hit home as Flynn sucked, nibbled, and pinched my nipples, sending sensations over my body that made me feel like floating in the air. While both men worshipped my body, I wrapped my hand around Flynn’s cock. It was only fair that I repaid the favour. Pulling Flynn closer, I locked my mouth onto his cock and felt him grow hard as I sucked him in deep.

“Yeah, good girl, Perie. That feels fucking fantastic,” Flynn murmured.

Not wanting to end this right as it started, I pulled my mouth off Flynn but continued to stroke him as I locked my eyes with Vaughn’s. He hadn’t let up on my pussy, sending his tongue into me. My body began to writhe against him of its

own accord, and he moved his tongue to my clit. “Don’t stop, Vaughn,” I moaned. “Don’t stop. I want to come.”

But he stopped right before I could climax, leaving me desperate for release.

I turned to glance at Flynn, who had disappeared. “What the hell?”

Vaughn simply chuckled and sent a devilish smile my way as he got to his knees. Flynn returned and tossed Vaughn a foil packet. The ex-soldier prepped himself before sinking his cock as far as he could into my desperate, pulsing pussy.

“Oh, my God!” My mouth opened in a silent O. My body always took a while to adjust to Vaughn’s size, so simply having him this deep was enough to give me a small orgasm.

Vaughn waited, riding me out. When I relaxed, he pulled me against him to straddle his lap. He wrapped his arms tightly around me, and we kissed as he moved within me.

“Oh my God, I love you, Vaughn,” I murmured as he curled his fingers into my hair. I felt Flynn press up behind me and arched my neck, allowing him to lather the area in kisses. “I love you, too, Flynn.”

“I love you, hotness. I want to show you too. Is that okay?” Flynn murmured between kisses.

*What is he intending?* I wondered.

He traced his finger down my cheek to the corner of my lips. “Do you trust me, Per?”

Intrigued, I nodded. I jumped when Flynn’s finger fondled my anus.

“Relax,” Flynn whispered into my ear, his breath sending goose bumps down my neck.

When I did so, Flynn slowly pushed his finger inside. It felt cold and wet with lube and slid in surprisingly easy. Vaughn moved within me gently as Flynn introduced a second digit and worked it around. I let out a noise that was somewhere between pain and pleasure.

“That’s it, baby,” Vaughn whispered.

“Are you okay?” Flynn asked.

A naughty smile played on my lips, and I nodded at him. Vaughn chuckled and kissed me.

Flynn pulled his fingers from me and slowly slid his cock inside. He paused when I tensed. “Breathe, Per. Relax and breathe. Let me in, hotness. I want to be one with you.”

Flynn’s words meant the world to me. I gave my body to my men, and Flynn slid farther inside me.

“I’m in,” Flynn announced.

“Oh, yes, you are,” I moaned.

Vaughn reached around me to Flynn. “I can feel you, Flynn. I can feel you through her.”

“You both feel...” I was so overwhelmed that I couldn’t even finish the sentence.

Flynn rested his mouth against my ear. “We’re both going to fuck you now. Is that okay, Per?”

“Yes. Yes, please,” I begged. I’d never needed anything so much as I needed to lose myself with them at that moment.

My breasts pressed against Vaughn’s chest, and I was squashed between them. Our bodies began moving rhythmically as both men took control of my body. My pussy reacted quickly, pulsing around Vaughn’s cock as Flynn’s



stroked in and out of my arse. I wrapped my arms around Vaughn's shoulders and clung to him. I was so close to my release.

Flynn looked at Vaughn over my shoulder. "She feels good."

"Yeah, she does." Vaughn moaned as they both pushed deeper into me. "Oh, God, I need to fuck her hard."

Flynn grinned as Vaughn's aggression reared its sexy head again. "Go to town, mate."

"Yes, please!" I begged again, hoping I didn't sound like a broken record.

Vaughn tugged my hair until my eyes captured his. "Don't break eye contact," he ordered me. "Keep watching me."

"Do you like what you see then?" I asked in a sultry voice.

"Yeah, babe," Vaughn said with a growl.

I rested my head back against Flynn's shoulder. "You know what to do, sexy soldier."

They pounded my body relentlessly. My cries were loud and unrelenting, and the guys joined me. The three of us gave ourselves over to one another until we were so spent we could no longer hold each other up. We collapsed together, huffing and puffing, our sweaty bodies still entangled.

"Holy shit," Flynn exclaimed.

"T-that was the... best sex I've ever had," I huffed between breaths.

"Fuck, yes," Vaughn agreed.

"I don't want it to end," I admitted.

Vaughn's soft lips curled up in a devilish grin. He glanced at Flynn, who was grinning as well.

"Do you think you could go another round, Per?" Flynn sounded hopeful.

Wanting to cherish being snuggled between the two men I adored, I grabbed his hand and pulled until his arm was around Vaughn and me. "Give me a few minutes."

"I think it's Vaughn's turn," Flynn decided.

Vaughn laughed. "Is that a challenge? Because I'll take it."

With a giggle, I immersed myself in the insane happiness I was feeling and how the thought of going all night with these two was quite a turn-on. I would certainly enjoy giving it a red-hot go.

After a moment, I turned my attention to the ceiling and listened hard. "The rain stopped."

Both men smiled.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## Perie

**T**he night's shenanigans left me with a delicious ache, the kind you only ever receive from being thoroughly fucked, and I could barely move. The guys looked a little stiff as well. I laughed when Vaughn patted Flynn on the arse, causing Flynn to jump.

Flynn glared at me. "You think that's funny, do you?"

"Yes," I said and flashed him an unashamed grin.

"You don't look so crash-hot there yourself, Per."

Oh shit, he had that dangerously mischievous look in his eyes.

"I'm fine," I lied.

A chuckle slipped from Flynn's throat that suggested I wasn't fooling him.

"Well, since none of us can move much today, I suggest we do some painting." Vaughn screwed a paint roller onto an extendable pole and tossed it to me. He followed suit with one for Flynn and then picked up some paintbrushes. "Which room would you like to start with, Perie-Berry?"

"Any of the smaller bedrooms."

Vaughn hefted the tin of base coat and carried it into the first of the bedrooms. He poured a generous amount into a tray, and we each took a wall.

Flynn opened up a music app on his phone. “What a bummer. I don’t have my speaker with me.”

“It’s better than nothing,” I replied.

“It sounds so tinny,” Flynn protested.

With a roll of my eyes, I set my roller against the wall. “You’ve become so spoilt. Stop being a brat.”

“I’m no brat!”

When Flynn pouted, Vaughn chuckled and added, “You kind of are.”

“No ‘kind of’ about it.” I cocked my hip and rested my fist against it.

Flynn dipped his finger into the paint and dotted it on my face. My mouth dropped open, and I swung my roller at him. He ducked out of the way, but I chased him and rolled the white base coat down the front of his shirt.

Flynn glared down at his shirt. “I can’t believe you just did that.”

“Seeing is believing.” I was more than pleased with my handiwork.

“Prettying up the pretty boy, sweetheart?”

Flynn scowled. “I’m not a pretty boy.”

Vaughn and I smirked at one another, then turned back to him. “Yeah, you are,” we said in unison.

Flynn aimed his pole at Vaughn. In a flash, Vaughn snatched my pole from me, spun it around in some bizarre and

fancy hand move, and snapped it to a stop an inch from Flynn's face. Flynn jumped and leaned back, then looked at Vaughn in surprise.

"You want to try me?" Vaughn asked, his voice low and threatening.

"Fuck. Where did you learn to do that?"

"MMA. I learned it alongside basic training. It was useful in the army."

"You know mixed martial arts?" I asked, awestruck. Vaughn was becoming sexier by the day.

"Yep."

"That's seriously hot."

Flynn met Vaughn's dark eyes and his own hardened. He touched his pole to Vaughn's. "Challenge accepted."

Vaughn smirked. "You're playing with fire."

Flynn pushed his luck and managed to roll paint down Vaughn's face. "Ooh, so messy."

Vaughn jabbed his roller at Flynn, but Flynn held him back. The pair grappled with their poles, trying to push against one another. Vaughn jabbed his roller at Flynn, getting some paint on him before Flynn pushed the roller down towards the floor. The two of them began to laugh, and Vaughn hooked his leg around Flynn's.

"No, you don't!" Flynn shouted with another laugh.

Despite Vaughn's best efforts to trip Flynn, the pair managed to stay on their feet. When the hulk of a man wrapped his elbow around Flynn's neck, the builder knew he was in trouble.

When a flick of thick paint hit their faces, they froze. As one, they turned their attention to me, paintbrush in hand. The laughter died in my throat as dread filled me.

“You’re going to pay for that, Perie,” Flynn warned.

With a gulp, I began to step slowly backwards. “Would you believe me if I told you it was an accident?”

“That sounds like bullshit to me,” Flynn sang.

“Get her,” Vaughn ordered.

I made a dash for the door, but Vaughn blocked my way, so I dashed under Flynn’s arms and rushed to the other side of the room. When I reached the paint tin again, I dipped my brush in, danced about, and flung paint at them again.

“We’re taking enemy fire!” Flynn cried as he ducked.

Vaughn held his pole out to the side, widening his stance. “You’re not going anywhere, baby.”

Biting my bottom lip, I considered my next move. Considering Vaughn’s super soldier training, Flynn would be easier to get past. So I grabbed Flynn’s pole and tried to push him aside. Vaughn took the opportunity to wrap his strong arm around my waist and hoist me off my feet.

“The super soldier has got me!” I screamed as I howled with laughter.

“The enemy is contained!” Vaughn announced.

I wriggled and tried to pry Vaughn’s fingers off me, even waving the brush behind me in an attempted assault. Vaughn turned his face to the side, but I managed to reach him. He grabbed hold of my hand and the brush in an attempt to yank it out of my grasp. Flynn unexpectedly swooped in and rolled paint over Vaughn and me.

“Oi, who’s side are you on?” Vaughn spluttered.

Flynn grinned. “My own.”

“See? You should totally be getting him, not me. I’m innocent,” I insisted.

The guys guffawed.

“Yeah, and Isobel never smoked dope on Fridays behind the maintenance shed at school,” Flynn replied with a chuckle.

“She totally did,” I confirmed.

He jabbed his finger in my direction. “Point made.”

Vaughn finally pulled the brush from my hand. He nibbled my neck and shoulder as he bunched up and lifted my shirt.

“What are you doing?” I whispered, my voice becoming breathy.

“Torturing the enemy.” Vaughn gently traced the brush from my tits down to my belly.

My breath hitched, and my pussy clenched when his teeth grazed my neck again.

“I’m so glad you didn’t wear a bra today, baby,” Vaughn growled.

“Well, this has taken a turn for the fucking hot,” Flynn observed.

Vaughn tore off my shirt and teased my nipples with the bristles of the brush. “I can’t resist her.”

“I don’t blame you. Not one bit.” Even as he said the words, Flynn was dragging my jeans down my legs and wasted no time in lowering his mouth to my pussy.



When I jumped, Vaughn murmured, “Still tender, Perie-Berry?”

“Uh-huh.” But I didn’t care. Flynn’s tongue playing with my opening and clit was too delicious to resist. “Don’t stop, though.”

Flynn stared up at me intently as he went about his business.

As I began to writhe, Vaughn held me firmly in place as I exploded all over Flynn’s tongue. He moaned into me as he lapped up my juices before trailing kisses up my body and settling on my mouth, kissing me deeply and relentlessly, letting me taste him.

“We have to work,” I mumbled when I noticed Flynn undoing his pants.

“Uh-huh.” Though his actions said differently. He hoisted me onto his body, sank his cock inside me, and my body reacted instantly. “This won’t take long,” he promised.

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*Vaughn*

Perie’s gold-flecked hazel eyes stared up at me as I brushed gentle strokes through her hair. The sex was great, sure. Well, better than great. But this was always the best part.

Snuggling with my loves on the floor of the spare bedroom with white drop sheets gathered around us, painting materials strewn everywhere, and paint splattered on the walls, I was at peace. I loved the way Flynn was dozing against Perie’s stomach, holding her in that bear hug again.

Perie absently traced the tattoo on my chest, her face pensive. Curious about what was going on in her brilliant mind, I asked, “What are you thinking about, Perie-Berry?”

“Lots of things,” she mumbled.

When she said nothing more, I pressed her. “Care to share?”

“Well, I was thinking that maybe we should plant a memorial garden for your friend and Denise.”

When my mouth fell open, Perie averted her gaze. “If you don’t like the idea—”

Was she crazy? “Sweetheart, I love it. I think it’s one of the best ideas I’ve ever heard.”

Perie lifted an eyebrow. “One of?”

“It’s right up there with me coming to work for you,” I said.

“*With* me. *With us.*” Perie glanced down at Flynn, who was snoring softly. Her eyes fluttered closed when I kissed her forehead.

“With you,” I confirmed.

“I was thinking of planting rosemary for your friend since it’s a remembrance plant. Or is that a cliché?”

“No, I think it’s perfect. What should Denise’s plant be? What was her favourite?” I asked.

“She loved daisies.”

“Then that’s what we’ll plant.”

Perie smiled and gazed at me for a ridiculously inordinate amount of time. “I meant what I said to Brooke yesterday,

Vaughn. I wasn't trying to prove anything. I have fallen in love with you again."

"I never stopped loving you," I whispered, cradling Perie's head in my hand. "You've been with me all these years. I took you to Afghanistan with me. I tried to run from the two of you, but you were buried deep inside my soul. You got me through the hardest times."

Perie's eyes welled up. "Even when you were injured?"

"Especially then." When a tear fell, I swiped my thumb across the apple of her cheek and kissed her forehead again. When she moved into my kiss, I wondered if she could hear my heart thudding loudly in my chest.

"I hope I'm included in this love fest," Flynn mumbled groggily.

Perie and I glanced down at our blond boyfriend as he traced his finger across the dry base coat on Perie's skin.

Perie wrinkled up her nose. "It would be kind of weird without you."

Flynn laughed against the skin of her hip. "You're such a sweet-talker, Per."

"I only speak the truth."

"You're going to need a shower to wash this off." Flynn glanced around the room and frowned. "And we kind of fucked up the walls."

"It'll clean up," I answered. "Looks like we've got an all-nighter ahead of us since we used up most of the day doing other things."

"Sure." Perie attempted to move, but her body protested. "Just give me a few minutes."

“Alright.” When my eyelids grew heavy, I hooked an arm under my head. The sound of Flynn’s steady breathing met my ears once more, and one glance at Perie told me she was going the same way.

Bugger it.

If they were going to nap, I was too. Who cared if we had rooms to paint?

# Chapter Sixteen

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## Perie

**O**ur progress over the weeks since Brooke had popped by for lunch was incredible. Most of the house was nearly finished, and my big, fancy bathroom *was* finished. The claw-foot bath was positioned in front of the open fireplace, beside the giant window, so I could relax, gaze out over the bush, and stay warm when doing so in the winter.

We had also painted the house from top to bottom, and now that the new shutters were on the windows, everything was taking shape.

Opening my daily schedule one morning, I was pleased to see things were up to date. Then I noticed the *actual* date. “What the hell?”

“What is it?” Flynn asked from the sink, where he was cleaning dishes from breakfast and dinner the night before.

“It’s the twenty-fourth of December. It’s Christmas Eve, and I never even realised. How did I let that sneak up on us?” A frown crinkled my forehead.

“We’ve been a tad busy, Perie,” Flynn answered.

“But it’s my favourite holiday, and I’m completely unprepared.”

Flynn threw down the tea towel and came to lean opposite me at the kitchen bench I stood at. “Well, it’s early. We can go into town and get a few things. What do you need?”

“A leg of ham, salads, sweets, starters, a Christmas tree, gifts for you and Vaughn—”

Flynn held up a hand, cutting me off. “You don’t need to worry about getting me a present. Let’s focus on the other stuff.”

“I am buying you a present,” I said adamantly.

Flynn gulped at the venom in my eyes. “Okay. Well then, I think we need to make our way into town for the morning. Let’s go and get Vaughn.”

With an excited squeal, I bounced around to Flynn and pulled him in for a rough hug and quick kiss. “Thank you, Flynn. You’re awesome.”

“Anything for you, hotness,” he replied, laughing at me as I bounded off to get ready.

Once I was dressed in a red wraparound dress and black ballet flats, I met the boys at the Amarok and climbed into the back seat as Vaughn made his way to the same door on the other side.

“Am I chauffeuring you two?” Flynn asked as he settled into the driver’s seat.

“You don’t belong back here, princess. Take the front seat,” Vaughn told me.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive,” Vaughn confirmed.

Instead of getting out the door, I climbed through the centre of the vehicle. Flynn smacked my arse as I plonked down in the seat.

“Oi!” My half-hearted scowl made Flynn laugh. Smiling over the enjoyment the cheeky spank gave me, I pulled the seat belt across my body and said, “Let’s get going.”

Flynn steered the vehicle down the driveway.

We knew we were approaching the town limits fifteen minutes later when we drove past the Christmas tree in the middle of the main roundabout the council put up every year. The roundabout led drivers into town or onto the bypass, and the tree made it difficult for drivers to see and give way to each other. T’was the season, after all, and not even the increased number of fender benders stopped the council from decorating the town how they wanted.

Pulling out a pen and notepad, I got down to business. “Okay, we need a plan of attack. Vaughn, you’re getting the meat.”

Vaughn gripped the grab handle above the window as he was bounced around in the back. “Righto.”

“Flynn, you’re in charge of groceries, and I’ll get the decorations.” I peeled off the list and handed it to Flynn, then jabbed the end of my pen at him. “Do *not* deviate from the list. Got it?” I flashed him my don’t-fuck-with-me face.

“Got it.” He held onto it tightly.

“So, we’re splitting up?” Vaughn asked.

“Yes. So, I can buy both of you gifts. And before either of you say anything, I am buying you gifts. Let me, please?” I sent them both a pleading look.



Vaughn squeezed my shoulder, and Flynn brushed his hand along my thigh. Both touches sent sparks through my body.

Vaughn leaned forwards so his mouth was close to my ear. “As long as you let us spoil you too.”

My heart fluttered, and I leaned into the kiss he pressed to my temple.

“Perie loves being spoiled,” Flynn said.

“It’s true,” I admitted.

Vaughn chuckled. “What woman doesn’t?”

I was out of the car the moment Flynn found a parking space under a long, thick garland of tinsel that would put a two-meter-long carpet python to shame. “See you in a few hours. You know how to reach me.” I waved my smartphone in the air, then spun away and skipped off down the footpath.

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### *Vaughn*

My first port of call was the computer store. I was determined to get my father set up with a cheap but useful computer for his business. Even if Dad wouldn’t use it, Robert, his smart, young employee, certainly would. Dad would probably rail against the idea because he was so old-fashioned, but I could be just as pigheaded as my old man, and I would have my way.

As I passed a jewellery shop, I paused, my gaze falling on a rose gold bracelet with interspersed rose gold beads and tiny diamonds. At least, I thought they were diamonds. Nevertheless, they were pretty. They were perfect for *her*. I moved towards the doorway, then paused and returned to the

window. Did I want to impulse buy or think about my purchase for Perie?

I glanced at my watch and realised it was half past ten in the morning on Christmas Eve Day in Granite Ridge. There wasn't exactly a whole lot of time to do last-minute shopping, and I still had to get to the butcher before they shut too.

“Hi there, Vaughn. May I help you?”

The gentle voice of the pretty brunette standing in the doorway made me turn. Did I know her? She seemed to know me, but that had happened a lot since I returned. So many people knew who I was, but I couldn't remember them for the life of me. Had she been in school with me? She appeared to be much younger, so perhaps she was a few years behind me.

After checking her name badge, I said, “G'day, Jameson. Aah, yeah, I'm thinking about buying this bracelet as a gift, but I'm not sure about it.”

Jameson moved beside me, her hands tucked behind her back, and inspected it with me. “It's a lovely piece. What are you unsure about?”

“Whether she'll like it,” I huffed, feeling slightly embarrassed.

“Who is it for?”

A blush washed over my face. “My girlfriend.”

“Aw, lovely! Would you like to come in and take a closer look at it?” Jameson suggested.

“Okay.” I followed the woman inside and watched her walk to the display window. She opened the cabinet using a small key attached to a springy rope at her hip and carefully

lifted out the bracelet and its bedding. My hands became clammy as Jameson approached me.

The way the gold caught the light as she set it on the countertop, and the sparkle of the maybe-diamonds let me know then and there that I was making the right decision. Perie deserved this and more.

Bending to inspect the bracelet closer, I asked, “Are they diamonds?”

“Swarovski crystals, actually. Our diamonds aren’t displayed in the front window, and, unfortunately, we’ve sold all our diamond bracelets as Christmas gifts.”

“Do you think she’d like it?” I wasn’t sure why I would ask a stranger such a personal question, but this woman knew her stuff.

Jameson rested her elbows on the bench, bringing herself down to my level. “That all depends on what kind of woman she is. Is she fancy? A bit of a tomboy? Does she like pretty things and dressing up, even occasionally? Does she like to be a little spoilt?”

A smile touched my lips. “All of the above.”

“Considering it’ll be coming from a man like you, Vaughn, I think she’d love it no matter what.”

I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye. Was she coming onto me?

No. All I could see in her gaze was genuine warmth.

“Consider it sold.”

“Lovely. This will be a beautiful Christmas gift. She’s a lucky lady indeed,” Jameson gushed. “Would you like it gift wrapped?”

“Absolutely.”

“Won’t be long.” Jameson picked up the bracelet with a flourish and went to prepare the gift.

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### *Perie*

The festive section of Granite Ridge’s cheap shop was awe-inspiring, and I stared at it with the same excitement that might afflict a small child on Christmas morning. Those wonderful decorations were so incredibly cheap, and they didn’t even look tacky. Determined to make this whirlwind Christmas celebration spectacular, I grabbed everything I could from the shelves—baubles, tinsel, Santa Claus figurines, adorable little Christmas animals, a star topper, a nutcracker soldier, lanterns, bowls and cutlery, and the all-important plastic Christmas tree. Soon enough, I stumbled to the cash register and dumped my armful of stuff on the counter.

When the young boy’s eyes widened at the collection, I flashed him a sheepish look. “I... may have to rethink some of my impulse shopping here.”

“No worries.” The pimply teenager lifted the handheld scanner from its cradle. “Where should I start?”

“Definitely the tree.”

*Beep.*

The boy looked at me expectantly as I considered the next item to go into the bag.

“Definitely the tinsel and the baubles.”

*Beep, Beep.*

This was where it became difficult. Oblivious to those around me, I sorted dumbly through the items.

“Ma’am?” the boy asked.

“Shh. Give me a minute.” I held up a hand to him.

“Alright. It’s just...”

I glanced at the kid, then turned at the sound of someone clearing their throat. Behind me was a line-up of people that could have been a mile long. With a grimace, I turned back to the kid. “All of it. Give me all of it.”

“Are you sure?”

“No!” After a moment’s hesitation, I decided, “Okay, do it.”

“O-okay.” Reluctantly, he began to scan the items once again.

When he reached the end of the pile, he announced the cost, and I blinked. “It’s what?”

“It’s one hundred seventy-eight dollars and sixty-nine cents,” the boy repeated.

“I thought this was a cheap shop?” I exclaimed.

“It is.”

My mountain of stuff was one hundred seventy-eight dollars and sixty-nine cents, and I’d just spent a small fortune on the guys’ gifts. What on earth had I done? Fishing out my card, I held my breath and swiped away. I knew I was going to regret this come statement time.

My arms were aching after taking a few mere steps down the street. Relief flowed through me when I saw Flynn make

his way to the Amarok with a trolley load of goodies, but then he paused and changed direction.

With a curious frown, I followed him.

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*Flynn*

My mouth fell open as Izzy and Michael carried baby Max out of the little church beside the supermarket amid a circle of well-wishers. Mum was there, happy and hanging onto Chris' arm without a care in the world. There were even a few old mates from my school days in attendance.

It seemed everyone was invited but me.

I only told Mum a couple of weeks back that I was done with the Coopers, so I wasn't sure why it hurt so much. But I couldn't help the old frustration that crept up inside me. This was it then. All the proof I needed to know that I honestly didn't matter to any of them.

"Hey, what's the deal?" Perie asked, breathless, as she stopped beside me. When I didn't answer, she followed my gaze. "Is that the christening?"

"Yeah," I spat.

"They really didn't invite you. God, those arseholes. I'm sorry, Flynn."

"You have nothing to be sorry for." I shook his head slightly and spat out a wry laugh. "Look at them. So perfect and proper. They make everything look effortless. It's like nothing touches them."

“Except they’re not perfect, not even close. There’s no such thing as perfection, Flynn. Life is messy and real. No matter how fantastic they look, we both know how ugly they are on the inside. The whole town knows it. Why do you think everyone calls the Coopers snobs?” She nudged me with her shoulder. “I know it’s difficult, but you honestly don’t need them. You never did.”

I pressed a kiss to Perie’s forehead, then glanced down at her mountain of shopping. “Jeez, Perie, what the fuck did you buy?”

“All the decorations!”

Her awe-filled voice made me laugh, instantly lifting my mood. She had a way of doing that for me. I took her shopping bags and settled them in the trolley.

Perie’s adorable smile touched her lips. “I made you laugh.”

“You always make me laugh. You always make me feel better about myself,” I murmured as I pulled her into a gentle kiss. “I love you, Per.”

“I love you, too, Flynn.” She wrapped her arms around my waist and snuggled into me.

As we turned away from the sight of the Coopers, I held my girl tight against me, cherishing how her small body felt in my arms. Perie Miller was my anchor, and Vaughn Forester was my new voice of reason. The two of them were honestly all I needed in this world.

# Chapter Seventeen

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## Vaughn

**W**ith Perie and Flynn's assistance, I carried the new all-in-one computer and associated accessories into Dad's mower shop. We walked past the tired old one-metre-tall Christmas tree that sat by the office door and still bore the same decorations Mum and I had decorated it with when we bought it in 1988. A familiar woman looked up from the other side of the reception desk, causing me to pause for a moment. "Vicki? What are you doing back there?"

I didn't mean for the question to sound so accusatory, but before I could take it back, Vicki glared at me. "Your dad needed extra help since you made yourself scarce."

"I didn't mean to," I said, feeling bad about not popping in more often.

"Yeah, well, you have. Where have you been?" Vicki demanded.

"Sorry, that's probably my fault. He's been helping restore my aunty's old house." Perie stepped forwards to greet the woman. "Nice to see you, Vicki."

Vicki narrowed her eyes. "Oh, I get it. You're hooking up with Perie Miller again. That is *so* high school."

“Vicki. As bitchy as always,” Flynn observed. “Don’t let the jealousy turn you too green, now. Mind you, it’s kind of festive, isn’t it?”

Vicki gaped at him in surprise.

“Where are we setting up?” Flynn asked, blatantly ignoring Vicki.

“In the back.” The three of us headed into the office.

Flynn and I got busy setting the computer up on the ancient metal desk and were soon arguing about how to install the software.

“Perie, tell him that’s not how you do it!” Flynn demanded, turning his attention to her.

Perie held up her hands in surrender. “I’m not saying a word.”

“What’s all this?” Dad demanded as he entered the office.

We all jumped at his sudden gruff appearance.

Slowly, as though I was approaching a skittish horse, I got to my feet. “Hey, Merry Christmas, Dad.”

Dad ignored my greeting and indicated the computer. “You didn’t answer me.”

“It’s your Christmas present.” I patted the top of the computer. “I thought I’d help you get more efficiency from your business and install a computerised system.”

Dad screwed up his face. “I’m no good with those things.”

“You don’t have to be. I’ll help you and train your employees,” I vowed.

The scowl on Dad’s face deepened. “How can you train them if you’re not around? I thought you up and left town. I’ve

been worried about you, son. Worried that maybe your demons had caught up with you.”

I reeled from the hurt reflected in my father’s voice and his implication. Moving across to the older man, I rested a hand on his shoulder. “No, Dad. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to disappear on you. I’ve had a lot going on. Nothing to do with my demons, though. They’re firmly in check, I promise.”

Dave’s eyes travelled the room, from Perie to Flynn, before settling on me again. “Are you three at it again?”

Perie stiffened. “I’m sorry?”

“I know what happens when you three spend time together. How you hurt each other.”

“It’s not like that, Dad. Not this time,” I promised, dropping my hand away and holding both out to him.

“What’s it like then?”

“Uh...” Flynn faltered.

“It’s...” I wasn’t sure how to phrase it, either.

“We’re in love.”

All three of us blokes turned to Perie, mouths agape.

“I love Vaughn. I love Flynn. They love me, and they love each other. We always have, but this time, we admitted it. We’re not hurting each other, Mr. Forester. We’re growing together.”

A heavy silence fell upon the room, and I gulped.

“As long as that’s true.”

Flynn turned back to the older man. “What did you say?”

“I said as long as that’s true,” Dad repeated.

“Yeah, I heard you, but—”

“Then why’d you make me repeat myself?” Dad snapped.

“Because I can’t quite believe it. I always thought you were a little bit judgemental, no offence...” Flynn said with a shrug.

Dad levelled Flynn with one of his hard glares. “Looks like you’re the judgemental one, boy.”

Drawing my shoulders up, I asked, “Does that mean you’re okay with this?”

“I don’t understand it, but it’s none of my business. It’s your life.” Tenderness touched Dad’s hardened features as he studied me. “All I ever wanted was for you to be happy, son.”

A lump formed in my throat, and I nodded once.

“Let me know when you’re all set up. I’ll send Rob in for a quick lesson,” Dad said, waving his hand towards the computer.

One corner of my mouth lifted. “Will do, old man.”

With a snigger, Dad headed back out into the workshop.

# Chapter Eighteen

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## Flynn

A fantastic aroma emanated from the kitchen the next morning, waking me at the crack of dawn. Rubbing my eyes, I staggered to the breakfast bench to find Perie cooking up a storm. Not only was something already in the oven, the benches were also scattered with ingredients for salads, sides, and desserts, and bowls and utensils in various states of use.

“Morning,” I mumbled around a yawn.

Perie looked up from where she was cutting Christmas shapes out of cookie dough. “Good morning.”

“How long have you been up?”

With a shrug, she continued her task. “I’m not sure, exactly, but pretty early. I had lots to get done.” The smile she sent me was devious, devilish, and oh-so-sexy. Abandoning her baking, she tiptoed over to me.

“What are you up to?” I demanded in a low voice, narrowing my eyes at her.

“You haven’t noticed anything, have you? The tinsel down the hallway? The figurines on all the windowsills? The Christmas tree behind you?”

When I turned to take everything in, lo and behold, the tackiest, cheapest plastic tree sat in the corner, adorned with all

kinds of baubles, glittery string, and a star on the top.

Perie wrapped her arms around my waist from behind. “Merry Christmas,” she whispered.

Turning to her, I cupped her face between my rough hands and peered into the kind, familiar eyes of my lifelong friend, life partner, and soulmate. “This is the best Christmas ever.”

“Why?”

“Because I get to tell the woman of my dreams how much I love her. Finally.” My usual playfulness was absent, replaced by a tenderness I knew Perie had never seen before. This was pure unadulterated love, Flynn-style. I was putting myself out on a limb.

Her response was spot on. Better than spot on.

“I love you so much, Flynn.” Her eyes glazed over. In the corner of her eye nestled a tear, which she attempted to blink away. I pulled her into a slow, deep kiss and savoured the taste of her mouth and tongue and the feel of her body against mine, her soft hair and supple skin beneath my fingers.

When she broke the kiss off, she did so reluctantly. “You’ve never kissed me like that before.”

“I’ve never let myself feel so much before,” I replied as I pecked her forehead.

“Promise me you will from now on?”

“I promise, hotness.” I pecked her lips once more. “Where’s Vaughn?”

“He went for a jog.” Perie glanced at her baking. “I need to finish my cookies.”

“Righto. I’ll make us some coffee.”

---

*Perie*

Dressed in a festive green, off-the-shoulder peasant top and green pants, I added a pair of tiny Swarovski Christmas tree earrings and a glass snowman necklace, then checked my reflection. I looked perfect for the occasion.

The small card table was decorated with a red tablecloth with silver reindeer, and plastic snowman-motif placemats sat under paper plates printed with Christmas wreaths. Beside each of the three places was a Christmas bon-bon, and in the middle of the table was an arrangement of plastic Christmas plants. The only real parts of the display were the crystal punch cups and the silver cutlery. It was tacky but beautiful, a style only I could pull off.

Once I was satisfied with how everything looked, I stepped out onto the back verandah and went in search of the guys I hadn't seen in hours. There they were, down the back near the shed. "Lunch is..." I began to shout, but the words died in my throat when I saw the shed was now painted in the beautiful shade of rustic blue I'd picked out.

My mouth dropped open as Vaughn looked up at me, paintbrush in hand. His bare chest glistened with a fine sheen of sweat, somehow making him look even sexier. "G'day, Perie-Berry. What do you think?"

"It looks beautiful!" I shouted.

"What are you waiting for? Get on down here and have a closer look," Vaughn ordered.



With a laugh, I slipped into my ballet flats and went down to the back of the yard, where I paused a few steps away to inspect their handiwork. The old-fashioned black hinges and slate grey roof offset the blue perfectly. “Did you make me window boxes?” I asked as I turned my attention to the windows.

“Yep,” Flynn replied. “You can plant whatever you want there... herbs, flowers, whatever.”

“We still have to lay the stone pavers, and we thought we could create a little garden under each window as well,” Vaughn said.

“It should be where we put Terry and Denise’s remembrance garden,” I suggested. “Don’t you think that would be nice?”

Vaughn set his paintbrush aside, came over, and wrapped his arms around me from the side. “It would be a great spot.”

“Who’s Terry?” Flynn asked.

We looked at him and then at each other when we realised he didn’t know Vaughn’s full story yet.

Vaughn squeezed Flynn’s shoulder. “I’ll tell you the story later. But first, Perie-Berry...” He opened the shed door with some pomp and circumstance. “Ladies first.”

Stepping inside, I took in the room with a gasp. There was a workbench along one wall, old pallets repurposed into storage for garden tools, floating shelves, a pegboard with hooks for smaller hand tools, and finally, a few old doorknobs stuck to the wall. I touched the doorknobs with a confused frown and glanced at the guys.

“For drying things like herbs. I saw it on Pinterest,” Vaughn said.

“You looked at Pinterest? I love that website!” I was certainly impressed.

“We know,” Flynn said.

“This is... it’s beautiful. It’s *so* beautiful. Guys, you’ve outdone yourselves,” I gushed.

Vaughn leaned his well-muscled arm on the top of the doorframe. “We’re glad you like it.”

It would be a bummer to leave this place sitting idle when I returned to Brisbane in a month. The closer the house came to being finished, the more sadness welled within me about it becoming a weekender.

But I pushed those thoughts aside because it was Christmas, and I wanted it to be a happy affair. Bouncing on the balls of my feet, I reached out and took Vaughn and Flynn’s hands. “I want to give you both your gifts. They’re not as wonderful as this, though.”

“They don’t have to be,” Vaughn said.

Flynn chuckled. “It’s not a competition, Per.”

“I know,” I said with cheekiness in my voice. “Come on, present and food time. Come on, come on.” I tugged on their hands like an excited little kid.

The guys laughed. Vaughn snatched up his shirt and tugged it back on as he and Flynn followed me back to the house. Although, a part of me wished he wouldn’t bother with the shirt.

“Aww, Per, this all looks amazing.” Flynn’s eyes bugged at the leg of ham and salads displayed along the breakfast bar and the festive table beside the tree.

“Help yourselves to the food and punch.”

Vaughn picked up the spoon sitting in the pasta salad. “All this food would feed an army.”

“He would know,” Flynn joked.

I lifted her shoulders in a half-hearted shrug. “It’s Christmas. There’s supposed to be too much food.”

As soon as Flynn and Vaughn were seated with their meals, I accosted them with gifts. “These are from me. They’re not much.”

Vaughn saw me struggling with one and grabbed it from me. Looking at the tag, he realised it was his.

“Merry Christmas,” I said.

I sipped my punch as I anxiously watched them tear open the paper.

“Aw, this is great.” Flynn lifted his new Bose Bluetooth speaker. “Now we can party hard.”

With a giggle, I said, “No more tinny music.” Then I looked across at Vaughn. “Are they okay? I’m not sure what constitutes good dumbbell weights.”

“These are excellent, baby. Thank you.” Vaughn leaned across and kissed me slowly for a few glorious moments.

“Me next.” Flynn got to his feet and picked up a large gift, which he set in my lap. While I was gawking, he went to the refrigerator and dug out another gift from the back of the bottom shelf. He carried it over to Vaughn. He kissed Vaughn’s lips before settling back into his chair.

“Oh my God, where did you find all this stuff?” I asked as I peered into the hamper I had unwrapped. It was packed full of top-of-the-line beauty products.

“The local chemist is surprisingly well-stocked.”

Vaughn unwrapped a craft beer sampler and immediately cracked open the bottle of One Fifty Lashes. “God, I love craft beers. Thanks, Flynn. You know your way to a man’s heart.” He set the bottle down on the table and got to his feet. “Lucky last.”

Vaughn’s gifts were the smallest of the lot. But the best things often came in the smallest packages.

“I thought that might make you smell sexy. Well, sexier than you do already,” Vaughn told Flynn when he had unwrapped the expensive cologne he’d bought him.

“You’re so lucky you backtracked.” Flynn jabbed his finger in Vaughn’s direction.

Vaughn chuckled.

“Oh my gosh. Vaughn, you’re too much,” I gushed, staring at the open box in my hand.

Vaughn flashed a half-smile. “You like it, then?”

“You’re spoiling me.” It wasn’t as if I minded, though.

“That’s the idea,” he replied, his low, sexy voice rumbling deep in his chest. “Do you like it?”

“I love it,” I whispered, trying desperately to staunch my desire for him.

It didn’t help matters when Vaughn lifted the bracelet from its box and clasped it around my wrist. The fine hairs stood up as Vaughn’s fingertips brushed my skin before he took my hand and lifted it off the table to kiss my knuckles. Desire burned in his dark eyes, giving flight to the butterflies in my belly.

Clearing my throat, I glanced at my plate full of lovely food. “Well, let’s dig in. We can’t let this food go to waste. But don’t fill up too much because I have some fantastic dessert.”

“What’s for dessert?” Flynn asked.

“Christmas cookies and plum pudding with custard.”

Flynn’s eyes bugged out of his skull. “I might skip the main and go straight for the sweets.”

“If, by the sweets, you mean me, then shucks,” I teased, preening and pushing my breasts out.

The guys cracked up.

“You definitely taste sweeter than plum pudding,” Vaughn said with a wink.

“Oh, that pussy,” Flynn sighed, making me turn beet red.

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### *Perie*

Christmas Day ended with the three of us relaxing together on the floor in front of the Christmas tree, drinks in hand. I was so stuffed and exhausted that I stared at the pretty fairy lights until they were blurry. I was comfortably snuggled up to Vaughn’s muscular chest, his arm draped over my shoulders. Flynn’s head rested on Vaughn’s opposite shoulder, his leg entangled with Vaughn’s.

“I don’t ever want to move from this spot,” I murmured.

Vaughn pressed his lips to the top of my head.

“It’s a pretty good spot.” Flynn drained his beer and set the bottle aside as I reached my leg across to join in my men’s

game of footsies. “I’m stuffed full. Perie, your cooking skills are altogether way too good.”

Sending him a quizzical look, I said, “Thanks. I think.”

Flynn laughed.

“We’re going to be eating those leftovers for weeks. Lucky the kitchen appliances arrived the other day,” Vaughn observed.

“We’re going to be rolling our way back down the range by the end of January,” Flynn joked.

Vaughn frowned at Flynn. “What do you mean by that?”

“You know, when we go back to Brisbane,” Flynn said carelessly.

Vaughn’s entire body stiffened behind me. “You *what?*”

Flynn sent him a clueless look. “What?”

Vaughn pulled away from us. “You’re still planning to go back to Brisbane?”

“That’s where my flat and my business are.”

“And mine.” I slowly sat up.

Vaughn gritted his teeth.

“Vaughn?” I questioned as I turned to face him.

“Are you planning to leave too?” Vaughn pinned me with an accusatory glare.

“My office is there.” I shrugged helplessly. What else could I do?

“After everything that’s happened between us, you won’t think twice about ending it all?”

I blanched. “Ending it? No way. Vaughn, I love you!”

“As long as I fit into your busy schedule, right?” He scoffed, his face contorting in anger.

“Why don’t you come with us?” Flynn asked. “You’d love it in Brisbane.”

“I hate Brisbane. I can’t be in a crowded city, and I can’t be around large crowds of people. With my PTSD, I’ll end up having panic attacks and be on edge all the time.”

My eyes grew wide with concern. “Why?”

“War fucks you up, Perie,” Vaughn snapped.

Flinching, I lowered my gaze as guilt flowed through me.

Vaughn launched himself to his feet. “If you two want to throw away what we’ve begun to build here, that’s your prerogative. I won’t stop you.”

He stormed to one of the spare bedrooms and slammed the door behind him. I blinked back tears as Flynn pegged his beer cap across the room, where it hit the wall with a satisfying clink.

Well, shit. This was an unexpected fuck-up.

# Chapter Nineteen

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## Perie

**D**ipping my toe into the water in the brand-new bathtub ought to have been an exciting experience. This new bathroom was something I'd waited months to use. I sighed, sank into the water, and let the warm water envelop my body. The scent of the lavender bath oil touched my senses. I closed my eyes in an attempt to push away the negative thoughts filling my being—thoughts of Vaughn, leaving Granite Ridge, and going on with my life as normal.

Could I honestly do that now? How could I tell Vaughn I loved him, then return to Brisbane as if nothing had happened between him, Flynn, and me over the past two months? Flynn and I had been way too career-focused for too long. We had forgotten that there was more to life.

“Perie.”

Flynn's quiet voice broke through my thoughts, and I jumped.

Flynn crossed from the door to the bath and rested his hand on my wrist. “Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.”

“It's alright.” I relaxed again and took his hand.

“You look worried, Per,” he pointed out as he balanced his bum on the edge of the tub.

“Aren’t you?” I asked as I pinned him with a glare. “We’re treating Vaughn like shit, Flynn. We opened up the possibility of us, and we’re going to just throw it away?”

“That’s not what I want, Perie, and you know it. What are we supposed to do? Our lives are in Brisbane... our jobs, everything we’ve spent our lives building. You really want to throw that all away?”

“No, but can’t we modify it?”

“How?”

A tear slipped down my face. “I love him, Flynn. I love him as much as I love you. Maybe he hasn’t been a part of my life for as long as you have, but that doesn’t mean he’s any less a part of it now.”

Flynn bent down, cupped the back of my head, and pulled me close while I traced the tip of one of the tattoos that peeked from the top of his shirt. I was trying to distract myself by falling into the beautiful artwork adorning Flynn’s skin.

“I understand what you’re saying. I agree with you, and I feel it too. If you have a solution, I’m open to it. But we need to think seriously about what we *can* do, Perie, without it ruining everything we’ve worked for.”

My sigh was an attempt to hold back my tears. “I know you’re right.”

“I promise whatever we decide, Vaughn will be the most important part of the equation.” Flynn kissed the top of my head, then got to his feet. “Enjoy your bath, Per.”

---

*Vaughn*

Gasping for breath and fighting to steady my heartbeat, I awoke in a cold sweat. It took a moment for me to gain my bearings enough to realise I was on the hard floor in one of the spare bedrooms, with only a doona beneath me. At least, that's where it had been when I fell asleep. Now, it was tangled around me like a snake coiling its way around its prey. The nightmares were back. Fuck, wouldn't I ever get rid of them? I honestly didn't need this. Things were good now. Well, at least, they had been until tonight.

I pressed the heels of my hands to my eyes and rubbed. Were Perie and Flynn going to abandon me? It would break my heart if they did. There was movement outside my room, and I sat up. I pulled on my prosthesis, stood up, and started for the door before remembering I was naked. It shouldn't have mattered at that point, after everything that had happened between us all. But for some reason, I gathered the doona around my waist and headed out to investigate the clattering. Over in the kitchen, Perie was busying herself with the post-Christmas clean-up.

Now?

"Perie, what are you doing up?" I croaked out, my voice still thick with sleep.

"What does it look like? I'm cleaning up." Perie set the punch bowl on the drainer.

"It's the middle of the night."

Perie shrugged. She looked agitated, and I stepped around the counter towards her. When I uttered her name again, she spun on him. "I'm not fitting you into a schedule, Vaughn. If that's what you think our relationship means to me, then you don't know me at all."

“That’s how it feels, Perie. It feels like I’m a fling or a temporary plaything in whatever you’ve got going on with Flynn. Your lives are inexplicably intertwined, and I’m the outsider.”

“You’re not. God, Vaughn, I love you!” She dashed across to me but stopped an inch from me.

She gazed up at me, her eyes wide and hazy, face red with anger, hair unkempt, and her knitted jumper hanging crookedly off one of her shoulders. I nearly forgot my anger. She was so fucking beautiful that she could weaken my resolve quickly.

“Please believe me, Vaughn.”

“I do,” he murmured. “But is it enough?”

“I believe it is. We’ll work something out. We have to.”

Her pained whispers stabbed straight into me. I brought my face closer to hers and brushed my fingers up her arms, enjoying how she shivered under my touch. My hands settled on her upper arms.

“I can’t lose you again,” she whispered.

“I can’t live in Brisbane.”

“I understand.”

“Do you?” I asked incredulously, lifting my eyebrows in disbelief.

She swallowed but didn’t utter another word. I studied her blank gaze. I knew she was trying, but she couldn’t get there.

“You don’t understand at all, Perie. How could you?” I released her, though it pained me to do so.

“I *want* to understand,” she assured me.

Somehow that was worse. I didn't need pity. What I did need was some peaceful sleep. "It's late. Go back to bed." I turned and stalked away before I took my frustration out on her.

---

*Perie*

My body shook with emotion as I watched Vaughn close the bedroom door. I wished Vaughn would let me in, that he would explain why he can't live in the city. It wasn't as bad as he thought. There were quiet places. My house in Paddington was quiet, and Vaughn would love it there.

A sob wracked my body as I abandoned the dishes and crept into my close-to-finished bedroom. Biting my lip to stop it from trembling, I crawled into the swag beside Flynn, slipped my arm over his waist, and buried my face in his back. I could no longer contain my sobs, and they overcame me.

"Per?" Flynn's groggy voice floated to my ears. He rolled over, and I covered my face. I felt my tears on my palms and cried harder.

"Perie? Hey, what's the matter, hotness?" Flynn took hold of my wrists, but I refused to budge. "Perie," he said again.

"Oh, Flynn," I tried to form a coherent sentence. Finally, I uncovered my face and peered across at him. "I don't want to lose him."

Flynn released a long sigh and pulled me into his arms. "We're not going to lose Vaughn, Per."

"You don't know that," I mumbled into his chest.

He took my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “I will do everything in my power to keep hold of that man, I promise.”

With a sniffle, I rested my forehead against Flynn’s. I needed to be as close to him as possible, to feel utterly surrounded by him. When I pressed my mouth to his, he kissed me tenderly. Flynn drew the covers tighter around us and held me close. Sleep soon took hold of me, and I was out like a light before I knew it.

It was a far from peaceful rest.

---

We spent most of Boxing Day in silence, listening to the cricket over Flynn’s new Bluetooth speaker while polishing the verandah and timber floors inside the house. The West Indies were winning the Boxing Day match against Australia, and Flynn was spitting chips.

“Those bloody mongrels!” Flynn growled as another Aussie batsman was bowled out

I giggled but gulped when Flynn glared at me. “I’m not laughing because they got out. I’m laughing at your reaction.”

Flynn narrowed his blue eyes at me. “My reaction is warranted. Vaughn gets it.”

Vaughn looked up from the deck. “Hmm?”

“That’s it?” Flynn demanded.

“I’m not getting involved,” the ex-soldier responded.

Flynn and I narrowed our eyes at him. When I glanced at Flynn, I saw a suspicious glint in his eyes. “What do you mean

by that, mate?”

Vaughn sighed. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, I think it does,” Flynn answered.

Vaughn pinned the other man with a glare. “It really doesn’t.”

Before he could begin an argument, I cut Flynn off. “Just leave it, okay? Leave it. I’m going to...” I turned to go inside but remembered that the floor polish was still drying, so I thought better of it. I made my way downstairs instead.

“I think you should go after her, Vaughn.”

“Flynn!” I snapped.

Flynn leaned back against the railing with a huff. I crossed the yard, stood before my beautiful garden shed, hugged myself, and stared at it. This thing meant so much to me. It may have been nothing to most people—just a building to store random stuff in.

Not to me.

To me, it stored my heart. My men designed it exactly as I’d dreamed and finished it for me as a gift for our first Christmas as a triad. It was beautiful. They were beautiful.

Now that was all disappearing. I didn’t know how to help Vaughn. I desperately wanted to, but how could I if he wouldn’t open up to me?

# Chapter Twenty

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## Vaughn

**A**lthough Perie and Flynn were throwing our relationship away, I wouldn't be disloyal or shirk my duties. Even if I had to work under the oppressive tension that had fallen between the three of us over the last couple of weeks, I'd never leave Perie in the lurch.

I knew I should have trusted my instincts. Nothing could ever compare to what those two shared. I could never be a part of their lives, and that thought killed me inside. My body ached with a dull pain. It was a new pain that had nothing to do with anything other than the people who meant the most to me.

The house was finished. All that was left to do was to bring in the décor. That was where Perie came in, and she was a force to be reckoned with. As promised, each room had its own distinct character, but the overall rustic theme was preserved by incorporating older-looking pieces. For example, there was the restored French blue dresser in bedroom two and the solid timber shelves above the toilet in the toilet room. Then there was the round timber dining table with white legs and a natural-coloured top that matched the kitchen and the old oak table Perie had repurposed into a vanity in her oversized ensuite.

Speaking of that bathroom of hers, the space was incredible, from the claw-foot bathtub that looked out that huge window to the stone fireplace and freestanding shower in the corner of the room.

It was no wonder Perie's business was booming, and it was no wonder she didn't want to give it up. This was her calling.

Shaking my head at myself, I wondered how I could ask her to give up the business she had worked so hard to build for me? Maybe I could live with them in Brisbane? I wasn't sure if he could do it, but I had to try for the people I loved.

Realising I had to talk to Perie and Flynn, I searched for them and found them in the master bedroom. Flynn had his suitcase on the new king-sized bed and was stuffing his clothes inside, while Perie had the phone pressed to her ear and looked perturbed.

“Can I talk to you guys for a minute?”

Flynn pressed his finger to his mouth. Frowning, I folded my arms and leaned back against the doorjamb. Staring up at the dark timber ceiling, I focused my frustration on the tiny fairy lights hanging there.

“What do you mean? How could you make a mistake like that?” Perie shouted down the phone. “That's unacceptable! I'll be there in a few hours. Don't do anything without me. I mean it.” She hung up the phone and tossed it onto the bed with a growl.

“Everything alright?” I asked with a frown.

“That was my solicitor. Something fucked up with some business he's been taking care of for me,” Perie grumped.

An itch to go to her grew within me. I felt a need to put my arms around her and shoulder her problems, but I wasn't sure

if I should. She looked at me longingly, and I felt like I'd broken in two. I couldn't handle it any longer. I couldn't let our relationship be tossed aside.

"I'm coming with you," I choked out.

Flynn and Perie both froze.

"You're what?" Flynn asked.

"I get it. There's no work for either of you here. Not like there is on the coast. I've had time to have a good, long think about everything, and I want to come with you."

Concern covered Perie's beautiful features. "Vaughn, we don't want to put you in a difficult situation. If Brisbane isn't the place for you, you shouldn't force it."

"Here's the thing. The place for me is wherever you two are. I'll adjust to Brisbane just like I've adjusted to everywhere else I've lived in the world. Perie. Flynn. You two are my home."

Flynn dashed across the room and pulled me into a kiss, which I responded to passionately. Flynn's crystal blue eyes danced with happiness when he broke away. "I'm so fucking happy to hear you say that, hot stuff."

I slid my hand around to cup Flynn's shapely arse. "Don't mention it, sexy."

"Are you sure?"

An unmistakable quiver in Perie's voice caused me to leave Flynn's arms and wrap my own around her. "I'll be alright, Perie-Berry," I murmured, resting my lips against her forehead and closing my eyes. "I'll be alright."

Flynn ran his hand down my back. "Do you need to get anything from your place?"

“No, I’m good, mate. I already have everything I need here.”

“Righto. Let’s go, then.” Flynn kissed the back of my neck before zipping up his suitcase.

---

### *Vaughn*

Perie’s house in Brisbane was stunning. The sprawling, double-storey, ultramodern home on a hill in a suburb whose name escaped my mind was as far away from the Granite Ridge house as you could get.

After she and I had ditched our things in her bedroom, Perie had gone to call her lawyer while I took myself on a grand tour. I toured the open-plan kitchen, living room, deck, and the dining area that faced out onto a grassed courtyard and led to the swimming pool, and then Perie’s large master suite.

Eventually, I found my way downstairs, bypassing the front door to some rooms Perie had converted into office spaces. This was where I found Perie sitting behind a frosted glass desk in the largest office. She looked right at home, her hair hung loosely around her shoulders, and her bare feet tucked underneath her on the office chair. I’d seen business attire in her wardrobe, so I figured she dressed to impress whenever she was open for business during the week. I spotted a front sliding door with a combined open-closed-trading hours sign hanging on it. *The public entrance*. It was a clever setup.

Perie glanced up from her laptop and smiled at me. “Hi.”

“Hey,” I replied with a small smile.

“Did you find everything okay? I’m sorry I had to ditch you.” She grimaced sheepishly and set her stylus down.

“You didn’t ditch me. It’s fine. What about you? What was going on with your solicitor?”

Perie waved it away. “Oh, it was just some property stuff.”

“Denise’s?”

“No. Another place.” She quickly closed her laptop and changed the subject as she got to her feet. “So, this is where I run P. Miller Designs. It’s where all the... *stuff* happens.”

“The Perie magic?”

Perie bit back a smile. “I guess you could call it that.”

“Impressive.”

“You think?”

With a bigger smile, I noted the nervousness in her voice. “It’s a bloody amazing house, Perie. Although, it is a lot of house for one person. Don’t you ever get lonely in here all by yourself?”

Perie shrugged. “Not really. I’m used to being alone.”

Now that I understood, I still sent her a concerned frown. “You shouldn’t be alone, Perie.”

“It’s suited me in the past. Having the freedom to do my own thing has worked well for me. Now, though, I think I would get lonely being alone.” With a playful smile, she gently tugged my T-shirt. I moved into Perie’s space until her arse hit the cool glass of her desk. “Help me make it less lonely, Vaughn.”

Pushing my way between her thighs, I bent over her, lips hovering above hers. “Here?”

“Why not?”

Fuck, I loved it when she was brazen, not ashamed to tell me what she wanted. As I captured Perie’s sweet mouth in a searing kiss, her tiny moan had my cock straining against my jeans. I hadn’t had her in weeks, and now, with one kiss, my body was desperate for her. We tore our clothes off each other, our hands grasping at one another’s bodies. The skin-on-skin contact was like a fireball that burned at a thousand degrees at our core.

I grazed Perie’s neck with my teeth, making her shudder. “Oh, yes, Vaughn. Please,” she murmured when she felt my tip nudge against her opening.

“Do you want me to fuck you, baby?” I growled.

“Please,” Perie begged.

“Tell me.”

“Fuck me, Vaughn. Fuck me hard.”

With another growl, I slid into her, unleashing my control. I spread her wide, then curled my arms around her languid body. My large hands cupped her arse cheeks, and I pulled myself in deeper, determined to fuck her until she couldn’t walk. “I’ve missed your body, baby. I’ve missed it so much.”

Perie tried to match my pace as I pounded into her, hard and unforgiving. She looped her legs around my waist and dug her heels into my lower back. However, I wanted to see her in all her glory, so I opened her legs wide and watched myself disappear inside her over and over again. Perie cried out as she reached her orgasm. I rode her through it, driving her body crazy and setting her completely on fire. Then she was crying out my name uncontrollably.

When I began to come undone, I pulled out and came all over her belly. Gazing down at the beautiful sight of my seed on her fair skin, I couldn't help the thought that ran through my mind. *Mine*. But she was *ours*, mine and Flynn's, and always would be for life.

Perie sighed. "God, I could go again."

With a devious smile, I slowly knelt in front of her. The way she bit her lip in anticipation was fucking hot. So was the way she gasped when I breathed against her pussy, and how her body arched into me when I clamped my lips over her clit and sank my tongue inside her.

"Yes. Make me come again, Vaughn," she whispered, her voice still rough from the previous orgasm.

Moaning into her, I worked my tongue in her viciously. Just as she began to moan and writhe again, the front door opened. Were those tiny footsteps I could hear? I lifted my mouth off Perie and turned my head towards the sound.

"Don't stop," Perie begged.

Flynn stood there, dumbfounded, with his arms full of stuff, then quipped, "Well, shit. The pups are scarred for life now."

My gaze fell upon three small dogs attached to leads linked around Flynn's arms.

Perie groaned. "Vaughn!"

"I'll let you get back to it." Flynn looked down at the dogs at his feet. "Come on, pups. We'll leave your mum to her business."

"You can always join us if you want," I shouted.

"Nope. One-on-one time's important," Flynn shouted back.

Perie and I giggled as I turned back to her. “Where was I, baby?”

“You were about to make me come again,” Perie purred.

“That’s right. I was,” I said with a wink. “You still into it?”

“Yes, please,” she begged.

With a chuckle, I bent down and got back to business.

---

### *Perie*

After two more orgasms, I snuck up the stairs to the living room. Vaughn’s T-shirt barely clung to my body, falling off one shoulder as my three beloved dogs bounded over to greet me. Rocket the Italian Greyhound, Jojo the Jack Russell–Pug cross generally called a jug, and Ziggy the miniature Fox Terrier could barely contain themselves.

“Hi, my babies, hi! Oh gosh, I’m surprised they even remember me,” I gushed as I sank to the floor beside Flynn’s spot on the couch and tried in vain to gather the small dogs into my arms.

“They could never forget you, Per.” Flynn stroked my hair, then bent down to kiss my neck. “Did you have a good time down there?”

My eyes danced with happiness as I smiled up at him. “I did.”

Vaughn trudged up the stairs, completely shirtless, and collapsed onto the couch beside Flynn. He rested his head against Flynn’s shoulder, and Flynn draped his arms around the ex-soldier.



“Did she wear you out, mate?”

“We wore out each other,” Vaughn replied, absently stroking Flynn’s tattooed arms.

Vaughn jiggled his toe when the blue and white Italian Greyhound jumped up and sniffed him, causing the dainty dog to bounce away. Vaughn glanced at me. “Are you going to introduce me to these mutts?”

“Rocket, Ziggy, and Jojo,” I said, pointing to each one in turn.

Vaughn leaned forwards, and Rocket bounded away again.

“Rocket, come here,” I scolded.

Rocket crept over to me, and I gripped his collar and scooped him into my arms, holding him tight so Vaughn could stroke his head. Rocket couldn’t stay still for long. He eventually became so squirmy that I had no choice but to let him go. But Ziggy and JoJo couldn’t wait for the attention.

“How come you didn’t bring them to Granite Ridge?” Vaughn asked.

“I didn’t want them to get in the way of construction,” I answered.

“The dog sitter is going to miss them, that’s for sure,” Flynn said.

Vaughn lay back in Flynn’s arms again, and Ziggy jumped onto his chest.

“Zig, where are your manners?” I asked my little miniature foxy.

“It’s okay,” Vaughn muttered, patting the white fur beneath the small dog’s neck.

I moved to the other side of Flynn on the lounge and flicked the television on, making sure to keep it low. Rocket and JoJo joined us. Rocket curled up in my lap, and JoJo made himself comfy against the side of my leg.

Flynn looked from me across to Vaughn. “Well, this is nice, isn’t it?”

Perie fell against him. “I think so.”

“These little guys complete the picture, don’t they?” Vaughn said.

Flynn raised his eyebrow at Vaughn. “Did you just call Ziggy a guy? She’ll be so offended.”

“Ziggy’s a girl?” Vaughn lifted her to inspect her private parts. “So, she is. Sorry, miss.”

Ziggy didn’t seem to mind one bit. In fact, she seemed to smile at him as she melted into the head rub Vaughn gave her.

Before long, we were all sprawled out and sleeping to the sound of the evening news bulletin.

# Chapter Twenty-One

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## Vaughn

**P**erie turned around in her seat as Flynn pulled the Amarok into a parking space at the local supermarket. It was Saturday morning—the most insane shopping day of the week—which meant people, lots of them. I could see Perie’s concern for me was through the roof.

“Oh shit, Vaughn. It’s really busy. Maybe you should’ve stayed at home.”

“Perie, I’ll be fine,” I replied, doing my best to put on a brave face.

Flynn put the vehicle into park. “If you want to stay in the car, mate, you’re more than welcome.”

“Not you too. Jeez, give me some credit.” I threw back my head and rolled my eyes.

Flynn frowned. “You’re the one who said you can’t handle crowds.”

“Well, I’m going to have to try, aren’t I?”

“We don’t want to push you,” Perie told me.

With a growl of frustration, I shoved open my door and stepped out of the vehicle, pausing as a woman zipped past me with her shopping trolley. I drew in a deep, calming breath.

When Perie slipped her hand into mine, I knew everything would be okay.

Together, the three of us made our way into the shopping centre. There were people everywhere—people laughing, talking, shouting, dashing here and there. Children cried, and the sounds of cash registers and overhead music met my ears. It was a mad crush of people, and my pace faltered.

“Vaughn. This way.” Perie dropped her hand from mine and approached a fruit and deli shop.

I watched in a daze as Flynn and Perie perused the shelves, oblivious to everything around them. It must’ve been nice not to have any worries. To not wonder when someone in the crowd would pull out a weapon and mow them down with bullets. To not worry about shelling and your friends dying.

But, of course, they didn’t.

Anything could happen at any moment, and they weren’t prepared. Flynn and Perie would never be prepared. It was my job to protect them and their innocence. How could I protect the people I loved in a massive crowd like this?

And then suddenly, they vanished. Even though I thoroughly scanned the store, I came up empty. How could two people move so quickly?

A loud sound came from beside me, and I jumped out of my skin. The man, who had just thrown an empty soft drink can into the rubbish bin, earned a scowl from me. It was just a can, though. Nothing to worry about.

Once again, I turned my focus back to the fruit shop. Still nothing. Stalking forwards, I rushed into the store, searching for my boyfriend and girlfriend. They weren’t there. It was claustrophobic inside there. Didn’t people understand personal

bubbles? Why did nothing else matter to them except their purchases?

“Excuse me,” I said numerous times as I tried to move out of people’s way. Eventually, I had no choice but to barge through them like a tank through a compound’s barrier to get out.

I was quickly losing focus. Everything began to blur, and I became short of breath. Knowing what was coming, I knew I needed to find a quiet place before I lost control. As I broke into a jog, I almost ran into various people, some of whom abused me. They didn’t matter and neither did where I was going. Finally, I found an alcove near a fire escape, threw myself against the cold wall, and squeezed my eyes closed. The sounds of the mall combined with remembered sounds of war were in my head, and pushing the heels of my hands against my ears didn’t drown out the noises.

Nothing worked.

Sliding down the wall, I brought my knees to my chest, buried my face into my legs and wrapped my arms over my head as I began to shake.

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*Flynn*

“Flynn, where is he?”

Perie’s tremulous voice met my ears, and I wished I had an answer. But Vaughn was nowhere to be seen. We were so concerned with buying fruit that we lost track of him, even though I had promised to keep a close eye on the ex-soldier.

“We have to split up. It’s not the biggest shopping centre. Vaughn has to be here somewhere, right?” Perie lifted her shoulders.

“What if he went out?” I pondered.

Perie’s eyes widened. “Oh, God.”

“Hey, Perie. Focus, babe.” I briefly pulled her close and pinned her with a firm gaze. “Breathe and focus. We’ll find him. Splitting up is a good idea.”

“Okay. I’ll go this way.” Perie pointed to the left.

“Righto.”

She and I broke away from each other, and I went from shop to shop in search of our man. When I asked clerks and random shoppers if they had seen a man that fit Vaughn’s description with no luck, I knew I was running out of options.

“Where the fuck are ya, Vaughn?” I grumbled as I scrubbed my hand through my hair.

After thinking about my options for a few moments, I turned down the hallway that led to centre management. That was where I found Vaughn. All six feet of my muscular man was curled into a foetal position next to a fire door. The way Vaughn was rocking unsettled me in a way I could barely explain. To see this usually stoic rock of a guy reduced to a bundle of nerves didn’t sit right.

*What the fuck did Afghanistan do to you, Vaughn?*

Approaching Vaughn slowly, I crouched beside him and rested my hand on his shoulder. Vaughn launched into fight mode, breaking my grip on him and wrapping a hand around my throat.

“What the fuck? Vaughn!” I gasped.

Recognition flashed in Vaughn's eyes, and he released me as quickly as he had grabbed me.

"Oh, jeez. Fuck. Flynn, I'm sorry. What the fuck did I do?" Vaughn blubbered as a tear trickled down his cheek.

I cupped Vaughn's face and brushed away the tear. "It's alright."

"Oh, fuck. I tried to keep it together. I want to be okay, Flynn."

"I know." I kissed Vaughn's forehead and pulled him into my arms.

Vaughn burrowed into my embrace. "I want the pain to stop. I want to be with you and Perie."

"We're not going anywhere, babe," I whispered. And I meant it.

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### *Perie*

Relief flooded me when I saw Vaughn leaning against a cement garden, his head hung in sadness when I rendezvoused with the guys outside the entrance to the shopping centre. I raced over and threw my arms around him, and Vaughn eased into my embrace quickly. He held me tightly and buried his face in the crook of my neck. We held each other for a long time, and I never wanted to let him go. Eventually, Flynn joined the hug too.

"I'm sorry we lost you," I mumbled against Vaughn's skin.

"You didn't lose me. I lost you two. I was trying to keep an eye on you both."



Flynn frowned at Vaughn. “What do you mean?”

“You don’t realise the potential risks in a place like this,” Vaughn told them.

Lifting my gaze, I sent him a questioning look. “What risks?”

Vaughn stopped himself before he could say anything more. “Never mind.”

“Risks at the shopping centre? It’s just a shopping centre,” Flynn pressed.

“Not for me. I can’t switch off. All I see in there are potentially life-threatening hazards. It’s a high concentration of people, lots of noise, and chaos. It’s the perfect place for something to happen. But it was too much for me to keep a handle on.” Vaughn rubbed his eyes.

“This was too much too soon,” I said. “We shouldn’t have brought you here.”

“It was my choice to come, Perie-Berry. I wanted to push myself for you two,” Vaughn told me as he traced his fingertip down my skin.

Flynn huffed. “You don’t need to push yourself.”

“I wanted to.”

Flynn pecked Vaughn’s mouth and gazed at him with a quirk of a smile. “Don’t do it again. You have nothing to prove.”

“Alright. Steady as she goes,” Vaughn agreed.

“Exactly,” I piped up.

“I’ll call you two a taxi home, and I’ll finish up the shopping.” Flynn pulled his smartphone out of his pocket and

dialled a number.

I watched Vaughn closely as Flynn pressed the device to his ear. The man looked broken. I hadn't realised how much his deployment had affected him before coming back to Brisbane. Perhaps this truly wasn't the best place for Vaughn. As Flynn and I glanced at one another, I think my best friend realised he had to stop being so blasé about other people's feelings. Not everyone was as comfortable in their skin as we were. We both needed to heed Vaughn's concerns and start treating him like a valued, equal member of this relationship.

When we arrived home and had time to process the events at the shopping centre, Flynn finally said, "I think it's about time you opened up to us, mate."

Once he finished packing away the groceries, Vaughn turned his focus to Flynn as though he were studying him under a microscope. "What do you want to know?"

"What happened to you in Afghanistan?" Flynn asked.

"He lost his foot and his best friend," I informed Flynn.

"It was a lot more than that, Perie. The things I've seen and done... I can't tell you, and I wouldn't want to if I could," Vaughn said.

"You can tell us anything," I assured him.

"No, Perie-Berry. Most of it's top secret. I can tell you I have PTSD that makes me hyperaware. I need to be in control of a situation at all times. I need there to be no potential threats. I know it's only a shopping centre to you two, but to me, that place is a potential death trap. So many things could go wrong so quickly there. In a situation like that, I can't switch off like a normal person. I'd like to be able to, but I can't."

“You need help, mate,” Flynn said.

“Gee, thanks,” Vaughn grumped.

“I don’t mean that as an insult.” Flynn moved around the breakfast bar and slipped in front of Vaughn. He propped a foot on the footrest of Vaughn’s stool between his legs. “You can’t just hide away up in the bush. You legitimately need professional help. Surely, we can contact the army for recommendations for some therapists?”

Taking Vaughn’s hand, I gently said, “I’d like to help you find out.”

“We both would,” Flynn agreed as he took Vaughn’s other hand.

Vaughn took Flynn’s and my hands in his own. “I welcome your help. I want to be better and the pain to ease up.”

And I wanted nothing more than to support him on his journey.

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### *Perie*

Vaughn fidgeted the entire time we were in the waiting room of the psych recommended by the Defence Force. He flipped through a couple of magazines, leaned forwards in his seat, then leaned back, and crossed and uncrossed his legs. Finally, when he was twisting his fingers together, I slipped my hand into his, trying to settle him. “It’s okay.”

Vaughn visibly relaxed at my touch. He brushed the back of my hand with the fingertips of his free hand. “Thanks, baby.”

“I’m sorry you’re anxious about this, but it’s going to help you.”

“I think it will too.” Vaughn willed himself to sound positive.

“Vaughn Forester?”

Vaughn drew in his breath and held it.

“You’ll be right.” Flynn patted Vaughn’s leg. “Knock ’em dead, mate. Remember to be open.”

Vaughn chuckled wryly. “Yeah, righto. See you two in an hour.” He got to his feet and trudged into a consultation room ahead of a female therapist dressed in a dark pantsuit.

I reached for Flynn, who shifted to Vaughn’s spot and wrapped me in his comforting embrace. I hoped this would help Vaughn, but I knew it wasn’t the only thing that would. Flynn and I needed to take stock of what we truly wanted in our lives—our careers or Vaughn? We couldn’t have both, not in the way we were used to.

I wasn’t sure about Flynn, but I sure as hell wouldn’t give Vaughn up a second time. Vaughn had to come first, and I was determined to take steps to ensure that would happen.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

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## Flynn

“**W**hy are we getting dressed up, Perie?” I grumbled as I fussed with the tie I was trying to secure around my neck. “Are we going somewhere fancy or something?”

“We sure are!” Perie called from her walk-in wardrobe.

“I hope wherever we’re going isn’t too crowded,” I replied.

“Will you quit it?” Vaughn demanded as he came to the doorway between the bedroom and the ensuite. “I’m getting therapy now. I will be alright.”

A few weeks had passed since Vaughn started seeing his therapist, and he was already making progress. Still, a long road lay ahead of him.

Glancing incredulously at JoJo laying on Perie’s bed and watching all the goings-on with avid interest, I finally fixed my tie. “Looks like I’m getting in trouble for being a concerned boyfriend, JoJo.”

The pup cocked his head to one side. Rocket wasn’t concerned, choosing to sleep on the pillows instead, and Ziggy was probably getting up to some kind of mischief.

“You’re damn lucky you look so hot in that suit, Flynn.” Vaughn scoffed.

“I’ll take that backhanded compliment in stride,” I quipped.

Perie’s giggle emanated from the wardrobe, making me turn my attention towards it. “Are you coming out of there, hotness?”

“That depends. Are you two ready?”

I glanced at Vaughn, who was looking fucking delectable in his tux, and I knew for sure I was ready.

“We certainly are, beautiful,” Vaughn assured her.

“Okay.” Perie tiptoed into the bedroom in a short black dress with a lace neckline. The bracelet Vaughn gave her for Christmas was around her left wrist, and rose gold and opal drop earrings hung from her earlobes.

When my cock began to harden, I buried my hands in my pockets. “I think ‘beautiful’ might be an understatement. Holy shit, Per.”

Perie blushed under their scrutiny. “This is okay, then?”

Vaughn strode across the room and pulled her into a kiss.

Well, then. That was one way to tell her what he thought.

The tiny sigh that escaped Perie shot straight to the area below my belt. Shit. They couldn’t start anything now if they wanted to get to wherever we were going.

Vaughn slowly ended the kiss but kept Perie close, his fingers gently massaging her neck as he gazed down at her. “You’re the most incredible woman I’ve ever known, Perie Miller.”

Perie ran her fingers through his hair and along his bearded jaw. With a whisper, she said, “I love you.” She turned her

loving gaze towards me as Vaughn nuzzled her. “I love you, too, Flynn.”

When I went to them, I placed a kiss on her forehead and one on Vaughn’s neck.

Vaughn lifted his face to them both. “I suppose we’d better be going.”

With a nod, I said, “Take us to this restaurant of yours, Perie.”

“Funny you should say that...” Perie said.

That mischievous look of hers was all too familiar, and my eyes sparked with suspicion. “What are you up to?”

She simply flashed me a cheeky smile, took our hands in hers, and led us to the courtyard. The area was lit by candles and strings of tiny fairy lights, and she had set a small, round table for three. A bottle of Riesling sat chilling in a bucket off to the side.

“When did you do all this?” I exclaimed in quiet awe.

“I didn’t. I asked my chef friend to come in and help me.”

I turned my attention to the kitchen, looking for said chef.

“She’s gone now. She snuck in and out while we were getting ready,” Perie said, laughing. “But she was nice enough to prepare everything for me.” She poured the three of us a glass of wine, then fetched a platter of starters. “Hungry?”

Vaughn and I each took a piece of bruschetta topped with salmon, cream cheese, and dill.

“Oh, God. This is fantastic. Can your chef friend live here with us and make all our meals?” Vaughn asked.

“That might be a bit difficult,” Perie responded.



Vaughn chuckled. “Move her family in here, too, if she has one. She can cook for all of us.”

“That’s actually beside the point.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, frowning at her.

“Shall we sit?” Perie quickly dashed over to the table and pulled out our chairs before sitting.

Vaughn and I shared a suspicious look before taking our places.

Perie saw the lack of food in our hands. “Oh, you’ve finished your entrees. Perhaps I should serve the meal?”

She started to launch out of her seat, but I wasn’t letting her get away that easily. I grabbed her wrist and pulled her back down again. When she was secured, I leaned forwards, rested my arms on the table, and pinned her with a firm look. “What’s going on?”

Her nervous eyes flitted from me to Vaughn, who was studying her with his signature calmness. I swear Vaughn could see right into your soul—a talent he often puts to good use.

Vaughn leaned his chin on his hand. “What’s got you all up in knots, sweetheart?”

Perie took a big swig of her wine, settled the glass on the table, and took a deep breath. “I’ve sold the house.”

My brows knitted together. “Which house?”

“This one.”

“You’ve *what?*” Vaughn demanded.

“I’ve sold the house, and I’m moving to Granite Ridge permanently. I’m hoping, but not expecting, that you’ll both

join me,” Perie said.

Vaughn’s mouth dropped open. His frown was deep as he said, “If this is to do with me, Perie, then—”

“It is to do with you. You’re not built for the city, Vaughn. Therapy or no therapy, you’re a lot happier in the country. Besides, I miss the place. I want to use that bathroom, sleep in that beautiful bedroom, and cook in that kitchen. I feel like the place will go to waste if I don’t move there. It’s too beautiful not to make my permanent home.”

“What about your business?” Vaughn asked.

Perie shrugged. “I can run my business from anywhere. I’ve begun to expand into the country areas anyhow.”

“If that’s what you want...” Vaughn trailed off, clearly uncertain of Perie’s decision.

“It’s not all about me. I don’t want to dishonour Denise’s memory by abandoning her house. She left me such an incredible gift. I think she knew I could make it beautiful again.” Perie fiddled with her wine glass. “I’m hoping both of you will want to come with me.”

Now was the time to reveal the plans I’d been considering. “Funny you should mention it, Per. Because I’ve been looking into expanding my skill set.”

“How so?” Perie asked.

“I’m going to learn how to make timber furniture. I’ve enrolled in classes in Granite Ridge. There won’t be as much building work out there, so I have to be smart and expand my business.”

“What about your house?” Perie asked.

“I’ll rent it out.” I shrugged as though it wasn’t a big deal, but it clearly was to my companions.

Vaughn’s laugh was one of joy, and his face was alight with it. “I fucking love you two.”

Excitement lit up Perie’s hazel eyes. “We’re doing this, then?”

The three of us took each other’s hands.

“It’s safe to say we are,” I agreed. “It’s time to go home, don’t you think?”

# Chapter Twenty-Three

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## Perie

**H**ome.

It was here all along.

The place we'd swiftly run from as teenagers was where we were supposed to be in the long run. Building a life together in a home we'd rebuilt together, where we could create memories, grow old, and possibly start a family.

Checking myself in the mirror, I smoothed down the skin-tight, square-necked dress with a multi-coloured feather print that I wore and took a deep breath. A soft knock sounded on my bedroom door. When I turned, Flynn poked his head inside.

“Hey, Per. We're about ready out there.”

“Does this look okay? I know it's not funeral standard to wear colours, but Denise loved colourful things, so I think it works.”

Flynn tucked his hands in the pockets of his dark trousers and moved over to me. “You look beautiful, hotness. You always do.”

As I slipped my arms around Flynn's neck, I sighed contentedly when he pulled me against him and wrapped his arms around me in a hug. He took my hand, and we made our

way down the hallway, painted the same latte colour as the rest of the house. The sound of my black heels was muted by the grey hallway runner. I picked up Denise's ashes from the fireplace mantle in the open-plan kitchen and family room. Hugging the urn to my side, I took Flynn's outstretched hand, and we made our way down the back stairs.

Vaughn was waiting for us. He looked handsome in his formal army uniform, complete with his army-issue slouch hat that sported an emu feather in its brim. He greeted us both with a kiss, then looked down at me. "Let's do this."

Flynn gave up my hand so I could link it through the crook of Vaughn's arm. Together, we walked to the new patch of garden where Vaughn had laid out a shovel and two plants.

"Here we are, then. Time to say goodbye, I guess." I glanced down at the urn in my arm and tightened my grip. Flynn squeezed my shoulder.

"Not goodbye. See you soon," Vaughn corrected me.

Through the tears welling in my eyes, I managed to smile and pressed my cheek to Vaughn's arm.

"Who's going first?" Flynn asked.

Vaughn glanced down at me. "Perie?"

With a deep breath, I stepped towards the first hole Flynn had dug and held the urn up to my face. "I brought you back home, Aunty Denise. You belong here as much as we all do." I opened the urn and gently poured Denise's ashes into the hole. Flynn and Vaughn squatted beside me. Flynn pulled the Shasta daisy plant from its pot and handed it to me to set in the hole. Together, the three of us piled clumps of dirt around the plant. We filled the second hole with a rosemary plant.

We returned to our original spots, and Vaughn dug a medal out of his pocket. “To my best mate, Terry. Who protected and served his country and made the ultimate sacrifice.” Vaughn set the medal on the ground underneath the new rosemary plant. Then he stood ramrod straight and saluted.

“The Last Post” sounded out suddenly. With a surreptitious glance at Flynn’s phone, I was amazed to see the music playing from an app. What a thoughtful touch.

A single tear rolled down Vaughn’s cheek, but he didn’t budge until the music had ended. “Thank you, Flynn,” he whispered.

“That was beautiful.”

The trio turned in surprise to see my father crossing the back lawn to us, dressed haphazardly in a wrinkly old suit that looked like it was from the 1970s.

Jack stopped a few feet away. “Sorry, I’m late. I thought I’d come and pay my respects to my sister-in-law.”

“How did you even know to come?” Flynn asked.

“I messaged him a few days ago,” I answered, even though Jack pointed at me. “I didn’t think you would make it, Dad.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately about what happened during my last visit. About what Flynn said to me.” His crinkled eyes bored into Flynn’s. “You were right, boy. I don’t spend enough time with my daughter. I don’t know her at all, and I should. You know I’m not used to staying put for too long, but if you’ll have me for a week, Miss P, I’d like to stay and get to know you and your men.”

My gaze softened, and I embraced my father. “Oh, Dad, you’re welcome anytime.” I pulled back and rested my hands

on his bony shoulders. “I was about to start making lunch. Would you like to help me?”

“Lead the way.”

“Aah, Per? I was thinking of inviting a couple more people. Is that okay with you?” Flynn queried as he waved his phone in the air.

With a nod, I said, “The more, the merrier. Come on, Dad.” Us Millers headed towards the house as Flynn dialled.

“Who are you inviting?” Vaughn asked.

Flynn pressed a finger to his lips. “It’s ringing.”

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### *Perie*

The table was set up beneath the bottlebrush tree, and I carried some platters of food over and set them in the middle of the table.

“Oh, look at this,” Brooke exclaimed happily, taking in the different dishes.

“Looks delicious,” Chris said as he dug into the salt and pepper grilled prawns.

Dad reached for the mango and almond salad. “I’ll second that notion.”

“Says the man who helped make it. Tooting your own horn there, hey, Jack?” Flynn teased the old man.

“A man has to be proud of his work,” Dad insisted.

Dave nodded his agreement as he munched on a paprika-covered baked potato cube. “Jack, you’re a wise man indeed.”



I scooped Rocket into my arms and basked in the company of everyone around us. I was enjoying cooking for the people I loved now that I had more time on my hands. Living in the country reminded me of a slower-paced lifestyle and how good this kind of life could be. I now took weekends off and had employees in Toowoomba, Northern New South Wales, and back down the coast. They helped take the pressure off my expanding design business and gave me more time to settle in with my men. I wasn't doing too badly for a woman who was about to turn twenty-six.

Flynn pulled me onto his lap. "She's been taking lessons from her chef friend."

"I'm proud of my progress," I confessed.

"We're proud of you, too, Miss P." Jack held his beer towards me, then took a sip. "If you keep cooking stuff like this, I might stay longer than a week."

"You know I'd like that, Dad," I told him.

"We're proud of all of you," Brooke added. "Of your furniture business, Flynn, your garden business, Vaughn, and Perie's interior design business expanding so rapidly. Not to mention this beautiful house you restored more or less by yourselves. You've all done so well."

Vaughn jiggled his leg. "I've still got issues to work through, but my monthly therapy visits have helped, and so has living out here."

"We all have things to work on, Vaughn. No one's perfect, and those who pretend they are? Well, they're kidding themselves." Chris glanced sheepishly at Flynn.

Flynn nodded at his stepfather. The two of them had called a truce and were working on strengthening their relationship

for Brooke's and the family's sake.

Silence fell over the gathering, and my men and I glanced at each other.

"Well, I guess now is as good a time as any to tell them," Flynn said.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Why not?"

"I agree with Flynn. Everyone's here. One fell swoop, Perie-Berry," Vaughn added as he held a small piece of prawn out to little Ziggy, who had become Vaughn's velcro dog, following him everywhere he went.

"Alright." My hands shook with nerves, and I tightened my arms around my little greyhound. "We've decided to hold a promise ceremony to each other."

"What's a promise ceremony?" Jack asked.

"It's like a wedding, except we can't actually get legally married to each other, so a promise ceremony it is." Flynn threw his hands up in surrender.

"That sounds wonderful!" Brooke gushed. "When will you have it?"

"In four weeks. On the anniversary of my mate's death," Vaughn said.

With a nod, I added, "We'll pay our respects to him again, and it will also become the anniversary of our lifelong commitment to each other."

"Megan's going to come home for it, too," Flynn told his mum.

"Fantastic. You must let me help you plan!" Brooke said.

I firmly shook my head. “There won’t be much to plan. We don’t want a lot of fuss.”

“Nonsense, this is your wedding.”

“*Promise ceremony*,” Flynn reminded Brooke. “Mum, not everyone will be okay with this, so no blabbing it around town.”

“If you think no one in town has cottoned on to the nature of your relationship by now, you’re severely misguided,” Brooke scoffed.

“We know they know. But it’s not in their faces, so they’re fine with it. Let’s not invite any undue pressure on ourselves,” Vaughn suggested.

“Come on, Brooke. It’s their day. Let them have what they want,” Chris chastised her gently.

Brooke twisted up her mouth. “Well, alright, then.”

“I’ll happily provide the wine,” Chris added with a wink.

“Thanks,” Flynn said.

JoJo rested his little head on Flynn’s foot and closed his eyes until a familiar voice hollered nearby. Jojo, Ziggy, and Rocket were instantly on their feet, barking and racing towards the newcomers.

“Did I hear something about a wedding?”

I gasped when I saw my mother walk across the backyard towards us. Her brown hair was shorter than mine and styled into a fashionable bob. Her skin was paler than normal, an obvious result of living in the UK for so long. Behind her was a handsome older man with salt and pepper hair. A *very* handsome man.

“No wonder she stayed in England,” Flynn hissed.

My mouth fell open when I turned to him and noticed him noticing Mum’s man. “Flynn!”

“What? It’s true. Don’t act like you didn’t notice.”

“I noticed,” Vaughn whispered, earning himself a light whack on the arm from me.

Mum turned her identical hazel gaze onto me. “Perie? Don’t I get a hug?”

She sounded English now too. The accent had crept into her voice.

Tears welled in my eyes as I got to my feet and made my way around the table. My smile was so huge it threatened to tear my face in half. “Oh, Mum. Bloody hell, I’ve missed you.”

Mum pulled me into a warm embrace. “Oh, I know, sweetheart. I know. I should’ve visited sooner. I’m sorry.”

Lifting my gaze to the man, I muttered, “I understand.”

“This is Roger.”

I pulled out of my mother’s arms and tentatively approached the man. “G’day, Roger. Welcome to Granite Ridge.”

“Thank you. It’s a pleasure to be here.”

I took a chance and opened my arms, and with a pleasantly surprised smile, Roger hugged me. There was nothing but solid muscle underneath his casual linen suit.

“G’day, Mary,” Flynn said, making me realise I hadn’t heard him or Vaughn approach us.

“Oh, Flynn, look at you, sweetheart. I can’t believe how good you look!” Mum gushed, giving his handsome face a motherly pat. “It’s about bloody time you and my daughter ended up together. And with Vaughn too. Hi, there.”

“Mrs. Miller,” Vaughn said with a nod.

“Aah... Mrs. Ackers now, actually. Roger and I just got married in Majorca last month.”

“Mum, that’s wonderful!” I gushed. But inside, I wondered why I hadn’t even heard about an engagement.

“Congratulations,” Flynn and Vaughn said.

“Thank you. We didn’t even get engaged first. It was a one hundred percent spur-of-the-moment thing on this beautiful balcony overlooking the ocean. We found a priest and just did it.”

Wow, Mum was living life on the edge.

“Congratulations, sir.” Vaughn shook Roger’s hand.

“We’re sort of getting married, too,” Flynn said. “That’s what you overheard. Not a legally binding wedding, but—”

“But it’s your wedding, all the same. It doesn’t matter if it’s not legal. It’s frustrating, of course. But all that’s important is you three. I always knew this was the way it was supposed to be.” Mum sent us a loving smile. “The divide wouldn’t have caused such pain if you three didn’t truly love each other. I’m so happy you found one another again.”

When I wrapped my arms around Vaughn, he held me close and looped his other arm around Flynn’s shoulder. When Vaughn jumped slightly, I glanced behind us to see Flynn had clamped a hand on our soldier’s fine arse.

“Care to join us for lunch?” Vaughn asked, doing his best to keep his composure.

“We’d love to,” Roger said with a smile.

He and Mum made their way to the table and took two spare seats. They quickly struck up a conversation with Jack and the other parents. Flynn, Vaughn, and I didn’t budge. We took time to cherish the sight in front of us.

“Well, would you look at that? All of our parents are sitting at the same table, and they’re getting along,” Flynn said in surprise.

“My mum and your dad are missing,” Vaughn said sadly.

Flynn kissed his cheek. “They’re here in spirit.”

“Terry, too,” I added.

Vaughn gazed down at me. “So is Denise.”

A small, sad smile touched my face as I glanced at the brand-new memorial garden.

“Oi! Are you three joining us, or will you just stand there like stunned mullets?”

Vaughn rolled his eyes. Dave certainly never minced his words. “Coming, Dad.”

Stifling a laugh, I realised there was only one place where you could make someone laugh at the ridiculousness of someone you loved. One place where no one would take offence at such mocking. One place where everyone was welcome, no matter what had transpired in years past, where hearts came to be restored.

That place was called home.

**The End**

# About the Author

Kiera Jayne writes love stories full of humour, fun, empowerment, and angst. Her characters range from shy to sassy, troubled to flirty, and everything in between.

Her influences include G.J. Walker-Smith, Cassandra Clare, and Olivia Cunning.

She is an animal lover with wanderlust in her heart and a passion for music, history, the Aussie bush, and epic television dramas. Not to mention an obsession with all things pertaining to Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Doctor Who & Marvel.

Kiera's Brisbane home is filled to the brim with books covering a vast variety of genres.

**Thank you so much for reading!**

It would be lovely if you could take the time to review this book.

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