



A Soldier's Coming

HOME

ARMY RANGERS SPECIAL OPS

SUSIE MCIVER

A SOLDIER COMING HOME

A CHRISTMAS MIRACLE

SUSIE MCIVER

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ARMY RANGERS BOOK 12
A SOLDIERS COMING HOME

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WESTON

IN THE DIM, SQUALID CELL, I HELD THE FILTHY MIRROR IN MY HAND, A grotesque reflection staring back at me. The man in the glass, bearing the scars of war, was a far cry from the one I used to be. My filthy hair was long and stringy my beard the same as my hair. We barely got enough water to drink much less wash with.

The desire to shatter the repulsive mirror coursed through me, but I couldn't bring myself to do it, not after Viper had saved my life. The mirror belonged to him. The four long years in this hellhole felt like an eternity. Would I ever return home? Thoughts of Shannon O'Grady were my only lifeline, keeping me from contemplating ending it all.

I wanted more than anything to be home for Christmas. It seemed forever since I had seen my family, who believed me to be dead. Would Shannon still want me if she could see me now? My body was a testament to the horrors of war, with a missing leg, a long scar tracing down my face, and a nonfunctional left hand.

But it was my eyes that had changed the most; they harbored a deep, unrelenting hatred. I no longer recognized the man staring back at me. I yearned to escape this place, to make it home again.

"I'm sorry, Viper. It's just... I can't stand the sight of myself anymore. If we do make it out of here will I ever be the man I was? How can I face Shannon like this?"

"I know it's tough, Wes, but we'll find a way out of here. We've been through hell, and we'll make it home."

That's Viper, my hero. Instead of leaving with his team, he stayed with

me. They found me lying in the ditch, where I crawled after I stepped on the mine that wasn't supposed to be there.

"Do you think we'll ever get out of here?"

"I'm surprised we have been here as long as we have. I thought my team would have extracted us four years ago. We are lucky they gave us everything we needed for me to finish the amputation of your leg; you had lost so much blood."

"Do you ever think about getting married and having children?"

"Hell, no. I'd never want a serious relationship or a wife. They want too much from you. They are always complaining about something."

"So I take it you've never seen a happy marriage."

"No, I don't think I have. I guess my parents had an okay marriage. They didn't argue at least not in front of us. But I have no interest in joining anyone in wedlock. Now I know what the 'lock' part means: you're shackled, and they throw away the key," Viper chuckled at his dark humor.

"I know some happily married people."

"Let me guess: your Army Ranger buddies are happily married to their women."

"Yes, they are. I haven't seen them in four years, but when I did see them, I can tell they love their wives. My parents loved each other."

"More power to them. How are you doing?"

"I would be doing better if they wouldn't always throw me in that damn hole. Why do you think they do it?"

"Their assholes. Maybe they heard some chatter about someone looking for an Army Ranger. I'll see if I can find something out. Don't work out today. That pisses them off when they see you gaining muscles, not knowing how you manage to do that."

I looked at Viper. "Screw them, I won't spend my life pleasing the fucking Iranians. You never try pleasing them, and they don't throw you down the hole."

"I would kill the bastard that tried," Viper growled.

"Yeah, and they think because my body is broken, they can do whatever they want." I picked up my wooden crutch, one of my fellow prisoners made it for me. "Yeah, they underestimate us. We need to stay strong."

I thought about our situation for the millionth time, trying to plan a breakout. Viper, a Marine Corp Force Recon man, found me dying in a ditch and he wouldn't leave without me. He had intentionally allowed us to be

captured to save my life. He is the real hero.

Until my dying day, Viper would be my friend. He more than saved my life he saved my sanity. I am Weston Evans, an Army Rangers Special Ops Lieutenant. I've been through hell but am determined to survive. There is a woman at home that I love more than anything in the world, and I'm going home to her.

Our existence was confined to a dismal cell on the lower floor, isolated from the other prisoners on the upper levels. The guards offered only meager substance, sometimes infested with insects. But I kept my eyes closed and ate anyway, unwilling to show weakness.

When the guards extinguished the lights at night, I seized the opportunity to work out. I devised a way to exercise using the pipes above my head. I had to stay in peak physical condition, always anticipating the day we would make our escape. I had to be ready to run alongside Viper.

One night, as I hung from the pipes, performing one-handed chin-ups, a soft but urgent voice penetrated the darkness. It was Viper, entering the cell with a hushed tone.

"Wes, we're getting out of here in three days. Don't jeopardize it. Stay out of the hole; I don't want to leave you here alone," Viper whispered before disappearing back to his cell.

I gently lowered myself to the ground, quietly on my one foot, and dropped down to my blanket. What the hell is he talking about? "Getting out of here in three days," I muttered to myself. How was that even possible? My mind raced with questions about the rescue. I wanted to know how and who was going to rescue us, and how they intended to breach this cement fortress. Could there be other Americans here?

I laid back on my blanket and closed my eyes. I was dreaming of running down the beach with Shannon, laughter in the air, and a little red-headed girl who looked like her mother ran with us. I felt free, with two legs and both hands working in harmony. But my peaceful reverie was abruptly shattered by the guards kicking me awake.

"Why the fuck are you kicking him? He was sleeping. He hasn't done anything wrong. "I'm going to report you to the Alliance of Prison Rights," a prisoner nearby shouted.

I seized the foot that came at me again and yanked hard. There would be a reason if I was going to the hole. The guard landed beside me, and I grabbed his throat. Another guard attempted to intervene with a kick, but I

had forgotten that only one of my hands was functional. Viper, ever vigilant, reached down and grabbed the second guard by the throat, saving me from my own recklessness.

“No,” I said, leaping to my feet. “I won’t take another beating. They’ve underestimated us for too long.” I could hear the other prisoners shouting and approaching. “I’ll tell them to get back to their cells if you leave me the fuck alone.”

Both guards nodded, but I remained skeptical. So, I did what was necessary. I squeezed until they blacked out, tore strips from their shirts to gag them, and bound them with more fabric. When I looked up, I found the other prisoners had gathered in front of my cell. I placed my finger to my lips, and they fell silent.

I looked at Viper, who had his left eyebrow raised. “It’s been six days since you mentioned the rescue,” I began. Maybe they did hear something about it. How long do we have before they exchange guards?”

“Maybe a couple of hours. Do you have a plan?”

“No.”

“No, you told me you’ve been devising an escape plan since we arrived.”

“I have, but I haven’t come up with anything,” I turned toward the thirty other prisoners. They were a mixture of different nationalities. “Do any of you know a way out of here?”

“That door over there will get us outside, but if there is a full moon, we’ll be seen,” one of them said.

“Humm, let me think.” I furrowed my brow, tapping my chin as if trying to coax the answer out of my own thoughts.

Viper’s eyes narrowed in thought, his lips curling into a faint smile. “How do you go to the level above us?” His voice was laced with curiosity.

I gestured towards the door at the far end of the corridor with a subtle tilt of my head. “Behind that door, down at that end, are the doors that go to the other floors. They only have one guard but he’s trigger-happy.”

I glanced around, taking in the grim surroundings. “How many floors does this prison have?”

“Four floors,” Viper replied, his voice hushed. “The top floor, those are the worst prisoners. You don’t want to help them escape; they’ll kill you. One of the guards told me they have three guards watching them.”

My gaze locked onto Viper, and a wry smile tugged at the corner of my lips. “What do you want to bet they are Americans on the top floor?”

“That’s what I was thinking,” Viper said, his voice tinged with concern. Suddenly, a noise pierced the air, causing us all to tense. The squeaky door hinges of the guards entrance made the sound all the more nerve-wracking. We huddled closer together, anticipation and fear hanging thick in the air. Everyone squeezed into my cell behind Viper and me. When I raised my head, Kash stood before us, his face a mix of shock and relief. His eyes dropped to the tied-up guards. “Are you kidding me, Lieutenant? You couldn’t wait ten more minutes? It’s good to see you’re alive. We get to rescue three Army Rangers, this trip, and a Marine. Viper it’s been a long time.”

“Yes, too damn long,” Viper said shaking Kash’s hand.

“Thanks to Viper, he saved my life,” I replied, gratitude in my voice. We are going to the top floor. We believe there are more Americans there. It’s good to see you, Kash. Who else is here?”

Kash’s eyes darted around the room. “Matt and Hunter are here. One is waiting outside. We had to shut those guards up.”

I took my crutch from Viper as Kash’s gaze fell upon my missing leg. “Don’t worry about me keeping up; I’ve been exercising. Let’s go.” I said, my determination evident. I looked at the men around us. “These men helped the Americans. They are going with us. Do you want to follow us or wait here?” I asked the men still standing in my cell.

“We’ll follow you,” One of them said, a hopeful smile gracing his face. We ran through the prison, moving quickly and quietly through the prison’s corridors, our hearts pounding with every step.

We knew we didn’t have long. First, we went to the top floor. I had a feeling that the men would be there. I held my hand up for silence when we got to the top floor. “I suppose they have two guards also, so I’ll go in first.”

Viper’s voice carried a hint of frustration, “Why the hell would you go in first?”

“Because I said so,” I retorted firmly. “Let’s go,” I stepped into the room, heart pounding, and scanned the area. There they were – Conner Murphy and Owen Sanger. Their eyes widened in disbelief at the sight of me. I was surprised they recognized me. Owen’s hand went to his heart, while Conner efficiently dispatched the Guards, with a swift punch each.

Moments later, Conner and Owen stood beside me, their faces a mix of relief and disbelief. Conner picked me up and swung me around, while Owen enveloped me in a tight hug. Let’s get out of here,” I said, looking around for

my crutch. Viper handed it to me, and we swiftly moved through the other floors, tying up the remaining guards.

Thirty minutes later, we raced down the road in jeeps, our hearts full of hope. Shannon was going to be surprised when she saw me. Hopefully, she wasn't married, or he would be one very unhappy man, because I knew Shannon loved me. First I needed to get myself cleaned up.

I must have had a pitiful look on my face, because Viper looked at me, "She'll be so damn happy when you get home." I nodded praying he was right.

SHANNON

HOLLY'S LITTLE GIGGLE ECHOED THROUGH THE HOUSE, MY FAVORITE SOUND. "Holly, where are you hiding?" I followed the sound of her voice, like a treasure hunter hunting for a hidden gem. There she was, behind the bedroom door, her small clutching a cherished photograph of her father, Weston. She never let that picture go, sometimes I regret giving it to her. She has become obsessed with her Daddy.

"What were you talking to your daddy about, sweetie?" I asked, lowering myself to her eye level, acting like I was really interested.

"I told Daddy you won't let me go to work with you because you were taking me to strangers."

I knelt beside her, my heart aching with understanding. "They're not strangers, honey," I reassured her, my fingers gently brushing a strand of her hair behind her ear. "They'll be your friends; I'll stay all day with you and help you make new friends. Once you start playing with them, you'll want to go every day."

"But Grandma said I can stay home with her."

"I'm your mommy, and I'm the boss," I said with a soft chuckle, taking her tiny hand into mine. "Let's get your backpack and put Daddy's picture back in your room," I said, walking to Holly's room.

"But Daddy wants to go to school with me. I'm his little girl. When is my Daddy coming home?"

"Come here, sweetheart," I said, settling in the rocking chair. I pulled her close, my arms enveloping her like a warm cocoon. "I told you; Daddy is in heaven. But he's right here in your heart," I whispered, placing my hand over

her chest. “he watches while you play and hears your prayers. Daddy watches over you because he loves you. And he wants you to mind your mommy.”

“Why?”

“Because he does,” I replied, my voice a tender murmur. A lone tear escaped my eye, and I brushed it away gently. “Now put his picture back on the nightstand. We need to leave, or we will be late on your first day,”

Holly reluctantly set the photo on the nightstand; her eyes filled with longing. “Daddy wants to go to school with me,” she whispered.

I didn’t comment, my heart heavy with the weight of her longing. As we arrived at the preschool, emotions swirled within me. Some kids were crying, clinging to their mothers, not wanting to be separated. Holly too started crying she didn’t like seeing anyone crying.

In her own tender way, she approached the other kids, offering hugs and kind words. “Don’t be scared. I’m here, and we can be friends. My daddy is watching us in heaven; he wouldn’t want to see us crying.”

Then she saw a father there with his child, and Holly, being Holly, reached out and pinched him. I was about to intervene when I heard her speaking to him.

“Are you a real daddy? You’re not in heaven.”

“Yes, I’m a real daddy.”

“My daddy is in heaven. Something blew him up. Can I feel how strong you are?” She walked over and felt his arms. “Daddies have to be strong so that they can take care of their babies. My daddy was strong. He would pick me up and swing me around if he were here. He loves me.”

“I bet he loves you more than anything. I’m sorry he’s in heaven, but he’s watching over you,” the man replied, his voice quivering. I glanced around, noticing two helpers discreetly wiping their eyes.

“Yeah, I wish he was here instead,” she said, her innocence piercing through the heaviness of the moment. I lifted Holly into my arms and held her close. “Your daddy wishes he was here with you too. Now, let’s play with the kids, okay? We’ll go outside and have some fun.”

By the end of the day, exhaustion had settled in. I had never worked so hard helping Holly play with the other children. Holly fell asleep on the way home because she wouldn’t nap at preschool. She just lay on her little mat, staring at me, afraid I would leave. I decided to let her go to preschool three days a week. Five days was too much for my baby to be away from grandma and me.

Grandma was at our house when we got home. I carried Holly to her room and put her to bed. Then I went and sat down where my mom was. "I'm only going to put her in for three days a week. She isn't like most three-year-olds. She'll be four on Christmas day. She talks like a grown-up to those kids. She cried because they cried. I feel like I've been working for forty hours."

It pained me to see her so obsessed with Wes. I couldn't help but blame myself for giving her that photograph. "I wish I hadn't given her that picture of Weston. She talks to him as if he were right there," I confided in my mom about my worries. "What am I going to do?"

"You're not going to do anything. This will run its course like everything else does," my mom reassured me. "Are you sending her to pre-school tomorrow?"

"If I don't, she'll think she's getting her way by staying home."

"I'll go with her tomorrow," I started to talk, but my mom held up her hand. "Let me finish. On the third day, she can go alone."

I didn't know what to do, I had no idea it was so hard letting your child go to school. "I don't know if that's a good idea. It feels cruel, sending her alone."

"Listen, Shannon, it'll be fine. You're doing great. And you know I'm here for you."

"Mama, have I told you how much I appreciate you helping me? I don't know what we would have done without you."

"Grandma, you're here. Let me go get Daddy, and we'll tell you about school," I looked at my Mom, and she shrugged as if to say everything would work out.

"Grandma, my school was awful; little kids were crying," Holly began. "I saw a daddy holding his little boy. I wish my daddy were there. Mommy wouldn't let me bring Daddy with me."

"You mean the photo of your daddy," My mom clarified.

"Whatever."

"Holly, don't talk like that to Grandma," I gently reprimanded her.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking at Grandma.

"I'm going to school with you tomorrow. We'll have so much fun," my mom told her. "We will show them how much fun they can have."

"Can I take Daddy?" Holly asked, her eyes hopeful.

"Of course, dear," my mom replied.

"Mom, really?" I asked, surprised my mom said yes.

“Holly will keep her daddy’s photo in her backpack,” Mom said putting her coat back on. The weather was cold at this time of year.

“Mom, why don’t you stay the night? We’ll order pizza and watch a movie?” I suggested.

“I’m going to the movies with Shirley, and then we are going out to dinner and a drink. I would much rather stay here with you and Holly, but Shirley has been lonesome since her husband passed away. How about tomorrow night? How does that sound?”

“Tomorrow would be great. Bring your bag with you in the morning.”

“I will. Holly, hug Grandma goodbye.” My mom said.

“Goodbye, Grandma. I love you,” Holly said, hugging her tightly.

“I love you so much, sweetie. The best gift your dad gave us was you.”

Later that night, I lay in bed, tears silently streaming down my face, remembering when I was with the only man I have ever loved. I knew I was pregnant before Weston went overseas, but I hadn’t told him. I didn’t want him thinking about the baby and me; I wanted his mind to be focused on staying alive, and coming home.

It’s strange sometimes I can feel Weston talking to me. My mom says that’s hopeful thinking. She thinks I should find a good man for Holly and me. I don’t want to do that, and I have no interest in finding another man.

By the third week, Holly was enjoying school more. She made some friends, but she treated them as if she was the grown-up and they were the children. I blame myself for that, because I have never talked baby talk with Holly, and none of my workers did either. Being pregnant with Holly was the only thing that got me through Weston never returning home.

I own a bakery called The Butter Cup. I serve cupcakes in cupcake holders that look like antique cups. I need to expand because I’ve been getting large orders lately. I rent my shop now, but a building at the edge of town will be for sale, and I plan on buying it.

No matter how tragic life is, it moves on, and I have to try and move with it. My phone rang, and I answered. “Hello.”

“Hey, Shannon, this is Louise from preschool. Holly is very upset. She brought the photo of her daddy, and another kid wanted to see it. He grabbed it from her hand, and it fell and broke. She’s very upset because she thinks her Daddy is broken.

“I’ll be right there,” I told the others I’d be right back. I had to pick up Holly.

“I hope everything is alright,” Burt said, looking anxious.

“Yes, her daddy’s picture got broken. I didn’t know she took it to school. I’ll try and hurry. I’m sure I will have to buy a new frame.”

“You don’t have to hurry. We are all caught up.” Burt declared.

I knew I had two more orders to do before we were caught up, and I would stay late again tonight. At least Holly could be with me.

When I arrived at the school to pick up Holly, I was surprised to see how upset she was. Holly honey, look at me.”

“I broke Daddy,” Holly said, wiping her eyes. “Now I can’t carry him around because he’s broken. I wanted to give Daddy booboo kisses, but my teacher won’t let me,” Holly whimpered.

“We will get a new frame for him right now, and he will be all better,” I explained, my heart breaking for my baby.

“He will,” she sniffed. “Does he hurt?”

“No, it’s only a picture, Holly, sweetheart he doesn’t feel anything because it’s a picture. You understand that, don’t you?”

“How do you know how he feels?”

I shook my head, not liking how this conversation was turning out. “Let’s go find a new frame,” It took longer than I thought it would because Holly couldn’t make up her mind what frame she wanted until she spotted a Superman frame. I was happy it was all plastic.

By the time we returned to the bakery, Burt had the other two orders started. What would I do without you?”

“You would do fine,” He picked Holly up and looked into her red, swollen eyes. Tell Uncle Burt why your eyes are red and swollen?”

“I thought I broke my Daddy, and he hurt, and the teacher wouldn’t let me kiss his booboo.”

“I’m trying to help her realize she is holding a photo, and he feels nothing,” I said, looking at Burt, hoping he would help me with this conversation.

“Let me see that picture of your daddy.” Holly ran to her backpack and handed Burt the picture of Weston. I saw the shock on his face. He grabbed the counter to steady himself. “Weston Evans,” he said so low it was like he was talking to himself.

“Do you know Weston?” I asked, walking to him. His hand shook while holding the photo.

“What? I need to sit down,” he said. I hurriedly pulled a chair for him to

sit on. He looked at me and then Holly. He pinched the bridge of his nose. I knew it was because he didn't want to cry in front of us. What the heck is going on?

"So Holly is Weston's daughter?"

"Yes, do you know him?"

"I'm his uncle. His mother is my sister. I haven't seen her in years. I disappeared from the family ten years ago. I still kept up with Weston. I imagine he met you when he came over to visit me. I heard about Weston from one of his Army Rangers buddies. My heart will always be broken without Weston in my life."

"Tell me what happened to him," I said, my voice cracking.

"He stepped on a mine that wasn't supposed to be there. They were being chased at the time by the Taliban. Kash said there was another outfit there. The Marine Corps Force Reconnaissance is deadly; the Iranians don't want to mess with them. I heard they were going to go over there and rescue some Americans who were held prisoner."

"Do you think Weston might be with them?" *My heart was beating so fast; maybe this is why I felt like I heard him talking to me last night.*

He looked at me and sadly shook his head, "They saw the mine throw him in the air, and when someone looked at him, his leg was off, he had a huge gash down his face, and blood was everywhere. When they went back later, he was gone."

"So he could still be alive."

"Now, don't get your hopes up. He didn't make it. We would know if he did. You have to tell who they are holding inside their prisons. Weston has never been on that list. The Rangers have checked it every time it comes out."

I wouldn't trust those people to tell the truth about anything," I said, then I nodded, acknowledging what he said, I couldn't help the tear that fell down my cheek.

"Shannon, did you ever meet Weston's family?"

"No, we were going to visit them and tell them about the wedding before he was shipped out. Do you think they might want to meet Holly?"

"Who wouldn't want to meet Holly? They're out of the country right now. They have a place in Paris. I still keep up with them. Weston's father emails me once a month. I'll let you know when they return, and we'll talk about how we will go about telling them they have a granddaughter."

"How come you are on the outs with them?"

“It was a stupid fight, and I don’t know how to fix it.”

“So you really are Holly’s Uncle, her great uncle.”

“Yes, it would appear that I am.”

WESTON

AS THE PLANE SOARED THROUGH THE SKY, TAKING ME AWAY FROM THE nightmare I had endured for four years, my emotions were freaking me out. I couldn't believe that I was enroute to Germany, where I'd finally receive a prosthetic leg. Viper, my savior and comrade, would be parting ways with me once we landed. His team awaited him at the airport, and the impending separation weighed heavily on both of us.

I glanced at Viper, our eyes locked in a silent exchange, and I fought to hold back tears as Viper spoke with a half-smile, his words laced with a hint of humor, “I hope to hell you don’t start crying when we separate. It’ll be strange not seeing you moping around, planning an escape route for us to escape.”

A lump formed in my throat, and I struggled to find my voice. “I am going to miss your ugly mug. Thank you, Viper, for what you’ve done for me. You risked your life to save mine. I will never forget; I’ll bring Shannon to meet you after I get everything straightened out. You are forever my brother.”

His eyes held a mixture of pride and sorrow. “I look forward to meeting her.”

I closed my eyes allowing exhaustion to claim me, and for the first time in four years slept peacefully. When I woke up, the plane was descending, and my heart raced. I gazed out the window at the twinkling lights of the airport, a sight I had never thought I would love.

Saying goodbye to Viper at the airport proved to be much harder than I had anticipated. Our hug conveyed more than words ever could—a silent

understanding of the bond forged in the crucible of combat. Then I was ushered away to the hospital, where Kash remained steadfastly by my side.

“Have you seen Shannon around anywhere?” I inquired, my voice quivering with anticipation and longing.

Kash's eyes filled with empathy as he delivered the news, “She moved after we heard you were dead,” She went to live where her mom lived. You might talk to Emily. She saw Shannon, delivered a cake to a wedding Emily catered.”

My heart ached at the mention of Shannon. “Did she say how she was?”

Kash's voiced softened even more. “She said Shannon saw her and cried. Emily said Shannon held her so tight she even cried while telling me about it. That was two years ago. Emily asked her over, but she never came. I think it was too hard for her. Now she'll be so happy. When are you going to call her?”

I hesitated, feeling the weight of my scars and my emotional turmoil. “I'm going to wait I need to see what the doctor says first. I want to be able to stand and hold her. What about my face and my hand?”

“Weston, Shannon doesn't give a damn about your face, hand, or leg,” Kash assured me with unwavering support. “She loves you for you and only you.”

“Yeah, but I'm not the same me I used to be; I see it in my eyes. It's like someone else is looking at me—someone with a lot of anger in him.”

Kash's gentle voice reassured me, “That will all go away with time. You don't get over being held prisoner for four years in a day; it takes time. And you have plenty of time.”

I nodded, determined to work on myself before reuniting with Shannon. My reflection in the mirror showed the scars and pain that I carried, both inside and out. The scar down the side of my face was pretty damn ugly, a stark reminder of the horrors I had endured. I knew how I looked; I saw myself in Viper's grimy mirror.

As we continued to the hospital, questions from the Army Rangers top brass, led by Colonel Welks, persisted. They met us at the airport and have been hovering over me, asking questions. He was starting to piss me off.

“Why were you left behind? I don't understand why A Marine Corps Force Recon soldier could stop and pick you up, but the Rangers left you behind,” Colonel Welks probed.

“They were running for their lives, and it wasn't what you are making it

out to be,” The enemy would have blown up our plane if they stopped to pick me up. I was in the ditch for hours before Viper found me.”

“But you said he allowed both of you to be captured...”

Fiercely protective of Viper, I interrupted, “I didn’t say he allowed it; I said for him to save my life, he managed to get us captured. Viper deserves a medal of honor. He sacrificed his life to save mine; he amputated my leg so I wouldn’t die. I will not let anyone try and put this on him. I owe him everything.”

“Of course, we wouldn’t do that. I can assure you that no one will be questioning Viper,” Colonel Welks assured me.

“I’m sorry; I don’t mean to be so grumpy. But I want to take a fucking shower and just relax. I haven’t done that in four years.”

“Of course you do. We’ll ensure that’s the first priority when we get to the hospital,” Kash interjected, eyeing the top brass to see what he would say.

“We’ll still have to get a statement for the last four years. We can do that in a few days. I’m just glad you are alive. Your parents have been on our backs for four years. They wanted your body so they could bury you. They should be here in a few hours. I called and told them you were alive.”

“Fuck, I wish you wouldn’t have done that until I was out of the hospital. My mom will freak out and start crying when she sees me. I will never get any rest with her there, and she’ll be all over me, wanting to do everything. I’ll just have to tell her to stop or something. I’ll think of something.”

“I’ll head her off at the hospital’s entrance and talk with them, which might help. But if I remember right, your mother was always hovering around you,” Kash announced.

“Thanks, Kash. Yes, my Mom liked doing everything for me; I’m going to close my eyes for a few minutes,” I said exhaustion tugging at me. However, as soon as I succumbed to sleep, the nightmares of the last four years returned with a vengeance.

This time, though, I wasn’t going to be a helpless victim. I was fighting for my life. The tormentors who had subjected me to unspeakable horrors weren’t going to throw me back into that hellhole. I would not allow them to kick me anymore; I was prepared to fight back, to kill them if necessary. I was fighting for my life. I would not allow them to kick me anymore. *I would kill them, fuckers.*

“Weston, damn it stop! Weston, wake the fuck up!”

Startled, I jerked awake and surveyed the scene. Kash sported a busted

lip, and Colonel Welks looked like he had tangled with a wild animal.

What had I done? I closed my eyes, regret washed over me, as I realized that I needed to confront my demons before I could even think about reuniting with Shannon. I knew I couldn't see her until I had this under control.

"I can't let Shannon know I'm alive. What if I did this in the middle of the night? It would kill her, and I can't take that chance."

Kash's voice held genuine concern as he leaned in closer, his brow furrowing. "I agree," Kash said, his eyes locked onto mine. "You need to talk to someone. Angel is going to be your doctor from here on out. I'll call Ainsley, and she can be your therapist."

I nodded, my voice trembling as I spoke. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to hit either of you."

Colonel Welks managed a weak smile, his fingers gently grazing his bruised eyes. They were both turning shades of purple and blue. "We understand," he said, his voice filled with understanding. "You'll have to write me a note about what happened; my wife would never believe me," he chuckled and shook his head. "Damn, you are strong. Most prisoners come out of those prisons looking starved and have no muscles."

"Viper said that was why the guards constantly attacked me in my sleep. They were angry I wasn't shrinking. The secret is to work out at night while they are sleeping. And close your eyes while you eat. I didn't let the critters in my food keep me from eating."

Kash glanced out of the window. "Here is the hospital. We will go through the back entrance in case word about your rescue has leaked out. They'll be reporters all over this hospital." We saw Angel standing by the back door, his presence reassuring. I exchanged a quick glance with Kash. "Does this mean I'll be all over the news so that Shannon will hear about it from the television?"

"I need to see Shannon before she sees this on the news. Let's pick up Angel, and he can examine me at the hospital in America, I said with finality in my voice.

Colonel Welks interjected, concern on his face. "What about your parents?"

Weston hesitated for a moment before answering, "You'll have to tell them plans have changed. As soon as we grab Angel, we are going home."

Angel walked up to the vehicle, a warm smile on his face. "Welcome

back from the dead, Lieutenant. Are you going to come into the hospital?”

“No,” I replied quickly, my voice tinged with urgency. This has leaked, and I need to talk to Shannon before she sees this on the news.”

“Smart thinking,” Angel nodded in agreement. Let me run in and get my bag. We’ll have to stop at the hotel and get my things.”

Kash chimed in, his gaze lingering on me. “What about your shower.”

I looked at him and chuckled. “That bad.”

“Yes,” Kash said with a grin. “You are that bad. When we stop by Angel’s hotel, you can shower, and he can give you something to wear.”

I turned my attention to Kash, trying to shift the focus. “Tell me a story about your family. How is Emily doing?”

“She’s doing great. I have two more kids since I last saw you. I have a sweet life. I’m one lucky man. Tell me about Viper?”

We paused as Angel climbed into the vehicle. He patted me on the back as he climbed inside. “It’s good to see you, Weston.”

“It’s good to see you too, Angel,” I replied gratefully. “ I’m going to take a shower when we stop at your hotel. Can I borrow something to wear?”

“Of course, you can,” Angel responded. “You’re broader now than the last time I saw you. My tee shirts might be a little tight. How is Viper?”

“Viper is good,” I began to recount my experiences, my voice filled with gratitude. “He saved my life, and he’s the only reason I’ve kept it together through all this shit. He wouldn’t allow me to fill sorry for myself.

“Thank God he found you when he did,” Angel said, nodding in understanding. “I understand he’s the one who did your surgery.”

I nodded. “He had to finish taking my leg off in a filthy cell with only a small candle for light. There was an Iranian doctor at the prison. He was a guard. He gave Viper some alcohol, a knife that wasn’t sharp, loads of gauze, thread, and a needle and tape. We needed every bit of that gauze. He taped my face together as best he could. Later he brought me something for the pain. We couldn’t tell anyone about any of the things he gave us, or he would have probably been killed.”

Angel acknowledged the gravity of the situation with a solemn nod. “He’s great. I found out he was a medic in Afghanistan.” Then he looked at Kash and Welks. “What the hell happened to you two?”

Colonel Welks tried to downplay the situation with a chuckle. “Weston fell asleep and had a nightmare.” The drivers laughter filled the vehicle. “We were in this vehicle, and there wasn’t a lot of room,” we heard the driver

chuckle again.

That's when I chuckled also, realizing it was the second time I had laughed in four years. Finally, we arrived at the hotel. Kash and Angel flanked me as we made our way to the room. The sight of the bed momentarily tempted me, but my priority was the shower. I stepped into the bathroom and stayed there for over an hour. Angel had to run and get me more soap. I used five of those little bars.

As the water washed away the grime and pain of captivity, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I had long hair and a long beard, and it surprised me to see that much gray. I used Angel's scissors to cut my hair and beard, but the mirror still showed a man with hard eyes who had been through worse than hell.

SHANNON

WHEN IT WAS HOLLY'S TURN TO TELL SANTA WHAT SHE WANTED FOR Christmas, her excitement bubbled over, and she didn't hesitate. She ran as fast as her little legs would take her and scrambled onto Santa's lap, her tiny frame contrasting with the enormity of Santa's presence. She began speaking rapidly, catching Santa by surprise.

Holly's words tumbled out like a waterfall; I knew Santa was surprised. Looking at Holly, you wouldn't think she talked like she did, most people expect her to talk baby talk. I knew I better get up there when Santa looked like he would cry.

With heartfelt sincerity, she presented Santa with a picture of her father and made a poignant request, "Here is a picture of my Daddy; if you can please bring him home for Christmas, I will tell all the little kids that you are real. My daddy has blue eyes like mine; he went to Iran and never came home."

Santa, touched by Holly's innocence and the depth of her wish, responded with warmth and empathy, "I will do everything I can to bring your daddy home to you. Every little child deserves to have their daddy home for Christmas."

However, a tense moment followed as I intervened, trying to shield Holly from the harsh realities of life. "Excuse me, Santa," I said, trying to shut his big mouth. "Millions of children don't have their Daddy home for Christmas."

Santa, ever the bearer of hope and goodwill, responded, "Yes, but they all deserve to have their Daddy home. Remember, miracles do happen."

Frustration and grief welled up in me, and I couldn't contain my emotions, "Not if their father is dead," I growled, the weight of my own pain and loss heavy on my shoulders. Taking Holly's hand and pulling her away.

With Holly's enthusiasm undiminished, she continued to express her Christmas wishes, "Mama, I wasn't finished telling Santa what else I wanted for Christmas. I want to see the Barbie movie and I want a new doll with big blue eyes and red hair like mine. But if Daddy comes home, I don't want anything else, only him."

My anger at Santa Claus simmered beneath the surface. Now, I was tasked with being the bearer of harsh truths and had to break Holly's heart by informing her that her Daddy wouldn't be home for Christmas. My own tears flowed, unbidden, as I realized the depth of her longing.

"Shannon, it's so good to see you. Are you okay?"

I wiped my eyes and looked at Lara. Seeing the people we hung out with when Weston, was here hurt so much, "It's been four years, and just the tiniest thing can make me cry. I'm sorry for crying; Santa Claus told Holly he would do what he could to ensure her daddy came home for Christmas. Can you believe that?"

"Is this Holly?"

"I'm sorry, Holly, I want you to meet someone. This is Lara Gray. She is married to an Army Ranger."

"Does she know my Daddy?"

"Yes, she does."

Lara stared at me speechless, and I knew I had shocked her. I could see it on her face. "Hello Holly, I'm so happy to meet you."

"I'm happy to meet you, too. Santa Claus is bringing my Daddy home for Christmas. My birthday is on Christmas, and I will be four."

"Do you have two parties?"

"Yes."

"I bet you have a wonderful time. She stood straight and looked at me. "Did Weston know that you were pregnant?"

"No, I didn't want his mind to be on me; I wanted his mind to be on coming home."

"I'm sorry, you should have said something; you always have us. Please remember that."

"I know; I have to get back to work. It's so good to see you," I hugged her, and we left.

I was sure I would get a call from Emily; she and Lara were best friends. “Let’s go, sweetheart; I have cupcakes to make. Holly seemed sad for the rest of that day and the next. “Holly, tell mommy what’s wrong.”

“I heard you saying that Daddy couldn’t come home because he’s dead.” I was overwhelmed with guilt and sadness. I don’t know how this got so out of hand. Holly loved for me to tell her about her daddy. Giving the picture to her, I thought she would keep it next to her bed, but not Holly. She carried it with her everywhere she went. I didn’t know she would be begging Santa to bring her daddy home.

“How about we go to the park before the bakery.”

“I don’t want to go to the park; I want to go home.”

“I’ll drop you off at grandma’s,” I would explain to my Mom that Holly is sad and needed hugging.

I talked to Burt about Holly and Santa Claus, “I’ve told her many times about her father. She’s just too young to know what being in heaven means. I forget that she is still a baby because she talks like a little grown-up.”

“I had a daughter,” Burt said, which shocked me. “She was on her way to school her senior year when she was hit by a car the police were chasing, and then the police car hit her, too. She died on the way to the hospital. She told the EMT to tell us she would be watching us from heaven and loved us.”

“That’s so sad. I’m sorry you had to go through something like that.”

“My wife left me because I bought Becky the car a week before. That was fifteen years ago, and I miss her every day.”

“Why did your wife stay gone? Couldn’t you plead with her to come home? She must have realized you were in as much pain as she was.”

“The thing with Celia is she had a few problems of her own. She was chronically depressed. It was hard not knowing what mood she would be in. She told me Becky was the only reason she was living. She jumped off the top of a building. She walked inside and went to the roof and jumped.”

“I’m sorry, Burt, it must have been hard getting up in the morning and going on with your day.”

“It was hard, but I got up each morning and went to the bakery. I pushed myself until one day, I didn’t want to have a business, so I sold my business and my home. I went on a road trip around this country. I visited every state, and I went to all the national parks. I was gone for two years, maybe a little longer.”

“I’m so thankful I have you helping me. I’m going to pick my baby up.

I'll see you tomorrow," Burt lived in the apartment above the bakery. I didn't charge him because I couldn't run this bakery without Burt.

He walked inside the bakery as I decorated four years ago and asked if I needed help. I told him I couldn't pay much, and he said he didn't need much, so I offered him the apartment over the bakery, free to live in.

I pulled into my mother's driveway, and Holly ran out to where I was. As soon as I opened my door, she started talking. "It's okay, Mommy; Grandma said they haven't found Daddy yet, so until they do, there is always hope. Can we get our tree today, please? I want to make everything pretty for Christmas when Daddy finds us."

"Mom," I said, She held her hand up.

"Miracles happen, Shannon, so let her have a little hope. What can it hurt?"

"It can hurt a lot. I know because I've had hope and waited for miracles for three years before I realized I had to stop hurting myself."

"Please, Mommy."

RELUCTANTLY, I agreed, "Okay, sweetie, let's get that tree; we are getting it early, so we have to keep water in it." We embarked on a heartwarming journey to the tree farm, out of town, the joy and excitement in Holly's eyes were infectious. We found a humble tree that Holly thought was perfect, and even though it resembled a Charlie Brown tree, it was beautiful, and brought back to me the meaning of Christmas.

Plus, it was easier to cut down. It started snowing, and it looked like a winter wonderland. With the tree tied to our vehicle's roof, we drove home through a snowy landscape, the scene resembling a winter wonderland. Captivated by the falling snowflakes, Holly attempted to catch them in her mouth, and her laughter filled the car when she climbed inside.

The man tied the tree on top of our vehicle, and we drove home listening to Christmas music. When we got home, we carried it inside, and I went to the attic to get the Christmas ornaments. I turned on Winnie the Poo movie for Holly to watch. Then I heard the doorbell."

That's strange. I hope nothing happened to Mom. I was always worrying about people, and I guess it was because I lost someone that I loved so much. I was scared all the time. "Holly, your show is starting."

I pulled the door open and stopped breathing, "Weston," He reached out,

to catch me and I fell into his arms, reality itself seemed to shift. Holly's shouts of "Daddy" echoed in the room, and I knew that this moment, this miracle would forever change our lives.

I RAISED MY HEAD, and then I heard Holly.

She was jabbering something I couldn't understand anything. Holly was still screaming daddy. She knew her Daddy was home.

WESTON

“SHANNON, ARE YOU OKAY?” I WHISPERED, MY VOICE TREMBLING, AS I reached out to her, my heart racing with emotions I never thought I’d experience again. “Look at me, sweetheart,” I uttered softly. The little girl’s persistent cries for her daddy filled the room, her emotions running over. *Does that mean Shannon has a husband?*

“Weston, how did this happen? You’re alive, I can’t believe you are alive,” Shannon cried, her voice cracking with tears. Overwhelmed with emotions, she began to cry louder, and I reached for her to hold her in my arms, but the toddler clung to my one remaining leg, making it difficult to hold Shannon close. So I gently scooped up the baby girl, her tiny frame trembling with sobs, just like her mother’s.

Then, in a moment that felt like a dream, everything changed. The little girl, her face streaked with tears, pressed her soft lips against my scarred face.

“I’ll give you booboos; now it’s all better. How does that feel?” she asked, her innocent eyes filled with wonder.

“It feels like magic,” I replied, my gaze locked onto hers, unable to tear my eyes away from her precious face. Her warm embrace and her belief in the power of her kisses were like a balm to my wounded soul. She laid her head on my shoulder, then she pinched me. “Daddy,” did she call me Daddy?

“You’re strong and can hold me for a long time. I knew my Daddy was strong. I told Santa I wanted you to come home for my Christmas present. You’re the only present I want. Will we get in trouble for you coming home before Christmas?” her voice was a mixture of innocence and concern.

I looked at Shannon, whose tear-stained face mirrored my own emotions.

Overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the moment, I found a seat before my trembling leg gave way. “No, we won’t get in trouble for me coming early. I couldn’t wait another day.”

“I’m so happy, Daddy. My name is Holly. Are you happy you’re my Daddy?” Holly asked, her voice filled with pure joy.

“I am so happy because you are my baby girl,” I responded, my heart swelling with love. I pulled Shannon into our embrace, holding both of them close. It was a feeling of completeness I hadn’t known in years, a sense of belonging that transcended all the pain and loss.

My heart was pounding; I was sure they could hear it. This is where I belong, right here with my family. I wiped the tears off my face and took a deep breath; it felt so good to be home.

Shannon raised her head and looked at me, her eyes reflecting a blend of astonishment and tears. “I don’t understand; they said you died. Santa told Holly he would try to bring her daddy home, and here you are.”

I took a deep breath and slowly explained to her where I was for all these years, my voice trembled as I explained, “I was held prisoner in Iran; we were running for our plane, and I stepped on a mine. I’m not the same man I was when I left here. My face is marked, I only have one leg, and my left hand doesn’t work.”

Holly’s eyes brimmed with tears, but she leaned down and kissed both my hands despite my disfigurement. “Booboo kisses make you feel better. Does it feel better now?” She asked, her eyes sparkling with innocence.

A lump formed in my throat as I replied, “Yes, it feels better, thank you,” My heart warmed, overwhelmed by her pure, unconditional love. I leaned down and kissed her forehead. I couldn’t believe this beautiful child was mine.

She was perfect. I looked at Shannon; she sniffed and wiped her eyes. “She talks good for a toddler. My mom and I have always talked to Holly like she is one of us, so this is what we get. Shannon chuckled, “You should have seen Santa if you think you’re surprised.”

Tears fell unchecked down her face, “I thought I would never see you again. I’ve missed you so much. I love you and don’t care if your body is different. All I care about is you are here with us. Are you going to stay here with us?”

“Sweetheart, I have to go to the hospital first; I don’t think I’ll be there very long. I was supposed to do this in Germany but wanted to see you first.”

“What hospital will you be at?” Shannon asked, her eyes filled with hope.

“I’ll be at the Veterans Hospital. It’s only twenty miles from here you and Holly can visit me. I will be starting some sessions with Ainsley because of my nightmares. You two are who I will be with for the rest of my life. I just need to get myself fixed first. I’ll be back. Angel and Kash are waiting for me outside.”

A wave of panic washed over Holly as she realized I would be going away. I saw it in her eyes before she started crying, “No, I don’t want my Daddy to go away,” Holly started to cry. Her arms went around my neck and held on tight. I held her gently, patting her back. “I’ll be back as soon as I get out of the hospital.”

“Holly, Daddy has to go to the hospital. We will visit him tomorrow. We’ll put the tree up together, and you can take pictures for Daddy.”

“No! I don’t want Daddy to go away.” Holly cried, this is when you remember she’s a toddler and needs hugs.

“Sweetie, Daddy won’t be far away. It’ll be okay;” Shannon reassured her, her own eyes welling up in tears. She hugged Holly tightly, understanding that, at this moment, all Holly needed were comforting hugs.

“I’ll explain everything to Holly; she’ll understand. The thing is, she has been obsessed with her daddy. I gave Holly a picture of you; she carries it everywhere she goes. She’ll calm down; don’t worry, I’ll take care of her.”

“That’s what you’ve had to do for the last four years. Tears still fell from her eyes. I bent, and my lips touched hers, and I felt the magic. “Why don’t you and Holly come with us? That way, Holly can see I’m not so far away, and I’ll return home to both of you.”

“Let me get our Jackets and put our shoes on. Why don’t I take my vehicle so your friends won’t have to bring us home?” Shannon explained, wiping her eyes. I looked at her and realized this trip would be great for her and Holly.

“I’ll ride with you. Let me tell the guys while you do your shoes,” I went outside and looked at Angel, who was driving. “Did you know I had a daughter? She’s beautiful and bossy, and I love her; these two are my family. We are going to follow you to the hospital,”

“That’s when a little red bundle in a blue coat carrying her shoes ran outside shouting Daddy. I laughed out loud and picked her up. “You have to wear your shoes outside, sweet-pea, so you don’t get sick.”

Holly kissed my scar and said, “Booboo kisses make you feel better,” and

then she started talking. She explained to the guys that she knew her daddy would come home because Santa told her he would be home for Christmas. Angel and Kash both had grins.

Shannon walked out and over to us and said hello. While I held on to Holly, she put her shoes on.

“We were just having a conversation with Holly, she told us Santa told her he would bring her daddy home. I bet you were happy with Santa.”

Shannon chuckled, “I might have hissed at him. We’ll follow you. I’s nice seeing both of you again.”

I carried Holly to the vehicle and buckled her up in her car seat. Shannon still had tears coming from her eyes. I reached over and took her hand I brought it to my mouth and kissed it. I love you, Shannon. Remembering us together got me through those four years; I remembered everything we did together and would concentrate on us to keep me going.

“Tell me how you survived.”

Viper found me in a ditch, and he carried me for miles. He deliberately got us captured so he could save my life. He did surgery on me and taped my face together the best he could. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Viper.”

“Why is his name Viper?” Shannon asked.

“He’s a Marine Corps Force Recon soldier. They use nick-names so people won’t get their real names and hunt them down. He was a medic and did what he could to save me. Because of him I kept my sanity.”

“We owe him everything,” she started crying, and pulled over. She looked at me, “Can you drive.”

“I haven’t driven in almost five years. But I wouldn’t drive if I thought it was putting you and Holly in danger, so sure I can drive.” We got out and changed places on the way around the vehicle. I stopped Shannon and, pulled her into my arms, and kissed her. I let her know how much I loved her and wanted her.”

Driving was sketchy at first, but I had my right leg and my right hand. That was all I needed for driving, and I made it there with nothing happening.

“We’ll be back tomorrow to visit you; I love you so much. I prayed every night that you would come back to us,” Shannon said; she looked like she was about to start crying again.

“I’ll never leave you again, I promise.”

“Holly, tell Daddy you will see him tomorrow. He has to go into the hospital right now.”

“Bye, Daddy, I love you.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, sweet-pea,” I said, giving her a hug and kiss. I kissed Shannon again, took my crutch, and followed Angel and Kash into the hospital.

WESTON

THE STERILE HOSPITAL ROOM BUZZED WITH TENSION AS ANGEL DELIVERED the news. “I noticed a piece of shrapnel lodged in your thigh. I’ll need to remove it to prevent any complications. Fortunately, it won’t be a major surgery. Regarding your hand, an orthopedic surgeon will be here later this morning. According to his assessment, your hand doesn’t appear to have a serious issue.

As Angel’s words hung heavy in the air, I winced, feeling the searing pain in my thigh where the shrapnel was lodged. It had been a constant, haunting reminder of the horrors I’d endured. The thought of another surgery sent a shiver down my spine, and I clenched my fists. At least this time I would have pain medication and something to put me to sleep instead of blacking out, as I did when Viper operated on my leg.

“What do you mean by not a serious issue?”

“I’ll let him explain everything to you. Your parents are here to see you. They haven’t seen you in five years. Be nice.”

“I’m always nice to my parents,” I replied as Angel walked out, and my parents entered the room.

A flood of emotions overwhelmed me as my parent’s stopped and looked at me. Tears streamed down my parent’s faces, and I couldn’t hold back my own. We hugged tightly, a mix of relief and joy washing over us like a warm embrace.

“Weston, I’m so happy. God answered our prayers and brought you home,” my mother choked out, both of my parents openly weeping, and I joined them in shedding tears.

“Hello, Mom and Dad, it’s so good to see you,” I managed to say between hugs. “I’m sorry you had to go all the way to Germany.”

“We didn’t get that far before we got the message, but we would go to the end of the earth for you, son. We love you, Weston, and I have never felt the happiness I did when we got that call. It’s so good to have you back with us.”

My Mom glanced around the room; I knew what she would say before she said it. “Do you think it would be better if you came home with us? We can get you a top surgeon to help you.”

“I have the best surgeon, Mom, and I’m fine where I am.”

“Daddy, where are you? I want my Daddy.”

My mother looked at me as the little girl shouted out for her daddy. I smiled to myself because my parents were about to meet their granddaughter. “Who would bring a child to this place?”

I heard a joyful shout, and before I could respond, Holly burst into the room. She was a bundle of love, and I couldn't help but smile. I had never known I needed a sweet little girl in my life until she became mine.

“Daddy,” Holly said as she climbed onto the bed with me. She gazed at me and smiled, and then kissed my scar. “Booboo kisses make you feel better. You feel better now?”

“Yes, sweet-pea, I feel wonderful.”

“I love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, sweetie.” Holly cuddled up next to me, her eyes shifting to my parents who stood there with their mouths hanging open.

“Mom, Dad, this is your granddaughter, her name is Holly. Holly, these two are your grandma and grandpa.”

Holly turned and locked eyes with my Dad. Her red hair was in a ponytail, and her big blue eyes, mirroring mine, shifted from Mom to Dad. Despite her small size for her age, she asked, “Do you like little girls?” while holding her breath for a response..

My Dad chuckled, “Yes, we do; we love little girls, don’t we, Grandma?”

“Yes, we do; we love little girls,” my mom said with tears in her eyes as Shannon entered the room. Shannon walked over to me, tilted her head, and kissed me.

“Hey, sweetheart, these are my parents. Lou and Tracy.”

“Mom, Dad, this is the woman I love, Shannon O’Grady. Remembering Shannon is what kept me going these last four years.”

“Hello, are you okay?” Shannon asked, putting her arm around my mom.

“I’m so happy. I have this beautiful little girl for a granddaughter, and I never thought I would have grandkids,” my mom said, her emotions spilling over. She turned to Shannon. “Please call me Tracy, and Grandpa is Lou.”

“I’m delighted to meet both of you,” Shannon said, then turned to Holly. “Holly, did you tell Grandma and Grandpa hello?”

“Hello, are you coming to my house for Christmas? It’s my birthday too; I’ll be four years old.”

My mom glanced at Shannon, who wasted no time before extending an invitation for Christmas. “Yes, please come to our house. We celebrate Holly’s birthday first, and then it’s Christmas. I’d love for you to join us for dinner on Christmas Eve, and you can spend the night. Time flies, and before you know it, it’ll be Holly’s birthday and Christmas.”

“We would love to join you for Christmas Eve dinner at your house. Thank you.”

I noticed Shannon’s eyes widen, and she headed towards the door just as my Uncle Burt entered the room. He paused when he saw my parents were present but then turned his attention to me, a broad grin spreading across his face.

“Hello, Uncle Burt.”

“Weston, do you know how elated I was when Shannon called me and told me you were alive? I only found out Holly was your daughter two days ago, and now you are here. This is the best Christmas gift ever.” He turned to Mom, then walked over and embraced her.

“How is my big sister doing?”

“I’m doing wonderful. I have my son back, I have a beautiful granddaughter, and I have my brother. Life couldn’t get any better.”

“How do you and Shannon know each other?” I asked Burt.

“I work at her bakery. I’ve known them since Holly was a year old, and discovering she was Weston’s daughter nearly floored me. I was waiting for you to return to the U.S., and then I was going to call you,” Burt told my Mom.

“I’m thrilled that we’re all together now. What are your plans for Christmas?”

“I’m helping Shannon with the Christmas Eve cooking, and then I’ll also be spending Christmas day there.”

“Us too, so that means we will spend Christmas together as one family,” Mom exclaimed, and Uncle Burt joined in the tears. I noticed Holly giggled

and I asked, "What's so funny?"

"I never seen Uncle Burt cry before."

"I'm not crying; I'm just overwhelmed with happiness that our family is together." I reached up and pulled Shannon close to me. "How about we take Holly to the park, and Weston and Shannon can have some privacy to talk?" my Uncle Burt suggested.

"Holly would you like to go to the park?"

"Yes, can I please have an ice cream too?" Holly's innocent request for ice cream and her affectionate gestures toward me dispelled the heaviness in the room. She was a ray of sunshine amid our emotional storm. I observed her chatting with Uncle Burt as if they were best friends.

"You have to ask Mommy."

Shannon considered for a moment. "Yes, you can have a small ice cream."

"Come up here with me, sweetheart; I want you to lay beside me." With trembling hands, I cupped Shannon's face in my palms and peered deeply into her eyes. "Shannon O'Grady, will you marry me?" I asked, my voice filled with love and determination. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she nodded, her lips quivering as she whispered, "Yes, Weston, forever."

"Would you like to get married tomorrow here at the hospital? I'll arrange for the hospital pastor to officiate the ceremony; he's already visited me."

"Tomorrow is perfect. I have the dress I bought four years ago; all I need are shoes. I'm so happy; I never thought I could be this happy ever again," she exclaimed as I embraced her.

"We have the rest of our lives to be together' I can't wait to be with you, and Holly, and become a family.

"Tell me about your friend, Viper."

"Viper was my sanity, my surgeon, and my friend," I began, a sense of gratitude washing over me. "I can't wait for you and Holly to meet him. He's from Tennessee and has six brothers and one sister. I know everything about his family. His oldest brother, Ryan, raised them after their parents died in a car wreck. There was a multi-car crash on the freeway when Ryan was eighteen and Viper was seventeen. They both fought hard to keep the family together. The State tried to take the kids away from him, but they had help from the town, who knew Ryan and the other kids."

"Ryan did all his college classes online to be there for Allison. She was eleven when he took over as her guardian. Viper claimed she was the wildest

child among all of them because the brothers spoiled her.”

“You're lucky to have him as your friend. He'll be my friend too. I'm glad he's going home to his family; they must have worried about him.” She kissed my jawline and my neck; my finger tilted her chin up, and I passionately kissed her lips. “You better get up, Babe or our daughter will walk in on something we don't want her to see.”

SHANNON

“HOW AM I SO LUCKY I GET TO HAVE YOU VISIT ME TWICE IN ONE DAY?”

“I wanted another kiss just to make sure you’re really here. I’m afraid if I have a normal day, you will disappear, and it will all be a dream.”

“I’m here to stay sweetheart, I will never leave again. I’m no longer in the service, and if I do work for Seal Security, it won’t be anytime soon. I love you, sweetheart. What is Holly doing?”

“She went shopping with my Mom; I think she is picking out a dress like mine. I told Mom if she wanted a white dress, that was okay with me. She loved my dress when I took it out of the box. She is so happy that all of us are getting married, and you will be here with us.”

“Don’t be late.”

“I won’t be. I love you.”

After leaving the hospital, I went straight to the bakery. Holly stayed all night with my Mom because I had to come in at four to do some baking. I hadn’t been very productive since Weston came back into our life. Now, I had to make sixty cupcakes.

Burt was busy making donuts, and the bakery was packed. The teenager I hired was working hard serving the customers waiting in line. I went to the back, stashed my bag away, and washed my hands before helping her with the customers. Then I went to the back and started making the cupcakes a client had ordered for a birthday party. I had almost finished when my phone started to ring. It was my Mom, all I heard was crying.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

“I can’t find Holly. We went to the mall and walked around looking at

dresses. I turned around to show Holly a dress, and she was gone. I started calling for her and checked everywhere, I looked in among the clothes thinking Holly was hiding and she's was gone. Someone has taken her. I called the police."

"I don't know what else to do. The whole mall is looking for her, they have locked all the doors no one can get in or out."

I stared at the phone not realizing I had cried out when Burt came to the back where I was baking cupcakes. He took the phone from me and spoke to my Mom. "Shannon, look at me. We are going to the mall."

"I have to call Weston. I can't do this without him."

"I'll talk to him while I'm driving," Burt said, guiding me to his car. Try not to worry if someone has Holly, we will find him and wring his fucking neck. Let's go."

When Weston answered the phone, I knew he heard my crying. I took the phone back from Burt. "Weston, someone has taken Holly. She was with my mom, and she disappeared. What are we going to do?"

"What? Has she called the police?"

"Yes, Burt and I are on our way to the mall," Burt took the phone because I was crying so hard that my words were hard to understand. I listened as Burt explained everything to Weston, and they hung up. "Weston will meet us at the mall; Angel will bring him, and some guys from Seal Security will meet us there, as well."

My mom was lying on a stretcher while the EMT worked on her. I jumped out of the vehicle and hurried over to her. "What happened to my Mom?" I cried, looking around at everyone. That's when I noticed the police blocking all the doors.

"She had a heart attack," the EMT said, "Please step back; we are taking her to the hospital."

"Mama, please get better. We need you," Burt pulled me away from her, and I wanted to cling to her and beg her to open her eyes. I heard a vehicle stop doors slam shut, and then an arm went around me.

"Sweetheart, we'll find Holly. What happened to your mom?"

"She had a heart attack. The EMT explained what happened. "The people helping her said she was so upset that her heart couldn't contain the pain. We need to leave now for the hospital," I kissed my Mom as they loaded her into the ambulance.

"Sweetheart, let's talk to the police," Weston said, putting his arm around

me.

“Hello, we are Holly’s parents. Have you looked at the cameras? Are all of the entrances closed off?”

“Not yet, and yes. Hopefully, whoever has her is still inside. There are people inside hunting for your daughter.”

A vehicle pulled up, and four men and a beautiful woman emerged. I recognized the Rangers, and I had met Ruby before, she was married to Asher. I wondered what they were doing here but I wasn’t going to say anything. We needed all the help I could get.

She went straight to the police. “Do you want to show me the cameras? If not, I’ll just pull them up on my computer.”

“Follow me, and I’ll let you have all the cameras,” the officer said as Ruby trailed behind him into the mall. Walked beside Weston and the Rangers and then we dispersed to cover more ground. We systematically combed through the shops, searching for any sign of Holly. An uneasiness gnawed at me, urging us to take further action. I glanced at Weston who was methodically checking behind clothing racks.

His phone buzzed, and he answered it. “What did you find?”

“We have the film from the camera that shows he took her down the back way where they keep all the supplies. So, since he can’t go out that way without setting the alarm off, we feel he’s hiding with her somewhere close to that exit. The others are looking there, so I’m sending you a picture of him.”

My throat constricted, making it difficult to speak. I had called out for Holly countless times; I prayed out loud to God to save my baby. I stopped and looked around, a nagging feeling that we needed to consider other possibilities. I turned to Weston as he continued searching the area.

“Sweetheart, people are looking outside. But the camera shows he didn’t leave this place. We will find our baby, and I will kill that bastard.”

My breathing grew more labored as thoughts of what he might be doing to Holly tormented me. Would he harm her to keep her silent? Disturbing images filled my mind, and I couldn't shake the fear.

“What is that? I whispered softly to avoid disturbing his listening. My heart pounded in my chest as I realized it was my baby crying. I rushed to where the sound was coming from. Weston beat me there. He held a crying Holly in his arms, and the man was at his feet, knocked out.

“Holly, Daddy has you now. I know you are so scared, honey,” Weston

said, holding onto her. I wrapped my arms around both of them as we cried together.

“That man was mean. He slapped me and told me to shut up because I told him my Daddy was going to hurt him for stealing me away from Grandma.”

I looked at my baby, I hated asking her questions, but I had to. “Holly, did he touch you anywhere else?”

“Yes, he put his hand over my mouth, and I couldn’t breathe. I heard Daddy calling out for me, and he took off running.”

“Where did he take you?” I asked. As I walked past the pervert, I kicked him hard and held Holly tight as Weston called the others.

“He took me to where the boxes and shoes were. Where is Grandma? I heard her calling for me, but that mean man put his hand over my mouth.”

“Let’s take Holly home,” Weston said, with his arm around us.

“What if he comes to our house?” Holly asked, her eyes filled with fear.

“He won’t come to our house, sweetie. The police are taking him to jail, where he will be locked up.”

“Unfortunately, he’ll most likely be out in an hour; child molesters or kidnappers don’t stay long in jail. He’ll probably be fined and not go to jail.”

“He kidnapped my daughter,” Weston said. I could see how angry he was.

“I know. It’s the D.A.; they no longer want to charge criminals.”

Weston didn’t say anything. He took Holly in his arms, and we walked out the door. Everyone cheered as they saw Holly and us walking to my car. That’s when I remembered I didn’t bring my vehicle. Burt pulled up, and we all got in his car.

“Hey, sugarplum, I’m glad you are back with us. Do you want me to take you back to the hospital, Weston?”

“No, that man will get us. I want to stay at the hospital with Daddy.”

“I’ll stay with you, sweet-pea. Where is your vehicle,” Weston turned and asked me. I was shocked to see all that hatred in his eyes. It scared me that he might do something reckless and end up in jail.

“My car is at work. I’m not sure I can drive. But I need to visit the hospital and see how my Mom is doing,” we drove with Burt to the bakery and got into my car.

Weston drove while I sat in the back with Holly. We had decided to go straight to the hospital. We were taken to the intensive care unit, and my

Mom lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

“Mom.”

“Grandma,” Holly said her eyes wide as she took in all the wires and monitors.

“My baby girl, Grandma was so scared when I couldn’t find you. Are you okay now?”

“Yes, Daddy knocked that mean man out, and Mommy kicked him. Now he’s going to jail. Did you get sick?”

“I feel wonderful now that I see you. Don’t you worry; I will be out of here for the wedding.”

“I didn’t get my dress,” Holly cried, wiping her sleeve across her nose. I took a Kleenex from my purse, and she blew her nose.

“We’ll get you a dress, sweetie, don’t you worry,” I said, hugging her tightly.

“Mom, what does the doctor say?”

“I had an anxiety attack, which turned into a small heart attack. We don’t have to worry; I will be fine.”

“Thank God. I was so scared. We are going to take Weston back to the Veterans Hospital.”

“No, I’m staying with you and Holly tonight. I promised her I would stay with her. You can bring me to the hospital at eight in the morning, that’ll be fine with Angel. I talked to him before we left the mall.”

“That makes me so happy. How are you feeling,” I asked him because I could still see the anger in Weston’s eyes. He looked weary, and I couldn’t help but wonder who he was talking to on the phone. I decided to call and see if the dress shop could deliver Holly’s dress. We would look online and pick one out.”

“Mom, I want you to think about moving in with us. I’ll be so worried about your heart now.”

“My heart is fine. You can ask the doctor yourself. I had a bad scare, and that was what caused everything.”

“I have to make a call. I’ll be right back,” Weston said, walking out of the room. He looked weary, and I couldn’t help but wonder who he was talking to on the phone. I decided to call and see if the dress shop could deliver Holly’s dress. We would look online and pick one out.”

I LOOKED AT MY MOM. “When do you get out of the hospital?”

“I already asked Burt to pick me up in the morning. I will be at your house early and I don’t want you worrying about anything. It’s your wedding day tomorrow.”

WESTON

I GLANCED AT SHANNON, HER EYES REFLECTING A MIXTURE OF RELIEF AND anxiety, and leaned in to kiss her cheek. The words slipped from my lips with a soft assurance. “I’ve let everyone know the wedding will be in your backyard. Afterward, I’ll return to the hospital. It just makes more sense than going back to the hospital to get married.”

While Shannon visited her mother, a whirlwind of emotions inside me threatened to spin out of control. My anger, like a beast caged within, roared in my chest. I couldn’t stay in that stifling hospital room any longer, not without risking doing something foolish. I began pacing, a nervous energy propelling my steps. Three rounds around the hospital corridors did little to help with my anxious energy inside me. I was having a difficult time controlling my anger. Finally, I sought solace on a weathered bench, where I found unexpected company.

To my surprise, Viper, was leaning against an old tree. “What the hell are you doing here?” I blurted out, walking over and giving him a manly hug.

Viper’s eyes held a mix of concern and understanding as he replied. “I got your message that you were getting married, and then I heard your baby girl was taken, and then I heard Shannon’s Mom had a heart attack. All in the same day. Luckily I was on my way here. So, I guess your life is pretty hectic right now.”

“Yeah, it’s been crazy. We have our daughter back, and you’re going to love her. But the bastard that took her most likely won’t be charged with much. So I’ve decided to make him pay another way, if that happens.”

Curiosity sparked in Viper’s eyes, his gaze probing. “What are your

plans.”

“I haven’t decided yet,” I confessed, the weight of the world on my shoulders. I’m having surgery after the wedding. I have some shrapnel in my thigh. Angel said it needed to be taken out as soon as possible. I guess that means I was lucky we got out of there when we did. My main problem right now is that man that took Holly, as soon as I’m able, that man will regret putting his hands on my daughter.”

Viper nodded solemnly, his expression mirroring my determination. “Let’s go inside, and you can meet Shannon and Holly. I’m surprised you left your family to come here. How are they all doing?”

“They are all on a three-week cruise, so I won’t see them for another week,” Viper revealed. “I left them each a message. Allison thinks she’s in love with the guy she’s with on the cruise.”

“Maybe she is in love. She’s old enough to know her feelings.”

“She’s not in love. Allison likes to stir things up with her brothers. Two of my brothers are now married they are all together. Our neighbor said Ryan was going to kick the guy off the ship when they were out at sea.”

“You don’t know how Allison has been coping with your absence, not knowing whether you were alive or dead. She must have gone through hell with you missing. They don’t even know you are alive.”

“I left each of them a message, so they’ll know soon. I told them I would be here. So if a bunch of noisy people that look like me shows up, it will be my family.”

“I’m glad you’re here for the wedding,” I admitted with gratitude, “Let’s go meet my family.”

As we entered the hospital, Holly ran up to me; they were on their way out. I swept her up in my arms, showering her with kisses on her soft cheeks. Shannon, this is my friend Viper. He’s come to see us get married.” Turning to Shannon, I introduced my friend Viper. He’s come to see us get married.

Shannon greeted him warmly, her eyes filled with appreciation. “Hello Viper, I’m so happy to meet you. Weston told us about you saving his life. We’re so grateful for what you’ve done. Holly and I are overjoyed, to have Weston home with us.”

Holly was busy showering my face with kisses, and then she turned her attention to Viper. “You have a booboo? She reached down, picked up his arm, and kissed the scar he had since college when he rescued an elderly woman from a burning house.

“Booboo kisses make you feel better,” she kissed his arm. Viper looked like he might take off running at any moment. “You feel better now?”

“Yes, I feel so much better now. Thank you, Holly,” Viper responded, his voice touched by genuine gratitude.

As Holly laid her head on my shoulder and drifted into a peaceful slumber, I turned to Viper. “Viper, can you follow behind us?”

“I’ll let you two be together on your last night before becoming man and wife,” Viper said. “I know you have a lot to do, and Kash has already told me Emily is cooking me a special dinner. I will see you two tomorrow.”

“Okay, we’ll see you then.” I acknowledged, watching him walk away. The hint of sadness in his gait did not go unnoticed.

“He seems sad,” Shannon said, watching him walk away.

“Yeah, he does. I’m going to call Kash.” I took out my phone. “Hey Kash, Viper is on his way to your house. I was thinking he looked sad. Can your kids climb on him to keep his mind off whatever is bothering him?”

“That’s their favorite thing to do, and I’ll tell them Viper needs some hugs. Did he at least shave? It’s probably because his brothers and sister were away.

“Yes, he’s all cleaned up. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yep, see you then.”

“That was a great idea,” Shannon remarked as we finally headed home. This was a long day. “Nothing makes a person feel better than having kids crawling on them. Let’s go home.”

Holly was sleeping in her room, and Shannon and I sat on the sofa. I pulled her on my lap and started undressing her. “How about we go to your room?”

“That’s what I was going to suggest,” Shannon whispered in my ear. She got up and handed me my crutch; I stopped by and looked in on Holly. She was sleeping, and I noticed she seemed restless. I hoped she doesn’t have a bad dream tonight.

I followed Shannon into her room, and my hands shook as I took her in my arms. I wondered what she would think about all the scars on my body from that damn mine explosion. Her hands went up, and under my shirt, she pulled it up and over my head, and then she went for my belt, but my hand covered hers.

“Sweetheart, I’m scared you won’t want me when you see me completely naked. Why don’t we get under the covers and turn the lights out.”

“No, I love every inch of your body; I love you for the man you are, not because of how you look. I’m so happy to have you back; I don’t care about anything except what’s in here,” she said as her hands covered my heart. You are mine, and I am yours. That’s how it’s been since we first met. That’s how it will be until eternity. Now make love to me before I explode for wanting you.”

I ran my hands through her hair, and my mouth found her soft lips. I lay her on the bed, undressed her, and removed my pants. I leaned over her and kissed her as my hands roamed every inch of her body, savoring the memory of how she felt. I kissed her eyes as the tears fell from them.

“Weston, I love you so much.”

“I love you too, sweetheart, and now I’m going to show you how much I love you.” I pulled her under me, I teased her before I took one of those beautiful full breasts into my mouth. The sounds coming from Shannon were making me crazy.

When my hand moved between her thighs and my finger touched her soft spot. Shannon couldn’t stay still; she raised her hips up and let me have my way. “*If I’m dreaming, don’t wake me up,*” I know she didn’t realize she spoke out loud, but I answered her anyway.

“You’re not dreaming, sweetheart. You’re here with me where you will be for the rest of our lives.”

Weston took a deep breath, “Sweetheart, do you want me to stop?”

“No, I never want you to stop,” she whispered in my ear. I was so hard, and it has been a long time since we’ve made love. She started moving her hands everywhere. She kissed every scar she saw, she reached down and touched me, and I couldn’t hold in the moan that escaped me. I moved her hand I didn’t want to come before I gave her all the pleasure she deserves.

“You have so many muscles. I don’t have the same figure I had the last time we made love, I’ve had a child, I’m not as firm as I used to be.”

“Sweet Shannon, look at me. You are beautiful, you are perfect for me, we are going to make hot, sweaty love to each other. I’ve waited a long time to be home with you, and to make you mine.”

“I’ve always been yours,” She reached down and ran her hand across my hard cock. “Let me touch you.”

“No, if one finger touches me, I’ll lose it.”

“Then lose it. I want to touch all of you. I want to kiss your entire body I’ve missed you so much. I love you, and you are mine. I love you I want to

taste all of you.”

I raised myself over her and slid inside her, I watched as her eyes gazed into mine, I still don't understand how I ever was so blessed to have Shannon as mine. “Let's make love, and the next time we can taste each other.”

“Okay, then let's make love,” Shannon said.

Shannon pushed up and wrapped her legs around me to bring me in deeper. “Easy sweet, I want both of us to enjoy this.”

But I couldn't hold back. She met me on every move. When I knew she was ready to climax, I let go. When I finally raised my head, she was watching me. “So the next time, we go soft and slow.” I threw back my head and laughed. “I'm ready when you are.”

“He didn't have to convince Shannon; she was ready. They made love slow, hot, and sweaty. Both of our bodies had sweat glistening on them. Shannon kissed my body everywhere as I did hers.

I trailed my finger down her side. Her skin prickled at my touch. I looked at her and saw so much passion in her eyes. She slowly closed her eyes, and I got up and went to the spare room. First, I checked on Holly; she was still sleeping.

I was in a deep sleep, when I was abruptly awakened by the piercing sound of Holly's screams. I grabbed my crutch and hurried as fast as I could to her room.

Holly's cries seemed to reverberate in the stillness of the night as I entered her room. My hands trembling, I gathered her into my arms, holding her close to my chest. I whispered tenderly to her, “Daddy has you now, sweetheart, daddy has you,”

I looked up as Shannon ran into the room, with a concerned look on her face. Her maternal instincts kicked into high gear as she joined me. “She had a bad dream.”

“My poor Holly, Mama is here, sweetie,” I reached for Shannon and pulled her in with us so all three of us were together. Holly was sweating she was in a panic and couldn't calm down. “Let's turn the light on to calm her down.”

“Look sweetie, see Mommy, and Daddy and Holly,” she couldn't seem to catch her breath, she was crying so hard, then she got the hick-ups. We held her for an hour before she fell asleep.

“I'll put her in my bed,” Shannon said, wiping a tear off her cheek. Gently, I laid Holly down and kissed Shannon goodnight. But as Holly stirred

and opened her eyes, she clutched onto me with determination. "No, Daddy, stay here," she pleaded, her small fingers wrapped around my arm.

"Okay, Daddy will stay here," I assured her, I put her between Shannon and me, and we wrapped her in our arms. I knew I was going to kill that bastard the first chance I got. I told myself that I wouldn't fall asleep. I woke up to Holly kissing my shoulder. "Booboo kisses make you all better."

"Yes, sweetheart, they make me all better. Where is Mommy?"

"Here I am, sleepy head," Shannon said her voice filled with warmth and love. "You better get up; we are getting married in one hour."

I laughed, hugging Holly, who giggled. This has been the best night's sleep I've had since the last time I was with Shannon. "Holly and I are going to get dressed. You get dressed in the spare room. Emily brought you some clothes."

With a sense of contentment and anticipation, I smiled at my family. "I love you, Holly, and I love you, Shannon; I'll show you how much tonight on our wedding night. Take Holly in the other room so I can get up; I'm underdressed."

Shannon's eyes sparkled with affection, and she playfully teased, "I know I had to cover you when Holly and I woke up. I have you some sweats. They were yours; you left them at my other house. But you have to give them back; they are mine now."

"You got a deal, sweetheart," I replied, feeling a rush of emotion. Damn, I was so incredibly happy.



I STOOD in Shannon's backyard, I waited with Viper standing next to me. We watched Shannon and Holly walk to where I was. Shannon's dress was beautiful; it floated around her, and her bare shoulders showed off all that gorgeous red hair. I looked at Holly; she wore a soft pink dress that puffed out at her knees. She saw me standing there, and she ran to me. I picked her up, and we watched as my beautiful bride walked to me, and she kissed me.

There wasn't a dry eye anywhere. When we were announced man and wife, I handed Holly to Viper, pulled a crying, laughing Shannon into my arms, and kissed her passionately. We were enjoying visiting with family and friends when I heard someone crying. I looked around, and Viper had a

beautiful woman with her legs around him as five men pounded him on the back.

“Viper’s family found him,” Shannon whispered in my ear. I smiled because I knew they had to have hired a jet to bring them here that fast.

“He’s going to be crying as loud as they are any moment now,” Shannon elbowed me when I said that and I laughed. Angel stood in front of me. It was time to leave for the hospital. Shannon hugged me around the waist as we sat on the bench.

“Remember the doctor who was going to look at your hand? He’s going to meet us at the hospital. I hate to take you away from your new wife and daughter, but it’s time to leave for your surgery.”

With a heavy heart I stood up, and Shannon handed me my crutch before laying her head on my shoulder, and I whispered, “I love you, sweetheart, I want you and Holly to stay here. You don’t have to wait at the hospital during surgery.”

Determination gleamed in her eyes as she insisted, “I’m going to change my clothes and meet you at the hospital, along with your parents. Holly will stay with my Mom. I will not leave my husband at the hospital alone,” I smiled when she called me her husband, and she cried.

Viper stopped and introduced us to his family, “I told you they were loud, especially Allison,” he quipped, as he put his arm around her neck and brought her close enough to kiss her on the head. So you’re leaving for the hospital. The next time I see you, I want you to have one of those titanium prostheses, but never get rid of that crutch.”

“I’ll never get rid of it. Thank you, Viper, for risking your life to save mine. You will forever be my brother.”

“Oh no, not another brother,” Allison said, smiling. We all said our goodbyes, and I left with Angel for the hospital.

SHANNON

“DID HE REALLY THINK I WOULDN’T BE HERE WHILE HE WAS IN SURGERY?” I asked, my gaze fixed on Tracy, Weston’s Mom. The anticipation of waiting for news about Weston’s surgery gnawed at my nerves.

“Oh, he knew nothing would keep you away. Shannon, Lou, and I are so grateful to have you as part of our family. We love you deeply. Thank you for bringing Holly into our lives. You’ve saved us. We had given up on everything, but now we couldn’t be happier. Thank you for including us in your lives.” Tracy’s voice quivered with genuine emotion, and her eyes shone with gratitude.

“You and Lou are our family, and we hope you’ll consider moving to our town so you can be part of all the birthdays and holidays. We might even start having more children, hoping you’ll want to be close by to be a part of their lives,” I hoped they would move here near us.

“You want us to move here?”

“Yes, we do.”

“Well, I will start looking for a new home right away. I want to live near my kids and grandkids. I can’t wait to start the search. I haven’t felt this excited in a long time. It feels like God is listening to my prayers,” Tracy looked so excited, I couldn’t help but be as excited as she was.

“I’m sure He is; He has answered all of mine,” I said, knowing how overjoyed my mother-in-law was because I felt the same way. Every thought of Weston being back home made me tear up. Now, we sat beside each other, anxiously waiting for the doctor to confirm the surgery was over.

Angel entered the waiting area, a reassuring smile on his face, “The

surgery went well. You can visit him in about thirty minutes. He'll sleep probably for the rest of the night. He has an appointment in two days to have his hand examined. Weston thinks his hand is useless, but the doctor I spoke to believes it's a minor procedure, and his hand will work again."

"What did Weston say about it?"

"He didn't say much. I don't think he wants to get his hopes up. Hasn't he mentioned it to you?"

"We haven't had much time together; with everything that's been happening. Tell me about Weston's surgery. I was hoping you could tell me about the surgery he had in that stinking cell where Viper had to amputate his leg. Did you have to do anything to it?"

"No, if I didn't know about his surgery, I would've thought it was done by a professional. He'll be fit for his prosthetic tomorrow. It will only be a temporary one until we can shape one specially for him. Soon, he won't need his crutch if he doesn't want to use it, although it will take some time for him to get used to wearing a prosthetic.

"He mentioned he can still feel his foot."

"That's common for people who has lost a limb. They'll reach down to scratch an itch, forgetting it's gone. It's been four years for him, so the phantom sensations have subsided. We'll see how it goes with the prosthetic."

"That's wonderful that he's getting it. Honestly it wouldn't matter to me. I'll take Weston however I can get him. But I know him; he'll want the best prosthetic available."

"Yes, he mentioned that to me. He wants the best. You'll be able to see him soon."

"Thank you, Angel, for everything."

"That's what I'm here for. If you need anything, all you have to do is ask."

I settled down next to Weston's bed as he slept, browsing listings of homes for sale in the area on my phone. I was taken aback when Tracy shared her price range for a new home. Discovering how wealthy they were made me uneasy about searching for a house for them. I had no idea what their taste in homes were so I didn't feel comfortable looking.

"Sweetheart, crawl in bed with me."

I looked at Weston and smiled before climbing into bed with him. "Let me know if I hurt you."

“Sugar, I’m three times larger than you; you will not hurt me. Where is our daughter?”

“She’s at my Mom’s. I wanted to stay with my husband on my wedding night.”

“I’m so glad you stayed,” Weston said, pulling me up against him, letting me know how hard he was. “How can we do this?” he whispered in my ear as his tongue licked it, his hand went up under my top, and he squeezed my breast. You’re my wife; I love you, wife,” he said, pushing my leggings down.

“I love you, husband,” I couldn’t stop the moan as his hand went inside my panties.

“I am going to make love to my wife on our wedding night,” he said as his fingers slipped inside me. My body moved on its own accord; I was ready to orgasm. Weston’s mouth covered mine as I cried out my release. I pushed my pants off as I guided his hard erection inside me.

We made beautiful love together before both of us fell asleep. I felt Weston pull the covers over us and pretended to be asleep as he informed the nurse it was our wedding night. A suppressed chuckle slipped from my lips.

“I’ll be back in ten minutes,” the nurse said, her footsteps echoing down the sterile hospital corridor.

“Thank you, kind lady,” Weston replied, his voice tinged with exhaustion and relief.

While they were talking I searched under the sheets for my clothes, a mischievous grin playing on my lips, unable to contain my laughter.

“I can’t believe you’re laughing and let me handle all the talking,” Weston chuckled, his eyes still heavy with sleep. “You have to admit it’s amusing. I’m just glad it was the nurse and not Angel.”

Our laughter filled the room, but was interrupted by a throat clearing from the bathroom. We both froze, exchanging guilty glances, before erupting into laughter so uproarious it stole my breath.

“Stay in there until we find Shannon’s pants,” Weston said between laughs. I nudged him, playfully and he silenced himself, pulling me close for a long, passionate kiss. Before handing me my leggings, with a knowing smile leaving the missing panties for a scavenger hunt later.

“You can come out now,” Weston finally called to the bathroom, where Angel had been hiding. Angel emerged his face adorned with a grin.

“Can I at least tell Ainsley about this?” Angel asked, mischief dancing in

his eyes.

“No, you can’t,” I replied, “I don’t want anyone talking about Shannon and sex in the same sentence.”

“I’m leaving. You two can stop discussing this right now,” I declared walking to the door. I turned back and looked at Angel. “How long were you in the bathroom?”

“I walked in five seconds before the nurse came in. I was hesitant to come out, thinking you two might be, well...you know.”

My face turned crimson, and I glanced at Weston. “I need to bake cupcakes for two children’s parties, I won’t return until later. I’ll bring Holly to see you.”

“Okay, sweetheart, I’ll see you later.”

I rushed home and took a quick shower before heading to the bakery. Burt was already hard at work. I decided to talk to him later and see if he wants to be my partner at the new bakery.

“What are you making?” I inquired, eager to distract myself from the burning desire to be with Weston.

“A wedding cake. The phone has been ringing off the hook since six this morning. Seems like the entire county heard about Weston and your wedding and wants us to make their cakes and cupcakes. I told them we needed advance notice for special orders.”

“Wow, it looks like we might get really busy. I wish I could focus on baking, but all I want is to be with Weston. I knew I had these cupcakes to make, but I promised Weston I would return later with Holly. Maybe we should hire another baker to come in a few days a week until things settle down.”

“I thought you might say that, so I arranged for someone to come in at one to discuss it with you. If you’d like, I can speak to her for you.”

“That would be great, Burt. I’m so thankful for you. And remember if you ever need a break or a vacation, you only have to say the word. You know that, right?”

Burt nodded appreciatively. “Yes, I appreciate that Shannon, but I’m good. No vacations needed.”

“Your sister is looking for property here. She wants to live closer to her son and grandchild. I didn’t realize she was so wealthy, and now I’m feeling embarrassed about them coming to my house for Christmas. I even asked them to stay the night.”

“Don’t be embarrassed. Tracy isn’t like most wealthy people. She’s down-to-earth just like she’s always been. That’s why Lou fell in love with her. Their house might look grand, but Tracy is the same she was when she grew up in a middle-class family.”

“That’s what I thought too. I’m relieved I won’t feel embarrassed. Plus, they’ve already seen my home yesterday at my wedding. Hey, we’re family now Uncle Burt. I’m so lucky to have you as my uncle.”

“I’m the lucky one.”

“We’re both lucky.” I worked until all the cupcakes were finished and stored in the fridge for my client’s that would be by to pick them up later today. Then I headed to the store to pick up some things for the house. However, as I pulled into the parking spot, my heart raced and total fear shook my body.

A van and a car blocked me in, and dread washed over me. I’d seen enough news to know what these guys were going to. My heart pounded as I locked my car and honked the horn, my trembling fingers immediately dialed Weston’s number.

“Hey, sweetheart, what are you up to?” Weston’s voice filled my ears, as terror took over my body.

“Weston, two men are trying to kidnap me. They’ve boxed me in at the supermarket,” I whispered, my voice quivering with fear.

“Run over their fucking car if you have to, just get away from them.” Weston’s voice was fierce and protective, cutting through the fear.

The men were banging on my windows, their intention clear and Weston heard them. “Put the phone on speaker, sweetheart. I want to talk to them.”

“You get the fuck away from my wife, or I will kill you with my bare hands,” Weston’s voice roared through the phone, filled with a primal fury that sent shivers down my spine.

“ Boom!” one of the men shouted menacingly through the window, his sinister intent palpable.

With a terrifying crash, they shattered my window, and I fought back with every ounce of strength in my body. It wasn't fair; I had just gotten Weston back, and my precious baby needed me. I wouldn't let these thugs kidnap me. The words poured out of me in a defiant scream. “I won’t let you take me! My baby needs me!”

But before I could comprehend the consequences of my resistance, a brutal fist struck me, and darkness consumed me.

WESTON

“DOES THIS CAR GO ANY FASTER,” MATT AND HUNTER HAD COME TO THE hospital to visit me when Shannon called. I had been walking on my new prosthetic when they arrived. I knew she would be gone, but when I saw her vehicle and everyone standing around it my instincts kicked in, I felt like I was in my war zone.

I had to clear my mind and concentrate on Shannon I would find her and I would kill all of them who took her.

“They hit her in the face and knocked her out,” this brave teenage girl explained as she handed me the wallet. I jumped on one of the men's back, and he threw me to the ground, but I managed to get his wallet,” I thanked her and quickly rifled through the wallet and found the photo of the Pakistani man. “Can your company bring up and address I asked Matt?”

“Give us about a minute,” Matt said, making a call. He returned shortly, saying, “It’s a fake address, just like the phony driver’s license.”

“I videoed them taking her,” another teenage girl chimed in, handing me her phone. I watched the video, and my hand shook. I saw Shannon putting up a fierce fight against those men until one with an eye patch slugged her in the face, rendering her unconscious. The rage built up inside me, and I knew I would kill him first. I sent the video to my phone before returning her phone back. Thank you. Did they spot you filming?”

“No, I was hiding behind the building.”

“Good, I don’t want you to stay here in case they’re watching the place.”

“Can I share this on TikTok?” she asked.

“Yes, you can ask if anyone knows them.”

“Share this number as well,” Matt added, providing her with a number from his burner phone.

I looked at Matt and Hunter. “Where could they have taken her?” A woman sprinted across the parking lot, waving her phone. “My son is on the phone,” she said, handing it to me.

“Hello.”

“Hey, I followed them until they reached the cliffs overlooking the ocean, off Waterfall trail. They shot my windows, so I had to stop. But I’ll continue to follow them on foot, and stay in touch with you.”

“Matt, let’s go; we have a lead,” I said, rushing to the vehicle, on my new prosthetic leg. “Just be careful not to be seen. Maybe you should just come back to town.”

“I’ll make sure no one sees me,” the boy said.

I looked at the woman, “I’m keeping this phone, and I’ll buy you anything you want.”

“Just take the phone, and keep an eye on my boy, he’s only sixteen.” *Damn, I was wishing he wasn’t as young as he sounded.*

Hunter was behind the wheel. “Do you know the way? I can’t recall where that road is?” I said, looking at Hunter.

“Yes, It’s on the outskirts of town,” Hunter replied as we turned onto Waterfall Trail. A few miles down the road, we came across the boy lying on the ground. Matt quickly got out, and the boy was sitting up by the time Matt reached him. They both returned to our vehicle.

“They came back the same way, the boy informed us. They have a different car now, a white van.”

“What happened to you?” Matt inquired.

“I heard them coming and hid, and after they passed, I ran and ran, but I couldn’t keep up. I wanted to see which way they turned.”

Weston observed the boy closely as he spoke. “You did everything right, and there must be a reason they took this route. Climb in; you can ride with us.”

As we passed the boys' car, I marveled at his survival despite the bullet-riddled vehicle. I’ll buy him another car, and his mama a new phone plus an iPad. After another five miles, we came upon their abandoned vehicle. “Be careful,” I cautioned as I stepped out of the truck, my balance still unsteady due to the prosthetic. I tipped forward, before catching myself. It was clear that this had been a premeditated act; they had known they were going to

kidnap Shannon, and had gone after her specifically.

Chills spread all over my body, and a sinking feeling settled deep in my gut. Who could want Shannon badly enough to kidnap her? Was it a sick son-of-a-bitch who saw her on television?

I turned to Matt and Hunter. "I wondered who hates me enough to make me suffer by taking my bride? Unfortunately the answer is yes. There are many people who despise me and would resort to this. They would take Shannon or Holly to get to me. But that was in other countries. Did they come here, or were they already here?"

"People thought I was dead, and then, just yesterday, it was all over the news that I had survived. Who could be behind this?" I took out my phone and called my Dad. "Listen, Dad, I need you to do something for me."

"Son, where are you? I've seen the video of those men taking Shannon. What the hell is going on?"

"Dad, I need you to take Holly and Shannon's mom somewhere safe; so no one can find them. I need you to keep them safe for me until I get Shannon back."

"But you just had surgery two hours ago."

"I'm fine, Dad. Please just keep them safe for me."

I will, son. I won't let anything or anyone near Holly. Call me when this is over. Christmas is in twelve days. I hope you find her before then."

I will. I'll find her long before then. Dad, can you tell Holly we'll be home soon? Tell her we are on a short honeymoon."

"I will, Son. We love you. Please take care of yourself."

"Goodbye, Dad. Let's take, what's your name?" I asked the kid.

"William, but my friends and family call me Will."

"Alright, Will. Here's your Mom's phone, and we'll give you a ride home. What's your address?"

"My thigh was beginning to hurt, I glanced at my buddies. "You two don't have to go with me. I still don't know who has her."

"We're going with you, and the others are meeting us. We need a computer, so we have to talk to Lara," Matt explained. He called his wife Lara, and gave her a quick rundown of the situation over the phone. She was already on her computer when we arrived.

"How many people should I look up?" She asked after our introduction. Then she looked me closely. "Wait, I know you. You were in Afghanistan when the Americans left, but I saw you leaving the area. You're the one who

saved all of those other people when the bomb went off.”

“Where were you?” I asked, scrutinizing her. “You were taking a video but dressed like one of those women.”

“Yes, I didn’t want them to kill me. Lieutenant Weston Evans Army Ranger Special Ops. So it was your wedding day yesterday, and your photo was in the news. Who do you believe took Shannon?”

“I have some Iranians that hate me. I believe...”

“Here he is right here. He was spotted in Los Angeles last week. Is this who you believe has Shannon?”

I reached for the desk before I fell on my ass. “He’s not dead. He’s supposed to be dead. I was assured that he was dead. Those fuckers lied to me.”

“Abbas Shas, I thought he was dead too,” Matt said.

“Who is he?” Hunter asked.

“He’s pure evil incarnate. He’s killed countless people, mostly women, for no other reason other than they didn’t wear their hijab the way he wanted them to. I have to get to her before that man does. He’ll start by chopping her body parts off. That’s why I shot him in the head. I was shot at the same time my team extracted me, but I was told he died.”

“He’ll torture Shannon if he gets his hands on her. We have to hurry and find her. Where the hell are they?” Damn, my thigh throbbed with pain, but I had to fight through the pain, I couldn’t let pain stop me from finding Shannon.

“Look at this,” Lara said as she enlarged a video of a man leaving a van. “This is one of Abbas’s men. Do you think this is the van they put Shannon in, the one you told me about? It’s white, but this one has writing on the side. What does that say? BB Bakery. Do you think they put that sign there so it would look like it belonged in front of her shop?”

I called Will’ he answered on the first ring. “Will, did that van have any writing on the side door?”

“Yes, but I couldn’t read it. I’m sorry, I’ve been trying to see it in my mind; there were letters, like maybe a ‘B,’ but I can’t be positive.”

“Thank you, Will, I’ll talk to you later,” I looked at the others, “Will thought it might be a ‘B’ on the van. This has to be them. Can you track the van’s current location?”

“Let me bring it up. Damn, we need Sofie’s computer. I’m going to call her.”

“Who’s Sofie,” I asked, growing impatient.

“She’s with Seal Security. Sofie is married to Noah. They have the most advanced computers system. I’ll send everything to her. Here she is; yes, she’s looking up the license number. It won’t take long.”

“Can we at least be in the vehicle driving? Lara, can you bring a laptop with us?”

“I have a month-old baby. I’m sorry, but I can go anywhere. Hang on. Sofie said there’s a helicopter waiting for you. She believes it’s better if you take a chopper. They are on the cliffs; she thinks you should hurry. She has a bad feeling about them taking her to the cliffs.”

“Fuck, I’m going to kill every one of those bastards.” Hunter drove as fast as he could until we reached the helicopter with Jax at the controls. We jumped in and took off. “Where on the cliffs are they?” I asked, looking at Jax.

“Lara said we’ll spot them in the air,” Matt said while talking with Lara.

“It’s been four hours since they took Shannon. I’m going to kill them, and no one will stop me.” After an hour, we reached the high cliffs. I peered through the binoculars, scanning everywhere, and what I saw made my heart race. Shannon was sprinting toward the cliffs as fast as she could. I knew Jax saw her too because he made a sharp left turn towards her.

I unbuckled my harness to reach for Shannon; I spotted the men with weapons closing in on her at the same time Shannon noticed us. I gestured for her to get down, and she didn’t hesitate. I aimed my high-powered rifle at the man pointing a weapon at Shannon and shot him right between the eyes.

Then she got up and ran. She stopped at the edge of the cliff, and the men kept closing in on her. Jax tilted the helicopter, and I held on tightly with my arm as I reached for her. Time was running out. You’re going to have to jump sweetheart! Jump! I saw the ledge on the cliff edge, and when we got close, Jax lowered the helicopter as I took out the other two men. Abbas wasn’t among them. When we approached Shannon, I reached down for her, and she jumped up, trusting me to bring her safely to where we were.

Shannon cried as I pulled her into the chopper, “I got you, sweetheart; you’re safe now.”

“That man is still in the van and said he would hurt everyone you loved.” I looked at Jax, Matt, and Hunter. We knew what I had to do. I had to kill Abbas before he could hurt my family.

“Where are we going? Why are you turning back? There are still men in

that van; we have to leave, they have so many weapons,” Shannon cried.

I buckled Shannon into the seat, and Jax headed straight for the van. No, you can't do this. She looked down at my prosthetic, “Your leg is not strong enough; they'll kill you. They have so many weapons in that van. I looked at her and touched the bruises on her face. I examined her hands and her arms, which were also bruised; I knew they had beaten her.

“Did they touch you?”

“No, they didn't touch me like that. They hit me, and the bruises will fade. We have you back now. Please don't go after this man.”

“He'll get Holly if I don't kill him,” she nodded, acknowledging I had to do this. I softly kissed her bruised lips. As Jax lowered the copter, I lowered myself and jumped, and Matt and Hunter did the same.

We were a mile or more ahead of the white van and waiting on the roadside in the bushes. As soon as I saw the van, I stepped onto the road, and my prosthetic leg almost gave way. Then I saw Abbas; I aimed my weapon, and he died with one hit. But then bullets started flying. There had to be at least three men in the van. I jumped back and shot the van up, so they had to stop.

I heard a grunt and looked to my side; Hunter had been shot in the leg. Matt fired and the driver fell over the steering wheel. When I looked back at the van, a weapon was aimed at my head. The bullet missed me by a hair. I rolled onto my stomach as the man ran toward me with his weapon pointed.

Where the hell did he come from? I fired my weapon, and he fell to the ground. It was over, and I was alive, and I was home in America, and it was so good to be home. I sat on a rock and took off my prosthetic. It hurt my foot; I know I didn't have one, but damn it, my foot hurt.

WESTON

ANGEL HAD BEEN LECTURING ME NONSTOP SINCE I RETURNED FROM KILLING Abbas. He had to redo my stitches, and as far as Angel was concerned, I managed to mess up just about everything I could.

“I would have done the same thing. I’m glad you killed that bastard,” he said, exiting the room. I glanced over at Shannon, who occupied the sole chair in the room. I didn’t want her out of my sight, so she will stay with me until I left the hospital.

“Hello, are you Weston Evans?”

“Yes, that’s me. Who’s asking?”

“I’m Doctor Dwane Wright. I’ve come to repair your hand.”

“Hello, doctor Wright. This is my wife, Shannon.”

“Hello,” Shannon replied, shaking the doctor's hand.

“Angel sent me the CAT scans of your hand and briefed me on everything that happened. I’m glad your husband was able to rescue you from those Iranians. Angel also mentioned you have a prosthetic. I received mine in Afghanistan.” He scrutinized my hand and its scars, examining it from various angles. I can take care of this right now if you don’t have other plans.”

“No, I have nowhere else to be.”

“Great, let’s get this taken care of. I’ll arrange for a room, and the nurse will come to assist you.”

I glanced at Shannon; she walked over to me, and I pulled her into my arms, giving her a kiss. “Don’t get your hopes up, sweetheart; this might not go as smoothly as we hope.”

“I don’t care about your hand; I love you so much. It doesn’t matter to me. I love you for you and nothing else.”

“I will never let anyone hurt you again. I love you. You’re my life, babe; you always have been and always will be.”

“Are you ready,” the nurse asked, entering the room with a wheelchair. “Why do I have to ride in a wheelchair?”

“Because it’s the protocol, and you know I need this job and don’t want to risk getting fired. So do me a favor and go along with it without arguing, okay.”

I rolled my eyes and took a seat. Shannon walked beside me, holding my hand. I wondered if she realized she was holding the hand that didn’t work. She kissed me when we came as far as she could go with us. “I’ll see you when you get out.”

“Okay, sweetheart, wait in my room.”

“I will.”

The nurse pushed me through the doors, and the doctor walked in behind us. “Are you ready to get this fixed?”

“I’m more than ready, and your positive energy is starting to rub off on me. How long is this going to take?”

“About an hour, maybe less. I’ll find out more once I get in there. So let’s do this.”

SHANNON

I WAS STARTLED WHEN ANGEL ENTERED THE ROOM, I MAY HAVE JUMPED AND made a noise. “I’m sorry, I should have knocked.”

“It’s okay, I’m just a bit jumpy,” I replied. “I was so scared when those men had me. My mind is still processing how it all happened. I have a few people in town to thank for helping Weston find me. I just want to see Holly, and then I can settle down.”

“If you need anything, please let me know. I’ll be around until Weston is out of the hospital. Depending on how the surgery goes, he should be able to go home this evening.”

“That would be nice. I’m afraid to go home by myself. I know those guys are dead, and I’m sure I’ll feel better in a couple of days. It has been so hard for Holly and I but it still scares me to think about what might have happened if Holly had been in the car with me. I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m going on about what happened to me.”

“Hey, anytime you want to talk, I’m all ears. I’ll be back later. Why don’t you get some coffee and relax while Weston is in surgery.”

“Thanks, Angel. That’s a great idea. I’ll bring the coffee back here and relax as you suggest. I’ll see you around,” I said as he left the room. I walked to the hospital cafeteria, and the delicious aroma made my stomach growl, so I ended up getting coffee and a sandwich. I returned to Weston’s room to eat, wanting to be there when they brought him back.

I closed my eyes, almost falling asleep, when I heard a whisper. My heart raced, but I forced myself not to overreact. I opened my eyes, to find my mother and Holly staring at me. “Mommy got owie?”

“Sweetie, Mommy is fine; my owie is all gone. I assured her, trying not to wince as I picked her up and held her close to me. My ribs were so tender. Holly kissed all of my booboos away on my face. My mom still hadn’t said anything. “Mom, are you alright?”

“I hope he doesn’t have any more enemies. I was afraid to bring Holly back here; if it were up to me, we would have stayed away longer. Lou and Tracy were convinced that bringing Holly back to you and Weston was now safe. How often will we have to worry about someone coming after you and Holly?”

“Mom, we will be fine. My husband will take care of me and his daughter. So, please don’t worry about anything. We are all fine, I promise. Now stop worrying,” I looked at Holly; she was still kissing my ‘owies.’

“Mommy, feel better now?”

“Yes, sweetheart, I feel wonderful,” I kissed her face. “Where did you go?”

“We went to Disneyland. We flew down there yesterday and stayed at the Disneyland Hotel. Lou chartered a plane for us. I couldn’t even walk around; all I could see were those men fighting with you and kidnapping you.”

“Mom, I’m home now, and I’m fine. I’m sorry you had to see that. We are not going to talk about it again.”

“Okay, I’m sorry you went through that, and I won’t mention it again. Holly loved Disneyland. Tracy said she took a picture with every Disney character there. I like Tracy and Lou; I’m glad they are moving here. I’m going with her tomorrow to look at some homes. Lou has meetings, so he’ll be away.”

“That should be fun,” I replied, feeling tired.

“Where’s my Daddy,” Holly suddenly shouted.

“Daddy is getting his booboo fixed. We need to get another Christmas tree when Daddy comes home. Daddy can help pick it out. Won’t that be fun?”

“What happened to the tree you bought?” Mom asked.

“I forgot to water it, and it is already dried out too much to use. Christmas will be here soon. I have presents to wrap and more to buy. There is so much to do. I feel like nothing is getting finished. I just can’t wait for Weston to come home. We are going to have the best Christmas, with your Daddy home with us.

“Why don’t you let me take Holly home with me, and after Weston is

home, I'll bring her to your house?"

"No, I want her with me, but thank you, Mom. I couldn't do any of this without you. Besides, you are going to have fun house-hunting with Tracy."

"Okay, I will see you two later," I stood up and hugged my Mom who had been through so much this last week. "I love you Mama."

"I love you too baby."

I watched my mom leave the room. I remembered how scared I was thinking about what those men had done to me. They slapped me hard, kicked me, and punched me. I was determined not to black out. I knew I had to get away, or I would be dead. They planned to kill me. They kept telling me they would. One of the men wanted to kill me and throw me out of the van to enrage Weston making it easier to kill him. The man in charge only had to look at them and they shut up.

When I jumped out the door as the van was still moving, I was scared but when I saw bullets hitting the ground around me I almost froze, but I had to save myself and then I saw Weston in that helicopter coming for me. I was so relieved and scared at the same time. Thank God that is all over.

I knew Weston was already angry and wouldn't lose control. He knew he had to stay composed to get me back alive. Holly and I were playing Pattycake when they returned Weston to his room. He was awake and laughing. The nurse looked at us and shook her head, "He's laughing because his hand hurts."

My eyes welled up with tears as I looked at him, "You can feel your hand?"

"Yes, and I can move my fingers too. The surgery worked. I have my hand back. How is my Holly doing?" he said, kissing the top of her head. "Daddy's going home today. I need to get dressed and get out of here," he slipped on his prosthetic. Holly watched everything closely. "Daddy hurt," she cried.

"No, sweetie, Daddy is all better," Weston said, picking her up. See, Daddy is all better," he smiled to make her smile, and she smiled. "My Daddy, all better."

"Yes, now I'm going to get dressed, and we will go home." He kissed me and handed our daughter to me as he went to dress.

WESTON

THE NEW PROSTHETIC WAS NOTHING SHORT OF A MARVEL. I STRODE effortlessly along the beach, each step a testament to the precision of its fit. Gone were the days of constant discomfort and pain. I stood at the same height as before, and my shoes slid onto it effortlessly. A smile lit up my face as I spotted Shannon and Holly in the distance. Waving to them, I marveled at the simple joy of running along the shore.

Shannon approached her eyes filled with curiosity. Holly, our bundle of boundless energy, scampered nearby, her tiny feet making imprints in the sand. With Christmas just around the corner, we had some last-minute shopping to tackle. The mall was sure to be swarmed with holiday shoppers, but the cares and stresses of the past seemed to have lost their grip on me. Happiness enveloped me, and I cherished every moment with my wife and daughter. “How is it?”

“It’s perfect,” I replied, my voice brimming with enthusiasm. “This Prosthetic is a game-changer, Shannon. It doesn’t bother me like the old one did. I can imagine running after all those babies we’ll have and racing along the beach with you and Holly. I love my wife and daughter. What more could a man ask for?”

A sparkle of excitement danced in her eyes as she shared the news. “I was going to wait, but you have me so excited I’ll tell you now. We are having a baby!”

I came to a sudden halt, my gaze locked onto Shannon. “Did you say we are having a baby?”

Her reply was a tentative nod, uncertain about my reaction. Without

hesitation, I scooped her up and kissed her deeply. “You've made me so incredibly happy. A new baby! We'll need a bigger home for our growing family.”

“You don't like our home?”

“I love our home, sweetheart, but if we have five kids, we'll need a larger one,” tears welled up in her eyes, and I knew she remembered telling me five years ago that she wanted five kids. “ You still want five kids, don't you?”

“Yes, and we better have them a year apart because I'm not getting any younger,” I shook my head and laughed.

“Let's go home, sweetheart,” I looked at Holly running from the water, “it's time to go, Holly,” I called as I watched my baby run up to me. I picked her up and put her on my shoulders. She was laughing her little head off as she hung on to my head as I ran, pretending I was going to fall.

The next day we were in the Mall when Holly's eyes sparkled as she spotted Santa Clause and raced ahead to join the line of eager children. I reached out to retrieve her, but Santa recognized me. Rising from his chair, he extended a hand.

“I'm really happy Holly's Christmas wish came true. I worried about telling her that her Daddy would be home for Christmas, and now you are here. I'm so happy for you and your family.”

“Thank you. I believe a miracle got me out of that prison in Iranian. I hope there are more miracles for others who need them. Holly, let's let the other children tell Santa what they want for Christmas.”

“Okay, Daddy, bye, Santa.”

“Goodbye, Holly, I'll see you again next year.”

We were decorating the tree on Christmas Eve, and our families were all there. I turned to everyone. “I have some wonderful news to share. We're having another baby,” I said as they all jumped up, clapping their hands and talking at the same time.

My Mom was crying; she was so happy. It was hard to believe I had been in prison in Iran six weeks ago, and here I was, standing with my wife and daughter, sharing with our family that we were having another child. After the families went home and Holly was sleeping, it was just Shannon and I alone in the family room.

Wrapped in each other's arms, we knew that the road ahead might not always be easy, but we were ready to face it together. Our love had overcome the darkest of times, and it was the foundation upon which our family would

continue to thrive.

As the clock struck midnight, we exchanged a heartfelt kiss. “Merry Christmas, sweetheart. This is the first of many Christmases to come for our family. I love you so much. Thank you for waiting for me.”

“Merry Christmas, Weston; I love you so much. We are going to have a wonderful life together.

THE END

I hope you enjoyed Weston's story, and I'm sure you will hear of them again, in my books. I enjoy putting my other characters in my stories. My next book is about Cole Reed, and Bailey Peterson; Cole will be joined by others from Marines of Delta Force Red Team. His team name is Viper. Book one will be out in January. Thank you for reading my books. I appreciate all my readers; I hope you keep enjoying my books. Here is a small part of Viper's story.

Susie Mciver
VIPER
BOOK ONE
DELTA FORCE MEN

COLE

“HAVE YOU EVER SEEN HER WHEN YOU ARE RUNNING ON THE TRAIL TO THE peak?”

I glanced at Allison puzzled, “Who are you talking about?”

“The woman up by the peak. A few months ago I went up there to check on Widow Harlow and saw her running like the devil would catch her. Widow Harlow says she’s hiding from someone, claiming there are traps all over the Peterson’s property. That’s where she is staying.”

Listening to her, I was utterly baffled not knowing what the hell she was talking about. “She’s been there since last spring, only goes to town every couple of months. She wears a hoody so no one will see her face, but widow Harlow has seen her. She said she walked down by that natural spring swimming hole and the woman was swimming naked.”

“It sounds like you and the Widow Harlow have written your own book about an innocent woman living on the mountain,” I said, growing frustrated. “Are you so bored with life that you have to make up stories about people you don’t even know?”

“Why do you keep calling Carly the ‘Widow, Harlow?’” I asked, Allison.

“Because that’s what she wants us to call her,” Allison replied.

“She’s younger than me. If you keep calling her that, she’ll never find another husband.”

Allison had mischief in her eyes. I knew she would say something crazy. “She is the Widow Harlow. Jim died two years ago. Why are you so concerned about her love life?” “Do you want to ask her out?”

“Don’t be silly; she’s like a sister to me. Call her Carly, or she’ll turn into

an old lady before you know it. When I run tomorrow, I'll go past the Peterson's place and see if I can see the woman hiding from someone."

"Good, I want to go with you."

"No, if she's hiding, she won't want anyone coming around. She won't know I'm there, so you stay put. If a crazy person is hunting for her, I don't want him to find you. Now, here I am, gossiping like you and Carly. Why hasn't she moved from that cabin at the peak? She gets snowed in every winter. How did Jim die?"

"His appendix burst while he was at work, and he didn't make it to the hospital in time. She likes living in her little house and has a gun in every room. And you know Carly will shoot anyone sneaking around her place."

"Tell me more stories from when I was held in that stinking prison for four years. What possessed two of my brothers to get married?"

"They fell in love, Cole. People do that, you know."

"Have you ever fell in love?" I noticed she avoided eye contact.

"No, I'm like you. I'll never fall in love with anyone."

"Really, no one?"

"That's right, no one."

I refrained from pressing Allison; I already knew she had loved James Bellmont since she was sixteen. She cried all night when he took another girl to the prom, and Allison's heart was broken.

Puppy love could be heartbreaking, I've been told. I thought they'd be married by now, given how James used to look at her. But then he went off to war with the Delta Force Team.

But that was Allison's life, not mine. She stopped sharing her life with me after going to college.

I wondered what my family was doing when I was locked up in that stinking prison in Iran with Weston Evans. Now, I was going to be an Uncle, and Sean becoming a father. My family, had believed I was dead for four years. Now, they thought something was wrong with me because I have no plans for the first time in my life.

Ryan wasn't married; he joined the Air Force, stayed for four years, and then returned home. I always thought he wanted to get out off the mountain for a while and see what the rest of the world was like. He'd been with the same woman for a year now.

I always thought he and Carly would get together, but then Carly married Jim Harlow, five years ago, after she came home from college. She was a

writer.

Ryan and Patty had nothing in common; they never showed affection in public. Unlike Weston and Shannon, who couldn't keep their hands off each other. But that was Ryan's life, not mine. I wanted my family to be happy with their partners. I wouldn't meddle in Allison's or Ryan's love life.

"I heard Carrie Bellmont married a former Navy SEAL," I said, glancing at Allison.

"Yeah, he's with SEAL Security now. They are very affectionate, unlike Ryan and Patty, I've never seen them hug or kiss, if you know what I mean. Gabe broke Carrie's heart years ago, and now they are happily married. Go figure, some people have all the luck. I've wondered if they touch each other when they sleep together."

"Are we really talking about our brother's love lives?"

"Oh, there's no love there. They put up with each other. Patty wants to marry Ryan for what he has. I have no idea what Ryan wants."

"Anything else happen around here that I missed?"

"Lord, yes, a lot has happened. Let's grab a beer and sit on the front porch. I'll fill you in."

"I can't wait. I need some whiskey."

"Whiskey it is. This is just like old times. Maybe you'll tell me about those four years in that Iranian prison; it might help with your stress."

"And maybe I won't. Why do you think I'm stressed?"

"Because you can't sit still for more than it takes you to eat dinner. You jump up and take off running. That's why I asked if you've ever seen that woman. Okay, I was going to tell you that Patty has cheated on Ryan before. He didn't seem to mind. I told him, he shrugged, like I don't care."

"I can believe that. One look and you can see they're not in love. If they ever get engaged, I'll say something. Until then, I'll keep quiet."

"Jase almost got married to Degan Bennett, and then she broke up with him. He was devastated. I wanted to pull her hair out for hurting my brother."

"I'm surprised you didn't."

"Ryan had hold of my arm, or I would have. She said she fell in love with her new co-worker. That was three years ago, and guess what."

"What?"

"He married her younger sister, and then they moved away because Degan was so miserable."

"Serves her right; karma bit her in the ass for sure. She was always so

emotional. I remember her crying at school at the smallest things. I'm glad Jase didn't marry her."

"What about Mike? How is he doing without playing football?"

Mike's had a tough year because of his injury. We all know Mike lives and breathes football. I'm glad he moved back home with us. He wants to move back to the city, maybe you can convince him to stay here."

"He's thirty-one; if he wants to live somewhere else, we have to let him. He's a grown man."

"Yes, but I think he wants to stay here but because he's a grown man he feels he shouldn't live at home.

"I'll get the feel of how he's doing, he's probably pissed because of his injury."

"Are you running up near the Peterson's tomorrow?"

"Yes, I'll check it out. I'll even stop and say hello to Carly."

"I'm glad you're home. I feel like I have help with family stuff. It was a lot on my shoulders, taking care of everyone. This is so nice; I miss our family sitting around talking at night. Nowadays, everyone just goes to their rooms."

"We can't have that. I'll make sure everyone visits in the evenings."

"I'm going to bed; I have lots of visits tomorrow."

"Why do you stay on the mountain and make home visits? Why don't you work at the hospital or start a practice?"

"People around here wouldn't go to see a doctor; most don't have insurance. So, I accept chickens, pigs, and other animals as payment. That's how most of them pay for my services."

"And you don't mind not making more money?"

"No, I have everything I need."

"You're a good person, Allison, our parents would be so proud of you. I'm lucky to have you for my sister."

"Thank you. I love you, Cole. We all missed you when you were gone."

"I missed all of you too. I'll be staying close to home from now on, so no need to worry about me going anywhere."

"Goodnight, Cole."

"Goodnight, Allie."

I LAY in bed that night, thinking about my family. Ryan was eighteen when

our parents died. He took custody of all of us; I was seventeen, almost out of high school, we boys were all a year apart, and Allison was eleven at the time, so Ryan has always been very protective of her.

He did all his University classes online. We were all shocked that he went into the Air Force when he did. Allison had just turned eighteen, and I was in the Marine Delta Force Recon Units. I was in the Force as a prisoner in Iran for the last four years. I've been home for six months. Ryan is on my ass to do something.

The next day, I was running up near the Peterson place when I saw the woman running toward me, hoodie was on, clearly unaware of my presence. I stepped aside and cleared my throat to alert her I was here.

She jumped and screamed, and then she kicked me almost kicking me in my jewels. I jumped out of the way before she kicked me again. "What the fuck are you doing? If you do this to every runner you see on this path, you'll get yourself in trouble," I cautioned.

She caught her breath and looked up I was taken aback by her beauty. "Are you new here?" I asked.

"No, I'm not new here. I've been here for seven months. You must be from that family down the hill with all those brothers. Are you the one who was held in that prison? I heard people talking about you at the grocery store."

"Yeah, I've heard people talking about someone hiding on this mountain too. That must be you."

"What? Why are they saying that?"

"They said you always have a hoodie on, so they assume you are hiding from someone. Is that true? Are you hiding from someone?" I watched as this beautiful woman nervously chewed her bottom lip, making me want to kiss it. Damn, it's been so long since I've had a woman, I'll have to fix that soon.

She looked like she might be twenty-five, ten years younger than me. My name is Cole Reed. Are you going to tell me yours?"

"Okay, but you can't tell anyone."

"Look, you need to tell me what the fuck is going on with you. Is someone after you?"

"My name is Bailey, I want to tell you, but I'm scared to say it out loud. What if he hears me?"

"It's only you and me out here sugar. No one can hear anything. Now tell me, what is going on?"

“Can you come with me to the cabin? I’ll show you a photo, and you will understand what I’m talking about.”

“Are you some sicko crazy lady?”

“No, I’m not,” she frowned and stomped off to the cabin.

“Then I’ll follow you to the cabin, but you have to swear that you won’t try to chop me up in little pieces,” she stopped, and turned around.

Great, now I have someone trying to scare me,” She turned and started walking, I followed until we reached the property. “I’m sorry. Wait, I heard there are booby traps all over the property.”

“They’re not real, and please don’t tell anyone else about them. I set them up to keep people away and they tell everyone else about them, to deter the monster who’s after me.”

Damn, I saw the fear in her eyes and knew if she went through all this trouble, it wasn’t put on.

When we arrived at the cabin, she invited me inside. It looked like something on Pinterest that Allison was always showing me all those years ago. From the outside, it looked like an old cabin. Inside, it was beautiful. “This is nice. Did you do this?” I inquired.

“Yes, my cousin sold me the cabin years ago; I can’t let people see me because if he comes around asking about me and showing everyone my picture, they can tell him I’m up here.”

As she removed her hoodie, her dark hair cascaded down to her waist. Fuck, I need a woman. “Tell me, what is going on?” I urged.

She handed me a picture, her apprehension evident. “Here’s his picture. As you can see, he takes a picture of me while watching me. Look we’re both in the photo. He’s been following me for three years. This is the only place where he hasn’t found me. What do you think?”

“You don’t know this guy. Maybe he went to school with you and is obsessed with you. When did you graduate?”

I couldn’t help but smile at her exasperated reaction. She rolled her eyes and I held back my smile. “What does it matter when I graduated ? That has nothing to do with this crazy man who is after me.”

“Yeah, but I think you’re too young to be out here alone.”

She turned and looked at me like I was the one being irrational. “Are you crazy? I’m twenty-six. I’ve taken care of myself since I was sixteen. Why would he be obsessed with me? I don’t even know him. I did not go to school with him.”

“You’re coming with me to my family’s place until we catch this guy. You can go with me to the peak, and we’ll get Carly too. She can’t be alone if this guy is lurking around.”

“Is she the one with the blonde hair?”

“Yeah, her husband died a couple of years ago.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. I’m fine staying on my own. I’ve been practicing my self-defense.”

I shook my head my concern growing. “Why are you shaking your head at me?” she asked frowning.

“Nope, you’re not skilled enough to protect yourself.”

“I’m getting better.”

“You can stay with us until we find this guy.”

“I don’t even know you.”

“You can trust me, and my family also lives there. If this man catches you alone up here, you won’t have a chance.”

“I’m not leaving my home. I told you why I’m hiding; the town was getting nosy. I’m staying right here.”

“I’ll see you later,” I said, leaving without promising to return. She’d find out if I came back when she sees me. First I need to do some investigating.

BAILEY

BAILEY COULDN'T DENY THAT THE MAN SHE'D JUST MET WAS VERY handsome. He might have been the most handsome man I've ever seen but he definitely has a screw loose. However I had a feeling I could trust him, and those dreamy eyes of his didn't hurt. Wow, he had to be three sizes bigger than me. It's been so long since I've felt safe. I just knew he would keep me safe. I felt it by the way he stood over me, like he would let no one get to me.

But then again, I reminded myself that I was perfectly capable of taking care of myself. *I had never relied on anyone before, and I had even bought a gun for added security.*

I decided to shut the new shutters I had recently installed on my cabin. I thought it would be hard, but when you have a job to do, you just do it. I wanted to ensure no one could enter if they showed up uninvited. Afterward, I prepared a quick dinner using my culinary skills. Cooking had always been a passion of mine, and I had even earned a scholarship to a culinary school back in Louisiana after high school.

I had worked at five different restaurants, mainly because of the persistent presence of a certain crazy man who always finds me. Who is this guy anyway? Damn, I was sweating the cabin began to feel stifling with the shutters closed, so I opened them up again. As soon as I stepped outside, I heard a woman crying. At first I couldn't see anything, but then I spotted the blonde woman I now knew was Carly.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I approached her.

"I was scared to go on the property in case I stepped on a booby trap," she replied

“Those traps aren’t real,” I reassured her. “I just said I had them traps to keep that crazy man away from me.”

“What crazy man?” Carly inquired.

“The one who keeps following me wherever I go,” I explained. “I don’t know who he is, but he must be crazy, right? Are you Carly?”

“Yes, what’s your name?” Carly asked.

“Bailey Peterson.”

“So, are you related to the family who owns this property?”

“I own this property now. I bought it from my cousin a few years ago,” I replied. “Why are you crying?”

“My dog died; he’s been with me for fifteen years. He walked into the forest and died. For some reason, I thought he would always be with me, even though he’s been slow lately. Can you please help me bury him?” Carly cried, wiping her eyes on the back of her sleeve.

“Of course I can,” I replied, putting my arm around her. I helped her to stand, and she turned and started walking uphill to her little cottage. I knew it was at the top of the mountain. “Why do you live way up here alone?” I asked as the path widened, and I moved up beside her.

“I lived here with Jim he was my husband, he died a couple of years ago, so this is my home. I’m sorry for being a big baby; Toby, my dog, was given to me by a friend I loved so much; his name is Ryan Reed. I thought he loved me as much as I loved him, but I was wrong. Now, with Toby gone, I have nothing and no one.”

“Do you have family around here?”

“Lord, yes, I have tons of family members around here. But they stopped talking to me when Jim and I married. No one on the mountain liked Jim, they thought he was mean and wanted me to leave him,” Carly said, avoiding eye contact. It seemed her family’s concerns might have been justified.

“Was he really mean?” I asked.

“Yes, he was,” Carly admitted. But as my Mama used to say, ‘You made your bed, and now you have to sleep in it. I stayed with Jim because I didn’t want to hear her say, I told you so.’”

I wondered why Carly, who couldn’t have been much older than thirty, was sharing her story with me. Perhaps she needed to get it off her chest. “Did he ever hurt you?” I inquired further.

“He did, twice,” Carly confessed. “Both times, he was drunk. When he was sober, I wasn’t worried because he didn’t hurt me. He shouted all the

time if I knew he was drinking I hid in the forest, and my biggest fear was he would hurt Toby my dog. Now that Toby is gone, I don't know what to do?"

I don't mean to be blunt, but you're fortunate your husband died. I know it sounds harsh but my sister's boyfriend killed her when she was only seventeen. That was when I decided I'd never fall in love."

"You just haven't met the right man yet," Carly suggested. "But I like the way you think. I thought I had found the right man, too," she continued. "His name was Ryan Reed, and we were deeply in love I thought. But when he left for the Air Force without even telling me, my world fell apart."

"When he returned, I ran to his house as fast as my legs could run. It was a foolish move," She shook her head. "There I stood, a forlorn hillbilly with no shoes, wearing my little brother's overalls, with all my stringy hair hanging down my back. I looked more like a child than a nineteen-year-old woman."

"When I saw the man I loved, he was so handsome in his uniform, standing next to the prettiest woman I had ever seen; also in uniform, I realized I was nothing but a mountain-dwelling hillbilly."

"They were together; I could tell by the way his hand rested on her hip. I greeted him, and then, with a heart shattered into a million pieces, I turned and ran home, crying like a child."

"Ryan came to see me, but I wouldn't let him in my room; he spoke through the door. He apologized, said he never meant to hurt me, and I was too young to be tied down to one man. But in my heart, there was only Ryan Reed. I know I'm pitiful."

"Can I share a secret?" My eyebrows went up, I thought that's what she was doing, telling me her secrets.

"Of course, you can trust me. I won't repeat anything you say."

"I never wanted to have sex with Jim, and I despised it when he forced me. Ryan was the one I loved, and Jim knew it. When he died, I cried, not out of sadness, but because I never had to worry about him hurting me again."

"I cried because I no longer had to hide in the forest at night, just me and Toby. I know God will never forgive me for that. That's why I stay up here on this mountain all alone. My conscience won't let me forget I felt relief when a man died."

"God isn't angry with you; maybe He removed your husband to give you another chance at happiness. What is Ryan doing now?"

"Ryan is out of my life for good. He's with someone else. I don't know if

he's happy, but it doesn't matter because he hurt me too much to forgive him. Besides, look at me. Who would want to date someone like me?"

I looked at her and said, "Are you kidding? You're beautiful. All you have to do is look in a mirror. I'm sure if guys know you are available, they'd be lining up at your door."

"Thank you, but I really don't want to date anyone."

As we walked, I noticed Carly's house, a familiar sight from my runs on the mountain. My favorite spot was the natural spring water pool.

We walked to where Toby lay covered with a baby blanket. "Where do you want to bury Toby?"

"Perhaps next to my flowers. It was his favorite place to sleep."

Together, we dug out the hole for Toby. I fashioned a cross with some wood I found, and then we placed Toby in the grave, covered it with dirt, and secured the cross into the ground.

"Can you say something for him?"

"Don't you think it would be better coming from you? You're the one who knew and loved him. Yes, it should come from you," I suggested.

"Alright, but remember God might be angry with me." I shook my head, and she began. "God, please take care of Toby now that he is with you. Please protect him from that mean Jim Harlow up there because you know how much he hated Toby. Toby, you know I will miss you so much. I love you, Toby. Amen."

"Amen," I replied, looking at Carly. "Will you be alright?"

"Yes, thank you for everything. Feel free to visit anytime you want. And if that crazy man starts lurking around, come here. I have a gun in every room and know how to use them."

"I will. Goodbye, Carly. I'm glad we are friends now," I said as I turned to leave but was startled when I saw Cole leaning against the tree, watching us. It seemed like he'd been there for a while.

He glanced at Carly and asked. "Was that bastard Jim Harlow mean to you?"

"That's none of your business," she replied before walking over to hug Cole. "I'm sorry you were held in that awful prison, and I'm relieved you're alive."

"Thank you. Carly, I'm sorry about Toby. I'll be staying at Bailey's until we catch that crazy guy."

"You're not staying with me. I can take care of myself, and I have only

one bedroom. I'd become the talk of the mountain. No, you can't stay with me."

"We can pretend to be engaged. That way, they won't gossip," Cole suggested.

"Is he crazy?" I said, looking at Carly. "They'll gossip even more."

"Not if they think we are getting married," Cole reasoned.

"I only met you today," I protested

"They don't know that," he replied, looking at Carly. Next time you go into town, you can tell them you met my fiancée, and she's not only sweet but she's stunning. Come on, sugar."

"Listen, you need to consider your actions. If people think we are engaged, you'll jeopardize your chance of finding your real fiancée. What if you fall in love with someone, and she thinks you are with me?"

"I'll never be foolish enough to fall in love; all that does is bring misery. Isn't that right, Carly?"

"Yes, he's right. I told you about my life, have you ever been in love? Hey, maybe you'll fall in love with each other."

"No," we both said at the same time. I looked at the handsome man with those beautiful, sexy eyes. His dark hair fell over those sexy eyes. Before I realized it, I walked over to him, ran my fingers through his hair, and pushed it back from his eyes.

"There, that's better." But then my hand froze, and I realized what I'd just done. What the heck did I just do. I met Cole's intense gaze, which seemed to mirror my own desires. I knew this could be a colossal mistake. He looked like he wanted me naked under him, and since that's how I felt, I knew this would be a big mistake. "No, you can't stay with me. There is no room," I insisted. He ignored me.

"Come along, fiancée, Cole urged, ignoring my protests. "It'll be dark soon, and I don't have my flashlight. We should get to your place before it's dark."

"I'll go into town tomorrow," Carly said. Goodbye, you two."

He held my hand and pulled me along. "It'll be dark soon, and I don't have my flashlight. We should get to your place before it gets dark."

"Listen, Cole, I don't even know you."

"You know me as much as I know you. Tomorrow you can meet my family. That way, they won't be surprised when they find out we are getting married. We'll have a fake engagement until this guy is caught. You can trust

me; I won't try to have sex with you.

"Yes, but can I trust me," I muttered under my breath, for my ears only. I heard a chuckle and hoped Cole hadn't heard me.

"This is just what I needed to keep Ryan out of my hair," Cole said as we kept walking. He still held my hand, and it felt safe.

"You are not staying with me," I declared with my foot stomping the ground. Cole stopped and glanced back at me.

"Alright, I'll stay tonight, and tomorrow, you and Carly are going home with me."

"Well, see," I muttered under my breath. I heard another chuckle.