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*Hathaway House*  
**Victor**



*Victor*

**Hathaway House, Book 22**

Dale Mayer

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## About This Book

*Welcome to Hathaway House. Rehab Center. Safe Haven.  
Second chance at life and love.*

Victor found it hard to stay upbeat when faced with a life of pain and a body that seemed more broken than whole. Adding to his depression is that his injuries were deliberately caused by “friendly fire” during a joint training session. It was hard to feel his way through the fog, until one of his therapy sessions brought up the concept of finding joy in his life.

As a pastry chef, Dawn loves to play with food. It makes her happy to see others smile. Only in Victor’s case the smiles were far between and too few to count. She made it her mission to find little ways to make him smile—only to realize that she was far too attached, considering he’d be leaving soon.

Can he find a way forward, without leaving her behind?

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## *Prologue*

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VICTOR WESTRIDGE STUDIED the website. He'd heard so much about this place that it was becoming like the best-known secret around. But he'd applied a long time ago and hadn't heard back. And then, all of a sudden, out of the blue, he'd gotten a response, and now he had paperwork to fill out, if he was still interested? He was definitely, still interested, but can you believe it?

As he looked at the computer screen and saw the glowing accolades, he wondered if it was even possible. Could something be that good? He wasn't so sure. And yet he knew several people who had been there and had made it through rehab, and he still wasn't exactly sure if they were all lying and making this up or what.

Just then one of the VA nurses, Gerry, walked in to check his blood pressure. Something that he was constantly being hit with. From beside his bed, she glanced at the website casually and said, "Oh, now look at that. That's a place for you to get into, if you can."

"Why is that?" he asked her.

"I've heard nothing but great things about it," she told him. "And I have had previous patients contact me afterward, telling me what an absolute delight it was to go there. If you get a chance, go."

"I just got an acceptance," he shared, with a wry look, "but I don't know if my doctors will let me travel."

"Your blood pressure's high, and we do have some problems stabilizing some of your medications," she noted, as she looked down at his stump. "And it depends on the healing on that leg."

“You mean, on the lack of a leg,” he clarified, looking down.

She nodded. “It’s pretty fresh, and you have a long way to go in that healing department. But they would help you a lot.” She added, “You also lost a lot of muscle and volume on that one hip, and that’s something else to be of a concern.”

“Meaning the fact that I won’t sit much.”

“Or ever,” she noted. “If these guys take you on, give them a shot. They’ll do an awful lot more for you there than we can here. Here they’ve done the rough work, but that special physio is what you need next.” She shook her head. “I don’t know that you can get what you need here.”

“They’ve got a ton of paperwork for me to deal with,” he complained, “and that’s kind of next on my list.”

“Do it,” she urged. “And let me know how you make out.”

“I can try. Do you know anybody who works there?”

“Yes, one of my friends works in the kitchen.”

“Yeah? As a cook?”

“She’s a line cook or something like that. She works for somebody named Dennis.”

“Interesting. You can always let her know that I might be coming.”

“I tell you what,” Gerry suggested. “You fill out your paperwork, and I’ll tell her that you’re coming. When you get there, you tell her that I sent you.”

He chuckled. “In other words, you just want the credit for my going.”

“I would love to have the credit for your going,” she admitted. “I know it would be a great place.”

“So why are you still here?”

“Because they don’t have staff turnover,” she shared. “Otherwise I would be there in a heartbeat.”



“I can always put in a good word for you too.”

She stared at Victor in surprise. “Now that’s a deal, and thank you for that.”

He shook his head. “You’ve looked after me for how many months now?” he began, “and very selflessly too. So I have no problem recommending you for work there.”

“Good, I would absolutely love to end up there. However, in the meantime, we have to get you there first.”

“Okay, I got another deal.” He grinned. “I’ll get this application in and completed, if you can help me with this mess of paperwork I have to fill out.”

She burst out laughing. “It’s a deal. I’ll come back on my coffee break.” And, with that, she disappeared.

And he stared down at the website, grinning. “Maybe it is my lucky day after all,” he murmured to himself. “If Gerry’s willing to go to bat to get me there, maybe there’s something to be said for this Hathaway House place.”

He could hope so. It seemed that he’d come as far as he could here, and, even now, as he stared down at the mangled end of his stump, it wasn’t looking great. He probably couldn’t travel for a while, but he sure wanted to. Anything to get out of here, anything to get away from the memories. Yet the thought of the trip was enough to make his blood curdle too. But, hey, change didn’t come without pain, and he was prepared for pain—if it meant improvements.

So he opened up the forms again. And winced. “I’ll be here all night,” he muttered. But there was no time like the present to get started, so he got down to work, grabbed a pen, and started getting the information together that he needed to fill out these forms. Hopefully this would be the change that he needed in his life. Now and forever.

## Chapter 1

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VICTOR STARED AROUND him at his private room, which was pretty impressive in itself. He also had a great view of the land surrounding this facility, and he marveled at the well-kept grounds, the fences, the barns, and then the animals that came into view. Any place that took on humans and animals had to be a good company with good people running it, right? It was way more than he had expected and so much more than he could have even hoped for. He was here finally, and it seemed so long ago when he and Nurse Gerry at the VA Center had looked at the Hathaway House website and then had done the paperwork to get him here.

First he had dealt with a waitlist, then the testing and then getting needed permissions from his old doctors, and then all kinds of messes to get through before Victor made it here. His horrific journey had been painful, but it got him here. And now? Now that he was here in his own room, he was starting a new path.

Just knowing that his rehab here would be so different from where he'd been gave him a bad case of nerves. Not that he would ever show anybody. Once he'd received the confirmation that he was being shipped off, Gerry had been so ecstatic that she had contacted her friend Dawn, who worked in the Hathaway House kitchen. And that's when Gerry found out Dawn wasn't a line cook but was the bakery chef.

Victor had to smile at that because who didn't love baked goods? It also meant that decent food must be here if they had a chef just for baking. Victor was beyond exhausted after the painful trip to Hathaway House and yet hyped up and stressed on the inside. When a knock came on his open door, he rolled his head to the side and smiled at the young woman who stepped in. He immediately knew she would be someone he could trust, someone who had his best interests at heart. Kinda

like Gerry, only it had taken him longer to warm up to her. Victor murmured, “Hey. I hope you don’t need me to do much. I’m too tired and exhausted just getting here.”

She smiled and nodded. “How about just say hi?”

“Hi,” he replied.

She chuckled. “I’m Dawn. Glad that you finally made it.”

He stared at her for a moment, then his face lit up. “You’re Gerry’s friend.” No wonder he had instantly connected with Dawn. They shared the same heartfelt persona toward the patients. She seemed too young to be a pastry chef though, considering how she had to be trained and take classes, right?

“Yeah, Gerry and I go way back,” she shared, “and she tells me that you’ve been a great patient.”

“Is anybody a great patient?” he asked, with a shrug. “None of us want to be in this situation. I can tell you that she’s been a great nurse to keep my mood up, as I tried to get in here. The waitlist was deadly.”

“There’s always a waitlist to get in here,” Dawn admitted. “I’ve already had several texts from her to see if you’re here and if you’re okay.”

He nodded and then smiled. “That’s the thing. Gerry doesn’t belong back there. She belongs someplace where people care. ... She was never really appreciated there by her coworkers. We always got along great, and the other patients loved her too.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Dawn noted. “There is a chance of a job coming up here, and I could put in a good word for her.”

“And I will too,” he noted. “That was part of the condition for her helping me get the paperwork done for this place,” he said, with a laugh. “We were a pair, take one, take both. Yet I honestly would not have a problem recommending her regardless. Even the fact that she’s checking in to see if I arrived safely shows you how much heart she has.”

“And heart is something we always need,” said someone from the door.

Victor twisted and then shuddered at the pain and closed his eyes, gasping.

“None of that. Don’t move your neck,” the woman stated, stepping forward. “Hey, Dawn. How’re you doing?”

“I’m doing good. This is the friend of a friend I told you about.”

“Ah, I remember. This is Gerry’s friend, isn’t it?”

“Gerry looked after me at the VA Center,” Victor murmured, when he could. “It’s just a sign of how much heart she has that she was checking in to see whether I’d made it or not.”

“We always need people with heart.” She chuckled. “So we’ll definitely take a look at her résumé.”

“That would be good,” Victor said. “She could really use a place like this to work in.”

“You haven’t been here long enough to know that personally,” She noted in a teasing voice.

“Maybe, but it doesn’t seem as if anybody has anything bad to say about it.”

“Some people will always have something to say about events that you wish went another way,” she acknowledged, “but, as a general rule, I find most of the people here are happy with their rehab program.”

Victor nodded. And then winced again.

“Stop moving that neck,” she chastised him.

“It was fine, but I kinked it on the way here.”

“I can have one of the physios come and take a look, or do you need a painkiller for it?”

“No,” Victor replied, “it’s not that bad.”

She laughed. “Of course not. It’s never *that bad*.”

His stomach growled at that moment. “Hey, sorry,” he said, embarrassed.

“No problem,” She replied. “I understand that you made the journey without a lot of food.”

“Yeah,” he responded in a dry tone. “The upset bowels are not fun when traveling.”

“Nope,” She agreed, “but you’re here now, and you have your bathroom right here. If you need any assistance, just tell us.” She stepped forward and handed him an e-tablet and then held out some paperwork.

“More paperwork,” he mumbled, with a groan.

“Always paperwork,” She stated, with a laugh. “It’s just part and parcel of life.”

“I get it,” he muttered, as he held out a hand, and she gave him the sheaf of papers. “I always wonder why we’re supposedly so digital and yet still caught up in paper though? Why can’t we do this all digitally?”

She shrugged. “I can do this digitally. Would you prefer that?”

“I would,” he replied. “Digital signing, or whatever that latest system is, sounds much more user-friendly to me.”

“Good.” She nodded. “I like to see progressive patients. I’ll send this back to you tonight, if I can. Otherwise watch for it tomorrow morning. Regardless, the paperwork has to happen, and fast.”

“Then do it tonight,” Victor stated, “if it’s not too late for you.”

She checked her phone for the time. “I should get it done tonight. And I’m Dani, by the way,” she muttered, as she walked out the door again.

He stared at the empty doorway. “Dani? That’s Dani?” he asked Dawn in a low whisper.

At that, Dawn chuckled. “Yes. Now, I am from the kitchen, so if you want me to go get you something, I’m quite happy to.”

He stared at her. “I hate to put that on anybody.”

“And you also know that, in times of need, that’s what we do,” she stated, with a smile. “I don’t plan to get you anything super fancy to further upset that stomach of yours, but, if you can’t make it to the dining room for dinner tonight,” she explained, “we still don’t want you to go without a meal.”

“I understand that.” Victor nodded. “I don’t even know if I’m allowed to go down myself.”

“And that’s another good point,” she said. “It is late, and you have just arrived, so it might be better if I just go get you something.”

He shrugged. “If you think so.”

“I do,” she said, seeming to make a sudden decision. “The question is, what do you like?”

“Food,” he replied instantly.

She burst out laughing. “Good enough. Beef, chicken, or are you just okay for me to get anything? Do you have any food issues?”

“No, thankfully I eat almost everything I like. Some things don’t necessarily like me though.”

“I think that goes for all of us,” she agreed, with a bright smile. “I’ll get you a selection and come back.”

“Doesn’t need to be a selection,” he pointed out. “Just get me a plate of food. I promise I’ll be a good boy and eat it.”

With another bright grin, she took off.

“Wow,” he muttered, “that was easy.”

He also felt really happy about Gerry’s prospects here. She’d worked tirelessly to make him comfortable all the time, so he had absolutely no problem recommending her to Dani.

“And wasn’t Dani something,” he muttered to himself. So young too. Or at least she looked young. A place like this had to age people quickly though. He wasn’t exactly sure how that worked, but, as far as he was concerned, so far everybody he’d met here had been great—even the front-desk staff when he had first arrived, and it had been total chaos out there at that time. Yet the receptionist had smiled and had done what she could to get Victor to his room.

Now here he was, settling back. Although he had absolutely no wish to go anywhere or to see anything at this point in time, he could see that maybe tomorrow—after a good night’s sleep—he could have a completely different state of mind. When a knock came on his open door, he was expecting to see Dawn. Instead a man held a small dog. Victor shook his head. “If you’re lost, I am the last person to direct you. I just got here today.”

At that comment, the man raised his eyebrows. “Wow, not bad timing then for me, if you’re here, and you’re on day one,” he said. “We’ll just come in, and I’ll introduce you to Racer here. I’m Stan, and I have the vet clinic downstairs.”

“Oh, wow,” Victor replied. “Animals inside and outside? That’s great to hear.”

Stan nodded. “I keep an awful lot of animals for therapy, and you’ll see this guy out and about quite a bit,” he noted. “The wheels are important for him to be mobile on his own, which he doesn’t do very much of. He’s usually carried around by the patients a lot. A word of warning, though, that I have to give everybody. Do not in any way feed Racer. He has a very sensitive digestive system, and he can get quite sick.”

“I won’t do that for sure. I have my own sensitive stomach issues, so I can relate to the little guy.” Victor gently patted him. The tiny Chihuahua’s tail went crazy. “He’s friendly, isn’t he?”

“Absolutely he’s friendly. He loves people, and lots of people love him,” Stan stated, with a smile. “I didn’t mean to

disturb you on your first day here. I'm sure you're tired and confused over all the new procedures."

"I am," Victor admitted. "I honestly don't think I even knew a vet clinic was here, even after studying the Hathaway House website and then filling in all that paperwork." He frowned, as he stared up at Stan. "That has to be a pretty special arrangement for everybody."

"It is, indeed," Stan replied. "I've been here almost since the beginning, and, as the animals help you guys, you guys help the animals. When you're back on your feet, and you're a little more settled, you're welcome to come down and give us a hand," Stan suggested. "We often have animals that just need cuddles or animals that need to go out for a walk. Whatever you're up for, the animals could use a little bit of love too."

"I'll definitely keep that in mind," Victor said.

And, with that, Stan disappeared.

"Now that was a visit to write home about," he muttered to himself.

When his phone buzzed, he looked at the screen and noted he had just received the digital paperwork from Dani. He went through the process on his phone, slowly and methodically going through the documents, and, by the time he hit the last signature, he was glad to have it over with. He put down his phone, and another head popped around his door. Dawn, with his dinner. "Hey, good timing. I just finished the paperwork Dani sent me."

"Perfect. Dani's pretty good about making sure that stuff gets taken care of fast."

"I would think she really had no room for errors, when you talk to all those medical personnel," Victor murmured.

"I know you are probably glad to get that over with. And now you can eat, without that worry." Dawn walked over, moved the small table closer to his bed, and placed his plate there.



He smelled the aroma right off the bat. “I don’t know what is for dinner, but it smells delicious.”

“All the food here is delicious,” she declared, with a bright smile. “And, no, not just because it’s where I work.” She laughed. “We do take everybody’s preferences into mind, as much as we can. We work with a dietician to avoid people’s allergies and such. Plus, we take suggestions from the patients and the staff as to what to add to the menu or what needs to be repeated more often. So feel free to tell us what you are hungry for. We can’t always cater to every request, but we do what we can. Plus, our buffet line holds several selections as to entrees, sides, drinks, breads, and desserts. For tonight, I brought you some herbed pasta with a chicken breast and a side salad.”

He studied his plate. “Those were all choices tonight?”

“Absolutely, and many more. I just didn’t know what you might prefer, so I stuck with some basics to try. After the trip here, sometimes the body has trouble digesting food on top of just recovering from the travel. Anyway, I told Dennis that you had arrived. He’ll come down later or send somebody to collect your dishes,” she explained. “I’m off work now, so I’ll get my own dinner. However, if you need anything else, you let me know.” And, with that, she was gone.

Victor shifted in the bed, using the remote to get himself into a more comfortable position, making it a little easier to eat. And then, getting the table where he needed it, he picked up a fork and cut a piece off the chicken. He knew it would be fantastic, even before he got it to his mouth. Just the smell of it was enough to get his taste buds going. And they did not disappoint. The citrusy herbed chicken was absolutely fabulous and full of flavor.

He sat here, with a happy sigh, and slowly worked his way through his dinner. He couldn’t eat it all, and, for that, he was sorry. The long ride here had not been terribly easy on his stomach. Still, it was a great dinner, and, as he put down his fork, someone popped around his open door. Victor shook his

head. “I wasn’t expecting to see a ton of people on day one,” he noted, “but it seems there’s a never-ending line of people.”

A tall man walked in and greeted him. “I’m Shane. Dani told me that you had some trouble with your neck on the way over here.”

“Oh,” he replied, nonplussed. “When I tried to talk to her earlier, I twisted and reminded myself that I hadn’t had an easy trip.”

Shane looked down at the tray in front of him. “Are you done with this?”

“Yes. ... I would love to eat more, but I don’t think I can.”

“Hey, that’s a problem we all face here.” Shane smiled, as he moved the table off to the side. “If you don’t mind, I’ll just look at your neck.”

Victor shifted enough in his bed so that Shane could better inspect his neck. Victor waited, expecting pain, but none came, just a gentle massage on the back of his neck. Victor murmured, “Hey, if I’d known that this is the treatment I would get for a sore neck, I would have mentioned it earlier.”

Shane chuckled. “Everybody handles the journey differently,” he shared, “but I would rather stave off a problem when it’s small and not let it get big enough to hold back your progress.”

“If you say so,” Victor muttered. “That feels good.”

“And that’s all you have to know,” Shane noted. “We’ll get you to where you want to go pretty soon.”

“Yeah? Says you,” Victor quipped, “I didn’t have a whole lot of progress anywhere along the line, up until right now.”

“We’ll see. I haven’t looked at your records yet,” Shane admitted. “And maybe it’s also a case of realigning what your expectation of progress is.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard things like that before too.” Victor sighed. “I really want to walk normally for a change.”

“And what does that mean to you?” Shane asked him.

“Left-right, left-right, instead of hobble-hobble-hobble,” he explained. “Right now I have quite a limp, and my back hurts a lot of the time.”

“That sounds like a problem with your prosthetic and maybe some weak back muscles. So, what about a job? A sport? A hobby?”

“A job?” he asked curiously, as the other two topics weren’t even in the realm of possibility.

“Are you trying to get back to some activity or to a previous physical level?”

“Not so much. I used to surf. I used to ski. I’ve been fairly active most of my life, but I don’t really expect to get most of that back again,” he admitted. “It would be nice to swim in a pool, if that were available,” he shared. “I’ve always found it a very good way to decompress.”

“Good to know,” Shane said. “We do have a pool here.”

At that, Victor stared. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, seriously,” Shane confirmed. “I’ll add it to your program.”

“Okay.” Victor frowned, not too sure what to say to that. The thought of having a pool here meant that either Victor was eligible to use it as a patient, or it would be part of his physio. Either way, it was still something to consider and to maybe look forward to. “I don’t know who has the say-so on the pool,” Victor added, “but I would absolutely love to get back to the water.”

“I’ll take a look tomorrow.” Shane pulled his hand away from Victor’s neck and asked, “How’s the neck now?”

Cautiously Victor rotated it enough that he could turn and look around. “Wow, that feels much better. Thank you.” He frowned at Shane. “That didn’t take much, did it?”

“Nope, not at all. And often it doesn’t. It’s just a matter of a little bit of care and attention, applied in the right way,” he replied, with another smile. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Wait, you gave me your name, but what do you do here?”

“I’m your physio,” Shane stated. “And we won’t do any hard work for a couple days. I need you to rest, recuperate from the move getting you here, while I will go over your file. I’ll pop by tomorrow, if I have any questions. Otherwise I won’t see you tomorrow. It’ll be the day after, when we do some tests.” With a smile, he was gone.

Victor liked the idea of a day to rest because he was already feeling pretty tired. The food had been excellent, but this had been a long day, a long trip, with a lot of emotional excitement attached to it all. And he wasn’t quite sure what was coming, and that made him more nervous than he had expected. So far, everybody appeared to be great.

Thinking that he might want a little bit more chicken, he turned and realized that Shane had taken his plate with him too. Victor had told him that he was done with his food. So, that’s just the way it was. Still, Victor was surprised to see a physio walk away with his dirty dishes. Just another anomaly here that Victor hadn’t expected to see, but it was a nice surprise. If everybody pitched in to help out like that, then this could be a really good place after all.

With a contented sigh, he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

\*

“YES, GERRY,” DAWN replied. “It’s all good. He’s here. He’s fine. Yeah, I stopped in his room. I also brought him some dinner, and he’s doing really well for his first day, after that long ride to get here. And he’s a really nice guy, just from the few minutes I saw him earlier. And, yes, he already put in a good word for you, when Dani was there today. I was so impressed with that. I don’t know what will come out of it or

if Dani will come back and talk to him again, but we're working on it," she told her good friend.

Laughing at Gerry's excitement over the good news on both fronts, Dawn finally ended the call.

Victor seemed to be a really nice guy. Dawn felt like she already knew him, maybe because of her previous conversations with Gerry about her patient named Victor. Dawn smiled at that. It usually took her a few visits to really size up some of these patients, especially when meeting them right as they arrived. They were usually in great pain and needed sleep immediately upon their arrival here, so she tried not to bother them.

Thus she was happy to see that Victor was so nice and easy to please. It made for a really pleasant working atmosphere. Sometimes you just had people—patients and staff alike—who didn't gel. Dani tried hard not to have that happen, but Dawn had seen it occasionally not work out, even here.

As she headed back down the hallway, Dani called out to her. Dawn poked her head inside Dani's office. "Hey, what's up?"

"I was just wondering about Gerry," Dani replied. "How do you think she would fit in with this group?"

"I think she would do fine," Dawn declared. "One of the biggest challenges now is to find people who match the same personality of the center. Gerry's certainly very caring about her patients. That's huge."

"It is huge," Dani admitted. "Yet the new hires also have to fit in with the staff, and we're all a little bit different," she noted, with a waggle of her eyebrows.

Dawn burst out laughing. "Yep, but then Gerry is too, in her own way. She's older. Her one son has grown up and is off living in, I think, California now. So, in a way, it wouldn't be a bad thing for her to come this way. She would be closer to her son."

“It depends on whether she’s ready to leave what she knows behind,” Dani reminded her. “And that would mean that she would need housing too, wouldn’t she?”

Dawn frowned at that and then nodded. “She probably would. And I think she would really enjoy living on the premises, like most of us do.”

“Okay,” Dani replied, “something to keep in mind. We don’t have an opening yet, but I think one’s coming. I’ve talked to Rose, and it appears she will take a training opportunity and return to California.”

“It makes sense. That’s where her heart is.”

“It is, indeed. We’ll be sorry to lose her. As always, when we get good people, it’s hard when they walk. Even when they need to go for their own sake.” Dani sighed. “But it’s all good. I’ll talk to Rose and see just when she’s looking at leaving or if she has even made a decision yet.”

“Good enough.” Dawn nodded. “It would be lovely if you kept Gerry in mind. However, if you can’t, I get it,” she said, with a shrug.

“We’ll see.”

With that, Dawn had to be content. She walked down the hall and out the front doors and headed home to her onsite apartment. It was hard to imagine what it would be like to have Gerry around. Way back when, she had been a neighbor to Dawn, as she had grown up. Poor Dawn had had problems with her mom, problems with her mom’s boyfriend.

Dawn had always gone to Gerry’s place for solace and for support. Gerry had been a godsend, supporting Dawn’s dreams. Dawn’s mom had found absolutely nothing useful about her daughter attending college. When she’d found out that Dawn was going to cooking school, her mom had snorted at that and had declared that Dawn should just get married, stating she would have an easier life instead of working for a paycheck.

To her mom, it would have been the same thing. Of course it wasn't the same thing to Dawn, but her mom had been fairly shallow about it. And then she'd remarried, and life had gotten even more difficult. It was all Dawn could do to get out before things got even uglier.

As she'd grown into a young woman, her mother had seemingly found ways to pick Dawn apart, as if her mom were jealous about options no longer available to her and also about Dawn's youth.

It had been a sad ending to their fractured mother-daughter relationship, but Gerry had been there for Dawn, acting as a surrogate mother, and had sent Dawn to chase after her dreams. Gerry had said, *So what if it doesn't work out? At least you tried. Still, I say keep on trying, until you get it right. Find something that you love and do that. If it doesn't work out, you'll find something else you love, and you'll do that. Life is not always a one-way street, and it doesn't have to be a dead-end street. Life gives us lots of answers, and not all of them have to be quite so dark. Your mother has made a lot of life choices that I'm not sure she's terribly happy with, which she's taking out on you, but that's not your problem. That's her problem. She gets to live with the decisions she made. Don't take on her pain as yours. You go live your life and find something that makes you happy.*

And that's what Dawn had done. Interesting to see that now maybe she could do something for Gerry.

## Chapter 2

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SEVERAL DAYS LATER Dani greeted Dawn in the hallway, as they passed each other. “Hey,” Dani asked, “can I double-check Gerry’s phone number with you?”

Dawn pulled out her phone and read off the number.

“Ah, I wrote down the number wrong,” Dani admitted, vexed.

“What about Rose?” Dawn asked.

“She is leaving,” Dani confirmed, “so I will give Gerry a call and see if she is interested.”

“She will be,” Dawn stated instantly.

Dani chuckled. “We’ll give her that chance and see. I’ll go through her résumé and have a talk with her and see how she feels about coming here. No guarantees.”

And, with that, Dawn had to be content. As she thought about it the rest of the day, when she had a break, she popped back into Victor’s room, which she seemed to be doing daily now. *Odd.*

He looked up when he saw her, and then he smiled in delight. “Hey, almost feels like I know you.”

“Right?” she replied, nodding. “That’s Gerry’s doing.”

“It is, indeed. Now only if we can get her here.”

“That’s one of the reasons why I stopped by. An opening is coming up here at Hathaway House, so Dani might ask you about Gerry. She just asked me to confirm her phone number, so Dani could call her.”

“That would be great. I don’t remember too many staff members I dealt with over the last couple years of surgeries



and recovery and therapy,” he shared. “Yet Gerry’s always the one who comes to mind.”

“Yeah, she has a big heart. She was there for me all those years that I needed her too.”

Victor raised both eyebrows.

Dawn shrugged, making light of it. “We were neighbors, way back when. When I was growing up, she was the person I went to for solace and joy,” she explained. “Mine was not an easy childhood, and my mother was a very different sort.”

He grimaced, then nodded. “Good for you that you had Gerry then, because she seems to come from a loving heart. While I’m new here, I don’t know what this place is really like yet, but it seems she would fit right in.”

“That’s what we’re hoping for.” With a quick glance at her watch, Dawn said, “I have to get back to work.”

“What’s on tap for the menu today?” he asked. “You’re the pastry chef, right?”

She nodded. “I am. However, I do a lot of other cooking here sometimes, if Chef needs me to pitch in. Otherwise I’m busy baking. Depending on what Ilse is also working on, I like to keep my skill levels up and active in many ways—so not just a pastry chef.”

“Anytime you need samples tested,” Victor offered, with a big grin, “you don’t have to worry about that. I’ll be happy to take one for the team.”

She burst out laughing. “You and a lot of other people.” Still chuckling, she headed back to the kitchen.

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VICTOR LOVED TO hear Dawn laugh, loved the way her face completely broke into such an expression of joy. Yet he found it such a weird thing to be here. The people were different, but in a good way. Yet Victor still was a little unsure about how to deal with that feeling of ... acceptance. Immediately he

thought of Dawn. He really liked her. He frowned as soon as he considered that. *Wow, am I that jaded?* he asked himself.

With a shake of his head, he focused on the possible good news regarding Gerry. Victor could only hope that maybe things would go well for Gerry, and that she would get that chance at a new beginning herself here at Hathaway House.

That's how he felt today was for him—a new beginning. Again he was caught by this new feeling of hope. Meanwhile, so far here at Hathaway House, this never-ending parade of people, doctors, therapists, all kinds of them, were coming and introducing themselves, saying that they were on his rehab team. Even the fact that whole teams were assigned to each individual patient blew him away. It was a nice way to look at it, but it wasn't necessarily the most commonsensical, at least not compared to the way his previous facilities had worked. Still, Victor was a happy camper to be here now.

And, sure enough, it wasn't very long before Dani walked in again.

He smiled at her. "Hey, thanks for doing that digital paperwork for me."

"And I already reviewed your completed paperwork too," she shared cheerfully. "That just means everything's a go, as far as I'm concerned."

"I'm glad to hear that," he admitted. "Now that I'm here, it would be tough to find out it's not available to me."

She nodded. "That's another problem with paperwork. A couple times things have blown up or mistakes were made, and things had to be fixed. ... In your case, everything's straightforward."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said, "sincerely."

Dani smiled. "Understood. Now, I understand that you had Gerry at your last rehab center."

"Yes, she's the one who helped me fill out the paperwork to come here."

“Was the paperwork hard or confusing in its wording?” Dani asked.

“Not so much hard,” he replied, “just maybe intensely data-driven. With something that you really want, you don’t want to screw it up, and you doubt yourself as to what you should put down.”

“Ah, that makes sense.” After that, Dani asked him several more questions about Gerry.

He answered as honestly as he could. “One of the things I can tell you is that everything she does seems to come from the heart. She just goes a little bit out of the way, compared to everybody else I’ve met in these settings.”

“That’s important too.” Dani asked a couple more questions, and then she was gone.

He almost felt like he’d been interviewed. As it was, he should have asked Dani about the dinner menu today. He looked at the wheelchair parked beside his bed and decided that, if he wanted to start his life the way he was planning to go, he should probably not even wait for anybody and just make his way to the dining room himself.

A map of the center was on his e-tablet, so it’s not as if he couldn’t find his way. It was just the effort required to get there. And yet instantly understanding that the thought process alone was stopping him, he realized just how much he needed to take care of business on his own. Otherwise his life would get worse and worse. He could see how, before, the more people did for him, the more he’d let them do. That had become this one-way street of dependency, and he didn’t want that here.

He wanted to be seen as somebody who was proactive, who cared, who was looking at having a life beyond just being a patient. And he definitely was. He wanted to have a life that went beyond this. All he could hope for was that, maybe here, he could start with a whole new persona, and nobody would necessarily see him as the patient who had let others do so

much for him. Not that he wouldn't let others do things for him at times, but he hated to admit that it had been easy to fall back on that. Yet he didn't want easy anymore. He wanted *right*. He wanted what was best—for him right now and into his new future.

## Chapter 3

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WHEN DAWN WALKED into his room at the end of her shift two days later—which seemed to be her routine every day now—she was surprised to see him sitting up on the edge of the bed. “Hey. Does this mean you’ve started your rehab program?”

“We were testing all day today,” he told her. “It does look like I might get to the pool sometime soon.”

“That would be good,” she murmured. “Can’t say I’ve ever spent much time there myself.”

“No? How come?” he asked.

“I don’t know how to swim,” she confessed. When he stared at her, she shrugged. “It’s not exactly anything I had access to.”

“Yet you have worked here how long?”

Still, humor filled his voice, and she didn’t take offense. “True, but, if you don’t know how to swim, and you’re working at a place like this, it’s not exactly something you can turn around and ask people to teach you. They’re all so busy helping everybody else that I would feel terrible asking.”

“And yet, if you don’t ask,” he pointed out gently, “you can’t learn.”

“Maybe.” She shrugged. “It hasn’t really been an issue. I do like the hot tub though,” she added, with a wicked grin.

He chuckled at her reaction. “Hey, a hot tub sounds phenomenal. And, if one is here, I would be a happy puppy.”

“Not only is one here,” she replied, “it’s a big one too. Right beside the pool. I do go down there on the odd occasion.”

He nodded. "I can't imagine not using it or the pool. I mean, if you've got the facilities, why wouldn't you, right?"

She nodded. "Exactly. And I can think of an awful lot of reasons to partake of the facilities, even if all I do is sit beside the pool and enjoy the sunshine or take the occasional dip in the hot tub to relax my muscles."

"Exactly," he agreed. "I feel the same way. It's great to decompress in the water." He nodded.

"When are you going to the pool?" she asked him.

"Tomorrow," he said, "at least I hope so. Shane didn't see any reason for me not to, put it that way."

"That's a huge step forward," she noted. "Good news all around."

"It certainly is for me," Victor stated, with a huge smile. "I'm thrilled. I really am. The journey to get here was stressful in so many ways, and now that I'm here, I still can't really believe it."

"Of course not. Rehab is different for everyone, depending on their needs. However, I got a glimpse into yours, as I spoke with Gerry a couple times," she shared. "I hope you don't mind that she shared with me some updates on what happened to you and how you've been handling life."

He winced at that. "I told her to share my medical records with anyone who called. Still it's easy to question why some things are done. Like, when you're injured, you are surrounded by more injured veterans." Victor shook his head.

"You have this whole group of patients who can do nothing but talk about their injuries. It's the last thing I want to talk about, yet some people are really hung up on it. That's all they even have for a topic of conversation. That's why it was so great to have Gerry there, to offset all that negativity. And the animals here? That is brilliant. Stan agrees. We help the animals, and the animals help us in return."

Dawn tilted her head. “Gerry did say that you were often really hard to get information out of.”

He chuckled. “Maybe so. I don’t really see it as information as much as, you know, it always sounds like it’s more whining than anything productive, and I’m not into that.”

“Oh, I get that,” Dawn agreed, “and I see it in you. Still, people care, and, if it helps to talk about it, somebody is always around to listen.”

“No thanks. I would like to think I’m done with all that,” Victor declared. “I feel like I’ve talked to people upon people upon people. All I really want this time is, you know, whatever I need to do to heal and to move on.”

“Got it. A man of action.” She smiled. “And hopefully you’ll get to that point really quickly.”

“That’s the hope.” He chuckled, eyeing the wheelchair. “Crutches or wheelchair? Or the prosthetic that doesn’t really fit me?”

“You tell me,” she said. “Where are you going?”

He frowned. “I was thinking it was dinnertime, but it’s not, is it?”

“No, not yet. Normally I start work early, and then I’m off early.” She checked her watch. “I’m a little late going home today.”

“Interesting,” he murmured. “I’m done for the day, and I was thinking about food, but obviously it’s not quite time for dinner.”

“You can always go for a tour,” she suggested, “or grab a coffee and sit on the deck, whatever you need to do.”

He nodded. “I might do that. And the vet center is downstairs, but I don’t know how to get there.”

“I can take you. My car’s parked out front anyway.”

He raised his eyebrows at her. “I thought you lived on the premises.”

She shrugged. "I'm heading into town."

"Sure then. I'll take you up on that offer." And, with that, the two of them headed toward the vet center, with Victor opting for the wheelchair right now. He asked her, "Do you ever have much to do with the veterinarian here?"

"Lots of times," Dawn replied. "We're all suckers when Stan needs a hand. And, of course, it just breaks our heart when we sometimes see the animals in really tough shape, too."

"I can't imagine," he murmured. "I love animals, so I hate to see them in any pain."

"It's also an interesting thing to see them here because Stan has, in some instances, control over life and death. If the animal's too badly injured and won't have any quality of life, he makes those decisions."

Victor nodded slowly. "That would be a very difficult position to be in."

"I think so too." She nodded. "Sometimes Stan gets quite depressed over the cases he's dealing with."

"It takes a special person to be a veterinarian. I couldn't handle that part," Victor murmured. "When I said that I love animals, I mean that I really love animals."

She smiled. "Most people here do," she added, with a laugh. "There's something very special about them."

"Agreed, and about being around them," Victor pointed out, with another bright smile. She led the way to the elevators. He looked at them and shook his head. "I'm not even sure where I am at the moment."

"It won't take you too long to get used to the place," she said. "It is confusing in the beginning, but very quickly you'll find your way around."

"I hope so. I've only been here a few days, but I do know how to get to the dining room."



At that, she burst out laughing. She stepped into the elevator and rode down with Victor. As soon as the door opened, she pointed. “Now here is where the veterinarian clinic is. Just go through there.”

“Is this where I leave you?” he joked.

“It is for the moment,” she said cheerfully. “I’m running to town, so I can get back here again for dinner.”

“Oh, go, go,” he replied, waving her off. “Don’t let me hold you back.”

“There’ll still be dinner served for a little while past the hour,” she noted, “but I don’t really want to stay in town for a meal.”

“You don’t like going out?” he asked her.

“We’ve got some really good food here,” she shared. “Never did really understand the common sense of going to town and having to pay for a meal, when I have it all here.”

“You’re right,” Victor agreed. “Yet town could be good if you feel the need to be social.”

“No, I don’t,” she murmured. “I get plenty of that here.”

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“GOT IT,” VICTOR murmured. And he watched as Dawn stepped back into the elevator and went back upstairs. Moving slowly and a little bit awkwardly in his wheelchair, he hit the button to open up the vet clinic door and rolled his way in.

A woman behind the front counter greeted him. “Hey. I haven’t met you yet. My name’s Robin.”

He smiled at her. “And I’m Victor. I met Stan on my first day, and, of course, he made an impression, with the little dog in the wheels.”

“Ah, Racer,” she noted, with a smile. “Did you come down to visit or ...”

“Visit, if visiting’s possible, yes,” he replied, “and if an animal needs a cuddle, I am not against it.”

She smiled. “Glad to hear that. We always have animals that need something.”

“What about today?” he asked, as he rolled closer.

“Let me go take a look,” she said. “Do you care what?”

“Nope, I sure don’t,” he told her.

She laughed. “Well then, I might have a treat for you.” She disappeared into the back.

He looked around to see a few other people waiting, and he realized, *Of course there were. This is a vet clinic.* Just because he’d barged in from upstairs didn’t mean that the clinic was strictly here for the patients upstairs. He winced at that.

When Robin returned carrying something fuzzy in her arms, he stared at it. “When I said that I was up for anything, I didn’t know I couldn’t identify it on my own.”

She chuckled. “Ferrets. We have two, getting some work done.”

He held out his arms, and she placed one of them in his arms. “Wow,” he murmured, “so soft.”

“Absolutely,” she agreed, “and they’re quite the characters. Now just don’t let go of it.”

He squeezed his arms and heard an odd squeak from the animal. “Oops, I didn’t mean to hurt it.” And he hated the sense of anxiety he felt already.

She shook her head. “You didn’t hurt him. This one in particular likes to squeak a lot. This is Jasper. We have Melanie in the back.”

Victor cuddled the animal. “It doesn’t mind being held?” he asked.

“These are pets. They’re used to it, and, in a way, they crave it. And, while they’re here, of course, they’re lonely.”

“Of course,” Victor agreed. “I’m sorry, little one. Today was not quite what you thought would happen when you woke up, was it?”

Robin had headed off to talk to somebody else, sitting on one of the side chairs. Victor half listened, while Robin explained that Max would be out in a few minutes. Victor wasn’t sure if Max was another pet or someone else who worked here. He wasn’t left to wonder for long, as another tech brought out a big dog. Max saw his owners and started to wag his tail with his whole body—to the point that Victor was afraid the large dog would rupture something. The woman was on her knees, hugging him and laughing.

“Thank you so much,” she said to Robin and soon left with her dog.

Robin came over and asked, “How’re you doing?”

“I’m doing fine. Not sure how Jasper’s doing though.”

“Jasper looks just fine to me,” she replied cheerfully. “Did you arrive upstairs recently?”

“Yes. I guess I look lost, don’t I?”

“A little unsure,” she noted, “but, hey, the fact that you’re even down here after just arriving is huge.”

“I don’t know much about the place,” he explained, “and I had a little bit of time to kill. I didn’t really want to sit and do nothing. I was being tested today,” he shared, with an eye roll. “And I don’t know what that will mean for tomorrow, but I suspect it will be a while before I get any energy to come back down here again.”

She shrugged. “You could be right. But, now that you’re here, let me go get Jasper’s partner.” And, with that, she went to the back and brought out the female.

Victor laughed, as the two ferrets chattered to each other, while she held the female. “They’re really friendly, aren’t

they?” Victor asked.

“They sure are. And, in their case, they’re just happy to be with people. And, of course, each other,” she added, with an eye roll.

“I like that idea too,” Victor stated. “I hate to think of them being separated.”

“I don’t think that will happen,” she murmured, “but you never know.”

“And what work are they getting done?”

“As a breeding pair, they were being checked over. At least the owners are hoping to breed them,” she clarified.

“Is that even smart to do in this day and age?”

“We don’t get into the morality on that one,” she shared. “As long as they look after the ferrets, take care of them, it’s not as big an issue as you might think.”

“Maybe not,” Victor murmured. “I just would hate to see anything happen to them or to have them mistreated.”

“No, we don’t tolerate that in any way,” Robin stated, with a smile. “Glad to know that you always think about the animals first.”

“Always,” he murmured. “Especially animals like this that don’t have any say.”

She nodded. “I agree, 100 percent,” she murmured.

Just then the male ferret decided that it was time to explore. “Oops,” Victor said, as his ferret managed to escape his arms. “Is that a problem?”

“Nope, not at all.” She put the other one on the floor too, and the two of them ran and jumped and generally had a grand old time in the big waiting room.

Victor laughed. “I’m really glad I came. This is great.”

At that, the door in the back opened up, and the man Victor had met on his first day here stepped into the waiting room,

carrying something huge. “Hey, Stan. That was your name, right?”

“Yeah, sure is.” Stan joined Victor in the waiting room. “Glad to see you down here.”

“I had a little bit of time to kill, so I came to visit the animals.” Victor studied the animal in Stan’s arms. “Good God,” Victor whispered.

Stan chuckled. “This is Hoppers,” he said, bending over to put the animal down. “He has a pen out back, but we like to bring him in and get him accustomed to being around people too.”

“*Hoppers*,” Victor repeated. “So you’re, ... you’re implying that this is a rabbit?”

At that, Stan burst out laughing. “Not only is he a rabbit but he’s a very friendly rabbit, and he’s a big fan of people.” At that, Hoppers hopped closer to Victor.

Victor bent down from his wheelchair. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a rabbit this size or even thought that they could get this big,” he noted in amazement.

“It’s his breed,” Stan pointed out. “And he’s also got the perfect temperament for his size, so that makes it that much easier on all of us.”

Victor raised his eyebrows. “If you say so. ... I’m just still stuck by the sheer size of him.”

“That’s one of the reasons why we keep him here full-time,” Stan explained. “He’s not so much a tourist attraction here as much as most people aren’t capable of giving him the space and the care that he needs.”

“Right. This is fantastic,” Victor said in delight, as Hoppers hopped up on his back legs and placed his front paws on Victor’s knees. “Wow, is he ever friendly.”

“And, of course, we don’t want somebody to pick him up and take off with him either,” Stan stated. “This guy is quite a mainstay around here.” He called to him and Hoppers, his

nose twitching, turned his ears so he could hear Stan, then returned to him.

“And he comes when called?” Victor asked in amazement. “You guys must have such fun down here.”

“We do.” Stan nodded, with a smile. “And you’re welcome to come anytime.”

“What time do you close?” he asked. “Just so I don’t cut into your closing down activities or anything.”

“Most of us live onsite,” Stan shared. “We have housing as part of our agreement with Dani upstairs. “Thus somebody’s always around to tend to the animals overnight, as needed. However, the office itself generally closes at 5:00 p.m.”

Victor nodded. “And, if it was five already, I would be heading up for food.”

“Not far off.” Stan glanced at his watch. “You want to miss the rush, just to avoid being in line too long,” he suggested. “However, if you’re happy to wait here a bit longer, I’m heading up.”

Robin added, “I’m heading up too.”

“Do you both eat here?” Victor asked.

They nodded. “Yep, sure do.”

She looked over at Stan. “Do you have a date tonight?”

He shook his head. “No, unfortunately.”

“Do you?” Stan asked Robin curiously.

“No, me neither,” Robin replied.

Stan turned to Victor and said, “If you want company for dinner, give us a couple minutes to lock up.”

Surprised and delighted at the invitation, Victor nodded. “Yes, please. It’s hard being new.”

“It’s always hard being new, no matter where you go,” Stan noted. “Robin and I have both been here for a number of years, but we get it.”

Victor smiled and waited, while Stan quickly locked up and put Hoppers back outside, although Victor didn't see what the rabbit's outside quarters looked like.

"I'll show you Hoppers' area another time," Stan stated. "Because you're in the wheelchair, we'll head up via the elevator, whereas Robin will probably walk around outside."

"And the pool's around that way, isn't it?" Victor asked.

"I'll show you the pool, from the dining room deck area above it."

Victor nodded. "I did see that. I'm kinda hoping that tomorrow I'll get a chance to dive in."

"That would be awesome if you do," Stan replied, "because not everybody gets in quite so fast."

"I hope I'm one of the lucky ones then," Victor shared. "Water and I are definitely friends."

Stan laughed. "Good for you. It's not a place that I go to much. I can swim, but it's really not my thing."

"Even considering you have all this available for you?"

He nodded. "I'm happy to go, but I'm also happy to do something else," Stan told him. "So I tend to leave it for other people to enjoy."

"I will take you up on that," Victor stated. "So your space just became mine."

At that, Stan chuckled. "It can be busy there sometimes. However, most of the time it's not, though."

"And I'm good with it either way," Victor pointed out. "I'm just grateful to have one available."

"Exactly. Dani's done a heck of a job getting this place set up for everyone, and, for the most part, I think everybody really enjoys all that she's done here. We even have horseback riding, if you get cleared for it."

“Wow,” Victor muttered. “I did see the fields out there, and I thought I saw horses, but I wasn’t so sure because I also thought I saw a llama.”

“You did,” Stan confirmed, with a laugh. “And we have all kinds of horses here now. I think we’ve got six or seven out there.”

“Yours?”

“Mostly Dani’s,” he clarified. “Midnight’s her own personal horse, and then we have Lovely, which is the llama you saw. Plus, we have a filly out there,” he added, “who’s no longer quite so little anymore. We have quite a few animals living on the property at this point in time,” he murmured. “I also bring through any that need fostering or help in some medical way,” he shared. “That’s always been a given, with Dani being such an animal lover and as horse-crazy as she is.”

“Sounds as if it’s to everybody’s advantage that she is.”

“Absolutely.” Stan grinned. “Believe me. Everybody here loves animals.”

“I can see why,” Victor murmured. “It’s pretty special and right in your backyard, and you don’t have to do anything but go outside and enjoy it.”

He smiled. “Exactly. So don’t be a stranger. Come down and enjoy.”

And before Victor realized it, they were nearing the dining room again. “I still get turned around,” he confessed to Stan.

“I am not surprised,” Stan replied. “Even when I thought I knew where I was going, Dani opened up another wing. It was quite a shock to realize that the place was just that much bigger now, and I was getting a little confused myself.”

“I figure it’ll take a day or two.”

“Give yourself way longer than that,” Stan advised him. “You’re not in any rush.”



“No, I’m not in any rush to learn the layout of Hathaway House, but I’m in a rush as far as my allotted rehab time here. We only have so long here that’s paid for, so there’s always that pressure.”

“Right,” Stan agreed. “More than just the pressure to get the most out of it but also to get that optimum healing that you desire and all within the designated time period.”

“Yeah, although for me, it’s, ... it’s less about that,” he began, then shrugged. “It was highly recommended that I come to Hathaway House, so I’m here,” he admitted. “The biggest thing that I’ve really noticed is how much people come from the heart. I was getting a bit jaded about humanity.”

“Interesting.” Stan studied him, as they made their way slowly to the buffet line. “A lot of people are here, and a lot of good people representing humanity are here.”

“I’ve noticed that already,” Victor stated. “After you’ve been in a lot of rehab centers, where nobody seems to care and where the food tastes like swill and where your beds don’t get changed very often, you do what you can, but you know that you can’t do very much.” He shook his head. “And you get that mindset where you feel as if you can’t do very much ever again.”

“Ah,” Stan replied, “it’s really important that you don’t get sucked into that.”

“Exactly,” Victor agreed.

And, with that, Robin gave her order to Dennis. Then Victor and Stan stepped up, as Dennis looked at the two of them eagerly. “What’ll it be, gents? What’ll it be? Make me happy.”

Stan laughed. “I have had a hard day, lots of work, so I will eat well tonight.”

At that, Dennis made a humorous comment and piled up a big plate for him.

“Man,” Victor murmured, “you serve wonderful food here.” He looked from Dennis to Stan’s plate and nodded. “How about you just double that.”

“You got it,” Dennis declared. “Glad you found the doc so fast.”

“I think I found the animals more than the doc,” Victor admitted, with a smile. “Yet thankfully I was allowed time with both.”

“Absolutely,” Stan said. “It’s all about doing what you need to do for yourself.”

“It is and it isn’t,” Victor clarified, “because, on top of that, it’s also about making sure that I don’t overdo things while I take care of what I’ve got to do.” He sighed.

“Very true.” Dennis smiled at him. “And that’s a smart way to look at it. Just don’t get so hung up on trying to get everything done that needs to be done.”

Victor nodded. “This is more about—and it sounds foolish—maybe just finding my faith in humanity again,” he murmured.

At that, Dennis piped up, “Remember. Life is as good as you give. So, if you’re not very happy with your world, turn around and try to make somebody else’s better.” He smiled. “It’ll make a big difference at how you look at your own world again,” he murmured.

“And that,” Stan added, “is also why the animals are great to have here. If you’re blue, if you’re out of sorts, if you need just a bit of love and a cuddle,” he suggested, “come on down. There will always be some animal that’s more than happy to see you, and, if none other, it will be Hoppers because he’s always happy to have a friend.”

Victor smiled at that. “And that’s one big rabbit. It will take a lot of friends to fill him up.”

At that, Dennis chuckled. “We also have plenty of animals always around visiting the patients, going from room to room.

So anytime you need some solace,” he shared, “you let somebody know, and we’ll find you an animal to love on.”

Victor eyed Dennis. “You mean, with all this dining room activity, they still let you out from behind the counter?” he teased.

A woman joined the discussion from behind him. “We don’t let Dennis out much,” Dawn shared. “He’s too well-loved to let go of.” She walked over and placed a hand gently on Victor’s shoulder. “I see you have found Stan.”

“I did,” he replied. “What happened to you? Are you back already?”

“I never really left,” she replied. “I ended up with a call from my mother, and that kiboshed my plans.” She gave a philosophical shrug. “The town’s not going anywhere. I can go tomorrow.”

“Good,” Dennis agreed. “Now, food.”

At that, even Dawn looked at the size of Stan’s servings and frowned. “Wow. I, on the other hand, know what’s for dessert, so I’ll have much smaller servings on my plate,” she murmured to Stan.

Dennis chuckled and handed over the plate to Dawn. “Enjoy.”

And, with that, they all headed out toward the deck.

As they got there, Dawn noted to Victor, “I see you have made friends already.”

“I’m trying.” He gave her an eye roll. “Part of that whole humanity thing.”

She nodded. “And you’ll find that people here come from heart.”

“That’s what I’m noticing,” he murmured. “And Gerry is exactly the same.”

“I’m hoping we’ll get her here soon.”

“Who’s Gerry?” Robin asked curiously.

As they all sat down at a table, Dawn quickly explained about how she and Victor shared Gerry as their mutual friend.

“Sounds like somebody we need at Hathaway House,” Robin replied, “particularly if she made such a good impression on both a patient and our pastry chef.”

“She did,” Victor confirmed, with a smile. “I was just thinking how sad it is that, of all the people I’ve met over the last few years as I deal with my medical issues, she’s the one I remember. Most of the other people just come and go. I’m sure there’s been good interactions with others in there, but there’s also been plenty of *blah* interactions,” he added. “So, as I already mentioned, it’s back to that whole humanity thing.”

“And Dennis is correct,” Dawn added. “When you see other things going on around you that need doing, and you step up and do it, you’ll find a complete mind shift along your own pathway in life.”

“I was thinking on that too,” Victor shared. “Even if it’s only going down and visiting the animals, it is a way to give back.”

“It absolutely is,” Stan declared. “Anytime you need it, you know where to come.”

## Chapter 4

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**D**AWN WAS SURPRISED to see how well and how quickly Victor seemed to collect people around him. She was a fan and found herself drawn to visit him at least once daily, no matter what was going on in her life. So several days later, when she walked in at lunchtime, he was already at a table with multiple other people, not one empty chair at that table. Considering that he had admitted many times already how he felt jaded about life and needed something to shift his whole world and his mindset, it was a surprise to see that he was as easily adaptable to the people here as he was.

When she saw him again later in the afternoon, as he went for coffee, she commented on it.

He nodded. "That's very true, but I wasn't like this before. I was much more standoffish. Maybe that's not even the right word, but it just, ... it feels like it."

"Interesting," she murmured. "People here are really happy at how well you're fitting in."

He shrugged. "I'm not sure I'm doing anything. I'm just being me."

She smiled. "Remember how that's all part and parcel of it," she stated. "Being you is fitting in and is the most important part that you're showing the rest of the world."

"Gerry used to say things like that," he muttered, with a smile.

"And that makes sense because, as you already know, I spent a lot of time with Gerry."

He nodded. "I was hoping that she could come here."

"And you know that she can't?" she asked curiously.

“I haven’t heard any more,” he replied. “So I honestly have no clue. Have you heard anything?”

She stared off in the distance and then shook her head. “Not really. I mean, we have talked since then, but she hasn’t brought that up at all.”

“See? I’m pretty sure that, if it were good news, she would have mentioned something.”

“I’m not even sure that it’s good news versus bad news as it is more about *no news*,” Dawn murmured. “Remember. A lot goes on here, and it takes time for any of that change to happen.”

“That’s true,” he agreed. “It seems as if I’ve been here forever now. Yet it’s only been eight days.”

She smiled. “And being here over one week is nothing when you consider you may be here, what? Sixteen, eighteen, twenty weeks?”

“I think I’m booked for sixteen and then due a re-eval,” he shared. “So I don’t even know what that will look like.”

“It will look like whatever it looks like,” Dawn replied. “Do the best you can, and the rest will fall into place.”

He grinned at her. “Right back to that same philosophical attitude that Gerry has.”

“A lot of us here are like that,” she admitted. “Mostly because we’ve seen so much, one way or another with various people—the staff, the patients, and our families alike. We’ve been touched many times by the things that the patients have done, learned, and their progress made. We’ve had patients who never thought they would walk again, and yet they walked out of here when their rehab was done. I’ve cried with many of them,” she shared, giving him a gentle smile. “And I suspect I’ll continue to cry with many of them as I cheer on their successes.”

“And that’s lovely,” Victor said. “It really is. I hadn’t even considered the impact on all you guys to see people here every

day, day in, day out.”

She nodded. “It’s good and bad. Sometimes it’s great. Sometimes, as you have experienced, days go by and you realize that somebody who you used to see is no longer here. You’re happy for them because they’ve moved out of here, and they’ve got another life to live, and they’ve managed to get back to it. Or, in some cases, it’s bad news. We’ve had patients who have had to go back to hospital, and unfortunately what they found was not good news.” Dawn sighed. “In those cases, we tend to get very upset, and we have to find a way to get past it. Even Dennis and I, as chefs, as well as the others... we get emotionally invested in the success of each patient here.”

Victor winced. “And that’s the thing, isn’t it? Just because we’re here doesn’t mean that other things can’t still happen to us.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she agreed. “As much as we would like to protect everybody from other illnesses and other diseases, we can’t. ... Sometimes there’s absolutely nothing we can do.”

As the days went by, as she continued to spend time daily with Victor, her own words and his kept coming back to bite her.

Today in the kitchen, Ilse finally looked at Dawn and noted, “Something’s obviously working away in the background of your consciousness.”

“Is that what it is?” Dawn asked, with a smirk.

“Or *someone*.” And Ilse raised her eyebrows inquiringly.

“Yeah, it’s not as if anything’s ever secret around here,” Dawn muttered. “And, yes, I have been spending a lot of time with the new guy.”

“Hey, spending time with Victor is not a bad thing,” Ilse noted. “It just depends on what that relationship looks like.”

“I have no idea,” Dawn admitted. “I really don’t. It feels as if where it started is not where it is now, but I really don’t

know much about him, not firsthand anyway. He doesn't talk about himself."

"And I understand how you can still not know much about him, even if you spend a fair bit of time with him."

"I do spend time with him every day. We have a mutual friend, and maybe, between us, we'll get her to work here," she shared, with a smile. "That would be lovely."

"And this is the Gerry person you've been talking about for a long time, isn't it?"

"It is, indeed, and it looks like Dani might just give her a try."

"We need people with heart, and, as I recall, that's something you say this woman has in spades."

"She absolutely does," Dawn murmured. "And, having recommended her, now I ... I'm nervous that it won't work out and that we got our and Gerry's hopes up."

Ilse laughed. "We're a funny race, aren't we?"

"We are, indeed. And Victor is funny too because I already knew a lot about him before he ever got here, just because of Gerry. As soon as he was accepted here, she started telling me all this stuff about him. And he's ... It's fascinating. It really is. He's an interesting guy. He's got some physical issues but nothing that's necessarily unworkable. He's come a long way. He's got family. He's got hopes and dreams for the future. He's ... I mean, he's no different than any other patient here, and yet he's very different."

"And that's all it takes," Ilse agreed, with a nod. "For whatever reason, you connected."

"Exactly," she murmured. "And I don't want it to seem as if it's more than it is."

"Yet it is more than it is," Ilse noted, with a smile, and a gentle one at that. "Don't feel pressured to do anything with it. Just be friends. They all need a friend here."



“I agree, and he also speaks of losing his love of humanity, losing his love of life, yet he’s easily making new friends here. I haven’t asked him too many questions about how he got injured, but I did ask Gerry, and even she didn’t say much. Some IED blew up the vehicle he was in. I don’t think he was driving.”

“So, regardless of who was driving, survivor’s guilt must kick in. Plus, chances are, he may have lost other men in his platoon or at least in the vehicle,” Ilse suggested thoughtfully.

“True. And, if he’s lost his love of humanity, why?”

“Right. Those might be questions best for him to address with his doctor. However, you may want to ask him privately, but they might be questions you also want to avoid.”

“Yeah, I’ve already thought of that.”

Ilse gave a wry look to her friend and laughed, as Dawn worked on making pies today. “So maybe you should be kneading bread instead of baking pies. It looks like you’re taking some frustration out on the pastry dough.”

“Not really,” she argued, but she eased up on her actions. “Pastry does need a softer touch.”

“It does, indeed, but, if you don’t have a softer touch to give it, then we’ll all live with ever-so-slightly tough pie crusts today.” Ilse chuckled. “I’m not sure anybody out there would even notice.”

“No, but I would,” Dawn declared, frowning.

“Exactly,” Ilse noted, with a smile. “And that’s why we do what we do because we put out the best product we can. However, we also know that we can’t always do that. In my opinion, I think Victor is trying to be brave and trying to be open to the world out there but is also very concerned that he can’t do that anymore, after his accident,” she murmured.

“And he might not be able to do some things, whether due to physical limitations or psychological issues, like PTSD or whatever. I mean, if he’s had just enough bad experiences, you

know yourself that it can be a pretty ugly scenario just dealing with things going forward.”

“I do. I do. I just ... I don’t want him to feel so bad about everything in life that he doesn’t heal properly.”

“I think our patients all heal,” Dawn clarified, “but the way they heal, the degree to which they heal, I think that’s quite different for every one of them. And I want the best for Victor,” Dawn said impulsively. “He’s also helping me bring Gerry over.” She smiled. “So, of course, I want the best for him.”

“We want the best for everybody here,” Ilse murmured.

“We do,” Dawn agreed, with a sigh. “Everybody deserves a chance.”

“Everybody deserves a chance, but not everybody is willing or ready to accept that chance and the responsibilities that go along with it,” Ilse shared. “So we must do our best to give hope to as many people as we can and to know that successful rehab will or will not happen, depending on the person involved.”

“I think that’s the hardest part really. I’m here trying to make things easier for him because of what he’s been doing for Gerry.”

“Which is also interesting that you’re worried about his mental state regarding the reality of life around him, and yet he’s doing this for her.”

“And maybe because, if he doesn’t help Gerry, maybe a part of him will be lost.” Dawn frowned at her own words. “That didn’t come out all that well,” she admitted. “I was telling him, trying to talk to him about the fact that sometimes it’s better to help others in order to find that part of humanity that you’re afraid is lost. I think he understood what I was trying to say, but ... I’m not so sure I conveyed it properly.”

“Don’t get hung up on presentation and what words to use,” Ilse noted. “Again, he needs to do what he needs to do to heal and, if you can help, great. However, if you get caught up

in that *He needs more of this or more of that*, you'll find yourself bucking up against a lot of problems. Remember. You don't have all the answers, and neither does anybody else here."

Dawn sighed. "In other words, I should just butt out, *huh?*"

"Nope, not butt out," Ilse corrected, "but maybe ease back."

She chuckled. "I think that's the same thing as butt out."

Ilse laughed. "You do as you see fit. The bottom line is, you're a good person. You've got heart."

"He does too," Dawn declared. "Otherwise he wouldn't be helping Gerry."

"Exactly, so maybe he's not as lost as you think—or as lost as he himself thinks."

"Maybe. I don't know." Dawn raised both hands in frustration. "But right now, I need to get these pies in the oven. Otherwise we're not getting them for lunch."

"Oh, that won't be good." Ilse laughed. "Everyone here is pretty protective about their pies."

"I've never seen a group of people go after fresh pie quite like this group," she murmured. "I mean, it's great and all, but wow."

Ilse laughed. "It is great and all, and you're right. It is a wow."

At that, Dawn returned her attention to finishing the pies. Yet, in the back of her mind, she wondered how upset about humanity Victor could really be, especially if he was doing as much as he was for Gerry. She didn't want to ask him about it because it was his right to make whatever recommendation he deemed worthy regarding Gerry. At the same time, Dawn firmly believed that doing something for others, as long as you believed in what you were doing, was a huge part of today's world. She just wasn't sure whether Victor was ready to see his actions as part of that or not.

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VICTOR GOT INTO the shower, still shaky and a little bit on the worried side. If he was this exhausted after his rehab session with Shane just now, what would these sessions be like down the road? These were nothing like what he had done in prior facilities. Today was hard. And it was just the beginning. What about the remaining fourteen weeks or so? Victor didn't want to panic. So much was happening that he wasn't even sure that he would get through this rehab program here.

He wasn't a defeatist by any means. But it was hard to see himself in the shape he was currently in and realize just how much work he still had to go. He thought he'd been in better shape than this. Instead he was almost back to the beginning. And that was not only shocking, it was an eye-opener. How far could he go? If a change was available to him, he wanted it, and he wanted it all. But seemingly starting well behind the beginning point, how much was still there for him to reach for? He pondered that question and a few others, as he dried off, dressed, then headed for lunch.

As he got up to the buffet line, Dennis gave him a bright smile. "Hey, how're you doing?"

"Tired and hungry," Victor admitted, looking at the food in front of him. "What's good today?"

"It's all good," Dennis declared. Then he leaned forward and murmured, "Save room for pie."

Victor's eyes lit up at that. "Like real pie?"

"Yes, like real pie," he murmured. "Dawn has been working in the kitchen, making pies. She does that when she's got a lot on her mind." Dennis chuckled. "I have to admit sometimes we give her a lot on her mind just so that she bakes up a storm."

He stared at him and then chuckled. "Does she know that that's what you guys do?"

"I'm sure she does," he admitted, "but don't go ruin it for us because you guys get the benefit too."

“I’m not ruining anything,” Victor claimed. “If fresh-baked pies are coming, believe me. I’m all aboard that train.”

“I figured you would be. Good man,” Dennis noted. And he served him his selected choices in decent portions, but not huge.

Victor asked, “Any idea when the pies will be ready?”

“They were a few minutes late going in the oven,” he replied. “So, when they come out, they’ll still be warm ...”

Victor eyed Dennis and lowered his voice, and asked, “You got any vanilla ice cream?”

He chuckled. “You bet I do. I’ll see you for round two.” And then he turned to serve the guy in line next to Victor.

Victor carried it out to the deck. And yet it was almost too hot. He was so tired that he wasn’t sure that he could handle that much heat, so he worked his way back to an inside table. As he picked out his table, a bunch of other guys joined him.

They looked at him and nodded. “We had the same thought. It’s a little bit too bright and too hot out there.” They introduced each other around the table.

“And I worked out with Shane this morning,” Victor shared. “I’m not exactly sure how much *oomph* I have left, and I didn’t want the sun to finish me off.”

The others again nodded, as if knowing exactly what Victor was talking about, and they probably did. Not everybody here worked with Shane, as he ran a large team of physios, but Victor was sure the patients here knew just about as much as Victor did about the hard rehab workouts being supervised here.

“How are you getting along?” Andy asked Victor.

“I’m hopefully getting there,” he shared. “It’s a long, slow process, and I was quite surprised to realize that I have as far to go as I do.” He shook his head. “It’s depressing. I thought I was further along than I am.”

“Ah, right. It’s one of those stages of life, right? You think that you’re doing just fine at your previous facility, and then you come here and realize that you don’t know jack about where you’re at and what you’re doing. Before you know it, everything’s different.”

“But is it *good* different?” Victor asked. “I still haven’t figured that one out.”

“I think it is,” Andy told him. “There’s a world of difference in being here versus other places. And where you’ll end up is also very different.”

“I’m seeing that,” Victor murmured. “I hadn’t realized just what a difference it would be.”

“You just need some tolerance and acceptance and then keep following what they tell you to do,” he suggested. “I’m outta here next week, and, when I arrived, I didn’t think there was any hope that I would get this far.” At that, he stood, finished with his meal, and said, “See you around.”

It was obvious to Victor how scarred Andy was and how he was missing a leg pretty high up. He had a fairly interesting prosthetic, space-agey, looking more like a blade. “Where’d you get the prosthetic?” Victor asked.

“A company in town does this stuff. They do an awful lot of custom work there as well. However, if you’re interested, a really cool place out of New Mexico does some really great stuff too.”

“Yeah, I am. I lost part of my leg in an accident. How does your prosthetic work?”

“The first one I had? Not so well. I was damaged and weak and yet expected to use that first prosthetic, but it wasn’t really functioning well,” Andy explained. “And it just became easier to not use it. I found it was throwing me off.”

Victor nodded. “We did go through that with my leg too, with some stock prosthetic that wasn’t cutting it. Plus, I think my stump wasn’t healed enough to add the prosthetic just yet.”

Andy nodded. "I have a ton of steel in me now, and they thought I would be good."

"Titanium knees and a replacement hip?" Victor asked.

"Yeah, exactly. How'd you know?"

"Because a buddy of mine went through that," Victor replied.

"Sorry to hear that, man."

"I think he's doing better now. At least I'm mobile, with the wheelchair. However, I am looking forward to getting a working prosthetic."

Andy nodded. "These are easy to get on and off. I'm totally fine with it. But being here helped me to see that I was fine and to realize that this is the new normal for me, for a lot of us. Hathaway House deals with a lot of wounded veterans here, and you get quite used to seeing all variations of injuries."

"I'm already seeing that," Victor murmured. "I was feeling kinda sorry for myself at the other place because it seemed like everybody else had all their limbs, and, in many ways, they were doing better."

"Yeah, been there too," Andy agreed. "You have to adjust to what's good for you. And this place will help you find that happy place." And, with that, Andy was gone.

*Happy place.* It's not exactly the term Victor would have used, but it did fit. There was obviously room for him to come to terms with a lot of it. And maybe his dissatisfaction with the world around him wasn't so much the world around him as much as the world that he saw inside him. Maybe because he was struggling so much to see how well everybody else was doing compared to how he wasn't. And yet there was no reason for those kind of comparisons. Everybody had their own issues to deal with.

Again it went back to the fact that Victor had had extra surgeries, especially on his hip, that was missing so much

muscle and fat, which affected his balance and his stability, all on top of missing part of one leg. So, if it seemed that his progress was slower than anybody else's, that bothered him because he didn't want to be left behind. He didn't want to be the last one out of the gate. Yet he also knew he should cut himself some slack.

Then he'd slowly come to terms with the fact that it didn't matter if he was the last one out of the gate, as long as he made it out of the gate. And here he was now wondering just how far down the racetrack he could go. And that was a shift, a good one. That was an optimistic change, and, for that, he could definitely credit Shane.

Victor sat there, with an empty plate in front of him, realizing he'd barely even tasted his food. He'd inhaled it so fast because he was starved, depleted after that intense workout. It was a problem here because lots of good food was offered, and he needed it for his health and his rehab, and he worked to enjoy every bit of the food they cooked here.

Then the meal seemed to be over, and he was on to the next thing. He thought that he should be relaxing more during mealtimes. Instead, he hated to admit it, it was all this focus on work, work, work. The joy in his life was limited to the various times he got to see Dawn. He was also waiting for an update from Dani regarding hiring Gerry.

Almost as if reading his thoughts, Dani called out to him.

"Hey." She walked over to him, holding a cup of coffee. "How're you doing?"

"I'm doing okay," Victor replied. "Finding the rehab here a little bit harder than I expected. Also finding that there's more that can be done than I expected."

Dani smiled and nodded. "Trust Shane. If anybody can get you as far as your body is able to go, it's him."

"I guess that's the trick, isn't it?" Victor stated, studying her. "It's all about how far you can go, how far your body will let you go."



“And how far your *mind* will let you go,” she added. “So many people forget about the mental aspect, and yet it’s huge. There will always be a mental element involved.”

“I always thought that everybody was doing more than me, better than me, and it really bothered me because I had. I was talking to Andy, who just left,” he shared, turning to see if he was still around so he could point him out. “But it’s almost like comparing cancer patients. You have as many body parts as most people here, and so I think I should be doing as well as they are,” he shared, “and yet everybody around me seems to be doing better. So then I started to think that it was me or that it was the surgeons or a problem here,” he noted. “I’m not even sure what I feel about any of it. I guess I’m just really confused right now.”

“And confusion is fine,” Dani noted, pulling out a chair and sitting down. “Nobody expects you to have answers. Nobody expects you to be the best. Nobody expects you to do anything other than try, with everything you have, to follow instructions, so that you can see the progress yourself.”

“I haven’t really seen so much of the progress,” he noted cautiously. “Yet I feel that it’s just out there, out of my grasp. Of course I’m afraid I can’t reach it. I’m afraid that it’s out of my way and that I came here to find the carrot dangling in front of me, but I won’t even try to reach for it.”

She smiled. “I get that. All I can tell you is to follow the process. Trust, believe in humanity, allow yourself to believe in yourself. I think, if you talk to the other guys in rehab, that they will tell you how the progress doesn’t show up for weeks and then *bam*. There it is.” She stood and added, “And these are the topics that you should bring up in some of your sessions with your therapist.”

“I haven’t really started those yet.”

She frowned, as she studied him.

He shrugged. “I think everything was pushed back until after testing, and now I’m on my first full week of rehab.”

She thought about it and nodded. “That sounds about right. But you should bring up those questions with your physio too,” she added. “I’m not exactly sure which psychologist is on your medical team, but they’re all good.”

“If they’re here, they have to be good, right?”

She nodded. “If they’re not good, I want to know about it because then I’ll fix it. Still, I don’t think just because you may not like somebody that they still can’t help you.”

“No, I wouldn’t do that.” Victor smiled. “Besides, I’ve seen a lot of good and bad people in this world,” he shared, for the first time voicing some of the pain in his tone. “And everybody has the ability to be both.”

Dani’s smile, when it came, was absolutely brilliant. He stared at her.

“That’s a huge realization,” she stated. “And you’re right. At times everybody in this world can be both, depending on the circumstance. Sometimes people are really easy and good, and sometimes they hit a wall. Maybe something happens that they can’t deal with, and it’s more than they expected at that moment,” she shared. “It’s not that they can’t do anything about it all the time or at any other time, but, at *that* moment, it’s beyond them. And sometimes they lash out. Sometimes fear overtakes them. Sometimes insecurity swallows them whole, which is essentially fear too,” she added. “I think it’s about not judging others but remembering that, when you do judge others, you’re really judging yourself. So, when you judge yourself, you come off looking at the wrong side.”

“But, if I think I am doing better than the others, I sound arrogant and conceited,” he argued, with a laugh.

“And that too is basically an insecurity. It’s the need to push yourself so that you’re better than everybody else because inside you believe or are afraid that you’re worse than everybody else.”

Just then her phone rang. She looked at it and sighed. “That’s a great conversation,” she pointed out, “so hold that

thought and work on it. I have to run.” And, with that, she was gone.

## Chapter 5

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**T**HE DAYS JUST blended in, and Dawn didn't realize how much they'd merged until she kept finding herself looking for opportunities to go see Victor.

Finally Ilse turned, looked at her, and said, "Just go already."

Dawn winced. "That obvious, *huh?*"

"You're useless until you've said hi to him in the morning. And, yes, it's six o'clock, and it's probably too early, but, if you don't run past Victor's room, you won't know."

"It is too early," she agreed, appalled, staring at the clock. "My God, I would have woken him up."

"And yet he might be awake already."

"Maybe not though," Dawn muttered. "I can't do that to him."

"Then settle down," Ilse said. "And then, when the time is appropriate, go, spend a few minutes, and then get back here and get to work."

"Will do," Dawn replied. "I guess it's pretty silly, isn't it?"

"I love seeing adults in love act like two-year-olds," Ilse shared, with a chuckle.

"Oh my, surely it's not that bad."

"Well, for two-year-olds, yes, but it sounds like the flush of first love."

"I don't know," Dawn argued. "I'm twenty-nine. How would that even work?"

"What's wrong with being twenty-nine?" Ilse turned toward her bakery chef.

“Your comments about the *flush of first love* and acting like a giddy youngster.” She shook her head. “I just realized that I’m too old for this.”

“Too old for what?” Ilse asked in astonishment. “Love?”

“Maybe, I don’t know.” She stared at her friend in confusion.

“Wow. Well, first off, that’s nonsense. Absolutely no way you’re too old for love,” Ilse stated. “I love seeing these eighty- and ninety-year-olds who fall in love and get married, some of them for the first time in life,” she shared. “Why would you put an age limit on love?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was your reference to toddlers.”

“How anyone acts versus their biological age can be two different things,” Ilse pointed out, still laughing. “And definitely don’t go down that rabbit hole of *you’re too old* because no way you’re too old. I’m older than you are, and I’m only now getting married to Keith.”

“That’s true,” Dawn acknowledged, then gave her a wicked grin. “What are you? A whole two weeks older than me?”

“At least,” Ilse confirmed. “However, that’s not the point. The point is, you are as old as you feel, and you should always be young at heart, even when life doesn’t make it seem to be an option.”

“That’s a sad thing to even consider, isn’t it?”

“Lots of sad things happen in life, but we work in a place where a lot of good things can happen in life too,” Ilse stated. “We just have to focus on the good things.”

Dawn nodded and kept working. The next time she looked up, it was 7:30 a.m. She glanced over to Ilse, who just rolled her eyes, and Dawn dashed out the kitchen. As she walked quickly down the hallway, she realized she probably should have brought Victor a coffee or something. It was too late now.

If she went back and got something, it would take up too much time.

She heard a voice when she got to Victor's room, even through the closed door. She frowned, not sure if he was alone or if he was on the phone. She knocked tentatively on his door and heard him call out to come in. She opened the door and poked her head in and saw he was on the phone. She smiled. "Hey, just wanted to say, *Good morning*," she said cheerfully.

He lifted the phone and waggled it. "It's Gerry." He chuckled. "She got offered a job here."

Her face lit up. "Really? Dani didn't tell me."

"I don't think Dani's probably had a chance yet. Gerry got the offer last night, but she hadn't accepted it then."

"That's fantastic news," Dawn said. "Give her my congrats."

He passed over the congrats on the phone.

Then Dawn pulled out her phone and sent Gerry a text herself. "I'm really happy for her."

"Me too. She will do really well here." When he said his goodbyes to Gerry, he disconnected the call and looked over at Dawn. "Now that we've done that," he asked Dawn, "do you ever worry that we did the wrong thing?"

She stared at him because, of course, she already had once worried about that. "You mean about uprooting her present life and bringing her here?"

He nodded. "I have full faith in what I said about her," he clarified. "I don't in any way doubt that. I just wonder about having her move to Texas to get this job. What if we're impacting fate or something by putting in a good word for her?"

"I don't think so," Dawn countered, with a bright smile. "How bad can it be if we help somebody else? Not only is it good for that person, it's also good for us."

“I guess,” he replied. “It was just a thought.”

“Your head’s full of thoughts,” she noted, chuckling.

He nodded. “That’s very true,” he agreed. “I hadn’t realized how much my mind is always working on something.”

“I think in many ways a lot of our minds are.”

“Yet I had a friend who told me that his mind was empty.”

“Seriously?” she asked. “How does that work?”

“He called it the *nothing box*. And he’d go into the nothing box, and it would be completely empty.” She frowned at him, stunned. He nodded. “I think, if you search Google for it, you’ll find an awful lot of people out there have a nothing box in their head.”

She murmured, “I can’t imagine. ... I’m always working on new recipes or figuring out what to bake next week or what to do on my days off. ... I can’t imagine a nothing box. What a waste.”

He chuckled. “I don’t even know if a *waste* is the word for it,” he murmured. “I mean, just because it’s not us and our way, maybe it gives them something.”

“What could it give them?” she asked in wonder.

“Time out,” he replied instantly. “Time out, where you don’t have to worry or think about anything.”

“Maybe,” she conceded, staring at him. “Still seems like a waste to me. My mind is an active and busy place, and, even earlier this morning, I wanted to say *Good morning* to you. However, I didn’t want to wake you. So I’ve been clock-watching to see when you might be awake.”

A flush of pleasure rolled across his cheeks.

She smiled at him. “Now I have another reason. I should ask Gerry when she’s coming.”

“I can do that,” he said, pulling out his phone. He quickly texted her. As they waited for a response, Victor added, “And, by the way, I would have been awake this morning. I just can’t count on it every morning.”

Dawn nodded. “I try not to work the hours that Ilse does, which are godforsaken early,” she noted, “but I’m not much further behind her.”

“We all appreciate how you two are in the kitchen, making food to feed an awful lot of hungry people, who are looking forward to each meal here.”

“I’ve seen hungry people waiting to be fed and who are fairly impatient about it,” she said, with a nod. “Nobody likes it when breakfast is behind schedule.”

He winced. “I would be right there with them—not impressed about the delay part.”

She chuckled. “See? You would be just as bad,” she accused in a teasing tone.

“It sounds terrible, doesn’t it?” He laughed. “I’ll try not to ever be impatient again.”

“But you will be,” she stated. “It’s human nature. Once you get adjusted to a schedule, nobody likes having that schedule changed.”

“Maybe not,” Victor agreed, “but now I have a face behind it, so I’ll be a little more tolerant.”

“A lot more tolerant would be good.” She nodded. “I have to go to bed and sleep sometimes too.”

“Got it. So, yeah, I’ll work on it.”

She smiled at him, looked at her watch, and said, “And, just like that, I have to go again.”

“How about you let me know when you’re off for lunch?” he suggested.

She tilted her head. “With my early start, my lunch would be around 10:00 a.m. I could push it to eleven, but that would



be it. I would need food before then.”

“Right, and I’ll be busy with a workout, so not today. That’s for sure.”

“Not today, but we can work it out. Like you said, another time.” And, with that, she was gone. She walked back into the kitchen.

Ilse laughed when she saw Dawn return. “See? It wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“No, it wasn’t. And he would have been awake this morning even earlier.”

“Ah, another early riser, *huh?*”

“Apparently,” she noted. “He also asked if we could meet for lunch.”

“Ooh, this is sounding more serious all the time,” Ilse faced her.

“I don’t know about *serious*, but it would be nice to spend some designated time with him, apart from dropping by for a minute or two.”

“Absolutely,” Ilse agreed, “but your lunch is not necessarily on his time schedule, is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” Dawn replied. “So we’re not doing that today, maybe in another couple days.”

“Find out what his schedule is,” Ilse suggested. “You can try and work something out that way.”

“I was wondering about that. I guess I have to ask him for his schedule, don’t I?”

“Ask him, but I’m pretty sure any of the nurses or Dani could tell you. Of course then be prepared for a whole lotta questions.” Ilse chuckled, with a knowing grin.

Dawn rolled her eyes at that. “Right? Does anybody else enjoy a couple in love more than this place?” she quipped. “Everybody is unbelievable.”

“Hey,” Ilse pointed out. “I’m one of those people who fell in love here, so this whole place was involved. Therefore, I fully realize exactly how everybody feels about it,” she declared. “They love it when people fall in love.”

“Everybody loves a happy ending. Some of the best patient stories here are all about happy endings. Sure, we get our fair share of sad ones too, and we do our best to smile bravely and to move on. However, when you get a chance to be part of a happy ending, everybody here jumps on that bandwagon pretty darn fast.”

“And, with good reason,” Ilse declared, “as happy endings are the best.”

And, with that, Dawn had to agree, and returned to the cinnamon buns she was making for lunch.

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VICTOR WASN’T SURE if he’d been too forward or too pushy, but, when Dawn didn’t mention their tentative lunch date for the next couple days, he realized that he would have to leave it in her court.

Finally she stopped in one morning and said, “Hey. I’m not too sure what your schedule looks like, but how about lunch today?”

He looked at her with pleasure. “I’m not sure what my schedule looks like either,” he murmured, “but I’ll tell you one thing. I’ll try to make it happen.”

She chuckled. “Not if it puts you in any trouble or makes life difficult for you,” she added. “That won’t help either of us.”

“Maybe not, but, getting an invitation from a beautiful woman? I’m no fool.”

At that, she burst out laughing. “Just check your schedule, and let me know if it works or not.”

“Let me do that now,” he said. “It’s early, and I’m heading down to breakfast. Still, I was hoping to have a better handle

on how this scheduling thing works.” He studied his e-tablet and nodded. “I think I can make it happen. I do have Shane this morning until 11:30, so we need to do lunch afterward.”

“Good. I’ll have a snack to hold me off,” she shared. “How about lunch after your rehab?”

He nodded. “I will need a shower first,” he added cautiously.

“Okay, so how about twelve o’clock at the actual entrance to the dining room.”

“Perfect. Oh and I heard from Gerry. She’s coming all right but won’t start for another month. And she’s excited.”

“Excellent.” And, with that, she bounced off.

He grinned. It was hard to imagine anything that would make him happier than something like this. His lunch date kept a smile on his face and kept his heart light and happy, as he made his way to breakfast. By the time Shane was done with him later this morning, Victor was exhausted and worn out. But he was more concerned about getting a shower and changing before meeting with Dawn.

He hadn’t even argued with Shane or groaned at all during the rehab session, and Shane had finally asked him, “What’s going on? You’re never this agreeable.”

“Lunch date,” he muttered. “I won’t do anything to mess that up.” When Shane raised his eyebrows, Victor shrugged. “Just because I’m injured doesn’t mean I’m dead.”

At that, Shane burst out laughing. “No, you definitely are not, and I’m certainly happy for you.”

“Good, then help me to make it there, without being such a wreck.”

“I won’t make it easy on you,” Shane declared. “Too much is going on in your world and you need to get things fixed up.”

“I get it. I get it,” Victor confirmed. “I was just hoping to not be a total wreck by the time lunch rolled around.”

Shane laughed again. “The sooner you’re not a wreck, the sooner you can move on in bigger ways.”

Of course it was too much to hope that Shane would take it easy on him. As Victor wheeled his way back to his room, he realized just how tired he was. Still, he was also excited, which was foolish, because he got to spend a fair bit of time with Dawn anyway. So one lunch shouldn’t make that much difference. But somehow it did.

As he made his way to the appointed time, he looked around to see her off talking with somebody near the buffet line. Victor wasn’t late but wondered if he should wave so that she knew he was here. And then decided there was no need for that, as she left her friend and turned Victor’s way. He rolled up beside her and said, “Hey.”

She smiled at him. “There you are. I was afraid I would have to eat without you.”

He shook his head. “Nope, not happening.” He chuckled. “The shower did take a bit longer than I expected, though.”

“That’s not unexpected either,” she replied. “Even a fast shower can still take time.”

“I didn’t want to interrupt something, as you were talking with people when I came in.”

“I talk with lots of people,” she noted, with a smile. “Not a big deal.”

“Good enough,” Victor said and waved her into the buffet line.

The two of them met up, where Dennis was waiting to serve people. He took one look at them and smiled. “There you guys are.”

“Yep, we’re here,” Victor replied. “What’s good?”

Dennis slapped a hand over his heart. “Oh my, now you’ve done it,” he declared, “absolutely broke my heart.”

“And why is that?” Victor asked in confusion.

“Because everything here is good,” Dennis teased. “How could you doubt that?”

Victor rolled his eyes at the theatrics and played along. “Right,” he agreed. “You are so right. Everything is good. So what’s extraspecial today then?”

“Well, I might let you get away with that one,” Dennis stated. “And what is extraspecial today are the Mexican burritos.” He pointed to a large tray of them.

“Ooh, I’ll take two,” Victor said.

“Me too,” Dawn added.

And, each with their trays, they slowly made their way to a table outside. “Inside or outside?” he asked, hesitating at the entrance to the deck.

“Let’s sit at the edge,” she decided.

He smiled at her. “Do you ever get angry, upset?”

“Nope, I can’t say that I do very often,” she shared. “I’m not some angel,” she clarified. “I have all the same human emotions as everybody else, ... but sometimes things go along better with certain people than others.”

“I agree.” Victor nodded. “You always seem very even-keeled.”

“*Ha*, that’s a good term for it, and you’re probably right,” she told him. “I generally don’t get too flustered about much.”

“How about if your pastry gets ruined?”

She winced. “Nobody likes to fail at things, and I can’t say that I’ve failed at very much in the kitchen in a long time,” she explained, “but it’s been known to happen.”

“I can’t even imagine that anything that you fail at in the kitchen is all too major,” he muttered. “Those pies the other day?” He just rolled his eyes.

“They were good, weren’t they?” she asked. “I do like my pies.”

“Anytime you want to repeat your homemade pies,” he said, “you know we’re all ready.”

“Really?” she asked, with a laughing look. “Is that the only reason we’re having lunch today?”

“Hey, you asked me,” he pointed out.

“I did, indeed,” she confirmed, with a smile. “And I do like that about us—that we can laugh and joke.”

“I think life’s too short for anything less,” he murmured.

“Until you start thinking about all the other things in life, like how humanity’s let you down.”

His mood visibly dimmed. “It’s not even that so much, as just realizing that what you so wanted out of life wouldn’t necessarily happen.”

“We can skip that subject, if you want.”

He smiled at her. “I’m okay. Just every once in a while that depression hits.”

“And it’s always depression about humanity though?” she asked.

“I guess. I just feel like the world could do so much more for each other, and we don’t. So, whenever I get depressed, that seems to be the part that really gets accentuated.”

“Did your parents ever do any volunteer work, charity work?”

He shook his head. “No, my parents were all about money. I got a lot of flak about going into the navy.”

“Why is that?”

“Because it’s not known to have great pay, because I won’t be the CEO of a big bank and have *status*,” he explained. “Doing something of service for the country to them was so foreign and so *questionable*, they kept asking me why I would even want to. I found it really difficult at times.”

“I’m sure you did,” she agreed sadly. “Whereas I’m also in the service industry, where I spend my day helping everybody here. Obviously I mean as a cook, which isn’t the same service as being a nurse.”

Victor shook his head. “Regardless, keeping up morale is huge. We saw it all the time on base. If you can keep the people happy, they’re so much more willing to get up the next day with a smile on their face,” he shared. “So what you do is just as important, but my parents wouldn’t approve of what you do for a living either. They would say that you short-changed yourself. Instead of being a pastry chef, you should have been the head chef.”

She shook her head. “But that wouldn’t bring me joy.”

Victor nodded. “I like that.”

## Chapter 6

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**D**AWN ASKED VICTOR, “You like what?”

“That it brings you joy,” he repeated, “and I think we should all do things that bring us joy. And I just don’t think most of us even knows what brings us joy.”

“What brings you joy?” she asked.

He shrugged. “I used to do a lot of woodwork. Whenever I would lose my temper, get depressed, think about humanity and what a mess it all was,” he began, with a laugh, “I would go into my shop, and I would churn through wood. This was a long time ago. I was living at my parents’ house, and technically it was their shop. They sold the house with the shop one day, causing one of the biggest problems we had. Maybe it was a message to me. I don’t know.” Victor shrugged. “They bought a new house, and we moved there, but it didn’t have a shop. Of all the things I would like to get back into my life, it would be to have that outlet again.”

She stared at him. “That’s certainly doable, isn’t it?”

“Maybe,” he replied. “I’ll look for a house, and that would ...” He stopped. “That would bring me joy.”

“Then it’s important,” she stated instantly. “Anytime joy’s the factor, it’s a good thing. Most people plan for every other emotion, including the responsible thing and the commonsense option, but they don’t think about the joy part.”

He smiled. “And so much of life isn’t joyful. There’s nothing joyful about bills.”

“True, ... but, if you think about it, having a house and having the bills, if that allows you to have that shop of yours and to enjoy cutting and shaving wood into your own creations,” she pointed out, “then it’s all worth it.”



“That’s the way I had thought it would be,” he noted. “Yet, according to my parents, that wasn’t the way it should be.”

“And I presume you left soon afterward.”

“Right afterward,” Victor confirmed. “And all my tools are still stored in my uncle’s garage. They’ve been there for years and years and years.”

“Will they still be any good?”

“They should be. If I had to replace them all at this point, it would be an incredible amount of money.”

“Have you contacted him, letting him know that you’re out of the military and will be looking for them again?”

“I have. He knows I’m out of the military, and he’s the one who reminded me that he still had all my tools. He said that he would be happy to do a road trip and deliver them too.”

She stared at him. “I like that. Sounds as if he’s not the part of humanity that you don’t like.”

He frowned. “I think it relates to my parents,” he noted.

“So much of life does,” she agreed, with a roll of her eyes. “When you think about it, everything in life that affects us strongly seems to come from childhood or from that part of our world that influenced us so much.”

“It’s really sad though. My parents have money, and they could do so much, but I don’t even think they enjoy the day-to-day parts of their lives because they’re just so busy making more money.”

“And you don’t want to get sucked into that mindless pursuit,” she noted.

“I don’t want to. I think it’s a problem in that I’m probably already sucked into that though.” He frowned.

“Don’t have to be,” she said. “You can do an awful lot of other things in life that will make it easier on you.”

“Maybe,” he murmured. And then he nodded. “I really do like the idea of getting the shop again. Would have to be something I’m serious about getting back into, though.”

“Or else what?”

“Then it’s a waste of money, isn’t it, if I buy a place that’s got a big shop, and I don’t use it.”

She smiled. “Or it’s not a waste because it gives you the opportunity at your convenience. Who says you want to get back into it today? Maybe you want to get back into it in, I don’t know, a week or a year. Maybe it won’t happen until you get married and have a child you want to create toys for,” she suggested, still with that smile. “Don’t put all that pressure on yourself.”

As he dug into his lunch, he realized just how much they discussed commonsense ideas. As if reading her mind, he smiled at her, as he gently covered her hand with his. “You really do have a unique way of looking at life.”

At that, she shook her head. “No, everybody here follows a similar philosophy. It’s not even so much me, but this place changes you.”

“Good, as there’s room for it in my case.”

She added, “It’s not that you need to change. You just need to relax a little, to open up about what you want out of life, and then not be afraid to go for it. And, if it’s something that you really want, and yet you feel that you have to justify it, bring it up with some of the shrinks and see whether you really do need to justify it or it’s enough that you just get to enjoy life.”

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VICTOR WALKED INTO his therapy session a week later.

Dr. Middleton, a visiting doctor from town, looked up and smiled. “Hey. How’re you doing today?” she asked. “I’m filling in for Dr. Maddox. Take a seat.”

“I’m doing okay,” Victor replied, collapsing on the big easy chair, setting aside his crutches. “Some things came up over the last few days that I’ve been wondering about.”

“Such as?”

And he quickly explained to her about the parental issues, the feeling of always getting depressed about humanity being so bad, and then his inability to decide on things that would make him happy.

She listened to him and made some notes. “So you just brought up a lot of issues, and some of them will be entwined.”

“Which ones?” he asked, confused.

“The ones involving being happy and your parents because a lot of that will be carryover from your childhood. I gather your family wasn’t happy.”

Victor stopped, as he went to explain it. “That seems like a judgment on my part. Maybe they were happy focusing only on money,” he murmured. “For me, it seemed as if they weren’t happy because I wasn’t happy.”

She smiled at him in delight. “That is a very astute observation. When we’re unhappy, we project that unhappiness to the world around us. So maybe they were perfectly happy, and you were the one who wasn’t happy, and now you’re afraid to become them by imitating them.”

“I guess it could be something like that.”

“Now, what is it that you’re talking about with joy?”

He brought up having a woodworking shop.

“And they sold the house without letting you know?”

He nodded. “But that was them because what mattered to them was that they make themselves happy.”

“Do you think they were happy?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “All they did was continuously climb the career ladder to reach their goals, and nothing was ever enough.”

“Right. Did they sell their house again?”

“Yes. And again and again. I used to keep this address book, just for all their changes of address.”

“And I suppose they made a little bit of money every time.”

He nodded. “Yes, and again that leads right back to the fact that they were always trying to social climb and to get higher and higher up that economic scale.”

“So what they were trying to achieve in your mind was something that isn’t achievable because, if you’re always trying to climb to be better, you don’t have any sense of self-worth to begin with.”

He sank back, as he stared at her. “This place packs a punch,” he muttered.

She looked up at him inquiringly from the notes she was writing. “Meaning?”

“Meaning that I’ve never heard or had these kinds of discussions in any way before,” he shared. “Everything that seems to come out of everybody’s mouth here affects me in a way that makes me reevaluate life.”

“Is that bad?” she asked, a small smile playing at the corner of her lips.

“No, I won’t say it’s bad, but it’s definitely different. I have done more questioning, and I’ve participated in more heavy philosophical discussions here than I think I have in a lifetime.”

“But it’s also a stage of your life now,” she noted. “And, no, it’s not necessarily because you’re injured and recuperating and dealing with a new future ahead of you, but more because you’re at whatever age and stage of life right now where you’re looking at what it is you want out of life and are

hopefully realizing that some of your past that you drag forward isn't necessarily something that you want to continue to bring with you."

He let out a heavy breath. "Wow." He stared at her. "Another punch."

"They're not intended to be punches," she said, her voice gentle. "They're meant to have you take a look at your life, what it is that you want in your life and that you have for issues, and realize that you don't have to keep them in your life. They don't have to move to the next stage of your life. You can drop them right now. And are we talking about being dissatisfied with humanity? Yes, because it's not humanity you're dissatisfied with. It's ultimately you, but then also your family, your childhood, everything that you saw before you. Were you happy in the navy?"

"I was incredibly happy doing what I was doing," Victor stated, "but I didn't handle the regimental lifestyle or the brass very well. They made decisions that seem to be self-serving instead of looking out for the greater good."

She smiled at that. "And what about now?"

"I mean, decisions are made that are supposed to be best for me, but sometimes I wonder. Sometimes during my treatments, I wondered if their decisions were being made because they were afraid of lawsuits, so ultimately about themselves instead of me."

She stared at him for a long moment and then nodded. "That makes a lot of sense. Most doctors have to carry a huge insurance policy, and, whenever they have too many deaths, that becomes a problem. Plus, if you sue the hospital, then the doctors are ultimately responsible and will lose their jobs."

"I get that side too. I really do. ... Maybe I'm just being too critical."

"No, you're being analytical," she pointed out, "and that's not a bad thing. Don't take it too far, don't be too critical of what's around you, but do try to make rational decisions about

what you have and what you want and what things in your life you don't want to take with you."

"I don't want to take along the sense that humanity sucks," he stated. "I don't want to take along this fear of doing something out of joy because it feels wrong in the eyes of my parents. Joy was never anything that we could even talk about," he murmured. "When I look back, I can't think of any time that we ever did things because we wanted to. It was more because it was necessary, and we needed to, or it was the thing to do."

"And I think it's the thing that causes you the most pain, the fact that your parents were social climbers instead of caring about the family unit. When you're done here, will you have very much to do with them?"

He shook his head. "No, they didn't want me to go into the navy anyway."

"Okay. And you enlisted because why?"

"I wanted to do something for my country," he replied. "I wanted to be as opposite from them as possible." At that he stopped and stared. "Wow, I don't think I've ever verbalized that before."

"Yet it's important," the shrink said, "because I don't want you still using them as a milestone by which to live your life."

"I don't want to either." He was shocked by what he had told her. "I didn't even realize that that was something in my world," he muttered.

"But now that you know it is, whenever you hear yourself making a decision or a comparison or a judgment, evaluate where it's coming from, ensure it's not coming from this position of wanting nothing to do with your parents because of who they are."

"And not wanting to become a clone of them," he muttered.

“I don’t think that’s possible,” she stated, with the gentlest of smiles. “Look at what you’ve already done in your life that’s so different from them.”

“But now I have to find a way to live with my new world,” he pointed out, “with a new career, whatever that will be, and, no, I don’t know what that will be. I have money to live on for quite a while but still, I need to pick up and to do something else for a living.”

“Of course. So you think of woodworking as a hobby, not as a career?” she asked.

“Wow. Another insight.”

She nodded. “So you want to be useful. You do need that. Not everybody needs that. Lots of people are happy to sit at home, a small amount of money coming in every month, just doing nothing.” He winced at that. “But, for you, that’s not what you can do. It’s not what you want to do,” she murmured. “And that’s okay. That’s the part you have to get to, is understanding that being you is also okay.”

He stared at her and then nodded. “Lots to think about.”

“Absolutely,” she murmured. “Now, anything else you want to talk about?”

He shook his head. “Nope, I’m good for today.”

She chuckled. “In that case, I have a homework assignment for you. You can take off the rest of the afternoon and go do something that makes you happy, like maybe visit the animals down below.”

At that, he looked at her eagerly and asked, “Really?”

She nodded. “Absolutely. ... Today we’ll practice doing something that makes you feel joy.”

“That’s definitely animals,” he declared, with a smile. “Good homework assignment.” And he stood, gathered his crutches and headed for the vet clinic.

## Chapter 7

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**D**AWN NOTICED SOMETHING had affected Victor. He was different. She wasn't sure whether it was a long-term thing or just something he was puzzling through. However, it was interesting to see how he reacted to everything around him right now. He was also making lots of references to joy. And in a good way.

And when he did it again at dinnertime, Dawn shared, "Hey, at least you're practicing joy."

"Did I tell you that's what my shrink gave me as an exercise today?"

She stared at him. "What do you mean?" And he explained. "Oh, I love that," she said. "I think that's a great idea."

"I went down to the veterinarian clinic and spent a few hours with the animals. It was a homework assignment, but it was homework I was happy to do."

"Which is why," she noted, "joy was the end result because you're happy to do it."

Victor nodded. "I really have no idea what I'm supposed to do for a living but maybe it doesn't really matter right now."

"That's wonderful." She took a seat beside him. "If you could do absolutely anything in the world, and you would do it out of joy, what would you do?"

"I would go back in the navy."

"Okay," she replied, "and, if that's not an option, what else would you do?"

"Animals," he stated, "I would probably rescue animals."

"Like all kinds of animals?"



“Yep, all kinds.” He smiled. “Foolish, isn’t it? No money in that.”

“As long as you’re not doing it to avoid being like your parents,” she added, “and it would bring you joy, then why don’t you pursue that?”

He stared at her. “It would be a constant money drain.”

“Then you can just tell your parents that they need to help out all the time.”

He laughed at that. “They would hate it.”

“And that’s fine too because that’s them, and you are you. What about your woodworking to support the animal shelter?”

“Wow.” He frowned at her. “Could I do that?”

Dawn smiled. “I don’t know where you’re at for money,” she noted, “but you could always take a look at buying acreage and setting up some shelter, if just for temporarily fostering animals. Or setting up a recuperation center for animals. I don’t know.” She threw up her hands. “Talk to Stan about it. We get a lot of guys through here who think what Stan has set up here with Hathaway House is a great system, and, of course, he always needs support too, continues to ask for donations and such. He takes in large animals, small animals, all kinds of them to foster.”

Victor nodded. “I hadn’t really considered something like that. ... In the back of my mind is still that notion that I need to work.”

“I think you should question that. I don’t know whether you *need* to work or you just need a way to create money,” she explained. “If you have some money and need a way to create other money to augment your savings, then choose to do the things that make you happier.”

Victor gave Dawn a wry look. “So much is shifting in my world right now that I’m not exactly sure where to go next.”

“Something for you to consider.”

“It is at that.”

And Dawn left him to it to go crash at her apartment. She hoped he would find something in his life that would make him smile on a permanent basis. When he talked about animals, it always made him look totally engaged. When he talked about woodworking, he seemed to come alive. And, of course, those were deemed to be hobbies to him, not necessarily something that could be turned into a job. However, she didn't know where he was at financially and whether he needed to have a job or not. She had assumed so.

It seemed to her that the rest of the world worked, even if they didn't necessarily want to. Dawn knew a lot of people who thought nirvana would be to sit at home and to do nothing. For her, that would drive her batty. But she wasn't everyone.

\*

AS DAWN HEADED to work early the next morning, she stopped outside the kitchen to watch the birds and to witness the sun, as it rose at the edge of the horizon.

Ilse stepped up to the open door and muttered, “There you are. Isn't it a gorgeous morning?”

“It is gorgeous,” Dawn agreed. “And, because of conversations with Victor, I'm stopping and smelling the roses a whole lot more.”

Ilse smiled. “I'm glad to hear that. If nothing else, being in a place like this should remind us to live our lives a little bit better, a little bit healthier, a little bit happier, all because we never know when it will be taken away from us. To remember that, when we walk and take a step, we should be happy because we can take those steps. We see the patients who struggle here and some of them? Sure, they saw action that we wouldn't choose to get caught up in, but some of them survived war and yet are victims of car accidents. You know these people never expected to be in that situation. Yet here we see so many good things, and we see so much joy.”

“And it’s the joy I want to remember,” Dawn murmured. “It’s the joy we need to live instead of just remembering. We can’t store memories forever, especially in place of living a life. All we can do is try for the best lifestyle that allows us to live day by day,” she murmured. “And, like you, I tend to forget. We all need to make it a habit. And to do better with that than we have up until now.”

“Exactly.” Ilse smiled at Dawn. “It’s just amazing how much in life is really about stopping and remembering the moment.”

“Agreed.” And, with that, the two women stepped into the kitchen, and Dawn closed the door behind them.

Dawn moved throughout her day, wondering how Victor had been doing. He’d seemed a little *consumed* these last few days, but then she understood—a lot was going on in his world too. A lot was going on in everybody’s world at this point. Still, something was very special about Victor.

Dawn whistled as she worked, and then, when she’d finally finished everything on her list for today, she turned around. “Looks like I’m done,” she murmured.

“Don’t sound so surprised,” Dennis told her, as he walked in. “It does happen, you know.”

“Not often,” she noted, with a smile.

“If you’ve got a moment, you should take a look outside.”

“Why is that?” Dawn asked him.

Dennis laughed. “Go take a look.” She walked out to the dining room, but Dennis followed behind her and pointed to the deck. “Go look down from there.”

Not sure what she was looking at, she headed to the deck and looked over the railing. She gasped and then laughed. “Oh my.”

And, sure enough, Victor was out in the middle of the field, with Midnight and Lovely surrounding him, butting him

for attention, but also taking advantage of the pail of feed with Victor.

“He’s quite comfortable out there, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, I was quite surprised myself,” Dennis shared. “I mean, obviously a lot of people like horses, but not everybody’s totally comfortable being surrounded by them like that. In fact, he had multiple animals coming up to visit and looking for attention.”

“I wonder if Dani’s seeing this,” Dawn muttered.

Dennis pointed off to the side, and there Dani stood, with a big smile on her face.

Dawn walked over closer to her boss and shared, “That is lovely to see.”

Nodding, Dani smiled at her. “Isn’t it? We just don’t get enough exposure sometimes to see how these guys do out here. Yet it’s obvious he’s perfectly happy. And it’s nice to see the interaction between him and the animals,” she murmured. “I would like to see more of the patients out in the fields, on either side of the fence,” she noted. “It’s so therapeutic for the animals, and our patients as well. There’s never quite enough time for me to get out to give the animals as much attention as I would love to.”

“The thing that really gets me,” Dawn murmured to Dani, “is how happy he looks.”

Dani sighed. “And I guess that’s what I’m jealous of right now. I’ve been stuck in the office, doing paperwork all day.”

“Go out,” Dawn urged. “Go out and visit with him.”

Dani looked at her with a wry smile. “Today I can’t. I’ve got a big meeting tonight.”

“Ah, more investors?”

“Somewhat,” she replied. “If it isn’t that, it’s something else.”

“Victor’s been working on trying to find things that make him happy, things that make him find a reason to go on with humanity because he’s always quite depressed about it—depressed about what the world is all about.”

“Maybe he should find something constructive that gives him a purpose in the world,” Dani suggested. “I don’t know what his plans are when he’s out of here, but sometimes, when you find yourself so upset about how humanity is, you need to do something constructive. I find that upset is mostly a sense of helplessness, especially when you look on as an observer. However, once you get actively involved, you find that things aren’t quite so bad.”

That was such an interesting thing for her to say. Dawn nodded and smiled. “Has that been your experience?”

She nodded. “It has, indeed. ... I think more people just need to be proactive and take part in some endeavor, so that they aren’t always concerned about what other people don’t do. Less to worry about if they’re more concerned about what they themselves can do.” And, with that, Dani smiled and turned to go back to work. “I can’t be here any longer and still get the work done.”

“Just don’t work too hard,” Dawn called back.

Dani raised a hand but didn’t slow down.

Dawn stared in the distance and then realized that, if nothing else, she really, really enjoyed seeing Victor’s face light up like that. She turned and looked back to see Dennis walking away. She walked over to grab a big yogurt and granola concoction and told Dennis, “Thanks for showing me that.”

Dennis shrugged. “We all need to see somebody enjoying life like that. I don’t think he realizes that, when you’re looking to find a purpose in life, you often show other people what’s missing in theirs.” And, on that cryptic note, Dennis headed back into the kitchen.

Dawn walked to her station, slowly rotating her neck and wishing she could go out and be with him, but she didn't want to disturb him either. Still, she gathered up her to-go dinner to eat at home and then planned to crash. However, when she left the kitchen, she headed outside, crossing paths with Stan, walking toward her. "Hey," she greeted him, with a bright smile. "That's lovely to see out there, isn't it?" Dawn pointed to Victor, still among the bigger animals in the pasture.

"Isn't he doing well?" Stan asked. "He came down and shared that he'd been told to find joy in his day."

She stared at him. "Told?"

"Yes, he had a therapy session yesterday. And, I guess, somewhere along the line, he was told to go find joy. And he said his joy would be among the animals, so he came down to me. And I sent him out with a bucket of grain yesterday and again today."

"So was that joy for him or joy for the animals?" she teased.

He chuckled. "Definitely all of the above."

"That's good. He's trying to find a purpose in life, something that makes him feel that this humanity, this journey, is not as depressing as it's been so far."

"And the best way to do that, in my world," he noted, "is interacting with the animals. Always goes back to the animals."

"And is that just because they're animals?" she asked curiously, "or is there some other reason?"

"I think being of service to others stops you from feeling that sense of helplessness, that sense of pity for yourself, and gives you a purpose outside of it," he murmured. "And animals are the perfect beings for that." And, with that, Stan turned and left.

She once again stared out at the meadow, wondering if she dared join Victor. As it was, he turned in the distance and

caught sight of her and raised a hand.

She laughed and walked closer. “Now you,” she replied, when she got within hearing distance, “look absolutely in your element.”

He grinned, and it was so light and carefree. “I’d always heard that old adage about, if you’re depressed, get a pet, but I didn’t understand back then why anybody would do that because looking after something else just seemed like more work,” he murmured. “And now I’m standing here in front of these animals, wondering how I can get some of my own.”

“Because?” she asked instantly.

“Because they bring me joy.” And there it was, stated simply and with such heart.

Dawn was charmed. She watched the animals that he was busy petting and smiled. “Looks like they’ve adopted you.”

“They’ve adopted the grain,” he admitted, with a big smile. “And that’s okay because I’m not asking anything of them other than to be themselves.”

“And yet you ask more of yourself,” she noted curiously. “How fair is that?”

He considered that for a moment. “I think I do that because I can do more.”

“Yet you don’t think animals can do more?”

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. “I’ve never thought of it that way.”

She nodded and didn’t bring up anything else. Eventually he started to crutch his way toward her, with an empty grain bucket, and still the animals fell in step beside him. She looked at his entourage and laughed. “Honestly, I haven’t seen anything quite so nice in a while.”

He looked around, and once again that big smile flashed. “It’s been a good day. Yesterday too,” he declared, with a beaming smile.

“Good, because, as one good day then follows another good day, pretty soon you’ll have a good week and before you know it, it’ll be ...”

“Oh, it’s not been that bad,” he countered, “and I have to admit it’s been a lot better since I’ve been here at Hathaway House. Still, being outside, with these animals, makes it twice as nice.”

“And that’s good,” she agreed, “because humanity isn’t all bad here, or in other places.”

“Nope, it’s not,” he stated. “You just get disenchanted with it when you see enough things that go wrong.”

“And again, people still have to be people,” she pointed out. “Not everybody wants to improve or to become better or to become anything than what they are.”

“You’re right. And that’s the hard part—to accept that they’ll be who they are no matter what.” He nodded slowly. “And I hadn’t really come to the point of wanting to accept that yet.”

“Maybe you don’t need to. Maybe you just need to find a way to get involved and to do something for yourself.”

“Maybe.” He gave her a wry smile. “Something to think about.” He slowly made his way through the fence. “What are you doing out here?” he asked curiously.

“Honestly? I was heading back to my place. I planned to eat these leftovers before I went to bed, but then I saw you out here. You looked so happy that I felt compelled to come over and to say hi.”

“That’s a good thing then,” he replied, smiling. “If my joy makes you happy, then it spreads the joy around.”

“It absolutely does,” she agreed, returning his smile. “So are we now on concerted attempts to find joy?”

“I did have a long talk with my therapist about being depressed and saddened by the world and the mess it’s in and the fighting globally, et cetera.” He gave a wave of his hand.



“And she basically released me from everything in my afternoon schedule yesterday, except to go find something that brings me joy. So I came down to tell Stan about it, and he brought me out here. And I loved it so much that I repeated it today, after my schedule ended.”

“And now you feel completely different?” she asked.

“I feel at peace,” he murmured, as he looked back at the horses, even now standing and staring at him hopefully. “There’s just ...” He stopped short. “It sounds funny, but it’s something about their energy that just makes me feel peaceful.”

“And I think that’s because their energy *is* peaceful,” she declared, smiling at the horses. Then she turned to walk slowly at his side. “You do realize they’re addictive too.”

“Yeah, you heard me say that I wanted my own.”

“I did hear that.” She laughed. “And you’d have to get your own because these are definitely spoken for.”

“And I can see why. That Midnight’s a beautiful horse.”

“Dani’s had him since she was young. Midnight was her saving grace, while her father was going through so much trouble.”

“I’ve heard the story about everything they’ve done here. I just find it hard to believe how much they’ve accomplished.”

“And she would say that she didn’t set out to accomplish all this, but that she just put one foot in front of the other to accomplish one baby step. Then, before she knew it, she already had this built.”

“And that’s the trick, isn’t it?” Victor asked. “Finding something that brings you joy and just moving with that urge to create it.”

“Or finding something that gives you purpose. If you don’t like the way humanity’s operating, maybe find something that you can do to change it. If your passion is pollution, find a way that you can work at cleaning up something on the planet.

If your passion's animals, find a way to have animals in your life." She shrugged. "If you want to help people, then find a way to help them. If you want to avoid people but to do something for the planet, then find a way to do that."

Victor laughed. "The longer I'm here, the more I understand something about me, at least a part of me. I think the main reason why I was so very depressed before wasn't so much about what people were like but that I couldn't do anything about it."

And, of course, that made Dawn smile. "Dani told me something like that when I was talking to her a while ago. How we tend to get depressed about life around us because we feel like we can't change it, and we don't have any control over how things are. So it ends up making us depressed—and not that the world is a bad place but that our place in the world is incomplete."

"I would agree with that," Victor stated. "I'm not quite physically there, and I won't be for a while, but it does give me food for thought."

"And that's a good thing," Dawn added, smiling, "because you never know what you might want to do. And I don't know where you're at for money, but ..."

"I have the capacity to make a lot of money," he stated calmly. "And I do have some money set aside."

"I don't know what to say because I don't know what direction you want to go, but it sounds like you definitely have options."

"And that's another point," he murmured. "When you're stuck like I was, you don't think you have any options, and that makes you just look around at the world and feel like it's all negative."

"But you do have options," she repeated.

"Yes, but physically I was feeling as if I was much less than I should have been."

“Ah, those great expectations again.”

He nodded. “They can be deadly.”

“Yes, I imagine they’re even worse when you have family expectations and thoughts that you should be doing something other than what you are.”

“And yet, with my uncle,” Victor shared, “I have the ability to do all kinds of things.”

“Which you had before, I guess,” she reminded him.

“And yet I wasn’t thinking or seeing it,” he murmured. “I was not even really seeing it as my money. I was seeing it as his money.”

“And yet you can do something for yourself with these funds now, right?”

“And he’s very environmentally conscious as well,” Victor murmured. “So, if my idea piques his interests, I could get him on board too.”

“That’s perfect. I mean, as much as I’m not a water person, I do worry a lot about the great big mess of plastic polluting the ocean, strangling some of the sea life.”

Victor nodded. “I flew over many oceans in military planes, but, at one point in time, I was absolutely astonished and horrified that we could have created something like that.”

“So, maybe something inside you wants to change that or to help with it,” she suggested. “All kinds of incredible innovations are happening to improve the situation. Plus remember that you don’t have to physically clean up the ocean, especially not alone. However, if you want to don a scuba suit and dive to the ocean bed, go for it. However, you can also give money instead of your time. For that matter, your time can be spent on land, researching where the worse sea pollution has occurred, and send out others to those spots. Help comes in many ways.”

“Again, more to think about.”

She smiled and looked at her watch. “I need to crash, as my mornings come early. I’ve enjoyed being out here with you. I’ll go stash this food in my fridge and eat this later and bring the empty container back with me tomorrow.”

“You do that,” he said, “and make sure that you don’t get so busy that you don’t eat.”

“Nope, not happening.” And she turned and walked away.

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VICTOR WATCHED DAWN go, feeling a sadness in his heart. One of the things that had made him depressed, that he had yet to even speak to anybody about, was the fact that he was alone. Plus not being so healthy physically seemed to mean he would always be alone. Missing a leg meant he didn’t, couldn’t, compare with the healthy males out there. Depression was a multifaceted downward spiral, and, once headed down that pathway, it seemed as if absolutely nothing would ever be good enough. In fact, not only that what he *did* wouldn’t be good enough, but also that nothing would ever change. He sighed.

“Don’t go there, fool,” he murmured out loud, as he slowly made his way back up to the vet clinic.

There Stan stood, watching him.

Victor smiled. “That was hugely fun,” he shared.

“Looked like you were enjoying yourself,” Stan said, with a nod.

“Yep, reminds me that we can focus on other things in life than the woes,” he noted, with a smile.

“Animals are good for lifting our spirits,” Stan concurred. “Matter of fact, I think these animals are one of the best healers we have here. Animals don’t whine. They don’t complain. They don’t get depressed and don’t feel sorry for themselves,” he shared. “They stop when they’re done, and, once they’re at that point, you can’t bring them back. They’re

just ... done. However, up until then, they'll fight and fight and fight, until ... they have nothing left."

Stan sighed. "Yet they don't whine about it. They don't complain about the journey. They're just on that journey, and they give it their all." And, with that, Stan smiled at Victor and shrugged. "Now my break's over, and I have to get back to my animals." And, with that, he took the empty pail from Victor and turned and walked inside.

Something was so profound about those words. Victor wasn't even sure that a message was in there for him, but it seemed that this was a day of unexpected and inexplicable awareness, as if everything around him was heightened. He wondered whether it was the moment of joy, the animals, or something else. He wasn't sure, but, as he headed back in to the elevator and made his way to his room, he felt that today, of all the days here at Hathaway House, had had the most benefits since he'd arrived.

## Chapter 8

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SEVERAL DAYS LATER, when Dawn popped into Victor's room to say her usual *Good morning* to him, she found his room empty. So she left him two treats on a napkin on his bedside table. She knew he would know who it was from when he found them. Since those treats tended to disappear very, very quickly at mealtimes, she wanted to ensure that he had a chance to get one or two. They were a special little Russian teacake that she absolutely adored, and it didn't come up in her roster very often. So, when it did, she knew that the ten dozen she'd already made would disappear before the day was out. She raced back to the kitchen, smiling to herself.

As she walked in, Ilse took one look and asked, "What's that smile for?"

She quickly explained, and Ilse laughed. "Now where can I can snag one of those?"

"Nope, you can't," Dawn declared. "They're already in his room."

"I could go for a walk and grab them now, so he wouldn't even know they are missing," Ilse joked.

"You can always grab yourself a few extras from the kitchen, before they are put out on the buffet line," Dawn suggested, with a smirk.

"I might just do that. Those teacakes are excellent."

"It's funny how we end up with such favorites."

"I don't know about *funny*, but such good food is here that it's hard to pick out a top favorite, in my opinion anyway. Regardless, none of us have to suffer for anything less than the best."

“And, if I’d realized how much everybody loves those teacakes,” Dawn noted, “maybe I should make them more often.”

“Not likely,” Ilse argued, laughing. “We can handle only so many ingredients per our budget, and, to make those teacakes for everybody exceeds our allocations. Still, everyone enjoys them so much when we do splurge to have them.”

“You’re not kidding,” Dawn agreed. She wasn’t making sweet pies today, but she had bread rising, and she returned her attention to that.

“By the way, how is that whole relationship thing going with you guys?”

“Good,” Dawn shared. “He’s still finding his way.”

“And will for quite a while,” Ilse murmured. “There are a lot of good signposts in this center, but it’s still a journey that they have to embark on their own.”

That statement struck Dawn with awe, and, by the time she’d had a chance to process it and to try to focus on remembering to mention it to Victor, the day was already running away on her. When her phone rang, she looked down to see a heart emoji and a text message. **Thank you.** She laughed out loud. And then put away her phone, as everybody else sent knowing looks in her direction. “He got his treat. That’s all.”

“No, that’s not all,” Ilse disagreed, yet with a smile, as she grabbed her purse and headed toward the back door. “It’s about doing something special because you care. And that makes it fun for everyone.”

“Kind of makes me sound sad,” Dawn murmured, “as if I’m a lonely widow or something.”

“Nope, you’re in the first flush of young love,” Ilse clarified. “And, if it’s good for the two of you, you need to nurture it. And, if it’s not good for you, you need to walk away from it.”

“And how do you know the difference?” Dawn asked, turning to look at her friend in amazement. “I’ve never heard you talk about that before.”

“It is what it is. And you don’t need to do anything except nurture it,” she stated. “The rest will happen automatically, if it’s meant to be.”

“I hope it’s meant to be.” Dawn frowned. “I really like him.”

“Then you don’t have to worry about it,” Ilse declared, with a gentle smile. “I’m meeting Keith,” she added and suddenly left.

One of the other guys came up beside her and noted, “Lots of relationships happening in this place.”

“I think because of the circumstances,” she suggested.

He nodded. “It must be because, wow, every time I turn around, somebody is out there celebrating, and Dennis is cracking champagne for them somewhere along the line.”

“Dennis has got quite a thing for the champagne celebrations, doesn’t he?” she asked, grinning.

“He does, indeed.”

“You know that he pays for it himself. I wonder if we should be pitching in for that.”

“*Ha*,” the guy said. “Speak for yourself. I’ve got four kids. Every penny I’ve got goes toward the kids.”

“I hear you,” Dawn replied, “and you’re doing such a great job being a dad.”

He rolled his eyes at that. “I don’t think they would agree with you.” He laughed.

“Yeah? What did you do last weekend?”

“Built them a treehouse,” he shared, with a big proud smile.

“You think they don’t love that?”



“I hope so,” he said, lifting up his bandaged fingers. “I hit my fingers twice with a hammer.”

She stared at him for a moment and then burst out laughing. “They won’t appreciate that, and they won’t understand that, but they will remember that treehouse for a long time to come,” she declared, with a bright smile.

He nodded. “And so will I.”

“Are you ready to have more?”

“Nope,” he stated. “No more. Four is enough. In fact, four is a handful,” he muttered. “I love it. I really do, every day of it. But, no, that’s enough.”

“And does your wife agree?” she teased.

“I hope so,” he replied. “She was working on the angles, trying to get me to agree to one more, but I think I got her on the straight and narrow over that.”

“I don’t know. I think, for some women, there’s never enough kids,” she shared, with a smile.

“That is a problem because, man, oh man, once they get into that baby-making mode, it’s ... it can be tough to get them to understand that enough is enough. But that’s also why there’s a father and a mother. Not everybody gets to have what they want,” he said. “It’s all about making decisions as a family too.”

“I get it,” Dawn noted.

He looked at her. “You want kids, don’t you?”

“Maybe,” she hedged. “It’s never been an issue before, so it’s not as if I’ve had much in the way of opportunities to decide for myself.”

“Well”—he gave her a bright smile—“for all you know, this is it.” He motioned out to the dining room. “Play your cards right, and you could be in the family way in a year from now.”

She rolled her eyes at that. “Maybe not quite so fast.” She laughed.

He shrugged. “There’s a lot of good to be said about having the kids when you’re young. You have energy to do all kinds of stuff with them, and then hopefully, when you’re older, ... you still have energy and time for just you and your spouse.”

“Is that the plan for you?”

“*Naw*. We’re a huge family already. My brother’s got lots of kids too. So my future will just be family on top of family,” he shared, with a beaming smile. “And you know something? I think that’s just perfect.” And, with that, he headed back to work on the stock in the freezer.

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IT SEEMED THAT Victor never had a chance to see Dawn very much anymore. Either he was busy with physical therapy or mental therapy or she was leaving him little bits of treats but never really got a chance to connect more than that. Finally he sent her a text. *I miss you. How about lunch?*

She sent back an answer. *How about dinner instead?*

He laughed and responded. *Yes, dinner works too.* By the time his day was done, he was exhausted and worn out, but no way he would miss out on the chance to meet up with Dawn. So he headed to the dining room a little bit early. He was leaning against the wall, with his crutches, waiting for her to show up. When she did, she looked tired too. He smiled at her, but he carefully studied her face. “Hard days?”

“Not so much,” she said. “Just busy.”

“Ah.” He smiled. “Understood.” He looked around and noted, “At least we’re early enough.”

“It won’t last,” she shared, “because ribs are on the menu tonight, and that will bring on the stampede.”

“Oh my,” he said, moving forward. “In that case, let’s get there before the crowd does. There won’t be seconds.”

Dennis heard that and laughed. “You could be right. We rarely run out of food with most meals. However, ribs are definitely one entrée that gives us challenges to keep enough supply on the buffet line.”

Victor nodded. “And I can understand why. You guys do them so they just melt off the bone and yet still have crispy parts and lots of flavor.”

“Not everybody likes them this way,” Dennis noted, “but we do them in barbecue sauce for others too.”

“I don’t think there’s a Texan around who doesn’t like ribs,” Victor stated, with a smile.

“I don’t think there’s a person around here who doesn’t like ribs,” Dawn clarified, as she waited for her plate to get filled.

With Dawn carrying both full plates, she and Victor slowly moved out to the deck. Even in the Texas heat, they had to check it out each day. As soon as they stepped outside, she winced. “How about we eat in tonight? Man, that’s hot.” They shuffled to an indoor table near the deck, and Victor sat closer to the sunshine.

“How’s that?” he asked her.

She nodded. “This will do just fine. I forget how humid it can be.”

“Today is bad,” he noted, “almost like a storm’s ready to break.”

“Oh, that would be fine by me,” she said. “After this, I’m going home and just resting for a while.”

“I was thinking about the pool,” he shared. “I haven’t been in for a few days, and I miss it. You should join me.”

She looked over at him and smiled. “I don’t swim. Remember?”

“Yeah, but you could learn, if you wanted to,” he suggested, with a waggle of his eyebrows.

“I’ve thought about it, but nobody here does swimming lessons.”

“I could show you,” Victor offered, “at least a few strokes.”

“Well, I do know how to dog-paddle,” she admitted, laughing.

“There you go,” he said. “You’re already halfway there.”

She laughed at that. “Hardly,” she murmured. But as she considered it, she added, “Maybe not tonight but another day.”

“Why not tonight?” he asked her.

“Because I’ll eat too much of the ribs, and I’ll be a sinker, not a floater.”

He burst out laughing at that. “On the other hand, the exercise will help your digestion, and it won’t give you an upset tummy, if you do overeat.”

“You’re almost convincing me,” she admitted. “I could at least come down and visit on the side of the pool,” she conceded. “Maybe just share a few moments under the evening sky with you.”

“Hey, I’m happy with that too,” he said. “Once we’re done here, I’ll get changed, and I’ll meet you down there.” She hesitated, and he added, “Come on. It’ll be great.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely I’m sure. You do have a bathing suit, don’t you?”

She nodded. “I do. I just don’t use it much, outside of the occasional soak in the hot tub.”

“In that case, it’s a perfect opportunity to join me and to put that bathing suit of yours to good use tonight by learning how to swim.”

“Says you,” she quipped. Yet she stood and nodded. “I’ll meet you down there in a little bit.”

“How long?” he asked, checking his watch.

She considered that. “Maybe half an hour? I will have to leave early, no matter what, to get to bed early.”

He nodded. “I can do that.” He gave her a big grin. “That sounds about perfect.”

Dawn waved goodbye and left.

Dennis came over and asked, “She didn’t stick around tonight?”

“We’ll meet down at the pool in a bit,” Victor shared. “Did you know she doesn’t know how to swim?”

“I didn’t know that,” he replied, surprised. “It’s something that I’ve done for so long, and I instinctively think everybody knows how to swim,” he murmured.

“Me too,” Victor agreed, “but apparently that’s not the case.”

“You’ll teach her?”

“Yeah, I offered to,” he replied. “At least I’ll see if I can get her into a bikini and in the water.” Victor laughed.

Dennis smiled. “She’s quite a looker.”

“She’s also got a heart of gold,” he stated. “And honestly, at this point in time, that’s worth more to me than anything.”

Dennis gently patted him on the shoulder and nodded. “I’ll second that too.” And, with that, Dennis was gone.

## Chapter 9

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**D**AWN DRESSED IN her bathing suit and threw on a cover-up, then headed to the pool. She really wasn't sure about this. She could sit in the hot tub without fear, but anything more than that? It's not so much that she was afraid, but that she just didn't know the mechanics of swimming. And, when not knowing how to do something, she didn't want to feel like an idiot in front of everyone. But when she got there to find almost nobody at the pool, she looked around for Victor. She heard him call out from the pool itself.

"Hey," Victor said, "I'm over here."

She turned to see him already in the water, treading water in the deep end. She immediately shook her head. "I won't do that," she declared.

He laughed. "You may be surprised at what you can really do," he suggested.

She shook her head. "What I don't want to do is become so scared that I don't want to ever go back into the water."

"Oh my, I wouldn't want that either. The water should be something to be enjoyed," Victor told her, "but you have to be safe about it."

She hesitated but walked toward him, taking off her cover-up and putting it off to the side. Although she could feel the masculine appreciation in his gaze, she was glad to not see the almost lasciviousness that she'd noted in other men's gazes at various times in her life. She slipped into the water at the shallow end. "It is nice here," she murmured. "It really is."

"More kudos to Dani for having put this all together," Victor said, with a smile.

Dawn nodded. "Sometimes I think about how much she's accomplished, and it just amazes me."

“Absolutely,” he agreed. “And it just goes to show you how much we can do when we put our minds to it.”

“And I’m pretty sure she would say that she didn’t do anything, that she had help or whatever.”

He chuckled. “That makes it all sound even better. To know that she didn’t set out to anything this grand, yet it fell naturally into place, is huge.” Dawn had to agree with him. He added, “Now, show me what you can do.”

She shrugged and dog-paddled her way from the shallow end to where it started to get deeper, and then she stopped, standing on her feet now, with her head above water. “That is what I can do,” she stated, with an eye roll.

“Hey, that’s not bad,” he said. “All you’re really missing is technique.”

“Is that all?” she quipped, with a laugh.

“That’s everything. I guess there was no money for swimming lessons for you growing up, was there?”

“Nope, not in my world,” she admitted. “I gather you lived in the water.”

“I was always a water baby.” He laughed. “But that’s all good, and we’ll get this sorted.”

“I don’t know about *sorted*,” she pointed out, with a snort, “but it would be nice to feel safe around the water.”

“Exactly. Are you afraid of it?”

“Only in that it’s something that I’m not really comfortable around,” she noted. “So, in that sense, then I guess I’m afraid of it.”

“But not badly from the looks of it.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never hesitated to go into the water, but I probably should have.”

“Ah.” Victor nodded. “So really it’s just all about learning some techniques. In that case let’s get started.”

And she was surprised when he set her off on dog-paddling along the edge to the end and back again.

“It’s not exactly the easiest way to travel,” she murmured, when she did one full lap. “Matter of fact, it’s exhausting.”

“Sure, it can be,” he admitted. “And that’s part of the reason why the fear sets in is because you get tired so fast,” he pointed out, “but you have to get tired enough that you want to try something different.”

She stared at him. “Meaning?”

“Meaning, we’ll try some strokes. Start with this.” He picked up a kickboard from beside the pool and pushed it toward her on the water. “Put this under your arms and rest on it, and now I just want you to kick your way there and back.”

She did that easily. “That’s fine,” she told him, “but it’ll hardly keep me alive.”

“You would be surprised,” he countered. “These things can hold a lot of weight. You just have to not fall off.”

“Right,” she quipped, with another eye roll. “In other words, it won’t keep me alive for long.”

He smiled at that. “Now we’ll work on a different stroke.” And, with that, he showed her how to use her legs in a different way. “This is the breaststroke,” he explained. “You’ll use the same kickboard, and you’ll just use that kick all the way across this time.”

It went on for an hour. And finally she sagged onto the steps at the shallow end and said, “That was fun, but I’m really tired now.”

“Yeah, that’s time to stop then,” he noted. “However, you did really well.”

She looked at him. “I guess so.” She shrugged. “I wouldn’t say I did really well though.”

“I don’t think we ever see ourselves the way other people do anyway,” he shared. “So what you might not see as *really*



*well, I see as excellent.*”

She chuckled. “Absolutely I don’t see my efforts that way,” she declared. “However, as long as you think I’m showing progress, then I’m happy.”

“You’re showing a lot of progress,” he stated, with a smile. “Don’t ever doubt that. It’s just a matter of pulling the parts and pieces together and practicing.” He added, “Before long, you’ll be dancing around in here like a fish.”

She laughed. “I wouldn’t object to that,” she replied. “It would be nice to have that level of confidence.”

He just smiled and nodded. “We’ll get you there.”

\*

OVER THE NEXT few weeks, Dawn had been surprised that she really enjoyed Victor prodding her out to the pool several times.

When she made laps using the breaststroke and then finally returned, using the front crawl, she mentioned to him at the end of one session, “Don’t you ever get tired of it?”

“Tired of what?” he asked, looking at her.

“Just dealing with people like me,” she murmured.

“Never. I don’t *deal* with people *like you*. I’m getting to spend time with you,” he clarified. “How could that ever get old?”

She burst out laughing. “You do say the sweetest things.”

“And not necessarily because I’m trying to be sweet,” he pointed out. “It’s the truth. I really do like spending a lot of time with you.”

Good, that feeling is mutual.

\*

AND THAT SET the tone for several weeks, as Dawn and Victor worked their way through her swimming lessons and the daily grind of his rehab therapy. When he finally crashed down

beside her at dinnertime, but, without any of the normal finesse, she looked at him.

He nodded. “Yeah, that tells you how I feel.”

She winced. “Tough day?” she asked.

“The worst,” he replied. “One of those days where you know you’ve gone completely backward, and you don’t know how to get back into the groove again,” he shared. “Remember when you asked me if I ever got tired of dealing with, you know, *people like you*, way back when on the first of your swimming lessons?” he asked. “Today was the day that I asked Shane that very question.”

She burst out laughing. “And I can’t imagine he said anything to you other than what you told me.”

“No, he said something a little different, but the gist was the same. And really, I don’t have any reason to complain. It just seems like everything today hurts. Everything today is sore, and everything today is just too much.”

She nodded in commiseration. “I’m sorry. Yet you’re dealing with all of it so very well. So I’m sure there has to be a point in time where it just feels like it’s all too much.”

“Yeah, I hit that today. It seems I’ve hit a lot more of those just recently too.”

“Time to back up and reevaluate?” she asked.

“No backing up to do.” He shrugged. “This is just what it is.”

She frowned, a little worried about his attitude. Yet he seemed to perk up over dinnertime.

And then, when it was finally bedtime, he looked at her and sighed. “I’ll crash early. Not that I don’t want to spend more time in your company,” he explained. “I’m just really tired.”

“Go,” she said. “I can see that you’re exhausted.”

He nodded at that. "I absolutely am." And he headed off to his room.

She frowned, wondering if it was possible that Shane was working him too hard.

Almost as if hearing her thoughts, Shane stopped by to say hey, and she asked him, "Was Victor pushing it today? He's really tired now."

Shane nodded. "We changed up his program. It was time."

"I think he's more depressed now than I've seen him in quite a while."

"Depressed?" he asked her. "Yet he did really well today."

"I don't think he believes it. I think the new program, or his lack of progress, or maybe the new program showing him that it's not progress right now is depressing him," she suggested. "I don't really know."

"It's possible," Shane noted, thinking about it, staring down in the direction that Victor had gone. "When you have a new program like that, obviously it's harder, and it's difficult to see that progress you're previously accustomed to. However, he knows it's a new program and to not expect the same level of excellence."

"Maybe he knows that," she admitted, "but I'm not sure he *knows* that."

"Right. And there is definitely a difference," Shane murmured. "You want me to talk to him?"

"I guess I would just like to confirm that he's okay," she clarified. "He was really down."

Shane nodded. "I'll check him out." And, with that, he disappeared.

She stared after him, wondering if she'd done the right thing. It would not be good if Victor thought she was interfering. And it's not that she was trying to interfere, but she didn't want to see him suffer, particularly when he'd seemed

so much better recently. However, tonight he'd definitely been the *old* Victor, the more depressed and down and unhappy Victor that she'd seen before. She'd really come to enjoy the happier Victor she got to see a lot of now. Of course it wouldn't always be that way.

Which was too bad because that Victor was lovely. And, while she wouldn't say this one wasn't, he was more worrisome. She settled on that term, even though it was not necessarily fair either. But, jeez, all of this rehab stuff could be hard to deal with, even without adding in the emotional or the psychological barriers to healing as well. It was hard on all of them, the patients and the caregivers here. And Victor was such a special man that she hated to see him suffer at all. Rather than worry about it, she had to place her trust in Shane.

So she headed back to her place for the night.

\*

VICTOR SAT IN his room on the bed, feeling an exhaustion he hadn't in a very long time. When a knock came on his open door, he looked up to see Shane standing there, frowning at him. "I'm fine," Victor said.

"But are you?" Shane asked, studying him carefully.

"Yeah," he repeated. "I just, ... the new program knocked me for a loop."

"It's meant to," Shane stated, "but we're not supposed to send you for a loop so far that you get depressed."

"I'm not depressed," he stated, with a bright smile. And then he realized that that sounded fake too. He added, "I just didn't realize how exhausting having the program change would be."

Shane nodded. "The whole point is to keep things mixed up."

"I get that, especially now," Victor agreed. "However, before experiencing it firsthand, it was a bit of a surprise."

Shane stared at him, his gaze fairly intense.

“I really am fine,” Victor stated. “I know everybody watches and worries,” he added, “but honestly, I’m okay.”

“I would hope so,” Shane replied. “A lot of people here care about you.”

Victor smiled at that. “That’s nice because I’ve come to care for a lot of people here too.”

“Good,” Shane replied. “In that case I’ll leave you. However, if you get too tired to sleep in the night or you get cramps, make sure you tell me.”

“I will,” Victor stated, “but I would hope that tonight will be okay. I would think this level of exhaustion would do me in easily.”

“I can’t guarantee that,” Shane admitted. “No way I can. You worked hard today,” he declared, “and I was really happy to see that. However, if it ends up costing you in the long run, setting you back, then that’s not good. We don’t want that. At the same time,” he added, “I think you’ve done a fine job here.”

Victor laughed. “I feel like I haven’t gotten anywhere,” he shared. “So I get that you’re trying to be positive and encouraging, but it just feels as if everything’s wrong today.”

“Yet it’s not,” Shane argued. “It absolutely isn’t. You have done a phenomenal job. I just need you to stay upbeat for a little bit longer.”

Victor gave a weak smile at that. “I’m trying.”

“Good.” Shane focused on him and added, “Try a little harder.”

And, with that, Victor burst out laughing and waved Shane away.

Victor wasn’t sure why Shane had come down to check on him, but Victor was glad that he had. It helped to just reinforce that he wasn’t alone in this journey of his. And that there really was some semblance of normalcy out there. Even

though that could be a little on the scary side, Victor would make it through.

And he wanted to make it through; he really did. He wanted everything here that they had to offer. And yet it was pretty hard to realize just how far he still had to go. Just a shift in his rehab system, just a change of his workout program was enough to knock him for a loop like this. He shook his head. Finally he talked himself into getting a shower, hoping the warm water would help his aching muscles, plus help him fall asleep.

Yet he was up an hour later, wide awake, worrying over his new rehab expectations.

When his brother called soon afterward, even his brother sensed something was wrong with Victor on the phone. When Victor explained what it was, his brother replied, “You used to be like that, even when we went to the gym. Remember? You would be at the peak of your routines, and then we would force you to change up the exercises or the weights or the reps or whatever because, as far as you were concerned, you were a success as you were. So, in your thinking, why change? Then the minute you weren’t a success, you found it hard to keep functioning.”

“God, it makes me sound like I’m a two-year-old,” Victor murmured, staring down at the phone. “Was I really that bad?”

“You absolutely were that bad,” his brother declared, laughing at him. “So buckle up. Remember. This is just the normal shifts of the normal changes that happen when pushing your body to do better. And you’ll get through this just fine.”

And, with that, feeling better and buoyed by his brother’s encouragement, Victor got off the phone and into bed. If nothing else, he figured that, with everybody watching out for him, he would be just fine. And, with that, and a smile on his face, he crashed for the night.

## Chapter 10

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**D**AWN LOOKED FOR Victor the next day but couldn't find him. As soon as she realized that two kitchen staff were no-shows, she buckled in and stayed the course, putting in a much longer day than she normally would. Yet it was needed, so that's just the way life was today. By the time her day finally ended, she brushed her hair off her face and sighed loudly. She was so very tired.

Ilse looked over at her and smiled. "Hey, I really appreciate you picking up the pace today."

"Not a problem," Dawn replied. "Sometimes it happens."

"Sometimes it does. Sometimes it happens a little too often," the head chef stated, shaking her head. "Just when you think you have all the staffing problems dealt with, some of your employees don't show up."

"This was one of the new guys too, wasn't it?" Dawn asked, looking around.

"Absolutely it was. Again we can only do what we can do."

Dawn nodded at that. "I get it, and hopefully they will both be back tomorrow."

Ilse nodded. "If I want them back."

"And that's always the problem, isn't it?" Dawn noted.

"We do the best we can when vetting new employees, but it's no guarantee that the staff we hire are here with the same intentions that we have. Too often they're not even close," Ilse muttered. "But, hey, staffing problems are an ongoing issue, so whatever." And, with that, Ilse waved Dawn off. "Go. Go get some rest."

“Or”—Dawn checked the wall clock—“maybe get dinner first.”

“Right. I can’t believe it’s already dinnertime.” Ilse sighed.

“And that’s part of the problem too,” Dawn murmured. “When you work a day, a long day like we have, it just seems like the whole day’s gone, and we didn’t have a chance to enjoy it. Reminds me of the psychiatrist’s order to Victor to go find joy in his life.”

Ilse nodded. “I think everybody who has to work an extra-long day should be ordered to go out and find some joy in their world.”

“Is that what you want me to do?” Dawn teased. “And what about you?”

Ilse laughed. “I got this.”

“Glad to hear that,” Dawn replied, “but you need a break too.”

“I’m fine,” Ilse stated, with a smile. “And obviously Victor’s been on your mind all day, and that’s a good thing too.”

“Is it?” Dawn asked. “Sometimes I think we’re getting too close.”

“Not where love is concerned,” Ilse stated. “There is no such thing.” And again she waved Dawn off. “Go. Go find him, go for dinner, do something.” And added, “Do something that brings you joy.”

Laughing, a tired and worn-out Dawn headed out of the kitchen and into the dining area.

Immediately Dennis shook his head and pointed down the hallway. “He’s not here yet,” he said. “Go drag him down to get some dinner.”

Dawn laughed. “That’s an order I can follow through with.” At least she hoped so.



As she headed toward Victor's room, even with the door closed, she heard his voice on the phone. It sounded like Victor was talking to his brother. She didn't want to listen in and so knocked on the door with a sharp rap. She heard Victor say, "Hey, somebody's here. I have to go."

And, with that, Victor hung up and called out, "Come on in."

She stepped inside and smiled at him. "Hey, I hope I'm not disturbing you. I heard you on the phone and wasn't sure if I should wait until you were done."

He shrugged. "Just my brother." He gave her a smile. "Come on in."

She smiled back. "Checking in to see what you're up to."

"I was thinking about heading down for dinner about an hour ago," he shared. "Then my brother called, so that got delayed."

"So then maybe you're ready now?"

"That would be a great idea." He looked down at his clothes. "Do I need to change?"

"What for?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I'm just feeling a little bit grubby."

"If you want to, go for it," she suggested. "I know what it feels like to be grubby."

"Have you just come off work?" he asked, staring at her as if suddenly realizing.

She looked down at herself and winced. "Maybe I should change too. I did just come off work. We were short-staffed by two today."

"Oh, no."

She nodded. "Yeah, I'm a little tired and worn out myself."

"Why don't you go get changed, have a shower," he said. "We still have time, and I'll get changed myself."

She hesitated and then shook her head. “I’ll do it afterward. I’ve really only got just enough energy for one of those, and it will be food first and then an early night for me.”

“Got it.” He nodded. “Let’s go then.” And, with that, he crutched his way toward her, and they slowly headed to the dining area. “Sorry to hear about your tough day,” he added.

“It happens,” she murmured. “It is what it is.”

He tilted his head. “Sometimes it would be nice if life weren’t quite so complicated.”

“Wouldn’t it though?” she said, with a laugh. “And still, it is what it is.”

He smiled. “You’re always such a good sport about it.”

“That’s the thing about being part of this team,” she replied. “It’s a team effort, and it takes a team to make it work and to pull it off,” she explained. “So, when you get some people not showing up, it’s irritating and aggravating, but you really don’t have time to argue about it. So, you just pitch in and get the job done.”

“And I really appreciate that,” he stated, “because you’re right. No point in complaining about it. The job has to be done, so get at it.”

She smiled and nodded. “And sometimes *getting at it* takes a whole lot more out of you.” At that, a yawn broke through her words.

He looked at her. “You’re really zonked, aren’t you?”

“I am,” she declared. However, as they made their way to the buffet line, she smiled. “Yet good food will perk me up.”

“And you know good food is here,” Victor noted, with a smirk.

“That’s one of the advantages of working here,” she said. “I always get to know what’s on tap, before I ever get in line.”

“Anything I should know about first?” he asked.

“You’ll find out soon enough,” she teased in a cheeky voice.

He chuckled. “I hear you there.”

As she stepped up to the buffet, Dennis eyed her and shook his head. “At least you came for food,” he noted. “I wasn’t sure you would.”

“Pretty tired,” she admitted, “but I do need food.”

“Let’s get you something to eat then.” He pointed out everything in front of them. “You do know what’s here to choose from, so what do you want?” He quickly served her the food that she requested and then dished up another plate for Victor. Dennis waved them off. “The crowd’s not too bad yet, but the dining room will fill up fast.”

She smiled and headed out to the deck and got hit by that Texas heatwave. She shuddered. “Nope, it will have to be inside for me.”

“I’m okay with that too.” Victor shrugged. “There are nice days to be out there, and then there are days with a heat advisory.”

She chuckled. “Yep, in Texas, we can expect both around this place. I try to get outside and enjoy Mother Nature, but with my schedule? It doesn’t work out so well. I’m up before dawn, the coolest part of the day, and then working until midafternoon, getting off right in the heat of the day. Although getting in the pool with you and learning to swim is one way to cool off some and to relax, to regroup.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. They settled at a table set close to the fresh air coming from the open doorway to the deck, but yet they were somewhat protected from the heat. Victor added, “At least here we get the fresh air, and we also get the air-conditioning.”

She nodded. “And I could use both today.” She settled down to tuck into her food. Tired as she was, it’s about all she could do.

He studied her and said, “After dinner, I may go just sit in the hot tub afterward or in the pool and relax. It’s too early for me to go to sleep. However, you seem ready to drop. And I’m not sure if the digestion of this meal will perk you up or will make you nod off before you even leave the table.”

She snorted. “Have you seen that viral cat photo—well, it’s a kitten—who fell asleep in its food? That’s where I’m headed right now.”

“I understand. Let’s eat, enjoy, and then we’ll see.” And that’s what they did.

By the time they were done eating, she smiled at him. “You know what? I feel much better.”

He nodded. “Food can do that.”

“It sure can,” she murmured. She rotated her neck gently, then raised both shoulders a couple times. “Wow. I learned that trick to raise your shoulders to release the tension there, which sounds counterintuitive, but it works. Plus, just now, raising my shoulders just showed me that they were already bunched up around my neck.” She shook her head, giving a big sigh. “You don’t even realize all the muscles you have tensed up like that all day long as you work,” she murmured. “Today was a really long day, and I must have been tensed up throughout it all—more than I expected.”

“As long as you’re okay though,” Victor noted in worry.

She smiled up at him, appreciating the fact that he cared, and nodded. “I’m fine. I shouldn’t even be complaining. What I go through is nothing compared to what you deal with every day in your rehab with Shane.”

Victor shrugged. “The difference is, I’m used to it.”

She winced at that. “Right? And that makes me feel even worse.” When he looked horrified, she laughed. “Hey, I do understand that you get what I’m talking about. Sometimes I have a lot of good things to say about where I work, and sometimes, like today, it’s not quite so easy.”

“As long as it all works out in the end,” he said gently. “Now that we’ve finished eating, I highly suggest we go get cool in the pool.”

“It is in the shade, isn’t it?”

“It is, indeed, and for a good reason.”

She smiled. “Okay, but you know I might not make it back here. I may get home and do nothing more than just crash in bed.”

“And crashing is allowed—just don’t crash until you get inside your apartment.”

She smiled at him. “You’re such a nice man.” He stared at her in horror, and her gaze widened. “What did I say wrong?”

“I don’t know too many men who want to be called *nice*.”

She frowned. “They should,” she murmured, “because being nice is a good thing.”

“But still is often taken the wrong way,” he added, with a half smile. “However, when you tell me that, I won’t take it the wrong way. I promise.”

“I think you already did.” She was laughing now.

“Maybe, but I’m working on retracting that real fast.” Now they both were laughing, as they separated off, so that she could go get changed.

\*

VICTOR WATCHED AS Dawn left, a little worried about her being so exhausted.

Obviously that concerned expression was still on his face because Dani, who came to grab a table outside and not quite in the sun herself, focused on him and asked, “Problems?”

He shrugged. “No, not at all. She’s just really tired today.” Dani didn’t even ask who *she* was, which was good because, of course, everybody already knew who *she* was in Victor’s world. At least he assumed they did.

Dani nodded. "It was a long day for everybody today. We were short-staffed on many corners."

"I'm sorry," he said. "That makes it tough, doesn't it?"

"It really does," she admitted, still with a smile. "Yet not everybody appreciates just how much work goes into keeping a place like this running. Therefore, when staff doesn't show up ... " She shrugged. "It all falls to the rest of us to fill in the missing holes."

"And that can be pretty tough too," he agreed, with a nod.

"But still, that's good," she explained. "When we get a tough day, then it helps us to remember the easy days. So the next time we're getting easy days, we're thankful it's not a tough day."

He burst out laughing. "I like the sound of that. And now I will go get changed for the pool and relax."

"Are you meeting her there?" Dani asked curiously.

He smiled, nodded. "I hope to but probably shouldn't."

She looked at him for a long moment. "And why do you think you shouldn't?"

He shrugged. "I hate to put too much hope into it. ... I never really expected to find anybody again after my accident. So to find her and to be as close with her as I am? It's a huge gift."

"Don't forget," Dani noted, "that it's a gift both ways." And, with that, Dani settled down to eat.

Victor stared at her, and, yeah, was maybe in a little bit of shock. He hadn't really considered it that way, and yet maybe he should have. If it was a gift one way, then it should be a gift the other way. Emboldened, he headed back to his room to change for the pool. Now he was really looking forward to tonight.

## Chapter 11

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**W**HEN DAWN GOT back to her apartment, she sat down and looked around. Now she really didn't want to go to the pool. She wanted to see Victor but didn't really want to get changed. Matter of fact, she was just too tired to do anything. It had been a long time since she had felt this level of fatigue. Still, something about it made her realize that, if she could just lie down and close her eyes for a few minutes, chances were, she would feel that much better.

She used to power nap a lot when she was younger but hadn't really had much need to do it lately. She sent Victor a quick text, notifying him that she would be a few minutes late. Then she curled up under her blanket and just closed her eyes, instantly feeling some of the fatigue of the day slide right off her.

Trouble was, when she awoke, she knew instantly that not only was it late but it was like seriously late, as in she'd quite likely slept for hours. She bolted to her feet and checked her cell phone. She hadn't put it on the charger, so it was out of battery too. She quickly plugged it in to recharge it, then walked into her little kitchenette and checked the wall clock there. Sure enough it was already ten o'clock. She stared in shock.

"Good Lord," she murmured. "How did that happen?" It was one thing to be a little late to meet Victor at the pool; it was another thing entirely to have her whole evening completely wiped out. She winced. So much for that plan. She reached up with a shaking hand, noting that she wasn't feeling all that great either. Maybe the best thing for her was to go back to bed.

She quickly picked up her phone, checked to see if she had recharged it enough, and sent him a message, explaining how

she'd just woken up, and she was sorry, but no way she could meet him tonight. She was exhausted. When he sent back a message, telling her to just rest, she smiled and sent him a happy face emoji.

With a sigh, she had a quick shower and then curled up in bed, trying not to fall asleep right away—afraid that she'd wake up early in the morning and not sleep again, only to find herself drifting off anyway, before she even had any chance to argue about it. When she woke the next morning, it was 6:00 a.m. She stared at the clock in shock.

“Okay, so I slept really hard and long last night, *both times*,” she muttered. Even though today was not one of her scheduled days to work in the kitchen, Dawn still needed to get up and to get to work. As far as she knew, they would be short-handed again today. Although nobody had called her in, she still needed to go because she just knew that they would be short-staffed.

It was just one of the things about this place. When you knew that the others would suffer if you didn't show up to help, then you picked up the pace, and you went in, and you did something about it. And she knew Ilse would be there for sure, and that would just make it that much harder on Ilse too. Ilse hadn't had a day off in what seemed like probably weeks. Dawn quickly dressed and headed to the kitchen. As she walked in, Ilse's face broke out with relief.

“Oh my, I was just wondering if I could ask you to work today.” She noted cautiously, “You already pitched in a lot yesterday.”

“It's fine,” Dawn replied. “I went home last night and crashed, fell asleep, and didn't even meet Victor as planned.” She shook her head. “After I woke up and explained to him that I wasn't coming at all, I went back to bed and crashed again, slept right through to six. Thankfully Victor prodded me to have dinner or I would have missed it last night.”

At that, she heard a gasp behind her. She looked over to see Dennis staring at her in mock horror. She added.



“Sometimes, when you’re just that tired, not even food is as important to you as sleeping.”

“I get it,” Dennis replied. “Just don’t miss out on too many meals.” With a *tsk-tsk*, he turned and walked out into the dining room.

Dawn quickly buckled in to help Ilse. “You need more staff,” she stated.

“We’ve got two people interviewing today,” she shared, “but we really need more than that.”

“I don’t know how you survive working nonstop for weeks. I mean, we need more people on the roster,” Dawn said. “Take my job, for instance. If I ever go down or can’t come in and help out, you’re completely screwed.”

“Believe me. It’s one of the things Dani and I’ve been talking about, trying to fill out the upper-level kitchen roster. It’s been tough lately. Some days it seems everything’s fine, and then we hit a dry patch, where, all of a sudden, it’s all about staffing issues.”

“I get it,” Dawn agreed. “Lately it seems like it’s *all* staffing issues.”

“Right? I don’t quite understand how the attendance runs in sequences like that,” Ilse stated, “but it sure seems to.”

Dawn nodded, stepped in to run the toast and the pancakes, while Ilse flipped bacon and scrambled eggs. Even Dennis was helping in the kitchen, moving smoothly behind them, picking up the slack.

“It’s a good thing we all know what we’re doing at this point,” Ilse shared, with a laugh. “If I had to train somebody right now, it would be a nightmare.”

“They wouldn’t be a help to us unless they could just step up and do what they needed to do,” Dennis stated. “Trouble is, ours is a special place, and not just anybody can do this job.”

“And not only do we need somebody who can just step in to fill this spot,” Ilse added, “we need more than *one*

somebody.”

Both of them agreed.

“I’ll talk to Dani again today,” Ilse promised. “First, let’s get breakfast out.”

Even with Dawn’s help, they would still be a little late, so Dennis started bringing out as much of the cold stuff as possible.

By the time they had hot food moving to the dining room buffet line, Dawn turned and looked around and asked, “What about lunch? What should I prep?”

“I’ve already started it,” Ilse stated. “We’ve got roasts in the oven. I’ve got potatoes ready to bake.” And she started listing off all the side foods.

Dawn nodded. “I can do some desserts,” she muttered, as she thought about what she could produce quickly.

“If you could, that’d be great. Of course, as you now know, there isn’t any dessert because that person didn’t show up today.”

“Right.” Dawn gave an eye roll. “That’s fine. I’ve got that at least.”

Just then the door opened, letting in two other cooks.

“Thank heavens for that,” Ilse said, with a smile.

They looked at her and asked, “We’re short again?”

“Yeah, we are, unfortunately.”

“We’re here, and we can help pick up some of the slack.”

And, with that, things started to move at a faster pace. Dawn was delighted to see the extra help because there was only so much one person could do. Even though Ilse and Dawn were really good at making do, still, it just got to be too much.

As Ilse filled in the others on what they were doing today, they quickly stepped up to their stations. Everybody knew

what their job was and got to work.

Dawn sagged back and looked over at Ilse. “Thank heavens they’re here.”

She nodded. “Believe me. I do know.”

And, with that, Dawn had to be satisfied because no point in rehashing it anymore. Everybody knew what had to be done, and new staffing was just part of the problem. As Dawn worked away, she started baking large cookies in one of the commercial ovens designated for desserts. As soon as she had them baking, she whipped up a couple coffee cakes. She made three different variations and got them going into the ovens too. Then she started making soft milk buns. After she had six dozen of them tossed into an oven, she turned and looked at Ilse. “Okay, that’s cookies, bread rolls, and coffee cakes. What else do you want?”

At that, Ilse stopped and smiled at her. “That’s a huge help.”

“I’ve also got a bunch of stuff in the freezer,” Dawn shared, “in case I’m not here one day.”

“I didn’t know about that,” Ilse admitted, with a laugh. “And it’s just as well. When you think about it, we’ll need them another time too.”

With a groan, Dawn nodded. “That is for sure. We keep hoping that we’ll get through these crunches and get some of this staffing issue resolved, but then another problem comes up. And here we go around the bend again.”

Ilse just smiled and kept on working.

One of the things that Dawn could do was get something going for later this afternoon. The cookies were a good idea but maybe, just maybe, she should make some pies too. With that thought in mind, she reached for the ingredients. It never even occurred to her to take a break and to go see Victor, mostly because she didn’t have a chance to even breathe. But she hoped he understood. If she had been tired last night, it was hard to imagine what she would be like tonight. But still,

she got some deep sleep last night, and that was always a restorative value that was hard to equate. Maybe at lunchtime she would get a chance to check on Victor. But by the time she lifted her head again, it was already two o'clock, and she'd put in a full day, and she still hadn't eaten yet. Her stomach grumbled at her just then.

Ilse ordered her, "Go, take a break, get some food, visit with Victor, something."

Dawn checked the ovens and nodded. "I can just about do that. Give me five to get the rest of the stuff out." And as soon as everything was cooling on racks, she tossed off her apron and said, "I'm gone for five."

"Take the rest of the day," Ilse noted. "You weren't even on the schedule today."

"Hey, it's not so bad today," Dawn shared. "I got some good sleep last night." With a smile on her face, she headed out.

Dennis intercepted her and handed her a huge sandwich. "Here. Take this with you."

"Is it for me or for Victor?" she joked, as she looked at it in admiration.

"It's for you," Dennis declared. "No point in feeding him if you're not there to take care of him afterward."

"Hey, it's not that bad," Dawn argued.

"Yes, it is," Dennis said. "Now eat."

"I'll take it with me and visit him, if he's not in a session." Then she frowned. "But he should be, shouldn't he?"

"You can always walk past and see. He might be on a break. We don't know. If he's not there, come on back and sit down here."

"Yeah, but you've got the dining room to clean before dinner. I'll be in the way here."

“Don’t worry about it. First off let’s just make sure that you get food.”

She smiled, kissed him gently on the cheek, and muttered, “You’re such a nice man.”

“*Nice,*” he repeated, with a roll of his eyes. “Now there you go, insulting me.”

With that, she left, laughing. She wandered to Victor’s room to see if he was there but saw no sign of him. She left a fresh cookie on his side table and headed back to the dining room, then down the stairs beside the pool. She sat here in the sun, realizing just how drained she was. She had a bottle of fresh water and slowly worked her way through the sandwich. Then she saw Victor arrive with Shane. She sat off to the side, just out of sight, and watched as Victor was put through the paces.

By the time he was done, Shane left Victor, who just sat there, catching his breath.

She called out, “Hey, stranger. That’s quite a workout.”

He looked over at her and then slowly made his way toward her. “Hey, stranger yourself,” he replied. “How’re you doing?”

“Pretty tired. The situation in the kitchen’s pretty intense.”

“Again today?”

She nodded. “Again today. I’ve been working since I got up.” And she lifted the last little bit of her sandwich and added, “First meal of the day.” He frowned. She smiled at him. “It’s okay. Believe me. Dennis is making sure I eat.”

“Good, but it doesn’t sound like you’re eating enough.”

“I’ll make up for it at dinnertime.” She laughed. “Some days are just like that. You try hard not to have these days happen, but, when they do, it’s just life,” she muttered. “Believe me. None of us want a continuation of days with all these problems, but, hey, I’m done now for the day.”

“Good for you. I am too.” He checked his watch. “It is three o’clock, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “It is.”

“Oh, good. I will make my way to the hot tub and rest for a bit. Then I’ll go back to my room and have a shower.”

“I wanted to apologize for last night.”

“No need,” he said. “With the hours and double duty you put in yesterday, it’s totally understandable.”

She felt bad. “Understandable, but still regrettable. I really did just crash. I was so tired. After I texted you to let you know that I’d fallen asleep accidentally, I literally just went back to bed.”

“You needed it,” he stated seriously. “What we don’t want is for you to have an accident as well.”

“No, I really don’t want that. We all know not to work when utterly tired, as that’s when the bad accidents do happen. I was refreshed this morning because I got some much-needed sleep last night. Still, some days you just wonder if any of it’s doable.”

“You worry me sometimes,” Victor shared. “It seems to me you guys just work so much.”

“Most of the time it’s fine,” she explained. “Most of the time there’s a break somewhere in all the madness of not enough kitchen help. However, right now? It’s just been pretty ugly.”

“Hopefully Dani can get some more staff in for you.”

“That’s the hope. Even if Dani finds someone to hire, they have to give notice at their job, so it’s not as if they can start right away, unless they are unemployed or new to the area or something. Not to worry,” she added. “I won’t overdo it.” He looked at her and frowned, and she realized what he was thinking. “Okay,” she admitted, “so we already overdid it, but we’re trying to pull it back.”

He smiled at that. “And that would be good. I would hate to see anything happen to you.”

“I’m careful, but doesn’t everyone say that?” she asked. “And we all can tell stories of someone getting a little bit too tired, and ... you know it happens.”

“Accidents do happen for no apparent reason at all,” Victor admitted. “However, sleepy people also cause accidents to happen. And that I would not like to see.”

She was touched by his concern and nodded. “If you’re relaxing in the hot tub for a bit, maybe I could go get changed and come back and join you?”

“Absolutely,” he said. “Please feel free. I’ll just sit here and chill a bit.”

“Okay, give me a few minutes.” Dawn quickly got up, leaving her plate where it was, and headed home. She got changed, put on a wrap, and headed back.

Victor sat beside the hot tub, looking like he wanted to go in.

“Are you ready for the hot tub?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Not just yet. We’ll let you get some laps in first.”

“I don’t even know if I have energy for that,” she admitted, with a smile. “If you want to go into the hot tub, please go. Your healing comes first.”

“I don’t know about that either,” he replied.

She smiled. “I do. The last thing I want is to interfere or to wear you out or to get you in trouble.”

“How would you get me in trouble?” He frowned at her.

“Only if it looks as if I’m impacting your ability to heal,” she explained. “And, no, nobody said anything to me.”

“That’s good. That would be pretty tough if they did say anything.”

“Take a look at it from their perspective,” she said, with a smile. “Everything they do here is to ensure that you’re getting exactly what you need, when you need it. So, if they think that I’m negatively affecting your ability to heal, then you can expect them to say something.”

“I still wouldn’t like it if they did, though. That should be something we decide.”

She smiled. “Remember. This is all about what you need.”

“But what about what you need?” he asked, looking at her intently.

She shrugged. “You know it’s been pretty crazy in the kitchen the last couple days, and I admit that it hasn’t been all that easy, but I am getting what I need. We do look after each other in the kitchen.”

He nodded slowly. “I really just want to sit in the hot tub and relax for a while.”

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” she declared, with a smile. And she sat down in the hot tub herself.

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“YOU COULD STILL do some laps,” Victor suggested instantly. “Whether I sit here or I sit over there won’t make a difference,”

“But it makes a difference to me, and I’m just as happy to sit here right now. I don’t want to overdo it myself, and, as you know, I’m already overdoing it.” Dawn laughed, as she said it.

He nodded. “And it’s always hard to know at what point in time to call it quits before you just pass out, isn’t it?”

“Is there even any way to know that beforehand?” she asked curiously. “It seems to me that so much is going on that taking that moment of self-evaluation is something that we almost must force ourselves to do.”

“That’s not something I think I’ve *ever* done,” he murmured. “So that’s an interesting idea in itself.”



“I don’t know if you’ve ever had to do it, since you were so happy with the navy,” she suggested. “Most of us have evaluated life at some point in time, usually in times of craziness, as in the kitchen recently, where we’re wondering if we were on the right path or not.”

“Ah, that evaluation I have definitely done since coming here,” he admitted, with a smile. “It’s not always an easy evaluation either. Sometimes we don’t really see who and what we are, not until other people point it out.”

“But sometimes,” she noted, “other people point out who and what we are, but they’re not always correct. When you think about it, nobody really knows you quite like you know yourself.”

“I never thought of it that way,” he said. “During my military career, I spent so much time having everybody else basically tell me what to do that you almost resent it after a while. Consequently, sometimes I do wonder if we get our backs up just because we’re being told what to do.”

“Regardless of what the message is, you mean?”

He nodded. “Yeah, sometimes I have to wonder.”

“And wondering isn’t a bad thing. Wondering, I think, is just human nature. *Are we doing the right thing? Are we doing the wrong thing? Is this the way to go about something or not?*”

He nodded. “And that’s what I mean. You get used to being told what to do and how to do it so often and for so long that you stop thinking for yourself, especially in a military setting. The counseling here is good at pulling out some of that,” he shared. “However, I think also having to live on your own in whatever condition you’re in helps too. Then you know for yourself what it is that you need to do, forcing yourself to not rely on others.” She looked at him, considering his words. He shrugged. “Just something else I’ve been thinking about.”

“The good news is,” she began, “there are many ways to think about life, and, if you find that this one works or is what

you need for right now, then absolutely go with that. Besides, I think everybody's different. I think everybody's needs are different," she murmured. "So what seems to work today for somebody may not work tomorrow for somebody else."

He chuckled. "Very true." He gave her a smile. "That's something else I like about you. You don't just blindly agree or disagree, but you stop and think about something I've mentioned."

"Lots of times my family has said things to me," she shared, "that make me stop and think. However, sometimes what they say doesn't make any sense, and I have to reevaluate what message they're sending me because maybe it's their own fears popping up. Maybe it's something else entirely," she said, with a shrug. "I think learning to question what you're told, what's asked of you, or what's set forth almost as if it's the gospel truth, are all important considerations too."

"I agree with that." Victor nodded. "That's one of the biggest things I notice here is how much everybody can share, really speaking honestly and candidly. It's ... It's a unique experience."

"Not just talking," she agreed, "but discussing the hard issues. No real topic is taboo here—no real subject that we can't delve into the pros and cons of, as long as everybody tries to stay relatively unbiased, trying to be open-minded about it all. We can definitely get into quite the discussions here."

He nodded. "It's like that discussion I had with the shrink about joy. I couldn't tell her what brought me joy. I couldn't come out and say what it was back then."

"And did that bother you?" she asked curiously.

"It bothered me in a sense"—he nodded—"because I felt as if I should know what brings me joy."

She laughed. "Right? As if you should know that about yourself. It's not something anyone else can answer for you." Then she eyed Victor. "So, when you told her that you had no

idea how to reply to her questions, how did she feel about that?”

“She just basically told me that it was up to me to find out what brought me joy and that I had a rare opportunity right now—here at Hathway House—to work my way through something like this. Once I was in the real world, it would be something that needed to be solved quickly, and quite possibly I wouldn’t have enough time or energy or inclination to solve it then, thus my need to work my way through it now.”

“But what’s to work through?” she asked. “Finding something that brings you joy doesn’t sound like something you need to work through.”

“I think that’s one of the things that she kept bringing up is the fact that maybe something is there to work through, some blockage maybe, and I’m not addressing it yet,” he suggested. “And the trouble with these kinds of conversations is that they always make you look for a problem.”

“When no problem exists?” she asked, with a nod of her head. “I’ve often wondered that too. When you look at everything that can go on in life and then at some of the questions that are brought up all the time, it makes you wonder if there’s even a problem. Sometimes people are afraid that there’s a problem, and really you just have to reassure them that they are fine.”

That gave him some pause too. “Just so many different ways to look at life,” he murmured.

“And again, there’s no rush. You have time, and it’s not as if an end result is due tomorrow,” she pointed out. “This is lifelong learning. I’m not sure that there’s ever any right or wrong or that there’s necessarily any time frame to get through it.”

“Sometimes it feels like there is,” he stated, with an odd look at her. “There’s always that ... that rush to get something done.”

“Do you feel rushed here?” she asked.

“Now that some of the healing is starting and I’m getting somewhere,” he explained, “there’s a sense that everything else needs to fall into place, and preferably more quickly than it is at that time, rather than to not fall into place.” He smiled. “I don’t want to feel pressured, but I’m only here for so long. Therefore, of course, I have a certain sense of timing, and I can’t stay here after that. Whereas this is your job, this is where you belong,” he pointed out. “Since it’s not where I belong, that’s brought up some odd feelings.”

Dawn frowned. “Probably because you’re making connections here with other patients, who could become long-term friends who last you for a lifetime; but this isn’t where you belong, and it’s not where they belong either. Still, there is the internet and road trips and flights to connect online or in person. Now, with a case like us, we can still keep in touch afterward, ... but it probably adds to that sense of disassociation.”

“It adds to the sense of not feeling connected, I guess, or not feeling ...” He stopped, thought about it for a moment and added, “That feeling of not belonging. That’s an odd one too.”

It was a conversation that would stick with him for the next few days.

## Chapter 12

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**T**HE NEXT COUPLE days in the kitchen ended up being just as chaotic as the first couple. Finally, when Dawn walked in on the following Thursday morning, she saw several unfamiliar faces. They looked at her, gave her tentative smiles, and she grinned. “*Yay!* New people,” She rubbed her hands together. “Maybe life can get back to normal.”

One of them smiled and noted, “I gather you guys have been pretty short-staffed.”

“Yeah, that’s one way to put it.” She gave them an eye roll. She introduced herself and walked over to her station and declared, “This corner is mine. Now that you guys are here, I get to claim it for myself again.”

And, with a bright smile and a laugh, she dove into the day’s work. But it felt so much better to know that enough people were here to cover the jobs that needed to be done. Hathaway House’s kitchen budget definitely needed some revamping in order to have this short-staffing not happen anymore. However, Dawn also understood everyone had jobs, family—plus life surprises that happened with moves and transfers. Thus, sometimes there just wasn’t always a perfect answer to these crises. Still, Dani had come through with new hires incredibly quickly, and that was huge.

When Ilse caught sight of Dawn a little bit later, the head chef smiled and whispered, “Looks like we’ll be okay again.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Dawn replied. “Every once in a while it just gets bad enough that you wonder if you’re doing what you’re meant to be doing.”

“You and me both,” Ilse noted.

Ilse’s serious tone reminded Dawn that she wasn’t the only one affected by all the extra work, but so was Ilse, even more

so in the sense that she was the one who ultimately had the responsibility of managing resources, both human and foodstuffs. “Let’s just hope that we’re good for a while now,” Dawn replied, with a smile.

Ilse nodded. “That’s the plan. Now we have to convince everybody who’s good and who started today to stay for a while.”

“Not counting the two who just couldn’t handle the stress after a few days?” Dawn asked, shaking her head.

Ilse nodded. “It’s best when those types are weeded out in the first week.”

“I agree with you there. Then there was the one guy we thought would stay but was gone too soon. What happened with him?”

“Yeah,” Ilse replied. “He was here for three months and then ended up joining the family business back in California.” She shrugged. “And I get it. I really do, but, at the same time, well ...”

Dawn smiled. “It sure messes with our plans, doesn’t it?”

“In a big way. But, hey, he’s happy, and he’s doing what he wants to do, and we can’t really expect anything else. People make plans of their own, so I really want to thank you for pitching in and for being here when I needed you.”

“Always,” Dawn declared instantly. “It’s what we do here,” she said, with a smile.

“It just occurred to me that I don’t know how serious you and Victor are,” Ilse noted. “I’m really hoping I don’t lose you over this.”

At that, she frowned at her friend. “Oh, wow, that never even occurred to me.”

“Hey, believe me. With all these staffing shortages, it’s occurred to me,” Ilse shared, with a snort. “And I would understand if you felt the need to move because he had to move, but ...”

“Right, everybody’s here temporarily, as far as the patients go, I guess. Victor and I were talking about that, just a few days ago, how this is where I live and work and belong, but he doesn’t. So there’s a lack of the same sense of identity here.”

“That’s because it’s temporary for the patients,” Ilse stated, “but not for us.”

“I get that—or I thought I got that until now,” Dawn replied, “but it is definitely something to consider, isn’t it?”

“Well, I was thinking about you. Selfishly, I might add,” Ilse admitted, “because I really wouldn’t want to lose you.”

“I’m not planning on moving or leaving,” she told her friend, with a bright smile. “So you can put that to rest.” But Dawn could also see why Ilse was concerned. It wasn’t anything that Dawn and Victor had discussed, and she certainly wasn’t to the point of even contemplating it, not until Ilse had mentioned it just now.

Now Dawn realized that time was marching on, that Victor would be leaving sometime, somewhere, somehow. There wasn’t a place here that he could stay, once discharged, so that meant a change would definitely be happening, whether she liked it or not. She frowned at that because she didn’t like change, and it would potentially cause her more problems than him. She winced at that.

That was one of the reasons why she had always avoided any tight-knit relationships with any patient because these guys came and went, and sometimes staff came and went with them. But more often than not, it seemed, the staff member was left behind because, of course, that’s where the staff belonged. She was still frowning about it when she headed out for lunch. She met Victor at the front of the buffet line queue.

He looked up at her, saw her coming toward him, and waved.

“Hey,” she greeted him. “You’re looking good today.”

“Ha. How can you tell?”

“I see you every day,” she pointed out, “and every day I see the change.”

He nodded. “You’re right. I am feeling stronger and better. But it’s an odd thing because it also means that my time here is also coming to an end.”

She winced at that. “That’s the second mention of your possibly leaving that I’ve heard today,” she murmured. “I can’t say I really was thinking about it until now.”

“No, I wasn’t either,” he replied. “And I think I’m quite happy to not mention it. It’s not necessarily something I’m ready to discuss.”

“I can understand that,” she told him. Still, it was a word of warning for herself that, when Victor left, it would hurt, and it would hurt a lot. And she needed to do something to protect herself from that pain, and, almost as soon as the thought crossed her mind, she realized that she must do something about it.

Now.

She looked at him and said, “If you don’t mind, I’ll take my lunch and head over to my place. I’ve got a really terrible headache coming on.” As fibs went, it wasn’t a great one, but she hoped that Victor would at least let her off the hook. She needed to contemplate what she would do about this. The first thing she needed to do was get away from him and just be alone with her thoughts, with her fears.

He nodded. “Absolutely. Remember. Take care of yourself.”

As she looked at the selection of food on offer, she frowned, wondering if she even wanted any.

“Take it with you,” he noted, as if reading her mind.

She looked at him and nodded. “I guess that would be the smartest thing, wouldn’t it?”

“Absolutely,” he said.



She quickly picked up a plate, and Dennis filled it. But, instead of sitting down, she walked over to her apartment. By the time she got there, she wasn't even hungry, and tears had gathered in the corner of her eyes. She realized just how involved she'd gotten, how much she cared. And they hadn't even discussed their relationship. They hadn't talked about anything as a couple. Neither had she asked how long he had left here. And that made her feelings even more frantic because she didn't know whether he was leaving in a week or two weeks or ...

"Why didn't we discuss it?" she muttered out loud.

Surely that would have been a topic of conversation any normal couple would have had. But instead it's as if they had been avoiding the whole issue. That's exactly what they had done, avoided it. And now the loss of him was facing her, and yet she didn't even know whether they had a relationship or not. She wanted to know how much longer she had with Victor, but she didn't want to bring it up with him because it would be a topic that she knew would bring on more tears.

Feeling like a fool, she texted Dani and asked how much longer Victor had at Hathaway House. When the answer came back as *six weeks*, Dawn stared at the text in shock. Only six weeks. Yes, sure that was still six weeks, but it was *only* six weeks. "Jesus," she muttered, as she sagged in place.

The time would go by so fast; she just knew it would. There wouldn't be any time to adjust.

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AND, SURE ENOUGH, as Dawn felt herself pulling back over the next few days, putting a bit of distance between her and Victor and her emotions, the next week just zipped by. And she didn't even know what to do about it. There was no way to stop this oncoming train that would devastate her. She didn't know what to say, didn't know how to even act, and she knew Victor had sensed the change in her. And had yet to bring it up. But then neither had she brought it up with him.

Ilse brought it up first. “What’s going on with you?” she asked. “You’re not dashing off to be with Victor anymore.”

She gave her a haunted look. “Yeah, I finally realized that he’s leaving soon.” Dawn shook her head. “Somehow I hadn’t caught the passage of time.”

“Ah.” Ilse nodded. “Well, before you get all upset about it, maybe remember that not everybody does leave in the time frame that they’re supposed to. ... Then obviously you have a decision to make.”

“What? ... What decision?” she asked, looking at her friend. “There is no decision.”

“I guess it depends on whether you want to spend more time with him or not,” Ilse suggested, looking at her carefully.

She stared at her. “You mean, maintain a long-distance relationship?” She frowned, not liking that idea at all. “I don’t know how he feels.” She waved her hand about. “So it’s hardly a subject to worry about.”

“You’re already worried,” Ilse pointed out. “What I find interesting is that you’re not talking to him. Instead you’re pulling back.”

Dawn winced at that. “Is it really that obvious?”

“Yep, it’s really that obvious.”

And Dennis was the next person who said something to her, as she went to get her lunch to-go.

She turned and looked at him. “I just don’t know how I feel, and his upcoming move is ... a bit of a shock,” she admitted, “I hadn’t ... I just hadn’t seen it coming, and, all of a sudden, I turned around, and there it was, right in front of me.”

“How do you think he feels?”

“I have no clue,” she shared. “We never—” She stopped. “We’ve never talked about it.”

“Maybe you should start with that step first,” Dennis suggested.

Dawn winced. “Yeah, those aren’t easy conversations.”

“Well, if you want to keep meeting him afterward, then it would help to start talking about it now,” he noted.

She raised both hands in frustration.

Dennis added, “And I already know that he’s trying to figure out what he’s done wrong.”

Dawn looked at Dennis in shock. “He’s done nothing wrong,” she declared.

“Then maybe you could tell him that,” Dennis said, with half a smile, “because he’s definitely worried.”

She frowned at him, and her shoulders sagged. “I guess he knows I’ve been avoiding him, *huh?*”

“I would think so,” Dennis stated, with a broad smile. “You may want to sort that out and soon, before Shane gets on your case.”

She winced. “Oh God, it will be one of those discussions, won’t it?”

“If you don’t fix it, yes,” Dennis declared. “How can it not be?”

“Oh no, oh no,” she muttered, as she worried about it for the rest of the day.

When she was done with her shift, she pulled out individual cherry pies, looked at them, and sighed. She picked one, grabbed a fork and a napkin, then headed to Victor’s room. It would be better to find out just what was going on now versus waiting any longer. She couldn’t believe that she’d left it this long, as it was. When she got there and found no Victor, she groaned.

“Of course there’s no Victor,” she muttered, raising her hands. “Just because I’m ready to talk to him doesn’t mean that he’s here ready to talk to me,” she muttered.

“Good point,” Shane said, from the doorway. She looked at him and frowned. He gave her a frown right back. “I hope

you were planning on settling up and sorting out your issues with him.”

“Everybody knows about it?” she asked.

“I’m sure they do,” Shane stated. “The two of you have been quite an item, and, all of a sudden, you’re not an item.”

She winced and sank down on the corner of Victor’s bed. “I didn’t even think anything of it, until, all of a sudden, it hit me that he’s leaving soon, and I just couldn’t handle it.” She stared at Shane. “It doesn’t make me a very good person, but I didn’t know what to do, so I just ... I just withdrew.”

“Withdrawing is one thing,” Shane noted, “but leaving a man like that hanging? It can be rough on him.”

She muttered, “This is when we get into that discussion about *not having relationships with patients*, isn’t it?”

“And yet so many of us have them,” Shane admitted. “And this scenario that you’re dealing with, it has nothing to do with the fact that he’s a patient—except that, whatever you’re dealing with right now and the way that you handle it, *will and could* impact how he acts tomorrow,” Shane stated, his tone serious. “There are a lot of good things about being here, but the fact of the matter is, these guys don’t stay, and that’s something you must come to terms with.”

“That’s what the problem is,” she wailed, staring at him. “God, why did I let it get this far? It was just so much easier to ignore it and to walk away.”

“And yet, for him, ignoring it wasn’t something he could do. I don’t know at what point in time this week that you left him to his own devices to wonder and worry about it. Did he talk to you? Did he ask you what was wrong?”

She shook her head. “No, he’s just basically given me space.”

“Sometimes space is good, unless it’s too much space,” Shane replied.

She stared at him for a long moment. “I came to bring him this and hopefully talk to him.”

“Well, he’s not here right now.” Shane checked his schedule and added, “He’s with the doctor, getting tests run.”

“Right,” she muttered. “I keep forgetting how much is happening in his world, how much is unsettled, and how much he has to still work on.” She shook her head. “And that just makes me feel worse.”

“None of this is meant to make you feel worse,” Shane pointed out, “but the patients’ lives are full in many ways that we can’t comprehend. They’re on a journey that’s completely different from what we’re dealing with in our lives. And sometimes it’s great to have somebody along for that journey, and sometimes that journey is something they have to complete on their own,” Shane explained, his voice calm and steady.

She stared at him. “That sounds terrible.”

“If you can’t be there for Victor,” Shane noted, “then it is a journey he needs to complete alone.”

“Oh my God,” she murmured, feeling even worse. “I don’t want it to be a journey he has to do on his own. I just didn’t know how to fix this.”

“Talk to him first,” Shane suggested. “Maybe nothing is there to fix.”

She winced. “Yeah, I half convinced myself of that before, but I still owe him an explanation for pulling back.”

“And that would be good,” Shane agreed. “He’s a good man. He’s worked really hard, but these last few days his heart’s not in it, and I know why.”

“*Great*, lay on the guilt.”

“I don’t have to,” he declared cheerfully. “You’ll fix this, and then we’ll see what Victor’s like tomorrow.”

“I don’t even know if I can fix it,” she admitted gloomily.

“If you can’t,” Shane told her, “I highly doubt anybody here can.” And, with that, he turned and walked away.

\*

IT HAD BEEN a long day. Something about the testing with the doc had sent Victor into a more depressed spiral. It was hard to find joy in his world, and he felt himself slipping back into the spiral he’d been in when he’d first arrived. He didn’t want to fall back; he didn’t want to see himself heading in that direction, but it was really hard not to. He just knew that something was wrong with his relationship with Dawn, and yet apparently she couldn’t talk to him about it. As he made his way into his room, he sank down on the side of his bed, wondering if he even felt like he could make it down for dinner.

Then he saw the treat sitting off to the side. Something was so heartbreakingly poignant about seeing it. As if that’s all she could do was send him a treat, just to say she had been here. And yet she wasn’t here now. Maybe that was his wishful thinking; maybe she just needed time. He kept staring at it and looked back at the number of texts that he had sent, asking if there was a chance to see her, only to be ignored. There were a couple instances where she basically said she was busy, things were crazy. It was the same excuses over and over again. But that was the first treat in a very long time. He didn’t even know how long. And it felt stupid to focus on that aspect of it. Because, in a way, with the treat, he wanted to think of it as a peace offering or maybe as an opening up again of a dialogue between them and an opportunity, but he didn’t know how to take it. It just seemed as if everything was so wrong all the time.

As he sat here on the side of his bed, he suddenly really wanted to go for a swim and then to soak in the hot tub. Whether he made it for food afterward or not wasn’t really a big part of it. But he needed to do something. He got changed, and, using the wheelchair because he was so tired, he slowly made his way to the pool. Somebody else was in the pool, but

he ended up hobbling his way over to the side and falling in. Only as he resurfaced did he see Dawn at his side.

She smiled at him. “Hey, stranger.”

“Hey, yourself.” He strove for a neutral tone. And then he struck out for the far end, wishing he hadn’t even come now. And yet he was here, so it was foolish not to do his laps. But his emotions were all over. He thought they had something; he thought that they were working toward something, but she’d made it plain that it was something she didn’t want. But then, what did he expect?

Trying desperately hard to talk himself out of the desperate, negative spiral that he seemed determined to slide into, he worked hard on his strokes, until finally even that was something he couldn’t maintain. He came up gasping for air. And there she sat on the side. Trying for casual and yet hopeful, he slowly made his way to her and heaved himself up onto the side of the pool next to her.

“Now I need the hot tub,” he said, almost shivering. She looked worried, so he shrugged and added, “I’m fine.”

“Are you though?” she asked gently.

He nodded. “Sure I am. Life is what it is.”

“Yeah, sometimes it’s tough,” she muttered, with a bitter tone. She faced him and admitted, “I haven’t been a good friend, and I’m sorry.”

Not sure what to say, Victor made his way carefully to the hot tub and even more carefully in. The last thing he wanted to do was fall and make a fool of himself. Then he had to stop and think about that. That was hardly the last thing that he had to worry about right now. So much else in his life was a concern that surely falling and making a fool of himself didn’t even count. And yet it seemed to him to be up there as a priority. He shook his head, as he sank back under the water, loving the feel of the heat soaking into his bones.

When he surfaced again, she asked, “You don’t have anything to say?”

“Lots to say,” he said. “I’m just not sure what I’m supposed to say.”

“How about whatever’s in your heart?”

“What’s in my heart?” he repeated. “Well, my heart’s hurting,” he shared, speaking honestly. “I thought we were friends. But instead you disappeared into some cocoon, barely answering my texts and completely ignoring me.”

She winced. “And you’re right. I did, and I do have an explanation, but you may not like it.”

He froze. “And what’s that? Will you finally tell me that you have another boyfriend or something?”

She stared at him in shock. “No, of course not.” Then she frowned. “Do you really think I would have spent all that time with you if I had one?”

“No, but that doesn’t mean you didn’t get one in the last week.” He shrugged. “Whatever, so tell me what’s going on.”

“I was hoping that you would speak first.”

He gave her a flat stare. “One of us has some explaining to do.”

She nodded slowly. “And you’re right, and that is me,” she admitted, with a heavy sigh. “I just ... It hit me suddenly,” she began.

He waited. The heat was soaking in nicely, but he could feel everything inside him tense up, as he anxiously waited for her to speak.

“It suddenly hit me,” she repeated carefully, going back to the same sentence. “That you would be leaving soon.”

“I’m not leaving all that soon,” he corrected. “Even now I still have five weeks here.”

She nodded. “And, for you, that’s probably a long time,” she said, “but sometimes, in my world, days and weeks just go by, and I don’t even really get a chance to realize how fast that time has already gone.”



“You’re correct there,” he said. “I’ve certainly had a couple days where I turned around, and weeks have gone by.”

“Exactly,” she agreed, “so, although five weeks seems like a lot of time, it’s really not a lot of time.”

He stared at her, uncomprehending. “And? So, ... so what? You figured that you’d just disappear until the time was gone that I could be out of your life?”

She stared at him in shock and whispered, “Oh my. No, no, that’s not what I mean at all.”

He gave her a flat stare. “You could have fooled me.”

She winced. “You have every right to be upset, and you have every right to be angry, but it’s the opposite of that.”

He frowned, shaking his head, very confused. “You’re making no sense.”

“No, I’m probably not. And that’s because it’s a difficult thing to talk about.”

He just stared and waited. These kinds of conversations weren’t easy at any time. But, at the moment, he just wanted to go back to his room to forget the conversation she was even trying to have. When she didn’t speak, he finally said, “Look. I get it. You don’t want anything to do with me. Understood,” he stated. “We can just continue in the same vein, as we have been, and it’s all fine.”

“And that would be a great sadness for me,” she replied gently.

He stared at her. “You’re still not making any sense.”

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m not. And I guess it doesn’t really matter whether I have trouble saying this or not. I need to get it out.”

“Whatever it is, yes,” he replied. “I would really appreciate it if we can have a bit of honesty.”

“And honesty is important.”

At that, he gave half a snort.

She winced. “And you’re right to not believe me. You’re right to think that I was, ... to think what you’re thinking, but you’re wrong.”

He didn’t even know what to say to any of that. He just waited and focused on his breathing, as he sat beside her in the hot tub.

She continued. “When I realized how fast the time was going by, it was like a sledgehammer that told me how badly affected I would be when you left.”

At that, his gaze widened, and he stared at her.

She nodded. “I really care. And it sounds foolish because I’m the one who walked away and who left you in the lurch. ... Hearing that you would be leaving soon was a real shock, and I learned just how much I care and how badly affected I’ll be when you do leave,” she shared painfully.

And it was painful to even hear her talk about it. But, for him, he was still in shock and such a shock that he wasn’t even sure he could trust his own voice. “So, instead of wanting to spend time with me, time that we still had together, you completely walked away?” He didn’t get that. He wasn’t even sure where she was going with this now because none of this sounded like what he wanted to hear. She was close, but there was so much distance between there and here that he just knew that getting back to what they had would be almost impossible.

“And that’s what was wrong,” she said, with a nod. “I shouldn’t have done that, and, for that, I’m very sorry. All I can say is that I got scared.”

He shook his head. “And we’re back to that. I don’t get it.”

“I knew that, when you left, I would be devastated,” she admitted, “and it made me realize just how much I had opened up to you and how much I would miss you. And it was a hurt that wouldn’t go away anytime soon, so it was almost instinctive for me to step back and to protect myself.” She

shook her head. “Only it didn’t work, and stepping back just made me feel worse,” she murmured.

She sighed. “It reminded me of all the good times that we had had. Every time I came to the pool, it reminded me of how much help you had given me in learning to swim, even now that I can swim and badly at that.” She gave him half a smile. “But I can now work on my swimming. I’ve got enough skill to make it and to continue along that line of progress. I go to the cafeteria, and all I see is you and the times that we sat together, laughing and talking about things that were really important.”

She grimaced. “And the longer it went on, the harder it was for me to find a way back to you because then my behavior seemed foolish and childish and impossible to explain away,” she murmured. “And I didn’t realize what I was doing or what effect it could have on you.”

And then he realized where this was going. “You don’t have to worry about it,” Victor said. “I’ve got five weeks left, and obviously wherever I was hoping we were going isn’t where you want to go. Otherwise you wouldn’t have pulled back.”

“But you’re wrong,” she muttered. “I don’t know where you were hoping to go. I didn’t give you a chance to explain. I didn’t give you a chance to even talk about where we wanted to go,” she added. “I just got so scared that I became very self-protective, and I stepped back. It was more about fear because I knew that you were leaving, and I was afraid that you didn’t want anything to do with me afterward.”

## Chapter 13

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**T**HERE. DAWN HAD said it. It sounded stupid and foolish in her own ears. She had no idea how Victor would take it.

He frowned at her. “Good Lord. What tangled webs we weave.”

She laughed at the famous quote. And she felt such relief to laugh. And then almost immediately she started to cry.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Why the tears?”

“Because I haven’t laughed in the past week,” she whispered, sobbing on her own.

“Oh, jeez,” he muttered. “I can’t handle tears.”

She half laughed through her tears. “And I didn’t think I would ever have a reason to laugh again,” she muttered, her heart breaking. “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I didn’t even know I *could* hurt you.” She added, “I knew we were friends, but I just ... I didn’t trust myself after all this time of being here and never meeting anybody who would want me back.”

He shook his head and whispered, “Dear God, don’t you know how special you are?” She stared at him. He asked, “You really don’t, do you?”

“What? I get up, and I work, and I step up, and I do things that need to be done,” she shared, “but everybody here does that.”

“No.” He raised a hand. “There’s something on my night table that you need to see. Maybe that will help you to understand.”

She frowned at that. “And yet that’s a long way away,” she pointed out, as they both sat in the hot tub still.

“It is, indeed.” He sighed. “Wouldn’t it be nice if we had robots to go get stuff like that?” he asked, with a laugh. “But I am serious that I never even considered leaving without you. Obviously you can’t go, as you live and work here. Plus, it’s something that I need to figure out as I leave, but I wasn’t thinking about just getting up and leaving,” he stated. “Obviously I wanted to figure out how we could have a relationship.”

She stared at him. “I don’t think I’m any good at long-term relationships,” she murmured. “I mean, it already hurt me so much to think about you leaving. So, to imagine you going away would be devastating.”

“You mean, every time I had to come and go?”

She nodded. “Yeah, that would be terrible. I would be crying constantly.”

“But what about if I live in town?” he asked, with a smile.

“I think you mentioned that a couple times, but you never made it sound like that was something you were serious about.”

“Because I hadn’t really figured out what I wanted, what I want to do. I still don’t, in a way. A part of me wants to do something to help with the environment or help with the animals or help somehow,” he shared, “but I’m still so focused on healing that—”

She interrupted, “And that’s what you should be focused on.” She nodded, finally starting to understand just how detrimental some of this emotional stuff, particularly when it went wrong, could be for these guys. “You need to focus on your healing,” she repeated. “That’s why you’re here.”

“It is why I’m here,” he agreed. “And the good news is, I am healing, and I am getting stronger, and I will regain full use of everything,” he said, with a smile. “And coming here was the best decision I ever made in my life, but, if I were to leave here, without in any way trying to make you a part of my life after this, that would be the worst decision of my life.”

She sniffled ever-so-slightly.

He whispered, “You really need to understand what we have and that I don’t want to lose it.”

“And that was the part that I was missing,” she whispered back. “I just figured that you were talking about *you* leaving and *your* life after this.”

“And yet was I,” he noted, “or were you just filling in the blanks?”

She thought about it and shrugged. “I was probably just filling in the blanks.”

“Well, in that lovely book, that’s not there.”

At that, Dennis popped his head over the deck above. “Do you need something?”

Victor nodded. “Would you mind getting me the little planner that you guys hand out to everybody off my night table? I really hate to ask.”

Dennis just waved a hand and disappeared.

“What’s the planner got to do with anything?” she asked, staring at him.

“I don’t even know that I can explain it,” he admitted. “So you were so afraid that I would leave without you, or without either of us knowing where we stood?” he asked.

“Yet that’s not it either,” she replied. “It just hit me that you were leaving. And that change was happening, and that the change was likely to be a change I didn’t want.”

He smiled. “Same diff, different words.”

“If you say so,” she muttered.

He laughed. “Let me, ... just let me show you the planner,” he said.

And when Dennis returned, Victor used his towel to dry off his hands and thanked him profusely.

Dennis smiled. “It’s all good. I’ve seen this a time or two.”

Victor didn't even ask what Dennis had seen, but Victor figured that, over the years, Dennis had probably seen absolutely everything that was happening at Hathaway House. Victor picked up the planner and held it out to her at an open page.

She dried her hands now and reached for it. She glanced at the title on the page. "Oh, this is your practice on joy."

He nodded. "Yes, but you need to read it," he prompted.

She looked down at it to see exercises and things that brought him joy. Number one was Dawn's smile. She gasped. Number two was being around Dawn. Number three was thinking about Dawn. She lifted her stunned gaze to him.

He nodded. "I was still working my way through all this, when you decided to pull your little disappearing act. And believe me. That was pretty tough on me too," he admitted, "because I was trying to figure out where we were going and how we could make something work. ... Obviously I still need a bit of time, and I still need whatever time I have here, if I even get to leave at the time period that I'm supposed to," he noted. "As you know, that's not exactly set in stone either."

She nodded slowly. "Did you mean it? What you wrote?"

"Absolutely I mean it," he declared. "Even after you cut me out, I meant it. It hurt, but I could remember the things, the time that we spent, with joy, so I owe you a huge thank you for that."

"I don't want thanks," she said.

"Well then, I don't want thanks for teaching you to swim," he replied, with a laugh. "So how about we just decide that what we have is special and that we'll work toward finding a solution."

She looked at him, tears running down her face.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa," he muttered, "and we're not getting all teary-eyed because that'll just make it way worse. And we'll build and grow what we have, and

we'll trust each other, and, when we get hit by emotions a little hard to handle," he added, "we'll come to each other and honestly share our fears, and we'll remember to find the joy in each other."

She smiled at him. "That's one of the nicest things anybody's ever said to me."

"And you need to remember that there are lots of ways to find joy in this life. But you are the one who brings me the most joy."

He wasn't prepared for it, but she threw herself into his arms and hugged him close. He just wrapped his arms around her and held her and whispered against her ear, "Not only do you bring me joy, and I thought you already knew, but obviously ... *we* hadn't discussed it. *We* hadn't said anything about it, but you are my heart," he stated simply.

She pulled back, looked at him, tears in her eyes, and whispered, "Thank you, thank you for being you." He just looked at her. She nodded. "It's because of you being you that I made it through this difficult conversation." She added, "I was just so devastated at the idea of losing you that I just didn't think I could handle it."

"We can all handle anything," Victor stated, "but I really don't want to handle losing you."

She tried to wipe away her tears, but now more were coming. "You say the nicest things."

"And it's not even a case of just saying something nice. I mean it," he declared. "You are my heart, and I want to find a way to make this work," he said. "I'm quite happy to relocate to town. Obviously the future is still a big unknown, but, as long as you're okay with that, and you're okay with however I end up physically—"

She placed a finger over his lips. "You're already way more of a man than so many other guys, so that will never be an issue."



He chuckled. “Now I know that you care because you’re obviously blind.”

She shook her head. “Nope, definitely not blind,” she murmured, “but I am in love.”

He stared at her, his eyes widening. And he wrapped her up in his arms, pulled her close, and whispered, “That’s good because it’s lonely in my heart otherwise. I’ve always loved you.” He shrugged. “I don’t know when or how, but, the next thing I knew, you were gone, and I was lost.”

“And what’s lost is now found,” she murmured, as she gently stroked his cheek.

“Perfect,” he murmured, “because all I need in my life is you.” And he lowered his head and kissed her.

## Epilogue

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WESLEY BRODEN STARED at the inside of the ambulance. He couldn't believe he had to travel this way. It was a six-hour drive, but he couldn't find anybody else to take him, so this was about the only way to go. It wasn't necessarily a true ambulance. It was more of an interfacility transfer vehicle.

The paramedic looked down at him. "You doing okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine. I had hoped to find somebody with a truck to get me there."

"Not advised," he replied. "Anybody in your condition will find it very painful to go that far for that long."

"It *is* much more comfortable to lie down," Wesley admitted.

The paramedic nodded. "That stump of yours is pretty sore, isn't it?"

"Both of them." He nodded. "They were doing better, and then they weren't. I tried to ... I wore the prosthetics too much," he shared, hating to admit it. "I just was really happy to get back up and to have some mobility. And then, of course, I pushed it."

"Yeah, that happens," the EMT noted, "especially on your left arm."

"Yeah, I don't have much of a stump." He had about four inches down from the elbow. "I was really trying hard to make the prosthetic work because I hate not being independent," he said, his tone letting through a tinge of anger.

"And yet there's times when you need help, like all of us." The paramedic lifted his pant leg and showed him his lower leg, which was a prosthetic.

Wesley stared at it. "Well, that gives me hope," he said.

“Don’t ever lose hope,” the EMT declared. “I lost my leg when I was sixteen in a motorcycle accident, and I thought my life was over at the time,” he admitted, “but it’s not. It happened long ago, and I survived pretty fast. I had to have surgery and rehabilitation,” he added, “but it is what it is. I’m fine with it. My wife’s fine with it. My kids think it’s cool.”

Wesley laughed. “I can see that too. That almost sounds like fun when you’re a kid. I’m probably not a whole lot older than you, but, at the moment, I think my arm amputation bothers me more than the leg.”

“Of course. At Hathaway,” he offered, “you’ll do just fine.” He pointed out the window. “You can see the grounds just coming up here. I’ve delivered a couple people here, and every time I think what an absolutely incredible place it is. I’ve looked it up a couple times, and the reviews and awards it’s won are just incredible,” he shared. “You’re in good hands here.”

Wesley nodded. “I hope so. Sometimes you just want to give up.”

“Don’t give up,” the EMT stated. “I’m proof that you can have a life after amputation. Even double amputations,” he added. “Find something you want to do with your life, and stick with it, and don’t let anybody tell you differently.” And those were definitely words to live by.

“Do you know anybody who works there?” Wesley asked him.

“Several people,” he replied. “Dani, the co-owner, I’ve talked to her a couple times. I’ve had a friend go through here. She mentioned Dennis in the kitchen—apparently he’s quite a character. I don’t know anybody else right now, but that doesn’t mean a whole lot.” As he pointed out the window again, he said, “Look. Somebody is out riding horses.”

Wesley shifted so that he could look outside. “Wow, I would love to get back to horseback riding.”

“They have training here for the patients too,” the EMT offered.

A couple people were out there. Wesley watched the woman, with her long red braid bouncing behind her, as she moved the horses at a great clip.

“Well, if nothing else,” the paramedic added, with a big smile, “you’ll have lots of good things to look at.”

Wesley wasn’t sure whether the EMT meant the woman or the horse. But, in truth, the two of them moved as one and looked absolutely stunning. “I used to ride like that,” Wesley muttered.

“And you can again,” the paramedic vowed. “Don’t worry. Have a little faith, and it’ll take you a long way.”

And, with that, they pulled into the driveway and up to the front of Hathaway House and the beginning of Wesley’s new life.

This concludes Book 22 of Hathaway House: Victor.

Read about [Wesley: Hathaway House, Book 23](#)

## Hathaway House: Wesley (Book #23)



***Welcome to Hathaway House. Rehab Center. Safe Haven. Second chance at life and love.***

Dealing with the loss of his right leg was one thing, but dealing with his missing left arm was more than Wesley can handle. He can hide the prosthetic leg. However, the arm is damn-near impossible to make look normal. And being normal mattered—or so he thought.

Alba is a therapist at Hathaway House, helping the patients come to terms with their new reality, in order to have the highest-functioning future possible. Wesley is on her roster, but, as their sessions progress, a connection builds that is hard to resist—or to ignore. But she has to stay professional. Yet, when she points out a few issues to help him change his perspective, their friendship hits a rocky spot. Needing to find her balance again, she pulls back.

Only when Wesley accidentally meets a young girl, visiting her father at the center, does Wesley get the paradigm shift he needs. The transformation is there within his reach, if he makes the effort. And the results will be worth it. He knows that. As Alba once again returns to his inner circle, he realizes just how much effort he's willing to put in to get everything he wants.

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## Author's Note

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Cheers,

Dale Mayer

## About the Author

Dale Mayer is a *USA Today* best-selling author, best known for her SEALs military romances, her Psychic Visions series, and her Lovely Lethal Garden cozy series. Her contemporary romances are raw and full of passion and emotion (Broken But ... Mending, Hathaway House series). Her thrillers will keep you guessing (Kate Morgan, By Death series), and her romantic comedies will keep you giggling (*It's a Dog's Life*, a stand-alone novella; and the Broken Protocols series, starring Charming Marvin, the cat).

Dale honors the stories that come to her—and some of them are crazy, break all the rules and cross multiple genres!

To go with her fiction, she also writes nonfiction in many different fields, with books available on résumé writing, companion gardening, and the US mortgage system. All her books are available in print and ebook format.

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VICTOR: HATHAWAY HOUSE, BOOK 22

Beverly Dale Mayer

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