



HIS HEART

JORDYN TRACEY

Sugar
and
Spice

His Heart

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the strong men and women who know what it's like to stand by your soldier and support him or her after the ravages of war, and to all the brave soldiers who fought and continue to fight for those of us back home. You're our heroes.

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Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Chapter One

August, 1997

Octavia sank down on her mother's front steps and watched Bryant slide out of his brother's pickup. She gripped the handrail between ice cold fingers, all the while dreading what she would say to her boyfriend of four years.

They had gotten together only two months after entering the same high school, and now Bryant had popped the most important question she would ever hear in her life. "I don't know how I'm going to do this," she muttered, low so he didn't hear while he paused at the curb chatting with a neighbor.

She noted how he kept darting furtive glances her way. He must be just as eager to hear her answer as she was to pretend he had never asked. And it wasn't that the boy was ugly either. Bryant was sexy hot with smoking blue eyes that had looked deep inside her soul from the first day she had met him. He was wiry but strong, really strong, because he had been lifting his older brother's weights since he was twelve. People had said it would stunt his growth, but that never affected Bryant. Octavia put him at six two and no shorter.

His smooth skin attracted her like nobody's business, and in the summer time when he tanned, she couldn't keep her hands off of him. The stark contrast to her own dark brown skin was a striking combination, and she'd gotten used to the looks and comments they'd gotten over the years in their small southern town. Interracial relationships were not the big deal that her community made it out to be.

She cared about Bryant, but there was one thing she couldn't look past, and that one issue was huge in her opinion. At least it was at this stage in her life. That alone would keep them from being together.

"Hey, beautiful," Bryant quipped when he finally walked up to her. He leaned forward and connected his soft lips to hers, sending a spark of pleasure coursing through her body. "Wanna walk?"

He held out his hand, and Octavia took it. For a few blocks, they walked in silence holding hands. Bryant fidgeted, alternating between squeezing her hand too tight and holding it too loosely. Octavia pulled away and ran her palm along her pants leg.

Bryant peered at her. "Your palm is sweaty. Any particular reason why?"

She swallowed.

"Tae?" he encouraged her.

“You asked me to marry you...” She flipped a braid back from landing in her face and clenched her fingers together. “We’re so young. I’m about to go away to college...”

“Away?” Bryant stopped walking, and Octavia did as well. With a deep breath, she turned to face him.

“Yes, away. I told you my dream is to become an R.N., Bryant. You’ve known that almost since we met. My parents didn’t go to college, or rather my dad dropped out before he could get through a year. My mom only went to the ninth grade. I want—no, I *need*—to do better.”

“For who. Them or you?” he growled.

She rolled her eyes. “You act like you don’t want me to go.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You’re not denying it.”

He ran both hands through his hair, bringing Octavia’s attention to it. She had encouraged him to wear it in that new style, the messy one, with so much gel it stood up. And he had dyed the ends of the front to blond so it was a mixture of dark brown and blond. Damn, how she loved that look on him. But right now he was pissing her off.

“Tae, look.” He reached out for her hands, and she gave them to him. He pulled her close, but she resisted. Her head needed to be clear. The hurt in his eyes pierced her heart. “I asked you to be my wife. We both know we’re perfect together.”

“We’re eighteen, Bryant. We have our whole lives before us. We don’t have to rush.”

“I can’t live apart from you much longer,” he almost begged. “I love you with all my heart. That must mean something to you. I want to raise a family with you. A big family, like four kids.”

She growled and jerked out of his hold. “Listen to you. Where do we get the money for that, Bryant? From your job at the gas station? My part time shit at the library?” She shook her head. “We’re not ready. You have to admit that. Besides—”

His handsome face reddened. “Besides, what? Go ahead and say it, Tae.” When he grabbed her by the shoulders and forced her to face him, her stomach knotted. “It’s the same old argument, isn’t it?”

“It hasn’t changed.”

“I’ve heard it all before.” He uttered a humorless laugh. “I’m not ambitious enough. I don’t care about nice things like you do. That’s all you want out of life, don’t you? Expensive clothes, an expensive house, money.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that! Why the hell can’t you understand?”

He shook her a little. “I can’t understand because you’re about to throw away everything that’s important in life. That other stuff is not worth much without love.”

At first Octavia didn’t respond. He had said throw it away. So they were at that point? If she didn’t say yes now, then fuck it? That was probably best anyway, wasn’t it? She couldn’t see Bryant changing his outlook on life. Having money just meant zip to him. He didn’t even aspire to getting his own car. He was just fine borrowing his brother’s truck upon occasion. That extreme laid back attitude drove her nuts. How the hell did she last this long with him?

Anger surging inside her, she met his warm gaze, and she knew why she had hung on so long. He was attentive and faithful and loving. When all the other boys were acting the fool, flirting with other girls or just dumping their girlfriends as soon as something better came along, Bryant had been by her side. He hadn’t strayed once that she had seen. He was the type of boy who would walk her home carrying all her books no matter how she insisted she could do it herself.

And well...damn, if he wasn’t good in bed. Four months ago she had turned eighteen, and on that momentous occasion, she had given up her virginity to him. Not from being pressured either, but because she couldn’t imagine being with anyone else, and she felt she was ready. She didn’t regret it one second. If she and Bryant were not compatible in every other way, they certainly were in the bedroom. She sighed remembering and seeing the genuine love in his eyes.

“We can take a small break,” she suggested. “Maybe until Christmas when I come home for the holiday. I can call you from school in a few days, and we can talk more.”

“Talk more.” He nodded in disbelief, resting a hand on his chin and one fist on his hip. “About how we’re broken up until Christmas.”

“Don’t be flip, Bryant.”

“How the hell am I supposed to be, Tae?” he demanded. “Because you basically just told me you never want to marry a fucking loser like me.”

“Don’t cuss at me.”

“But you can cuss at me?” he growled.

She took a step back, and all his anger drained away.

“I’m sorry. Tae, I love you so much. Don’t do this. Please.” He moved closer to her, drew her into his arms and rested his chin on the top of her head. She had always enjoyed how she fit there and felt protected from the world despite how she was physically bigger than him, just shorter. Weight was problem, and she fought to drop the extra thirty pounds on a daily basis.

Bryant tilted her chin up and kissed her lips. Her eyes closed, she felt him brush his cheek along hers, and she remembered that he had just begun to have stubble, which meant he could shave for the first time in his life. Wetness touched her cheek. He was crying. Octavia pressed her lips together, her eyes burning but no tears coming, and nausea assailed her.

When he drew back and seemed to note how her face was dry except where he had left his tears there, and her expression must show the determination she still felt, his shoulders slumped. “You always were a very cold person.”

She gasped.

“I wondered how you could put up with me and if you loved me since you never said it. Not even once.”

“Bryant.”

“Don’t.” He held up his hand. “I get it.” The best man she could ever know whether she admitted it to herself or not, walked away from her, and Octavia couldn’t do a thing beyond watching it happen.

* * * *

Bryant had walked three blocks in the opposite direction to Tae’s house before he remembered he had left his brother’s truck in front of her door. He dreaded going back. He had already made a fool of himself begging her and crying. What an asshole he was to think that she would say yes to him. All the signs had been there from the beginning. They just weren’t right for each other. They never had been. But he had loved her so much, loved her still—with everything inside him. How in hell was he going to get through this?

Doubling back, he braced himself to see her beautiful face. Tae was deep rich chocolate brown, and he had fallen for her the second he laid eyes on her with her tight blue jeans and her T-shirt that said “Possessed by Satan” in ragged red letters. How she thought she would get away with that top in school he didn’t know. She didn’t. And he had cut out of his first day of classes to follow her home, watching her ass sway as she walked.

Learning that the defiant girl with the mesmerizing eyes was more serious about her life than she appeared was a shock. When she had said yes to him, had gone on a date to the

movies and let him kiss her on the first date was even more astounding. Tae had always told him, she was the bad-good girl and he was just plain good. If Riley, North Carolina was a farming town, he'd have been reared on the farm, she'd told him. He had never cared how she teased him. Just so long as she was there, by his side, letting him love her.

The street in front of Tae's door was empty of people. The row of tightly packed houses were all dark, and the area looked abandoned on both sides of the narrow street. But Bryant knew it only that the working class had all shuffled off to the factory on the edge of town or a few to the small library, the single grocery store or where he worked, the gas station. There really wasn't much more to Riley, North Carolina, and Bryant had never needed more. He loved his medium sized town and had never desired to leave it. His hope had been that he and Tae would graduate high school, get married and raise a brood of kids. Now what did he have? Without her.

He slipped inside his brother's truck, which he had left unlocked and turned over the engine. The vehicle roared to life, and Bryant threw it into gear to head back home. He had rushed out half cocked that morning all excited. Now he was returning with his tail between his legs.

Rory was bent under the hood of his pet project car when he got there, like he always was. Bryant parked and slid from behind the wheel. He tossed his brother the keys and almost made it to the front door before his brother's voice stopped him.

"So how'd it go? She say yeah?"

Bryant considered ignoring him but thought better of it. "You already know she didn't, don't you."

"Course," was all he answered.

Bryant smashed a fist into the door and hung his head. His eyes burned all over again. His gut twisted.

"So what are you going to do?" Leave it to Rory to show no emotion at all when Bryant was ready to scream and cry like a little girl. His brother had always told him he had a lot of growing up to do, and Bryant knew he was right. People in their community had praised Bryant most of his life, telling him he was mature for his age and responsible. He would be a comfort to his mother when she was too old to look out for herself. Both the Hussner boys would. They didn't know him like they thought they did.

"There's nothing to do," he told Rory. "I'll wait for her to change her mind."

"And then what, Bryant?" Rory growled. "You can't live your life waiting around for that girl. She's sexy and beautiful, I'll give her that, but her ass has always thought she was better than you. Ain't got a pot to piss in anymore than the rest of us, but she still had that attitude, like her nose was in the air and she was too good for us. I always wondered

when she would drop you and move on. Now, I see she kept you around for entertainment while she was still stuck in this town. Now she got her ticket out, and it's good-bye, Bryant."

He whirled around. "You knew she was going away to college?"

Rory shook his head. "Who didn't know? Oh, let me guess—you. I did wonder with a little more maturity and some more time, she might turn out to be right for you...Well, I'm glad she dumped you. Now you can do something with your life other than chase after her." Rory scratched his chin, leaving a black smudge there.

"What's that supposed to fucking mean?" Bryant yelled. "I loved her. I love her! And why does everyone think I should be doing something different? I'm who I am. I'm content. Or I was."

"You're a fool is what you are, Bryant." Rory wiped greasy hands on an even greasier towel and strolled over to Bryant. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a pamphlet. "Severe asthma kept me out of the military. It's not going to do that to you. In this town, there's only so much you can do with your life. I don't want you for the factory. And you sure as hell ain't working for that gas station forever. So this is it. The army."

Bryant took two steps back staring at his brother who was older than him by seven years. Rory had always acted like he was more his father than his brother, ever since their dad had been killed in a freak accident down at the factory. Maybe that's why he was determined that Bryant wouldn't choose that life. Bryant had respected him for "being the man of the house" so to speak. But here was where he drew the line. "I'm not joining the army. You can forget it. I'll make my own path."

Rory looked at him like he'd lost his mind. "She promise to call?"

Bryant's eyes widened. "What?"

"You heard me, little brother. Did she promise to call you? When she gets to that fancy college of hers."

"She said she would," he admitted. "Maybe in a few days. Maybe by Christmas."

Rory took hold of his wrist, twisted his hand over with strength Bryant was still trying to grow his muscles into and stuffed the brochure in his palm. "She won't." And with that he turned away and went back to working on the car. With relief, Bryant blew out a heavy breath. He knew Rory. His brother wouldn't say another word about it until Bryant did exactly what he had commanded.

* * * *

December 1997

“Tae, can I talk to you a minute?”

Octavia glanced back over her shoulder as she shuffled her pile of books to her arms. A fleeting memory of Bryant offering to carry them slid into her mind, but she pushed the thought away. “Professor James, can you call me Octavia, please?” She wrinkled her nose. “I don’t really like that nickname.”

The older man grinned, his blue eyes twinkling and making her heart flutter as she was sure happened with all the girls in his classes. “Sounds more serious, huh? You’re a very serious student, Octavia.” He bowed his head slightly in acknowledgement of her preference. “One of my most promising. If you keep your nose in the books and keep the boys on the back burner as you’ve been doing, I can guarantee you’ll do well. You’re intelligent and ambitious. You’ll make a fine nurse someday.”

Octavia sucked in a trembling breath at his compliments. “Thank you. I’m doing my best, and will continue to. I know the other girls think I’m stuck up and all that.” She rolled her eyes. “But I have my goals, and no one is going to take that away from me. Not now, and not ever.”

He nodded. “Good. So with that in mind, I was thinking maybe you’d benefit from a little extra coaching with me a couple afternoons a week. Your grades in my class are good, but I think they can be better. And you want to maintain your scholarship. With the higher grades balancing out the lower ones, it will keep you competitive. What do you say?”

Octavia might be just eighteen and hadn’t been out of Riley five minutes, but she was no fool. She saw the light of interest in her professor’s eyes. She’d even thought she caught him on a couple occasions staring at her ass, but student-faculty relationships were forbidden as they were at any college. Yet, this man knew his stuff, and if he could help her get to where she needed to go...

She looked up from the floor where her gaze had drifted as she considered Professor James’ proposal, clutching her books to her chest. “Can I get back to you?” she asked.

He smiled, but she sensed his impatience. “Yes, of course. Here’s my card. Call me when you make up your mind. It’s crucial that you move quickly, Octavia. My time is limited.”

By that she wondered if he meant he had a couple other girls on the hook, just waiting to take him up on his offer. Octavia made a small sound of acknowledgement and whipped around to exit the lecture room.

When she stepped out of the science building, the air was frigid, and the wind had picked up. She treaded carefully over the walkway because whoever the university paid to shovel and salt the area hadn’t done a decent job of it. Where had the time gone? It was

December already, and she would be heading home for winter break in a couple of weeks.

The knowledge reminded her that she hadn't phoned Bryant in all that time like she said she would. She had avoided calling, fearful that he would be exactly the same as he always was...or that he wouldn't.

When she reached her dorm room, she dropped her books on her bed and reached for her cell phone. Her heart beat a tattoo in her chest, and she came close to hyperventilating. She did miss him. So much. He had said she was cold, had always been so, and some of her fellow students had said the same thing. Maybe she was. Maybe she had no heart, didn't have the capacity to love anyone or to even cry. Octavia searched her mind for the last time she had shed a tear and couldn't recall. Yeah, she had major issues.

Not wanting to put off the inevitable any longer, she thumbed through the numbers stored on her cell, vowing to phone her parents right after she had spoken with Bryant. His mother's number came into view, labeled with his name, and she punched the button to make the call.

"Ms. Hussner? This is Octavia Stokes."

"I know who you are," came the sharp reply.

Octavia drew the phone away from her ear and looked at it before speaking again. "Um, I was wondering if Bryant is around. I wanted to talk to him."

"You're a month too late," she quipped.

Octavia swallowed. "I'm sorry?"

"He joined the army. And none too soon if you ask me. Anything's better than waiting around for a girl like you." The woman continued to rant, igniting Octavia's irritation although she couldn't blame her.

The army? Octavia rubbed her forehead. She shouldn't be surprised. She hadn't called him like she said she would, had put it off from week to week just because she was too spineless to face him again, to hear the love in his voice and know she wasn't worthy of it or if she...wanted it. Had she been playing him for a fool all this time as his mother seemed to think, was near shouting over the phone? Octavia didn't want to think so, but she had no evidence to the contrary and no horrible experience in her past for an excuse to how she was. Bryant was better off. She needed to just move on and let it go.

"Well, thanks, Ms. Hussner," she interjected in the middle of the older woman's tirade. "I know you don't believe me, but I do wish Bryant and your family all good things in life." She hung up before more insults could be hurled at her head and then dug through her

purse and brought out her professor's card. With shaky fingers, she punched his number into her phone.

* * * *

One month prior

"Please, Bryant, think about this," his mother begged for the millionth time. "I don't want you in the military. I know your options are limited, but maybe you can move to a bigger city and then—"

"Mom," Rory interrupted. "It's too late. He's already signed up. His bus is here for goodness sake. He's going off to boot camp, and that's that."

"When did you become the one in charge?" she snapped. "I'm still your mother and Bryant's."

Bryant sighed. He didn't like to worry either of them, especially his mother. She wasn't getting any younger, and lately she was looking more haggard. His greatest fear was that he would get shipped off somewhere in another country, and she would pass before he could get home. Even now his stomach tightened thinking of it. Drawing her into a firm hug, he whispered in her ear, "Don't worry, Mom. I'll come back safe and sound. I promise. It's just boot camp. What could happen?"

As his bus pulled out of the station, Bryant heaved a sigh of relief that he had been brave enough to leave home and man enough to let Tae go. Raising a family with her had been a pipe dream anyway. Yet, on some level, he wondered what she would think of him having joined the army. Would she be worried about him, or proud? Would joining the army constitute having ambition in her eyes?

Bryant hadn't realized how long he had been mulling over Tae's thoughts about him until the bus rolled into Fort Jackson, South Carolina where he would live for the next thirteen weeks. When the bus pulled to a stop, he gathered his stuff and shuffled down the steps to the ground only to bump the man standing rigidly at the bottom. Bryant uttered a small apology and turned away to line up with the other men.

"You're already starting on the wrong foot, private!" the man boomed.

Bryant opened his mouth to apologize again, but the man stomped up and frowned over him.

"What's your name, private?"

He swallowed. "Bryant."

Red suffused the man's face. "For the next few weeks, if your maggot ass lasts that long, I will be your commanding officer. When you address me, you will address me as sergeant. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sergeant."

Bryant's eardrums rang with the response. "Sergeant, that is clear, sir!" he roared.

Realizing he had better snap it into gear, Bryant straightened his shoulders, stared straight ahead and shouted, "Sergeant, that is clear, sir!"

The man sneered. "Good, now drop down and give me thirty pushups for pissing me off so damn early in the morning."

Bryant hit the ground, his mind in a whirl. This wasn't him. He wasn't a hard ass. The only physical labor he had done was to lift weights. He had been average at just about everything in his life, and he liked peace above all else. What the hell was he doing in the military? Why did he listen to Rory?

"Weak!" his sergeant yelled. "Twenty-five more."

Bryant's arms ached and wobbled. His breakfast shifted around in his stomach. A vision of Tae swam before his eyes before he blinked away the wetness in them. No, he could do this. He was stronger than anyone gave him credit for. It was in there. Maybe somewhere deep down, and perhaps Rory knew that or believed it. Tae didn't believe in him, but he would prove her wrong if it killed him.

Chapter Two

January 1999

Octavia pushed aside the blankets draped over her naked body and shivered. Did Malcolm even turn the heat on? It must be below zero in his apartment. She inched to the edge of the bed and dropped her feet over the side. In silence she dressed with a glance over her shoulder to make sure her new boyfriend didn't wake up and try to stop her. He liked to have sex in the morning, and she just wasn't in the mood.

Her mind was filled with thoughts of her coming test today and how she hadn't studied enough for it. Chemistry was a real challenge, and no matter how many coaching sessions she had taken, she wasn't catching on. In fact, that was how she had met Malcolm in the first place. Otherwise, she would never have let herself get involved with a guy until she had finished school.

Then again, perhaps her time with her first year professor had taught her sex was about getting what she wanted out of people. She hated that thought, and honestly she hadn't been thinking that way when she first went out with Malcolm. It just seemed that she was destined to make poor choices, stupid ones that led her down the wrong path. Wasn't she a better person than this?

"Maybe I'm not," she whispered to the cold room.

Yawning with a hand pressed to her mouth, Octavia descended the stairs to the front door of Malcolm's apartment building and stumbled down to her cheap little car. She dumped her books in the back and hopped around to the driver's side to fight with the lock there. Finally inside with the engine running, she cranked up the heat and rubbed her hands together to ward off the cold.

A minute later and she was headed down the highway toward her university. Something smelled, and she lifted her grey sweatshirt to her nose and groaned. A shower would have been in order, but she needed all the extra time she could get to do a little more studying. Being clean would be her reward after she finished. A memory made her chuckle, of her mother saying you never know what can happen, Octavia, so always have on clean underwear.

"She didn't mention being clean yourself."

She laughed again, and a horn blared from somewhere behind her. Octavia glanced up in time to see an SUV flipping end over end and heading directly for her. Her heart thundered, and panic set in. She jerked at the steering wheel, and her small car let out a grinding noise of protest but didn't turn at all.

"Oh no," Octavia whispered. "Please, no."

Grinding metal upon metal. Octavia's head jerked. Her seatbelt snapped, and there was no air bag. Glass shattered around her, and something wet was running down her cheek. At last all was in darkness.

* * * *

"Open your eyes, sweetheart," someone said.

Her head was on fire. At least it seemed that way. She tried raising a hand to it, but couldn't be sure she was. She squinted, but that shot daggers of pain through her as well, and she let consciousness fade. Just before peaceful blackness took over, the voice called to her again.

She moaned. "Leave me be, please."

"I'm sorry, Octavia, but you'll have to wake up. We need to know you're okay, don't we?"

"We don't care right now," she muttered.

The person chuckled. "Well if you can be flip, then it's not all bad, huh?"

Not all bad? Meaning there was something bad. She tried to open her eyes. The light was too much. Tears filled her eyes, and the gentle voice turned firm with an order to someone else to turn the lights down some more. Feet shuffled about, and the glare lessened.

Octavia tried to focus, but somehow everything was blurry from one eye, and the other wasn't getting anything at all. Maybe they had a bandage over it. What was she doing here, wherever here was?

"Where am I?"

The gentle voice again. "You're in John Hopkins Hospital."

"John Hopkins," she repeated. A memory surfaced. "I had an accident."

"Yes."

"I'm...hurt?"

Hesitance this time. "Yes."

John Hopkins was among the best, if not *the* best hospital in the country. They could overcome whatever ailed her. No problem. Right? She swallowed. "Tell me everything."

They did. She was blind in one eye. Battery acid. She would never see out of that eye again. They had been called miracle workers, but her eye would not heal. It could not be repaired. Period.

“What else?” she demanded.

“You’ve suffered extensive nerve damage in your right cheek from a tear there. We’ve done what we could with it and some cosmetic surgery to clean up the area. Unfortunately, because of the nerve damage there’s only so much we can do with it...We do not recommend any further surgeries on your face.”

Which meant she would want them to do more. Her heart beat hard enough to ache. She called for a mirror. The doctor at first didn’t want her to see her face. Wait until the swelling goes down, the doctor had said. Octavia insisted.

Without preamble, Octavia looked. The bandages had been removed, and she wondered how long she had been out that they could remove them. Her blind eye was closed. She willed it to open, and after some time, the lid responded. It was stark white where there should be color, and the skin around her eye and on down on her cheek was ugly with a jagged rip that had been sown up. Spots around it looked like they had been burned, obviously from the battery acid.

Tears welled in her eyes. Had she thought she couldn’t cry? Now they came without stopping, in floods that soaked the gown she wore. She sobbed, bordered on screams. And then the vision in the other eye blurred, and pain jetted all over her head. She vomited, and they jabbed a needle into the IV hooked up to her arm.

“You must not stress, Ms. Stokes. You’ve had extensive head trauma, and stress will only aggravate it.”

“My good eye is blurred,” she cried out, reaching for the woman. The doctor took her hand. “Calm down. Everything will be okay. Shh.”

Octavia didn’t know why she was so insistent until she realized that as her breathing slowed, and the medicine kicked in, the pain eased, and her vision cleared. She sucked in deep breaths and blew them out with a small wheeze.

“It’s clearing,” she muttered.

The doctor checked the eye again. “When you stress your mind, it puts pressure on your optical nerve, and your vision blurs. There’s no reason to think that you won’t have good vision from now on in that eye. But you must maintain control of your emotions.”

Octavia emitted a wild laugh. “Everyone already thinks I’m a cold bitch. Now what?” She cried again, but the medicine was making her woozy. Soon she lay back and closed her eyes. With a shaking hand, she reached up to the blind eye and helped its lid to close

the rest of the way. So this was her life. She had been told she was beautiful most of her life. Now she was a monster, and she deserved it. Look what she had done to Bryant. She yawned, drifting off. Bet he'd be glad if he knew that he had escaped from being her husband. He was better off without her.

* * * *

“Octavia, are you ready?” her mother asked as Octavia sat hunched on the side of the hospital bed. “We’ll go by your dorm and pick up the rest of your things, and then we can head on home.”

She reached up to be sure her hair hung well over the right side of her face, and then she stood. “Please, don’t bother calling me Octavia anymore. For some reason, I feel like it doesn’t fit. Just Tae is fine.”

Her father frowned, which she brought into view only by turning her head more to the right. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Yes. And thank you for all you’ve done. I needed to see someone...I mean I needed to make sure I have everything. I have to return some borrowed books and get some other items I had borrowed from others before we leave.”

“Of course.” Her mother hovered while she stood, and Tae wanted to wave her off, telling her she could get into the wheelchair on her own, but a wave of dizziness hit. She did her breathing exercises as she had been taught and focused on remaining calm, finding her center of peace. The doctors believed the headaches and blurred vision would become less frequent with time, but there was no guarantee. Tae would have to learn to adjust and figure out how to live independently now that school was out of the question. Her dream had gone up in smoke.

A few minutes later, Tae sat in the back of her parents’ car with dark glasses over her eyes. She had loaded up on pain meds because the nerves in her face still didn’t like the featherweight glasses, but she hadn’t yet adjusted to the brightness of the day. She prayed that would come with time as well. Otherwise, she would be housebound like an invalid.

They drew up to her university and she was surprised to see Malcolm. She shuffled out of the car and called to him. “Malcolm!”

He turned, and Tae experienced a flutter in her stomach, both for the fact that the boy was cute and also for seeing him for the first time since that morning she had left his bed. She took a few slow steps in his direction, trying to maintain her balance, only to see him step back. The door behind him opened and a young woman stepped out and into his arms. She pressed a soft kiss to his lips, and Malcolm encircled her waist. He cast an apologetic look at Tae before the two went off in the opposite direction.

“What the hell? I can’t believe that boy didn’t wait for you to talk to him, honey,” her mother complained. “How rude! If the people are like that here at this fancy school, then I’m glad you’re coming home.” She gathered Tae in her arms and kissed her forehead. Tae winced. “Oh, I’m so sorry, baby. Come on, sweetie, let me get the wheelchair out and—”

“No, Mom,” she insisted. “This is my life, and I’m not an invalid. I’ll get stronger. The headaches will ease, and even if I have to look like a monster for the rest of my life, meaning I won’t have a boyfriend, well, so be it. I’ll be okay.”

“Oh, Tae.” Her mother burst out crying, and Tae did all she could not to join her.

* * * *

March 2003

Tae sat in the semi-darkness of her small living room and arranged the TV dinner she was about to eat. She knew it wasn’t healthy, but she hadn’t felt like cooking for the last couple of days. Her mother believed it was something in the air, something odd stirring about that would cause the pain to increase. Tae had been subject to migraines every time the pressure in the atmosphere shifted. If a cold front came down, wham she was laid out on her back. If it was a warm front, same thing. When her damn head would fix itself like the doctors had informed her might happen over time, she’d like to know. They should have emphasized *might*, she thought.

While slicing into her overcooked fried chicken, something the newscaster said caught her attention, and then the bottom fell out of her world. Her silverware tumbled to the tray top from her trembling fingers. At one second her heart was pounding, and the next she wasn’t sure it was beating at all. But the blood rushing in her ears meant she was still alive in spite of the news. The U.S. was at war. *Bryant!*

Tae reached for the phone, but it rang just as her hand hovered above the receiver. She picked it up.

“Sweetie, turn on News Channel 36,” her mother said in a wavering tone.

“I have it on. I just heard. “Ma, Br—”

“I know.”

Only her mother knew how she regretted what had happened with Bryant, but even she didn’t know how Tae felt on some level that she deserved what had happened to her, how she could never be a nurse now. She had fought for her independence and had even gotten the long term contractual job of labeling blood vials in the veteran’s hospital’s lab during the midnight shift. After a small battle with her parents that had led to her slamming out of their house as if she was still the young twenty year old she had been

when the accident happened four years ago. It had been hard won, this apartment and standing on her own two feet. But none of that changed the fact that she did work overnight when the traffic in the hospital was non-existent. And she shopped only at the twenty-four hour grocery store with her hair pulled down over half her face. Plenty of people had physical issues, but somehow she hadn't yet come to terms with hers.

So to hear that the man she had dumped for her selfish reasons might have to go to war because she had driven him away, was a hard pill to swallow.

"We'll just pray for his safety or that he won't have to go," her mother whispered as if speaking in a normal tone might jinx it.

"He's in the army, Ma. Of course he'll go."

"They're sending the marines," her mother insisted.

Tae chewed her lip. "I'll call you back. I'm going to phone Mrs. Hussner."

"Tae—"

She disconnected before her mother could say more. If she didn't do this quickly she might lose her nerve. After all, she knew what her mother would have said. Mrs. Hussner hated her and wanted her to have nothing to do with her son, but Tae had to know if Bryant was okay. She dialed the number and waited for the call to go through. With any luck, Mrs. Hussner wouldn't recognize her number and would answer anyway in case it was important.

"Hello?" came the thick, muffled voice as if she had been crying.

"Mrs. Hussner?"

A pause. "Yes." The voice had turned bitter.

"This is Tae—"

"What do you want?"

She swallowed her own irritation at the woman's attitude and went on. "I heard about America going to war in Iraq and wanted to know if Bryant is okay, if he had any chance of not going."

"Haven't you done enough? Hasn't it been long enough so that you moved on with your life? I heard you were back in the area, working at the VA."

Tae stiffened. Had she heard all of her story?

“Think you’re big stuff working there? Are you a nurse now, got what you dreamed of after you tossed my son aside? Now he gets to go to war and maybe I’ll never see him again.”

Tears filled Tae’s eyes. “I’m so sorry...”

“He was stationed in Texas, so they flew him out here for a couple days and that was it. Gone. My baby’s already gone to Iraq, damn it, and it’s your fault, you sorry piece of trash. I wish he never met you, you hear me? I wish he never met you! After all this time, he’s still stupid enough to think he loves you. Why I ask you? You’re nothing, and you’ll never be nothing!”

Tae gasped for breath. She wanted to tell the old bag to kiss her ass, but she didn’t. She knew the woman was speaking as a terrified mother who was facing the very real danger of losing her youngest son. Mrs. Hussner may not have liked her for Bryant, but she had never been rude to this extent or called her outside her name. So Tae bit her tongue.

Muffled voices came through the phone, and soon she heard Rory saying, “Ma, give me the phone and go lay down. You’re only getting yourself worked up for nothing. I’ll bring you tea in a minute.” He came on the phone then. “Tae, that you?”

She hesitated, not sure if he would attack her as well. Rory hadn’t said much of anything to her or about her that she knew of, but that didn’t mean whatever his opinion had been in the past hadn’t changed for the worse. She would not allow him or his mother to intimidate her. “Yes, it’s me,” she said with as much firmness as she could muster.

“Thanks for calling,” he said. “Sorry about my mother. She’s taking this hard. They may have just announced that they’re sending troops into Iraq, but we’ve known for a bit. Like my mom said, Bryant came home for a couple days to say good-bye...” His voice broke, and all Tae heard for a while was his heavy breathing. “It’s not your fault, Tae, that he joined the service. It’s mine. I pushed him. It was always me who told him which direction to go in for his life, and he listened. I thought I knew best, but I sure as hell didn’t this time.”

She fumbled for a tissue on the side table and wiped her nose and eyes, careful with the right one. Considering what Rory had said, she wondered if he had been the one to suggest to Bryant that he ask her to marry him. Maybe he had never intended to ask her. No. She shook her head. Looking for a way to make herself feel better was not what she needed to focus on at this time. “It’s not your fault, Rory. You couldn’t predict what would happen in the future. Besides, Riley just didn’t have that much going for it. Everyone knows that. A man works in the factory, works a dead end job at one of the few stores there or joins the military. That’s it. The military was the best option for Bryant six years ago.”

“I tell myself that,” he muttered. “It doesn’t help. Nothing helps either myself or my mom feel better. Fuck!” he roared. “I made a promise to myself that I would take care of him, that I would steer him on the right path when we were kids and lost our dad.”

“And you have. He’s a good man.” This time her voice broke, and no amount of tissue would soak up her tears. She tried to muffle it so Rory wouldn’t know.

He heard them in her voice anyway. “You regret letting him go,” he whispered. He paused, and she thought she picked up the sound of a door shutting. He might have been moving somewhere where his mother couldn’t hear their conversation. “It’s not too late, Tae. Write him. I hear that they can eventually get access to email. I’ll give you his email address, and you can send him an email. Then when he gets it, it’ll be up to him to write you back.”

Tae had been twiddling with her spoon on her plate. She angled it so that it reflected her face. The image was only a blur, but she had stared at it in horror and sorrow, in resignation many times. “It is too late, Rory. You just don’t know.”

“I’ll give it to you anyway,” he told her in a firm voice. “Write it down. You’ll change your mind.”

As much as Tae longed to do just that, she hesitated. What was the point? With vivid clarity, she remembered how Malcolm had looked at her, like he was scared or disgusted and he had picked up another girl before she had even gotten out of the hospital. While on a conscious level, she knew his actions reflected what a jerk he was, but it also let her know that men wouldn’t look at her the same. She couldn’t seem to make herself believe that there was one who was sweet enough and loving enough to look past her outward appearance. And that was barring the fact that she would never move beyond where she was now if she couldn’t bear stress without freaking her head out.

No, Bryant must have healed by now in spite of how his mom had insinuated that he still loved her. She would not take him on that roller coaster ride again, especially if after all that time in a desert country he comes home to find her in the state she was in. Maybe she was still in a way being selfish, but she couldn’t do it. She just couldn’t.

After Rory had recited the email address and insisted she repeat it back to him, all without her taking note of it, he ended the call. “I have to go see that my mother’s okay. Like I said she’s taking this thing hard, and so am I, I guess. We’ll be okay though. Write him, Tae. He’ll need an anchor to keep him grounded. Talk to ya later.” He hung up.

In desperation, Tae tore through her purse looking for a pen and paper. When she found her pin and an old phone bill in her purse, she scribbled over the paper, but the ink had run out. She scratched and scratched with no luck, and then bent forward as a sharp pain went through her head.

Locating her pills which were never far, she popped two into her mouth and drank half a glass of water before lying back on the couch. It was just as well. Bryant was better off. He could live a happy life after Iraq. The war surely wouldn't last long.

* * * *

Leena twirled the slip of paper between the fingers of one hand while she chewed the end of her pen and stared off into space. A soldier. Damn if soldiers weren't hot as hell. She had dated a few in town, but all the good ones had seemed to be stationed elsewhere, and she wasn't looking to settle down just yet. That's what would get her out of Riley, she knew, in order to go with one of them when they weren't at war.

She supposed writing one could be entertaining, especially Bryant since she had had a thing for him for years now, ever since she and Tae had started high school together, hip to hip. They had been inseparable up until then. But the second Tae laid eyes on Bryant, he had taken up her focus, and their friendship dissolved. At the time Leena didn't mind too much because she was getting more into boys as well, just not one. But she had vowed that one day she would see what all the fuss was over Bryant. Now was her chance.

Her fool of a boss had taken it into his head to start a grocery delivery service for the older customers in town, and Bryant's mother had taken him up on it. Never mind that she still had a young son who would do whatever she wanted. Rory wasn't going anywhere. What was the point? He ran her house, paid the bills, did the upkeep. Seemed to everyone else that the house was his, and his mother lived with him, not the other way around.

But what could Leena say to her boss when he instructed her to run Mrs. Hussner her small bag of groceries. She did it, and since Mrs. Hussner had said the door would be unlocked, Leena had walked in. She grinned as she descended the front steps back out to her mini pickup. Never in a million years would she have thought she'd overhear Rory giving out Bryant's email address.

She had written it down on a whim, but maybe, just maybe she could get something out of this. If she played her cards right, he might come home to her and not to Tae. Besides, she knew a secret about Ms. High and Mighty Octavia Stokes that not many people in town knew about. In time, her little secret would come out, and there wasn't a doubt in Leena's mind that a man like Bryant wouldn't look twice at her old friend.

"Not with all this to look at." She laughed taking in her low cut blouse revealing the swell of her D cup breasts, her tan-from-a-bottle skin.

Instead of driving back to work, she took a left at the corner of Main and drove down to the public library. Taking the last open spot out front, she threw the car into park, grabbed her purse and hopped out of the vehicle.

Hearing a whistle somewhere behind her, she added a little extra sashay in her hips and strode into the warm interior of the library. Pausing to scan the small expanse, she spotted the information desk and then crossed over to it.

“I’d like to use the computer, please,” she informed the plain-faced, static-y haired librarian. Damn, was there a requirement to look the part of the job?

The woman blinked in seeming disbelief. “Leena?”

She raised her eyebrows. “Yes?”

The woman chuckled. “I’m just surprised to see you in here, hun. How’s your dad and them?”

“Fine,” she said repressively. “Can I use the computer? I took a class last summer, so I know how to use it, if that’s what you’re worried about.” Her ‘class’ had been a computer repairman, and she had done more of taking him than whatever it was he had been trying to teach her about computers. Although she was pretty sure she remembered how to set up and access a Yahoo email account. She had been thinking then that it might come in handy. She was cleverer than anyone had ever given her credit for. She knew that.

“Sure, right this way.” At Leena’s attitude, the woman became all business, probably offended that Leena didn’t remember who she was, but she didn’t let it get to her. She filled out the paperwork for a library card and was soon settled in front of the computer with a warning that she would only get forty-five minutes and then she would have to get off to give others a chance to use it. Leena glanced around the micro library and spotted one other person who seemed immersed in a book entitled *Watchmen*. She rolled her eyes and returned her attention to the screen.

After going through the tedious motions of typing in www.mail.yahoo.com and then clicking the sign up button, followed by entering her personal information, she finally had her own email account. She had been about to use *sexygirl23* as her username, but aside from the fact that it wasn’t available, she figured she might not be taken seriously if her email address was *sexygirl23@yahoo.com*. Grunts and curses fell from her lips while she tried various combinations until she settled on *leena23riley*, and that hadn’t been taken so she snatched it up.

She dug through her purse for Bryant’s email address and typed it in after clicking the button for composing a new email. She paused chewing the tip of a manicured nail while considering what to say to Bryant. With her eyes closed she brought up all that Bryant seemed to care about in his life, and the number one face that popped into her head was Tae.

“Fuck!”

She heaved a sigh and flexed her fingers before curving two of them over the keys. She was no typist. That was for sure.

Best to keep things short and sweet:

Hey there, Bryant,

I don't know if you remember me, but this is Leena from your hometown, Riley. I know you're in a tough situation right now, and I thought you might like to hear from someone back home. You know, just to feel like life isn't as whacked out as it seems where you are, halfway around the world. I don't know if you're interested, but look I'm here to talk when you can. I'll listen. As a friend. Write me if you'd like.

Leena

She smiled at the results. That was good. Not sexy just supportive. Well, not sexy yet. She wouldn't be Leena if she didn't give him a few wet dreams while he was sweating in the desert. With a kiss to a fingertip and then pressing it to the screen, she sent the email off.

Her plan was in action, and before long, Bryant's sexy soldier ass would be all hers.

Chapter Three

Bryant paused for one glorious moment from his work to stare out across the desert and wipe an arm across his forehead. The ground was flat and dry, and all he could see for a good half mile were small shacks and a few people in robes with head coverings. Around him soldiers scurried here and there, setting up equipment, monitoring radios, cursing because something wasn't working or they didn't have the materials they needed. He himself could have used some batteries for his night vision goggles but his commanding officer, the CO, had said no additional ones were available. Make do.

He sighed. With sweat, blood and tears in his pillow at night he'd made it through basic training and had even come to enjoy his life back in Texas where he was stationed. But this? Iraq? It was a contest to see who could stay sane while in the worst of conditions. He was managing but sometimes it got to him. At least now he could be proud of the fact that he was hard enough never to cry. He just sucked it up and went on. That's what he'd had to do on the trek up here to his forward operations base, his FOB. Lugging their packs at fifty pounds in full gear in ninety-five degree weather had been no picnic, but they were here. More fun in the sun awaited him, he figured.

"Hey, Bryant!" his sergeant snapped. "You on vacation?"

"No, sir, sergeant," Bryant replied and bent over his task.

"Success!" someone shouted, and Bryant glanced up. His buddy, Luke was nodding his head with a wide grin on his face and pointing at the laptop in front of him. "We're live, baby! We're live!"

Longing for home hit Bryant like a fist to the gut. "We have access to Internet?" he asked.

"Yep, you know it! Now to see if my baby has written me," Luke said. "She better have. I have this feeling...you know?"

A few grunts of understanding were uttered around him, including Bryant's. They had been out of contact with family and friends for over a month. Back in the states that didn't seem to be too long, but here felt like it had been a year. Bryant wondered if Rory had sent him a message, and he pictured his mother's weeping face when he boarded the plane. He wouldn't allow himself to think of Tae. He had pushed her far in the back of his mind as a lost love, someone he would one day feel confident to say he was over.

Free time for him wouldn't be for another four hours. He could wait. He was a soldier, and duty came first. Period.

The hours crawled by. In fact, it seemed like they were going backward at some point. Bryant's free time dissipated when his sergeant assigned him to a new task. Adjust the

timing on the fifty caliber heavy machine gun. The gun had been jamming. “And we do not need our asses blown off because this weapon isn’t functional when we need it.”

“Yes, sir.” Bryant nodded respectfully and trudged out to the humvee. He glanced down at his watch. Fourteen fifty hours. He hadn’t slept for the last thirty, and a shower would have been great. He shrugged and pulled his aching muscles to the top of the humvee and went to work on the weapon.

Three hours later, he was done.

At last he settled in a small area inside the tent after stepping over equipment and other soldiers’ stuff to get there. The air was thick and hot and smelled like something had died, but he ignored it all to sit at a one of the laptops and log online. Quickly typing in Live.com, he waited with suppressed impatience while the computer thought about it. Finally in, he checked his messages. He had several. Five from Rory, one for every day he had been away from his mother...and one...from leena23riley?

He opened that one first and scanned the contents. A warm feeling rolled over him, and it wasn’t the heat of the Iraqi desert. With effort he kept control of his grin. So she wanted to be friends and write to him? That was nice. He remembered her too. Sexy and beautiful, on the wild side. Rumor had it that she had slept with half the guys back in high school, but Bryant didn’t go in for rumors. Besides, it had been years, maybe she had changed. Her email sounded like it.

While he closed Leena’s email and clicked on his mother’s an ache tried to surface inside him that the email hadn’t been from Tae, but he beat it back into submission and focused on what his mother wrote. Bryant steeled himself against the emotion he knew would be there.

After he had read the very last email with his mother pleading for him to be safe, to wear his protective gear—even in the shower—he stretched his muscles and turned his head at the tap on his shoulder. Luke handed him an O’Doul’s, the non-alcoholic beer they got to drink. Might not be the real stuff, but it was cold.

Bryant snapped the laptop closed, picked up his gun and followed Luke out of the tent. They found a spot to sit on top of some crates and took two long gulps of their beer while watching the night sky. Bryant swallowed hard and heaved a sigh.

“So, you going to ’fess up or what?” Luke asked him.

Bryant frowned. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I saw that email. The one from the girl. You going to write her or you still pining over that other one?”

Bryant let out a string of curses. “Is there no privacy? Fuck!”

“This is the army, you idiot. You checked your privacy at the door when you signed up.” Luke jostled him and turned to spit on the ground. “Besides we’ve been buds since that first day you made an ass of yourself at basic training. And you damn sure cried on my shoulder enough. So out with it.”

“I did not cry on your shoulder!”

Luke laughed.

Bryant glared at him. Luke was always joking, always had a smile on his face, and Bryant couldn’t recall even a single night when his friend had broken down when things got too tough in the beginning, when they were all a bunch of scared kids on their first time away from home. Instead Luke had been the life of the barracks. Even his cold-hearted son of a bitch sergeant liked Luke, and that was saying something. Bryant couldn’t imagine having gotten through all this without him.

“Fine,” he growled and polished off the rest of his beer. “I’m not sure what I’m going to do. At first I liked it that she wrote, but now sitting here all the memories of Tae are rolling around in my head, and I can’t seem to crush them like I did before. I’d fucking moved on. I’ve been with other girls in Texas. You know that.”

Luke nodded. “Yeah and I know you kept ’em all casual, just fuck buddies, and even that didn’t last. All the time it was her, wasn’t it? Your chocolate bunny.” He jostled Bryant again, fluttering his eyes.

Bryant flared his nostrils. “Keep it up and see what you get.”

Luke held up his hands. “Whoa, take it easy, man. I’m on your side. But you gotta ask yourself, is she worth it.” At Bryant’s darkening look, he rushed on. “I’m not putting her down, but she threw you aside, and that was years ago. Here you are a soldier in the army. You’re a hero, bud. Ain’t *too* ugly.”

“Shut the hell up.” Bryant laughed.

“I bet you a hundred bucks she’s moved on and got herself a regular man. You said she wanted to be a nurse or something, went off to a fancy college? Yeah, she’s probably pulling in good money and happy. Then there’s you, always brooding, silent. Get over her. Move on. If that chick back home is hot, I say take her up on her offer.”

“Only if she’s hot though?” Bryant asked with a chuckle.

Luke nodded. “Yeah, only if she’s hot.”

“Yeah, okay,” Bryant agreed. “I’ll write her. Can’t hurt, right? This tour’s got us stuck here anyway, and the only conversation I’m going to get from Rory is whose car broke down that he had to fix and my mother wanting me to go AWOL.”

Luke smirked. “Yeah like you can just walk out of this bitch.”

“Nothing to do, gentlemen?” their sergeant bellowed when he walked up on them.

“No...I mean yes, sir,” Luke said and stood.

“Get it moving. We’re leaving in an hour.”

Bryant raised his eyebrows. “I thought we were digging in here for the night.”

“Change of orders. Let’s go. You’ll be debriefed in five. Let’s move.”

Used to ignoring his weariness, Bryant retrieved his gun and followed his friend and their sergeant to get his specific orders. He knew from experience that they would be rolling throughout the night and wouldn’t stop until maybe dawn. After that when he would rest would be anyone’s guess since he might be put on watch while a few of the other guys could grab a couple of hours. Or he could get lucky and be allowed a couple himself.

While he walked he considered Leena’s email and what Luke had said to him. It was true, he had slept with one or two women while in Texas, but Tae had filled his mind, and no matter how he had tried to drive her out at that time, he couldn’t do it. Now in Iraq he had gained some peace as ironic as that was, and maybe Leena would be the key to his total healing. He would never know if he didn’t give it a try. Besides, he was lonely as hell far away from everything familiar. He would write her when he had free time next and they had Internet access again.

* * * *

October 2005

Leena,

Be ready for me, baby. I’ve got two weeks of leave, and I’m coming to Riley. I don’t want to do a damn thing except spread your legs. Clear your calendar. Take off work. I’m horny as hell!

Bryant

Anxious for word back from Leena, Bryant had been checking his email every time he had the chance, which wasn’t many. He had been lucky so far, no injuries. An IED had

gone off while they were just approaching Nasiriyah, and the bomb had killed one of the guys, but Bryant had been farther back in the line up of humvees. They all mourned their teammate's loss, but were thankful that they were still going strong.

Now just over four clicks from the town, the area was only getting hotter with insurgent activity. Every now and then it still boggled his mind that he was fighting in a fucking war that nobody wanted.

“Two weeks!” Luke shouted. His friend seemed always to be shouting one thing or another. “We’re going home, son!” Luke reached out a hand, and Bryant clasped it. “Got that girl waiting?”

Bryant didn't like to talk much about Leena. He'd been stupid enough to show a couple of the guys the pictures she'd sent, and had been subject to catcalls and dirty jokes about her breasts. Not that he didn't fantasize nightly about them himself. Leena had turned out to be the wildcat he remembered, but damn if he didn't want something more. Well, after the war was over anyway. For *this* two weeks, he wanted sex, sex and more sex.

At last, he got his email to open and sat reading Leena's response. He couldn't help but grow hard at her words. She knew how to get a man excited, he'd give her that. Luke leaned over his shoulder reading out loud, to Bryant's annoyance. “Hey, guys, listen to this,” he yelled. “Bryant, I'm sitting here in my room trying on my fishnet stockings, my garters and spikiest of heels. I'll let you decide on the colors and whether I should wear a bra or just let my girls bounce free.”

“Damn!” someone called out. A sudden crowd formed around Bryant's computer.

“Wait, wait, wait, Luke. Click on that. Looks like there's a picture,” one of them said.

“Hey,” Bryant protested, but with the number of arms reaching around him, he couldn't stop them. A sleazy picture of Leena came up on the screen. She was practically naked. Groans rolled through the crowd.

“Fuck, Bryant,” Luke complained. “Wanna switch girlfriends?”

“She's not my girlfriend,” he began but then fell silent. He had been talking to Leena over email and sometimes calls for the last two years. Why hadn't he accepted that they had something going? After all, she had stuck by him. Not every woman would do that. More than one of the guys had lamented the fact that their girl had melted away like she had never existed as their time here extended on and on. He had already completed two tours himself and was hoping to stay in Texas a while to do some special ops training after his leave. Even at this point, it wasn't certain yet.

An alert came in over the radio, and then bursts of gunfire went off outside the tent. Bryant slapped the laptop closed, and men scrambled about. He jerked his gun up from the position it was always in, at his side, and rushed for the exit.

Taking a knee behind a barrier with his weapon readied, he waited to be briefed by his sergeant. Several bullets pinged the metal a few feet away from him, leaving small holes that could easily have been through someone's body. The danger had become a way of life for them, and he didn't let it bother him or make him jump, but he was aware. Always aware.

Not yet, he prayed. Not just yet.

While his sergeant got his orders from the radio, Bryant glanced around for Luke. He was nowhere in sight. "Listen up," the order came." Bryant focused, but before two words passed his superior's lips an explosion went off and then another. Smoke filled the air, and soldiers scattered, taking defensive positions. All around him was gunfire, and the acrid scent of gunpowder filled his nostrils. A bullet whizzed past his ear.

"Fuck!" someone shouted. "What the fuck is going on? I can't see shit!"

One of the men was yelling into the CB, and Bryant perked up his ears to hear commands and warnings while he squatted low to the ground, making his way around one of the vehicles. A break in the smoke, and he could see through to the rocky grounds forty meters out. A group of men in black flowing clothing. He lifted his gun and found them in the scope.

"Engage," came the order.

Bryant picked them off, one after another. After some time, the snaps of rifle fire ceased, and the bombing stopped. The air took its time clearing, and Bryant and his team assessed the damage. He still hadn't spotted Luke anywhere. He worked his way through soldiers, stepping around the medic that was seeing to a flesh wound in a soldier's arm.

Heading toward one of the guys named Frank, he stopped him. "You seen Luke?"

The man shook his head. "Not lately. Fuckers blew up a supply truck. Now we're down more shit we didn't have enough of to begin with," Frank complained.

Bryant slapped him on the shoulder with the usual "make do" and kept moving. He had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he didn't know why. They had come under attack plenty of times. He and the others had always done what they needed to, to stay alive, to keep moving. This felt... He came upon a group of men huddled around another who was lying on the ground. The only thing visible from his position was one scuffed boot and half a calf. He slowed his gait.

His throat parched, the little hair on his head plastered to his scalp and his uniform hanging on a wet body, he pushed on as if he was walking through water or in this case quicksand.

And then he saw him. Luke. Lying there covered in blood with parts missing. His body was still enough Bryant didn't have to go over there and check or get the report that he was dead. Luke was the carefree one, the one that had never cried in the beginning. He was the one that would crack a joke and have them all laughing when a second before they felt like they would lose their minds out here. Now he was gone.

The medic stood and put a hand on Bryant's shoulder. "I'm sorry. I know you two were close."

Bryant shook his hand off and did an about face. He marched past everyone, no longer hearing the shouts and commands. Blood rushed in his ears, his heart pounded very much alive when Luke was fucking dead. He barged into his tent and over to his stuff. Thinking that he wanted only to break something, he reached his bunk and overturned it. He kicked a box of books someone had given him the day before, and the pages fluttered too softly for his taste.

A mirror slid out from wherever it was stashed. He jerked it up and stared at his bloodshot but dry eyes, and then he smashed his fist into the mirror over and over until there was nothing left. The pieces had fallen to the floor, and the backing shattered in his hands. When blood streamed from his knuckles and he was breathing heavy like a raging bull, he dropped to the floor and sat there in silence, waiting for the control to return.

"All done?" his sergeant said.

"Yes, sir," Bryant answered.

The man grunted. "Luke was a good soldier. Now, get that hand tended, and let's move out."

* * * *

"Bryant's coming home," Tae's mother informed her.

"Ma, you don't have to give me a blow by blow of everything Bryant does. You told me last week that he'll be at a higher rank now, a Specialist?"

Her mother nodded as she folded Tae's laundry. No matter how often she told her mother she could do her own laundry and anything else necessary in her home, the woman wouldn't listen. Tae had come to the conclusion that this was her mother's way of spending more time with her, and if that was the case she should leave her to it. The visit broke up the monotony of her life anyway and eased the loneliness just a little.

"Well," her mother went on, "I found out that he has to take some training or something or other and then he'll be at the rank of a specialist. But that's after his two week leave to spend here in Riley. Then it's back to Texas, I guess. I just pray he doesn't have to go back to that senseless war. You know they've lost many young people already behind it."

Tae's chest constricted. "Mother."

"I'm sorry." She reached across the table and patted Tae's hand. Tae leaned away a tad and readjusted her hair. Her mother made a tsk sound. "Tae, it's me. You don't have to hide."

Tae stood up. "I think I'm going to go and lay down a while, Ma. I feel drained after we scrubbed the stove."

"That's because you wouldn't get out of my way and let me do it."

Tae ignored her and kept walking to her bedroom. As soon as she shut the door, the phone rang, and she picked it up. "Hello?"

"I thought you should know—"

"Don't." She sighed. "Riley will not let time past," she grumbled. "It's over, Rory. And I know he's coming. My mother told me. I guess news travels fast around here, and apparently one's private number is not sacred either."

She thought he might have chuckled but couldn't be sure. Rory was always serious, and she couldn't remember ever seeing him crack a smile or just laughing out loud. It must have been difficult to be responsible for one's family at a young age. His mother had never been a strong woman, even when she was younger. Their father, from what Tae's mother had informed her, had treated the woman like gold, and she had taken it hard when he passed. Must be where Bryant got it from, she thought, and then chastised herself for even entertaining the thought.

"Rory, you're tormenting me," she admitted and then regretted it.

"I'm sorry. But that must mean you still care." He paused and then said, "I know that—"

"Don't!" Grasping at straws, she made up something to get him off her back. "I'm seeing someone. He works at the hospital where I work. We're serious, and I think..." She'd been about to say she thought he could be the one, but that was taking it too far to get Rory to stop hoping she would come back to Bryant. She still couldn't figure out why he was so determined. He should have been pissed off like his mother was or at least want her to be happy with whoever Bryant chose.

"It's just that where he's headed now is not where I want him to go," Rory almost begged. "He's stronger now, much stronger. What I want for him might be important, but it doesn't sway what he decides any longer. The army in that sense has been good for him. He's hard. I'm proud of that. But..."

On one hand she wanted him to admit what the problem was, and on the other she knew it was better for her peace of mind that she didn't know. If he had been hurt, Rory wouldn't struggle to tell her. She was pretty sure he would come right out and say it. "Where he is headed," Rory had said. That couldn't be the training in Texas. What else was there? He was at war.

Tae pulled in a deep breath, closed her eyes and smoothed down her long sleeved plaid dress. The dress hung too loose on her frame. She'd wanted to lose thirty pounds before the accident, and she had. Now she needed to pick up a few. Shopping online could be tricky if one didn't have the knack, and she didn't. Strolling into a local mall would be great, but she couldn't get up the courage. So this was it.

"He's what?" she encouraged him. "What path is Bryant on that you can't stand seeing him on?"

Still Rory hesitated, and then he finally spoke. "He's seeing a girl from Riley. Or he's been talking to her, sometimes calls, most of the time emails. It might get serious, I mean I don't see how it couldn't being that they've been talking the last couple of years."

Tae's mind was awl. Her mother hadn't shared that news with her. Two years? Rory had to be right. One didn't cyber date that long and it not get serious."

"W-Who is she? Do I know her?" She hated how her voice trembled, but had to know. This was a good thing. She could smash all subconscious hope she might be tucking away inside herself that some miracle would happen, her face would be back to normal, and she'd have a shot at Bryant.

"It's Leena."

Tae blinked, staring down at her bed, recalling that her mother had picked out the comforter, one she did not like. For a few moments the name didn't click in her head. She didn't know any Leena, but Rory had said it like she should know, and his tone had held distaste.

And then it hit her. Her best friend from fourth grade up until ninth when she had met Bryant. *No, no, no.* He couldn't be seeing her. She had become a slut of the worse kind. Not Bryant. He would never go for a woman like her, would he? Of course he would. The girl was beautiful, and if his mother had anything to say about it, Leena was definitely the right color. She was white. She closed her eyes and lay down on the bed with a throbbing in her temple. In all fairness, there were more reasons than the color of her skin why Mrs. Hussner didn't like Tae.

"Leena. I remember her," she said simply. "I wish him well."

"Tae!"

“I’m sorry, Rory. I cannot help you...or him. I understand you don’t want your brother to date a woman like Leena. I assume she hasn’t changed.”

“If you consider worse a change, I guess she has,” he muttered.

“Well since he’s coming back, you can talk to him, tell him how she really is.” She bit her lip. “I guess that might not work. I mean she’s been hanging in there all this time. Maybe she truly cares about him. Did you ever consider that?”

“No, and I’m not going to. I don’t believe it. Geb over at the supermarket told me he thinks she’s got something going with two or three soldiers at the same time, different units. Emails them all and strings them along. I guess if they all have leave at different times, then they might not be the wiser, but...”

“It’ll blow up in her face before long. You’ll see. And if Bryant’s as tough as you say, then he’ll be fine. After all, he was okay when I screwed up.”

“You acknowledge that.”

“Rory, don’t,” she begged. “Please.”

“Why don’t you ever come to the community dances? No one has seen you since you got back, and no one knows where you live. It’s not in Riley. Your exchange is different.”

“I’m in Tempe. I get a ride down there to the VA hospital for work, and then get a ride back.”

“Get a ride?” he said wonderingly, considering she had a vehicle of her own the last time he had seen her.

She rushed on to cover her slip. “You’re not asking me for a date, are you, Rory?” she teased.

He choked. “Of course not!”

A pang went through Tae’s stomach, and she automatically reached for her face but stopped. Rory knew nothing of how she looked. He was only reacting that way because she had been his brother’s girlfriend. Still it hurt. Bruised feelings weren’t always rational. “I was kidding,” she told him. “I’m not much of a social butterfly. I’ve never been. Besides I work like an animal, taking on extra shifts.”

“Nursing,” he said knowingly. She didn’t disabuse him of his assumption, and she didn’t know how long she thought her secret would last in their community. Up to now, she wasn’t particularly newsworthy so no one must have gotten into conversation about her, that she had quit school. She prayed it stayed that way.

“Rory, I have to go. I’m sorry I can’t help. I need to...get some rest before my next shift.” That was true. She worked the midnight shift, and it worked out wonderfully for her. But she figured she would only lie down for a short while. Rory, hung up with disappointment in his voice, and Tae felt for him, and for Bryant. She just hoped that her ex-boyfriend’s heart was not involved. With maturity and her own screwing him over, she hoped he would be more cautious about loving or trusting. That was the reality that life handed out to you every day.

Tae lay down on the bed only to be disturbed a second time by a soft knock on her door. She opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling. “Come in.”

Her mother’s head appeared around the edge of the door. “Baby, I know you were resting, but your brother is on the phone. He wanted to talk to you.”

Tae frowned. “Isn’t he coming in this weekend, Ma? I can talk to him then.” She and her brother were not very close. He was a couple years younger and into his own lifestyle that did not include their parents or her, and hadn’t for a long while, even before her accident. Afterward, he had called and visited with her twice. And then he had gone off to college himself in Colorado. Visits home had been few and far between.

Her mother handed her the cell phone and walked out of the room. Tae sighed. “Yes, what is it, Lee?”

With no hello or how have you been, he said, “I want you to go out with my friend I’m bringing with me.”

“What?” she shouted and then lowered her volume. “No, absolutely no. Lee, you know how I am now. You know my problems.” She paused. “Or maybe you don’t since you don’t bother to come to see me or call. Let me break it down for you, brother. One side of my face looks like road kill, and if I get too worked up I’m fucking blind!”

She had no idea why she was so angry, but she was. Part of it must be the pain of knowing Leena would be with Bryant and he could actually love her for all Tae knew, and the other was that her brother cared so little about her that he didn’t know she was not date-worthy.

He broke into her tirade. “I know that, Tae. Don’t you think I know what’s going on with you?”

“No. I don’t.”

“Well, Mom tells me every detail of your life and everybody else’s lives in Riley. Why the hell she think I left in such a hurry? Because I don’t want any parts of it. Just like you tried to.” He paused as if he realized the insensitivity of his words at long last. “Look, it’s not a big deal. This guy, my friend Muff is cool. He’s not into all the superficial stuff, like looks and all. I thought he might be good to go out with you. He’s only going to be

here a week or two at the most. You two can just have a cup of coffee or something. What's the big deal?"

She didn't say anything.

"Come on, Tae," he begged. "I know it would be nice if you could just have male companionship for like a few nights when you don't have to worry about whether he's thinking you're not pretty. It will be a break for you. And trust me, Muff is huge on his save the planet, shit. His mind is too elevated for that kind of vanity. He's said so enough times to the rest of us."

"So in other words, you're trying to foist him off on me?"

He chuckled. "Is it working?"

"What kind of name is Muff?"

"Ask him."

Tae was terrified. But if she expected to move past the fear and develop a social life, then this might be the first step. After all, Bryant had done it. She could too. She had to try. "Okay, Lee. I'll do it, but you better warn him. I mean really warn him. I don't need some guy staring at me like I'm a freak of nature, and I'm not looking for a love match. Just someone to talk to and like you said, have coffee. Deal?"

"Yeah, deal. See on Saturday."

"Okay. And thanks."

Chapter Four

When Bryant's plane touched down in Charlotte, despair and excitement warred for dominance in his heart. He couldn't allow himself to give over to despair, and yet it didn't release him long enough to enjoy the excitement of being home. So as he stood and yanked down his bag from the overhead compartment, he settled on existing.

In the airport terminal, he paused, searching the area for Leena. She was nowhere in sight. With the number of pictures she'd sent over the last couple of years, he didn't doubt he would recognize her. With those breasts normally squeezed behind a blouse a size too small and that platinum blonde hair, she would stand out in a sea of people.

He craned his neck over the people crying out greetings to loved ones or just rushing off to whatever final destination they had in mind. Through the throng, he spotted Rory's solemn face and experienced a rush of emotion. He'd missed the loser who thought he was his father.

"Bryant!" Rory quipped and drug him into a bear hug. "What the fuck! You've grown out. You're bigger than I am."

Bryant snorted but didn't smile. "That's not saying much. You're no body builder."

"Whatever. Good to have you home." Rory grabbed his bag from his hand with a slap on his back and started in the opposite direction. "Mom can't wait to see you."

"Why isn't she here?"

Rory shrugged. "Been sick the last week." He held up a hand. "Before you start in on me for not saying anything, it's only a cold, but she won't rest. She's always worrying. I think she was born to worry. Anyway, I told her I flat out refuse to take her to the airport if she wasn't better because she didn't lie down and rest. Laid down for a half hour and got up, so I left her."

Bryant shook his head. "You always were a cold bastard."

Rory cast him a glance but said nothing. Bryant knew Rory cared. He just had a funny way of showing it, and he didn't waste emotions for a minute, on anybody, least of all his own family. Bryant sighed.

"Did you hear from Leena about coming to the airport?" he asked his brother.

"Should I have?"

Bryant frowned. "Did you or not? I expected her to be here."

Rory looked like he was going to comment, changed his mind, and then changed it again. “Where the hell is that going, Bryant? You know she’s not worth—”

“Don’t start.”

“You had a good woman. You let her get away from you.”

Bryant glared at his brother while he tossed Bryant’s bag in the back, unlocked his truck and they got inside. “You’re fucking kidding me, right? In case you’ve forgotten Tae dumped me, and that was years ago. Not even an issue now.”

“No?”

“No,” he said with firmness he hoped would put an end to the conversation. No such luck.

“Leena is a good fuck. I’ll grant you that. But that’s all she’s good for. You’re not the type of guy who will make that kind of thing permanent. Not with her kind. You need a wife.”

Bryant turned his head and stared out at the passing scenery. Nothing had changed. He rolled down the window a little and breathed the air. There was something cleaner about America. No, it was freedom. Freedom had a scent, and this he was taking in was it. And modernization, he thought. Houses, not shacks, good paved roads. His eyes widened at the strip of restaurants they passed. McDonald’s. Good old greasy, bad for you American food.

For a second he thought of Luke and remembered that his buddy would never see this again, never breathe the air, never see his family and have his sister chew him out like Rory was doing Bryant right now. He had died in a foreign country, far away from all that was familiar, and for all Bryant knew he had been lonely and afraid somewhere deep inside. Maybe he should have tried harder to get Luke to talk about home and just everything. Jokes were great to encourage the guys but what about his friend? Had he neglected to give him what he needed? He’d never know.

Rory interrupted his thoughts. “I see sadness in you, Bryant. It wasn’t there before. I can only imagine what you dealt with over there.”

“You being sensitive?” Bryant tried to joke and failed.

“If you want to talk about it...”

“I don’t.”

Rory didn't say anything more for a couple miles. He flipped through the radio channels, found a country music station he liked and leaned back. Finally he spoke. "I talked to Tae."

Bryant didn't bother responding.

"She's back. Lives in Tempe. Far as I know she never comes to Riley. Maybe there are memories here she's too scared to face. You should go see her. I've been trying to talk her into coming back to you—"

"What!" Bryant glared at him. "Damn it, Rory, you can't keep interfering in my life! I'm a grown man now, and I'll be damned if I let you tell me what I can and cannot do! I joined the army because—" He stopped. It would get him nowhere blaming Rory for getting him in the war. Truth was he loved being in the army. It was his life now, and while he wouldn't choose to fight a war, he loved the discipline of the army, the orders, the status, everything about it.

He ran his hands through his hair and closed his eyes trying to calm down. "What...how is she? Does she look good? Healthy?"

Rory smirked, the closest he ever came to a smile. "Not sure. Like I said, she lives in Tempe. She doesn't come to Riley that I know of. Her mother visits her often enough and her father. I think she feels the same as I do about you two. She gave me Tae's phone number and had to know I would pass it to you."

"I don't want it."

Rory dug around in his pocket after he had pulled to a stop at a traffic light.

"Did you hear me? I said—"

His brother stuffed a small slip of paper in his shirt pocket and thumped it with the back of his hand. "Take it. You never know."

"I'm seeing Leena."

"About her—"

"Fucking drop it!"

Rory let it go, but Bryant had the feeling it wasn't over. The pushy bastard would never let him hear the end of it until he talked to Tae at least. Maybe he would, just to get his brother off his back. He sighed, wondering how his mother would take the fact that he would be leaving a couple days early to fly out to Tennessee in order to see Luke's parents. He had no doubt the army had informed them about their son by now, but he wanted to give a more personable account of Luke's last days, how upbeat he always

was, how he had the back of every man in their platoon. He would hope someone would do that for Rory and his mother should he ever get killed out there.

A few hours later, after spending time with his family, holding his mother while she cried and assuring her he was okay though he remained silent about Luke, Bryant was at last able to borrow Rory's truck to go and hunt down Leena. She had not answered her cell phone all the times he had called, and he was getting pissed off. He'd written to her again and told her how he needed to talk, to just spend time with her because of Luke. He thought she would understand and be there for him. He hoped he wasn't the dumb ass that Rory had called him when they had argued about it twice more at home.

After prying the info out of Rory that Leena worked at the local supermarket, he gunned it the two miles over there in a worse state than he had been when he arrived. He needed some serious down time, anything to get his mind off of Iraq and losing his friend.

The sun was just going down and was a big fireball of red on the distant horizon. It seemed to sit on Main Street between the narrow row of houses with barely enough space to drive down it, cars parked on both sides. As much as Bryant loved the small town of Riley, he'd always dreamed that clichéd dream, the one where there was a white picket fence, out in the suburbs or the country around a sweet little house just for him and his wife. Years ago, he'd imagined it with Tae, and him carrying her across the threshold. Every time he tried to bring it up these days, all he saw was dry desert and dead bodies littering the ground in places. Now, it was Luke's in particular.

He screeched to a halt outside the supermarket and sat idling between two parking spaces. His chest constricted, and it became hard to breathe. Hands gripping the steering wheel like his life depended on it, he glanced up to see Leena standing at the entrance of the store, weight on one leg, popping gum and smoking a cigarette. Her head was cocked to the side, and her eyes were lowered in a flirty way as she said something to the man beside her. A soldier, Bryant noticed, in fatigues.

Bryant slipped from the truck and stood there staring. He tapped a hand against his thigh in rapid succession while shifting from one foot to the other. "Leena," he barked.

She glanced around, and her eyes went wide before she tossed away the cigarette, said something to the man beside her and darted over to him. "Bryant, oh sugar, it's so good to see you." She flew into his arms. Bryant had to lock his legs to keep from being forced into the side of the truck, but his body came alive the second she fell into his arms. She was all softness and curves, and her breasts pressed into his chest. Bryant let her slide down his body to land on her feet but he held her close, a hand tucked at her nape while he turned his nose into her hair. Honeydew melon, he thought.

The emotions rained down on him. He needed to find somewhere to get alone, because a soldier did not break down in public. Period. But it was too late. He dragged Leena closer and squeezed his eyes shut while pulling in so much air so fast his lungs burned.

“You were to meet me at the airport with Rory,” he muttered, still buried in her hair. His voice didn’t sound normal. It was thick and heavy. He swallowed hard.

“Tomorrow, I thought.” She giggled like it was no big deal.

“I needed...”

He let it go, and Leena drew back, but he dragged her close again with her forehead pressed to his. Her long hair blocked their faces on one side but not the other since it was pinned back somehow. He hoped no one saw the pain that must be etched in his face. He didn’t even want Leena to see it. The hopelessness tore at him and threatened to make him collapse, but he held on to sanity and to Leena. She was all he had right now, all that mattered in this second.

* * * *

Tae dug out a few bills from her purse and unraveled them before handing them over to the cab driver. Catching a taxi from her apartment into Riley had been expensive and a huge step, but she had wanted to surprise her mother. Especially after the woman had almost burst into tears about having to choose between coming out to help Tae around the house like she usually did and looking after Tae’s father who had slipped in the bathroom and broke his ankle.

“Ma, it is so not a big deal. You should be there with Dad. He needs you,” she had said. And then thinking that sounded like she was saying she didn’t need her mother, she revised with, “I’ll be fine for a while, and anyway Lee’s going to be here tomorrow with his friend. Remember, I have a big date to get ready for. I have to search through my closet and find something suitable. I might even go out and shop at the mall for something new.”

“Oh yes!” Her mother was almost clapping she was so happy about that. “Right. How could I forget? But I should be there with you if you’re going shopping, Tae. I don’t want anything to happen to you...”

“Ma, relax. I’m a big girl.”

“But Tae—”

She didn’t need to be reminded of all her issues. “Ma, it’s fine. I’ll see you when Lee brings me down. Matter of fact, I see I have this blue dress I’ve only worn once. It will be perfect for a casual get-together with a friend.”

“I thought it was a date.” Her mother was crestfallen.

“Friends first. Isn’t that what you always told me about you and Dad?” she said tongue in cheek.

“Yes, you’re so right.” Her mother chuckled. “I’m forgetting all my good advice. Okay, sweetie, I will call you tomorrow, early, to be sure you’re on schedule for Lee. I love you, baby. Always remember that.”

“I know, Ma.” *You and Dad are the only ones.* But she didn’t say that out loud. She had vowed shortly after the accident not to wallow in pity parties, and she wasn’t going to start now.

After her mother had agreed to stay home and take care of her father, Tae had decided to surprise her while at the same time learning to get out of her comfort zone. In a fit of real boldness, and since it was getting dark out, she had the taxi driver stop near the supermarket. Not at the front door so people could watch her get out of the vehicle, but around the corner. She could suck in a few calming breaths and then work up the nerve to pass under the bright lights in the store. With any luck most residents would be off having a good time on a Friday night, or preparing to, and they would not be doing their weekly grocery shopping.

The cab pulled off, and Tae straightened her dress, hooked her purse up over her shoulder, and made sure her hair hung just right. “Okay, Tae, girl,” she whispered to herself. “Find your happy place and stay there so we can do this. It’s so not a big deal. And hell it’s been a few years since you’ve been home. Maybe no one will recognize you.” *Fat chance.*

With measured steps and a confident smile plastered on her face, Tae turned in the supermarket’s direction and rounded the corner in time to spot Bryant in the arms of her old best friend Leena.

Tae gaped. Their bodies were locked together, their foreheads pressing against one another, and Bryant’s hands were tenderly cupping Leena’s face like she was the most important thing in his life. Tae’s steps faltered. She lifted a hand and patted the air a couple of times before she made contact with the wall beside her to catch the weight of her sagging body.

He loves her, she thought in despair. Despair she had no right to feel. She hung on, unable to turn away as Bryant’s mouth lowered to Leena’s and she took his gentle kiss as if it was her due. Her big breasts were hidden somewhere behind the tight muscle of his arm as it engulfed her and that broad chest protecting her, shielding her like she was a precious gem. A small cry was torn from Tae’s throat just watching them, watching him in particular.

Bryant was different. It had been eight years since she had seen him last, the scrawny eighteen year old, and now he was a man. The army had filled him out with bulky muscle, mass that under any circumstances would make a woman weak in the knees just looking at him. Broad shoulders, powerful legs, all for Leena.

A pounding began in Tae's head at the same time the tears began to fall. She worked her way back around the wall to the street intersecting with the one where Bryant held Leena. She pressed her back to the wall and sobbed, all the while cursing herself out because she had no right, none at all, to be crying over him. It was she who had let him go, who had never known with certainty if she loved him.

The clear devastation that was wracking her body right now, brought on one of her migraines and with it the blurred vision. The more she tried to calm down, the more the tears fell. She searched her purse for her medicine but couldn't lay her hands on it. All she was able to find was tissue, and she used it to mop her face and nose. That was of little help when she couldn't stop blubbering.

"Come on, Tae. Get a grip," she begged herself. Her emotions weren't listening.

Even with blurred vision, she noted the twilight crossing into full darkness. The streetlights which popped on only exacerbated her pounding head. Darkness and blindness meant she was more vulnerable out there alone and not knowing who to trust, afraid to call out for help. And every time she lost her vision, the fear of it never returning made everything that much scarier. Without some time to lie down and be quiet in a safe place, she would never pull herself together.

On the verge of hyperventilating, Tae stiffened when someone called her name.

"What the hell. Tae?"

She blew out a breath in relief. Her brother Lee. The blur in front of her shifted, and she sensed him close. "Lee? Uh, could you give me a ride to Mom's? I was going to do a little shopping but changed my mind."

Keeping her head low, she hoped he didn't spot her tears. She reached a hand up pretending to scratch at her eyebrow, checked her hair and rubbed her temple. At least the sobs had calmed the moment she knew it was him.

"Stupid," he grumbled. "Fine. Let's go. Muff's actually excited to meet you." His voice seemed to fade as he spoke, and she figured he was walking away. Panic set in. He wasn't alone. Of course he wasn't. He'd told her he was bringing his friend, and they were early.

"Lee," she shrieked as low as she could.

He must have stopped. "What?"

"I...um...I can't see," she whispered.

He must not have heard what she said, but he picked up on her not following and the fact that she stood there twisting her hands with her head down. As had been his habit when they were growing up, he jumped to the wrong conclusion.

“Cut the shit, Tae,” he grumbled. “You said you’d go out with him, keep him company. You damn sure aren’t going back on it now. We didn’t waste our time driving all the way back here for nothing. Now stop that girly crap and get in the car.”

Anger suffused her body to replace the nerves. “You are the most insensitive asshole I’ve ever met, Lee. You don’t know a damn thing about me, not before my accident or now. You’re more blind than I am if you can’t figure out the problem is not that I’m backing out of the date.”

“Then what is it? I don’t have all night. I’m tired.”

“I can’t see!” she shouted. Needles of pain exploded over her head, and she fell forward into her brother’s chest. Sharp angles broke her fall. He was thinner than he had been before he left for college. Probably not eating right, she figured somewhere in back in the still sane part of her mind.

Lee’s arms came up around her. For a moment she thought he would hug her, but he pushed her upright, though gently. “Sorry. I didn’t know. Come on.”

Tae reached a hand out, and Lee took hold of it before leading her across the pavement. She caught the creak of the door opening on his old beat up convertible, and when he had settled her inside, he did the introductions. Tae thought she’d throw up.

“Guys, this is my sister, Tae.”

Guys? Her stomach turned.

“This is Muff, the friend I told you about, Kendra, and Davon.” A round of “hey” filled the area in the car, and Lee started the engine. Tae pushed out the smallest of greetings and kept her head down. She figured it had been inevitable anyway that Muff wouldn’t be interested, and she sure wasn’t right now with her head pounding. All she wanted to do was disappear inside her old room at her mother’s house and sleep until next week, pretending what she had just seen between Leena and Bryant had never happened.

The problem with that was—she was jealous as hell. Years ago she’d tossed him aside for a stupid dream, and all the time she’d known he was a good man. There just weren’t many men out here like Bryant. Now she didn’t deserve him, not for a minute. But neither did Leena. Did she? Then again, maybe Bryant’s sweet heart had changed her, had influenced her to be the woman he needed. She only hoped so.

* * * *

Bryant backed Leena into the motel room with his lips plastered to hers, and he slammed the door behind them. He drew her into his arms and traced greedy kisses along her jawline, her neck and lower to her chest. With frantic fingers, he pinched on the buttons on her blouse, trying not to rip them off in his eagerness to see her breasts, to knead them in his palms.

“Damn, I want to fuck you,” he rasped out and then hesitated. “Was that too harsh? I get around the guys and forget my manners.”

She grinned. “Don’t be stupid. I’ve been around soldiers most of my life too. I know how you talk.” She winked. “And I know how you fuck. Now shut up and give it to me.”

Bryant let a slow grin spread over his face, and then he ripped Leena’s blouse open. He yanked it down her arms and threw it across the room before he went after her bra. The red lace that did nothing to disguise her puckered nipples soon followed her blouse, and Bryant hoisted her into his arms to carry her over to the bed.

He dropped her down on the soft surface and followed, his lips hungry to get that deep rose bud into his mouth. Desire ruptured in his body as he sucked and licked at Leena’s nipples. He encircled her waist and yanked her into position beneath him, while parting her legs with his knee.

Only giving himself an instant, he leaned up and stripped of his clothing, and gloving his shaft with a condom, before he was on her again, pushing his tongue down her throat and imagining it was his dick. He wondered how she’d feel about doing that for him, and then thought about who he was with. Leena might do anything he wanted sexually, even letting him fill her ass with his come.

But right now he was on fire, and he needed release. They had all weekend to try as many positions as the two of them could come up with. At last the endless daydreams were over. He could indulge his fantasies.

With his hands on the backs of Leena’s thighs, Bryant sat up and positioned his erection at her opening. She wasn’t as wet as he would have liked, but he wasn’t going to wait. He glanced at her face, and felt a small disappointment that she wasn’t...someone else. And the expression of ecstasy seemed a tad forced, but he ignored it.

He pushed in, and Leena screamed. Bryant’s lips parted in a gasp. He fell forward, his hands on either side of Leena’s narrow hips. He pushed a little farther. She wasn’t as tight as he imagined she would be, but she felt incredible. Her warm softness enveloped him, seemed to stroke him, and he had to stop pushing to avoid coming right away. When he was calmer, he pushed again until he filled her.

“Oh wow, lover,” she teased. “I had no idea you’d be so big.”

Bryant grinned. “And when I am done you’ll say I had no idea you were so good.”

He thought he spotted irritation in her expression, but he hadn't been mocking her. Had she said those words before, to other men. Yeah, he was a dumb ass. He pumped her hard, ignoring her cries, not knowing if they were bliss, pain or fake. Reaching beneath her, he lifted her hips off the bed, and with his weight on his knees and hands, he rammed deep into her and out again, at first fast and then slow. He didn't stop once.

Sucking her nipple, nipping it at intervals and licking it at others, he pounded into Leena for his release. She screamed, hurting his ears, but still he didn't stop. Without warning the buildup started. His core muscles tightened, and his balls contracted. This was it.

"Fuck, I'm coming!" he shouted.

The release was strong and so good. He didn't want it to stop. Groaning through it, he let all the tension and the pain of loss eek out of him until at last he rolled off of her to the bed. Leena lay still for a while in silence. Bryant was grateful for that. He didn't know if she had climaxed, but in a few minutes he would make sure she did.

She sat up. "My turn."

His eyes widened at her boldness. She shoved him flat, took hold of his shaft, and whipped the condom off. With apparent long practice, she stroked him until he began to get hard again. When he was stiff, she leaned across to her purse and pulled several condoms from it. Bryant watched as she shuffled through the packages no doubt looking for the right size. He wanted to deny his sexual desires, but couldn't.

She tore open the packet with her teeth, holding it in one hand while still stroking him with the other. Soon he was gloved a second time and Leena positioned herself over him. He sank inside her with ease and moaned at the pleasure it gave him.

Leena chuckled. "You might like this, lover, but I'm getting mine in this round." She winked. Her hips rocked, pushing him so deep. Bryant let loose a few swear words and licked his lips. Her breasts bounced, and he stared, mesmerized. Leena put her head back and began to whine, a low odd sound until it built in volume to a scream. She bounced harder.

Bryant grasped her hips but she pushed his hands away. He lay flat with his arms at his sides and watched her. She didn't need his participation at all, and he didn't mind. Her pink lips parted, her long hair flapped about creamy white shoulders. He traced the line of her slender body down to a narrow waist and a super flat belly, lower still to the close cropped muff of sandy hair at her apex. He caught sight of his shaft gliding in and out her.

Against his sides, her thigh muscles tightened, and then she screamed louder. Her inner muscles contracted, and he knew she was orgasming. Just knowing she was sent him over

the top a second time. He shut his eyes, and rich chocolate ones slid into his mind just as he exploded with not Leena's but another's name on his lips.

Fuck! Tell me she didn't hear that.

Leena climbed off of him and headed to the bathroom without a word. She slammed the door shut, and Bryant threw his arm over his eyes. "Fool!" Why the hell couldn't he just get over Tae. It had been eight damn years. A sane person would have. Weary, he sat up and snatched the condom off to deposit into the trash. He watched his shaft rise and rolled his eyes. He needed to make nice. Tae was in the past.

Glancing at the packages of condoms on the nightstand, he left them there and stood to round the bed and head for the bathroom. The shower was running. He tried the knob, found it unlocked, and walked in. The shower curtain was drawn, and Leena was inside. Bryant pulled it back to join her. He watched her soap her beautiful body ignoring him.

"I didn't mean to do that," he muttered. "I'm sorry."

"You're still pining after her after all these years?" she complained. "She's moved on, become a nurse and left your small town ass behind. When are you going to realize that?"

He clenched his jaw but said nothing. Reaching for the soap, he allowed his body to bump hers, and she made no move to distance herself from him. That was encouraging. He first soaped his hands and then turned her back to him to run his hands down over her body. When he reached the curve of her ass, he lingered and then dipped between her cheeks to press a finger at her anus. She arched her back, pushing her ass into his palm.

"You've had it here?" he almost demanded.

"Of course." She bit her lip after the admission, looking up at him. "I'm not a virgin, Bryant."

"I didn't think you were." He hesitated. "I expect if you're going to be with me, that you'll *only* be with me."

"You're one to talk, crying out another woman's name when I made you come."

"Point taken. However—"

"I get it, okay?"

He noticed she didn't affirm that she would be faithful to him, but he didn't push. He was not looking for a wife, not right now when he was still full time in the service. At the rate he was going, a wife might never be in the cards for him, and that was fine. When he was sure he wouldn't bring up Tae again, he would pursue Leena about being faithful to him. Either way, he damn sure wasn't going to go for her standing him up when he came home

and then finding her flirting with another soldier. That would never be tolerated one way or another.

Angry, he whipped her around and dropped to his knees. When he had rinsed all the soap away, he forced her legs apart and buried his mouth between them. Holding her folds open, he thrust his tongue into her moist center and then drove it higher to her clit. A tremor shook her legs muscles. Bryant reached behind her, parted her cheeks and drove a soapy finger into her ass. While he sucked hard at her clit, almost wanting to punish her, he pumped his finger in and out of her ass.

Leena's screams of "yes" filled the space in the narrow shower. Her obvious pleasure, which sounded very real this time, only drove Bryant on. He pumped harder still and sucked and licked her like a man starving. Her cream flowed, and he delved for it, eating up every drop. When she was still and quiet, he stood and placed a heavy hand on her shoulder.

"Go down on me," he commanded.

She bulked in expression but said nothing. After she had sunk to her knees, he handed her the soap so she could wash him. She rubbed it between trembling hands until the bubbles formed, and then she placed the soap in its holder. Her palms slid over his staff, washing from the base to the tip. Her fingertip teased the opening at the top, and Bryant had to bite down on a cry.

"My balls," he told her in a harsh whisper. She obeyed, cupping them with gentleness, washing, rising and then washing again. When he was clean, she took him between her lips. Bryant braced himself.

Inch after inch slid in. He hadn't considered himself more than average in length, but he had a good girth. Yet, Leena took him, all of him, deep into her throat. He caught the back of her head and pushed. She sucked. Bryant braced himself on the shower wall, gasping and holding off his climax to get all she had to offer. *Damn it, she's good.*

She pulled back and ran the tip of a tiny tongue around his hard-on, teased the thick head, and then slid him between her lips. She teased and sucked, withdrew and pulled him in again. He groaned, wanting to encourage her not to stop, but refusing to allow a word to pass his lips. *More! Harder!*

She swallowed him, grasped his ass, slapped it twice, and then sucked harder. He shouted, a hoarse cry that left him weak. He came pumping her face, his fingers tangled in her hair. This was the third time, and he didn't know if he shot out any come at all, but the sensation was there, and that was all that mattered to him. He rode it out, loving it, wanting it to go on. But soon his body calmed, and Leena moved out of his grasp, resting on her heels. She looked up at him, still sexy with swollen lips and wet hair.

She ruined the effect by tilting her head to the side, lowering her lids in practiced seduction. “Well? It was good, right?”

He sighed and nodded. “Yeah. It was.”

She grinned, revealing perfect teeth. “So I was wondering. Don’t you want to take me shopping tomorrow?”

Bryant flared his nostrils. She’d talked of that a lot in her emails, how her favorite past time was shopping, and she had described each and every article of clothing she had purchased. He remembered wondering how she could afford to go so often. Now he knew. How quickly would she deplete his money? He sighed again.

“Yeah, I guess I do.”

Chapter Five

Tae fidgeted across the table from Muff. She couldn't believe the man had actually gone through with going out with her after the fiasco on the side of the road the day before. And she didn't know what she had been expecting, but he wasn't bad looking. While she studied his dark mocha face, she considered how it was nice that he wasn't Lee's age but three years older, which put him older than her as well.

He wore stylish glasses and had good hair, the kind you get when there's a mix of races in the last two generations. His ears did sit a little too far from his head, but she wasn't complaining, and well this wasn't a date-date anyway. This was just showing a friend around, a friend of a friend.

"So what do you do for fun?" she asked him although she shouldn't have considering her favorite past time was a book in giant text or read out loud to her in a mechanical voice on her computer.

He grinned, a nice sexy one that gave her butterflies. "I save the planet."

She blinked. "What, for real?" She had thought Lee was laying it on thick just to put her at ease when he had told her of Muff's passion. Really she should have known better given that Lee never went out of his way to make her feel better. That just wasn't him.

Muff nodded and leaned forward across the table, hooking his hands together with an expression of excitement coming into his eyes. "Do you know that Americans produce one hundred ninety-five million tons of garbage every year?"

"I..." Tae had no idea whether he was right or if he was just spouting off numbers to impress her. She wasn't impressed.

Her date wasn't done. "You yourself probably produce about fifteen hundred pounds of that by yourself."

Tae frowned and put a hand to her chest like he had just accused her of a crime. "Me? I—"

"And you can believe that with all that trash, we're running out of landfill space."

"I guess."

A waiter brought their meal and set it down in front of them. Studying her chicken parmesan, Tae wished she had suggested they go out for coffee as originally planned. But Muff had grinned and said he'd like to buy her dinner. She'd been flattered. Now she was not so sure.

"Let me ask you this, Octavia."

She cringed. At one time, she refused to be called anything but her full name, and only close family and Bryant had ever defied it. Now, it seemed too much. She could have choked Lee for mentioning her full name in the first place. Muff had jumped on it like it was recycling. And what a nerve he had with a name like his. She still hadn't gotten around to questioning him on it.

"Do you follow the three R's?" he asked.

Where was a migraine when she needed it? "Not really."

He reared back in his chair, his eyes wide and mouth hanging open with un-chewed beef in the side. "You don't know what they are, do you?" Something told her he would educate her real quick. He ticked them off on the tip of his fingers with the point of his knife. "Reducing, reusing, recycling. I see I've got my work cut out for me. If we're going to see each other, I want my woman to be informed and smart about doing all she can to save the planet right beside me. Can't have anyone saying you're irresponsible or a slob."

Tae's silverware clattered to her plate. She glanced around to see if anyone had picked up on the noise. No one had but she still checked her hair and then addressed the fool who thought he could dictate her life. "Excuse me? I don't remember becoming your woman. This was just friends having dinner, and it was supposed to be coffee, but you insisted on more."

It was his turn to stare at her blinking with incomprehension. After a minute his slow smile spread over his face. She'd thought it was sexy before, but now it appeared to be just oily. Snake charmer came to mind like the guys in those old black and white cartoons, for some reason. "Well, okay, I didn't go about it right, but"—he shrugged—"I figure we can go out a few times, see how we fit. You've got a nice body, and Lee tells me you used to be in school for nursing. That means you have a good head on your shoulders and have at least some consciousness of bettering life."

His arrogance knew no bounds. If Lee was the type, she would have thought this was all a joke. "You're not serious. You fucking can't be serious."

"Watch your mouth," he growled. "I don't like women who don't speak like ladies."

"You don't define me," she shot back at him. "Got that?"

At last her words seemed to be sinking in. "Hold up. You're not saying you're refusing to be with me?"

Tae dragged her napkin across her mouth although she had only ingested two bites of her meal. It was a shame too because the food was delicious. "Ya think?"

If he weren't so dark-skinned, he would be flaming red right about then. "You're refusing me? *You* are refusing *me*?"

Tae didn't speak. The direction he was headed in was becoming plain.

"You ought to be glad someone—anyone—would be willing to go out with you, to date you more than once after he saw..."

Her fingers twitched around the stem of her wine glass, and one eyebrow began an angry ascent up her forehead. "Go on," she encouraged him. "After he saw what?"

Cruelty entered his eyes. "Your face. I can't actually see it, but Lee described it to me, the scar, jagged and red. He said they can't fix it no matter what and that you look like a freak under all that hair."

Tae gasped. Lee didn't say freak did he? She might have been able to take what Muff said about her. He didn't matter, but not Lee. They'd never been remotely close, but she thought he loved her deep down. Then again, maybe there was no deep down for Lee. He did the right thing for what it would look like, so others wouldn't look down on him. Not because he had a good moral code that guided him. The reality of that came clear.

Muff wasn't done. "I offer you myself, my expertise, and you throw it back in my face. You who no one would ever want with a face like that. You should get down on your knees and kiss my feet."

She'd had enough. "You can get down on your knees and kiss my black ass! Yeah, I said it. I don't care how ugly my face is, but I do not—I repeat, *do not*—have to put up with a jerk. If I have to be alone the rest of my life, so be it, but I'm not settling for an asshole, least of all an asshole like you!"

Tae stood up, shoved her chair back and headed for the door. Muff called after her. "Hey, since you want to be like that you can pay for half the meal!" She kept walking. When she reached the door, the host winked and held it open for her while she passed through. Muff's grumbling was snuffed by noises of the night out on the street.

When she reached the curb, Tae sighed in satisfaction. The vision in her left eye was clear, and she didn't have so much as an ache in her head. She grinned as she strolled down the pavement. Maybe things were looking up. The situation with Muff hadn't stressed her to the point of having a migraine and vision problems. Who knew, she could be healing and before long she'd be able to return to school and get her nursing degree. On top of that, she'd sat for a good hour in a public restaurant without panicking that everyone was staring at her.

At the corner, she twisted left and right looking for a taxi. When she didn't spot one right away, she dug out her cell and searched through the numbers for the service she always used. When the dispatcher came on the line, she said, "Hello, Jan, this is Tae. Can you

send a car out for me?” Tae had learned the names of both dispatchers over the years of using a taxi to get around since she could no longer drive. She didn’t do it too often since that would eat into the little money she had, but the few trips were regular like with her many doctor’s appointments. She gave Jan the address and hung up. As expected, fifteen minutes later, her ride rolled to a stop in front of her, and Tae got in.

Soon she was within a couple of blocks of her mother’s house. She dug out the fare from her purse. “Um, could you stop here, please? It’s a nice night and I want to walk the rest of the way.”

“Are you sure, miss?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” She hopped out and shut the door behind her. A warm breeze stirred her hair, and she smoothed it down. This was Riley. She didn’t need to fear. When she was a kid, her mother had often left the door unlocked, just as anyone did at that time. Crime was up just enough to force them to lock their doors, but not enough in their little corner of the world that a woman had to be nervous about walking alone at night. Besides, she had her whistle, and last year she had taken a couple of self-defense classes. Tae liked to think she could rearrange a man’s nuts as well as anyone. Well, when she wasn’t having a blubbering episode on a street corner like the previous night.

With her gaze on the ground out of habit, Tae strolled along replaying the scene in the restaurant. She couldn’t believe Muff had thought she should be grateful to him. What person, in any situation, would be grateful with an attitude like that? Not her, that was for damn sure. Not that she wasn’t hurt by his words. She was. Her self-esteem had plummeted the moment she woke up in the hospital to learn of her fate. Sure, confidence was low, but it did exist, and she’d be damned if she put up with a man like Muff just to have companionship.

As for the recycling issue, the save the earth campaign, she wasn’t against recycling. She knew they’d all be a lot better off if they were more responsible and did things right so that a century down the line, their children’s children wouldn’t suffer behind their mistakes. But she did not need Muff’s self-righteous ass shoving it down her throat.

Well, whatever. She had put Muff in his place, and she wouldn’t be seeing him again. She laughed. Not that he would want to after what she had said to him, embarrassing him in front of all the other patrons, then sticking him with the check. However, dealing with Lee was a whole other issue.

When she came to her mother’s street, she turned the corner and began to walk the few yards to her mother’s door before something made her look up. Chatter from one of the houses. Tae’s heart thudded in her chest. She stopped under a street light and then backpedaled into the shadows.

Bryant stood on the top step of her mother’s house, and Lee and his girlfriend stood in the doorway talking to him. What was he doing here? Tae glanced around and spotted Rory’s

truck on the street. No one was inside, so he had left Leena somewhere. Tae could only be grateful that he didn't bring her along. Still, what did he want?

She considered walking the few steps to greet him and put one foot forward but stopped again. The conversation she had had with Muff came back full force. *"You who no one would ever want with a face like that."*

It occurred to her that Muff didn't matter. She had no tender feelings for him, no regrets. Bryant was different. She didn't acknowledge that she still had those kind of feelings for him, but still he mattered, what he thought or what he would think if he knew what she looked like now. To have him look at her and think for an instant that she got what she deserved would be too much to face. She couldn't do it. All the boldness from earlier had drained away.

Heart threatening to rip from her chest, she ducked behind a light pole and waited. She studied Bryant's body language. His shoulders seemed stiff, and he had shoved his hands into his jean pockets. She couldn't see the expression on his face from her distance, but she imagined he it was grim and prayed it wasn't because her stupid brother was telling him about her accident. It had occurred to her to just let the news break about what happened to her, but not tonight.

Another few minutes passed, and then Bryant turned around and marched down the steps. He hopped into the truck and peeled away from the curb. Not until he had turned the far corner did she come out of her hiding space and slowly continued to her mother's house.

* * * *

Earlier that day...

Bryant woke up to peeling paint on the ceiling above him and a lumpy mattress beneath. From the brown stains over his head, he guessed there were leaks when it rained and was grateful for the clear day beyond the open blinds. With his arms tucked behind his head and a threadbare sheet just covering his groin area he watched Leena standing in only a pair of bikini panties and nothing else, digging through her pants pockets. She already held a single cigarette between two fingers. He figured she was looking for matches.

"Mind telling me why we're in a motel, Leena?" he asked. "I thought we would be at your place."

She glanced up, irritation plain on her face, blue eyes narrowed. "My roommate's a bitch, and I didn't feel like dealing with it. I can get loud during sex. You found that out already." Her words should have been teasing with a wink, but it seemed she was not a morning person. Neither was he when it came down to it, despite rising early every single day for years. Today was an exception.

“You’re going outside to smoke like that?” he asked when she had her hand on the knob. She glanced down, went back to slip into her blouse and then shuffled out the door, slamming it behind her. He sighed. His fantasies of how this would be were better than reality.

Rolling to his feet, Bryant gathered his things. He wasn’t quite sure if he believed Leena about her roommate, but he wasn’t going to question it. He wasn’t questioning a lot of things regarding her, like how she had seemed so much like Tae when he first began chatting with her over email, and then slowly she’d changed—or the right word might be *reverted*—to what she was now, the sultry kitten who almost seemed to care, but didn’t. Leena was about herself, and Bryant had come to the conclusion that he was using her as much as she was him.

That was also why he had decided to visit Tae. Rory, who seemed in the know about every damn thing had been the one to wake him from his sleep before he had fallen into studying the ceiling. His brother had informed him that Tae was in town, and he’d be a fool if he didn’t go see her at her mother’s house.

Bryant stretched out his stiff muscles as he headed for the shower. On the phone, he had dismissed Rory’s suggestion, but now he thought he just might go over there. It couldn’t hurt. He was an old friend, nothing more, come by to see how she was doing. He grumbled as he stepped under the hot spray. Was he still a teen, wet behind the ears? Here he was justifying himself, making excuses, and the problem was while he had pushed her to the back of his mind when he was away, thoughts of Tae had come roaring forward the second he stepped into Riley, and finding Leena the kind of woman she was did not help matters. She could not wipe away the memories no matter how many times they had sex.

Dressed, he determined to visit a bunch of people he knew would like to see him while he was in town and then make his final decision about visiting Tae late in the day. That way, he would not seem so eager.

By eight thirty in the evening, he was headed over to Tae’s mother’s house having borrowed Rory’s truck. One of these days, he would get his own vehicle, maybe when he was settled for a longer period in one place.

The street was just the same, tightly packed little houses all lined in a row. Tae’s mother had asserted her individuality by placing a gigantic flower pot at either side of her steps and filled them with colorful flowers. Brightly-painted shutters accented the lower and upper windows, and for a moment Bryant’s dream house flashed in his mind for no apparent reason. He shook his head, jogged up the steps, and rang the bell before he could chicken out.

After some time the sound of footsteps approaching echoed through the door, and then Tae’s mother stood there, looking like the older version of the woman he had once given his heart to.

“Mrs. Stokes,” he muttered and then cleared his throat. “How are you? It’s Bryant if you don’t remember, an old friend of Tae’s.”

“Bryant!” she shrieked and dragged him into her arms. When she drew back, she held onto him and gave him a once over. “Just look at you all filled out, a man now. Come in, come in.”

Bryant had barely a moment to consider it before the older woman dragged him into the vestibule and slammed the door closed as she called out to her husband.

“Gary, it’s Bryant come to visit.” Mrs. Stokes never let go of Bryant but tugged him into her small living room and offered him a seat. “My husband broke his ankle a few days ago, so he’s laid up like a baby, but don’t mind him if he’s cranky. You want something to eat, sweetie, something to drink?”

“Uh, no thank you.” He glanced around the room, stuffed full of knickknacks and family photos on the walls and every table. Throw pillows with peaceful scenery stitched onto the surfaces graced the couch and loveseat, and what looked like a nineteen inch television stood in the corner with a La-Z-Boy parked in front of it. Bryant winced at its size. He’d thought almost everyone had invested in a large flat screen by now. Even his mother had, or Rory did.

The older man in the La-Z-Boy turned to smile and offer him a beer or coffee before facing the TV again. Bryant stood with his feet braced apart and his hands behind his back. “Ma’am, is Tae in?”

Mrs. Stokes squeezed her hands together, her eyes flicking this way and that as she seemed to think of what to say. At last she waved a dismissive hand. “Oh, she’s out at the store, but she’ll be here for a couple days at least. Why don’t you come again tomorrow, say at two o’clock?” She nodded. “She’s sure to be here then.”

He opened his mouth to respond when a voice behind him interrupted. “What’s he doing here?”

Bryant turned to see Lee, Tae’s brother and a pretty black woman at his side, clinging to his arm like she thought he might run off and leave her. He nodded in greeting. “Lee.”

Lee smirked. “Bryant.” There had never been any love loss between the two of them. Bryant simply did not like Lee, and the feeling was mutual. Lee took exception to the fact that Bryant had called him a fuck up, and Lee had reciprocated with the opinion that Bryant thought he was better than everybody else. Rory had never helped matters by agreeing that Bryant was better the one and only time they had gotten into a shouting match that nearly ended with fists.

“I was here to visit with Tae as an old friend,” he explained. “I’ve been making my rounds today and thought I would stop by. Your mother told me—”

“That Tae is out at the store,” Mrs. Stokes bellowed, cutting him off. “Right, Lee? I told him to come back tomorrow. Tae’s sure to be here then. It was great seeing you, Bryant, and tomorrow when you come I’ll have some dessert for you. Someone—I won’t name any names—ate the last of my chocolate cake at dinner tonight.”

Twittering like a little bird, she shuffled Bryant toward the door. “Let me see you out.” The phone rang, and she stopped. With a pointed look at Lee, she said, “I’ll get that. Lee, you show Bryant out.”

Having no other choice but to go, and wondering just what the hell was going on, Bryant moved to the exit after telling Mr. Stokes good night. When he was on the top step outside, Lee stopped him.

“My mother’s trying to be nice, or trying to play matchmaker one, but I don’t give a fuck,” he said.

Bryant turned and frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Tae’s out on a date. She ain’t at no store.”

“Oh.”

It should have been obvious with how his mother was flitting about seeming to search her mind for an excuse. Yet the news was still a kick in the gut. Of course she was out with a man. It had been a long time. Guy was probably a doctor or something, someone with ambition, a bright future. He shifted his stiff shoulders.

“Look, do my sister a favor,” Lee suggested. “Don’t come back. She’s moved on, and you should have too. In fact, I’ve been in town one night, and everybody and his brother is telling me you’re hitting that Leena chick. I know that’s not love for real, but whatever. You don’t need her *and* Tae, so forget her.”

Like you care. He didn’t feel like arguing, so he let it go. “Tell your mom something came up if you want. Don’t tell Tae I was here if she doesn’t tell her.” With that, he swung away, skipped down the stairs and tore off in Rory’s truck. It had been a mistake to come. He should have known by now. Their relationship was history, and they had no future.

* * * *

Tae walked on jittery limbs to her mother’s house and ascended the steps. She used the key she had kept after she had moved out to let herself in. Warmth she knew was her

mother's stove hit her in the face. That could only mean one thing. Her mother was baking.

Slipping from her jacket, she passed into the living room and kissed her father's cheek. "She's expecting someone?"

Her father's eyes didn't leave the screen in front of him. "Not today. She's mad because I ate the last of the cake. What was it there for if not to be eaten? The woman won me with her cooking, and now she's complaining."

Despite the ache in her heart, Tae smiled. Her parents' enduring relationship was an ideal for anyone. They griped about each other, but it wasn't real. They still held hands after forty-five years of marriage. Tae wandered through to the kitchen, but her mother was on the phone with her back to Tae while mixing batter in a bowl.

Tae left there in search of her brother. She pinned him down in the basement where he had made his bedroom from the age of fourteen. Hoping her face didn't give away her unsettled emotions, she took the plunge and questioned him. "I saw Bryant leaving as I was walking up," she announced.

He flipped another card over in his hand while studying his game of solitaire. "And you didn't call out to him I'm guessing."

Tae gritted her teeth. "What did he want?"

His cold eyes flicked to her face and then lowered again. "You."

The implication of his words sent a shiver down her spine, but she steeled it. "My...date didn't go well. Apparently, my brother gave him a vivid description of my face, even saying I look like a monster." It was at that moment Tae realized Lee's girlfriend was still there. The woman was so quiet, she was often overlooked. Tae regretted her words and stepped back away from the single lamp burning in the area. "Why would you do that, Lee? He thought...He assumed..." She couldn't finish the sentence.

Lee sat up. "Don't blame me. You're the one who wanted me to tell him everything so he would know what he was getting."

"It's the damn getting I don't like!" she spouted. "I was not offering it up!"

Lee burst out laughing, as usual not giving a fuck. "That's rich. And you weren't willing. Nothing will please you. After all this time, you're still the stuck up bitch you always were." He shook his head. "Funny, I always thought you and that goody-goody Bryant were a perfect match. But don't worry, I set him straight. I told him you moved on and that you were out on a date."

Tae stared at Lee. “I don’t get you. I know that siblings fight, but you’ve never given a damn about me. You never acted like you cared even the least little bit. It’s like if you help me or give me the time of day, there’s a catch. There’s something in it for you. What’s the deal, Lee?” she demanded. “What’s your problem?”

She waited in seething silence for him to say something, anything, but he concentrated on his game like she wasn’t there. Tae glanced at Kendra, but the girl was pretending to be engrossed in Lee’s thirteen inch TV. Tae sighed and spun away to head back up to her room. She’d had it with Lee. He had better not ask her to do anymore favors for him.

Two seconds after she’d snapped her bedroom door shut, avoiding a slam since it would bring her mother up inquiring about what was wrong, a knock sounded on her door. Tae took her time, tossing her purse on the bed and kicking off her shoes before she answered. When she opened the door, Kendra stood there shifting from foot to foot with her eyes focusing everywhere but on Tae’s face.

Tae touched her hair. “Yes?”

“Can I come in?” the woman asked.

“I’m not up to company tonight, Kendra. I just had the worse night—”

“Please,” she begged. “I need to talk to you about Lee. He’d kill me if he knew I was up here. I told him I was leaving to go to my cousin’s house.” She rolled her eyes. “He didn’t bother walking me to the door.”

Tae hesitated. On one hand she wanted to know if Kendra had some type of insight on her brother, dating him as she was. But then on the other hand Lee had been cruel, and nothing could excuse the way he had acted. She didn’t need a crystal ball to know how her mind would replay not only Muff’s mean words but Lee’s, all night long.

She stepped back and held the door wider. “Come in, but only for a moment. My head is starting to hurt, and I need to get to bed.”

Kendra walked across the room and sat on the bed without being invited to. She ran her hands along faded jeans, rattling the half dozen bangles on each wrist. “First off, I’m not his girlfriend. I’m just a friend.”

Tae didn’t respond. What was she going to say to that? Lee had found a reason to lie about his relationship with Kendra.

“I’m Davon’s cousin,” she said needlessly.

Tae frowned. “I already knew that being that Lee introduced you all that way when we got here last night. He lives on the other side of town, right? Funny how we never knew y’all when he lived here, but you met at Lee’s college.”

Kendra gave an awkward dip of her head and then shrugged. Her movements jerky, she stood and paced over to the dresser. She reached for the knob to turn Tae's lamp to a brighter setting.

"Don't," Tae begged.

"Oh," she squeaked. "Right."

"Did you have something specific to tell me, Kendra?" she prodded.

Kendra grumbled, like she resented having to admit what she was about to say. "Lee met Davon while he was still in Riley. They've been together ever since."

"Together," Tae repeated.

"Yeah, together." Kendra turned to face Tae. "Lee is gay. He and Davon are a couple."

"That's hardly news in this day and age," Tae told her.

Kendra rushed over to the door like what she had to say was finished, but then she stopped with her hands pressed on the wooden panels. "Lee hates you because he loved Bryant. Years ago when he went to Bryant's house to tell him the truth, Rory stopped him. Rory told him he would kill him if he ever tried anything with Bryant. Rory said you were for Bryant and nobody else, and he wouldn't let anyone get in the way of that."

Tae's head whirled. She sank in slow motion to her bed. She'd never heard anything like this. Bryant's story had always been that he and Lee hated each other on sight, but this? Lee had loved her old boyfriend and tried to steal him from her? And Rory bordering on obsessive? Who were these people she'd known most of her life? Maybe Kendra was making it all up. The common saying was that you had to watch the quiet ones.

She eyed the woman at the door. Kendra didn't appear to be crazy, but one never knew. "I don't know what to say," she admitted.

Kendra shrugged, calmer now that she had dropped her bomb. "You can verify all this with Lee or Rory." Her brown eyes narrowed. "Trust me if you confront either of them, you'll see the truth in their reactions."

And with that, she opened the door and shut it quietly behind her. Tae sat unmoving while the pain in her head began a steady increase and the dim light wavered before her vision. So much for thinking she was getting better. Now she could lie in bed and replay the drama that was her life.

Chapter Six

Bryant stood with Leena in his arms and Rory nearby looking about ready to pop a gasket. Could he be anymore obvious about not approving of Bryant's relationship with Leena? Ignoring his brother, Bryant lowered his head and captured Leena's lips in a hot kiss. His shaft stirred in response, but his heart was dead.

"I'll send you tickets," he whispered in her ear. "You can come to Texas once you get things settled here."

She squirmed. "To visit, right? I'm not staying there, Bryant."

He frowned, drew back and grabbed her elbow to lead her out of Rory's earshot. "I'll pay for everything, Leena, get you an apartment—"

"You don't love me."

He paused, staring down into her eyes, wanting to make promises and declarations but not able to move the words past his lips. Why couldn't she be...? He stopped that train of thought right there, knowing it would do no good. "I'm not asking you to marry me, Leena, just live with me for a while. Texas is a great place to live, a little hot in the summer, but the mild winters make up for it."

"Like I don't have that here?" She crossed her arms. "I like my independence, Bryant. What we have is good, just like we have it. I'll come out there, and I'll be here when you come home, waiting for you." Her tactic changed in an instant. "You said yourself you could be sent back to Iraq at some higher up's last minute decision. I don't want to be stuck over there all alone, with no family and friends while you're half way around the world."

She had a good point. Bryant hadn't considered that. He was healthy and strong, and the war was still going on. There was no reason to think he wouldn't be sent on still another tour before long. In fact it was highly probable. He ran a hand over the back of his neck and glanced up to Rory who was barking orders into his phone. Bryant figured it was the guy he worked with down at the shop.

"Okay, then you said you were unhappy with your living arrangements. Why don't I pay for you to get your own apartment?" Bryant knew he was using his money to try and hold onto her, to be sure that he had someone waiting at home for him, but he made the decision anyway.

Leena's eyes lit up. "Really? You'd do that? Pay my rent, every month?"

Bryant chuckled. "Yes, every month." He narrowed his eyes at her. "And you will come to Texas as often as I want you there. Right?"

She nodded with a dazed look in her eyes. “Yeah, sugar. You got it. I’ll be there, and I’ll wait here for you too.” She pressed her curvy body against his, flattening her breasts on his chest. Bryant did everything he could not to hoist her up and wrap her legs around his waist. After a long few minutes of kissing her soft lips, he put her back from him before he lost all sense of where he was.

“It’s settled then, and thank you for coming to the airport this time.”

She smirked. “I know where my bread and butter comes from.”

He winced at that, and Rory marched up to pull her away from him. “Okay, you’ve done your scene. Move on.”

“Rory,” Bryant warned.

His brother ignored him. “I need to say good-bye to my brother, if you don’t mind. Go get something at the food court over there. I’ll find you.”

Leena gave him a dirty look and swung away. Her hips swayed hard with each step, and Bryant didn’t miss how Rory watched as much as he did while she walked. He was pretty sure Leena knew their eyes were on her ass, and she preferred it that way.

Rory rounded on him. “I didn’t just overhear you telling that whore you would pay for her apartment?”

“Don’t start, Rory.” Bryant hefted his bag to his shoulder and carried it across to one of the nearby chairs. “What I do with Leena is not your business. I’m no longer your responsibility. You need to remember that.”

“She’s a fucking whore,” Rory blurted, too loud. He lowered his tone. “You’ve got to know she’ll be wrapping her legs around every guy that looks her way while you’re gone, and she’ll be doing it right there in the apartment your hard earned money is paying for.”

“Cut it, brother,” Bryant snapped. “I’m tired of hearing the lectures about my relationship with her. It is what it is.”

Rory wasn’t giving up too soon. He shoved Bryant in the chest, but Bryant stood firm. His brother’s eyes widened a second before he masked his surprise. While he knew Bryant wasn’t a scrawny kid any longer, it must have still come as a shock to be faced with it. Bryant wouldn’t be bullied, and he was a good four inches taller than Rory now.

“I didn’t raise you to—”

“To what? Disobey you?” Bryant flared his nostrils like he smelled something. “I know. You thought I’d always follow you around. I even joined up for you.”

“Not that again.”

“Yeah, again,” Bryant asserted. “It was a good idea. I don’t regret it.” Although he did in some ways. If he had been here when Tae called back then. Rory hadn’t told him that. His mother had let it slip. He sighed and brushed the thought aside. “Listen, tell Mom I love her. I hate that she’s sick so often now.”

“She’s never been strong.” Sadness came into his brother’s eyes.

“I’ll be back,” Bryant promised. “Tell her I’ll be back.”

“She knows.”

They embraced, and Rory slapped his back. Bryant pulled away, lifted his bag and started toward the gate where boarding was being called for his plane. Rory stopped him.

“Bryant.”

“Yeah?” He turned back.

Rory pulled off his cap and scratched the back of his head, the emotion in his eyes clear, but his facial expression stony. “Everything I did, I did for you. You know that, right? I mean you know how...uh...I feel about you, my little brother.”

Bryant grinned. “You going soft on me, Rory?”

Rory’s skin reddened from his hairline to his neck, and Bryant shook his head. He moved back to stand in front of his brother and offer his hand.

“Don’t worry. I know. I said I’ll be back. I’m just heading over to Texas for a while to do training. With any luck, all this bullshit in Iraq will be over before my plane touches down. And yeah. I know how you feel. You’ve been a dad and a big brother to me, Rory. Don’t think I don’t appreciate it. I love you, man.”

They both sniffed and cleared their throats, gave one last handshake, and parted ways.

* * * *

February 2008

“Are you sure about this, Tae?” her boss asked. “You’ve been on nights for years, and that’s worked out for you with less traffic and all. I’ve told you about the noise, the radios playing, the phlebotomists sometimes getting a little heated in their discussions of whatever is the hot topic of the day. There is tons of coming and going all day long.”

Tae chewed her thumb nail and then hid it behind her to look more confident than she felt in case her supervisor decided to flat out tell her no. “Yes, I’m sure. It’s just a week, right? While Nancy is on vacation. What trouble could I get into during that time? And it will give me a chance to see if I can handle working during the day, like you said, with more people around. Let me do this, Charlene,” she begged. “It’s not like you have a bunch of choices here. Nobody else can do it right now.”

Charlene blew out a breath and studied the paperwork in front of her. She tapped a pen while she considered Tae’s offer. “What has your doctor said?” she asked. “I know that shouldn’t bear any weight on your working in the lab recording the information off the blood and stool samples, but I care about how you are too, Tae. When you started here—”

“I know.” Tae’s thumbnail found its way back to her teeth. “Over the last few months, my headaches have improved. My doctor and I believe we’ve found a good drug that the pain responds to, and I’ve taken up meditation. It relaxes me a whole lot. I’m good. I promise you, I’m good.” Just to add icing to the cake, she threw in, “I’m doing so well, I might even take a class in the fall. There’s no reason to think I can’t finish my degree at this point.”

Charlene looked doubtful. “All right. I’m going to give this to you. One week. Eight to four. If you have any trouble or you think you can’t handle it, you come to me right away. I mean it, Tae. I’ve noticed how much more helpful you are around here with the girls on nightshift. They tell me. You’re coming out of your shell, and you’re less afraid to let people see you. That’s wonderful, but pace yourself. Okay?”

Tae whooped and then lowered her voice, clenching her hands together in a cheer. “Okay. Thank you, Charlene. You won’t regret it.”

Tae could scarce contain her excitement. Things had been looking up. She hadn’t lied to Charlene that her doctor felt good about her current meds, and she had taken up meditation. However, the reason for that was because the physician had also told Tae her body would eventually adapt to her meds the same as they had previously. So she was looking into other methods to ease the periods when a migraine took hold of her, natural methods. One of them had been meditation, and she had picked up a book on eating more raw foods instead of processed goods.

She was determined to move forward, to live. And that meant coming out into the daylight. When Nancy had announced her vacation, Tae had seen it as a sign. She had laughed, thinking she’d been spending too much time with her mother who saw signs in everything—both good and bad.

Back in the lab, Tae sat with a smile plastered to her face and her head bent over a tray of blood samples, most with a lavender cap. *CBC, complete blood count*, she thought, knowing she was right about the kind of test the doctor had ordered for these samples.

She'd been doing this job too long, and she was finally dreaming of something more, praying it would one day be possible.

Tae slipped one tube from the wrack and twisted it to study the name while her fingers were poised over her keyboard. She was careful not to look too long at the moving blood, because the last time she did, thinking about how some people got dizzy at the sight of blood, she'd gotten woozy. That was a mistake she was not going to repeat.

"Brown," she muttered and typed it in.

"Ms. Stokes!"

She shrieked and swung her arm to the right. The sample in her hand went flying, and the entire tray went after it, smashing to the floor. Tae stared in shock as the glass containers shattered, and blood from different patients began running together over the tiled floor. Tae's heart hammered in her chest, and her teeth chattered for no reason. She stood to her feet, noting the splashes of red on the tights she'd worn that day and her skirt.

She lifted her gaze a short way to the clogs the doctor wore, the man who had called out her name without warning. She had always thought he looked like a goof in those shoes, and now they were spotted with the spilled blood as well. Tae covered her mouth with her hands.

"Take your hand down," he snapped. "We have to do a clean up, and you must be checked. I will be recommending you be dismissed over this."

He was an ass too, she remembered.

"Doctor—" she began, but he'd already left the scene, which she was pretty sure was a violation of hospital protocol since we wasn't clean either.

After explaining countless times and going through a vigorous clean up and explanation about getting tested because of the incident, Charlene insisted Tae go home for the night. She wasn't the least bit sorry to go as she was exhausted. As Tae shuffled down the hallway toward the exit, having already rung up her taxi service, she thought about the blood on the floor.

"A sign."

Just when she had been mocking her mother, mocking herself for figuring Nancy going on vacation was a sign that she could come out of her shell and live her life more. Now this. And blood spilled could never be a good sign. At the outside door, she shook her head.

"That's crazy. That blood ain't nobody's sign." She laughed but bit it off when the winter blast hit her full in the face. Outside on the sidewalk, she tucked her scarf tighter around

her neck and pinched the top button of her coat closed. Glancing up and down the street for signs of her ride, she froze seeing her mother's Honda stopping at the curb. Her mother slipped out looking pale behind her rich caramel complexion. Tae's stomach knotted.

"I decided I wouldn't call, but come over here to pick you up," her mother said.

Tae checked her watch. "Ma, it's four in the morning. What are you doing up?"

Her mother drew her close in a tight squeeze. "Something's happened, baby."

Tae curled her fingers in her mother's coat, willing whatever it was to go away and not ruin the hope she had been feeling despite the crap that had happened to her tonight. Charlene had even said she didn't give a damn what Doctor Stick-Up-His-Ass said. Tae would always have a job if Charlene worked at the VA hospital.

"What is it?" she had to ask.

"It's Bryant." She drew back and glanced down into Tae's face. "You know the army. We're just finding out weeks later, but he was injured. They flew him to Germany to recover, but—"

Tae's legs gave out. Her mother caught her and dragged her back to her feet. Together they moved to her mother's car and sat inside with the engine running, both staring ahead.

"I'm sorry. I'm telling this all wrong, Tae. I'm not sure what really happened. They are so damn tight-lipped half the time, and Rory's trying to make heads and tails while dealing with his mother."

Tae rested a hand on her mother's knee. "He'll be fine. He must be fine."

* * * *

Several weeks earlier...

"Happy birthday toooo youuuuu," the guys sang, and Bryant tried not to look embarrassed.

"Blow out the cupcake," Frank yelled. "I went to a lot of trouble to procure that, man. It's gold." When Bryant did, Frank asked, "What did you wish for?"

Someone punched his arm. "Idiot. Bryant don't need shit else. He's already fucking everybody's dream lay."

"Yeah, I heard that," another guy shouted. "I am so jealous."

Bryant snorted. “Shut up.”

Frank slapped him on the shoulder. “Thirty years old and a new rank, *Sergeant First Class* Hussner. We can all give you a harder time of it now.”

The CO strolled through at a hurried gait, cutting off any response Bryant might have made. “Time, men. Let’s roll out.”

Bryant snatched the candle out of his cupcake and stuffed the treat whole into his mouth. His pack was ready, so all he had to do was get it strapped onto his back, gather his gun and get moving. They were headed across the river to check out things in the nearby town. Depending on what they found, the mission might be one to two days or a week. Whenever he was out of his FOB, he didn’t have the daily half hour communications with home, and Rory had admitted that it weighed on his mother until he returned.

That had at first gotten to him since it sounded like she wouldn’t make it through the year. As he had done like all the other guys over the years, Bryant disconnected from the emotions that might distract him. Not having his whole mind on what he was doing could get him killed with one foolish mistake.

The humvees were lined up. Bryant slipped into the first vehicle, and Frank took the wheel with two other guys on Bryant’s team taking the back seat. Bryant monitored the radio while at the same time having his gun trained on the passing landscape. They had been plagued with snipers the last few days and hadn’t yet located where the shots were coming from. As soon as they knew, whoever they were would be taken care of. The problem with that of course was that one would go down, and another would take his place.

The procession crawled at a cautionary but steady pace. Without taking his eyes from the roadside, Bryant instructed, “Keep your eyes peeled, guys. We do not want to encounter any IEDs.”

Something silver glinted in the distance. Bryant raised his scope to his eye to take a look, but it was just debris on a bush. He lowered his weapon with relief and turned his attention to the front of the vehicle to see ahead. The bridge was still a few meters off. He glanced up at the sky. The sun was going down, and soon the danger would heighten with darkness upon them. The constant delays in moving out had put them behind schedule, but it couldn’t be helped.

Without warning a sharp whistle sounded in the air. Every muscle in Bryant’s body tensed. The radio came alive with shouts, and as Bryant barked his orders, the first grenade hit. The humvee seemed to fly up off the ground and slam down. The bomb had missed its target, but the impact had shaken them. Frank tried to regain control of the wheel when a second grenade went off. This time the hit was on the bridge, and with

them just about to cross, their front tires went down over the side with the collapsing cement beneath them.

“Back it up, damn it!” Bryant roared to Frank.

“I’m doing my best, sir,” Frank shot back.

Bryant shouted into the radio but no one seemed to be listening. He threw his door open and stepped out to call some order to the chaos, but chose the wrong moment. The burn seemed to start first, and all noise around him ceased. He blinked once and looked down. Blood was everywhere, and the blast must have been close, because at the same time his mind registered that he had been injured, he was thrown back against the humvee. Frank’s fingers curled around his collar, and he yanked Bryant into the humvee at the same time another blast hit.

They were going over the side into the river. Bryant’s hearing returned long enough for him to hear the crunching metal and then the splash down into the water. They sank like a stone. Water filled the interior of the humvee fast. Bryant turned to tell Frank to try getting his door open because his side was crushed. His friend’s unseeing eyes stared back at him from his position of being curled over the steering wheel.

Bryant turned to check on the guys in the back when the vehicle tumbled so that it was upside down. Bryant slammed down toward the ceiling, and a snap in his arm wrenched a gasp from his throat. Before he could right himself, a body came down hard on top of him, covering the top half of his body. One arm was pinned beneath him, while the other was at an awkward angle. The water level rose up over his nose and mouth, and he couldn’t for the life of him lift his head. He tried to brace his feet to push up with his legs, but one was useless. He couldn’t get it to respond at all.

With all his strength, he pushed with a single shoulder, and still the person on top of him didn’t move. Bryant knew his teammate must be dead. His lungs burned. He was running out of time and air. If someone didn’t assist him soon, he wasn’t going to make it.

* * * *

Tae stood out in the hallway outside Bryant’s room. She had hidden around the corner watching as Rory left to take his mother back home. The woman looked pale, and Tae wondered how long she would be around. Her heart ached for Mrs. Hussner, but at least she had gotten to see Bryant again. So easily he could have been lost, she thought with an ache in her own heart.

She inched along closer to Bryant’s room, keeping her breathing easy and remaining as calm as possible. Rory and her mother had her half out of her mind with worries that Bryant was returning to Riley either dead or almost. But come find out, he had been flown back from Germany for a specialist to take a look at his leg.

She peered in through the window in the door. He lay asleep on his bed, and Tae nearly sank to the floor at the sight of him. How she had missed that face, missed his laugh, hearing him talk to her. All of it seemed like just yesterday.

Glancing up and down the hall, she pushed at the door and then went inside to creep over to his bed. He lay still, too still, and she had a moment of panic thinking his heart had stopped, but his chest rose and fell in a low sigh and then a moan. She took his hand.

“It’s okay, Bryant,” she whispered, not knowing if he heard. “Everything will be okay. They’ll fix you up just like they fix up all the soldiers who come through here.” She knew that wasn’t really true. Some were just too badly injured, and she had heard the stories of sobbing mothers being led out, cursing whoever had sent their babies into war in the first place. Tae prayed that would never happen to Bryant.

She straightened his sheet and sniffed, trying not to give into the tears that were rolling down her cheeks. He had a cast on one arm, and one of his legs was elevated. After some time of standing there not knowing what to say and not really belonging either, she turned to go before someone caught her. Bryant’s fingers curled around hers.

“Don’t go.”

The words were so soft she wasn’t sure she had heard anything. Trembling, she peered at him over her shoulder. His eyes were slitted, and he looked just past her. She had a moment’s terror that he was blind and then realized he was half out of it from the medication the doctors had prescribed. But he knew she was there. He must have heard her.

“Tae, please don’t go,” he said again. “Don’t leave me again.”

She crashed down on her knees and pressed her lips to his fingers, tears blurring her vision and sobs wracking her body. “I’m so sorry, Bryant. I’m sorry. Everything is my fault. You wouldn’t be in this situation if I hadn’t been so cold to you, so dismissive when you gave me your heart.”

He didn’t respond or move. She swallowed and tried to pull herself together.

“Now, I-I...” She fought to find the words.

“Tae, you’re here.” Rory spoke behind her. “Thank you for coming.”

She stood up and noted that Bryant had fallen asleep again. He may not have heard her apology. She released herself from his tight hold and lifted a hand to her face. Backing up a step, she answered Rory. “Yes, I had heard he was here. I work in the lab.”

“It’s been years.” Rory brushed her sleeve, and she pulled away. “Let me get a look at you...”

She swung away in the opposite direction so he couldn't see her, but Rory was too fast. He stepped around her and blocked the door. When he took a gentle hold on her arms, she tried turning her head away, but not before she caught his gasp.

"Tae." His voice was filled with anguish. "What happened?"

She rested a palm over the right side of her face and looked up at him. An ache passed through her heart because he looked so much like Bryant. "You need to worry about your brother right now, your family. I'm fine."

"What happened," he said again more firmly, and he didn't let her go. She had no choice but to answer.

"I was in a car accident two years after I started college. I've been like this ever since." She took a deep accepting breath that her secret was out. "I am blind in my right eye and scarred for life on the right side of my face. For a while I lived like a hermit, and that's why you and everyone else in Riley have never heard what really happened to me."

Rory dragged her into his arms and held her tight. He didn't say a word, didn't give out false assurances, and for that she was grateful. She almost let herself cry on his shoulder, but pushed it away. Bryant needed him, and that was all that mattered.

"You stealing my girl, Rory?" Bryant said behind them.

Tae gasped. Had his memory been damaged? She was too afraid to turn around and wanted to leave, but Rory still had a firm grip. He didn't force her to face Bryant though. She wondered if he thought she was too hideous for his brother now.

"No, of course not." He grinned over her shoulder. She'd never seen him grin. "I was comforting her until you woke, little brother. But I think the two of you need to have a nice long talk." Rory gave her a stern look. She suspected he would stand outside the room and not allow her to leave if she tried.

She heaved a sigh and nodded. Rory released her and walked out of the door. Tae resisted following. She stood unmoving. "How are you, Bryant? J-Just broken bones?" she said with hope.

"Afraid not." His voice had grown clearer, but was stony, without emotion. "They don't know if I'll walk again. There's shrapnel in there, pressing on the nerves, hard to remove. I've assured them all and my mother that I will walk. Period."

The mechanism in the bed sounded, and she figured he was making it so he could sit up. She clasped her hands together. "I guess someone has contacted Leena to tell her you're here."

“Is that why you’re keeping your back to me, Tae? Leena?”

“I should get back to work.” She took a step forward.

“Stay.”

The word cut through her. It wasn’t a command but a plea. Her shoulders sagged, and she wanted to cry, to scream for not being what he needed. “I’m not your girlfriend. You need her,” she told him, hating the words as they passed her lips.

“Tae, stay with me.”

“You don’t understand, Bryant. It’s been so long. A lot has happened, and—”

“Stay, Tae. Just...stay this time.”

Dread closed her throat and made it hard to breathe let alone face him. She spun on the ball of her feet. Her head low, she shuffled in baby steps toward him and then waited at the side of his bed for the courage to raise her gaze from the floor. By the time she did, she could have cried out with relief. Bryant lay there with one palm open face up and his eyes closed. A small smile tinged his full lips, making her remember what it was like to touch hers to them.

She sat down on the side of the bed and waited. The smile faded, and Bryant paled. “He saved my life,” he whispered.

Tae licked her lips. “Who?”

“Frank.” Bryant didn’t speak for a while, and Tae continued to wait for him. This was about him and not her. He gasped awake, and she knew he was afraid to sleep. He was resisting the medicine. “He saved my life. Frank pulled me back in the humvee. I should never have gotten out. I lost another friend and a couple men in that attack, Tae. I can’t get it out of my mind.”

She didn’t know what to say, how to support him. What words could ever comfort his aching heart? “I’m not sure how to help you, Bryant. I have no experience with this kind of thing. Maybe Rory might be better or a therapist?”

He opened his eyes fully this time, and Tae jumped thinking he saw her face, but he didn’t react to it. She wasn’t too sure he saw her in front of him and wondered if he was having a waking nightmare of what he had experienced. “I need you to be here when I wake up, Tae,” he told her. “Can you do that, Tae?”

Somehow irritation tingled over her at his repeated use of her name, and she thought he was being sarcastic but then realized he was trying to convince himself that she was there. His next words confirmed her suspicion.

“You are here, aren’t you? I’m home.”

Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. Risking everything, she leaned over and kissed him. Bryant’s lips parted, and Tae deepened the kiss, snaking her tongue along his bottom lip before delving farther. A shudder racked Bryant’s body, and he ran his hand along her side stopping at the swell of her breast. Everything inside her told her to twist into his touch so that his palm would brush her nipple, but she drew back.

Tae took hold of the button to lower the bed and activated it. “Don’t be afraid to sleep now, Bryant. I’ll be here when you wake up. I promise.” Lack of proper sleep not only wiped her out but sometimes put her on her back with a migraine for days, but she was determined to stay. Bryant needed her right now, and it was time she stop hiding. When he was stronger, he would know the truth about her and let the chips fall where they may.

Chapter Seven

Tae slipped into her jacket, although the weatherman had been calling for warmer weather, and she headed toward the front door. Before she could unlock it her phone rang. She considered ignoring it, but only her mother ever called, and if Tae didn't answer, she'd be bugging her on her cell phone and fearful that everything was not okay. Checking the caller ID, she found she was right.

"Hey, Ma."

"Hey yourself, sweetie. You sound chipper. I wonder why," she said with a knowing tone to her voice. "Couldn't be a certain soldier boy?"

Tae rolled her eyes. "Ma, you did not just say that. And yes, it's Bryant. We're going to the park and then, we'll come back here and cook dinner together. Neither one of us is any good at it, so it should be fun."

Her mother chuckled. "You sure are spending a lot of time with him."

Tae frowned. "You were pushing for me to a few months ago, even years ago, trying to get us back together. Don't tell me you've changed your mind."

"No, no, of course not." She hesitated. "I just..."

"You're waiting for the other shoe to drop?"

Her mother gasped. "Tae, that's terrible."

"Okay, I'm putting words in your mouth," she admitted. "I have been waiting for it. And I feel guilty too. I mean when I came to see Bryant at the hospital, it was like Leena ceased to exist for him. We should have...He should have...I don't know. I feel like I stole him from her, but Bryant says it wasn't love in any way. He just needed someone to be there, someone to remind him of home who was in his corner."

Her mother grunted. "And Rory wasn't enough."

"Ma, for real? What's the deal? You seem negative all of a sudden."

"I'm just scared for you, Tae. I wanted this. I still want it. Maybe I'll feel better when you're married."

Tae shrieked. "Married? Who said anything about that?"

She wanted to say her heart had kicked up a few notches at the mention of being Bryant's wife, but she couldn't come out and admit to having that fantasy. In her mind she was preparing for it, even longing that Bryant would see her worthy to be his wife. He had

looked full into her face and not flinched, not once. Sure, he hadn't seen the full impact of her scar, but none of it seemed to faze him. And because of his attitude regarding her health, she had felt strong, even confident to stand by him as he had several surgeries and then physical therapy, while he consulted more doctors to see if he could regain full motion with that leg. She had held his hand all this time while he pushed through to be able to walk with a cane and a limp. Yet that was just the physical issues.

“To tell the truth, Ma. I keep thinking something will happen to ruin the tentative happiness we have right now, but I'm going to enjoy this for as long as it lasts.”

“Optimism, baby, optimism. That's what we need. Everything will be great. Okay, well enjoy today, and leave a day open next week for Dad and I to take you to lunch now that you're getting out more. Okay?”

“Yes, will do. I'll talk to you later.” She disconnected the call, put the hand piece down and headed out the door.

While she left the apartment building to step into her waiting ride, she thought about what her mother had said. The fact that her mother was feeling what she was about her relationship with Bryant, that something would go wrong, it still irritated her.

When she had pulled the door closed in the backseat of the car, she blinked. “Bryant? What are you doing driving? And whose car is this?”

He winked. “Don't you want to come up front with me?”

She hopped out of the back and moved to the front seat. “I was so deep in thought, I wasn't even paying attention. You could have been some stranger. I always take taxies.”

While she chattered to cover her nerves at being out on what would amount to their first date since they were teenagers, Bryant reached across the space between them and took her hand. “Don't I get a kiss?”

“Uh.” Her mouth dropped open. She had been giving him small pecks on the cheek or temple since that first more intimate kiss in the hospital. She chewed her lip thinking it over, but Bryant didn't wait. He swooped in close to her, and his warm lips covered hers. Tae shivered.

Bryant caught her chin up and pressed closer, slipping his tongue between her lips. He moaned and would have dragged her over to his lap if Tae didn't pull back. Disappointment was plain in his beautiful blue eyes. “I think I'm strong enough to—”

“Bryant!”

“You know you've been thinking about it, Tae.” He grinned, and he seemed happy, except for the periods when his eyes clouded, and he became serious. She knew that was

when he was remembering, and she did all she could to help him forget even if that was impossible. “I’ve seen you checking out my body,” he teased.

“I have not!” She tried to look indignant but failed. Truth was even laid up Bryant was sexy. The man—and he was all man, no longer a boy—made her wet just staring at his hard body. Tae had noted when his shaft seemed to tighten and grow out at times. Not once had Bryant hidden it. He seemed to want her to see, to want him as much as he wanted her now.

Bryant took hold of her hand and guided it to his groin. He was stiff, and he ran her fingers over his length, letting her feel every detail up to the head. “I want to take you to the park...but...”

Tae licked her lips. “But it might be better to just stay here,” she finished for him. Neither of them moved. Tae’s hand was still trapped beneath Bryant’s hands. He had increased the pressure of his hold until her fingers were wrapped around his member. All Tae wanted to do was rip open his zipper and draw him out. She didn’t know if she wanted to suck him until he filled her mouth or if she wanted to climb on his lap, pull her panties aside beneath her dress and bounce until she screamed through an orgasm. Both would be incredible.

“Whose car is this?” she asked again just for something to distract her from attacking him.

“Mine. I bought it today. Rory helped me pick it out.” He smirked. “You know he doesn’t believe I know a thing about cars. Never mind that I was right beside him down at the garage for most of my teen years. I prefer an SUV, but it would be a bitch to climb in and out of every day.”

Tae nodded. “It’s nice. I like it.” She didn’t want to talk about his car.

“I got something for you,” he announced.

Her eyes widened. “What?”

He leaned around to reach into the back seat and pulled a bag up from the floor. Tae spotted two packages inside, one big, one small. Both were gift-wrapped. Tae clasped her hands together and looked into Bryant’s eyes. The love she saw there almost took her breath away.

“Which one do you want first?” he asked.

Feeling like a child, she put a hand over her eyes and pointed her finger toward the packages. “Eenie, meenie, miney, mo...”

Bryant laughed. He stilled her hand and pushed it down. Tae uncovered her eyes and found that he had directed her to the bigger of the two. She giggled and tore into it. Inside was a little teddy bear in a nurse's uniform. Tae's face fell, and she stared at it.

“Oh damn, Tae. I'm sorry.” He pressed the box closed and tried to pull it away, but she held on. He stroked her arm. “I meant it only to say that you've been here by my side nursing me back to health, and I've been the selfish pig not even discussing your health.”

She shook her head. “No, I've liked that. It's been refreshing. Most of the time, I only talk to my mother, and she's forever talking about it. Well, that and you.”

“Me?” Curiosity came into his eyes, but she rushed on.

“The bear just shocked me. That's all. I love it. Don't worry. I know that part of my life is behind me, being a nurse. At least for now. And I've enjoyed caring for you, helping you do your leg exercises. I may not be able to do that kind of thing professionally, but there is fulfillment in helping the one I..”

She wasn't ready to go on with that train of thought.

“The one you...?” he encouraged her.

Tae's cell phone rang, and she dug it out quickly in hope that Bryant would let it go. Her mother's name flashed on the screen. Tae answered. “Hello?”

“Sweetie, I'm sorry to interrupt your date. I just realized how harsh what I said earlier was, or what I hinted at, and I wanted to say I'm sorry. I always want to support you, to be there for you.”

Tae smiled. “I know, Ma.”

Her mother went on. Tae shrugged to Bryant who watched her face and stroked her fingers, sending chills up her arms.

“I figured out what I was feeling after I hung up, Tae. It's being needed. You've always loved being needed by others, but that was only half of what made you special,” her mother reminisced. “You liked to be the one with just what we all needed to help us in whatever it was we were dealing with. I think that's what led you to want to be a nurse in the first place. You liked the thought of being specifically trained to help the sick.”

Tae appreciated her mother's insight into who she was, but the reminders about her lost dream were getting old.

When her mother was trying to do self-analysis, and worse—Tae analysis—there was no stopping her. “So when Bryant got home, he needed someone who could be there with him, help him with his exercise, someone who could interpret what the doctors were

asking him to do at home to strengthen his muscles, and that's where you came in. I was nervous at first that it would be too much for you, but you said you didn't have too many issues with headaches."

Tae grew impatient. "Ma, can we talk about this later, please? Bryant's waiting."

"Oh sweetie, that's what I'm saying."

"Saying what?" Tae grumbled.

"What happens when he doesn't need care anymore, when the therapy is over? He's walking with a cane now, I hear. You've been able to give him what he needs, baby, but I've been more and more nervous about what's next."

Tae focused on Bryant. There was little doubt in her mind that Bryant loved her. He might never have stopped loving her all these years. The way they had drifted back together as if they had never been apart had struck them both in conversation over his times exercising. Tae had to be honest with herself as well. She loved him, had always loved him, even when it wasn't clear to her. And she would be lying if she didn't admit, at least to herself, that she had found greater happiness knowing just what her mother said, that he didn't just need her, but she had the strength to help him.

The years after the accident had left her empty in so many ways, so weak and needy. It was why she had fought for her independence, but it had not been enough knowing she had no purpose, nothing she could offer the world beyond simple labeling of test tubes. There had been nights she had cried herself to sleep for all the loss.

But Bryant needed her. That was enough. It *had been* enough. Now he had bought a car and was walking. Would he soon be well enough to go back to his duties with the army? They hadn't discussed it, and she had at first assumed he would retire because of disability. She couldn't begrudge him that he was getting better and she was stuck in the same place.

"Ma, I understand what you're saying, and I'll think about it. Let me talk to you later, okay?" Before her mother could say anymore, she said good-bye and disconnected. She turned to face Bryant in time for another kiss, and she moaned. "I can't get enough of those."

He kissed her again. "Don't." He gestured to the phone. "Problems?"

She shook her head. "No. So what about my other present?"

He smirked. "One track mind." The box appeared in his palm, and Tae almost snatched it away before attacking the wrapping. This time, she was careful about opening it. The box was so small she had a moment of panic that it was a ring, not sure if that would be a good thing or a bad one at this point.

Jared's name was embossed on the front of the small white box. Tae's heart pounded. She pulled it open to find a beautiful diamond bracelet and caught her breath. "Oh my goodness, Bryant. This is so beautiful." She hesitated to remove it. "Isn't this a little much? I mean..."

Bryant reached into the box and lifted the delicate jewelry. He took hold of her wrist and looped the bracelet around it then closed the clasp. "When I saw it, I knew it was right for you, that I wanted you to have it."

"But—"

"Don't argue, Tae." He kissed her lips. "Trust me."

She looked from the too expensive gift to his face and back again, not finding anything more to say in protest. "Thank you."

He stroked her cheek. "Let's go inside."

The meaning in his voice was unmistakable. Tae didn't think for a second that Bryant expected to be intimate with her because of his gifts. They were both horny as hell, it having been a long time, and, well, it felt like the right time.

She smiled. "Yes, let's."

* * * *

Bryant knew the moment they stepped into her room that Tae was terrified. She crossed her arms over her chest and stood near the bed unmoving while he leaned heavily on his cane in the doorway. *She has no idea how beautiful she is.* He vowed that this time of intimacy between them would be his time to show her what she meant to him, and how lovely he thought she was. For her to trust him, to open herself to him meant everything, and he wouldn't abuse it no matter how his body ached to be inside her. She needed slow and gentle. She needed caresses, and he would give them to her.

He crossed the room and sat down on the bed, offering her his hand. After some moments, she joined him but sat stiff, hiding behind her hand. He reached out to lift it away from her face, but she jerked out of his hold.

"Don't."

"Trust me, Tae."

"I do...but not that. Please, not yet."

He nodded. "Okay."

With care, he began to unbutton her dress at the front and ease it off her shoulders. He tried not to react to the small scars on her shoulder and right arm. He guessed they were negligible to her face. Kissing each place she had been hurt, he laid her on the bed and continued to undress her. The tiny sniffles she made while she lay rigid and prone let him know he was going about this the right way.

“Don’t be afraid,” he told her. “I promise, I won’t hurt you. Tae, you think you’re not beautiful anymore, but you are. So sexy. I want you, baby.” He came to thick black tights that covered her legs. In the warmth of spring, he wondered why and was surprised when he uncovered her smooth curvy legs. “Why in the world do you wear these?” he asked as he bent to kiss the inside of one knee.

Tae shivered. “Feels like a shield of protection.” She gasped. “Bryant, what are you going to do?”

He grinned at the high pitch to her voice. “Why I’m going to eat you, baby.”

She squeaked but she did not resist when he spread her legs. Taking his time, he ran his tongue along her warm skin, reveling in her flavor and aching to reach that hot, wet spot he remembered so well. He reached the top of one thigh and took a small nip, and she shuddered.

“Bryant, I’m not so sure...”

Her voice trailed off when he pushed her legs farther apart, and finding her soaking wet, ran a finger down over her folds to her opening. He held up his finger coated with her cream and raised an eyebrow. “Someone is ready.”

Her embarrassment was plain, but Bryant couldn’t wait any longer. He buried his mouth between her legs and stuck out his tongue. Damn, she was good. So delicious, he couldn’t stop himself. He delved deeper, snaking his tongue as far as it could go. Sealing his lips to her moist box, he began to suck and lick. He moaned as he ate, and Tae squirmed and whined. At one point she seemed about to push him away, but then she grabbed hold of his shoulder, dragging him forward.

“Bryant!” she screamed.

He drew back. “What do you want me to do, baby?”

Terrified, her eyes were wide, and lips were parted. He figured he’d take his time with those in a little while. Tae tried to pull his head closer, but he resisted. She frowned, and when he realized she thought he didn’t want her, he reached beneath her to stroke her ass and tug her closer to his mouth.

“What do you want me to do, baby?” he asked again.

She figured it out, that he wanted her to voice her desire. She hesitated and tried to chew her lip off, along with ripping the skin from his shoulder. Bryant winced but waited in silence. At last she spoke. "I want you to...to...uh...lick..."

He grinned. "Yes?"

"Eat me," she blurted out with her eyes closed. "Bryant, eat me like you can't get enough. I want to hear it, the sounds."

Bryant put both hands beneath her and raised her higher. "My pleasure." He lowered his head and ate like a man hungry for the best meal he'd ever eaten. He sucked and licked, even nibbled gently at her sweet core. At one point, he closed his lips around her nether lips and pulled back tenderly. Tae cried out, ripping at the sheets now instead of him.

Bryant groaned and made the small noises that seemed to turn Tae on. And they were doing things to him as well. He was rock hard, ready to burst in the bed, but he held on. Soon he brought Tae to an ear-piercing shouting orgasm, but he didn't stop. With determination, he pleased her a second, a third and a fourth time before he rose up to a sitting position.

In that pose, he realized his leg was throbbing, distracting him from continuing. Tae sat up and wrapped her arms around his neck. She kissed his cheek and rested her forehead next to his.

"That was wonderful." She kissed him again. "Bryant?" When he didn't answer, she drew back. "You're hurting. I'm so selfish. We should have waited."

He shook his head and patted her hand. "No, we both wanted it. Me as much as you."

"But you haven't come." She seemed to consider what to do, and then she slid from the bed, headed for the bathroom. "I'll be back in a sec."

When she returned, she held her hand out to him.

"What?"

She rolled her eyes. "Just come on."

Deciding that trust goes both ways, Bryant eased to the end of the bed, retrieved his cane and stood. He hobbled behind Tae watching her ass sway, gratified that she was confident enough to not hide herself from him. When they reached the bathroom, he was surprised to breathe in a sweet fragrance, and moving farther inside, he found the bathtub filled with bubble bath.

Tae glanced at him. "Warm water is good for muscle ache."

“Good idea. How did you luck out and get such a big tub?”

She shrugged. “*Very* lucky. You know two people can get in there.”

Bryant hooted. “By all means.”

* * * *

Tae waited until Bryant settled inside the warm water before she joined him. She couldn't believe she was here with him, letting him get an eye full of her naked body, and when he kissed her scars she'd gotten from the accident on her arm and shoulder, she nearly sobbed at his gentleness. Never had she imagined a man could or would treat her in such a way upon discovering the damage to her body. Yet she hesitated to allow him to see her face. A whole other type of courage was needed for that. She could almost see herself allowing him to look at her face and imagined that he wouldn't draw back in horror.

She sank down into the water facing Bryant, and he watched her, his gaze flicking from her face to her breasts and back again. Of course that was after the tiny triangle between her legs had been covered. He'd almost looked like he was hungry again. Just thinking of it had Tae hot all over. Bryant had learned a few things since their last time of being together. Thinking he had learned it all from Leena annoyed her, and she shook the thought from her head.

“Why are you frowning?” he asked as he reached for her.

“I'm trying to figure out how not to hurt you.” That hadn't been her thought just then, but it was true nonetheless.

“My thighs are just fine. Come sit on my dick.”

Tae's eyes widened. “Dirty language, Mr. Hussner. Maybe I should make you suffer a little longer.” She smiled.

Bryant tugged her up onto his lap, and her breasts flattened on his chest. The hardness between them set her on fire. The man had no problems with his equipment. “I've suffered enough without you. Baby, let me hold you. I want to be one with you.”

She shivered. He knew the words to say, was tender and sweet. Her heart beat faster and not just in sexual excitement. Bryant slid a hand down over her belly to feel her center. When he was sure she was moist, he moved both hands to her hips and lifted her. Lightheaded at her boldness, Tae extended a hand between them and grasped his erection. She guided it into her and gasped at the stinging stretch to fit him in.

“We'll stop. I'm hurting you,” he told her.

“No way. More,” she demanded. “I want all of it, Bryant.”

Bryant didn't argue. She didn't think he could. When he was buried to the hilt, they began a slow grind together, almost as if they swayed to music. Mumbling each other's names along with endearments, they kissed and stroked each other's bodies. Bryant ran fingertips over Tae's nipples, sending shivers up and down her spine. She arched into his touch only to find instead of his palm, his lips closed over her tight buds. The moan that escaped her was ragged and needy.

“Tae, my love. It's been too long.”

“Yes!” she almost screamed when he had lowered his mouth to the beginning swell under her breasts and nipped his way up to her dark chocolate areola. When he had run his tongue all around it, he covered her nipple once again and sucked it hard into his mouth. Tae jerked on his lap, and Bryant growled.

“I'm coming! Right now!” He howled once, long and loud, and then she felt his seed fill her, hot and feeling so good, she came for the fifth time right behind him.

After some time of shivering in each other's arms, trying to come down from their high, Bryant eased Tae down between his legs. She was careful not to bump his injured calf and began washing his chest with shaking hands.

“Tae.” He stopped her hands and lifted her chin. “I want to stay with you. Tonight...Forever...”

She pulled out of the delicate hold he had on her chin and stared down at the fading bubbles. “I...”

He lifted her chin again. “Tonight.”

“Okay, tonight. We'll go from there,” she agreed.

Tae didn't know why she panicked when Bryant's desire was clear. He wanted to go back to what they had before or at least build something new. How could he be so sure about what he wanted, when it seemed all she ever did was second guess every thought, every feeling. And even after she'd made a decision, she wondered if it was the right thing to do. Bryant was self-assured.

Years ago she had told him how she thought about the details of them being together, what they would say and do, how the experience would go. He had asked if she was a born worrier, and she'd admitted that she was. After all, she was her mother's daughter. At her question of whether he ever worried, he had said he just hoped for the best. What the hell was that? Watching him and listening to him in the last few weeks, she didn't understand him any better than she did when they were teens—not his devotion to her, not his way of thinking. He was just Bryant, and she needed to accept that.

Tae pondered the question of where she and Bryant were headed until late in the night when he was breathing deep and dreaming of who knows what at her side. She couldn't believe he was here in her apartment, after so many years. He was real.

She reached over and stroked his back, shaking at the warmth and life she found there. His scent, a mixture of sandalwood and just male essence, had already permeated her room, and she'd be smelling it long after he was gone. She breathed him in deep and let it go in a slow sigh before closing her eyes to try to get some sleep.

A few seconds was all it seemed she had gotten when something jerked her awake. She stared at the darkened ceiling waiting for the sound to repeat itself. When it did, her heart thundered in her chest.

Bryant had shoved the night stand aside he was battling something so hard in his sleep. His groans of agony raised goose bumps on Tae's skin and set her hair on end.

"Bryant!" she called, but he didn't seem to hear. She grabbed at his arm while he was reaching for something unseen. Tae was shocked to find his skin drenched with sweat, and his eyes were closed. "Bryant, baby, wake up. You're having a nightmare."

He jerked from her hold, and she almost went flying over the side of the bed. Hooking her legs on Bryant's body saved her from hitting the floor. Her soft cry of shock seemed to bring him to consciousness. He jerked awake, surprised to find her sprawled over his lap.

"Are you okay?" she asked him. He didn't answer. "Bryant?"

His expression grim and his eyes glassy, he pulled out from under Tae and threw back the covers. Her heart constricted to see that his limbs trembled with each step he took toward the bathroom. Not having said a word, he closed the bathroom door, and the distinctive click of the lock falling into place was like an explosion that filled the room.

She blinked. Where was the loving man she had made love with earlier? She didn't understand this. Flipping over, she sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed. At the bathroom door, she gave a tentative knock and then pressed her ear close. There was no sound from inside.

"Bryant?" she called.

No answer. She checked the knob knowing it was locked, and still there was the ache in her chest that he would shut her out. Was this his normal reaction to having bad dreams?

"Bryant, let me in," she called again. "I know it's hard, remembering and..." She let her voice trail off. What did she know? Nothing. Not a single thing, and wasn't there some mental issue, some stress she had read about where soldiers were concerned after they

returned from war? Was this what Bryant was suffering, and would she make it worse if she pushed him too hard? Indecision, doubt and even anger rolled through her as she waited against his silence with the door between them. She sank to the floor and rested her head on the panels until her eyelids began to droop.

Tae didn't know when Bryant came out of the bathroom or how she had gotten back into the bed, but she woke to sunlight steaming in the open curtains at her window. She glanced over to them and knew she would never have left them open because the light sometimes got to her before she became alert enough to turn away from it. Pushing the covers aside, she sat up to find Bryant sound asleep beside her. There were dark rings around his eyes from obvious lack of sleep.

She considered waking him and demand to know why he had shut her out when he had claimed to want to be with her forever. With a hand poised above his shoulder, she stopped, the doubts returning. Maybe he was angry with her, blamed her for what had happened to him. It was her fault. She was so freaking tired of thinking that way, but couldn't push the thoughts away.

Deciding it might be best to keep her distance for now, she slid out of bed, took a quick shower and left the apartment to go to work. Her coworker had the day off.

One thing was clear, her relationship with Bryant was not going to be the picnic that either of them imagined just because they were older and more mature.

Chapter Eight

Tae strolled past her supervisor's office for the twentieth time that day and stopped on the opposite side of the door to slide her cell phone from her pocket. It buzzed, and she checked the screen. Bryant was calling. She pressed the end call symbol and slipped it in her pocket. While she chewed the inside of her cheek, considering whether to go in and talk to Charlene, her phone buzzed for the millionth time. She couldn't resist checking.

This time it was a text message. *"Tae, please call me. We need to talk...I'm sorry about last night. Can we please discuss it?"*

Tae blinked away the moisture in her eyes and then took a deep breath. She rapped on Charlene's door. "Charlene, can I ask you about something?"

Her supervisor swiveled in her chair and waved Tae inside with the phone up to her ear. Tae would have backed out, but Charlene covered the mouthpiece. "No, come on in. I'm wrapping this up."

Her attention returned to her call, and Tae sank down on a cushioned seat in front of the desk. She didn't even know if Charlene would know what had happened to Bryant last night or if it was anything beyond a simple nightmare, but she had to know before she spoke with him.

At last, Charlene hung up the phone and linked her fingers atop her desk with a smile on her face. "What can I do for you, Tae? Dr. Ippy isn't giving you a hard time anymore is he?"

"Oh no, it's not that." Tae worried her bottom lip. "I was wondering if you knew anything about mental stress regarding a combat vet."

Charlene's eyes widened. "Are we talking about anyone in particular?"

Tae sat there in silence. She was not about to admit that it was Bryant and what he meant to her. Coming in here was hard enough. "It's a friend. He had a nightmare, and then his symptoms were shaking, unfocused, sweating. I'm not sure what else."

Her supervisor nodded. "Sounds like Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. Soldiers who have had horrifying experiences like having their life threatened or seeing someone close to them die can suffer from it. They can relive the experience through nightmares or even a smell can trigger the symptoms you describe. Obviously if your friend did a tour in Iraq even once, he must have faced unspeakable horrors."

Tae ran a hand over her forehead and closed her eyes. "How can I help him?"

“You can’t. Not really. You can support him and be there for him. You can learn to relate to him as not to aggravate his condition, but he needs therapy, most likely for the rest of his life.”

Her stomach churning, Tae swallowed. “Aggravate? I could have done something wrong?” Tears welled in her eyes. “I can’t do that. I can’t do *this*.” She waved her hands about, not knowing what to do. Last night had been terrifying and confusing. More so for Bryant, that was for sure, but she couldn’t be the right person to support him.

Charlene reached over the desk and patted Tae’s hand. “Calm down, sweetie. You don’t give yourself nearly enough credit. You can be there for your friend.” She swiveled in her chair and pulled open a file drawer. After searching through several hanging folders, she withdrew a pamphlet. “Here’s some information and a number to call for training on how to deal with your friend. I think you need to talk about this with him. I’d be surprised if he wasn’t already being treated right here for PTSD and just hadn’t discussed it with you yet.”

Tae considered that information. Was it possible that between Bryant’s physical therapy sessions which she had attended with him faithfully that he had also been talking to someone about PTSD? If that was the case then he had still been shutting her out. The knowledge pissed her off.

She thanked Charlene for her time and information, and left the office with a dull throb in her head. By the time she had packed her things and was headed to the exit door, she had downed a couple of pills, her only thought being to get home and crash. Outside, the sun had the nerve to be shining when she felt like crap. She held up a hand to her face to look for her driver, but he wasn’t there. Bryant leaned against his car with his arms folded over his broad chest. Despite herself, Tae’s mouth watered as she took in his triceps bulging below his short sleeves.

“What are you doing here, Bryant?”

He stepped away from his car, opened the passenger side door, and guided her inside. “I’m picking up my girlfriend since she did not bother to return any of my calls.”

“It was a busy day.”

“Well we can go to your place and talk—”

“I have been invited to my mother’s house for dinner. Lee is back in town again, and she wants her whole family together.” While Lee was in town, her mother hadn’t invited her, but Bryant didn’t need to know that. She knew she was being a bitch but couldn’t help it. She didn’t have a right to be angry but she was and needed some time alone to sort everything out.

Alone time wasn't to be. "Well, I'm sure she won't mind one more," Bryant told her. "You want to stop and change first or head over there?"

She sighed. "Head over now." If she dared take time to freshen up he might corner her into talking about last night.

After some time of driving toward Riley, Bryant noticed her squinting against the light. "Why don't you wear sunglasses? I imagine the light can't be good when your head is hurting."

Had he noticed she had a migraine? Guilt assailed her. The man picked up on her needs, but she had been blind to his.

"I can't wear sunglasses. No matter how light they are, they are excruciating on the right side of my face."

He said nothing in response for a while, and she closed her eyes with her arm poised over her head. He stroked her hair. "I will get the windows tinted tomorrow, and I'll pick you up. Am I right in guessing your usual ride doesn't have tint?"

She turned and stared at him.

He grinned. "What?"

"Nothing."

When they arrived at her mother's house, the door was flung open and her mother came rushing down the steps as if she hadn't seen Tae in years. "Sweetie! I'm so glad to see you. I'm glad I decided to fix extra tonight. You should have told me you were coming."

Tae groaned and glanced at Bryant. He didn't appear to realize she had flat out lied to him, but it was more than obvious. She turned back to her mother. "We don't want to impose, Ma. Have enough for Bryant?"

"Of course! She took hold of their arms and dragged them toward the house. Once inside the house, Tae greeted her father in front of the living room TV as usual and spun around to see her brother. She hadn't spoken to him since the night Kendra revealed what she had. Tae stood there in silence and so did Bryant. Lee made no attempt to speak. His gaze roved them both, and then he walked away. Tae glanced at Bryant and noted his annoyance at her brother, but she hadn't told him what really happened years ago, and she wasn't about to.

Dinner was pan-seared tilapia over jasmine rice with mushrooms and asparagus. Her mother had also made her Riley famous baked mac and cheese with seven different kinds of cheese and collard greens seasoned with ham. When Tae entered the kitchen, her

mother was just pulling homemade rolls from the oven. Tae zipped over and snagged one to smear with butter.

“Darn, Ma. Where do you find the time to cook all this, and I thought you weren’t expecting anyone. You made this mac and cheese and the rolls just because?” Tae was in the middle of dipping a fork into the cheesy dish. Her mother smacked her hand.

“Watch your mouth, girl. You’ll be cussing in a minute.”

Tae frowned. “I said ‘darn.’”

Her mother’s eyebrow went up, and Tae fell silent. “You know how spoiled your father is with my cooking. If I didn’t go all out sometimes, he’d think I didn’t love him.”

Tae laughed. “I think you just like the fuss we all make over you when you cook like this.”

“That too.” Her mother winked. “Come help me get this food in serving dishes and tell me what’s going on with you and Bryant? You have been looking happier, and you’ve been in Riley every time I turn around.”

“You’re complaining?” Tae washed her hands, dried them and began scooping the food into dishes to place on the dining room table. “We’re fine, I guess. No relationship is perfect or doesn’t need some work. I’m not sure what we’re doing or where we’re going. Or if we’re going anywhere.”

Her mother squinted at her, hair flying about her head and face flushed from the heat of the oven. “Sweetie, you sound like you did when you were about to go off to college, like you were running.”

“I’m not running.”

“What’s got you antsy? Bryant’s getting better, and he’s sticking around. I’ve never seen a man look so in love since your father figured out that I was the woman he wanted to spend his life with. Bryant never takes his eyes off you, and if you ask me he was miserable the whole time he was with that skank Leena.”

Tae gasped. “Ma, what do you know about the word skank?”

“I know enough. Anyway, don’t mess with this, Tae. I want only the best for you, and I think Bryant is it.”

Tae had grabbed a paper towel to wipe her hands on, and at her mother’s words she shredded it between twitching fingers. Her eye went out of focus, but not from stress. She day-dreamed thinking about her mother’s words and her situation. She was way out in the deep with this relationship, in waters that were choppy and threatened to engulf her. Her

mother read her right. She did want to cut line and run. But the thought of losing Bryant, of walking away from him put a tightness in her chest that was unbearable. They would talk tonight after they left her mother's house, and everything would be fine. It had to be.

After she and her family had stuffed themselves, Tae was surprised to find her mother returning to the table with peach cobbler. "Oh goodness, Ma, there's no way."

"Way!" her father called out, eyes big and fork ready. Tae laughed, and Bryant did too, but she noticed his fork was at the ready as well.

She smirked at him. "You too?"

Bryant licked his lips. "Damn...I mean darn right. I remember your mother's cooking, and drinking Ensure and choking down MREs in the desert is no substitute."

"You'll be cussing in a minute," Tae told him.

"Oh shoot," her mother exclaimed. "I forgot the whipped cream your father likes. Tae, can you get it, and get Lee's ice cream as well."

Lee jumped to his feet. "I'll get the ice cream."

Tae gave him a look but said nothing. Bryant would have followed, but Tae's father struck up a conversation with him about his car. Bryant sank down into his seat, and Tae squeezed his shoulder before following behind her brother to the kitchen. As soon as the kitchen door shut, Tae started her own conversation.

"So when are you going to tell Ma you're gay, or Dad for that matter?"

"It's none of your fucking business. Besides that you bring it up now after all this time? Kendra couldn't keep her big fat mouth closed." He didn't even look at her but yanked the freezer door open and took out the Rum Raisin. That flavor did not go with the peach cobbler, but she didn't stop him. He slapped a ridiculous amount into a bowl and then licked the spoon watching for her reaction.

"What the hell is your problem, Lee?" Tae's head pain had eased but it was beginning to throb again. She ignored it. "Okay, so you're what you are. What does that have to do with me? Why would you hate me? It's not like I took Bryant away from you."

"That's what you think?" he growled. "I should have fucking known Kendra wouldn't get it right."

"So you weren't in love with Bryant all those years ago?" She crossed her arms. "Kendra said you went to confront Bryant about how you felt, but Rory stopped you, told you to stay away from him."

Lee glared, picked up his bowl and threw it so hard into the sink that the dish shattered. Tae jumped, staring at him. Her mother peeked into the kitchen, and Tae gave her a tight smile. “Sorry, Ma. Butterfingers.”

“Oh, sweetie.” Her mother sighed. “Be careful. I don’t want you to cut yourself. Hand me that whipped cream. Your father’s getting impatient.”

Lee handed it to Tae, and Tae handed it to her mother. Her mother glanced between the two of them with a clear warning in her eyes and then left, the door swooshing behind her. Tae’s mother liked harmony around her, and she might not know what they were talking about, but she sensed that they were arguing. Not that she would have missed it the way Lee didn’t speak when she and Bryant arrived.

“For your information,” Lee continued, “Rory didn’t just warn me off Bryant, he punched me in the face. Just like that, without warning. No one but you is good enough for his little brother.”

“When was this?”

He rolled his eyes. “The year before you went away to college.”

Tae blinked. “We were dating. So you didn’t give a fuck that he was my man at the time. You wanted him, and you were going to try to steal him away from me.”

“Don’t try to get all high and mighty, Tae.” He ran his hands over his head staring at the box of melting ice cream on the table. “I am so tired of you getting everything you want. Everything, from the time we were little until now.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” She almost laughed.

“I’m not! Our parents spoiled you—”

“They were good to you as well, Lee. Don’t even start it. Besides, we’re not children anymore. You don’t need to go back in the past..”

“Of course I don’t, because it’s still going on. You think Ma would smile and say be careful if she knew I broke that bowl? No, she’d rip me a new one and tell me I was being irresponsible. She’d throw a guilt trip on me or something. All because I’m not her perfect little angel. Yeah, I admit it. I wanted to rip Bryant away from you. For once you wouldn’t have everything. But that didn’t work out, and I couldn’t even get the satisfaction of you two breaking up the following year, because he didn’t dump you. You dumped him.”

Tae sat down rubbing her arms. What in the world should she say? Her brother disliked her, was holding on to past slights whether real or imagined because he thought their parents favored her. “I’m sorry, Lee. You’ve always kept me at a distance, especially

since our late teens, which I now see why, but I thought it was just sibling rivalry stuff. I'm sorry. I know they love you. There's no doubt about that."

He shrugged, the anger fading from his eyes. "Whatever. You're still the perfect princess. I bet they can't even see that scar." She flinched when he nodded toward her face. "So you can be sure I'm never going to tell them about me. I'll live my life the way I want to away from Riley, and I'll stop in to visit."

"That's hardly practical." He moved to pass her, leaving his mess, and she reached for his arm. He yanked out of reach. "Lee, I want us to be friends."

He didn't address her plea, but just walked out of the kitchen, and Tae stood to clean up the mess.

* * * *

When his cell phone rang, Bryant had to release Tae's hand on his lap while he dug it out. He glanced at the caller ID and stiffened, recognizing the number. Leena. He considered not answering but thought better of it since she would more than likely keep calling. He admitted he hadn't handled things right when he broke it off with her, but at the time, he was half out of his mind with grief, and the only light had been Tae. His sweet Tae. Shame filled him that he had used Leena when he couldn't have Tae, but it was now behind them, and he had hoped Leena would get that.

"Yeah?" he answered with too abrupt a tone. Tae looked at him, but he smiled and turned back to the road.

"I need to talk to you, Bryant," she began. "Can you meet me?"

"Hell no." He cleared his throat and checked the clock on the dash. "It's almost midnight, you know." He had been bugging Tae to get her shift changed to day time, but no openings were available just yet. At least that's what she told him. He wondered, because she didn't appear too eager to do it other than the occasional cover for someone else.

"You owe me!" Leena snapped.

"Excuse me?"

She changed her tactics. "Please, Bryant. Just five minutes of your time. You could give me that at least. I mean you dropped me so fast and not even a 'thanks for the fuck, but I'm moving on.'"

He shook his head at her language. Tae could let a curse slip once in a while, but she had class. Leena had zero and wouldn't know what he meant if he ever mentioned it. "Fine."

"Thank you. How about in an hour at Shane's?" she suggested.

“No way.” He damn sure wasn’t going to be seen meeting her at a bar. Word would spread around town that he was cheating on Tae with Leena, and that was not happening. He and Tae had talked a long time about his condition, and he had begged her forgiveness for not admitting the extent of it. She had even agreed to take some classes on how to manage her emotions and how to support him when he had the nightmares. The shame he had felt that night for sobbing in his sleep and then waking to cold sweats and trembling was more unbearable knowing she had seen him so weak. But they were going to work it out, and he wasn’t going to risk what they were building because of Leena.

Rather than suggest a place, he waited for Leena to come to her senses and say something so he wouldn’t have to explain to Tae later. He did feel bad about dropping Leena and felt he owed her five minutes, but not a second more. She named a far less populated location, and he agreed and disconnected the call.

“Who was that?” Tae asked.

His gut turned knowing he was going to lie. “Rory.”

Tae chuckled. “How old do you have to be before he stops acting like a mother hen with you?”

He forced a smile. “Ninety-five, I think.”

They had a little laugh before he pulled into the hospital’s parking lot and parked the car. He hopped out and went around to help her from her side and walked her to the door.

“You know you don’t have to do that every time.” She grinned and then winced.

Bryant pulled her into his arms. “Head still hurt? You need to take off tonight. I’ll take care of you this time.”

She squeezed him and offered her sweet mouth to his for a kiss. Bryant covered her mouth, drinking in the nectar that he could live on for the rest of his life. After a few moments, he pressed her head gently on his shoulder and rubbed her back.

“I can’t take off. There’s no one to cover for me right now, and I like to work. I like the atmosphere in the hospital.”

“That’s not weird at all.”

She laughed. “Don’t worry. I’ll take my meds again in a couple of hours, and do some meditation on break. Friday, I have a doctor appointment. I think I’m just becoming immune to this medicine. It wasn’t unexpected. He and I will work it out.”

Bryant lifted her hand and cupped her face. “Tae...”

“I know. I know. Stop worrying. You’re getting like your mother hen brother.” She kissed him again and pulled from his arms. Bryant stood at the door after she’d disappeared through it and then turned back to his car. He did worry. A lot. But in his conversation earlier with Tae’s mother she had warned him that Tae was stubborn and independent to a fault. She wouldn’t allow him to baby her or treat her like she was an invalid. He understood that but it didn’t make it easier to deal with when he saw her in pain and couldn’t do a thing about it.

Remembering his agreement to see Leena, he slid behind the wheel of his car and started the engine. “Might as well get this shit over with.”

Rather than head back to Tae’s apartment, he stayed in town until it was time to meet Leena. Parked at the side of the road in the shadows between the street lights, he was surprised to see her arrive on time. He was not surprised to find her uncurling her long, bare legs from some other guy’s car.

Bryant got out of the car and walked around to lean on the side with his arms folded over his chest and his legs crossed at the ankles. He waited for her to approach him. Teetering on too high heels, she sashayed over to him and would have leaned up to kiss him if he didn’t push her back in time.

“What’s this about, Leena? I’m sorry I didn’t break it off like I should have, but it’s been a while now. You know it’s over.”

She pouted. “Well, I wanted to tell you how much I cared about you and—”

“Leena, cut the crap!”

She scowled. The guy in the car blew the horn, and Leena cursed at him before turning back to Bryant. “I need some money.”

“What?” He couldn’t believe her boldness. Then again, he could.

A heavy sigh passed her red lips, and she ran fingertips along the line of her blouse that revealed the swell of her breasts. She was just short of toppling out of the opening. “You encouraged me to get my own place, and you were paying for it. The second Ms. Tae comes into the picture, you dropped me cold and didn’t even give me a chance to make sure I wasn’t thrown out on the street. I can’t afford that place by myself, and I haven’t found a roommate yet. I can’t pay the rent this month.”

He closed his eyes and ran a hand over them. She was right about that. Rory had warned him about keeping Leena as a mistress. *Fuck!* “What about him?” He nodded toward the guy waiting. “Can’t he pay it?”

She rolled her eyes. “Michael’s broke. He can’t even keep his ass out of jail for five minutes.” She rested her hands on his arms. “Please, Bryant. Just this once, and I’ll never bother you again. I swear.”

He shouldn’t. Giving her money might encourage her, and if it got back to Tae, he didn’t know what she’d think. His stupidity had gotten him in this mess. He had to do the right thing. “Just this once, Leena. I mean it. Don’t call me ever again. Got it?”

She nodded, her eyes wide with excitement.

“How much?”

She named a sum, and he considered walking away. Instead, he opened his passenger side door, reached into the glove compartment and pulled out his check book.

“A check?” she whined.

“Take it or leave it,” he snapped.

She sighed. “I’ll take it. Thanks.”

Bryant wrote the check, tore it off and stuffed it into her hand. Seconds later, he roared down the street feeling like the biggest idiot in Riley. But at least she was out of his life, and he had settled the weight on his conscious concerning her. In an effort to make sure that he and Tae remained in a good place, he determined to tell her about giving Leena money. Better that it came from him and not someone else.

* * * *

Tae entered the building where her doctor kept his offices with the determined hope that he had already found another medicine that could combat the headaches. They had been out of control in the last few days, and she had had to give into Bryant’s insistence that she take a couple days off work.

Days spent with the blinds closed and soft relaxing music playing were becoming the norm. Her appetite was shot to hell, and she only ventured out of her room at night to nibble toast with caffeine free tea. In order to come to the doctor’s office alone without Bryant tagging along to make sure she was okay, she had to agree that he could wait for her in the parking lot no matter how long the appointment took.

As she crept along to the bank of elevators at the end of the hall, she had to smile. The man was devoted to her. They hadn’t yet exchanged expressions of love, although she saw the desire in Bryant’s face and heard his hints to it. She wasn’t ready. Fear took hold of her every time she considered it. That would be the ultimate step, the indicator that they were in this thing come what may.

Why she was so damn afraid, she didn't know. As she pressed the button for the elevator, she determined to tell Bryant she loved him when she got back to the car. No more giving into her fears. They were ridiculous and unnecessary anyway.

The elevator pinged, and the doors slid open. Tae started forward but stopped when Leena stepped out. She gasped. They stood there face-to-face, neither saying anything at all.

Leena stuck a hand on one hip and flipped her blonde hair over her shoulder. "Well, well, if it isn't my old friend, Tae."

Tae's hands tightened on her purse. "Leena."

"What's up, girl?" Leena laughed like nothing had ever come between them. "Been a long time, hasn't it? Years. It's good seeing you though." She rolled her eyes and had the nerve to plump her breasts as if that did anything for Tae or maybe Leena thought she was jealous given her own small boobs. "Well I'm glad to see you. I wanted to say thanks and all."

Tae frowned. "Thanks? For what?"

Leena waved a hand. "For the money, stupid. For Bryant paying my rent the other day. He really comes through for me when I'm in a pinch." She ran a hand over her breasts again. "And I am super grateful. So thanks."

With that bombshell dropped, she moved around Tae and continued down the hall and out of the building. Tae stood in place unmoving. Bryant hadn't said a word, not one word about giving Leena money. Could she be lying? Somehow she thought Leena was telling the truth because it would be a simple matter for Tae to ask him.

The ache in her head intensified, and she stumbled forward into the waiting elevator to the second floor where her doctor's office was. Leena's words played over and over in her mind. That whore had rubbed herself like she was either willing to give Bryant some reward for paying her rent, or she already had given it to him. Knowing Bryant, Tae didn't think he would do that, but still she never would have thought he'd take care of Leena and not tell her either. Her stomach churned, and she thought she would throw up.

"Ms. Stokes?" her doctor called out, and Tae came to the realization that he had been trying to get her attention for a while.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Yes, what were you saying, doctor?" she asked.

He hesitated. "Perhaps you should call in a family member or friend before I share the results of the tests we did last week."

Tae went still. “W-Why? What is the result? What did you find?” Her throat dried in an instant although she had increased her water intake over the last month. It was as though she’d never taken a sip in all that time. “Just tell me.”

“Is there someone close to you picking you up today?”

“Just tell me, damn it!” she screamed. At his eyes widening, she calmed herself. Yelling was not helping her head. “I’m sorry. Please, doctor, just tell me. My boyfriend is down in the car waiting for me.”

That seemed to appease him a little. “Ms. Stokes, remember we indicated just after your accident that there was damage to the tissue around the optical nerve of your left eye. Because of the severe head trauma you have migraines which were likely to continue throughout your life. The migraines would aggravate the damaged tissue causing some swelling and possible temporary loss of sight at times of high stress. We expected that the tissue would repair itself to some degree over time. However, that hasn’t happened.”

Tae closed her eyes and bowed her head. “Meaning?”

“Meaning the damage has not improved but rather your optical nerve has deteriorated. We have been so focused on the damaged tissue and the migraines that we did not look too closely at the optical nerve. We suspect an infection of some sort and need to do more tests, but at this point, I’m afraid the further damage is beyond repair.”

The words echoed in her head. A pulse pounded in her temple. Her hands shook where they were clasped in her lap.

“Ms. Stokes, you have to come to terms with the fact that very soon, you will be blind in both eyes. Now you can...”

Tae heard nothing else beyond that. Blind in both eyes? Now? No, it couldn’t be. It couldn’t happen. She stood up and walked out of the office without looking back. She took the stairs because the elevator took too long coming, and she strolled half out of it to the front door. Someone called to her from behind, but the woman stopped when Bryant stepped from his car with a gentle smile on his face and his arms open to her.

Tae paused watching him, taking in the structure of his face, the contours of his beautiful body and especially that smile and those deep blue eyes. Her chest constricted. She had a class on PTSD on Monday. Who in the hell was she to help him? She couldn’t even help herself. Soon she would be useless to anyone, unable to continue her job or afford to maintain her own apartment.

She stepped through the sliding glass doors and walked up to him. He tried to hug her, but she held herself stiff. “Bryant?”

“Yes, baby? What’s wrong?” He frowned down at her, rubbing her arms.

“I think.” Her voice faltered. She cleared her throat and tried again. “I think that it’s best that we not see each other anymore.”

“What?” She tried pulling away, but he held on tight. “What’s this about, Tae? Talk to me. We said we’d discuss everything with each other.”

She glanced up at him. “We did say that didn’t we? Funny how that didn’t include you telling me that you paid Leena’s rent.”

His mouth dropped open. So it was true.

“Baby...”

“Take me home, please,” she whispered. “And it might be best if you moved back to Rory’s. That’s the best thing for us both.”

Chapter Nine

“I’m sorry, Bryant. She still won’t see you.” Tae’s mother stood like a sentinel at Tae’s apartment door, blocking his access. For a moment he considered pushing past her to force his way in, but he rejected the idea. For one that wouldn’t soften Tae’s heart toward him, and it would probably bring her whole family down on his head.

He spread his hands out before him, pleading, he hoped, in his eyes. “Just one minute of her time. Please, Mrs. Stokes. I just need to explain to her about—”

“What, sweetie?” she interrupted. When he didn’t speak, she went on. “Tae hasn’t told me much of anything except that you lied to her.”

“I never.”

“And,” she said in a louder tone to drown him out, “I know there’s something more to it than that. I have always loved you like a son ever since she first brought you over for dinner when you two were just fourteen or fifteen. I know that you both have things to work out, both personally and together, but right now she needs me. I’m going to be here for her, and if she doesn’t feel strong enough to see you, you need to accept that.”

“Mrs. Stokes...”

“End of story.” She slammed the door in his face.

Bryant leaned heavier on his cane as he descended the few steps to the ground. His leg ached like a bitch, worse than it had ever been, and funny enough he was almost glad about it. The soreness took his mind off Tae. *Fuck*. Who was he kidding? Nothing took his mind off of her. He ached to hold her in his arms, to hear her say she still loved him. He had made a mess of things delaying telling her. The problem was that he had been afraid of this happening, that she wouldn’t take it well. He wished with all his heart that he could go back and have a redo. No matter how his conscious plagued him, he would leave Leena hanging and be assured that his relationship with Tae was firm.

He hobbled to his car and sat inside while he dialed Tae’s number on his cell phone. After five rings, it went to voice mail. He disconnected and tried again. This time it went straight into her voice mail. She must have turned the phone off. He snapped the phone closed and threw it with force into the seat beside him and then slammed his fist into the center of the steering wheel. The horn blasted, and he was relieved that he hadn’t caused the air bag to activate.

Running a hand through his hair, he started the car. “What the hell am I going to do without her?”

Traffic was busy for this time of day when he got back to Riley, and his foot was too heavy on the gas, but Bryant didn’t give a rat’s ass one way or another. He blew through

stop signs and ran red lights. More than once he glanced in the rearview mirror expecting to see flashing lights, but he lucked out. The police force wasn't extensive in Riley anyway. Returning his attention to the road ahead, he recognized the direction he was headed in—the supermarket where Leena worked.

The tires on his car screeched when he stopped, and he jumped out of the car to storm toward the entrance. Once inside, he paused to look around for her, just realizing that she might not be working tonight. Whatever, he'd harass whoever he found to give him information about where she might be. He had already heard she'd given up her apartment. The bitch had been just making trouble getting money from him, and she would pay for it.

Bryant stalked past aisle after aisle until he became aware of shouting somewhere in the rear of the store. A man and a woman were going at it. The closer he came to where they were the more he recognized the voice. It was Leena. His extra lucky day!

He rounded the last aisle and stopped. Leena stood there dressed as slutty as she could get away with at work, her blouse cut low behind the green apron she wore and her pants seeming to have been strayed on her slender curves. When he came home after so long, he hadn't been able to stop looking at her. Now his stomach turned upon sight of her. What surprised him was that her nose was red, her eyes swollen, and she was crying. Bryant blinked and waited to see what was going on.

“Daddy, I said I don't have any money. I have to get back to work. You're going to get me fired,” Leena complained between sniffs.

Daddy? Bryant shifted his gaze to the salt and pepper greasy-haired man in front of her. His wife-beater T-shirt and dark slacks looked like they hadn't been washed in...never and hadn't been off his body for that long as well. Bryant walked slowly toward them, all the while listening to the conversation. He hadn't known Leena had family, but of course she would have.

“After all I done for you, girl?” her father said. “You treat me this way? I know you got a new boyfriend that gives you money. Heard that gossip with my own ears. Now give me what you owe me, Leena.”

“I said no,” Leena shouted.

Before Bryant or any of the people standing around watching the show could react, Leena's father lifted his hand and brought it down across her cheek. She went flying back into a stack of canned soda. Cans went everywhere, some bursting and spilling their contents across the floor. Someone screamed, and Leena's father was still yelling.

“You gonna give me what I want, Leena,” he shouted. “Think cause you grown and moved out you can sass me? I raised you, ain't I? I taught you how to get along in this

world, get you yours. You owe me.” Bryant took a step forward as the man began loosening his belt. What the hell was he about to do?

One of the male employees grabbed his arm, and another person called for someone to phone the police. Two more men came running up to tackle the older man to the floor, pinning him there by sitting on his back. A couple of the women helped Leena to stand. Her face was fast bruising. Bryant turned away and headed back to his car. There was nothing he could say to her to make him feel better anyway. The consequences of his actions were his own fault.

Back in his car, Bryant drove at a more leisurely pace. He had nowhere to go, no one to see. When he spotted Shane’s, he had not intended to go there, but he stopped anyway. He didn’t even know they were open during the day. Checking his watch, he noted that it was four in the afternoon. Late enough to drink.

Slumping on a stool, he scored a bowl of peanuts and began to scoff them down without tasting a one. The bartender wiping off the counter at the other end spotted him and strolled down to him. “Bryant, haven’t seen you here before.” The man reached out a hand to him. “One of our heroes. Let me shake your hand.”

Bryant took the offered hand and pumped it twice and then went back to his peanuts. “Yeah, just stopping in. Can I get a beer?”

The man nodded.

“On second thought,” Bryant called out, “give me a Greyhound.”

The bartender winced. “Oh, hard day?”

Bryant didn’t answer. He was no fool. He figured half the town knew by now that Tae had dumped him for the second time, and the man was just looking for a bigger scoop on what had happened. Should he let it slip to his wife that he had seen Bryant in Shane’s, she would rake him over for information she could share with her girlfriends.” The knowledge had Bryant slouching more and wishing he already had his hands on that drink.

After downing the liquid in one burning swallow, Bryant slid the glass across the counter and demanded another. He put that one away with less time and ordered again.

“Don’t you want to take a little more time with those?” the bartender suggested.

“Another!” His head buzzed.

The bartender complied, probably feeling sorry for him, and this time, Bryant took only a sip while replacing his peanut bowl with another. The front door opened, and he glanced over to see two men he didn’t recognize enter. They were both in fatigues, laughing loud

and gesturing. He dragged his gaze from the sight of them and focused on his drink. One of the men stopped near at his side.

“Sergeant.”

Damn. Even strangers knew who he was. He could not be invisible for one night? Bryant raised his glass but didn't look up. The man moved on with his friend a couple stools away. Bryant picked up on the conversation they renewed after they had ordered a couple of beers.

“Man, I don't know about all this. I'm just waiting to hear that I have to go back, and I can't do it. I mean, bodies everywhere, being shot at every time you turn around. I'm scared, really scared to get my ass blown off.”

“I hear you on that,” the other man responded.

Bryant frowned. They were young, unseasoned soldiers. He'd been there. But he would have never thought to run away from his duty. Then again, everyone wasn't the same. Just before they had pulled out the first time, he remembered his CO had to go and retrieve an AWOL soldier. He closed his eyes.

Frank had almost run. No, he had attempted to, but Luke caught him and talked him out of it. And for what? Now they were both gone. Bryant gripped his glass in an iron hold, making his fingers ache. His head began to pound, and his stomach did somersaults. He ran an arm across his forehead.

The images came with a sudden viciousness, and he was hard pressed to fight them off. First Luke and then Frank. He heard the gunfire and the explosions like they were happening right now all around him. He tried forcing his eyes open to make himself see that it wasn't happening, but his lids wouldn't obey. He jerked off the stool, and the glass smashed on the floor with him doubled in half.

Someone touched his arm. “Hey, man. You all right?”

Anger welled inside him. Bryant jerked his arm away. “Get the hell off me!” he shouted. His eyes at last obeyed his brain. He glanced around. All eyes were on him, and the two soldiers were on their feet. Bryant stumbled back and fell. The same man tried to help him, but Bryant swung out, and his fist connected with the man's chin. Just like that, the guy went down unconscious.

The soldiers closed in. “Let me help you home, sergeant,” one of them said.

“Back the fuck off!”

They kept coming. Bryant swung, but the soldier side stepped him, swung around behind, grabbed his arm and put him on his knees in one smooth movement. “Forgive me, sir. I

can't let you do this." Bryant struggled but the younger man's hold was firm. Hell, he had taught the men in Texas how to do just such a move. He sighed, frustrated and still angry at everyone in the place for no reason.

The other soldier turned toward the bar. "Do you know someone we could call for him?"

The bartender nodded. "Already done."

To Bryant's shame and embarrassment, fifteen minutes later, Rory walked into the bar. His face was red, but he had no expression. "You want to let my brother go?" he demanded.

"But—?" the soldier began.

"He's fine." Rory grabbed for Bryant's arm and seemed to think better of it. "Let's go, Bryant. Fun's over." The soldier released Bryant, and he stood up to pay his bill. After tossing a bill on the counter, he turned and walked out behind Rory. He had sunk to a new low, and he didn't know when it would get better, if ever.

* * * *

Tae sat in total darkness in her room until her mother opened her bedroom door and flicked the light on. Tae winced. "Ma..."

"Don't Ma me." Her mother planted hands on her hips. "I want an explanation and I want one right now. You've dropped Bryant, and you haven't said why." Before Tae could respond she went on. "And don't tell me that nonsense about Leena. You know as well as I do that man loves you like you were his sun."

Tae cried out. "Don't say that."

"Why not?" Her mother snapped at her for the first time since before her accident. "Tell me the truth, Tae. Right now. I'm not leaving this apartment until you tell me what's going on with the two of you. I said I wouldn't interfere, that I would just be here for you, but I can't stand it. Do you know how many times Rory called?"

Tae rolled her eyes. "Spare us both from interfering family members."

"What did you say to me?"

She coughed. "Nothing."

Her mother crossed the room and sat down at Tae's side, taking her hand into her lap. She lifted it and kissed Tae's knuckles. Just that tender move, so filled with love, had Tae doubled over and sobbing.

“Baby, please,” her mother sobbed along with her, “tell me. Sweetie, I’m going to be here with you no matter what.”

“Ma, I can’t. I just can’t.”

“You can. One word. Just one word, baby.”

“B-Blind.”

At first her mother didn’t say anything, and then the words seemed to sink in. She screamed, startling the mess out of Tae. When her mother would have slumped over the side of the bed, Tae reached out and grabbed her, pulling her mother into her arms. The roles were reversed in an instant.

“No, no, no! Please, no!” her mother shouted. “Haven’t you been through enough? This is too much. God, please!”

“Shh, Ma.” With their arms locked together, they rocked back and forth, Tae’s tears forgotten in her effort to comfort her mother. “Everything will be fine. I got through the accident and the scarring and the blindness in the one eye. I’ll get through this.”

“You’ll move home as soon as possible,” her mother said.

“Ma.”

“No arguments. Now I can take care of you.”

Tae sighed. She wouldn’t argue. They would work things out when the time came, but she sure wouldn’t move until she was forced to. She had been considering it all while she sat in her room. There was training that she could get, classes in learning to read Braille, and there must be a job somewhere that she could do which didn’t require sight. Maybe not in Riley or Tempe. Charlotte would be a good place. She did not look forward to that battle with her mother in the decision to move so far away.

At least she wouldn’t be helpless, and Bryant... Her heart ached thinking of him. He would find a woman who could be by his side, who did not have so many issues that she couldn’t support him in the emotional aftermath of Iraq. Leaving him had almost destroyed her, but it was for the best.

After some time, Tae’s mother sat up straight and squeezed Tae’s knee. “Okay, tell me everything the doctor said.”

Tae told her, and her mother’s eyes widened.

“Well we’re damn well going to get a second opinion. I know that!”

Tae gasped. “Ma.”

Her mother rolled her eyes. “And we’re getting every test known to man. There will be no ifs, ands or buts by the time we’re done if I have to ride those doctor’s backs until I know so much I could get an honorary medical degree!”

Despite the heavy depression weighing on Tae’s shoulders, she burst out laughing. “Ma, you’re something. What would I do without you?”

“You would make all these good decisions on your own.” She wiped her face and stood up. “Now, about Bryant.”

Tae stiffened, but her mother rested a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m going to be honest with you, sweetie. I can’t stand seeing you two apart. I was hoping for grandkids some day, and Lee sure isn’t going to give me any.”

Tae blinked. “Come again?”

Her mother’s nostrils flared. “You heard me. Anyway, I guess I understand your reasoning somewhat for breaking it off with Bryant. Lord knows he has his problems to deal with. But like I said, we’re going to do everything in our power to find out what our options are, and we will come out on top. You hear me?”

Tae gave a watery smile and nodded. “Yes, we will. Ah, Ma, about Lee...”

With a wave of her hand, she turned to leave the room. “Oh don’t worry about that. Your father’s going up to his place in Colorado next week.”

“What!” Tae squeaked. “Does he know that Lee—”

“He knows.” Her mother paused. “Lee needs to understand how much we love him no matter what lifestyle he chooses. I think he doesn’t realize that, and it’s very important to Dad to talk to him about it.”

“Wow.”

Her mother winked. “Hey, Dad and I are old, but we’re down. We have the 411.”

Tae winced. “Okay, I need my old-fashioned mother back quick.” They had a nice chuckle, and then Tae followed her mother into the kitchen where she knew she’d have a losing battle in making her own lunch.

* * * *

Bryant stopped his car outside Shane's and turned off the engine. He slipped out and strolled up to the door. As soon as he stepped inside, the bartender spotted him and held up a hand. "Sorry, Bryant. You're not welcome here."

He frowned. "What? I deserve service just like anyone else. I won't cause trouble."

The man shook his head. "I might believe that, but I'm not taking chances. You've got stuff to work out, bud, and in the bottom of a shot glass is not where you'll find your answer."

"Who the fuck are you now, my preacher?" Bryant roared.

The bartender raised an eyebrow at Bryant's outburst. Bryant sighed and spun around to leave. He scoured his mind for the location of another bar, but Riley didn't have much to offer. Maybe he should try driving over to Tempe. No, he'd just end up outside Tae's door begging her to take him back. He had more pride than that.

"Yeah right," he muttered as he slammed his car door after getting inside and gunning the engine. He threw the car into drive and rode down the street craning his neck for another way to put himself out of his misery. Rory had ridden his ass the last few days, demanding that he pull himself together, and even dragging him into the shop to forget his worries under the hood of a car. The problem with that was that Bryant couldn't take standing on his leg for too long, so he spent more time nursing a cold Coke in the corner watching Rory deal with his picky customers than anything else.

He had escaped at last and was determined to get soused. Maybe if he did it alone, no fights would break out this time. His solution lay at the corner of Main and 5th. He hadn't known a liquor store was there, but he would make use of it tonight.

Within minutes he had purchased a bottle of Jack Daniels and was back in his car, headed for the lake. This time of night, there shouldn't be too many people there, and if there were they'd be busy breaking the law as well being there after dusk and probably drinking.

He parked almost sideways in the lot and trudged over the grass toward the water. In hindsight, he should have chosen one of the small private roads with more tree coverage to hide his vehicle, but he didn't feel like going back. At the water's edge, he kicked his shoes off, sank down on the grass, and twisted the cap off his bottle.

He raised it to the dark overcast sky. "Here's to you, Tae. Love of my life." Pain clutched his heart, and he drank.

* * * *

Leena stretched up a little to look at her neck in the rearview mirror while she drove. A bruise was forming where her father had punched her in the throat. Not as hard as he

could have, but it still hurt like hell. She didn't know why she'd bothered to drive out to his house in the first place having vowed to never see his ugly mug again. But then again, she'd been afraid not to, knowing he would be out of his mind with rage at her causing him to get thrown in jail...again.

She'd let him have the last of her money until next pay day. Fifty dollars. That might keep him a little while. Her father was a charmer when he wanted to be, even cleaned up nice. He'd latch on to some lonely woman after while and forget all about Leena. Meanwhile, she needed to find herself another man. Michael hadn't lasted. No broke ass man did with her. And he had lied about being military. Like she wouldn't find out? *Damn, what a waste of time.* A guy would get the goods, but he better look out for her needs too.

Leena put her attention back on driving as she rounded a curve in the quiet dark road. She had to slam on breaks to avoid running over the man swaying side to side in the center. Her headlights picked up the wreckage that was his car wrapped around a tree, and she was shocked to find it was Bryant who fell over on her hood clutching a bottle in one hand, his eyes drifting closed.

She giggled. "I am so fucking lucky, it's scary."

Bryant lifted his head at the click of her door opening. "Who's that?"

"It's me, sugar," Leena cooed. "Come to take you home. Everything is going to be all right. I'll take good care of you."

Leena reached for his arm, but he pulled away, stumbled and fell on the ground. He had trouble regaining his feet and finally allowed her to help him stand. "I don't need you," he spat. "Anyone but you."

"Is the state of your relationship with Tae my fault, Bryant or yours and hers?" She raised an eyebrow at him, and he stared at her like she'd sprouted horns from her head. She went on. "You're blaming me, but it was you who didn't tell Tae about you giving me money. All I did was thank her, thinking you two were a couple, practically married and so it was both of your money. At least that's how I thought of it. You're the one who broke her trust. Not me."

If Bryant didn't look like someone had ripped his heart from his chest before, he did after her little speech. In some deep, dark place where she had shoved all feelings of guilt and shame, she felt a tingle of pity for Bryant, but she squashed it. Why should she go easy on him anyway? He used her and dropped her as soon as that bitch Tae showed up. It was she who had spent two fucking years talking to him through email and instant messages with no gratification whatsoever. And it was she who travelled back and forth to Texas to scratch his damn itch. Where was Tae then?

Not that Leena had been faithful to Bryant all that time. She wasn't. But she still considered it paying her dues, and she did not deserve to be tossed aside like Bryant had done to her.

"So do you want a ride or what, Bryant?" she asked him.

He lifted his head where he had slumped over the hood again. "Yeah. Thanks, I guess. But not...not home." He seemed to be thinking about it but being as drunk as he was, she figured he couldn't put two good thoughts together. Still even drunkenness couldn't erase the threat of what he'd hear from Rory if he came in like he was. She laughed at that. Everybody in town knew how much Rory despaired of Bryant ever getting his shit together. Leena knew he'd kill his brother for drinking and driving then smashing into a tree.

She ran a hand down over Bryant's back and leaned down to his ear. "You know, you can come to my place. Just as a friend, somewhere to crash and sleep it off." She used her best card to get him to do what she wanted. "Better to face Rory in the morning."

He winced. "Yeah. Okay. Thanks."

On the way back to her new apartment, which she shared with another asshole roommate, Leena considered that they should have called the police to report the accident instead of leaving the scene, but she wasn't worried too much about it. She and the sheriff had a history, and she was pretty sure she could convince him to look the other way about what had happened. Rory would be happy to haul the car into the shop as well. No big deal.

At Leena's place, the lights were all off. She checked to be sure her roommate had paid the light bill and was relieved that it turned on. The woman must be out of town, where she went often to visit her boyfriend.

"Luck is so on my side tonight," Leena said and led Bryant stumbling to her bedroom. He dropped on the edge, and she rolled him over to his back to undress him. Finding no reason to stop at his boxers, she hauled those off as well. Bryant didn't move or open his eyes.

Leena admired his sexy body and ran her hands over the plains of his ripped abs. Desire flamed to life inside her. She checked his face again. He was still out, so she ran her hands lower to grasp his rod. It grew stiff with one touch, but that made Bryant wake up.

"What are you doing?"

She smiled. "Pleasing you."

He seemed about to say something, but just stared instead. Leena climbed on the bed, arranged her legs around him and reached beneath her miniskirt to push her panties aside. Before Bryant could come to his senses and realize that they shouldn't be doing this,

Leena was going to get all the pleasure she wanted out of him. And after that, she would get him to give her more money to keep her mouth shut about what happened tonight. If she played her cards right, Bryant could be a sweet source of income for a nice long time. The thrill of knowing that was better than any orgasm she could ever have.

* * * *

Bryant woke to a weight on his chest. His mouth cottony and his head pounding, he winced against the sunlight streaming into the room, knowing for the first time a little of what Tae had to deal with. The memory of Tae and that they weren't together hurt. He fought to push the thought away and hated that he was sober again, worse that he remembered how he had drunk himself silly last night and tried to drive home. *Fuck!* Rory would ride his ass about crashing his car. Sometimes he didn't feel like a man at all. His mother wouldn't like it, and neither would his brother, but Bryant needed to get his own place. He should have done it long before now but with being full time military, it hadn't seemed practical since he was never in Riley until after his injury.

He yawned and opened his eyes then froze. A woman with long blonde hair and stark naked lay at his side with her arms slung across his chest. Bryant scanned the room. He was not sure where he was, but this was not home. Struggling to sit up with his head spinning, he tried not to wake the woman while at the same time looking for his clothes. Then it hit him.

Leena!

Shit, shit, shit!

The night before came flooding back. He had gone home with her, let her undress him, let her...*Shit!*

One dumb mistake after another one, all having to do with Leena. What the hell had he been thinking? How could he? He and Tae weren't together, but he felt like this was a betrayal. Nausea threatened to overtake him. He stumbled out of the room looking for the bathroom and hoping she didn't have a roommate who would find a naked man in her hallway. At last, he found the bathroom and emptied the contents of his stomach in the toilet.

After rinsing his mouth, he crept back to the room, got dressed and let himself out of the apartment. No one had to know right? He remembered being on a back road somewhere near the lake because he hadn't gotten far in his state. Leena had found him out there. He would just have Rory tow his car and forget this happened. That is, if he could get that bitch Leena to keep her mouth shut. Either way, he and Tae were done for good. A sweet woman like her did not deserve a fool like him. He would just move on—alone—because it was for sure no other woman would take her place. He wouldn't allow that. And not one drop of alcohol would pass his lips ever again.

Chapter Ten

Tae set her tea cup down on the table and sighed. She wrung her hands in her lap and stared through the window at the couple arguing.

“Are you going to go out there and talk to him?” her mother asked.

Tae’s eyes widened, and she turned back to stare at her mother. “Are you kidding? He’s there with Leena.” She tried not to frown in disgust, but it was hard not to. “Besides, I haven’t changed my mind. He’s better off without me.”

“Better with Leena?”

“No,” she admitted. “Anything but that. Still it’s funny that he keeps going back to her. Maybe he loves her and just hasn’t admitted it to himself.”

“Or maybe she’s a conniving little—”

“Ma, don’t.” Tae rubbed her forehead. At least the headaches had gone back to their normal annoyance when she was too stressed, but not bad like they had been when she could do nothing but exist in bed all day and night. “I don’t think I can deal with your potty mouth any more than the last time.”

Her mother chuckled. “We’re celebrating, remember? Dad will be here soon. You should be ecstatic. Your fool of a doctor was wrong, and the second and third opinions were right. You are not getting worse. You will not go blind in your left eye because the treatment worked.”

Tae sighed again, this time in relief. “Yes, I remember. How could I forget? You bullied all the doctors just like you said you would do, and after all the tests and retests, I’m worn out. Probably look like crap too.”

A smile lit her mother’s face that was just slightly less haggard than Tae imagined hers was. “Look at you, Tae. It’s day time. You’re out and about. You’ve been switched to daylight hours at your job. Things are looking up for you. At least go and say hi to Bryant. Be friends if nothing else.”

“Did I mention the resentment about interfering family members?” she asked.

Her mother pretended not to hear as she sipped her coffee, black with no sugar. Tae cringed.

“Fine. But if he tells me to kiss his as...uh...butt, it’s on you.”

Tae stood up and walked out of the restaurant to the street. She'd known Bryant and Leena were arguing by their dark expressions and gesturing hands, but the moment she hit the street, the heat between them became clear. Leena shouted the loudest.

"It's your fucking fault! Deal with it!" With that Leena spun away and stomped down the street to disappear around a corner. Tae was about to hurry back inside the restaurant when Bryant looked her way. His face paled upon sight of her.

Tae couldn't move. She just stood there staring at him while he stared back. After some time, she took a deep breath and closed the space between them. "Hello, Bryant. How are you?" She was about to say, 'what's it been, four months?' But that would be stupid. They both knew how long it had been since they'd spoken. Bryant had stopped trying to see her, and even though it was what she wanted, it hurt.

If she had expected him to smile she was doomed to disappointment. He scowled down at her. "What do you want, Tae?"

She gasped. "I just came out to say hi. My parents are having lunch in the restaurant there, and my mother and I are waiting for my father." She forced a smile. "Oh, good news. I am now on dayshift at the hospital. And as you can see, I'm out in daylight. Still can't abide too much sun, but it feels like freedom either way. I am so loving it."

The scorn in his eyes didn't lessen, nor did he offer his congratulations. "What do I care about your life now? You dumped me, remember? Wasn't good enough for you. Still not." He shrugged. "I've got my own issues to deal with. Or was that it all along for you, Tae? That I was too fucked in the head for you to put up with?"

She staggered backward at his animosity. "Of course not. That wasn't it at all. I... You wouldn't understand."

He waved his arm. "Guess I wouldn't, and it doesn't matter now. I also have good news." His expression said otherwise. "I have a baby on the way, and I guess I'll be marrying Leena."

"B-Baby? M-Marry?"

He seemed not to recognize her stunned reaction. "Well, I have to go. A lot of preparation to do. You understand. Later." He walked off leaving her there ready to collapse on the ground.

"Tae?" Her father strolled up. "What are you doing standing out here in the sun? Come inside." He held out his arm, and Tae took it without a word. She clung to him with the last of her strength and let her father lead her back inside the restaurant. When she retook her seat, her mother seemed to read from her face that everything did not go well between Tae and Bryant, and she said nothing. Tae was grateful when her mother took control of the conversation and chattered on and on to cover up Tae's silence.

All the while Tae thought she knew what it was like to die inside but still function in the real world. Leena was not only having Bryant's baby, but he also was going to marry her. For a few seconds Tae considered that Leena might be lying to get her hooks in Bryant but then she remembered how Leena was dressed. Slutty as usual, but her belly was a tad bigger, and so were her breasts. In fact, Tae's mother had commented on it as well while they had watched the two through the window. She had no doubt thought it would make Tae feel better by pointing out how thick Leena was getting, even her ankles. Leena had always had slender long legs with thin ankles that Tae had been jealous of in high school. With all this in mind, she was convinced that Leena was indeed pregnant.

After lunch, Tae excused herself from her parents to go walking through town. In front of the public library, she phoned for a cab and instructed the dispatcher she would be going to the lake, and then in a couple hours she would need to be picked up to go back home. For the first time, she didn't talk to her mother, and her mother hadn't pushed that she tell her what was going on. Tae needed to get somewhere alone and just sit in silence. Bryant was gone, lost to her forever, and there wasn't a thing she could do about it. Leena's ass still didn't deserve him, but well, she had him, and Tae prayed he would be find happiness. If he did care for Leena deep down, Tae hoped the woman would love him in return and be faithful. "Just let her treat him right."

* * * *

Bryant waited with his head back on the seat he occupied and his hands folded across his lap. He knew he looked calm and collected, yet he was anything but. His breakfast had come up seconds after he'd eaten the last bite this morning, and he hadn't slept in days. Leena called him on a daily basis to wreck havoc with his life, and Rory was hounding him about what "that slut" was doing calling him again. Bryant's mother had taken a turn for the worse and had been hospitalized, and now he was sitting here in this damn hospital waiting for a doctor to give him and Leena the results of the paternity test.

"Bryant, I'm hungry. Can't you go get me a snack at the cafeteria?" Leena whined.

He eyed her for a moment and wanted to tell her what to kiss, that she was pregnant not disabled, but he didn't say it. Where she had laid her hand on his arm, he shook it off and stood up not bothering to ask her what she wanted.

The scene he'd had with Tae played in his mind as he went to find out where the cafeteria was. The sight of Tae there looking so sweet and beautiful, most of all happy without him, had set him off. He had been deliberately mean to her, and the crap about marrying Leena hadn't been a consideration until after he had blurted it out. Later common sense had set in, and he knew he'd better be sure the baby she was carrying was his. That meant waiting until she was at least twenty weeks pregnant, which now she was.

While he stood in line with a plate of fruit, he realized the information the doctor had could mean freedom or hell. Then again, that innocent child might be his, and if it was,

he would do all in his power to make sure he or she was taken care of. That was a promise.

“Here,” he grumbled when he returned.

Leena frowned. “Fruit?”

“It’s good for the baby. What did you expect, donuts?”

Her eyes lit up, but he turned away when a man in a lab coat exited a wide door at the end of the corridor. A single sheet of paper sat in his hand, and Bryant’s heart began to pound. Sweat broke out on his brow. He ran an arm over it and swallowed but no spit formed in his mouth to ease the sudden ache in his throat.

“Oh boy,” Leena whispered.

Her face was pinker than it had been earlier. Her ass was nervous, and Bryant frowned, clenching his hands at his sides. That could only mean one thing that she hadn’t just been with him like she claimed when she first told him she was pregnant. Hope rose in his chest. It could be that other guy, the one who had sat in the car blowing the horn for her when Bryant had given her money that night. Maybe he had been as stupid as Bryant had been not using a condom the night Leena took him home drunk.

Please let it be true, he pleaded with God. Let it be that other guy’s, any other guy’s baby but mine.

“Mr. Hussner, Ms. Jones?” The doctor held out his hand to shake both Bryant’s and Leena’s.

“Get on with it,” Leena snapped, her cheeks flaming red now. “We need to know.”

The doctor frowned at Leena’s rudeness and turned to Bryant. “We ran the test twice, and we’re certain that there is a ninety-nine percent chance that the baby is yours, Mr. Hussner. Congratulations.”

Leena jumped up and down squealing and then stopped holding her belly with one hand and her breasts with the other. Bryant snatched the test sheet results from the doctor’s hand and scanned it, and then he turned on his heel and walked toward the exit. Out on the sidewalk, he stopped, stared at the sky with his mind a mass of jumbled thoughts. After that, he turned back to the hospital, walked all the way back to the waiting room he had occupied with Leena.

“Let’s go,” he told her.

She had just been standing there in silence, the doctor having returned to his other duties. Leena nodded, gathered her sweater and bag and followed him out. He helped her into Rory's truck and walked around to the driver's side.

"What are we—?"

"I'd advise you not to speak right now," he warned her.

She fell silent.

Bryant drove Leena back to her place and then drove home. He checked his watch. Rory should be in since today was his early day. His brother had insisted on getting the truck back so he could run errands. Bryant parked out front and steeling his resolve, he entered the house.

"Hey," Rory called out when Bryant stepped into the kitchen. "Gonna go see Mom in about half hour. Do you want to go? I also got a couple deli sandwiches from the place on Main we like. Want one?"

The sight of the stacked lunchmeat and cheese on fresh baked sourdough turned Bryant's stomach more than it had that morning. "No, thanks. I need to talk to you though, before we go to see Mom."

Rory eyed him with suspicion. "Does this have to do with why that bitch keeps calling your cell?"

"She's not a bitch."

"When did you start defending her, Bryant?"

Bryant sank into a chair and dipped his head into his hands. "Since the baby she's carrying is mine, that's when. I found out for sure today. Paternity test. Ninety-nine percent." He chuckled instead of punching a hole in the wall.

"You could not have been that stupid, Bryant," Rory raged. "Damn it, I've been on you nonstop, and you still do this shit? What the fuck?"

"Shut up, Rory!"

Restraint left. Bryant did put a hole in the sheet rock beside him. His brother fell silent. Bryant flexed his fingers, noting the blood on his knuckles. He ran a hand through his hair and stood up to pace. Rory set his sandwich down and pushed his plate away. He waited in silence.

A good ten minutes had passed before Bryant took his seat again. "I'm going to marry her."

“Like hell you are.”

They glared at each other.

“I’m thirty years old, Rory. You can’t bully me like you did when I was eighteen.”

His brother’s eyes narrowed. “I’m well aware that it’s my fault you were hurt and that you have those nightmares, having to go through that therapy every week. I thought I was doing the right thing by you, but I wasn’t, and I have to live with that the rest of my life. Watching you in pain is a kick in the teeth every time I see you.”

“Thanks for that,” Bryant muttered with heavy sarcasm.

“You know what I mean. I’m sorry.”

“I know. Don’t worry about it. I didn’t have to go.”

“Just like you don’t have to marry Leena.”

“I’ve thought about it.”

Rory stood, slamming his hand down on the table. “For how long? The five minutes since you learned you are the father? This is a big decision, Bryant. You can’t go charging in with your gun to save the day.”

Bryant frowned, wondering what that had to do with anything. “For your information I have thought on this, a long time. I didn’t just learn about the possibility of it being my baby. I’ve been considering what I would do if it was mine. You of all people should know how hard it can be on a child when the father’s not there. We both do. I’m not having that for my son or daughter. Not ever. You stepped up when Dad died, but what about my baby? Who will do it? Leena? I’m not willing to take that risk.”

The fight seemed to drain out of Rory. He dropped into his seat, hands flat on the table and an expression of resignation on his face. “When did I lose control over you?”

Bryant smirked. “While you were sleeping.”

Rory rolled his eyes. “Are you sure, Bryant, because if there’s any hesitation in you that this is the right course—”

“I’m sure.”

“Then may I make one suggestion?”

Suspicious, Bryant nodded. “What’s that?”

“Wait.”

“Rory, look I said—”

Rory held up his hands. “I don’t mean forever or years from now. Just wait until the baby is born, okay? Let’s say a month, no two months after. That can’t hurt anything, can it?”

“It can’t help either,” Bryant grumbled. “But okay, I’ll wait. I haven’t discussed it with Leena yet anyway. Who knows if she would have agreed to it.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

Bryant chuckled. “Yeah, she would. Her hands would be firmly planted in my pockets.”

“You’re the fool marrying her.”

His appetite back with a vengeance, Bryant reached across the table and nabbed Rory’s sandwich. He tore off a bite before his brother could complain or stop him. He munched while he thought and then grabbed Rory’s lemonade as well, drank down half the glass and wiped his mouth. “All right, I’ll wait. Funny, I feel just a little excited thinking about my baby. *My* baby, Rory. I’m going to be a father. I wanted it to be with... Never mind.”

Rory smiled. “It could still be.”

“Don’t start.” Bryant finished off the sandwich and the drink and washed his plate before deciding on what to do for his coming child first. He had spoken the truth to Rory. Now that the initial show was over, and really he’d had over a month to get used to the possibility, he did feel an inkling of love for his little boy or girl. After all the child was a part of him. That counted for a lot.

He had only four months to prepare, and what he needed to do most of all was get his head on straight. If he could put the nightmares behind him and the few waking episodes behind him all the better.

* * * *

Tae held her cell phone as carefully as she could against her ear as not to aggravate her pounding head and waited for her doctor to come on the line. She squinted at the near indecipherable handwriting on her prescription sheet. Whatever was written on the paper was not Relpex, which was what she had requested to be switched back to after the last one had become useless. Relpex may cause her to be useless after taking it, but it was better than the body aches from the previous med. She grumbled while in the pharmacy line, hoping her doctor would come on the phone before she reached the counter.

Someone spoke behind her. “Hey, Bryant, you’re back again. Damn man, that baby isn’t even born yet and you’re stocking up on diapers. You’ve bought us out!”

Tae stiffened on hearing Bryant’s name.

Bryant chuckled. “Don’t be dramatic. I have not bought that many. Besides, Bryant Junior is due to arrive any day now. I’ve got to be sure I have everything.”

“Oh, is that his name? Bryant Junior?” the other man said.

Tae swayed and closed her eyes. A few nights ago, she had dreamed of having Bryant’s baby herself, and they had named him after Bryant. Tears filled her eyes. She stared down at the other items in the basket she held, chunky beef soup on sale two for three dollars. Why she was grocery shopping at Eckard’s she didn’t know.

“Tae?”

She blinked away the tears and turned. Bryant stood there, towering over her and looking so good, too good. And happy. Her heart seemed to crack and stop beating seeing him that happy and her so miserable. He’d gotten over her with his little boy coming, and she’d heard a rumor that he was planning his and Leena’s wedding for when the baby turned two months old, having no idea why that would be. Maybe the one who had passed along the news had gotten it wrong.

“Hello, Bryant,” she whispered.

He touched her elbow, sending chills of both delight and longing through her entire body, and he guided her out of line to one of the empty aisles. Tae went along wanting to pull out of his grasp and at the same time loathing to break the connection.

“I wanted to say I’m sorry,” he told her when they were out of earshot and sight of other patrons. “I was mean to you the last time we spoke, and it was uncalled for. I was upset, and I took it out on you.” He stepped closer, invading her personal space. Her mind whirled, and her breathing became labored. “Can we be friends?”

Her lips parted when she couldn’t draw in enough air through her nose. Bryant’s gaze lowered to her lips, and she thought she’d end up in a heap on the floor. *Don’t look at me like that. Don’t look fine enough to eat.* She tried to focus on what he had said and what her response should be.

Bryant moved closer. The next thing she knew, his lips were on hers, and her head had gone back. *Friends don’t kiss like this...Don’t let it end....*

Without warning, Bryant jumped back, his eyes wide. “Oh shit, I didn’t mean to do that. I’m sorry.”

He fumbled with the package of disposable diapers under his arm. It dropped to the floor. Tae considered picking it up to have something to do, to get his eyes off her and to hide how much she had enjoyed the kiss, but her body wasn't functioning beyond holding her up.

Bryant backed away from her, and Tae crumbled her prescription slip between her fingers.

"Tae, I guess it's not a good idea after all for us to be friends." His voice was thick, but she doubted it was with unshed tears like she was battling. "Again, I'm really sorry about how I acted, and hope you can forgive me."

He turned away. She called out. "Bryant?"

"Yes?"

I love you. "I wish all the happiness in the world for you and your baby and...everything."

He smirked, knowing no doubt that she couldn't bring herself to wish him happiness with that skank he was going to marry.

"Thanks."

* * * *

The phone rang. Tae rolled over and squinted at the clock. She covered her mouth as a yawn escaped. "Three in the morning? Someone has bumped their head calling me at this time." She fumbled about on the nightstand for the phone and finally found it. "Hello?"

"Tae?" It was Rory.

"Rory, have you lost your mind? Do you know what time it is?"

"Have you seen Bryant?"

She frowned and sat up. "Why would I have seen him? He's engaged to someone else, remember?" When he didn't say anything, she continued on a sigh. "I saw him about a week ago at the pharmacy, purely coincidental, trust me."

The sleep left her the moment she heard Rory sniffing as if he'd been crying.

"Rory, what is it?"

"The baby," her cried in anguish. "Tae, his baby was stillborn two days ago. I haven't been able to find Bryant since then."

“Oh no!” Tears sprung to Tae’s eyes. “Oh no, oh no.” She slid to the end of the bed and threw the covers off her legs. “Are you sure he’s not with Leena? Is she okay?” she asked as an afterthought.

Again, Rory paused. This time when he spoke she knew it was from a struggle to contain his anger. “That bitch said she was relieved in a way, because she never knew how much a baby could change a person’s life. That’s what she said to me when I went to ask her about Bryant. I’m hoping she didn’t say that shit to my brother. After I threatened to wring her neck, she said she had better sense than to say that to Bryant because he was out of his mind afterward.”

Tae gasped. “She said those words? Out of his mind?”

“Yes. To be honest, I’m scared. He can’t take this, Tae. He’s been through so much already, and you know how much he loved that baby and was looking forward to him being born. Can you think of anywhere he might have gone?”

Tae paced with a hand to her temple, her eyes closed since both were worthless at this moment. She was used to moving about her bedroom in that condition. “No, not right off. I will think about it. We hadn’t been seeing each other long before we split the second time.”

“I’m going to drive around and look for him again. And Tae?”

“Yes?”

He blew out a shuddering breath. “When I find him, I need to know if you will be there for him.”

The implication of his words sank in, and Tae dropped to her knees to sit on her heels. “Me? Leena—”

“Fuck, Leena. I need to know if you’re going to be there for my brother, damn it!” His voice was too loud. Tae winced and gagged pulling the phone from her ear as pain ricocheted around her skull.

“Rory, you don’t understand,” she said when she could speak.

“What is there to understand, Tae? You love him. I know you do, and yet, you’ve fought it for years. I don’t get that. When he needs you most, you’re telling me you won’t be there?”

If she could have shouted back without fainting, she would have. “You have no right to lay a guilt trip on me. We are not together. Bryant chose to be with Leena. Maybe you need to be looking at yourself who can’t accept that he’s a grown man, able to make his own choices. I feel horrible about what’s happened to him. I do. But I can’t do anything

for him. I can't be his strength in his time of need." She stood up and put a hand out in front of her to locate the bathroom doorway. "I'm so sorry," she told Rory and pressed the disconnect button.

She dropped the phone on the floor in her bedroom and entered the bathroom. Making it just in time to the toilet bowl, she dry heaved over and over between sobs.

Chapter Eleven

A key in the lock of Tae' front door alerted her to someone coming inside. Her mother was the only one with a key, and Tae had spoken to her an hour ago. From what she had said, she hadn't intended on coming over. Tae sighed but didn't move the cloth from her eyes or her body from the bed. If her mother wanted to lecture her, Tae wasn't stopping her, but the deep voice of the person entering her room was not her mother.

"Get up, Tae. Get dressed now!"

She tensed and pulled the warm cloth aside for a peek into the room beyond. He hadn't switched on the light, and for that she was grateful. "What do you want, Lee?"

He yanked the covers off her body. "I said get up. I've come to drag your sorry ass where you belong."

Tae shrieked. "I could have been naked under there."

Lee smirked. "Trust me, I have no interest in it. Get up, I said."

"Who sent you? Ma? I'm not going anywhere, Lee. I have not been able to see for three days—"

"I don't give a bag of shit," he growled. "You've been a scared rabbit for long enough. I blame Ma for feeding it so long and both of them for spoiling you all your life, but I'm not holding it against you anymore. Now this is not about you and your problems, Tae. It's about Bryant. He needs you. We think..."

Tae turned her head in the direction she had heard her brother's voice. "What?"

"He's hurting, Tae. You can't tell me that doesn't get to you. When Rory found him, he was messed up, hadn't slept or ate in a few days. He doesn't speak at all, just stares at nothing. Rory's talked to him, Ma has, his mother checked herself out of the hospital to see him, but he's not responding to anyone. We all believe he will respond to you."

"What about his fiancée?" Tae couldn't help asking.

"She's gone."

"What do you mean she's gone?"

"Gone! She skipped town as soon as she got out of the hospital. Must be stupid, but no one gives a damn. We're thinking about Bryant." He pulled her by the arm. "Now, you have two minutes to get yourself cleaned up because I will drag your ass down there to his house if I have to. You will talk to him. You will try to reach out to him, and I mean

that. You're going to forget about yourself for once and be there for the man who loves you."

Tae would have protested, but Lee shouted the seconds she had left before he dragged her. It was useless to argue. When her brother had become Bryant's advocate, she didn't know, but she suspected he had released a lot of the hostility and hurts he had built up over the years when their father had visited him. Being accepted as one was, with genuine love, must be invaluable and a healing balm to a broken heart.

Tae was scared beyond reason that she would not be what Bryant needed, being so flawed and broken herself, but saw now that she had to go. She had to make the effort. His heart must feel like someone had torn it from his chest and stomped it without mercy. How he must blame himself for all the misery around him, and like she had done when she had her accident, he might even think that somehow he deserved to have his baby taken from him because he hadn't been able to save his friends and later hadn't been able to make things work with her. Tears rolled down her cheeks. If he thought that, for even a second, she had to reach him. Thinking like that had kept her in the dark alone, and not because of her eyesight either.

"Okay, I'm going," she told Lee. "I won't leave his side until he hears me."

Twenty minutes later, they pulled up in front of Rory's house, and Tae sat taking deep breaths, trying to calm herself. She attempted to go to a peaceful place in her mind, producing a beach scene, her favorite.

"It's not working," she said through clenched teeth. It was no wonder she wasn't getting better.

"No, matter." Lee jumped out of the car, and soon he had her door open grasping her hand. "I'll lead you to him."

They stumbled along at a snail's pace, Tae tripping over every crack and crevice it seemed. The trek to a second floor bedroom seemed to take forever, and Tae thought she heard Rory whispering somewhere ahead, but the voice fell silent when she neared. A door opened, and she was guided inside. Memories washed over her the moment she picked up Bryant's scent. Her heart ached.

The door behind her closed, and she knew they were alone. Like a miracle she'd been praying long for, a sweet calm flowed down over her, and her breathing slowed. The pain in her head didn't dissipate entirely, but it did lessen and with it went the blur in her left eye.

Bryant sat in a chair near the window, but Tae was sure he couldn't see out with the curtains drawn. He wasn't moving, and for a second she thought he wasn't breathing either.

“Bryant?” she called. He didn’t respond. “Bryant, it’s Tae. I’m here.”

Just like that, he cried, hunched over with his face hidden in his palms. Tae hurried across the room and rested a hand on his shoulder, but he pulled away. He slid out of the chair and landed on his knees between the wall and the bed. Tae dragged the chair out of the way and sank down beside him.

“It doesn’t feel like it now, but it will be okay, baby,” she whispered. “And no matter how long it takes, I’ll be here. I’m not going anywhere.” She tried touching him again, and again he moved out of reach. By his hunched shoulders and his face turned away, she knew he didn’t want her to see him cry. That was one of the first things a soldier learned, never to cry, or never to allow anyone to see you cry.

Tae sat there beside him, her hands in her lap, sobbing her eyes out along with him, speaking soothing words, telling him it wasn’t his fault that his sweet little son was in a better place. Her words seemed so empty, so useless, but she kept speaking anyway, kept encouraging him, and most of all, letting him know she would not ever leave him again.

After some time, Bryant turned and grasped her around the waist, shocking her with his strength. He lifted her off the floor and placed her on his lap. Still not allowing her to see his face, he buried it in her neck. A shudder passed over his body, but at least the tears had stopped, she thought.

“I can’t get them out of my head.” His voice was muffled. “All of them, my son, Luke and Frank. I’ve made so many mistakes. I didn’t deserve Bryant Junior. Tae, he was so perfect, so small and...still.”

Tae choked. She wrapped her arms around Bryant’s neck and pressed tight against his chest. If she could have soaked up all the pain, she would have. “Bryant, what can I do? I wish I could take it away and do it all over so that you’re never hurt and you never lose anyone you care about, especially your son. But it is absolutely not your fault.”

“I know.” He kissed her neck. “I know what you’re saying is true. Logically, I know, but it’s so hard to bear. I want to be strong, to feel nothing.”

She drew him back and held his face while staring into his eyes. “But don’t you see, baby? Doing that is how you get lost and how your heart doesn’t heal. When you let it out by crying and talking to someone, that’s when you begin to get stronger. You face the hurt and deal with it little by little. You conquer it.”

She was startled when he kissed her, but she didn’t resist. He cupped the back of her head and pushed his tongue past her lips to taste her mouth. Desire ignited within her, and Bryant rained kisses along her cheek as he spoke. “I want to forget.”

“No.” She trembled as his mouth reached the swell of her breasts. “Don’t forget. Forgive.” With effort, because she wanted him to never stop, she pushed him back.

“Forgive yourself, Bryant, for all the mistakes you may or may not have made. You have to understand that none of this is your fault, that life brings us tragedy sometimes, and it’s often unavoidable, and then allow yourself to realize that you were human with your choices. Just like everybody else. And forgive, baby. It’s the only way to regain your peace of mind and strength to go on from here.”

Bryant stroked her cheek, a small smile stretching his lips. “When did you become so smart?”

She smacked his arm for the unintentional insult. “When I did what I’m advising you to do.”

He straightened his back, rearranging her a little so that she was aware of the hard-on he sported. Was this even the time for that? Could they move forward together like she had suggested? Whether they should or could didn’t matter. She had been serious about her declaration. She wasn’t moving from his side from here on out.

“It’s likely that I’ll have the nightmares again at various times,” he said.

“I’ll be here.”

“And I’m thinking I will need to have you by me every single day to get through it all. Also, before this happened, I had been talking to Rory about opening a shop of our own. Me managing more than working on cars. That would mean me living here in Riley what with long hours in the beginning.”

Tae narrowed her eyes at him. “What are you getting at?”

“Marry me, Tae.”

She blinked. Talk about out of nowhere. “M-Marry?”

While he was about to state his case, Tae kissed him hard on the mouth. She’d screwed up the first chance she had to spend a lifetime with Bryant years ago, but she wasn’t about to toss away their second chance. “Yes!”

He seemed surprised that she had agreed so fast, without being convinced. “Yes?”

She nodded. “Yes. I am sure. Yes, whenever you want.”

The sadness returned to his face, and for a second he closed his eyes. “I have to settle things concerning my son, but after that...” He clutched her hand. “You’ll be there with me.”

“I will.”

Bryant slid his fingers across her belly, stopping at the tiny pearl buttons of her blouse. He plucked two open before he paused. “Just a little peace of mind? For now?”

Tae understood. She drew back and continued unbuttoning her blouse. When she drew aside the two halves, his eyes widened. She hadn’t been able to find a bra so she’d come without one. Her fiancé’s gaze was riveted to her breasts.

“You’re so beautiful.” The pad of one thumb brushed a puckered dark nipple.

Tae moaned. “You never stopped believing that, even with my face as it is.”

“Your face is beautiful as well.” He gathered the thick lock of hair she kept over the right side of her face and pushed it back, tucking it behind her ear. Tae locked her fingers into tight fists to keep from hiding. If Bryant could let her into his pain, she could let him into hers. He leaned forward and kissed the skin around her scar where it didn’t hurt as much to the touch. “I will spend my life proving to you how I feel.”

Tears welled in her eyes. “I’ll never be better than this, but it’s likely I will never be worse either.”

“In whatever state you are in, my love, you are perfect.” He stood up and carried her to the bed. With care, he finished undressing her and then undressed himself. When he lowered his body down next to hers, Tae thought she would burst with the joy that welled in her heart. How far they’d had to come to reach this place of trust and acceptance between them.

“I’m sorry for leaving you, Bryant, for how I treated you back when we were just out of high school and later. I love you so much. Forgive me.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. I love you, Tae. Forgive me for hurting you, for being weak and making poor decisions.”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” she echoed him.

He stroked her inner thigh, his hand gliding higher until he bumped her wet center. Tae bit her lip and arched her back when he began to tease the tender bud there and then parted her folds to push his fingers inside her. She moaned, calling out his name. Bryant followed up his slow pumping hand movements by closing his mouth over one of her nipples.

Tae’s moans grew louder. “Maybe we shouldn’t, Bryant,” she whimpered. “Someone will hear us.”

Bryant worked his hand harder and pulled at her nipple until it popped free from his mouth. He nuzzled her soft flesh and tasted it at intervals, running his tongue across her skin. Tae shook from head to toe on the verge of a powerful orgasm.

“I’m not giving this up for anything.” He pulled his hand from between her legs.

Tae cried out. “No, don’t stop.”

Bryant chuckled. “Don’t worry, baby. I’m not going anywhere, but we come together. I just wanted to get you nice and wet for me.”

“If I get any wetter we’ll wash away,” she complained.

He laughed again while climbing atop her and resting between her thighs. Tae wrapped her legs around his waist while Bryant stared into her eyes and laced his fingers with hers beside her head. She read all his emotions in his eyes and his expression, from sadness to contentment that they were one. He lowered his hips, and his shaft penetrated her. It had been too long. The pleasure made her head spin, but in a good way.

Tae cried out. “Oh, Bryant, I want all of you.”

“You have all of me, baby, my heart and soul.” He pushed deeper, beginning a slow grind. His eyes drifted closed and fluttered open again. “That’s so good. Feels like it’s been forever.”

“It has. Make love to me.”

He lowered his head and captured her lips in a searing kiss she felt all the way down to her toes. His hips ground into hers, filling her to capacity with his thick arousal. The ache of a coming climax stole over Tae’s womb. Her core muscles clenched in anticipation, and she pushed up to meet his thrusts, wanting to be consumed, to truly be one with her lover.

Bryant picked up the pace. His body slapped hers, and the sound heightened her pleasure. They growled in each other’s mouths, licked and sucked with a growing hunger. “Damn it,” Bryant grumbled against her lips, “I think I’ll need all night inside you.”

She forgot her fears of being overheard and threw back her head to scream. “All night isn’t enough. Fuck me hard, Bryant!”

He kicked it up another notch, pounding deep and fast. Reaching under her, he kissed along her neck while squeezing her ass and yanking it higher to meet his thrusts. What the hell had she been thinking giving this up?

“Don’t stop. Don’t fucking ever stop!” she screeched.

“I don’t plan on it.”

She roared through an orgasm, but Bryant wasn't done. He pulled out of her, flipped her to her belly and hoisted her hips so he could thrust back inside her. Tae slid her hands up the mattress and gripped the edge of the bed, arching her ass to let Bryant go as deep as he needed to. She began an aching climb to another orgasm.

"I'm going to come," he shouted with his hand on the wall above her head. "Ah, you're so good, baby. I love your body. Mm, I want to eat you up." He braced both hands on the wall, and impossibly pumped faster. Their mouths met, their tongues intertwined. They groaned through their greedy kisses, and then Bryant exploded. He roared his release, calling out her name and telling her he loved her.

While their bodies cooled down and their breathing slowed, they lay entangled together, Bryant still stretched out on top of Tae. His shaft lay semi-hard between her legs, and Tae wanted it to stay there forever if it wasn't inside her.

Bryant squeezed her hips. "I might need to go another round or two. Are you up for it?"

"Without question."

A knock sounded at the door. When it opened, Bryant moved just enough to block Tae's body from being seen, but he made no effort to cover himself. Rory peeked in and then turned bright red, averting his eyes.

Bryant and Tae laughed.

"Uh, sorry," Rory mumbled. "Guys, nothing makes me happier than to know that Bryant's okay." He actually smiled which shocked Tae. "But damn, some people don't have a girlfriend. Can you keep it down?"

Tae buried her face in a pillow. Bryant laughed.

"Whose fault is that?"

"Brother, seriously, get your own place. The sooner, the better." Rory closed the door behind him.

Bryant pressed his mouth to Tae's ear and whispered, "I know of just the place for us, baby. I know you'll like it."

"Any place with you is where I want to be."

* * * *

Tae stood before the mirror not looking at herself but staring at the floor. From that angle, her white satin dress was lovely, and she could almost imagine that she was pretty. Her

fingers ached from clutching them together in front of her. When a hand came down on her shoulder, she jumped and cried out.

“If you don’t stop that, sweetie, you’ll be too weak to hold your bouquet,” her mother said.

“Ma, I can’t do this,” she rasped, not glancing up. “Who do I think I am in this dress? I can’t even look at myself. I have no right—”

“Stop right there, miss,” her mother snapped. “Before you go putting yourself down, you remember who is waiting out there in the sanctuary for you.”

Tae caught her breath.

“You may doubt yourself and your right to look beautiful—because you do look beautiful, baby—but you cannot deny the fact that Bryant almost worships the ground you walk on. You’re his sun and moon. Isn’t that true?”

Tae blinked away the moisture in her eyes lest she mess up her makeup. “I can’t deny that. He does seem to think I’m something special.” She laughed, happiness welling inside. “He’s so special himself. I-I can barely breathe sometimes just thinking about him. Ma...”

“I know. I know.” She kissed Tae’s cheek. “Hold your head up, baby. If you’re too nervous right now to do it for yourself, then do it for Bryant. Be his strength, but also allow him to be your strength when you need it. Look at yourself in the mirror.”

In small degrees, Tae raised her head until she was face-to-face with her reflection. She gasped. Her hair stylist had swept her hair atop her head, and instead of the usual thick clump of hair covering the entire right side of her face, there were a few strategically placed cork screw curls dangling. They minimized the appearance of her scar without covering that entire half of her face. The effect was amazing.

Everyone knew of her accident now and the condition of her face, so it should not come as a surprise. With the combination of the dress and her hair, even she could see that she looked pretty.

“Wow.”

Her mother squeezed her shoulders. “Wow, is right. Now, the music is starting. Let’s not keep your husband-to-be waiting.”

Tae’s mother left the room, and Tae took a stabilizing breath before she followed. The small church was packed, every pew full. Some people were even standing at the back of the room, and she wondered if they were there only to see her face. For a moment, she

faltered, holding back when she rested her hand on her father's arm. He looked down at her and winked.

"It's okay, baby," he whispered. "Look down the aisle and see what's waiting for you."

Tae was afraid to look, sure that Bryant would have some expression that showed he had changed his mind and was feeling trapped. She braved it and glanced toward the front of the room. Her heart pounded so hard, she thought her vision would go any second and the pain would start, but she spotted him with ease.

He was handsome in his tux, broad shoulders and big chest making her ache for him. Her gaze rose to his face, and what she saw took the last bit of breath she had. Bryant beamed. Even from her distance, she picked up on the love that shone in his eyes. He smiled and nodded his head as the wedding march began again for the third time.

Tae turned to her father. "I'm ready now."

He patted her hand and started forward, Tae gliding at his side. When they drew up to the minister, the music stopped, and the announcement was made about who gives this bride away. Soon Tae was handed over to Bryant, and she shook from head to toe, clinging to him. She felt his arm muscles tense, so strong and steady. She stared into his eyes, and he seemed to send a silent message of support.

Her mother had said she should allow Bryant to be her strength, and she knew he was being that now. It would be difficult for her to let go of her independence to a degree that let him in, to trust him to help her, but she would fight her inner demons to do just that.

Their vows were exchanged, and the minister announced, "I now pronounce you man and wife. You may kiss the bride."

Bryant couldn't seem to grab her fast enough. Tae let out a small yelp when he took her by the waist, lifted her a little and covered her mouth. Her head drifted back, and the entire room ceased to exist. There was her and Bryant, the only inhabitants of the world. She was Mrs. Bryant Hussner.

When Bryant lowered her to the floor again, Tae became aware that the guests were all on their feet clapping and cheering. She ducked her face against Bryant's jacket, and he held her close.

"My wife," he whispered. "That sounds so wonderful. I have a surprise for you."

She looked up at him, eyes wide. "You do? What is it?"

He grinned. "You'll see."

Tae kissed her mother and father and hesitated before Bryant's mother who was pale and hadn't stood. Coming to a decision, she leaned down and kissed the woman on the cheek, gratified that she didn't pull away. A hug for Rory and they were on their way, rushing down the church steps amid bird seed thrown at them. Bryant tucked Tae into his new truck, and they were off.

"Where are we going, husband?" she asked.

He beamed. "I said wait and see, wife." He winked.

"You said we couldn't leave on a honeymoon just yet, so that can't be it." She tapped her mouth speculating. Bryant reached across to her, tugged her close to his side and wrapped an arm about her shoulders.

"Wait and see, Stubborn."

Twenty minutes later, when they drew up to a cute little house with a white picket fence around the front, she screamed. Bryant had barely enough time to pull to a stop before she jumped out of the truck.

"You're not serious, Bryant!" she shouted. "You're not serious! Is this ours?"

"All ours," he said coming around to the front of the house. "I closed on it a week ago."

She threw herself into his arms, and Bryant spun the two of them around once. Tae burst out crying.

He frowned. "You're not happy, baby?"

"I'm too happy. I can't believe we're here, together, that we're married. It all seems like a dream and that I'll wake up soon."

He lifted her chin and kissed her lips. "Tae, you are my heart. I love you with everything in me. You can believe that if you are dreaming, when you wake up, I will be right there by your side, still loving you."

She cried harder but held him tight. "And I will be there with you as well, baby. When you are hurting, I'll be with you to help you heal. Always."

"Then nothing and no one will ever come between us again. That's a promise."

The End

About the Author

Jordyn Tracey is the author of best-selling novellas *Taking Joy* and *Loving Jiro* as well as a few other works. She enjoys writing interracial romance where the characters often deal with real life issues and struggles that make them stronger while learning to love and trust that special someone in their lives. You can find out more about Jordyn on her blog at www.jordyntracey.blogspot.com or locate her on Facebook.