

# No Strings Attached



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## Prologue

Alicia looked up from her order pad at the Marine. He was the only late-night customer. "Tell you what, since I'm closing up soon, how about I make you a blue plate special?" She saw a frown crease the man's brow, "On the house. My way of showing gratitude for all you do."

The guy was typical United States Marine Corps. She should know; hers was a Marine family. Since they had come to this country in the early nineteen hundreds, the men of her family had proudly served their adopted homeland. Her great-great-grandfather had been a doughboy in World War I. Her great grandfather had served as a US Marine in the Pacific theater. But they had been the lucky ones coming home to their families.

Alicia loaded the plate with a selection of her grandmother's best food. A giant tamale and enchilada, rice and beans, as well as a generous serving of grilled steak and chicken. Marines were always too lean. And this man was no exception.

Her grandmother had already gone home for the night. Alicia had insisted that the woman take it easy this past couple of years since her heart attack. The irony was that Alicia did not come from a large Latino family. She had only her grandmother. Her father was an only child. His dad died in Vietnam before he could give him brothers or sisters.

It was a curse that was to repeat itself when her father died in Desert Storm. When her mother had left a couple of years later, Alicia had begged and pleaded to remain with her grandmother. She had seen her mother only a handful of times over the past almost twenty years.

The buzzer on the industrial microwave went off, and Alicia took the two plates from it using potholders. She used her wide hips to swing open the double doors between the kitchen and the dining room. She smiled as she put the plates on the table in front of the man. "Hope you enjoy it. Just holler if you want more. I've just got some cleaning up to do in the back."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Alicia. My name's Alicia." She studied him for a moment. Damn, this one was a looker. All-American blond with stunning baby blues that would make any woman's heart race and her panties wet.

He nodded and picked up his fork. Usually, the Marines that they got in this place were overly friendly. More than one had hit on her, which generally resulted in her grandmother coming out of the kitchen with a broom in those arthritic hands. But not this guy. He seemed a million miles away.

Alicia watched him as she cleaned the dining room. Her grandmother had already cleaned the kitchen, so Alicia only needed to put a couple of things in the refrigerator and wipe down the microwave and food prep area again.

The man seemed to enjoy his meal, shoveling large forkfuls of the food into his mouth. But it was evident from his tall, lanky frame that he would burn it off quickly enough. These guys usually did.

As he brought the last forkful to his mouth, she approached the table. "Can I get you anything else? Grandma makes a mean apple pie."

He shook his head and looked up at her. Her heart froze in her chest at the sight of his deep blue eyes, eyes that held such pain she could not breathe. "No, ma'am. It was delicious, though."

Alicia was not usually the chatty type, not one to lead men on. She did her job waiting on them, but unlike the other waitress that had worked for her grandmother for years, she did not flirt. But something about this man reached out to her. "You stationed here?"

"Just home for a few weeks on leave. I'm heading back tomorrow."

She did not need to ask where to. Half of the troops from the Marine base were deployed to the Middle East. They had been for over a decade now.

Every time another one came in the café before deploying, her grandmother would grab the cross around her neck and kiss it, giving thanks that Alicia had been a girl baby and not another boy child to be sacrificed for duty and honor. But they still tried to do their part.

"Leave? How long were you back?" she cleared the table in front of him.

"Six weeks. My wife was killed in a car accident." His voice was completely flat as he said the words, but it explained the pain in his eyes.

"I'm sorry," she murmured.

"Thank you for the food, ma'am. I guess I should head out. Let you get out of here."

Alicia knew that he was right, but something inside of her sensed that there was more to this man's story. "No, a cup of coffee and some pie. Before you go."

He looked at his watch. "I suppose if it is quick, ma'am."

She disappeared into the back once more. She frowned as she put the pie into the microwave and poured two cups of hot black coffee. What was she thinking? Obviously, the man was upset, but they had chaplains and counselors on the base. Surely, he would have spoken to them? But still, her heart pulled her back towards the table.

She put the small plate of pie and a cup of coffee down in front of him. But this time, instead of busying herself with cleaning, she took a cup of her own cup and sat down in the booth across from him. "I'm sorry about your wife. It must be hard."

He shrugged again as he brought a bite of pie to his mouth. His eyes locked on hers as he chewed it, as if he were studying her this time. Her heart skipped a couple more beats staring

into those baby blues. He sighed as he laid his fork down on the plate. He lifted his cup of steaming coffee and took a sip. "Truth is that she was not alone when she was killed. My former best friend was in the car with her. They were having an affair."

Alicia tried hard to mask her shock. She knew that was the reaction the man was trying to elicit from her. That and perhaps pity. Instead, she squared her shoulders and met his gaze. "It happens more often than it should. My mama had replaced my dad before his body was even cold in the ground. My grandmother always felt that she was probably messing around before Daddy died."

He smiled at her and nodded, "Corps family?"

"For as long as we have been Americans, Flores have served this country with pride as Marines. My dad died in Desert Storm. My grandfather in Nam. And the generations before them served in Korea and both World Wars. So yeah, we know the score."

"But not you?"

She laughed, "Grandmother would kill me herself. She says that we have given enough of our men. They do not need our women too."

"Wise woman, your grandmother."

"She is that. So, what now? You're heading back with this chip on your shoulder? I might only be in my second year as a psychology major, but even I know that's not a good combination."

He laughed then, and it echoed around the empty diner. "You'll make a damned good shrink. I've had my head shrunk by the best, little lady, and they could take lessons from you." He lifted another bite of the pie to his lips as he studied her some more.

When he had finished it and drank more coffee, he stared down at the table. "Truth is that I went into Hollywood tonight. Thought I'd get drunk and find a prost-," he paused and looked up at her. "A pro to drown my sorrows."

"I take it; it didn't work."

He shook his head, "None of them appealed to me. Just made me sick to my stomach, actually."

She shrugged this time, "Maybe what you need isn't that kind of comfort."

He laughed again, "Lady, I just spent nine months high and dry only to discover my best friend was screwing my wife. I've got at least another six months without a real woman. Oh, trust me, that is the kind of comfort I need."

"I meant maybe you don't want it from someone you have to pay for the pleasure. Maybe you just need some simple no strings attached fun with someone you like," she stared into those

deep blue pools. Even she was questioning her sanity. This was so unlike her. And if her Abuelita ever found out... It did not bear thinking about.

"Oh, honey, there are always strings attached."

She laughed this time, "Not always. Sometimes two adults can screw without head games or emotions."

He frowned at her, "I can't believe I'm even having this conversation with you. You look like white picket fences and mini-vans, a half dozen kids, the dog, and probably a cat or two."

She laughed yet again at how accurately he had painted the picture of everything she wanted most in life. And one thing she knew: that picture did not include a Marine. As her grandmother said, the family curse ended with her.

Still, from the moment this guy had walked into the diner, there had been something about him that called to her. Something that set her tummy tumbling in a way that it had not in a very long time. Well, honestly, never. She wanted him. If only for this one night.

"So, if you planned on hooking up with a pro, I take it you bought the condoms already?"

She watched as he sputtered into the coffee, but he nodded. "Then just let me cash out, and you can walk me home, jarhead."

She stood up from the booth, but this time instead of just picking up his empty plate, she leaned over to give him a view at her decent B-cup breasts.

He frowned for a moment before shrugging once more. "Don't look a gift horse in the mouth, my grandmother always said."

"Well, those ain't my mouth, and I'm no horse," Alicia pronounced with an extra swing of her round bottom in the tight jeans.

"No, ma'am. That you are not," he stood up.

It took Alicia twice as long as it should have to count up. She kept losing track every time she glanced at the man waiting by the door. He was staring out into the chilly desert night. She was sure that his mind must be as confused as her own.

This was not like her. Oh, she was no flowering virgin, not that she wanted her grandmother to know that. But she had lost her virginity in high school to her steady boyfriend, and over the past few years, she had slept with a few more guys.

But casual sex was not her style. The no strings attached that she boasted to this man would be a new experience for her. If she could go through with it. Yes, she was attracted to him. More so than she had been anyone. But still, as he accused, she was white picket fences and commitment. It was the way she had been raised. And this no-strings thing was an anathema to her.

She stuffed the deposit slip into the bag with the cash and zipped it up. She tucked it inside her coat and walked over to where he stood by the door.

"Don't tell me you do that when you're alone?" he frowned with obvious concern.

"The bank is just a couple of doors down, and this is a small town."

Alicia reached up and brushed a kiss across his lips. "But thanks for caring." She meant it too. Somehow it took the sting out of the whole no strings thing.

Then she realized that she did not even know the man's name. She debated that as they walked outside. She fumbled with the lock until it clicked into place and then motioned with her head towards the bank a couple of doors down the main street.

Should she ask? It was scandalous to make love with a man whose name you did not even know. Not make love. Have sex, no strings attached sex. And wasn't a name the thinnest of strings? If she knew his name, wouldn't she be tempted to scour the local news for information about him? She dropped the bag into the night deposit and turned towards him.

"My apartment is just over there," she motioned across the street to a block of townhouses. He followed her in silence. Alicia debated it all again. When she looked over at her companion, his hands were stuffed into the pockets of his jeans; his shoulders slumped over.

As they stood in front of her door, he straightened, "Thank you, ma'am, for the dinner and the pie. And your nice offer, but this is probably a terrible idea."

"Probably, but don't you think you at least owe me a goodnight kiss?" Her newfound boldness spoke before her mind could argue its boldness. But she could not imagine living another fifty or more years without having tasted those lips at least. Were they as soft as they looked?

"I suppose it is the least I can do, ma'am."

His large hands encircled her upper arms. Her skin seemed to catch fire even through the rough denim of her jacket. She looked up into those deep blue eyes that appeared darker under the dim light of her porch lamp. She watched as his Adam's apple bobbed up and down nervously.

He lowered his head, slowly closing the distance between them. "Thank you, ma'am," he whispered against her lips.

She could smell the rich black coffee and the sweetness of the apple pie, but there was something else too. Something totally and entirely masculine, something that beckoned for her to taste its sin, just this once.

As his lips moved softly over hers, she took a single step forward into his arms, pressing her body against his. She moaned softly when she felt the hard ridge in his jeans brush against her thigh. He groaned like a wounded animal, and then his tongue surged into her mouth. His grip on her upper arms tightened until it was almost painful, but it was the most intoxicating

thing she had ever felt. Their tongues danced with one another for several long moments until he reluctantly drew back.

"I should leave," he whispered as he looked into her face.

"But you won't," she smiled as she flicked the key in the lock of her front door. Without looking back, she stepped inside her apartment. She did not bother to turn on the lamp, enough light filtered through the open curtains to illuminate their way to the bedroom.

It was not until she heard the door softly closed behind her that she was confident he had followed. She sighed. She would consider later why she would have been so disappointed if this man had left.

"Follow me," she smiled into the darkness, thankful that he had not. It was only a few short feet down the hall to her bedroom, but the walk had never felt so long as her mind once more fought the conventionality of a lifetime.

She was glad that the door was open. An impediment might have been enough to send both of them running. As it was, she reached back and took his hand, almost dragging him into her inner sanctum. Like the living room, she had left the curtains open when she went to work earlier, and the full moon shone through, lighting their way to her double bed. The brightly colored Mexican blanket was more muted in the darkness.

She pulled him down on top of it with her as their lips once more sought and found the perfect erotic rhythm to keep the doubts at bay. She practically shot off the bed when she felt his hand cup her right breast through her t-shirt. She moaned into his mouth as he found her nipple and pinched it between his thumb and finger. "Please," she heard the throaty whisper when he pulled back from the intense kiss for a moment. Who was that sexy siren, she thought.

"Yes, ma'am," he whispered as his lips trailed hot, wet kisses down the side of her throat as his other hand brushed up the inside of her thighs until it cupped her heated core. Her hips had a mind of their own as they arched up into his caress as he rubbed her through the rough material. Then his hot mouth found her hard nipple; his teeth bit lightly at it through her shirt and bra. She cried out, but not in pain.

His fingers found the button of her jeans and tugged so hard that she was afraid he would tear it off. Then she heard the loud sound of the zipper in the quiet of their little world without any rules. When she felt his calloused hand push inside her pants to cup her wet womanhood, her legs fell open even more.

Then his fingers were inside of her, pushing harder and deeper than anyone ever had. And she was flying, racing to the moon, sailing through the darkness as the stars rushed past her closed eyes. "Oh god," she cried out as her hands gripped his shoulder for an anchor in the turbulent seas. She had never felt anything like this before, as her orgasm went on and on.

She felt something sliding slowly down her legs, but her endorphin flooded brain did not register that it was her jeans until she saw him toss them across the room. Then those rough

hands were tearing and pawing at her shirt. She lifted her head to allow him to pull it off, taking her bra with it. Then she was naked. Naked in her bed. With a strange man. A man whose name she did not even know.

If that other Alicia would have balked at the idea, this new sexy siren found her hands tearing at his t-shirt as impatiently as he had torn at hers. His own hands were already working on his belt buckle and jeans. She managed to tug his shirt off just seconds before he pushed his jeans down to land on the floor.

Then his hands were all over her. Skimming her stomach and heating a trail to her firm breasts as his mouth captured her nipple and suckled. The sensation was even more intense without the thin barrier of her shirt and bra. She was whimpering and moaning, rubbing against him like her grandmother's gato as she felt the tension coursing through her once more.

He must have felt it, too, as his hand once more spread her thighs open. This time instead of pushing deep inside of her core, his thumb found the hard nub at the apex of her mound. It circled the throbbing button, coming closer and closer to it but not actually touching it until she cried out, "Please," once more.

Then he stroked it hard and fast as three of his thick fingers plunged inside of her wetness. She arched up as his teeth bit into her nipple. It is not possible, she thought, as once more she surfed the universe. Her orgasm rolled on for all eternity as her body tightened and spasmed from her toes to the top of her head that felt it would explode at any moment.

She heard something tearing, and suddenly he was on top of her, covering her as he pushed inside of her. She sucked in a deep breath and willed her body to relax a bit. He was larger than her other lovers had been, thicker too. It did not help that she had not had sex since her grandmother's heart attack over two years ago. But none of that mattered. She had to have this man inside of her. Had to feel all of him. Know all of him.

When he would have pulled back, slipped away perhaps, her nails sank into the firm flesh at his sides, no love handles for this man. This perfect lover. This aberration. She held him to her, drew him deeper as she arched her hips up to meet his thrust. He groaned out this time, "So fucking tight."

He was inside of her then, pushing deep. Hard and fast. Pounding mindlessly. It was what they both wanted, what their bodies demanded on this mad rollercoaster ride through the stars. She cried out just as she would when plunged down the ride at the fair.

Her body exploded yet again, and this time it was more intense because the frantic way her lover was moving inside of her told her he was with her this time, every step of the way, every twist and turn, and he followed her, took her on the ride of a lifetime.

She was gasping for breath, her whole body replete, limp, and exhausted. She could barely lift a finger as she felt him collapse on top of her. She smiled and closed her eyes as she felt him shift to the right, taking the bulk of his weight off of her. But their legs and lower bodies

remained intimately locked. She wanted to say something. Tell this man how spectacular it had been. But words would not come.

His breathing slowed, and she found her hands caressing his broad shoulders. She looked over at his handsome face, relaxed now in sleep. She memorized each line and plane. She knew this was a dream. A once in a lifetime experience, and she did not want to waste a moment of it.

But her body was too satiated. After a long day on her feet and then the stellar releases of her orgasms, it was impossible to fight slumber forever.

They woke twice more in the night. Alicia was shocked that each seemed to be better than the last. As she fell asleep in his arms that last time, she promised herself that she would ask his name in the morning. Perhaps exchange numbers and emails. See where this thing might go.

But she awoke to the shrill sound of her alarm. The sun was pouring into her bedroom, revealing the stark truth of daylight. She was alone. Her mystery man was gone. Disappeared into the desert. She swallowed back regret and gloried that for once, she had dared to grab life and hold onto for the most exhilarating ride of her life.

"Thank you, jarhead," she whispered as she stretched her naked body. She ached in the most delicious of ways as she stood and walked to the shower. Time to face another day, but she knew that she would relive it all again that night. In her dreams. In the bed that she had shared for one instant with the man of her dreams.

# Chapter One

Jon Tyler stood outside the small diner. What was he doing here? It had been seven years. Seven hellish years. A nightmare that he would never awake from. The constant pain in his neck, shoulders, and upper back a continuous reminder of what had happened, what he had become. A monster. Worse than any Hollywood creation. This latest trip to the VA hospital was yet another memento.

So, why was he here? He was incredibly glad to see that the place still existed. With the economic downturn, too many small businesses were failing. He did not want to examine too carefully why it should matter so much to him that this one had not.

But he knew. He knew the truth. This was the last place that he had known even a modicum of happiness. That night had been burned into his charred brain. He had relived it tens of thousands of times over the past seven years.

Not that he thought he would catch a glimpse of her. Alicia. She would be long gone now. A shrink somewhere. Maybe even helping fucked up people like him, but he was beyond all help. Why he kept going was beyond him. But something inside him refused to die, as his friends had that night.

He might have turned then and fled from the memories of what lay on the other side of those glass doors. Except that a young couple, another Marine and his girl, practically pushed him through them. He adjusted the hood of his jacket, making sure that his face was covered entirely.

She looked up from behind the cash register and smiled. His heart stopped. Came to a complete standstill. “Ya’ll take a seat. I’ll be right with you as soon as I finish up here.”

The couple slid into a booth by the window. Jon’s heart accelerated as the young Marine reached across the table to grab the hands of his lover. He could only Hope that their course was happier than his had been.

He almost turned and left then. But she looked up at him, “Have a seat at the counter. Alison will get you some coffee while I take care of them.”

Was it curiosity that made him stay? What was she still doing in this place? What about that psychology degree? Jon was not sure, but once more, that indefinable something compelled him to follow her order.

He alternated, staring into the darkness of that cup and sneaking glimpses of her light. She took the couples’ order as she had his that night a lifetime ago. She smiled and joked with the other waitress and cook as she placed the order. The other woman took off her apron and left a moment later.

When Alicia returned to take his order, Jon panicked. Not that there was any chance this woman would recognize him. That IED had made damned sure that not even his own mother

could do that. Even his voice had been changed by the tight burn scars that constricted his throat, lowering his voice.

He kept his head down as he placed his order — apple pie. It held precious memories. Her smile radiated, filling some dark reaches of his mind, “Always a good choice.”

He knew that she would have stayed and chatted. At three o’clock, the diner was practically empty, just the young couple, what appeared to be a homeless man, and himself. He dropped his head further and brought the cup of coffee to his lips to forestall any conversation. But his brain screamed a million questions, wanted to know all the answers, especially that all-important one: what was she doing here?

Jon could not bring himself to take the risk. That night and this woman was his one perfect memory. If he knew the truth, it might shatter that illusion.

So, she turned her attention to the homeless man. “What else can I get you, Steve?”

Her smile was just as bright for this man that most would ignore and many would condemn. His chest tightened, and it had nothing to do with another spasm of the muscles constricted by the scars that covered half of it.

“Thank you, ma’am. But I’m good. How much do I owe you?”

She turned and grabbed a broom from the corner, “The sidewalk out front could use a sweep if you have the time.”

The man nodded, and Jon would have sworn his eyes clouded over as he took the broom and disappeared out front.

She went back to the kitchen to collect the couple’s order but managed to smile as she passed him. His eyes were riveted as she chatted with the couple, ensuring they had everything they needed.

Then she turned her attention to him once more. How he had craved her attention that night. How he had savored those memories for the past seven years, replaying each and every one of them over and over again in his darkest moments. He was determined to catalog each movement, each word, and add these too to his precious cache.

She poured more coffee into his cup and brought the pie, steaming hot with a scoop of vanilla ice cream. Jon need not have worried about deflecting the conversation that he was sure to follow as a tiny whirlwind of energy and joy blew through the door, followed closely behind by the other waitress.

“Mama, mama,” the little girl squealed in delight as she propelled herself at the woman he loved.

Yes, somewhere in the darkness of the past seven years, Jon had come to accept that in a single night, he had fallen helplessly in love with a woman he would never have. Why else

would those memories that sustained him? Her face that he had seen in that split second, which had determined life and death for a dozen men.

As his chest tightened even more, he told himself that he should be happy for her. As he said to her that night, she was white picket fences, a half dozen kids, a cat, and a dog. But the lump in his throat told him it was not that simple. His heart filled with jealousy at the lucky bastard who had given her what he never could.

“How was school, Hope?” She beamed at the child as she returned the embrace.

His mind drifted back to what it felt like to be wrapped in those arms, drawn close to her warmth.

“Bene, Mama. It was good. Can I have ice cream?”

Jon chuckled at the normality of it. As much as it pained him, this was what she deserved. Whatever had become of that other dream? Did it really matter? She obviously loved and adored this little person with sandy blond-brown hair and warm brown eyes like her mother’s.

Alicia looked at the clock on the wall, “I suppose one scoop won’t spoil your appetite for dinner. Do you have any homework?”

“Si, Mama. I have a story to read.”

The door opened, and the homeless man sheepishly entered, holding out the broom. “All done, Miss Alicia.”

“Steve!” the little girl squealed with almost equal delight as she had with her mother. As before, she ran and embraced the man, mindless of his dirty clothes.

It seemed that Alicia had named her daughter well. Hope definitely applied to this child, as much as it did her mother.

Alicia smiled as she brought two bowls of ice cream from the back and motioned for the man to take his seat again. “Hope has some homework, a story she needs to read. Do you have the time to help me out a bit more? Let her read it to you?”

The man nodded, “Anything for the two of you, Miss Alicia.”

She fussed a bit more as she got them settled at the end of the counter. Jon was glad that his hood allowed him to observe without being noticed. The years had been good to the woman. She looked almost the same as she had that night. Perhaps her breasts were a bit fuller, maybe from having children. He should definitely not imagine how they would overflow his hands now.

The young couple smiled as she approached their table. They declined the pie and settled the bill instead. She cleaned their table. Jon watched her every move. He stored all of them for

later - when he was alone once more. Alone as he always had been. Except for that one precious night.

He half-listened as the child read the book to the homeless man. The duality of his emotions warred in his mind and heart, joy that she had the life she was meant to have and deep-seated jealousy of the faceless, nameless man who had given it to her.

The story ended, and Alicia hugged her daughter, praising her efforts, as she thanked the homeless man.

“I better be going, Miss Alicia.”

“Where are you staying tonight, Steve?”

“Oh, you know, wherever I can find.”

Jon watched as she reached into the pocket of her apron and drew out something, pressing it into the man’s dirty hand. “For all your help today.”

The man shook his head, “No, Ma’am, you do enough for me as it is. Always feeding me.” Tears streaked down his unwashed cheeks, “Heck, treating me like a human being. Letting me spend time with your little girl like I was normal.”

“You are a human being, Steve. A hero. And the food, well, that’s just our way of showing our gratitude for all you did, jarhead.”

Jon could not breathe. It was a familiar feeling. Sometimes he woke in the night, the scar tissue around his larynx tightening to the point he could not get air past it. But this was not that. Those words, so similar to the ones she had first spoken to him that night.

He looked at the man in a new light. A brother. A Marine. Like too many of their kind, adrift and lost. Unable to adjust to civilian life, come to terms with the things they had seen and done over there. She saw that. She and her daughter.

Jon’s eyes burned. Once upon a time, the tears would have gathered in them. Now he relied upon eye drops to avoid further damage to them. Not that it would have mattered; the hoodie would have covered any tears as it did the scars that had changed him.

“Does it hurt?” The tiny soft fingers brushed his cheek.

Jon thought of how her mother had caressed his cheek all those long years ago. How had he not noticed that the child had moved behind the counter? She was standing practically in front of him, staring at his scarred visage.

He had been so lost in her that his usual alertness was muted. Good thing his life and the lives of his men no longer depended upon his senses. Not that they had done him or them any good in the end.

How did he answer her question? You did not tell a child - every minute of every day for five years. Some truths you hid. Instead, he did his best to smile, an action that on the rare occasions he attempted caused a slicing pain to shoot to his brain.

It was not just the pain, though. He knew that what passed for a smile now was more frightening than one of those B-grade horror movies. But this child did not run screaming as others had.

“Some times,” was the half-truth he settled upon.

Jon heard the tinkling of the bell. Noticed that Alicia had let the man out. She, too, saw belatedly that her daughter was conversing with a stranger. She came to stand behind the little girl, her hands on the tiny shoulders. “Hope, you know better than to bother customers.”

Turning to him, “I’m sorr-...”

The words died on her lips as for the first time she looked at him. Really saw him. What he had become. Jon felt his heart stop. His worst nightmare was fulfilled. He saw the fear in the eyes of the woman he loved.

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The words froze on her lips. Alicia’s heart stopped. Her worst nightmare or perhaps fondest wish was fulfilled as she stared into those blue eyes that she could never, would never forget.

His scars barely registered. Her mind was on a far different track than the injury that must have caused such damage to her once handsome lover.

No, her thoughts were centered on the tiny scrap of humanity that stared up at her. Her daughter. Their daughter. How did you introduce a child to her father? How did you tell a man he had a daughter? After seven years? What did a mother do?

How many nights had she lain awake, especially in those long months of her pregnancy, after her grandmother’s death, when she had felt so all alone in this world, overwhelmed. How many nights then had she dreamt of this moment? But whatever words that younger self had said in those dreams fled her now?

Fear gripped her. The fear that only a mother can know. The fear of losing her child.

Oh, she knew it was not that simple. She would not actually lose her daughter. The man would never go so far as to demand full custody of the child she had never told him about. Would he? Would he even recognize paternity? After all, they had been so careful that night to use protection.

Heck, even she had not realized she was pregnant until well into her second trimester when her tummy began to bulge. She had dismissed the tiredness, loss of appetite, and occasional nausea as nothing more than stress and grief following the loss of her Abuelita. She had been both shocked and overjoyed when that little stick turned blue.

The child had been such a blessing. When she felt at her lowest, utterly lost and alone, with no family other than the mother that had swooped in following her grandmother's death, suggesting that Alicia sell the diner and move in with her family.

But Alicia had known. It was not some re-ignited sense of motherhood that drove the woman, but the money — the chance to profit from her daughter's loss. Even then, Alicia had been tempted. She could transfer her studies to UCLA, live with her mother, and make a fresh start.

That little stick had changed it all. Given her life purpose. It was as if her Abuelita and perfect lover had conspired to keep her safe. She had told her mother of her pregnancy, watched the look of shocked worry on the woman's face. She was unsure which of them was more relieved when she announced that she would keep the diner and stay here.

She had quit university. Between the diner and pregnancy, she did not have enough energy for anything more. Crawling into bed, the bed they had shared that night, exhausted, hugging her growing baby as she fell asleep.

But that was the past. And her present was held in those blue depths and the little girl in her trembling hands. Her future uncertain.

Alicia forced a reassuring smile, "It's okay, sweetie. I'm sure he understands. Why don't you go home with Alison? See if DeShawn has levelled up yet? I'll be home in time to tuck you in as always."

Her daughter nodded as she turned back to her father, "I Hope you feel better soon."

Alicia barely contained her tears as she nodded towards her friend and employee, who followed her orders despite the questions and concern in her eyes. Alison quickly bundled her daughter out the door to the house down the street. It had been her grandmother's, but like this place was hers now. Alicia said a silent prayer to the woman.

Then she turned back to the man at the counter. What she would give for just a few moments of her Abuelita's practical wisdom right now. It all came down to – what now?

Did he recognize her? Did he suspect that Hope was his child? What do you say to the perfect lover who returns after so long? Obviously, his life had changed as much as hers. What was the right thing to say or do now?

Alicia closed her eyes and prayed for wisdom as she picked up the towel and began to wipe down the counter where Hope and Steve had left their bowls. She snuck glances at him as he pushed the pie around his plate and took the occasional sip of coffee.

The scars marred the handsome face that she had studied as he slept that night. She supposed they would frighten or disgust some people, make most others uncomfortable. But that was not what upset her.

It was what she should do now that continued to plague her as the man pushed the plate away. The man? The father of her child. The perfect lover. The only man she had been with in close to a decade. And he was still - the man.

Would he forever be nothing more? He looked up and asked, "What do I owe you?"

Before she could stop them, the words burst from her lips, "It's on the house. My way of showing gratitude for all you did."

## Chapter Two

Jon wondered once again what he was doing back here. He had been thinking the same thing every day for the past week. But something kept him here. From that first visit, her cryptic remark as he left had played on his mind. Her words were exactly as they had been that night. Had she somehow recognized him? But that was impossible.

That IED and the fire that had rampaged through their SUV, killing his men, and turning him into the monster he saw in the mirror when he dared to look, had destroyed everything of the man he had been that night. Besides, she had said something similar to the homeless man, hadn't she?

But she had no way of knowing for sure that he had been a Marine. He had said nothing of his purpose in being in this town. So, why had she said that? Perhaps, though, she merely assumed. The extent of his injuries, this town that was home to little other than cacti, desert snakes, and the Marine base around which it had grown up, she could have, must have, put two and two together to come up with four. That was the only explanation.

Still, he could not put that doubt from his mind. Could not bring himself to walk away again as he had that night. Snuck out in the dark, left her sleeping, he had dared not look into the depths of those warm brown eyes one more time. He knew women lied; his wife had proved that. But something in those eyes had made him want to toss aside that lesson, to believe in love again. It was silly, ridiculous.

He had succumbed in the end, though. Her face, those eyes were what he saw as the heat and flames licked the skin from his flesh. Were his last thoughts as he lost consciousness. And the first when he awoke. Over the months and years of pain, they kept coming back to him at his lowest moments, when he would have given up, curled into a ball, and begged for the blessing of death that had been his mens'. He had known then that she had wormed her way into his heart that night, woven some magical spell of love and Hope.

Hope, that was the other thing which kept him here. Over the past week, he had put a couple of pieces of the puzzle together. He had made friends with Steve, his homeless Marine comrade, and with the other waitress, Alison, too. He had tried to be subtle with his comments and questions, how lucky Alicia's husband was to have her and such a beautiful little girl. What he discovered raised more questions than they answered.

For the woman, he would have sworn, was white picket fences, mini-vans, a half dozen kids, and pets, there was no husband. There had never been. She was a single mother. And try as hard as he dared, neither Steve nor Alison would betray the identity of the child's father. If they even knew.

He had lain awake nights in his cheap hotel room, pondering that. The math worked. He had pumped the little girl herself for her age. Six, she had beamed — a big girl, in first grade now.

But they had been so careful that night. Hell, he remembered thinking that he would have woken Alicia to make love to her one last time before he left. Except the three-pack of

condoms was empty. Sure, technically, he knew condoms were not one-hundred-percent. Was it possible?

He had tried to convince himself that he was not the only Marine Alicia ‘comforted.’ Her words, ‘no strings attached,’ would have attested to that. Except for the tightness that wrapped about his hard cock that night and the look of innocence in those eyes at the magical wonder of the heights to which they soared. He would bet what was left of his miserable life that the woman was not loose with her favors, as his mother would call it.

So, where did that leave him? A week in this hell hole that held too many memories, most of them bad, and Jon was no closer to having his answers than he had been the day he walked back into this place. His hand hovered on the metal handle.

He should just leave. Go back to his hotel room, pack what few things he had brought with him for what was supposed to be a quick check-up at the VA, arrange the online car service, cross the desert, and get up that mountain he called home. The place he had made for himself. His refuge. The one place where he need not worry about hoodies to cover his scars, the stares of others, the whispers, the looks of pity, or fright.

He turned. And that whirling dervish of energy and yes, Hope, ran straight into him. “Jon, Jon,” she chorused as if she had known him all her life, as if he were once more the man he had been, as if he were her...

Her little arms wrapped about his waist, “I have a new story today. Can I read it to you? Please?”

He looked up to the frightened and shocked face that had filled his dreams for seven long years. Though that was not the look, it wore in his fantasies. Alicia was quick to hide it, though, just not fast enough for the man that had once relied upon his senses and powers of observation to keep him and his men safe.

The look that replaced it was not much better, certainly not the one of blissful contentment that he had left on it that morning. It was polite, even a warm smile. But it was tight, and if you looked closely, that smile did not reach the depths of those warm brown eyes.

“Hope, I’m sure that Jon has other things to do. Maybe DeShawn will have some time after practice today, or perhaps Steve will be back. But I promise if they aren’t, I’ll listen before the dinner rush,” she smiled at her daughter.

Alicia lifted a nervous gaze to him, “I’m sorry. I know that Hope can be a bit overwhelming at times.”

He shook his head. Hope had not been overwhelming. She was a welcome distraction. Something that had been woefully missing in his life for a very long time. Something that he wished with all his battered heart was indeed his to hold onto for more than a brief story.

“It’s no bother, Ma’am,” was all he managed to say as he held open the door for them, then followed them inside.

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Alicia peeked around the partition that separated the kitchen from the dining area. The sandy brown head bent over the book, so close to the scarred one of her father. Her throat tightened. Keloid, contracture, hypertrophic; over the past few days, Alicia had learned more about burns than she ever wanted to know.

If she had felt his pain that night, the pain of betrayal and loss, it was nothing compared to all he must have endured over the years. Almost certainly still did and always would. Her heart ached.

And now this. The sheet of paper trembled in her fingers.

“Are you okay?”

Alicia turned and tried to smile at her best friend and employee. Alison had been such a blessing. After her grandmother’s death and discovering she was pregnant, she had not known what she would do.

To compound that, the waitress that had worked for them for years had suddenly stolen three days' worth of deposits, over five-thousand dollars. If the loss of money were not bad enough, Alicia had been only weeks from giving birth. How would she keep the diner open without a waitress? What would she and the baby live on while she recovered?

Then, one afternoon, this woman and her two sons had come in. Although they were big boys, even then, their mother had insisted they order from the children’s menu. She had only water. While the children grumbled and fought, Alicia had piled plates high with far more food than a child’s portion. She had added a third plate to the order. When she had taken the tray laden with her best to the table, the woman had cried and smiled weakly at Alicia.

As the boys demolished the food, the woman had snuck away, supposedly to the bathroom, but she had sought Alicia out. “Thank you for all that food. I’m sorry, but I can’t afford to pay anymore than what I ordered. I’m so sorry..” She had burst into tears.

Over a cup of coffee and apple pie, while her sons enjoyed their own dessert with extra ice cream, Alicia had drawn the woman’s story out. She was fleeing an abusive husband. But their car had broken down only a couple hundred miles into the cross country trip to the brother that had reluctantly agreed to take them in.

With no money to pay for car repairs or even the tow truck, Alison was out of options. There was no way her brother would send the money, and if she called her husband to get them, well, it did not bear thinking about. To make things worse, they had not eaten since breakfast that morning.

Alicia had empathized with the woman. Her hand covered her baby bulge as she thought of all she would do for this little one. She had offered Alison and her sons the spare rooms at her Grandmother’s house. Even though she could have used the money, she had not been able to bring herself to sell the house that had been in her family for generations.

Instead, she had given up her apartment and moved into it. But it was three bedrooms, and she only used one. There was plenty of room for them. Alison could work as a waitress until she had the money to fix the car and a little extra for gas and hotels.

That was over six years ago, and they had never left. Well, Damien, Alison's oldest son, was away at college now. And his younger brother, DeShawn, would soon be graduating and going away as well. The two single mothers and their children had formed an odd sort of family, Alicia supposed. Supporting one another.

But obviously, it had not been enough for Hope. She handed the paper to her friend as the tears ran faster down her cheeks.

Alison glanced at it for a moment, then wrapped her arms around Alicia. "We both knew they were missing a man in their lives. Sure, Damien and DeShawn had their coaches, but it was not the same as a father. And as much like big brothers as they have been to Hope, it isn't the same."

Alicia wiped the tears with the back of her hand as she sniffed, "Yeah, I know. Just look at how she has always gravitated to Steve. When he goes off drinking like this, she is lost."

Her friend nodded, "He'll be back, sweetie. Hope is good for him too. Without her, the man would probably never be sober." She tilted her head towards the dining area, "And besides, this time, at least, she has a distraction."

Alison's words were meant as comfort, but they burned into her soul. What would her friend say or think if she knew that Jon was the no-string-attached lover that had gifted her with Hope?

The women had become like sisters; there were no secrets between them. Alison knew of that one perfect night, and Alicia knew the messy details of Alison's decade-long marriage to the professional athlete whose occasional abuse had escalated as his career faded. But Alicia had not told her friend the truth about this new 'regular.' The time had just never seemed right, and it was not now either.

"I better start cleaning up. You want to take Hope home and get her ready for bed, please?"

Alison stilled; her gaze seemed to search Alicia's face for a long moment before she wrapped her in a warm embrace. "As I said six years ago, I'm here for you anytime, in any way, for as long as you need me. You know that, right? I can never repay what you have done for the boys and me."

Alicia wrapped her arms around her friend, returning the hug. "You don't owe me anything. You never have. I'm the one in your debt. I don't know what I would have done if your car hadn't broken down that day. How would I have kept this place going? Who would have shown me how to change diapers or breastfeed? And I sure as hell would not have survived two days of back labor without your support. I love you; you know that, right?"

Alison chuckled, "Well, not the good kind. We have both been missing that for a long time. But as much as I love you too, neither of us swings that way. Might be nice if we did..."

Alicia drew back. She had sensed some change in her friend for weeks. Some restlessness, unease perhaps, but lately, she had been so caught up in her own mess that she had not given it much thought. “You okay, Ali?” she used the nickname that she rarely did.

“Yeah, I guess. It’s just that with Damien gone and DeShaun leaving in a few months. Well, you have a few years before you have to face an empty nest.”

“You always have a home here. Hope and I still need you.”

“Yes, but this is a reminder that our kids need more than we can give them, isn’t it?” Her friend held out the paper for her. “I’ll kidnap her away from our new customer and take her home. See you once you close up here.”

She brushed a kiss against Alicia’s cheek and squeezed her shoulders, “We’ll figure it out. We always do.”

Alicia nodded and smiled, trying to fake the confidence she did not feel as she stared again at her daughter’s incomplete homework assignment.

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Jon knew he should have left long ago. He had been here for hours. His early dinner long since finished. He had eaten two pieces of pie as an excuse to remain. He remembered the taste of the pie that night. He remembered everything about that night. Whether this was as good as that had been, he would never know. His sense of smell and taste was deadened by those flames too.

He watched her clean up the dining area, refill the condiment containers, and wipe down each chair and table just as she had that night. The cook had left over half an hour ago. Alison had taken Hope home a couple of hours earlier.

Jon knew where they lived. He had felt like some stalker as he followed her that first night. Of course, he had excused it as a need to protect Alicia. She still did not have better sense than to take the nightly deposit to the bank all alone.

He had expected her to cross the street to the row of apartments where they had gone that night. But instead, she had continued down the main street. It was a good ten or fifteen-minute walk to the quiet street with its scattering of a handful of non-descript single-story brick houses. The woman should have driven. It would have been safer. So, he had taken to guarding her each night. Of course, she did not know that.

She had moved on to cleaning up behind the counter. Her actions practiced as if she had done it a million times. Perhaps she had. He knew so little of her life. Had nothing to go by except a single night in her arms and the furtive glimpses of the past few days.

She lifted the coffee pot and walked towards the booth where he sat. Without a word, she poured the remnants into his cup. He expected her to go back to her cleaning. Instead, she took a seat across from him. She put the coffee pot down on the table next to her. Her hands

clasped in front of her. Her eyes were downcast. Long moments ticked by. Jon did not know what to say. Neither, it seemed, did she.

When she shifted, Jon thought she might rise and go back to her duties. But she reached into the pocket of the white apron she wore and pulled out a piece of paper. She did not even glance up at him as she unfolded it and placed it on the table in front of him.

“I was called to the school today.”

He saw tears slip from the corners of her eyes. He ached to kiss them away but reminded himself he had no right. The only thing he could do was listen. If she needed someone to share her burdens with, it was the least he could do.

“I’ve tried so hard. Most of the time, I think I’m doing a pretty good job with her.”

Words of reassurance were on his lips, but before he could utter them, she continued, “Then something like this happens. And I know there are somethings I can never give Hope, holes in her I can never fill. I should have known that. I grew up with those same holes, made up the same fantasies.”

She finally looked up. Those brown eyes that had filled his dreams were brimming with unshed tears as others coursed down her cheeks. “But this time, there is something I can do. It may not be much. And I certainly have no right to ask you this.”

Whatever she wanted, he would do. Anything to halt those tears that ripped his heart apart as much as that explosion had his body, mind, and life. She had only to tell him what she needed. He would do it somehow. But Jon was not prepared for her next words.

“I know I promised you no-strings-attached. And this is a helluva string. But please, please, I beg you, for Hope’s sake,” she pushed the paper closer to him.

For the first time, Jon looked down at it. The words across the top burned into his brain – Family Tree.

“I promise I won’t draw you any deeper. I mean, Jon is a common name. Hope, hell, I don’t even know your last name. Shit, I don’t care, don’t even bother with it. Whatever you can do.”

She shook her head as she tried to draw the paper back. Jon’s unscarred right hand covered hers, captured the form beneath.

“I’m sorry. This was a bad idea. I don’t know what I was thinking. This isn’t your problem. Forget I said anything.”

Alicia rose from the table and ran into the back of the diner, leaving him alone to stare at the half-completed paper. Her words, their unstated meaning, echoed in his scarred mind as he read the first line - Guadalupe Hope Flores.

Above it, in a child's scrawl, Alicia Maria Flores. The two rows above that were complete, but the other side of the sheet was blank. Well, not exactly empty. They were marred with the raised scars of dried tear stains. Were they Hope's tears or Alicia's? Maybe both.

Jon folded the paper and put it in his pocket as he placed a wad of bills under the coffee cup. He needed to think. He needed fresh air. And to walk.

Even though the thought had crossed his mind, hell, it had taken up residence in one of its endless dark corners, nothing had prepared him for this. For the reality of what it all meant. He had a daughter. A child that needed him. No one had needed him for five years. Not since the day he had let his men down.

So, what are you gonna do about it, jarhead? That was what he needed to walk and think about.

## Chapter Three

Alicia forced a smile once more as she slipped into Hope's room. "Hey, sweetie, are you ready for bed?"

The huge crocodile tears in her daughter's brown eyes tore her heart out of her ass. All she could do was crawl into bed beside Hope and hold her tightly. She understood exactly how the child felt. How many times had she stared at old photographs of the father she barely remembered or listened to Abuelita and tried to create memories of the man? Her daughter did not even have that.

Well, she did not know that she had memories of her father. Alicia was not sure what she had been thinking. About Hope, of course. But what had possessed her to do something as foolish as telling the man the truth? What had she expected? Certainly not that expressionless silence.

But that did not matter at the moment. Hope did. Her daughter was all that had counted for the past seven years, all that would for the rest of her life. And damage control was the order of business now.

"Miss Mandy was right, precious. Times are changing. Families are not just Mommies and Daddies anymore. That was what she wanted all of you to learn."

Her daughter stared up at her, "But I hurt you, Mama. I disappointed you."

When the school had called, Alicia was terrified. Hope was the model pupil, so the only possible reason was illness or an accident. She had rushed from the diner, leaving Alison in charge. But when she arrived to find a red-eyed and perfectly well Hope in the classroom alone with her teacher while the others were out at recess, she had not known what to think.

When Mandy explained the homework assignment and her daughter's outburst in class, the disappointment she felt was not directed at her child but at herself. The young teacher had apologized to them both.

With her hand on her burgeoning belly, she explained that this assignment was intended to help the children see that the nature of family was changing. That while most children still had a Mommy and Daddy, often they did not live together. Others had two Mommies or two Daddies. Of course, Hope was not the only child of a single parent in the class. It was just that the others had been able to complete the assignment.

Mandy had tried to point this all out to Hope and the others, but Alicia knew Hope felt things more intensely. She always had. And she knew the high price that came with that gift.

She slipped into bed beside her daughter and drew Hope close. Alicia kissed the top of her sandy-blond head, a legacy from her father.

“We have a wonderful family, sweetie. Not only do we have each other, but there is Alison, Damien, and DeShaun. Even Steve. So, what if our tree does not look like other peoples. It is a tree that we planted, grew, and watered ourselves. Not one that we inherited.”

“And Jon, too, Mama. You forgot that he is part of our family now.” Her daughter brushed the tears away with her hands as she beamed with new understanding.

What would her daughter think if she knew the truth? How much Jon actually belonged on that tree? How much he truly was family? Would Hope be angry with her for keeping that from her? How could she possibly explain the ridiculous notion of no-strings-attached to a child? Could she ever forgive her? Or would Alicia lose the one thing that mattered most to her?

What would happen if her revelation had run the man off? How would Hope manage the betrayal? Her daughter missed Steve on those occasions when he lost his battle with the bottle. When he was gone for days at a time, first in drowning, whatever ghosts haunted him, then in shame. Alicia was never sure whether it was hunger or some need to belong that always drove the man back to the diner. But she knew that Hope smiled and hugged the homeless man tighter each time.

It was too late to think of those things right now. As Abuelita always said, you cross those bridges when you come to them. “You need to get some sleep now, precious. Have you brushed your teeth?”

The child nodded, “And read your story?”

“Si, Mama, DeShaun listened to me read Madeline.”

“And said your prayers?”

“I waited for you, Mama.”

Alicia was about to begin the nightly ritual when a knock at the door interrupted them. Who could it possibly be this late at night? “I’ll be right back, sweetie.”

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Jon stared at the door. He should not be here. How was he going to explain knowing their address? He had spent the past hour walking, trying to come to terms with the truth that had only been a vague dream, a remote possibility. Until tonight.

He did not doubt Alicia. She was not the type of woman to lie. That much he knew. It was not as if she had anything to gain either. She was not demanding seven years of back child support, as she should. All she had asked was some information.

Granted, he had had to call his mother for some of it. He always zoned out when the woman began to groan on and on about the illustrious Tyler family history. He had been dragged as a child to too many Daughters of the Alamo meetings. While the first bit about his parents,

brother, and sister was easy enough, the rest about long-dead grandparents and great-grandparents was not.

He was about to turn, go back to the hotel, and do he had no idea what, when the door opened. Her eyes were swollen. He had done that to her. How many other tears had she shed alone over the past seven years? How many other crises had she been forced to handle on her own? Jon's throat tightened at the thought.

Before she could ask questions, demand to know how he knew where they lived, he held out the scrap of paper. "I'm sorry. It took me a while. I had to call my mother for most of it."

She nodded her head in silence. Her trembling fingers grasped the paper like it was a treasure map.

Whether she would have thrown it back in his scarred face or screamed and yelled in anger, perhaps even called the police on him as a stalker, he would never know. That tiny whirlwind of Hope rushed out of nowhere, dancing and singing, "Jon, Jon!"

His child, his daughter. How had he not seen it before? Yes, she had her mother's warm brown eyes, her skin a light olive denoting generations of mixed blood, and her more golden blondish-brown curls several shades darker than the blond he had once been. Before the fire singed it all away. It was also several shades lighter than her mother's rich brown with faint auburn highlights. He could almost remember how soft Alicia's hair had felt between his fingers that night. But it was there. The shape of her tiny mouth, nose, and even those eyes was Tyler too.

"Mama was putting me to bed. I have school tomorrow."

Was there a slight pout on her lips? Had he been the cause of her pain as well as her mother's? He wanted to wrap her in his arms, tell her how very sorry he was, promise her she would never hurt again. But he did not have that right.

Not yet, anyway. They needed to talk. He and Alicia. Because if she thought he was going to buy that no-strings-attached line again, she was wrong. He should not have that night. No, this little girl was so much more than a string. She was a tie that bound him to the woman he loved. A living, breathing memory of the one perfect night in his long, fucked up life. And he was not walking away from that.

It was another chance at life. He had already been given a second one, surviving what few men did, what his men had not. So how many opportunities did a man get?

"Oh, I'm sorry. It's late. I should have known. I just stopped by to give your mother something. I'll let you get to bed." He was rambling. He wished he had that paper back, something, anything to do with his hands. Instead, he placed them behind his back. There was nothing at-ease about his stance, though.

Hope reached for his hand. It was not the first time she had touched him over the past few days. But it was the first touch of his child. His child. The words still seemed surreal in his mind. He smiled as he treasured the knowledge and her warm touch.

“Mama, can Jon help me with my prayers tonight?”

He heard the sharp intake of breath, looked up into her face before she could mask the pain, saw more tears gathering in her eyes. “I’m sure Jon needs to get home, sweetie.”

But he had no home. Perhaps he never had. And while he was hardly the type for prayers, not even when he had thought he was dying, it was not some god whose name he called, but hers, Alicia’s. Still, if there was such a thing as prayer, his was for the chance to be there for his child and her.

“Por favor, Mama. Please. It won’t take long. I promise to go straight to sleep,” his child pleaded, looking from one of them to the other. Jon smiled, imagining the trouble she could cause with that look in the years to come. How many disagreements they would have over this one.

But right now, this was the argument that mattered most to him, “I don’t mind. I’d love to help Hope with her prayers.”

He watched the movement of her throat muscles, the way that her knuckles turned white on that sheet of paper as she nodded her head. But she had nodded it, given her permission for these precious moments with his child.

Hope took his hand and drew him past her mother, down a small hallway, and into some pink nightmare of fluffy unicorns and princesses.

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Alicia was left standing in the living room, holding Hope’s homework assignment. The paper shook as she read – Jonathan Edward Tyler. The other names did not matter. After seven years, she knew his name. The man who had given her one perfect night and Hope. Her no-strings-attached lover.

But this piece of paper boded other questions. The most pressing of which was: what now? Obviously, this changed their no-strings deal. But how? What was he doing here? How did he even know where they lived?

Oh my god, a strange man was in Hope’s bedroom saying her prayers with her. Not a strange man, but her father. While she was relegated to waiting outside. Alicia could count on one hand the number of times she had missed Hope’s prayers. Usually, when she was ill. But things were changing.

Why had he come back? What had drawn him to the diner that day? And why had he stayed? Had he suspected even before she told him? Oh, why had she told him at all? What was she thinking?

Alicia folded the paper and wiped the tears that had begun to fall again with the back of her hand. There was only one way to find out the answers to her questions. They needed to talk.

She walked down the hallway to her daughter's bedroom. They knelt on the floor. It was usually her there beside Hope. But tonight, it was her father. Alicia studied the man. With his eyes shut, she would not recognize him.

The lower right half of his face and neck was barely scarred, but the rest of his face, head, and neck was covered in shiny, red, and silver ridges. His mouth was drawn down on the left side; his nose and left eye misshapen. The top of his head that had been covered in the short blond hair of a Marine high-and-tight was instead a road map of those scars.

"...and god bless my new friend, Jon, too. Make him all better the way Mama does me when she kisses my boo-boos. Amen."

Those blue eyes looked up, caught, and held her gaze. She felt the heat rise into her cheeks at having been caught staring.

But it was not the way he thought. She would never, could never, pity him. He had survived. He had survived his wife's betrayal and death, and he had survived this too. He was strong. A strength she saw reflected in their daughter.

"Okay, young lady, it is time for bed now," she did her best to be stern.

"Yes, Mama." Hope smiled as she touched her father's shoulder, "Thank you, Jon. Can I read you another story after school tomorrow?"

He smiled, though the left side of his face mainly remained an immovable mask of those shiny red scars. "Nothing would make me happier, Hope. But your Mama is right. It is time for bed."

Her daughter nodded and stood up. Alicia would have sworn that her heart was in a vise, and the screws turned as their daughter leaned over and placed one of her special kisses on the worst of the burns that covered her father's left cheek. She had never been prouder or more frightened in her life.

Alicia's nice, comfortable world was changing fast. Too fast. Just as it had that night. This man seemed to be the harbinger of change in her world. And what that meant this time was uncertain. But one thing was for sure, she needed to find out. They needed to talk.

"Buenos noches, Hope. Jon and I are going out for a walk for a bit. But you can call Alison if you need anything." This was not a conversation they could risk having their daughter overhear.

"Si, Mama. Buenos noches, Jon."

"Goodnite, my little angel," that smile was broader as he stood up. His unscarred right hand brushed the hair back from her face. "I'll see you tomorrow. I promise."

Her daughter smiled and turned over, closing her eyes and cuddling her favorite pink fluffy unicorn.

Alicia turned off the light switch. She knocked on the door across the small hall. Alison opened it, her tablet in hand. “Hey, sweetie. Is everything alright?” The woman looked over her shoulder.

“Yes. Jon and I are going for a walk. Will you keep an ear out if Hope needs anything.”

“Of course,” the gentle squeeze of her friend’s hand told Alicia more than her words.

“I’ll be fine,” whether she was trying to reassure Alison or herself, she was not sure.

She nipped into the third bedroom, only long enough to grab the jacket that hung on the back of the door. DeShaun was still out with his friends, so the attic addition was empty. Alicia did not dare look at him. She just assumed that he followed her as she walked down the hall. She walked through the living room and out the door.

It was only when the cool desert night air hit her that she shivered. It was not from chills; her jacket warded those off. But the enormity of the situation had finally caught up with her.

“What now?”

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Jon kept his hands in his jacket pockets. As usual, the hood covered his scarred head and much of his face. “I was hoping that you could tell me.”

Silence was Alicia’s only response as they walked on for several minutes. They walked not back towards town but further into the cold, barren desert.

Cold, barren desert was an appropriate metaphor for his life. A childhood of being the Tyler that was expected of him, always in the shadow of his father and older brother. Only at A&M and in the Marines had he managed to break free. Even then, he had floundered, uncertain of who he was or what he wanted. His marriage had been a disastrous attempt to be his own man – with the wrong woman. Duty was all he had left, and he failed at even that, losing all of his men in the process, good men. The past few years had been survival. Recovery was impossible.

Only twice in his life had he ever felt complete, whole, a man. And both of those were with this woman. He knew that it was impossible for Alicia to love someone like him. If he had been a bitter fuck up that night, he was a monster now.

But the truth was he did not want to walk away from them. Either of them. That sheet of paper proved that his daughter needed him. Wanted a man, a father in her life. And while he did not condemn Steve, in fact, he could more than understand the power of pain that sent a man running for the bottle. He did not want a homeless man playing stand-in daddy to his child.

“I want to be her father — a real one. Not just a name on some paper, Alicia.” The words were out before he could consider their ramifications.

She sighed and turned to face him, “I don’t know whether I’m relieved or terrified. I know how Hope feels. I grew up with only old photographs of my dead father. I am still never sure if the few memories I have of him are real or just my imagination and Abuelita’s stories.”

She looked down at the ground as she rubbed her hands on the front of her jeans. “That damned homework assignment only made me face the fact. I can’t be both mother and father to my daughter.”

“Our daughter, Alicia. Ours.” Jon knew that he was pushing her. That all of this was too new. He had only just reappeared in her life. Wounded and scarred beyond recognition. Not just physical ones either, but unseen wounds that went far deeper.

But he knew this was his only Hope. The only thing that made life worth living. She was the only thing that ever had. That one precious night in her bed was the best memory of his life. And even if he could never have her again. He could be there for his child...and for her. Even if that meant the ‘friend zone.’

She smiled weakly as she nodded, “Our daughter. So, what are we going to do about it? How are we going to tell her the truth? Six-year-olds don’t understand no-strings-attached?”

Jon was not sure he did either. “I think I told you there was no such thing.”

Alicia laughed, and it rang out across the desert darkness, bringing light and joy that he had not felt in a very long time. Jon found a new purpose. If he never made this woman moan beneath his touch and loving again, he would make her laugh like that, and often. He would lighten this load that she had carried for so long all alone.

“I guess you were right.”

“What a woman admitting that a man was right? Don’t ever let your sisterhood hear that.” Her answering smile and nod of her head made him smile. That warmth that had been missing for most of a lifetime spread in his chest.

“Enjoy it. I can’t promise they are words you will hear often. Especially when it comes to Hope,” she stopped and looked up. “Do you know what I felt tonight? When she asked you to say her prayers with her?”

Jon shook his head. Uncertain where this was going. This question, or this situation. But he knew he needed to be here. With them. And he would do whatever it took to make that happen.

Her voice was rough as she chuckled, “I was jealous. Jealous because Hope’s father was taking my place.”

“I’m not trying to take your place, Alicia. You’re a fucking amazing mother. You know why I say that?”

She shook her head.

“Do you know how many kids scream or cry or run or, worst of all, stare when they see my face? But not Hope. Sure, she stared, but it was not the same. And when she asked me if it hurt, it was like something exploded inside me.”

He wasn't sure what made him do it. He knew he had no right. That he should not have dared. But it just seemed so natural to reach for her hand, to draw it into his. It felt so fucking right. Like the world was, for this moment, a beautiful and wonderful place.

“Maybe it was Hope. You named her well, sweet...” Jon stopped himself. The words hung in the cold air frozen between them.

He dropped her hand. He would not let how he felt about this woman complicate an already difficult situation. “I'm not trying to take your place. I admire you. The job you have done with her. All alone. I'm sorry about that. If I had known...”

She stared off at the moon, “That is my own fault. You know I made the decision not to ask your name that night. When I first found out I was pregnant with her, I regretted that. Then I decided that it was some sign. That she was some miracle, some gift from a god, I don't even believe in. My purpose for going on after Abuelita died.”

“That's how I feel now, Alicia. Like meeting that little girl was some fucking miracle. One I don't deserve but can't turn away from. I just want a chance to get to know my daughter. To be a part of her life. Even if I don't have that right, don't deserve it, please don't take that from me. Don't take that Hope.”

It was Alicia that reached for his hand this time. But she reached for his left hand, the one missing two fingers, covered in scars so deep that they constricted movement. The one that he might still lose.

He tried to draw it back, to hide it. But she would not let him. His throat tightened, and his eyes clouded over with unshed tears. How like her mother their daughter was. Neither afraid of the scars that even he hated. His badge not of survival but failure. He knew he did not deserve either of them. But he always had been a selfish bastard. And this time, he wanted so desperately to hang onto the Hope that they brought back to his life.

“I would never do that to you. Or to Hope. I meant what I said; I remember exactly how she feels. Most of the other children have a Mommy and a Daddy, even when they don't live together. But not having a father leaves this huge hole, especially in a little girl's heart.”

He squeezed her hand, as much as that hand was capable of anyway. “I'm sorry.” Jon was not sure if he apologized for not being there for her and his child until now. Or for the depth of pain half-hidden in the ghost of Alicia's past.

“So, we're back where we started. What now? How do we tell our daughter that you're her father?”

“Do we have to? I don't want to hurt her or you. And like you said, no-strings-attached won't make any sense to her. She already likes me. Couldn't I simply step into her life like Steve has? Be there for her - and you, if you need anything.”

While the solution he offered was so much less than what Jon wanted, he knew it was more than he deserved.

## Chapter Four

Alicia wanted to accept his offer. It hid her sin. And if she were honest, it kept this man around. In Hope's life, yes, but also in hers. And somewhere since that afternoon, when she stared into those eyes that she had never forgotten and never would, Alicia had realized that she wanted that. Each day she had sighed with relief when he walked through the door at the diner. Each day she watched the clock, wondering if this would be the day he disappeared from her life as he had that morning. Without a goodbye.

But she knew that it was not enough. Not for her daughter. She did not need another 'male role model.' He had those - Damien, DeShaun, Steve, teachers, and others. She understood what Hope needed was a father, a Daddy, a Papa. Someone that she knew would always be there.

"Marry me?" The words were out of her mouth before they had even registered in her brain.

"What?" He drew his hand back, and she felt bereft. Not just the rejection of her proposal, but her.

"I'm sorry. I suppose that was stupid," she lied to cover her hurt. "It's just that I do know how Hope feels. She doesn't need another Steve, even one who won't go off for days and abandon her for the bottle and drugs. She has male role models. What she needs is a sense of belonging. Someone that she knows is hers. That she has ties, commitment to. She needs a father."

She barely breathed as she plunged further into her story. "Obviously, she has that. I do not doubt that you want to be that to our daughter. And maybe if she were older, this would be easier."

She chuckled at the thought, "But explaining a no-strings and no names liaison even to a thirteen or sixteen-year-old might not be as easy as it sounds. So, how else do we tell her that you're her father? What story do we make up? What lie do we tell Hope?"

She knew that she was rambling. Speaking her thoughts aloud before they took root, or she could examine them. It was something she usually only did with Alison. And often not even then. Alicia had learned to guard her heart. From the painful death of her father, the rejection of her mother, to winning and keeping the love and approval of her Abuelita, the only person she had left.

But this was new. Raw. Even that night, this man had made her feel things she had never imagined. Something that not even her steamy romance novels alluded to. Or perhaps it was that words could never capture the vulnerability she felt.

"I guess we are back to 'what now.' We know that Hope needs a father; you want to step into your natural role as that father. But how? How, Jon? How do we tell our little girl that you're her Daddy?"

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Jon forced his mind away from the images that danced through his head. That had sprung from his seemingly fertile imagination like Athena from Zeus's forehead. Pictures of their family. Hope, a confident, laughing, content little girl secure in two loving parents.

And her, Alicia writhing beneath him as she had that night. Her moans filled his mind and soul to overflowing. Her body ripening again. He had missed so much. Hope's first kick. Her birth. Had she been an easy baby? Or had she had colic, whatever that was, as his mother complained he had? Her first word was certainly Mama; she used it often enough now. What would it have felt like to hear Da-da for the first time? Her first step? All of that was gone. But in his mind, there were others — other babies.

Jon bit back bile, swallowed the pain as he realized what bothered him most, what held him back from accepting her proposal, from jumping for the golden ring that she held forth so casually. In his mind, in those dreams, he was whole. It was not the scarred shell and half-man in that imaginary family photo. It was not a mangled hand that rested on Alicia's round tummy. It was the handsome Marine he had been that night.

That was why he avoided mirrors. Not even years of therapy, not just the overworked, overburdened, and often burned-out ones at the VA either, but the best that his parents' money could buy. Not even they could help him to accept what he saw each time he looked in a mirror.

No, while his daughter might accept him as he was, he could never live a lie with her. See pity in Alicia's eyes. As much as his soul might cry out and long for those dreams, that tiny ray of Hope, he could not settle for crumbs from the table of the woman he loved. It would kill whatever little spirit remained in his scarred shell of the man she had once known.

"I don't know." He sighed as he released the last visage of that impossible dream. "What have you told her about her father?" He forced his mind to the realities of the situation.

"You might not believe this, but nothing. Absolutely nothing. Until this damned homework assignment, Hope never asked. Alison's ex never had anything to do with her sons. And a couple of her other friends from kindergarten had single moms too. So, I guess it just never occurred to her to ask."

"And when she did? I'm assuming she did for this assignment."

Alicia dropped her head, her hands once again rubbing along her jeans. "Not really. She never showed me the paper," Jon heard the pain of that admission in her voice. "She did ask about her father a couple of nights ago, but I changed the subject. I know that was wrong, but I could not lie to her. And I didn't know what else to do."

'Could not lie to her.' The words played in Jon's mind too. Did he want to build his relationship with his daughter on lies? But Alicia was right - the truth was not for the ears of a six-year-old. A desperately lonely and broken man accepting whatever comfort he could find in the arms of a stranger, angel though she be. It might make a good Penthouse Letter, but not an appropriate introduction to your child.

They were back to where they began. ‘What now?’ How could he be the father he wanted to be to his child, the father she so obviously wanted and needed, without lying to her?

Jon examined her proposal from a new perspective. It was clearly the way out. But could he do it? Could he marry the woman he loved only for their child? Could he live with her day after day, night after night, wanting something he could never have? What choice did he have? Hell, maybe this was some new torturous punishment for his failings as a man and a commander.

“How would it work? This marriage, I mean. I’m assuming it is in name only.” He tried desperately to hide the pain and self-loathing from his voice. To keep it casual, as if it were not the most crucial question of his fucked up life.

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Alicia looked up; in the moonlight, the scars danced across his cheeks. Her fingers ached to trace them, to soothe away the pain, to repeat their daughter’s first question to her father. Does it hurt?

But even in his seeming acceptance of her proposal, she felt the rejection. She stayed her fingers as she forced words from her mouth. She was sure that she was rambling. Thinking aloud once more. Disjointed meanderings of her mind because her heart was broken by the cold of this man’s words.

“I don’t know. I guess we shouldn’t rush things too quickly. Do you live around here? Maybe continue as we have for a bit. You could ask me out, I guess would be the first step.”

It sounded so mundane. So normal. A date. A first date. With the father of her six-year-old daughter. It was not the first time in the past seven years that Alicia had felt the shame of the situation. She knew that Abuelita would have been so disappointed in her. Love her, yes. Support her, for certain. But she knew that the woman who had raised her would have been terribly hurt and disappointed by the situation.

But then she had never had to face that reality. Her grandmother, her beloved Abuelita, had died the night that Hope was conceived. The truth was that her body might even have been cooling while Alicia lay beneath this man. Enjoying her one perfect night.

It was another layer of her guilt. Though she never made a habit of checking on Abuelita after closing, something her grandmother had resented during her convalescence. Alicia still blamed herself for not checking sooner, not until after the breakfast rush.

Another truth was – she did not regret, was not ashamed of, what happened that night. Her one perfect night with this man. The daughter that had given her life purpose and Hope when she was lost in her grief. No, she was not ashamed of her child or the one time in her life that she had taken a chance.

But that was not true either. She was taking a chance now. Perhaps an even bigger one than that night.

What did she want? His words from that night rang in her mind - picket fences, half-a-dozen babies, a mini-van, a dog, maybe even a cat. And she wanted them with this man. Some part of her knew even then that was what she wanted.

But hearing the pain behind his question, Alicia knew it was more about what she could have than what she wanted. Her brow furrowed as she realized it was not rejection that she heard but fear. She remembered how he had tried to draw his hand back when she had taken it earlier. How he almost always kept the hood of his jacket up. Oh, it was fear of rejection, but his, not hers, that stood between them.

The biggest chance of her life, the biggest risk was – could she make this man understand she still wanted him? Scars and all. Was she up to the task? Or was she setting herself some impossible task like Sisyphus pushing the boulder up the hill only to have it roll back down again? Would she be crushed under it? Did she dare take that risk? Or did she play it safe?

She had not played it safe that night. And she had the most beautiful, wondrous daughter to show for it. So, while the risk might be soul-crushing, the rewards were worth it.

Alicia stepped forward, closing the distance between them. She reached for his hand once more. This time she made a conscious choice to grab his injured left one. She lifted it to her breast and held it there as her other hand pushed the hood back from his head, the scars gleaming even more like silver threads in the moonlight.

“Is that what you want, Jon? A marriage of convenience? In name only? Because make no mistake about it, I won’t have Hope seeing her Mama and Papa sleeping in separate beds or rooms.”

She lifted her face, stood on her tiptoes as she brushed a soft kiss on the left corner of his mouth that was drawn down.

“Don’t you want me anymore?” She moved closer still, her hips plastered against his. She smiled as her tongue traced along the ridges of his lower lip. The hard bulge she felt against her answered her question better than words could. “This marriage will be very real, Jon.”

She took a risk, releasing his hand. Hope sprang anew when he did not move it from her breast. Her hand cupped that bulge in his jeans. She stopped toying with the seduction, found that she was the spider caught in her own web. Her lips covered his mouth. She forgot the scars, the pain, the risks she was taking. The moment her lips took his - she was home.

He tasted just the same. She had missed the taste, the feel. What would he think if he knew that not only had she not made love to another man since that night, she had not even kissed one? Her hand wrapped about his shoulders and neck, drawing him deeper into her web. She felt him resist for a moment.

Then he took control, and she was lost. Just as she had been that night.

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Jon was lost in the feel of the woman he loved. He could remember the taste and smell of her still. Even as his mind drowned in her words, his body could not fight her allure. He took control. He did what he had ached and dreamed of doing for seven long years.

His tongue danced against hers. His hands roamed her body that Alicia offered so freely. He moved his injured left hand to her bottom. While his right took its place, cupping and kneading her breast. It was not as much about shame as it was sensation. He wanted to feel, truly feel it all. And the sense was dulled in what remained of that mangled appendage.

Her breasts were fuller. Gone were the pert B-cups. What overflowed his palm was soft, ample, and most definitely a C. Was that the result of her pregnancy? Had she breastfed Hope? That fertile imagination, he never realized he had, drew the picture in vivid, live-action color. His cock hardened even more at the thought.

When her hand covered the front of his jeans, cupped his hard length, he almost came. He did roar into her mouth and grind shamelessly into her touch. He was a fool. He wanted this woman. He always would.

But why, his mind screamed. Why would a woman like Alicia ever look at someone like him? That thought was more effective than an icy cold shower. It allowed him to step back, break the kiss, and take control.

“Why, Alicia?”

He studied her stunned features. She was breathing as erratically as he was. Those magnificent tits that he had held in the palms of his hand a moment before were heaving. Her lips were swollen. Her hair mussed, falling about her face in soft tendrils from the ponytail. He longed to touch it. To draw this woman back into his arms and never let her go. But...

“I won’t be some pity fuck.” The vitriol of his words shocked even him. And the look of pain that crossed her pretty face stung his soul. He wanted to reach for her, apologize, take the words back. But he could not. They were the truth. And he needed her to understand that.

He had survived his mother’s social climbing, her constant diatribes reserved for her imperfect son. He had survived his wife’s and best friend’s betrayal. Hell, his body, if not his mind, had survived the blast that claimed six of his best men.

He could not marry her, sleep in the same bed with the woman he loved, night after night, and make love to her because she felt sorry for the poor, scarred, lame Vet. He might not have much pride left. As much time as he has spent in those damned open-backed hospital gowns, his dignity was long since gone.

But he could not do what she asked. He could not live with her pity. He shook his head, “I’m sorry, Alicia. But there must be another way.”

## Chapter Five

Alicia choked back tears as she watched them, two heads bent over the book. One sandy brown curls and the other a road map of red and silver scars. In the two weeks since that night, Hope had not missed a day reading to her father. Jon continued to come to the diner every afternoon, always after the lunch rush. He was there to greet Hope, chatting with her for a couple of hours, then slipping away when Alison took the little girl home.

The trouble was they were no closer to a solution. Hell, Jon avoided the subject when she tried to bring it up. She had discovered that he was staying in the chain motel down the street. He lived a few hours away in the mountains across the state line. He had only been in town for one of his regular check-ups at the VA hospital that first time he came to the diner. Even before she had told him that he was Hope's father, something had kept him here.

Alicia was getting more confused by the day, perhaps the moment. The very thought of Jon returning to his home frightened her. It was not just that Hope had come to depend on him in a way that she never had poor Steve.

The homeless man had reappeared the day after their walk in the desert. She had almost not recognized him. Not only was he clean, but shaven and wearing new clothes as well. It seemed that he had found work rather than spending the past few days in the bottle again. He was helping a widow out around her ranch.

He had brought another pink fluffy unicorn for Hope. He had smiled as she raced through the door, sing-songing his name. He had stayed for pie and a story before explaining to her daughter that he would not be around as much since he had a job now. Her daughter beamed and hugged the man that, for a time, had filled the hole in her little heart.

Alicia had thought that perhaps Fate once again had taken a hand in their lives. While she was incredibly happy for Steve and Hoped that this time he indeed did manage to get back on his feet, it also meant that the way was cleared for Jon to take a more prominent role in their child's life. But as she had tried to tell him that night, Hope needed more than another male role model, a couple of hours every afternoon, and someone to listen to her read.

'And you? What do you need? What do you want?' That voice had been getting louder in her mind these past few days. What did she need? She had not been with a man since that night. Seven years was an incredibly long dry spell for anyone. And since that kiss in the desert, the toys in the drawer next to her bed, and her fingers simply were not up to the job. Even when she did resort to them, it was his face that filled her fantasies, that fueled her orgasms.

Of course, it had been him that she had fantasized about for seven years. Her one perfect lover. But it was different now. It was not that handsome Marine with his high-and-tight and sad blue eyes that had sent her soaring these past few nights. It was him – the scarred and profoundly wounded man whose kisses had been like coming home that night.

But his words echoed in her mind: 'I won't be some pity fuck.'

Alicia felt her nipples harden within the confines of her utilitarian white cotton bra. They were almost painful as she watched him smile, that lopsided one that she had come to love. Love? Was that it? Had she fallen in love with the father of her child? Or had she been in love with him all along?

But the wounded warrior sitting patiently with their child was no fantasy. He was very much a real man. One whose scars went deeper than skin and muscle. She had known it that night. What for her had been a perfect lover, who had given her a surprise gift to cherish, had even then been a wounded man, trying to escape the betrayal of the people he cared about in her arms and bed.

His words that night only confirmed how much worse those wounds had gotten over the past seven years. Unlike the scars that covered his head, face, and neck, the ones to his pride were open, suppurating, and festering wounds.

He had taken her genuine attempt to seduce him as pity. And the truth was she had neither the experience nor confidence to try again.

It left them at a stalemate. None of them got what they needed. Hope still lived with the Daddy hole as Alicia had come to think of the bond she shared with her daughter. She had only traded one male role model for another. Jon was alone in a crappy motel. And she was so sexually frustrated that she had gone through a pack of batteries and risked carpal tunnel. Still, she wanted him.

She swallowed the pain and brushed away the tear that had escaped its prison. She forced a smile and turned back into the kitchen to oversee the finishing touches in preparation for the dinner rush in an hour.

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Jon swallowed the lump that seemed to be perpetually lodged in his throat these days. As much as he loved spending time with his daughter, it was not enough. Not enough time. And certainly not enough to simply be her friend. Another male role model, as Alicia had called it.

He hated to admit it, but she had been right. It was not enough for Hope either. He saw that now. In the days since Steve had reappeared, only to say goodbye, he had seen how the child reluctantly transferred her Hopes and dreams to him. But he could tell that she feared he too would abandon her.

Nothing was further from his mind as he listened to the story. This one tore at his heart. The tale of a Daddy monkey frustrated with his child for doing all the wrong things. Things that children do: throwing things, jumping, and swinging.

How many times had he gotten into trouble with his mother the same way? Except this Daddy monkey apologized for yelling as his Little Monkey. He knew that Marianne Buford Walker Tyler never would.

Jon longed to be different. To be like the father in her story. To wrap this miracle of Hope in his arms. To hold her tight and never let her go. To whisper, 'I love you, little monkey' in her

ear. To hear more of those nightly prayers. To tuck her in at night and wake her in the morning. He wanted to be more than just Jon. He needed to be her father. Her real father in more ways than simply the blood running in her veins.

He had turned the situation over and over in his head for two weeks. There was not much else to do in that tiny motel room. Even his morning runs in the desert were consumed with the dilemma. Well, not entirely.

He snuck a glance at the woman half-hidden by the kitchen door. She consumed him in other ways. Even just sitting here next to his daughter, that brief glimpse was enough to get him half hard. For two weeks, his libido that he had thought almost dead had flared to life like a wildfire flamed by the wind from the embers of a cold campfire. His good right hand was in nearly as much pain as the mangled left one from overuse. And still, he was unsatisfied.

It was her touch that he craved. Her kisses. The feel of her lush body writhing against his as it had that night. The night that their child was conceived. And that night under the blanket of stars in the cool desert air haunted his dreams. He wanted her. Fuck, he needed her.

As many times as he ran the situation through his head, he still could not come up with a winning battle plan. Like that other time. Sometimes there was simply no way out. That was how he felt now.

He could not walk away from his child. Not now that he knew her. Knew how very much she needed him. How much he needed her. Wanted her.

But this male role model thing was not working. It was not what Hope needed. Or what he wanted.

They could not tell a six-year-old child that she was conceived during a ‘no-strings-attached’ one-night stand. No matter how perfect that night had been. Or the fact that even before he knew of his child’s existence, the strings of love had woven about his heart, drawing him back to this place and her.

Alicia? She was right about something else too. He could not imagine being married to her in name only, a convenience. Not when he had ached for years for just one more of her touches. A single kiss. That night in the desert had fueled and flamed the love that had seen him through his darkest hours. Added new memories to the ones that he held so sacred.

No, the only thing that made sense, the only solution that was open to him, was to marry the woman he loved. So, why did that feel like he was walking into another ambush? He had been the lone survivor of the last one. But he was not sure he could bear this one.

Pity-fuck. Could he live his life knowing that the only reason she married him, that she stayed with him, that she shared his bed was their child?

Because he knew the truth, no matter what she said, she was just being nice. Compassionate and understanding as she had taught their daughter to be.

And he was glad for that, in both of them. It was indeed a quality that was woefully lacking in this world. But it was no reason to share a man's bed. Well, not one that he wanted from her anyway.

The story was over. It had been over for a couple of minutes. Hope sat as quiet as he was, seemingly as lost in thought too. It was the first time he had not seen that smile on her beautiful face. "What wrong, sweetie?"

He would do anything to see that smile back. His heart ached, and the blood pounded in his head. Hope looked up at him with those same warm brown eyes of her mother, glazed over with unshed tears this time.

"Mama and I are invited to Miss Mandy's wedding." His daughter paused, "Commitment ceremony she said was the right name."

Jon frowned, uncertain who Mandy was or why she called it a commitment ceremony instead of marriage. "Why is that a problem, Hope?"

"I don't want to go. All the other kids will be there. Miss Mandy and her partners are celebrating love, she said. She says that is what is important. And Mama says that family is the people we choose. But everyone else will be there with their Mamas and their Papas, and I don't have one."

Jon watched those gargantuan tears spill from the corners of her eyes. For the first time, he gave in to the need to wrap his arm around his daughter. He drew her close as he sought words for the jumbled thoughts in his head - like a jigsaw puzzle with pieces missing.

He remembered what Alicia had said that night. That Hope had never even asked about her father until recently. That she had other friends from single-parent families. So something did not make sense. What had changed? Logic and his instincts told him it was something more than a homework assignment and a commitment ceremony that was troubling his daughter. But what? And how did he find out?

"All of them?" Jon tried to keep it simple.

The tears sped up as she shook her little head. The curly waves that were so like his own before the burn scars or high-and-tight cuts danced about her face. "I guess not."

His gut told him that he was onto something, "Then what does it matter if it is just you and your Mama?"

"Cause Amy will be bringing her new daddies. She has two of them. It's not fair. I don't even have one."

Her innocent words ate at his soul as she pulled from his embrace and rushed over to Alison. "Take me home, Ali," he could barely hear her whispered plea.

The waitress finished pouring another cup of coffee for the only other customer this time of day, an elderly gentleman whose wife had died a few months back that sought what human contact he could find at the diner most days.

The woman smiled and nodded as she turned towards the kitchen, “Alicia, I’m taking Hope home now. I’ll stay with her until DeShaun gets home from practice. I should be back before the worst of the supper rush.”

Alicia came through the swinging door that separated the kitchen from the dining area. She frowned as she looked at their daughter, “What’s wrong, baby? I thought you were reading to Jon.”

Their daughter nodded but kept her head down, “I finished the story. I want to go home now.”

A deep frown creased her forehead as Alicia stared over at him. He nodded as she turned her attention back to their little girl, “Okay, if you’re sure. I’ll be home in time for prayers, I promise.”

“Alright, Mama,” Hope whispered as she took Alison’s hand and practically dragged the woman out the door.

Alicia checked the older man’s cup, smiled at him, and said something that Jon was not paying close enough attention to hear. His thoughts were all over the place. Most of all, they had walked out that door with his daughter.

She had the coffee pot in her hand as she took a seat across the table from him, just as she had that night. “What happened? I thought things were going good with you two.”

“Who the hell are Mandy and Amy? What the fuck is a commitment ceremony? And how exactly does a child have two fathers?”

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Alicia was not sure whether to laugh or be angry at Jon’s outburst. She compromised on a light chuckle as she poured more coffee in his half-empty cup and tried to answer his questions.

“Mandy is Hope’s teacher. She is having a commitment ceremony with her partners and has invited all the children and their families.”

“As for Amy, she is Hope’s best friend. She has been since nursery. Her mother, Kacey, was a widow. You know the score, another Marine KIA.”

She sighed as she looked down at her trembling hands. “A couple of months ago, Kacey became involved with her husband’s best friends. Seems they felt duty-bound to take care of them.” She chuckled nervously, “Well, perhaps a bit more than duty was involved.”

“Why? Why do you ask? What did Hope say?” It was strange and painful. She had always been the one that Hope came to. Now, it seemed the secrets between her and her daughter were growing. And the biggest secret of all sat across the booth from her.

He sighed as he brought the cup to his lips. The silence stretched out between them as he drank. When he looked up, his words rocked her world. “Does your offer still stand? I guess the proposal would be more accurate?”

Alicia drew air into her oxygen-starved lungs. How much time over the past couple of weeks had she spent thinking of new ways to convince him that marriage was their best option? Whatever had happened with Hope seemed to have done the trick. “What happened, Jon? What did Hope say? What changed your mind?”

He stared at the cup, avoiding her gaze. His good hand toyed with the handle while he kept the damaged one hidden in a pocket on the front of another of those hoodies he favored. “You were right. Hope does need more than another male role model in her life.”

He lifted his head slowly, met her stare. “It’s more than that family tree homework or her teacher’s wedding or whatever the fuck. Sorry, I know I shouldn’t cuss. But my daughter just told me that her best friend has two new daddies. And that it isn’t fair when she doesn’t have one. My head’s sort of screwed right now.”

Alicia let out the breath that she had not been aware she was holding. “So, that’s it. Hope does not get worked up very easily. She never has. Alison told me she was the easiest baby she had ever seen. I’ve been wondering what happened. Why, so suddenly, she was curious about her father.”

“Now, I understand. Hope is probably missing Amy too. They used to spend loads of time together after school. Kacey works for the District Attorney. She has a pretty restrictive nine-to-five job and still brings work home once Amy is in bed. So, it was just natural for the girls to come here. Between Alison, me, and DeShaun, we had it covered.”

“But Chris, one of Kacey’s new partners, enjoys picking her up after school now. He likes spending time with his new little girl. He’s invited Hope a few times, but maybe seeing Amy with her new daddy just made things harder for her? Damn, why didn’t I see what was going on? I feel stupid. A good mother would have figured it out and known how to help her child.”

His hand covered hers on the table, “Don’t you dare say that again. You’re a great Mom. You’ve raised a helluva kid all by yourself. No thanks to me.”

His eyes, those blue lakes that she could never, would never, get out of her mind or soul, held her gaze. “And you did know what to do. I was just a jerk for not seeing it. So, does the proposal still stand? Will you marry me?”

Alicia knew she had no other choice. For Hope’s sake, she would say yes. But her heart ached. This was so much less than what she wanted, had dreamed of, all her life. She nodded her head, “Yes, the offer still stands.”

She was unsure where she found the courage, but she wrapped her fingers through his as she spoke. “But let me be clear, all of the offer. This will be a real marriage. Do you understand that, Jon?”

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Jon looked down at their hands, entwined on the table. Looking at those hands now, you would never know. But if it were his other hand? How could Alicia, any woman, actually want him as a lover?

Sure, the essential bits for making love had been untouched, at least by those flames. The scars covered his head, neck, and about half of the left side of his chest and back. Thirty-percent of his body, the doctors had said. But that was more than enough. The burns and scars had endangered his airway and constricted his movements.

That did not even consider the psychological damage of looking like a walking nightmare, a character from some horror movie. And that was what was fucking his head in, right now. How could he be any kind of husband and father when he preferred hiding out on the side of a mountain? Even when he was forced to be around people, he always wore hoodies, even in the middle of summer. He hid in plain sight.

Why couldn't she see that? Take what he could offer, stability and money, and let the other just be. But was that he wanted? To be her husband and deny himself her soothing touch, those sweet kisses, the sanctuary of her body? He was so confused. He had not felt this way since waking from the induced coma. Disoriented. Uncertain.

But he wasn't, not really. This was the best option for Hope. The only one they really had. “I understand.”

She smiled - Alicia actually fucking smiled. “Good, then you can escort Hope and me to Mandy's commitment ceremony this Sunday.”

Panic flared at her words. “What? No! No, I can't,” he stammered.

“Yes, yes, you will, Jon. Because it is what our little girl needs.”

He shook his head, “No, no, it isn't. Do you want her bullied at school? Your daddy is Freddy.”

Alicia stood up, hands on her hips, as she pointed at the door. “If that's how you feel, if you're only interested in being her daddy when it is convenient or easy for you, then there's the door. We made it this far without you. I'll find some way to handle this one too.”

She turned and walked away, back into the kitchen. Leaving Jon alone with his thoughts and her words.

## Chapter Six

Alicia was confused. She had spent the whole night and most of the day in her thoughts, mulling over their conversation. And she was no closer to coming up with a solution to their situation. The bottom line was that as much as Hope wanted and needed her father in her life, Jon's pain and insecurities could ruin it all.

She wanted, needed, to help for Hope's sake as much as his. And her own. But she had no idea how to reach him, to get through to him. But she might know who could.

"Alison, since the lunch crowd is over, would it be okay if I took a break? Today, I'd like to pick Hope up from school myself."

"Of course, suga'. But what do I tell your secret admirer when he arrives?" her friend teased.

"Tell him that I'm picking our..." Alicia caught herself. She had not yet confided the secret in her best friend and savior. But right now, she did not have the time to explain the messy details. "That I'm picking Hope up from school."

Her friend nodded with a frown creasing her brows. "Sure. No problem."

"We'll talk later, I promise." She felt guilty for not confiding in the woman earlier, but she did not dare risk Hope overhearing at home, and the diner was not an appropriate place for such a conversation either. She promised herself she would make the time for the truth, though.

Alicia rushed to the school; she barely made it as the bell tolled. She looked around the waiting throng of parents. He was easy to spot. Not only was he one of the few dads in the queue, but his wheelchair stood out in the crowd. She pushed her way through, excusing herself with nods and smiles to the people she knew.

"Chris, can we talk?" She got right to the matter.

The man with the greying hair around the temples and deep lines in his forehead and around his mouth looked up at her. "I was taking Amy to the park today. Do you and Hope have time to join us?"

She nodded as she caught sight of their girls holding hands as they came out the door. "I'll make time. I need your advice about something."

"Sure, you know that Noah and I will do anything we can for you and Hope. We owe you so much for being there for our girls when we couldn't be." He frowned, drawing those lines down at the corners of his mouth. "Well, when I had my head so far up my ass that I wouldn't, might be more accurate."

It was her opening, "That is what I need to talk to you about."

He nodded as their daughter's joined them. "Let's get these girls an ice cream before we go to the park," the man's face was completely different in the presence of the little girl that Alicia supposed was his step-daughter, if such labels mattered. Looking up at her, "We'll talk while they play."

The girls danced ahead merrily as Alicia considered how to begin her tale to this man that she barely knew. But he was the one person that might understand what was going on in Jon's mind, that might be able to offer her some insight and Hope. She had to take that chance.

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Jon was nervous. Worried might be a better word. He had been here for over an hour. Not only was there no sign of Hope yet, but Alicia was not around either. Had she given up on him? Did she truly mean what she said yesterday?

If so, where did that leave him? He was not on Hope's birth certificate. He had only Alicia's word. Would that be enough to take her to court? Hell, what was he thinking? Would he even do such a thing? It would bring Hope right into the middle of the very mess they had wanted to avoid.

But he could not walk away. Hope needed a father. And the truth was he needed them. Both of them.

"Hey, suga, care for more coffee?" Alison smiled.

"Sure," at least nursing another cup would give him an excuse for staying a bit longer. Though, it would soon be the dinner rush. He was usually long gone by then. Too many people, too many curious stares. Of course, Alicia had usually sent Hope home by then also. Where could they be?

"Alicia should be back soon. She picked up Hope at school today. Said there was someone she needed to talk to," Alison seemed to read his mind.

He frowned at her words. They raised as many questions as they answered. And he certainly was in no position to grill this woman for answers. "Thanks. I was just worried..."

He could not explain more. While this woman and Alicia were close, he was not sure if she knew. Knew that he was Hope's father. "Thanks."

The woman took the seat across from him, just as Alicia had the day before. He Hoped this conversation went better. "You know, since Damien went away to college, and now Steve has found a job and place to live, that little girl could use a good man in her life."

Her eyes searched his scarred face as if she could see into his soul, which was even more damaged. Would she find him as lacking as Alicia had? Where did that leave him?

"I mean, she has my other son, DeShaun, but even he will be going away to college next year. He is even talking about spending the summer riding his bike across America." The woman

shook her head, “I guess I’m just trying to say they need someone. Someone who is going to be there for them.” Her eyes met his, “Long term.”

If the woman only knew how long term he wanted things to be. But the time for that might have passed, and another dream might have died.

“Jon,” her sing-song voice, laced with such excitement, filled his heart with light. For the moment, he cast those doubts aside as Hope raced across the diner and wrapped her little arms about his neck. His daughter buried her face in his hoodie. And for the moment, the whole world was right.

Until he looked up at her mother’s dark scowl. “Sorry, Alison, I know we’re running late. The dinner rush will be starting soon, and I’m afraid neither of us has time to run Hope home.”

“That’s okay, Mama. I can stay right here with Jon. I won’t get in your way. I promise,” their daughter pleaded.

“Maybe DeShaun could pick her up?” Alicia ignored her pleas.

Alison shook her head, “He has a late practice today. Big game is Friday.”

Alicia sighed; it was laden with her frustrations. Worse yet, she had neither spoken to him nor even looked his way.

“It’s fine. Hope is right. She can stay here with me,” the words were out of his mouth before he had considered the fact that meant he would be forced to endure hours of those stares he did everything he could to avoid.

“I guess there is no other choice. I’m sorry for the inconvenience, Jon.”

It was on his lips to say that his daughter could never be inconvenient, but instead, he just shrugged her words off and turned his attention to their child. “So, what have you been up to today, little lady?”

“Mama and I went with Amy and her daddy Chris to the park after school. We even had ice cream. I got chocolate. Do you like chocolate?” Hope beamed as the women turned towards the kitchen, preparing for the rush that would start shortly.

Jon smiled at his daughter, “Who doesn’t like chocolate?”

“Amy. She prefers strawberry. But I like her anyway.”

Jon chuckled at the simplicity of the little girl’s words. She was pulling a book from her bag as the door opened, and a dark-haired little girl about the same age raced towards them.

“Here, Hope. You forgot your sweater.”

A wheelchair glided through the doors with a man, perhaps in his late thirties. The man looked towards Alicia, “We thought she might need it. The nights can get pretty chilly.”

Alicia smiled at him, “Thanks, Chris. I completely forgot that she had been wearing one today.”

“It’s cool. We kinda got distracted with our conversation,” the man smiled at her with a familiarity that caused jealousy to boil in Jon’s veins. Who was this man? And what had he been talking to Alicia about?

“It’s not a problem. I thought I might treat Amy to dinner out anyway. Kacey is working late, and Noah is out on maneuvers this week. So, it is just us. And I hate cooking for just two. Besides, the diner beats fast food or pizza. At least for me.”

“Great. It’s on the house,” Alicia smiled at the stranger. And that green monster bared its teeth, though Jon held it back. Barely.

“No way,” the man argued as he wheeled his chair closer to the table where Jon sat across from the two little girls who were engrossed in their own conversation.

The man held out his hand, “Chris, Chris Bennett. And that’s my daughter, Amy. She and Hope have been friends since nursery. You have to be Jon. Alicia was telling me about you.”

Jon’s mind raced with a myriad of confusing thoughts. What had Alicia told this man about him? And why was it obvious who he was? Because Hope was sitting with him? Or because of the scars? And why would she mention him at all?

“Have a seat,” Jon replied, hoping his voice did not sound as gruff as he thought.

The man laughed and waved his hand at the wheelchair. “I bring my own these days. It is one good thing; I never have to worry about finding a place to sit.”

The other little girl looked up and laughed, “Daddy, you’re so funny.” Then she bent her head back over the book that the girls were examining so closely.

Jon was at a loss as to what to say to the man. But Chris did not seem to share the problem, “I was paralyzed in the same firefight that Amy’s dad was killed in.”

He opened his mouth to say ‘sorry’ then thought of all the times that he had resented those words when others said them to him. Instead, he just nodded.

“I spent the next eighteen months at the VA rehab center wallowing in self-pity and anger while our friend Noah finished out our tour of duty.”

As the man stared at the little girls, his features lost their jovial façade. “I completely forgot the promise we had made to Thomas. Until Noah dragged my sorry ass back to the real world.”

“Daddy, you have to put more money in the swear jar.” Amy looked up for a moment from the coloring page that the girls had found in the bag and moved on to when they tired of the book.

“I won’t tell Mommy about the ice cream if you don’t about that word,” the man conspired with a smile.

“Deal,” the child held out her hand.

They all laughed, and the girls turned back to their coloring. As the man watched them, his look was not the joking one it had been earlier. “That little girl, Kacey, they were just what I needed to bring me back from the world of the living dead.”

He met Jon’s gaze, “But I almost missed it. I almost lost them both. And it would have been my fault. My pity party almost cost them their lives.”

Jon heard the pain in those words. He felt it to his soul. Alison brought them food. A wide variety of dishes and they all began to divide it up as the girls laughed and talked. The men, too, shared secrets.

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Alicia was incredibly nervous. This was not how she planned it. Sure, she had sought out Chris’s guidance. His help in understanding the pain, fear, and self-doubt that seemed to eat at Jon. But she had not expected the man to show up here. To spend over two hours talking and laughing with Jon like they were old friends. What was he saying to him? How much did Chris share with him about her concerns?

She had tried to catch snippets of their conversation every time her duties brought her close to their table. She had used the coffee pot on more than one occasion to seek the men out. She had checked in on Hope every time that things slowed down. The trouble was, for a Wednesday night, the diner was bustling.

It was almost eight before the crowd began to thin out. Amy had fallen asleep in Chris’s lap, and Hope was leaning against Jon, her own eyelids drifting downward, too. It would be another half an hour before she could spare Alison to take her daughter home.

Chris smiled at her as she approached with that coffee pot. “No more for me, thanks. I need to get this little girl home and into bed. Kacey is going to have my head already for keeping her out this late on a school night.”

He turned to Jon, “Think about what I said.” He maneuvered the chair towards the door, “And I’ll see you both on Sunday.”

Alicia watched him negotiate the door. Sometimes she would hold it open for customers, especially the elderly, but she knew how much Chris valued doing things for himself. So she held back. As he disappeared through it, she turned back to Jon. She wanted so desperately to ask what Chris had meant for him to think about.

But before the words were out of her mouth, Hope’s head practically fell into her father’s lap. “I’ll have Alison take her home.”

He shook his head, “It’s okay. I don’t have anywhere to be. We can wait here, and I’ll see you both home when you’re done.”

Alicia pondered his suggestion. While she desperately wanted more time with him, she would take as much as she could get, Hope really should be home and in her bed where she could sleep more comfortably.

She considered the dilemma as she finally reached into the pocket on her apron. She pulled out her house keys and passed them to him. “Take her home and put her to bed. Alison and I might be a bit later tonight. This place is a mess.”

Jon looked as if he would argue. While the burn scars restricted his facial movements, making it harder sometimes to read these things, Alicia felt like she was beginning to recognize quite a few of them. “Please,” she added. “It would be a big help.”

He gave her that lopsided grin, the mostly unmarked right side of his mouth turned up in the familiar way that it had that night, even if the deeply scarred left side twisted like that two-faced character from the movies. “Alright. Anything I should know? Do I need to bathe her? Where are her pajamas?”

She shook her head, “I think we passed all that an hour or so ago. If she wakes up, she can show you where her nightgowns are. And remind her to brush her teeth. But something tells me she is out for the count.”

“So, take her shoes and socks off and tuck her under the covers. It’ll probably be a couple of hours before I can get home. If you need to leave, let Alison’s son DeShaun know. He’ll keep an ear out for her.”

He shook his head as he looked down at their little girl, “As I said, I got nowhere to be. At least nowhere that matters. I’ll see you when you get home.”

For some reason, those words rang in Alicia’s mind for the rest of the night as she and Alison cleaned the diner and prepped for the breakfast rush the following day. How right they had seemed - to know that Jon would be waiting when she got home seemed so incredibly right.

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Jon brushed a stray strand of curly light brown hair off his daughter’s face. Alicia had been right, of course. Hope had barely stirred as he awkwardly pulled back the blankets with his good hand while somehow managing to keep hold of his precious cargo with his damaged left one. She had not even roused when he slipped off her shoes or socks.

He hated to admit it, but some part of him wished that she had. He remembered that first night, the joy of listening to her read a bedtime story. He craved more of those memories. A lifetime of them. But if he was going to make those with his child and her mother, then Chris had given him lots to consider tonight.

For the past five years, since he awoke in that hospital bed in excruciating pain, he had drifted through life. Time would be more accurate. He had not lived, just existed. More than

once, he had considered the alternative as well. When the pain or the memories became too much, once he had even counted out the pills. But something had stopped him at two. Was that something Fate? God? Whatever the fuck had decided that he should live while other good men died.

He took in each nuance of his little girl in repose. Was this the purpose? Did, as Chris said, she need him? Was she the reason that he had lived? Not that they had been free to talk with both their daughters listening in. But the man had undoubtedly hinted at it. His new friend had certainly given him lots to think about tonight.

Jon was glad that they would have time alone tomorrow to speak more frankly. They had planned to meet for coffee, then pick the girls up from school and take them to the park again. Would Alicia be okay with that? Had he been a bit presumptive? Jon did not know where he stood with any of this. But he sure as hell knew where he wanted to.

He bent over and placed a kiss on his daughter's forehead. His daughter? Just the words made his heart soar and gave his mind the Hope after which she was named. He most definitely knew what he wanted. And it was not just to be a father to his child.

He stood, and with a final glance at the little girl, he turned off the lights and slipped down the hallway. He paused at the door next to it. He wanted to slip inside. To strip off his clothes and fall into her bed. But it was too soon. He was not ready for that any more than Alicia or Hope were. But the memories of that one night when their daughter was conceived beckoned to him.

Would it be as good? Probably not. He swallowed back the bile at the thought of being naked with another human being, a woman, especially her. Even if the essential bits were unmarred from the blast, the scars that covered his head extended down much of his back and almost halfway down his chest as well.

But by far, his biggest worry was his damaged left hand and arm. The doctors continued to debate whether or not it would be better to amputate it. They believed that he would have more functionality from a prosthesis than the damaged limb, missing a finger and thumb. But he was just not ready to make such a final decision.

Walking into the dimly lit living room, Jon was not sure what to do. He felt like he was invading her privacy, being here alone. It made him uncomfortable. In the end, he sat down on the sofa and pulled out his phone. He smiled at the message from her, had everything gone okay, she would be home as soon as she could. He responded, reassuring her that all was well. He checked the news on his feed.

Jon leaned his head back. His mind raced with all that had happened these past few weeks — all the decisions they needed to make. And the possibilities for the future. The truth was - he did not want to leave. He did not want to go back to that lonely hotel room. As his eyes drifted closed, his dreams filled with all the could-bes.

## Chapter Seven

Alicia knew this was her chance. The first one that she had had in the weeks since Jon showed up and perhaps the last one she would have for who knew how long. Of course, Alison knew the truth about Hope's father, the no-strings-attached Marine that had miraculously appeared on the very night that her Abuelita died and disappeared before dawn. But how did she tell her the truth?

The kitchen was clean. She had sent Carlos, her night cook, home half an hour ago. It was only the two of them as they scrubbed down tables, put up chairs, and refilled all the condiment bottles, ready for the morning.

Alicia jumped when Alison placed her hand on her shoulder. "Go ahead, spill it. Whatever has been bothering you lately. I think I know, anyway."

She shook her head as she looked into her friend's compassionate blue eyes. "Think you know what?"

"Jon is Hope's father."

The words hung like specters in the silence. Alicia grasped the back of the chair she had been cleaning. It was all that kept her standing. She should say something. But no words formed in her addled brain. She could not even move her head that was weighed down like lead.

Alison smiled and pulled out the chair behind her. She guided Alicia into it. "It was the only thing that made sense."

Alicia finally found the strength to nod at her friend.

"So, what are you going to do about it? When is the wedding? DeShaun will be finishing high school in six weeks. You know he wants to spend the summer traveling before college starts in the fall. I'll move on when he does."

That broke through the fog; Alicia shook her head, "No, this is your home, Alison. It has been for seven years. And this does not change that."

Her friend, who at forty-five could easily pass for thirty-something, smiled wanly. "It does, Alicia. You need a fresh start. A chance to form a family. Hope needs her father."

Alicia reached across the table; her hand covered her friend's as she heard the pain in those words. "You know, your car breaking down here was the best thing that happened to me."

Her friend forced that smile as she looked up into her eyes. "I don't know what we would have done without you."

She squeezed Alison's hand tighter. "Or I, you. I could not have kept this place running those last few weeks of my pregnancy and right after Hope's birth. And without this old place, how would we have survived?"

"You're my friend, more than an employee. Hell, you're more like a partner. So, no more talk about you leaving. We'll figure something out. Just like we did when Hope outgrew my room, and we had to remodel the attic for the boys."

"Alicia, this is a man. Hope's father. You need your space. Some privacy. Maybe DeShaun and I should move out now?"

"No, no way. Besides, I don't even know what's going to happen."

Her friend chuckled, "You're going to get married. You're gonna burn up the sheets with your still plenty hot Marine. You're gonna make more babies. Give Hope a half dozen brothers and sisters, for sure." She turned her hand over and squeezed Alicia's instead, "You're going to live happily ever after."

Alicia felt the tightness in her throat as unshed tears burned her eyes. "It isn't that simple."

Alison gave her a lop-sided grin that somehow reminded her of Jon. "Of course, it isn't. Nothing worth having ever comes easy in this life. But it is what is going to happen. I know these things. I promise."

How could she make her friend understand? Hell, she did not understand herself. She had practically thrown herself at the man who had been her fantasy lover for seven years. And he wanted a marriage in name only.

"I wish. But even if, you don't have to move. I mean, I'm hoping that Jon will move into my room."

"What do you mean, 'hoping'? Of course, he will. Once you're married, that is."

Alicia shook her head as she lost the battle with those tears, and they slipped down her face. The story just poured out then. The two women, united by the bonds of friendship and single motherhood, sat together as they had over so many other challenges for the past seven years. They sat and talked. Talked until Alicia began to see a way forward, until she was filled with Hope for a new beginning.

Only one thing still bothered her. No matter how much she argued with her friend, she could not get her to agree to stay. In the end, Alison had dropped her head and whispered, "I can't, Ali. I need to move on."

Her friend lifted her head then and met Alicia's gaze with tear-filled eyes. "I have had this feeling for months. That when DeShaun left, I needed to as well."

She squeezed Alicia's hand again, "But I was worried about you. How you would manage without me. I mean, like you said, this is more than just a waitress job. Who would pick Hope

up from school? Who will take out the spiders when you scream? Who would listen when you need to talk and hug you, tell you it's all going to be fine?"

"Yeah, well, I'm still not sure that Jon is up to the job."

"He will be. I know it."

"So, you say, but I'm not convinced. Besides, it won't be the same. I'll still need my best friend. Hell, you're the big sister I always wanted."

"And you have been a miracle for the boys and me. When I left Derrick, it was on blind faith because I knew the next time he lost a game and got drunk would be my last beating. I could not leave the boys alone with that man. But I knew we couldn't stay at my brother's for long. And I had no idea what I'd do next."

"Yeah, well, you're overqualified for a waitress. You could have gotten a job as a reporter somewhere. Done loads better than this," Alicia waved her hand around the diner.

Alison shook her head and smiled, "Better than this? No way. I've loved our time here. With you and Hope." She sighed and looked down at their hands still clasped together on the table, "But, as I said, I've known for some time that it is time to move on."

"But where? What? Where will you go, what will you do now? What about Damien and DeShaun?"

"The boys will be fine. I always said Derrick was worth more dead than alive. I just could never bring myself... But thankfully, he did not shoot it all into his veins before he ODeD. He left them enough money to get through college and still have a bit. If they're good to it anyway."

"Yeah, but that won't help you. He cut you right out of his will after the divorce. So, how will you survive?"

"I'll figure something out. I have to do this. I just know it."

"That 'know' it?"

"Yes, that one."

"Do you know where?"

"Alaska."

"Alaska? But it is huge. And cold. And wild. Where will you go? What will you do?"

"I'm not sure exactly. But I know that something has been drawing me there for months. But I couldn't uproot DeShaun so close to graduation. And, of course, I was worried about you and Hope. But I don't have to anymore. Jon is here. So, tell me, have you done the nasty? I mean, that walk in the desert the other night was awfully long?"

Alicia shook her head, “No, I mean, not that. We kissed. Well, I kissed him. But he insists that this marriage is in name only.”

“Why?”

“The scars.”

“Hell, did he lose that too?”

Alicia had to laugh. “No, at least not from what I felt in his jeans that night.”

“Oh, do tell.”

How like her friend to be so blunt. It was one of the things she loved the most about Alison. She was certainly going to miss her. But if this indeed was one of her friend’s ‘knowings,’ there was no doubt the woman had to go.

“Nothing much to tell. We are at an impasse. Jon insists that we remain celibate.”

“And you still want to jump the man’s bones? I’m putting my money on you. I give it another week tops before you have him in your bed.”

“Well, right now, we should finish up here and head home. He said that Hope didn’t even stir when he put her to bed. But I’m sure that he wants to get back to his hotel and get some sleep.”

“Now, where’s the fun in that? Sleeping in a hotel or burning up the sheets in your bed? Seems an easy decision to me,” her friend laughed as they surveyed the dining area.

“Looks like we’re almost finished to me. You count out while I clean the counter, then we can head back. But I say invite the man to spend the night. What you got to lose? You ain’t had none in seven years.”

Alicia laughed, “I could say the same about you.”

“Who knows, maybe that’ll change. Maybe we’ll both get lucky.”

Her friend’s words echoed in her mind when they got home to discover Jon sleeping on her couch. It was not quite her bed, but it was a start. At least, he would wake under her roof.

Like father, like daughter, she thought as she removed his shoes, lifting his feet and legs onto the sofa. He did not even stir when she lifted his head to put a pillow under it. Or when she tugged the quilt about him.

Only when she bent and kissed his scarred forehead, “You’re a good man, Jon Tyler. And you’re going to make a good father and husband too.” She pronounced wishfully as she turned and escaped down the hallway, lest he wake to see the tears in her eyes. If only...

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Jon was running a bit late today. So, Chris was already waiting at the chain coffee shop where they had arranged to meet. He had woken on Alicia's couch. His daughter was staring down at him with a huge grin, dancing from foot to foot and exclaiming his name. Alicia was trying to get her ready for school, and Alison had already left for the diner.

He had offered to take over the task for her. Get their little girl ready and off to school so that Alicia could go to the diner. At first, she had been reluctant; he did not even know where the school was. Jon made the excuse that in a town this small, everyone knew such things. But the truth was he had gone by there a few times to watch as Hope played with her friends during recess. He had missed so much.

"Hey, man, how's it going?"

"I spent the night at Alicia's." Jon had not meant to say anything, but the words just tumbled out.

"Wow, that's fast. Maybe I should be asking your advice," Chris replied as he brought the paper cup to his lips. "Docs say I should go light on this shit, but hell, it's the elixir of the gods. What's life without coffee?"

"Just let me grab some, and we can chat."

What he really needed was an excuse, some time to get his thoughts together. How much did he want to share with this man? Sure, they were both jarheads. They shared the bonds of being... Even his mind stumbled over the word. He still could not bring himself to say...disabled. But what other word was there? Injured? Impaired? Different? None of them were any better.

He placed his order. The place was pretty busy, especially for the post-lunch rush. But these places always seemed to be. Whatever happened to a good old-fashioned percolator or even a drip coffee pot? But these days, it seemed everyone had to have some posh-ass shit with flavors and cream. Not him; coffee was coffee. And it should never be iced.

If only other things were that simple. He still was uncertain what to say as he took his paper cup with straight black coffee and joined the other man at the table. Maybe he should just listen.

"Sorry, I was late. I had to run back to my hotel to shower and change after I took Hope to school this morning."

The other man chuckled, "You don't need to say anything more. Not even my best drill sergeant voice will get Amy moving in the morning." But there was a smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye as he said it.

"It did not help that I didn't know where anything was."

The other man nodded, "It must be tough. Finding out you have a kid this late."

Jon's mouth dropped at those words.

“Sorry, Alicia and I talked a bit yesterday at the park. She told me the whole story. I thought you knew.”

Jon sighed. So much for worrying about what to share with the man. “So, what did she tell you?”

“The no-strings thing. You showing up at the diner the other week. Not knowing what to do. How Hope has been jealous of Amy because she has me and Noah now. And...” He paused.

“Did she tell you she asked me to marry her?” Jon stared at the paper cup, his voice little more than a whisper.

“Yeah, she did. She thought I might have some insight into...”

“Into why I want...”

“Yeah.” An awkward silence hung between them for a couple of minutes as each made a show of drinking their coffee and avoiding the subject they had come here to discuss.

“So, do you? Have some grand insight into why I want a marriage in name only?”

“Because you’re still being an asshole and haven’t dealt with your shit yet.”

Jon wanted to throat punch the other man. What did he know? Except that was just it. He did know. Or at least had to deal with something similar.

“Decided you can’t throat punch a cripple yet?” The man smiled.

Jon shook his head, “The jury’s still out on that one.”

Chris laughed, “Good cause I can still kick ass. Or at least I’m relearning how to.” The other man met his gaze, “There’s loads of things I’m having to adjust to. Including the fact that I can’t fuck anymore.”

Jon was very glad that he had swallowed his coffee. Otherwise, it might have spewed across the room from his mouth and his nose at the man’s painfully honest words. He, on the other hand, had no comments at the moment.

“Yeah, that’s taking some getting used to. But you know, as my grandma used to say, there’s more than one way to skin a cat. Or, in this case, a pussy.”

Jon felt the heat rising in his face at the man’s words. This took locker room bragging to a whole other level, and he still was not comfortable enough to speak.

“My dick might not work anymore. Thanks to the bullet that shattered my spine. But my tongue, fingers, and that drawer full of toys that Kacey had collected in her decade as Marine wife, who rarely saw her husband anyway, make damn sure that I keep a smile on our little lady’s face when Noah isn’t around.”

Chris paused, “Want another one? I sure as hell need another. Fuck, we should have met at a bar for this chat. Caffeine isn’t as good as liquor for this talk.”

“Yeah, you’re right there. What you havin’? I’ll get them.”

“My legs and cock might not work anymore, but I can still manage to grab a couple of cups of Joe. Let me guess, straight black?”

“Is there anything else?”

“Nope. Nothing beats it. Except maybe Jack or Jim. But I promised myself, Noah, and Kacey that I’d stay away from that shit. And I’m clean for almost a year now.” He shook his head covered with long, surfer blond curls that were liberally sprinkled with grey. The man might talk like a Marine, but he did not look like one.

“But sometimes...” He paused and looked off for a long moment. “I’ll be back with those coffees in a couple of minutes.”

Jon watched as the man navigated his wheelchair around the tables and chairs strewn about the coffee shop. But more than that, he observed the face of the other customers. Their looks of pity, and the occasional disgust, was something he was more than familiar with.

The man’s words had shocked him. To say the least. Though why he was not sure. He knew from his own time in the VA that spinal cord injuries could cause... Damn, he was having trouble with words today. Impotence. Erectile dysfunction. He tried to imagine what that must be like for the man, especially in a relationship like...

What had Alicia called it? Poly? Polyamory? Polyandry, that was it. The idea was way beyond his comfort zone. The thought of sharing her with another man, any other man, would drive him insane. Then, again, if he wanted a marriage in name only, what had she said? About it not being fair. Was it? Was it wrong to expect her to wear his ring, carry his name, and not...?

“Here you go, as strong as they make it. A black eye, two added shots of expresso.”

Jon took the cup from the man and brought it to his lips. He knew he was stalling for more time, but his mind was still trying to work through the complexities of Chris’s situation...and his. “Wow, that shit is strong,” he exclaimed as the caffeine hit his senses.

“Yeah, I’m breaking all the rules today. The docs say no more than one cup of coffee per day. That shit is hard on the kidneys. And since I also pee in a bag, I gotta be careful of those too.”

Was he ready for this kind of honesty? “It can’t be easy.”

“I don’t know. Is it any easier looking like a character from a horror film?”

Jon once more considered throat punching his new ‘friend.’ Fuck, with conversations like this one, could the man be considered that? “I guess,” he finally answered.

“My grandma used to tell me, ‘I thought I had problems because I had no shoes. Until I met a man with no feet.’”

“Your grandma is just a wealth full of wisdom, ain’t she?”

“Was. She died when I was a teenager. I ended up shuffled from one foster home to another after that. Until I graduated high school and joined the Marines. But yeah, she was. I can’t tell you the number of times I think of some dumb saying she told me growing up.”

Jon saw the moisture glaze over the man’s eyes. “Hell, sometimes I think she was the guardian angel that kept me from dying that day like Thomas.”

“Do you ever...” the words were out before Jon could stop them.

“Ever wish it had been me? That I had not made it? That I had been the one to die that day?”

Jon nodded his head slowly.

“Every day, several times a day at least, for that first year. I even told the nurses once or twice just to leave me be. To let me die.”

Jon nodded at the memory. He could remember a few of those times too. When the pain, physical and mental, had been too much to bear. “And now?”

The other man smiled, “Not for a single minute. Not even on my worst day. I am so fucking thankful to Nan, or her god, or whatever the fuck is out there that I am alive. Alive to watch Amy grow up. Alive to be there for Kacey when she needs me. Alive to fulfill that promise Noah and I made to Thomas.”

He patted the wheels of his chair, “Life’s good now. Even if my legs or dick don’t work. My brain does. My heart too. And I can love and be loved by some fucking amazing people. And that is all that really matters in life.”

“You know, the funny thing is I have more love in my life now than I ever did before. I love my Nan to pieces, but that old bird was not the type to go all soft. She took me in because my Mama was a drunk. She made sure I had three meals a day, went to school, and church on Sunday. But I can’t remember her ever telling me she loved me or hugging me.”

“When I fell, it was the old ‘big boys don’t cry’ thing. Like I said, I love the woman. And I know she loved me too. She was sixty years old, and she didn’t have to take me in. She sacrificed not just her golden years but money she did not have to raise me. But that is not the kinda parent I want to be to Amy. Or the new baby that Kacey’s having.”

It was a day of surprises for Jon as he did sputter his coffee this time. “Congratulations?”

“This one is Noah’s. But we’ve already decided to have one more in a couple of years. That one will be mine.”

This time Jon managed somehow to keep from spewing his drink, but he was not sure how as he swallowed it and his shock at the man's casual words.

“Don't worry; I'll save you the gory details on how that one is accomplished. You don't want to know.”

Jon laughed. “What? There are some intimate details you don't share with strangers?”

“You aren't a stranger. You're a brother. You know that. And do you think it is easy telling another man that your dick don't work?”

“I'm sorry.”

“For what? That my dick don't work? Or for being an ass? Listen, I get it. I understand. As the saying goes, ‘been there, done that, own the t-shirt.’ That's probably why Alicia came to me,” he sighed as he met and held Jon's gaze.

“The thing is, there comes a time when you gotta man up. We're fucking Marines; we know that. We been trained for that shit. Surrender is not an option. Even if your dick don't work or your face looks like hamburger. It's what in here that counts.” His fist pounded his chest.

“So, explain to the man whose dick don't work, why you don't want to use your perfectly serviceable gun to keep the woman you love and the mother of your child smiling? Cause I'm really dying to hear this one.”

“You wouldn't understand. It's not the same.”

“No, it's not the same. I can't fuck. You won't. But for what it is worth, man, here's what I do know. You're right. Fucking ain't everything. But the real problem is you're still trying to protect yourself. You're trying to do the ‘right’ thing by your woman and little girl. And kudos for that.”

“But let me tell you, from personal experience, you can't do it. You can't take care of them while you keep yourself hidden off and protected. It never works.”

“But what if?”

“What if what? What if you're not good enough? What if you're so damaged that they can't love you?”

Jon's heart stopped. That was it — his deepest fear. The man had said aloud the words he could not bring himself to face. “Yeah, what if they can't love me like this?” Jon whispered the truth.

“Now, we're getting somewhere. First of all, if Alicia didn't care, she would not have bared her soul to me yesterday. Begged me for some insight into how you feel. And oh, I don't think your woman knows. The fact that my dick don't work ain't something we banty about for just everyone. But, yeah, she cares. Fuck, if you ask me, the girl's in love with your sorry ass.”

Jon was once again surprised at this revelation. The idea that Alicia loved him was the stuff of fantasies. His dreams. Not something he would even allow himself to consider as a possibility. But it was not just that...

“I just don’t want to be an embarrassment. To either of them.”

“Worried that some blond surfer dude or hot-ass new recruit gonna steal your woman away?”

“Can I get a break here, dude?”

“I’m sorry. The thing is, I do know exactly how you’re feeling. It is not easy to face our fears. We’ve been trained to ignore them. To tough it out. To act in spite of them. But that isn’t always the answer. Like I said, I spent eighteen months in rehab, and my mind was more fucking shattered than my spine. I snuck out to buy booze. I stayed drunk most of the time. I tried to hide. Hide from what I had become.”

“Then, one day, Noah showed up. I was really drunk that day. Hell, the doctors were about to throw me out on the streets; I was causing so much trouble. He poured coffee into me. He physically dragged my ass into the shower, a place I had not been in days, maybe weeks.”

“And he told me more truths than I was ready to face. Then he took me out of there. Put me up at his place. And every day, it was the same. Showers and truth. He made damned sure I could not get alcohol either. I hated that mother fucker. I wanted to kill him for what he was doing.”

“I even tried. One morning in the shower, I got so angry when he would not just leave me be, let me drink myself to death. I took a swing at him. He took a couple of punches. Then he picked me up, shook me, and said, ‘I’m not giving up on you. My friend is in there somewhere, and I fucking want him back.’”

“I just shrugged like it didn’t matter. He got so mad then that he left me there. Naked in the shower. It was fucking cold. I had no choice. If I wanted to make it, I had to apply all those things they had been trying to teach me at rehab. It wasn’t easy. But somehow, I managed to dry myself off, get dressed, and into my chair.”

“And for the first time, I cried. I really cried. I thought that I had finally done it. That I had pushed the one person that cared about my sorry ass away. And I didn’t know what I’d do then.”

Chris paused as he stared out the window. Tears tracked unchecked down his cheeks. The silence stretched for minutes as both men lost themselves in memories.

“But I hadn’t. That night, Noah came back. And he brought Kacey and Amy with him. He had been on my case that we had a promise to keep to Thomas. What he had not told me was that he was doing just that. He had been checking in on them every fucking day.”

“Noah seems to have it all together. He goes to work every day. Took care of me. And was there for them too. Everything we think a Marine ought to be and do. Except it is all a fucking lie. The number of nights that I lay in bed and listened to him scream in his sleep.”

“And Kacey? She was drowning herself in work. Her little girl and her job. She had bottled all her pain and anger tightly inside of her. She refused even to admit they existed. Duty. That was all the two of them knew.”

“But not Amy. Do you know what the first thing my little girl said to me was? ‘Oh, your chair is so cool. Can I have a ride?’ She thought my wheelchair, the thing I hated most, was cool. All she wanted was to ride in it. Can you imagine that?”

Jon nodded his head, “Yeah, the first thing that Hope said to me was, “Does it hurt?” But how do you tell a child every minute of every day?”

“You don’t. It’s our job to protect them. To preserve that innocence for as long as we can. And to cherish each blessed moment of it.”

“But what if...”

“What if the other kids are mean to her? What if she gets bullied because her daddy is a freak?”

“Do you know how to pull your punches?”

His new friend shrugged and laughed, “What’s the point? The hard shit needs to be said. And being the cripple means that nobody is gonna punch me for doing it.”

“Don’t count on that.”

“Good. I could use a good tussle. You know I took up judo. I am working on my black belt now. Yeah, wheelchair judo is a fucking thing. And it rocks. I’m even considering trying surfing again.”

“How do you do it?”

“Well, there are a couple of different options...”

“No, not surfing. Being so positive. How can you...”

“How can a man whose legs and dick don’t work being so fucking happy, you mean?”

“Yeah, that,” Jon chuckled.

“It’s easy when you have the love and support of amazing people like Noah, Kacey, and Amy. Oh, I still have my moments. Especially when someone assumes that I can’t do something, but it’s getting better. I usually just smile, thank them, and explain that I can do it myself.”

“Sorry about earlier.”

“No problem, we’ll get there, dude. Cause I don’t know about you, but I’m glad to have a new friend who can truly understand what it feels like to be different. Even if we aren’t exactly the same, it is shared ground.”

“Yeah, it is. Like your Nan said about the man with no feet.”

“Or in this case, the man with no working dick? So, are you at least reconsidering that crazy shit?”

“It isn’t that exactly.”

“You’re worried about being naked with a woman. I get that.”

“Are you a fucking mind reader too?”

“Nope, but I’ve met a couple of those in my day. You’re just painfully obvious, dude.”

“Oh, thanks.”

Chris brought his finger to his temple and closed his eyes, “Oh yes, I see. You’re worried that Alicia will be turned off by your scars. That she will compare you to the man she knew back then. That it won’t be the same.”

“Very funny.”

“And completely accurate?” His friend met his gaze, “It won’t be. Hell, it wouldn’t be even without the burn scars. Shit, what Noah and Kacey share isn’t the same as what she and I do. The thing is that love doesn’t work that way. It’s not about comparisons. It’s about being and accepting just what is.”

“Both Noah and I know that Kacey will never love us the way she did Thomas. And that’s cool. Love is miraculous. The more you give, the more you have. But you gotta learn to give it. I had to learn to give and receive it. And I know that ain’t easy either. But damn, am I glad I did, I still am.”

“So, how did you do it? I mean, learn to love.” Jon was not the type to share confidences. But this man had bared so much of his soul and history. Didn’t he deserve the same? “That night was the closest I have ever come to love.”

“And that makes you even more worried that things will be different?”

Jon nodded his head without meeting his friend’s gaze.

“That’s a long story. And we need to be at the school for the girls in a few minutes. We can talk more while they play in the park. But I’m on the clock today. Kacey gave me a real tongue lashing for keeping Amy out so late on a school night yesterday.”

Jon nodded and began to clear off their table, but Chris took the tray from him. “I’ll get that, dude.”

Jon smiled and nodded as they made their way through the growing crowd to dump their cups in the trash and head out for their girls. Their girls? The words had a nice ring to them. And after this day, Jon felt more Hopeful than he had – ever?

## Chapter Eight

Alicia struggled through the day. Jon had asked to pick Hope up from school today. Combined with coming home to find him asleep on her couch and waking up to him, it was just too close to those could-bes that she had imagined since she looked into his eyes that first day.

There was no doubt left in her mind – she loved him. The question was – how could she make him see that? Make him understand that the scars did not matter. That he was the same man. No, a better man than he had been that night. The only man she wanted in her life. Or Hope's.

Her thoughts kept straying down those paths. She had messed up several orders already. She felt like a tightly capped bottle of soda. All of this was shaking and shaking her. The pressure was building up inside, and she was unsure when or how she was going to pop.

She wanted to slink away to a corner somewhere and cry. She wanted to walk out into the desert and scream at the top of her lungs. She wanted to hit something hard. And most of all, she wanted him to hold her tight and never let her go. Promise her that they would get through it all somehow.

Her talk with Chris had helped her to understand a bit more. She got that Jon was worried that she might be confusing pity and their history with genuine feelings. But she wasn't. She was sure of that. She did not pity him at all. In fact, she had pitied him more that night for the emotional baggage his wife's death had caused than she did the physical scars now.

But how could she explain to him something she did not understand herself? There was just some connection between them. It was what had caused her to do something so out of character as to propose that ludicrous no-strings-attached one-night stand that had resulted in Hope's conception.

It was that same connection that she had recognized in his eyes that first day, even if his features were changed. And it was that connection that made her yearn for something more with him. The problem was that she had no words to put to that feeling, that connection. And until she found them, she knew the situation was virtually Hopeless.

“Mama, Jon, and Chris are coming to my school tomorrow.” Hope burst through the door like sunshine after a storm.

She held out her arms as her daughter raced to embrace her. She met his gaze as she wrapped their little girl in her arms. “Thank you.”

She was uncertain if she was thanking him for picking up Hope at school or this most precious gift of all. Those tears that she had wanted to slink away and cry gathered in her eyes. She released Hope and brought the back of her hand up to wipe them away. She drew fresh air into her lungs and forced her voice to remain calm just as she forced a smile on her lips.

“So, what is this? Why are Jon and Chris coming to your school, sweetie?”

“Miss Mandy wants to talk about ax-ceptunce?” Hope smiled, revealing a missing tooth, her first.

Alicia gripped her daughter’s chin, “What is this? You lost a tooth? You didn’t even tell me it was loose.”

“It was only a little loose, Mama. But then we were playing soccer with these boys in the park, and I got hit with the ball. It started to bleed, and when Jon checked, it came out.”

“What? You got hit with a ball?” She turned on Jon, “And you didn’t think to call me? Our daughter gets hurt, and you can’t be bothered to even text?” Her eyes went wide as she realized what she had revealed in her anger.

But Jon was not flapped. He crossed the room to stand behind Hope, his good hand resting on her shoulder. “It was not that bad. I had first-aid training, so I knew what to look out for. Hope was fine, except for the tooth, and that would have come out soon anyway. She ran right back to the game.”

“Still, you should have at least texted me. I mean, her first tooth is a big deal,” Alicia mumbled.

Hope smiled as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a scrap of notebook paper folded into a tiny square. “That’s what Jon said. So, we saved it. He says that the tooth fairy gives extra for first teeth.”

Alicia stared over their daughter’s head at him. After being a single parent for so long, she was struggling. Sharing these kinds of firsts with him was not something she had ever considered until recently. And the reality of it was starkly different from what she had imagined.

Jealousy. She was jealous of Jon. Of his new role in their daughter’s life. It was an emotion she had not expected or one that she knew how to handle. “I’m sorry.”

He shrugged and forced that awkward one-sided smile that she was coming to realize meant he was as uncomfortable as she was. “No, you’re right. I should have phoned you. I’ll do better.”

If Alicia had thought that Hope had missed her faux pas, her next words disabused her of that notion. “Mama, is Jon gonna be my Papa? I don’t mind if I only have one. Most of the other kids only have one. Amy is special cause she has two, plus her daddy that died.”

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Jon saw the deer in the headlights look on Alicia’s face. He knew this was his chance, an opportunity he might not get again, to take this situation under control. To steer things in his direction.

He knelt on the floor next to his little girl. His eyes met hers, just a shade lighter than her mothers. Just as trusting.

“What would you think of the idea, Hope?”

His daughter threw her arms around his neck. Nothing had ever felt better. He looked up at Alicia. He could see that she was struggling to manage the situation. Well, almost nothing. But the feeling of rightness he felt in her mother’s arms was distinctly different.

Hope drew back, her little hand caressed his cheek, the badly scarred left one. “So, that’s why you stayed the night last night? You moved in? Like Chris and Noah did with Amy and her Mom? You’ll read bedtime stories with me? Say our prayers? And tuck me in now? You’ll walk me to school and pick me up every day like Chris and Amy? Oh, I can’t wait to tell all my friends at school that I have a Papa too.”

Jon’s heart stuttered to a stop at her words. He was more than a bit nervous about tomorrow. Chris had volunteered him for the ‘freak show and tell’ as he had jokingly called it. He liked Hope’s teacher and admired what she was trying to do with the children. But Jon knew human nature. There would always be bullies. And he worried about how having him as her father would affect Hope in the long term.

Then again, despite all that Alicia had done, Hope was struggling without a father. Maybe Chris and Miss Mandy were right. Maybe if you taught understanding and acceptance when children were young, then things could be different. He certainly Hoped so for his little girl’s sake because the die was cast now. He smiled and nodded his head.

“Mama, I’m hungry. Can I eat, and then Papa take me home?”

Papa. Words had never been sweeter than those. As for the rest, they would deal with it. Somehow.

“I’ll have Jorge make you some tamales. They’re your favorite. But right now, take a seat and do some drawing, please. I need to talk to Jon.”

“Papa. You should call him Papa now, Mama,” his daughter smiled as she danced away like the world was her perfect playground.

That was not how Alicia saw things, not from the thunder cloud look on her face. He tried to prepare himself for the storm that was to come.

“So, what now? What the hell do we do now, Jon? Hope is expecting you to just move-in,” she whisper-screamed.

He shook his head, “I don’t know. Is that such a big deal? I can sleep on the couch like last night. At least until...”

“Until what? Until we get married? Remember, we don’t agree on what that means, either.”

He could see how upset Alicia was by all this. She had been on edge from the moment they came in. That was probably why she slipped up. He wanted to take her into his arms, hold her tight, and promise that everything would work out alright. Except she was his big girl. And they both knew it was not that simple. This was real life, and shit happened. Like unplanned pregnancies and IEDs. Sometimes all you could do was deal with it, roll with the punches.

“I’m sorry, maybe I should have tried to dissuade her.”

“No, this is my fault. I was the one who slipped up. Look at her. She’s even happier than Christmas morning.”

Jon saw the tears in her eyes, watched them begin to trek down her cheek. “I promise I’ll do my best.” It was all he could give her, all he could do, all anyone could.

She once more reached into the pocket of her apron and pulled out that set of keys. “If you mean that, then take these. Have another set made at the hardware store down the street. Then move your stuff into my room.”

“Are you sure? I can keep the hotel room for now if you want. Sleep on the couch or go back there once she is asleep. Then come back in the mornings.”

“And what if Hope wakes up in the middle of the night? What if she wants you? No, I put my foot in it this time. And you made a promise to our daughter. I guess we’ll both have to live with it. Figure this shit out as it goes. But I won’t let her down, Jon. And I Hope you won’t either.”

He took the keys. This was not how he wanted things to happen — none of it. Having a child he did not know existed until a few weeks ago. Being blown up by an IED in a fucking shithole, fighting for his parents’ wealthy friends and oil more than his country or freedom. And this was certainly not how he had wanted to woe her.

But shit happened. And you dealt with it like a man. Or you gave up, gave in, and died without ever living. Something had kept him alive when other good men died. Maybe it was for them: his little girl and the woman he loved.

“Okay. I don’t have much anyway. Just a few clothes, some books, and my paperwork. I can be back in a couple of hours and take her...”

“Home. You can take our daughter home before the diner fills up with the dinner rush, Jon. Home. Daughter. Those are words you better get used to saying.”

“I can think of loads worse things than taking our little girl home and putting her to bed for school tomorrow.”

Alicia looked at him as she smiled, but he could see it was forced. “It’ll be okay. We’ll figure this out somehow.”

He grinned; his was genuine. “Those were my lines, sweetheart. And yes, we will figure this out. We have a damned good reason to succeed over there.” Now was not the time or the place for a declaration of his undying love for them. But soon. Soon.

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Alicia watched him leave. This day had not gone anything as she planned. Then again, nothing had since that night when she threw caution to the wind and invited a hurting, lonely Marine back to her apartment for ‘no-strings-attached’ sex.

“Where’s Papa going, Mama?” Hope frowned as she looked up from the paper.

Of course, this was a string that neither of them planned for, but certainly, one that she never regretted. And she was pretty sure that Jon felt the same. It might not be soulmates, some magical connection that she liked to imagine it to be, or even love, but their daughter was the one bond they did share. And that would have to be enough to build the rest upon.

She slipped into the booth with her daughter and looked down at the picture she was drawing. Tears welled in her eyes at the barely recognizable stick people. The way that the man and woman were holding the little girl’s hand between them. She smiled to see another woman and a bigger boy in the background as well.

“That’s a beautiful drawing, Preciosa.”

“It’s our new family. How long until you and Papa get me a new baby brother or sister like Amy is having?”

This day just kept getting weirder. Of all the things for her daughter to ask? “I didn’t know that Kacey was pregnant,” perhaps she could distract her daughter. At least long enough to come up with an answer that was both believable and not an outright lie.

Hope nodded her head without looking up. “Amy says it takes a long time to make a baby. But she said it was going to be her Christmas present. Do I have to wait until Christmas too, Mama? Or can I have my baby sooner? Maybe for my birthday? That’s still a long time away.”

Alicia could not help but laugh. Three months, hell, it might take her that long to get Jon in the mood for some more baby-making action, though she sincerely Hoped not. The idea of spending even one night with that man in her bed without jumping his bones was hard enough.

But at least Hope had given her something to work with. “It takes time to make a baby, sweetie. Babies grow inside the Mamas for nine whole months. That is about the same amount of time from the first day of school until the last, even a bit more.”

“And sometimes it takes time for Mamas and Papas to make those babies too. You know that Kacey, Noah, and Chris have been a family for several months now. They did not make a baby right away.”

“How did they make the baby, Mama?”

This was not the conversation she wanted to have with her six-year-old daughter right now. This was not the place, and Alicia did not have the time this topic deserved. Hell, she had not even considered how she would explain sex to the child. But she knew that she would. No storks, cabbage patches, or watermelon seeds for her daughter.

She had not lied to Hope, ever. Unless, of course, you counted the biggest one of all, the lie of omission – that Jon was her Papa in every way. That one was big enough; she was not about to add this sin to it.

“I need to get ready for the dinner rush, sweetie, and that is a long talk. How about we sit down and discuss it later, okay?”

“When? Tonight?”

Bless the child; Hope never gave up. “Not tonight. I won’t be back until late, and you have school tomorrow. Then we have to get ready for Miss Mandy’s commitment ceremony on Sunday. How about we talk about it after that?”

Her daughter frowned, “But Miss Mandy and Sarah and Josh made a baby too. I want to know how. So that we can get one too. Please.”

“Hope, I said that we would discuss this later. I made a promise, and you know I always keep them. Now, please, I need to get ready for the dinner rush,” and explain our new houseguest to Alison.

She was not pleased with the pout on her daughter’s mouth, but at least her daughter nodded her head reluctantly and went back to drawing.

One battle down. Now onto the next one. She Hoped this one would go a bit better as she slipped into the kitchen, where Alison laughed at something Jorge said.

“Can I speak with you for a moment, Alison?”

Her friend smiled, “If it's about the hunk that’s going to be sharing your bedroom, don’t sweat it. We sort of overheard.”

Alicia blushed, “Sorry, I didn’t mean for it to go this way. It’s your home too. We should have talked about this before Jon just moves in.”

Her friend reached out and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “Life isn’t always neat, Ali, you know that. Sometimes Fate drop kicks our asses over the goalposts of life. And all we can do is go with the flow.” Alison smiled reassuringly, “DeShaun and I will try to keep out of your way while ya’ll settle into a new routine.”

“No, as I said, that is your home too.”

“No, sweetie, it is not. Don’t get me wrong; you’ll never know how much I appreciate everything you have done for me and the boys. But that is your home. Your family’s roots are in that place. It has just been a rest stop for me, Damien, and DeShaun. A wonderful, beautiful place and time of memories that we will always carry with us.”

“But like I said the other night, it is time. Time for me to move on. To find my Fate. My own home. My sons are grown. Men with lives of their own and their Fates to live out. And that is as it should be too.”

“Now, it is time for you. You and Jon to build upon all those other families that have come before. To create your own home and traditions. Would it be better if DeShaun and I got out of your way? It is only a few more weeks until graduation, and then he is off to explore this whole wide world. Or at least America,” Alison smiled, and the years slipped from her face.

At almost forty-five, she was still a pretty woman. But at that moment, all the cares and responsibilities relieved and something almost ethereal bringing a glow to her countenance, Alicia could see the young woman that she had once been. One that had attracted the attention of a basketball legend.

Alicia squeezed her hand in return, “I wouldn’t hear of it. You’re my best friend. And honestly, I need you right now.”

Her friend shook her blond head and chuckled, “You can’t hide or run from your Fate, sweetie. You gotta met that shit head-on. But yeah, I’ll be here for you for as long as I can anyway. Until mine calls me.”

“When did you get so metaphysical about everything?”

Her friend frowned, “I don’t know. It is just something. Something I feel inside. Something I can’t explain. Or ignore. It just keeps calling me. And it’s getting stronger.”

When Alison looked up, there were huge tears in her eyes, “Please understand. Hell, what am I saying? I don’t understand. But at least, accept. Accept that this is the way things need to be. Has to be. That it is what is best for all of us. You. Me. Jon. Hope. Damien and DeShaun too. It is just something I know deep inside, even if I don’t know how I know it. Damn, none of that makes any sense.” Those tears spilled out the corners of her blue eyes, and black streaks began to mar her cheeks.

Alicia wrapped her friend in her arms, and Jorge muttered under his breath, shrugged, and turned back to the grill, obviously uncomfortable with the show of feminine emotions.

“Of course, Alison, I do understand or, like you said, accept. It’s just that I’m going to miss you. You’ve been my family for so long, all of Hope’s life. I don’t know what I would have done without you. And honestly, I’m having trouble imagining my life without you there.”

Alison pushed back, breaking the embrace. She swiped at the tears with the back of her hand, making a bigger mess of those dark smudges. “I know. I feel the same way sometimes. But I can’t stop this - whatever it is. And you can’t change your Fate either. Not that I think you’d want to?”

Alison might be right about that. This might not be how she would have planned things, but this night Jon would not be sleeping on the couch or in a crappy hotel room. He would be sleeping in her bed. That was a start.

## Chapter Nine

Jon stared in the mirror. It has been so long that he had forgotten the last time he did. What it reflected was not as bad as he remembered from that occasion. But it was a hell of a far sight from the last time he had been naked with her.

He picked up the jar of moisturizing cream that the docs at the VA insisted would help soften the scars and stop itching and oversensitivity. Perhaps they were right about that one thing. His reflection certainly would suggest so.

That did not mean he was comfortable with what he saw. He wished for the pressure shirt that he had worn for most of that first couple of years. Including the hood, it covered most of his scars. And it made an excellent excuse for hiding.

He used his good hand to massage the cream into his scalp. He missed his blond hair. Seeing how Chris had allowed his to grow out from the traditional high-and-tight reminded him of just how much.

He added a bit more pressure to his strokes. It was a balancing act. The area was still intensely sensitive. But the more pressure he used, the more it would soften and desensitize the area. He moved down to his neck and then his shoulders.

It was almost impossible to reach certain sections of his back, especially on the right side, because his left hand was virtually unusable. He toyed as he always did with the idea of allowing the damned docs to amputate it. Maybe they were right about that too. But he could not bring himself to that yet.

Because he could not reach that area of his back, it was prone to tears, cracking, and ulcerations. He had ended up with a couple of infections as a result. He tried to check it in the mirror but could not see much.

Not that it mattered. He would not be sleeping naked anymore. He looked over where the boxers and t-shirt lay on top of the closed toilet lid. He was glad that Hope provided the perfect justification for that.

But he had been struggling for the past few hours with how he was going to manage to sleep in the same bed with Alicia without...

Fuck, that was not happening. Well, he was sure it would. She had made it clear that night in the desert. This time there were definitely strings attached. Not that his body wanted to disagree with the woman.

He had not gotten laid since the night that Hope was conceived. First, he was deployed for six more months. Even on his leave, though, he could not bring himself to go to a prostitute or pick up some woman in a bar. That night had plenty of strings attached, even before he realized how he felt about Alicia or knew about Hope. One night in her bed had ruined him for other women.

Of course, after the explosion, that had not mattered. The very idea of being with a woman was off the table. The only women that would look at him, well, he had never been into pity-fucks. Certainly not with her.

He closed his eyes as he began his nightly routine of stretching exercises, which minimized contractures and maximized his range of motion and mobility. Simple exercises that many people used to relieve stress in tight neck, shoulders, back, and face had added significance for him — three times a day or more, depending upon how he was feeling. He was almost religious about them. And except for his left arm, he was doing better than the doctors had expected him to.

But he was not, and never would be, ‘normal.’ In the way he looked or what he was capable of doing. Even simple tasks like dressing himself, tying his shoes, or brushing his teeth had had to be relearned. While he was past those initial occupational therapies that had taken him almost two years, he was still learning new adaptations.

But how to make love to a woman had not been one of the areas covered in his therapy. It was certainly not a topic he had covered with the shrinks. They were still trying to get him past the survivor’s guilt and occasional suicidal thoughts.

Oddly enough, Hope and Alicia proved to be a more effective treatment for that than anything the VA had to offer. Or even his parents’ private ‘experts.’ He smiled, which was itself a stretching exercise, one he had not done very often until these past few weeks.

But just the thought of his little girl reading that dumb book about the daddy monkey and his little monkey, the way she had thanked god, or whatever was out there, for her ‘new’ Papa, and the sanctity of tucking her in was enough to keep him smiling for days.

Or at least until Alicia got home from the diner and he had to face the reality of a long night in the bed of the woman he loved, the one he longed for physically and emotionally. What was he going to do? How was he going to handle that situation? Was he going to settle for a lifetime of pity fucks?

Did he have many choices? Between her instance that they have a real marriage, his daughter’s pleas for a baby brother or sister, and his god damned cock that he knew was going to betray whatever honor he had left, it was not so much a matter of if as it was when.

He pulled on the boxers without much trouble. The shirt was a bit more of a challenge. Maneuvering that left arm seemed to be getting more painful by the day. He was going to have to face that choice soon. But not before he dealt with this night. And her.

He stared at the man in the mirror. Sometimes he thought he almost saw that other man. The man he had once been. That blond hair that was virtually invisible with the high-and-tight. The patrician nose. That quirky grin. And, of course, the smooth, unmarred olive complexion. But that man was gone, never to return, as dead as the men that had counted on him, the ones he had failed.

That was old ground. The shrinks were right. The only thing he could do about that now was make damned sure that his life counted for something. In some fucked up ways, he was living for them all. And for the first time since the explosion, that was not such a daunting and depressing thought.

Hell, if all he did was raise Hope to live up to that name, he would be content. And those others? The baby brother or sister that she asked you for? What about them, jarhead?

He shrugged, and the pain of the contracture shot through his back, another reminder. “You have some shit to deal with, my friend,” he said to that stranger in the mirror as he opened the door to the bathroom and ran into her.

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Alicia was glad not to find Jon on the couch when she walked in the door. But he was not in her room either. Though the duffle bag of his belongings was open on the floor by her bed. He was not in Hope’s room either. Maybe he went for a walk?

She still had no idea how she was going to handle this situation. Oh, why had she opened her big mouth? Why had she let the truth slip out? Though they had not told Hope the complete truth. She knew that one day they would have to do so, but for now, this was enough for a six-year-old. No-strings-attached was more R-rated than PG-13 even.

She went back to her room and grabbed a night-shirt. She chuckled as she brushed past the ‘Book Boyfriends are Best’ one. That was not the right one for this night. It seemed after seven years, she finally had a man back in her bed — the one from the night that had filled her dreams for all those other dark lonely nights.

And what good is it going to do you if he still wants a marriage in name only? She had been mulling that one over and over in her mind all afternoon. The question was: how should she handle this situation? Did she accede to his wishes and keep to her side of the bed? Did she try to seduce him? She was not sure that her fragile ego could manage another rejection like that night in the desert. Not that it was a total rejection; the bulge in his pants meant that the man clearly wanted her.

So, why did he not accept what she offered? Okay, the pity fuck shit. Which brought her back to the question that she had cogitated over all day, how did she convince the man that he was no pity fuck? Could she?

She shook her head and headed down the hall to the bathroom at the end. She always tried to set a good example for Hope, brushing her teeth morning and night. Maybe even a shower? Though usually, she got those in the morning to wake her up. Being at the diner before dawn necessitated strong black coffee and cold showers.

Of course, she could probably use one of those just about now. The idea of that man in her bed had her distinctly sticky in certain places. And it was not like she could use BOB or even masturbate with him in the bed next to her. Hmm, maybe she should get that shower, use the pulsating setting for something other than sore muscles?

Her mind was caught up in those thoughts as the bathroom door opened, and she walked straight into him. Jon. Damn, why did the man have to look so incredibly sexy in plain white boxers and a t-shirt? What had she been thinking? Agreeing to this?

She knew what she had been thinking - about their daughter. Hope needed a father. Jon wanted to be a real father to their daughter. If not a real husband to her. She would need to deal with it. At least for now.

“Sorry, I thought you had gone out for a walk or something...” Had he considered running? Going back to the hotel at night as he had suggested? Was she that undesirable? “I’m sorry...”

“Sorry for what, Alicia?”

“Sorry for getting us into this mess with my big mouth. I don’t know what I was thinking,” she was rambling. “I should brush my teeth. Take a shower, maybe.”

He nodded as he squeezed past her in the tiny hallway. Maybe if she stayed in the shower long enough, he would be asleep when she came to bed? But what would that solve? She would just be delaying the inevitable. Maybe she should take the bull by the horns...or his dick?

She was no closer to deciding after brushing her teeth. She had decided to forego the shower, after all. It was late. She should go to bed and get some sleep. But sleep was not what was on her mind as she walked back down the hall to her bedroom. She had to remind herself that this was not death row, and the executioner was not waiting on the other side of that door — just the man she loved.

Loved? Did she love Jon? She kept vacillating on that one. She knew that she was attracted to him. He had been the star of all her fantasies for seven years. And scars or not, he still was. As cheesy as it sounded, how she felt about him went more than skin-deep. It always had. Whether that was love or not, she did not know. And it was too damned late to think about that now. In more ways than one.

As her Abuelita would say, ‘she had made her bed; now, she had to lie in it.’ Quite literally this time. And standing outside the door in the hall was getting her nowhere. She forced her hand onto the knob. Turned it and commanded one foot in front of the other. She willed a smile onto her lips as well when she saw him sitting up on the side of the bed.

He turned when he heard her enter, “I thought we should talk.”

Alicia’s heart stopped. Her throat tightened, and all she could do was nod her head. This was it. And whether she was ready or not, this night might well decide the Fate of their relationship. She definitely was not prepared.

“I’m exhausted. Could we do it another time?” She chickened out as she took the other side of the bed. She turned off the lamp and hugged the edge of it. Hoping and praying that Jon did not press the issue.

He just sat on the other side of the bed for several long minutes before he turned off the light on his side and slipped beneath the blanket. He turned his back to her and kept to his side as well. Alicia felt the tears running down her cheeks and fought back the sobs that wanted to erupt from her throat. Of all the fantasies she had ever had about having this man back in her bed, this was nothing like them. She felt his rejection to her feminine core.

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Jon did not want to be here. He had barely slept last night. Just being in the same room with her, let alone the same bed, less than two feet between them, was some new form of torture. Worse even than some of the physical and occupational therapy that he had undergone.

His dick had spent the whole fucking night at full mast. And nothing he did or said could convince the little traitor that it was best this way. That he did not want a pity fuck. And obviously, she had changed her mind. She could not go through with even that. Without layers of clothes, he was so repulsive that she backed out. Not even for Hope's sake could she force herself to touch him.

For Hope's sake. That was what he kept holding onto. She had woken him before dawn. She was heading into the diner. Would he get Hope ready and take her to school? Was this to be their new routine? Strained politeness for the sake of their child. Of course, he had agreed.

After dropping his daughter at school, he had called the VA, scheduled another appointment. Maybe it was time to talk with the doctors about amputating his arm? If a prosthesis could be more functional, that was what mattered, right?

Then he had taken a long walk in the desert. He needed to be alone. To think. And he always did that best in nature. That was why he had used his trust fund and the money he had saved from his decade in the Marines to buy a piece of the Rockies, just north of Las Vegas. He had both the desert and the mountains on his doorstep.

The problem was that today he felt as if his soul and future were as bleak and barren as the land around him. How the hell had he thought that he could sleep in the same bed with her and not want her? Oh, it was not just the wanting. He had known that he would always want her. It was the reality of being so close and not touching her.

Oh, he had touched her alright. She did not realize it, but she had woken him up when she crawled out of bed. How could she not? Their bodies had in sleep entwined tightly about one another. His cock was throbbing against her stomach. Their legs tangled in one another. His good hand was wrapped through her hair, and the damaged one rested on her hip, drawing her closer.

But Jon had not opened his eyes. He had merely moaned and turned back towards his side of the bed, pretending to still be asleep until he heard the shower running down the hall. Even then, he had laid there barely moving, trying to get his confused mind, tense body, and hard cock under some semblance of control. He was not having much luck when she came back in, fully dressed, smelling of sunshine, and woke him up.

The rest of the morning, he had gotten through on autopilot. Making breakfast for Hope, helping her to dress, then walking her to school. If he thought that a walk in the desert would miraculously provide the answers he sought, he was sadly mistaken. He was no closer to a solution to this dilemma than he had been last night or for the past few weeks.

His daughter wanted and needed her father. He wanted to be a real father to her, not some part-time weekend warrior. But how the hell was he going to sleep in the same bed with the woman he loved and keep his distance? Physically or emotionally? And was he willing to settle for that pity fuck? For an obligation from her?

But he needed to put all that aside for now too. He had promised Miss Mandy, Chris, and Hope that he would speak to her class about being different. Though what he was going to say exactly, he was not certain. And what did he do if some of the kids were scared of him? Or made some rude comment as had happened a few times? He just had to man up, his daughter was counting on him, and that was what mattered.

Jon inhaled deeply, pushed open the door to her classroom, and was greeted by smiles from Chris, Miss Mandy, and Hope. He could do this.

## Chapter Ten

“Mama, mama, you should have seen Papa. He was so amazing. Everyone loves him,” Alicia smiled as Hope burst through the doors, followed by Chris, Amy, Mandy, her partner Sarah, and bringing up the rear, Jon. He stared at the floor nervously.

All day, she had been regretting how last night went. She had chickened out. Plain and simple. And she knew that she had hurt him. Waking this morning to discover that during the night, their bodies had become entangled, looking into his sleeping face, she had fought back the need to touch him. To caress those scars. To take him into her arms and body and reassure him that everything would be alright.

But fear of another rejection like in the desert that night, the time ticking away on the clock, and the need to get ready for work had all stood as legitimate excuses. All of which she regretted now. She forced a smile.

“I’m sorry, Jon. In all the excitement yesterday, I completely forgot. You and Hope mentioned that you were talking to her class today, but I never found out about what?”

Chris and Sarah answered for him, high-fiving as Sarah shook her hips, and Chris did a bit of a wheely in the limited space between the tables. “Get your freak on,” they laughed and sang as Mandy shook her head. Amy and Hope giggled.

“Actually, I wanted all the children to learn about being different. About understanding and accepting those who are. Especially those who won’t make the commitment ceremony this weekend. So, I asked Sarah, Chris, Jon, and a few others to come and talk to them. Jon was a last-minute addition, thanks to Chris.”

Their friend, Chris, smiled, “But the star of the show.”

Hope beamed up at her father. Alicia got the distinct impression that he was blushing, but the scars made that a bit more difficult to tell for sure. “Congrats, Jon.”

“Can we have ice cream to celebrate?” their daughter finagled.

“Just one scoop. It will be dinner time soon,” Alicia smiled as everyone rearranged the tables and chairs, pushing a couple together to accommodate such a large group and making room for Chris’s wheelchair at one end.

Alicia busied herself preparing the ice cream and pie for the adults as her mind tried hard to come to terms with the latest surge of jealousy. She was glad that Hope was bonding so quickly with her father. And she knew that Jon needed their little girl just as much as she needed him. But it left her feeling distinctly alone. On the outside looking in.

And whose fault is that? She had no one to blame but herself. It seemed she had mishandled this whole situation. From the way that she just dumped the news that he had a child on Jon’s lap so suddenly. To her shocking proposal. Spilling the beans like she had yesterday in front

of Hope. And most certainly the childish way she had run from Jon when he wanted to talk last night.

She felt tears stinging her eyes. It seemed that was all she did of late. Cry. She wiped them away with the back of her hand. Lifted the tray and forced a smile as she faced the small group of friends, the only people in the diner during this mid-afternoon lull between lunch and dinner rushes.

“Pie and ice cream to celebrate,” she declared as she began to pass the dessert plates and bowls around the table.

“I really shouldn’t,” Sarah looked at the plate with a slice of pie topped with vanilla ice cream like wives looked at their Marine husbands returning from a year-long deployment. “A girl has to watch her figure.”

“Then hand it to me, sweetheart. I’m eating for two,” Mandy rubbed her hand over her distended abdomen.

Sarah’s hand covered her partner’s, “Well, sugar, I suppose just this once, I can sacrifice myself for you. Don’t want you putting on any more extra pounds than you need to with Junior.”

Mandy chuckled as she bent and placed a tender kiss on the dark red lips of one of her partners, “I thought that might be the case. I’m sure that Steve will forgive us girls this one weakness, don’t you think?”

“Well, I won’t tell him if you don’t?” Sarah winked her fake lashes.

Alicia felt those tears returning as she watched the women. Would she and Jon ever share that kind of camaraderie? Tease one another? It was a far cry from the polite tension that seemed to arc between them now and undoubtedly different from the torture of the previous night.

She tried hard not to be jealous of them. She knew only some of what they had been through, what they were still going through. She hated prejudice and small-minded people. Love was love in whatever form it took. She would not be jealous of them for having the courage to take a chance on that love when she had lacked that same courage.

She met Jon’s gaze across the table and tried to smile as she picked up the tray to go back into the kitchen and hide some more.

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“Aren’t you joining us, Alicia?”

Jon wanted to throat punch Chris again. Though it was not his friend’s fault that he had botched things so horribly last night. He should have gone to bed and been asleep before Alicia even got home. That would have made their first night in the same bed easier. Whatever had made him push the issue?

He could see that she was looking for some excuse, but Hope was jumping up and down. “Yes, Mama. Papa can tell you all about today.”

She nodded her head and smiled down at their daughter as she took a chair next to Sarah, across the table from him. “I’d like that,” she said as she met his gaze with a tentative smile. He tried hard not to read too much into that smile.

“It was nothing, sweetie,” he demurred.

“Nothing?” laughed Sarah. “He was just the star of the show. If Chris giving a couple of kids a ride around the classroom in his chair was not enough, Jon let them touch his scars. How’s a girl to follow that? You tell me.”

Jon shook his head. He had to admit, he learned more and had his own prejudices challenged more by the woman than he ever had. He was still trying to come to terms with the word woman. While she was a stunning one, knowing that Sarah had begun life as Mark had frankly blown his mind.

But Miss Mandy was right. What this world needed most was understanding and acceptance of differences. Hell, greed, hubris, and fear of those who were different was the reason he had spent his whole adult life fighting.

Listening to the man, no, the woman, talk about what it had felt like growing up. Knowing that you were different. Feeling as if something was not right. Not being like the other little boys. Not liking the things they liked and certainly not liking girls. All the little boys had identified with that bit of it.

But when Sarah spoke about sneaking into her big sister’s room to try on her clothes and make-up, about how her father had found her there and beaten her, the room was silent. But with the flair of a Hollywood star, she had shrugged her shoulders, smiled, and boasted that now her sisters came to her for fashion advice.

Jon had laughed along with the rest of them. He admired the way that Hope’s teacher was standing up for what she believed in. Personally, with her unusual relationship. And professionally. He was glad that he had gone today, proud to be a part of such a collection of ‘freaks’ as Chris and Sarah called them. In addition to Chris, Sarah, and himself, there had been a young blind man with his service dog and a slightly older woman who was deaf.

But besides Sarah’s story, what had surprised him the most was when Mandy had confessed at the end her own differences. She was autistic. She struggled each and every day with sensory overload from the fluorescent lights in the classroom. She sometimes got distracted by the sound of traffic outside, and every single day she battled social anxiety on the way to school. Only her strict routine and the loving support of her partners helped her to face the challenges. But they were all worth it, she said.

No, this day had definitely been enlightening for him as much as his daughter. And looking around the table at this diverse group of people, some of whom he knew were becoming his

friends, he felt for the first time since that horrible day that he belonged. That his life meant something. That he had some purpose left on this planet.

Wrapping his arm about his little girl sitting next to him, he bent over and kissed the top of her head, “Thank you, Hope.”

“What for, Papa?” she brushed her hand tenderly across his scarred cheek.

“Just for being you. Hope. And for taking a chance on loving me,” he pushed the words from his throat that was clogged with emotion.

“How could we not love you? You’re my Papa. The best one ever.”

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Alicia could not breathe. She fought back the tears again as she watched the exchange between her little girl and her father. If the lie of omission bothered her, it was nothing compared to their daughter's heartfelt honesty, ‘How could we not?’ How simple life was when you were a child.

She felt a gentle squeeze and looked down to see Sarah’s perfectly manicured hand wrapped about her dish-water chapped one. “It’ll be alright, sugar. Love always is in the end. And I should know. You’re bringing him on Sunday, right?”

She nodded, “We wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“You know Steve, and I appreciate all the support that you, Chris, Noah, and Kacey have given our girl this year? This whole thing with the school board is harder on her than she lets on. And with the pregnancy too. Well, I just wanted you to know that we’re here for you too if you need us.”

Alicia smiled and squeezed her hand in return. “Thanks, I appreciate that. But I better be getting back into the kitchen. Get ready. Won’t be long now until the dinner rush.”

Sarah laughed, “Oh, this is going to be good. Both of you trying to run and hide, the way our Steve did. Well, my money is still on love. You can’t hide from that shit forever. Owww...” She turned to Mandy on her other side, “What you do that for, darling? It hurt,” she pouted as she rubbed her shin.

“Watch her potty mouth around the children,” Mandy whispered.

“Or ya’ll tell Daddy? Oh, I’m so afraid.” Sarah winked at her partner.

Alicia blushed; she did not begin to understand the complexities of the relationship between Mandy and her two partners. But she recognized love when she saw it. And wasn’t that all that really mattered? Or at least that was what the book that Mandy had recommended to her claimed. Nothing Done In Love by some New Age guru from L.A. who had not one but two husbands.

Looking across the table, she watched Jon and Chris talking. His arm was still casually wrapped around their daughter as she colored and chatted with her friend. All that might be fine. She certainly was not the type to judge Mandy and her partners or Kacey and hers. But how the hell did they manage? Just one man was proving difficult enough for her.

## Chapter Eleven

Jon cursed under his breath. That was the only way he was cussing these days. It was amazing all the little ways that having a child changed your life. And, of course, the big ones too. He had made sure that he was in bed and pretending to be asleep each of the past two nights when Alicia came home from the diner.

And each morning, they had woken with their bodies entwined. Legs and arms laced and interlocked. His cock hard against her stomach, her head in the crook of his shoulders and neck. It boded the question: how long could they go on like this?

Yesterday had been his first full day with his little girl. No school to interfere. They had watched cartoons on television. He was shocked to learn that these days there were half a dozen children's channels that ran the things twenty-four-seven sometimes — no more Saturday morning before noon.

He had made them cereal for breakfast as they watched an atrocious remake of one of his childhood favorites. But Hope had not seemed to care. He had to find the originals and educate his daughter on the fine art of comedy, mystery-solving teens, and fake ghosts.

Then he had walked, and Hope had biked to the diner for lunch. They spent the afternoon playing in the park. Dinner was again at the restaurant. Then home to bath, read, and bed. He was not sure who was more tired, Hope or him? Being a parent was not as easy as it seemed.

And if he heard it once, he heard it a dozen times: when can I have a baby brother or sister? Of course, with both her teacher and her best friend's parents pregnant, he supposed it was no surprise. The problem was the decided lack of baby-making action. Or even the discussion of them. For all he knew, Alicia had changed her mind. Maybe she was not interested in...

But her body was. That much was for sure. The heat and wet that seeped onto his leg in the morning. The way that her nipples hardened and brushed against his chest each night. Of course, that could have nothing to do with him. He had no idea how long it had been for her. But not even masturbating in the shower before bed each night seemed to keep his dick under control.

"Fuck," he whisper-cussed as he gave up and pulled the knot out of the tie. That was at least half a dozen attempts now. But none seemed comfortable.

He had dragged Hope out shopping this morning after cereal. Just to buy the dress shirt, slacks, and tie. Even back home, he had nothing appropriate for an occasion like this. Not only did he usually not go places with this many people, but this formal shit had never been his thing.

How many times had his parents dressed him in some monkey suit worse than this and dragged him to some society or political thing? At least, he had not had to force Hope into a dress. In fact, he had rewarded her with a new one for putting up with the old man's decided lack of shopping skills. It was she who had picked this get-up, in fact.

Soft, warm hands reached around his shoulders. Their gazes met in the mirror as her hands covered his. He jerked the virtually useless left one away. That was the problem. Tying a tie was always challenging enough, but it was almost impossible with just one good hand. Yeah, he needed to talk to the damned docs again.

Her fingers tugged the tie free of his grasp. “You don’t need it. In fact, you could have worn jeans and a t-shirt. This isn’t a formal affair.”

“Now, you tell me,” he sighed. “And I dragged that poor kid out this morning for this crap.”

Alicia chuckled, “She finagled a new dress out of the deal, I see? She already has you wrapped around her little finger.”

He blushed at the accuracy of her words, “It doesn’t do any harm.”

“I’m not saying that.” Her hands on his shoulders turned him around. She unfastened the top two buttons. The damned shirt felt quite a bit better. “I don’t remember my father. And I barely saw my mother and her new husband once they got married. I guess I just think it is cute.”

He nodded. The silence stretched out uncomfortably between them. Was this what life was to become? Sexually charged tension, unspoken words, and only a child in common? How could he live like this? Close but never touching the woman he loved.

She had said it was not formal, but she looked stunning with her hair up in some loose ponytail thingy. Whisps of it fell free about her face and neck. She wore a flowy hippie-type dress made of thin cotton material and sandals. As usual, her face was practically devoid of make-up. Not that she had ever needed such artifice. Alicia’s beauty, like their daughter’s, came from within.

“We should get going,” she turned and grabbed a light sweater from the closet that they now shared.

After that first night, she had cleared out a section in it and a couple of drawers for his things. Though most of that space was still unused. He should go back ‘home,’ pack up some of his stuff, and close up the cabin. But maybe he was avoiding that. Maybe things were just too tense in this new situation to be comfortable with that.

“The ceremony is at their ranch just outside of town,” Alicia said. “I’ll drive.”

Did she realize that he could not? Well, technically, he could. But it was not a skill that he had bothered to relearn. Most of the time, he was happy to stay on his mountain alone. He preferred walking into the nearest town on the rare occasions he needed something.

And when he needed to come here to the VA, he just got one of those car services to bring him. It was another of the arguments that the doctors had made for amputating his arm. With a prosthesis, he could learn to do so many other things, including driving again. Back then, it had not seemed such a big deal. But now, with Hope, he was finding all those things he could not do with his damaged arm more frustrating.

Yeah, he needed to talk to the docs.

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Alicia smiled as they approached the circle of chairs set up behind the sizeable ranch-style house. Steve's home was several miles outside of town. Its seclusion and the scenery were to be envied. The desert had a beauty all its own. Especially now.

People thought of the desert as dead. But it wasn't. It was teeming with life. Cactii offered flowers as lovely as any rose. Insects, snakes, lizards, and so much more. Maybe she was just prejudiced. After all, she had lived on the edge of it her whole life. Still, nature called to her, calmed her as it always had.

Hope spied Amy and a couple of other children from her school. She raced off to join them. Alicia caught sight of Chris's wheelchair and noticed Kacey next to him. She walked towards them. Jon could follow if he wanted. The man had practically ignored her the whole way here, chatting with Hope as she drove.

Things could not continue like this. She could not imagine living with this kind of tension for the rest of her life. The thing was, she shouldered much of the responsibility. She was the one that had chickened out when Jon dared to address things honestly. She did not have the words then or now to express how she was feeling. To reach him, convince him that the scars on his physical body did not change how she felt about him.

She forced a smile as she approached her friends, "Where's Noah?"

"He has training exercises this weekend and couldn't get out of them," Kacey replied as she looked over Alicia's shoulder.

What did she say? How did she introduce him? It was just another reminder of the uncertainty in this situation. Thankfully, Chris saved her the trouble.

"Hey, buddy, this is my partner, Kacey. Kac, this is Amy's dad, Jon."

Jon brushed past her, extending his good right hand while hiding the damaged one behind his back, she noticed. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Chris has told me so much about you."

"Don't believe any of it," Kacey laughed as she took his hand. Her eyes moved to Alicia's, "I can't wait to hear the story behind this one."

Lucky for her, a pretty young woman and what appeared to be her two beefy bodyguards chose that moment to step through the arbor of wildflowers, which would be the center stage for the ceremony.

The odd thing about them was that each of the buff guys had a brightly colored baby sling wrapped around his shoulders, and cherubic little heads peaked out of them at the audience as if this were an everyday experience for the babies.

Alicia breathed easier as she signaled for Hope to join them, filling the vacant seats next to Kacey and Chris. The girls had barely settled into seats next to one another when the familiar melody and classic voice began to blast the message 'love is all you need' from somewhere behind them.

The small crowd of around fifty people seemed to turn as one to look over their shoulders for the source. They were greeted by the sight of the tall, classically handsome man with dark hair in a custom-made suit. On his arms were two glowing brides.

Sarah was swathed in a tight-fitting straight cut and heavily beaded cream dress that flared about her shapely calves. Her long dark hair was swept back from her face and off her neck, secured in a fashionable chignon. Atop her head was a silver and diamante tiara. Her make-up was impeccable as she held tightly to her husband's right arm.

Mandy was almost the complete opposite. Her white dress was a loose, gauzy confection that flowed in waves about her rounded fecundity. Her blond hair flowed about her shoulders and face. Her head topped with wildflowers, and in lieu of designer heels, she was barefoot, making her seem even more petite compared to her two tall and glamorous partners.

The commonality for all three was the glowing look of love on their faces as they walked the make-shift aisle between the rows of seats. Each looked at the people around them, smiling and occasionally nodding at someone. Mandy even lifted her bouquet of wildflowers in a wave to Amy and Hope.

By the end of the song, they had joined the unusual assembly under the bower. The pretty young woman that Alicia had first noticed stepped forward. Her voice was surprisingly strong for someone so young and ethereal-looking.

"We welcome you all to this special celebration of love between these wonderful people: Steve, Sarah, and Mandy. I know that this may seem unusual for some, or perhaps most of you, odd even. But I grew up the only child of the most amazing single mother who taught me that, as the song said, love really is all you need. My mother's message and life went beyond that. They were a testament to the fact that Nothing Done In Love can ever be wrong."

The woman looked to the two men on either side of her, exchanging secretive smiles with each. "Even for me, that message was not always easy to learn in a world that for millennia has placed strictures of religion and law upon love. That has defined it so narrowly as only between one man and one woman. It is not easy to be different. To openly love as the goddess wills you."

She smiled at Steve, Sarah, and Mandy as she continued, "It has been my privilege to get to know this family over the past few months through the relationship workshops that our center operates. So, it was my great pleasure when they asked me to officiate at this commitment ceremony."

"I know personally that such is a bittersweet experience. While we come together today to celebrate love and life, it saddens me that this cannot be a formal union. That while in my

mother's lifetime, we have come far enough in expanding those old definitions of love to recognize that it is not merely men who love women and women who love men. But that sometimes it is men who love men and women who love women. I am proud to live in a country that finally recognizes that."

She paused and sighed, "But I am saddened that we have not yet come to realize that love is big enough, deep enough, profound enough to encompass more than just two people. For some of us, love is shared intimately between three, four, or sometimes more people. That rather than dividing us with jealousy, such relationships can bind us tighter. That love can be like ropes where more strands bring greater strength."

"It is my deepest Hope that I will live to see the day that families like Steve, Sarah, and Mandy and my own can enjoy the same legal standing as marriage." She smiled as she looked around the crowd, "But until that day comes, The Danvers Foundation will continue to promote unions such as these with the words of my mother..."

"Nothing Done In Love can ever be wrong."

"But this day is not about our center, my mother, or my family. It is not even about the greater issue of equality for polyamorous families. It is about three people. Three individuals who have struggled against personal and societal norms to come to this point, to the revelation that love is all that matters. It is all we need."

"It is their story to share with you and their love we celebrate this day. Steve."

Alicia felt the tears forming in her eyes. If only it were as simple as this woman said. She and Jon did not even battle those societal stigmas as Steve, Sarah, and Mandy did. Or as Kacey, Noah, and Chris. But despite being just one man and one woman, it seemed that sometimes love was not enough.

At least not to break through some walls, she looked over at him. Would she ever be able to convince him that her love was more significant than those scars? That all she wanted was him.

The man behind those blue eyes whose pain had bored into her mind and heart across the table in the diner that night. Blue that had deepened to midnight swirls as they touched that night, two souls reaching out to steal something so precious. And in the process create something equally beautiful, she reached out and brushed a soft curl back from their child's cheek.

She wished it was that simple for them.

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Jon felt her eyes on him. His throat tightened as the vaguely familiar man stepped forward. If only it were that simple. If only he were man enough...

"Thank you all for coming today. Some of you know me, know my personal struggles. For others, I may look vaguely familiar. That is part of the curse I have borne my whole life.

Being the son of a great man is never easy. Being the gay son of the greatest Marine general of a generation was and is the only life I have ever known.”

Hands reached from behind the man, feminine ones on each shoulder. Steve turned and looked at each of the women, smiling.

“It was never easy. I think I always knew I was different. And no matter how hard I tried to be the son that my father wanted, it was never enough.”

He paused and looked down at his shoes before continuing, “By the time I hit puberty, I knew. I knew that I was not attracted to girls like the other boys. I was blessed and cursed to come of age in a time when there was an active homosexual movement. At least, I had a word, something that described how I felt for the first time.”

“But still, I pretended. I tried to deny who and what I was. To please my father mostly. But moving from place to place like we did, living on one military base after another, there were no opportunities to network with others like me. At times I thought I was the only one. The only gay kid around.”

“Then, we moved here. The first people I met at my new school was this flaming queen and her studious best friend.” He turned and held out his hands to the women, “And for the first time in my life, I felt accepted. That I was free to be me. At least around them.”

“I don’t know what might have happened to that fucked up kid. Oops, sorry, Mandy. I forgot about the kids.” He looked out at the audience, “Sorry, kids. I’m sure many of you have heard that word before. You know I should not have used it. At least not here. I apologize.”

Hope’s teacher smiled and winked at her children as the man continued, “I don’t know what would have happened to that messed up kid if it weren’t for the two of you. You both have always been my anchor. My rocks. The only people I felt safe being me around. You were my best friends, and you still are.”

“You were there by my side. You, especially Sarah, encouraged me to face myself, my fears, and my father. When I finally found the courage to come out to my parents, it was the two of you who were there for me, shoulders to cry on.”

“That song says love is all you need. But there is something else, something we need alongside that love, maybe it is part of it, and maybe it is different. But love without acceptance is meaningless.”

“I know that. I have spent all my adult life coming to terms with the words, ‘you are still my son, and I will always love you, but I can’t accept what you are.’ I can’t tell you the damage those words did. But, my girls know.”

Tears spilled over the man’s eyes and down his cheek as he addressed Sarah. “So, it is unconscionable what I put you through, sweetheart. I, of all people, should have understood how important that acceptance was when you came out as transgender.”

“But I was selfish and as small-minded as my father. All I could think about was me - how I was losing my lover, my husband, how everything would change now. I am sorry. You deserved so much better. So much more than I gave you. Nothing I say now can make up for the hurt I caused you then. All I can promise is that I’ll spend the rest of my life trying to make that up to you.”

“You are the person I love. Your laughter. Your joie de vivre. Your smile. The way you always see the good in people, even me. It is your soul, your spirit, that I love. It was not easy for me to understand that, to get to the point that I realized your body is just a container for that. And it does not matter. Yes, in this case, my eternal love, whether you are called Marcus or Sarah, does not matter. I love the person you are inside.”

Jon’s throat tightened at those words. The idea that a physical body did not matter, that love was more important than all that, struck to his very core. If only that were true.

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Alicia felt those words like a hot knife cutting through butter. Never had she heard it better put into words. That was precisely how she felt about Jon. If only she could find some way of making him believe it.

Steve turned slowly to Mandy. “You have always been there for me. For us. Our best friend. But not until this past couple of years have I understood what that meant. The way that you fit perfectly between us. How you could see both sides without ever taking one. You were always just there.”

“And I took that for granted too. I discounted the value of that friendship simply because, for me, it was not sexual. But, sweetheart, as wonderful as it is and can be, there is more to life and love than mere sex. You showed me that too. And in the process brought us all closer. That too is love.”

“Sarah and I are not complete without you. And this baby is just a physical representation of that. We will always be eternally thankful to you for being a part of our life. An equal part.”

Steve took their hands and brought them to his lips, first kissing the back of Sarah’s hand and then Mandy’s.

“My girls. You complete me. You bring me peace. You comfort me. You challenge me to be a better man. I love you both the same and differently. And I know in my heart now that what we share, as unique, as different, as unfathomable as it is to this world, is, at its core, love. Deep and abiding love.”

“Thank you both for sticking with me. For teaching me what love really is. For never giving up on me even when I pushed you away. Thank you for loving me.”

Was that what it took? Was it as simple as not giving up? As loving him, being there, and showing Jon that she was not going anywhere?

And if it was, did she have that strength? Could she withstand more rejection like that night in the desert? Could she find it inside herself to try again?

Catching a glimpse of his damaged hand wrapped around their daughter's shoulder, Alicia knew it was not a choice. She had no other option. As Steve said, they belonged together. Why else would Jon have been saved? Why else could she never move on, never be interested in another man?

And Hope? She needed them both. But not battling and insecure, she needed them whole and united. If this world was to become a better place, if humanity was to evolve, stop sending boys and men like Jon off to be nothing more than cannon fodder for the greed and hubris of others, then that woman was right. We needed to recognize that love was the power that bound us all together.

The love of a mother for her child. The love of a woman for a man. Or a man for a man. A woman for a woman. Or any combination of that. Love was love. How and with whom we shared that was no one's business except our own and our partners.

That was the world she wanted to leave for Hope. A world where her daughter, where everyone was free to love who they wanted. And in this case, that began by modeling what love was. By finding the power within herself to take that risk.

Alicia reached over. She placed her hand over Jon's badly damaged one. He looked up at her, and she wanted, or perhaps needed, to believe that he understood. That he was trying to meet her halfway.

Hope looked up at them. She beamed from within as her tiny hand covered theirs. Yes, a three cord strand. That was what they were. What they would grow to become was still an open-ended question, but this was the beginning.

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Jon brought the bottle of cold beer to his mouth and drew a long swig. It was a refreshing contrast from the stifling desert heat that was reaching its zenith. He stood on the edge of the artificially green lawn looking out at the stretches of seemingly barren sand and rock. Was there some hidden meaning in that? That was just one of the myriad of questions that he had been trying to come to terms with since the ceremony ended three beers ago.

Hope, Amy, and a handful of other children from their class ran about, playing, and laughing. Alicia had drifted into conversation with a group of women, mostly centered around the woman who had officiated this unusual ceremony.

As an outsider, he was still trying to figure the complexities of it all out. He had quickly managed to realize why Steve looked so familiar. He was a younger version of the man under whom Jon had served for most of his decade in the Marines. Jon knew the high standards the man had as a commander. He could not imagine what it would have been like being his son. Especially his gay son.

Of course, he had learned earlier that Sarah was transgender. She had been born with a penis, but that never felt right. He had not known though that Steve and Sarah were married. Well, he supposed technically, Steve was married to Marcus. He shook his head, too many beers to come to terms with that one.

But it was like the woman said, did any of that matter? Love was love, right? And he had seen enough of this world to know there wasn't enough of it to go around.

The thing that he was struggling with most, though, was that moment. When Alicia had reached across and touched his hand, or what little was left of it. The way she had looked at him. He could almost feel it. Love. Real love.

Not that he was sure he even knew what the hell that was. While he was not gay, he could most definitely identify with Steve when it came to being a disappointment to your parents. He was stuck right in the middle. A perfect older brother who excelled at everything. Academics, sports, and leadership. The sweet baby sister who was the apple of everyone's eye.

Then there was Jon. Too active. Not focused enough. Too opinionated. Always getting his good clothes dirty. Never using the right fork. Hell, it was a fork; what did it matter which one you used for what?

And he certainly did not want to think about his first marriage. Had he ever loved her? Or was it all just another rebellion against his family, the great Tyler name? Had she felt that? Was that what had driven her into the arms of his best friend? Or was he giving them too much credit? Was it nothing more than too many long deployments and lust? Did it matter? No, he had never loved his wife.

No, only with her, with Alicia, had he caught fleeting glimpses of what he believed was love. But how did someone like him know? Was it love he saw in her face this afternoon? Or was it pity? Resignation maybe? Trying to make the best of things for Hope's sake?

And it was damned sure they needed to do that. It was the least they owed that little girl. The very least she deserved was two parents who put their differences and needs aside and did what was best for her. But was that enough for him? Could he settle for that? Especially with Alicia, the woman he loved? And he was more confident now than ever that he did love her.

"Looks like you could use another one," Jon turned to see Chris holding out another bottle of beer. But then he drew it back, "Wait, you aren't driving, are you?"

Jon shook his head, "Nope, one of the things the docs say this arm ain't good enough for."

Chris nodded and passed him the other bottle. "You still thinking about letting them amputate it?"

"Yeah. I know I should, but knowing and doing are sometimes two different things." Was he talking about the surgery or other, more significant issues in his life?

His friend sighed and joined him, staring out at the desert in silence for a long moment.  
“There comes a time when you gotta take the risk, bro.”

Was his friend talking about the amputation or those more significant issues? Did that matter?  
“I know I’m not supposed to say this, but fuck, I’ll blame the beers. I’m scared. What if I make the wrong decision? The wrong choice?”

“Like you think you did that day?”

How had the man known? How had Chris cut to the very core of what was bothering him most? How could he ever again trust his ability to make the right choice when his decision had cost his friends, good men, their lives?

“Man, sometimes all we can do is play the hand that life deals us. Sometimes the cards don’t go our way. But life isn’t a card game; we don’t get to fold when we’re out of money or luck. I’ve had too many fucking friends fold in this game. I’m not gonna blame them. Hell, knows I’ve thought about folding a few times myself.”

“The thing is that sometimes life does deal us a winning hand. But even then, it is up to us to decide how we’re going to play it. Do we go all-in? Or do we fold our full house aces high to a pair of deuces because we’re afraid of betting too much and losing?”

“You’re the only one that can make that decision, dude. But for what it’s worth, your old lady is over there pumping that New Age guru for information on how to make someone realize that you love them, not their appearance. What you say we take our asses over and break up the girls’ club?”

Jon brought the bottle to his lips and drained it. Dutch courage, maybe? But he wanted so desperately to believe that what his friend said was true. That what he had glimpsed in her eyes was real. But Chris was right, this was the highest stakes poker game he had ever played, and the thought of losing was paralyzing.

The funny thing was the thought of winning was almost as scary. Did he still have it inside of him to be the man she needed? A real husband this time. And a father. To Hope...and to any other children they had. Hell, he was behind schedule on that one. Seven wasted years and they had at least five more to add to the brood.

Yeah, Alicia was mini-vans, half-a-dozen kids, a cat, and he definitely wanted a dog. A nice big one. Not a Saint Bernard. It wouldn’t be fair with this heat. A golden retriever or collie, maybe. Hell, he was planning dogs and kids already, and he had not made love to his woman in seven long years. That needed to change. And the sooner, the better.

Might as well not bother with the damned condoms this time. They hadn’t worked with the no-strings shit. Besides, a new baby brother or sister could not come fast enough for Hope. Yeah, sometimes life did deal you a winning hand. But you had to have the courage to go all in. And come what may, this hand he was betting it all.

## Chapter Twelve

Alicia watched Jon tuck Hope into bed. She had crashed hard in the car, but then too, it was past her bedtime by the time they had left the party. She did not envy Miss Mandy the next day. Half the kids in her class would be falling asleep at their desks.

But this day had been enlightening in more ways than one. She was still trying to process all the things that she had discussed with Kaitlin Danvers. But above all the others, there was one thing that rang true in her soul – she had to stop protecting herself. She needed to give this thing a real go. And that meant she needed to confess how she felt to Jon. How she really felt. And that was a scary thought. How did she tell him that she had fallen in love with him that night? That she still was.

One thing that did help a bit was hearing what Kaitlin's partner Chase Logan had said... "It's not up to you to convince him that you love him. He's gotta come to terms with that himself. All you can do is offer your love freely." He had gone on to explain his own troubles with coming to terms with losing his leg.

There was so much to process in her head. She was tired too. Bone tired. The thing was, she did not want to spend another night like the past three, carefully clutching her side of the bed and waiting for the man she loved to fall asleep.

Jon brushed a kiss on the top of their little girl's light brown curls. "Good night, sweetheart," he whispered as Hope turned over on her side, tightly clutching her pink fluffy unicorn. He stood and walked towards her.

She inhaled deeply, willing herself to take that risk. She held out her hand to him, "Hope isn't the only one exhausted tonight. What say we head to bed too?"

Slipping out and closing the door behind them, she looked up. Jon's head was down. It made her nervous that she could not see his eyes. Had no idea what he was thinking or feeling. His voice was low when he finally responded.

"You go ahead. There are some things I need to do first."

She felt as if he had stabbed her. Was he avoiding her still? His words gave little clues, but she could not help the doubts and insecurities that assailed her. She had tried again, and been rejected, again. "Okay," was all she could mumble as she pulled her hand back.

She was determined to make it to her room, their room, before the tears started. And she would once more be safely hugging her side of the bed and pretending to sleep when he did join her.

But his fingers tightened on hers, preventing her escape. She turned her head towards the wall to keep him from seeing the unshed tears that she was fighting so valiantly to hold back. He was not having that either as his other hand, the damaged one, came up to her chin, lifting it and turning her face so that she was forced to meet his gaze.

He closed his eyes for a moment, and she heard him draw in a deep breath before he spoke. "I'm sorry, Alicia. But there are some things I need to do first." He paused, and she could feel his insecurities, "Routines. To prevent further complications..."

He stared at the floor for a long moment, "With the scars." After a long pause, he looked back up and met her gaze, "I just wanted you to understand. It isn't that I don't want to, but that I can't."

"Even though the burns healed, if I don't..." He shook his head, "I won't bore you with the specifics. I won't be long, though. Fifteen minutes or so." His fingers squeezed hers, and he attempted one of those rare lopsided grins, "I'd like it if you can manage to stay awake. We could talk a bit, perhaps?"

Alicia felt her heart sore to the heavens. She could feel how incredibly hard that must have been for him. But his explanation made sense. She had done a bit of research over the past few weeks, from the very beginning actually, the moment she had looked into those eyes and recognized her lover.

She should have realized that he could not just come straight to bed, that he needed to clean and moisturize the old wounds. Otherwise, that website said they could dry out, crack, and become infected.

She was uncertain how to handle the situation, though. She was curious. Not in some perverse way, but in practical ones. If they were going to make this work, spend the rest of their lives together, Jon could not keep hiding such practicalities from her. The question was: was it too soon? Would she just push him further away? She wasn't sure, but she was tired of playing things safe.

"Can I watch?" The words were no sooner out than she realized how callous they must sound. Her hand flew to her lips. Her gaze sought his as those tears she had been fighting spilled over, "I'm sorry. That came out all wrong. I didn't mean like that. I don't know. It just seems that if we're going to make this work..."

Couldn't she ever say the right things? Even when she tried, it seemed she always messed it up. She had probably set this whole thing back weeks or months. She just wanted to run. Run and hide. Turn back time would be a good thing. Learning to think before she spoke might be nice too.

She could barely see his face for the tears that had suddenly gone from a light shower to a flood, "I'm sorry. I'll wait in the bedroom when you're done. If you still want that is," she fumbled words her words.

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Jon tightened his hold on Alicia's hand. "No, you're right. If we're going to make this work, then I have to quit hiding."

He felt the tightening in his chest. He recognized the fear and uncertainty that had gripped him earlier. He remembered those first weeks after he made it back home. The nurses had

tried to work with his mother to teach her the proper way to clean and care for the burn wounds. He still remembered the way that Marianne Buford Walker Tyler had drawn back in terror. In the end, the great Tyler money had funded home health nurses who came twice a day once he was released home. They did what his mother could never bring herself to.

Of course, after almost five years, the scars that covered his head, neck, back, shoulders, and part of his chest were far from those oozing, red, and open wounds. But still. If his own mother could not bring herself to touch him, how could this woman? And why did that pain cut deeper?

He swallowed his fear, his uncertainty, and his doubts. If Alicia could take the chance to reach out to him like this, he owed her the benefit of the doubt. He had to meet her at least halfway. "If you're sure? I mean, if you want..."

He forced that smile he knew made his face seem more grotesque than reassuring, but it was the best he could do. "Let me get some things from our room. I'll be right back."

He rushed down the hall without waiting for her answer. Was he afraid that now he had agreed she would change her mind? Flee? Where would she go? That was just it. Where could either of them go, really? They had to start somewhere. This tension could not continue. It was not good for either of them...and eventually, once the newness wore off, it would not be good for their daughter either.

If this was where she wanted to begin, then so be it. Perhaps it was better sometimes to face the worst, to jump into the deep end. And standing naked in the shower with her watching would be that. Her staring as he massaged the moisturizing cream into the scars was not going to be easy.

He grabbed the leather shaving kit that contained all the things he needed and a fresh t-shirt and boxers. He inhaled, willing himself to find the courage to face whatever was to come. Could it be any worse than the unspoken tension of the past three days and nights?

Remembering the look on his mother's face, yeah, it could be. But it was better to face that too. Yank that band-aid off and face whatever was to come. He sent a silent plea to whatever was out there - and despite it all, he did believe that something was. Even if he had long ago abandoned his parents' vengeful and terrorizing Southern Baptist god.

It took only seconds for the short walk back to where she waited with her back turned outside the bathroom door. But it seemed an eternity, and he was a condemned man on that final walk. She turned as he approached. She had dried her eyes and had that forced smile on her face.

"You know it's okay if you've changed your mind. I won't hold it against you or anything. I mean..."

Her delicate hand came up to rest over his heart. "No, I haven't changed my mind. I just want to say thank you, Jon. Thank you for trusting me. I know this must be incredibly hard for you. But it means a lot to me that you are willing to try."

He chuckled, “Shouldn’t those be my lines, sweetheart?”

“We both have to try, right?”

He nodded as he opened the bathroom door. He had not realized until that moment how incredibly tight a fit this was going to be. There was no place to hide in such a small space. He would be exposed. Totally and completely.

Jon hesitated. His fingers hovered uncertainly at the bottom of his t-shirt. He willed himself to act, to move. But before he could, he felt Alicia’s soft form pressed to his back. He looked down and watched as her fingers gripped the fabric. She tugged it upwards. He lifted his arms as far as he could, pulling his good arm through the hole and tilting his head and other arm until they sprang free.

In the process, he had turned until he faced her. Alicia was so incredibly close; barely inches separated their bodies. He inhaled to steady his shaking hands as her fingers began to trace the pattern of raised red and silver lines from his neck across his chest. The right side was not so bad, but it was the severely marred left she concentrated on.

He had known that the scar tissue was more sensitive to touch but never had he realized just how much. Her light, tentative tracing was driving him insane. For once, not in a bad way. But his cock that was always at half-mast around her was now rock-hard. If he looked down, Jon feared he would see it jutting from his boxers that felt incredibly tight and restrictive.

As if she could read his thoughts, Alicia’s soft hands slipped inside the elastic waistband of those as well. He watched her bite her lower lip as she pushed them down over his hips. His cock sprang free. He brought his good hand up to cover what he could of it. “I’m sorry. I know this wasn’t what you had in mind. But I don’t have much control when I’m around you...”

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‘Trust your instincts. The goddess will lead you,’ the woman’s words echoed in her memory. She sent a plea out to the goddess. Was this the right thing? Her hand pushed his aside and wrapped around the hard length as she dropped to her knees in front of him.

“I don’t think that’ll be much of a problem, do you?” She blew each word across the purple-red tip where a bead of pre-cum already gathered at the slit. It was a hypnotic sight. She was powerless to stop herself from sticking her tongue out and licking it away. She savored the sweetness as she looked up at him.

“Maybe this wasn’t what I had planned, but, Jon, I’m tired of second-guessing myself. Or questioning if everything I do or say with you is wrong. I want to follow my heart. Like I did that night.”

She knew that the tears she had barely managed to contain earlier were trekking down her cheeks once more, but she did not give a damn about those either. This felt right. More right than anything had in a very long time. In seven long years.

“And right now, what my heart wants is to swallow your cock until your fucking head explodes. Then we can talk or deal with whatever else there is.”

She did not wait for permission or a response as she once more leaned forward, swallowing the head of his hard cock. Her hand wrapped about the base moving up and down the hard length as she sucked and licked it.

She heard Jon’s quick intake of breath, felt the expletive to her core as he wrapped his good hand through her hair, using it to guide the motions and rhythms to match the ones that his hips were making as he face-fucked her mouth.

She was not sure how she found the nerve, but her other hand pushed her dress and panties aside, then slipped between her open thighs, finding her clitoris as she stroked it softly. She battled to forestall her orgasm.

As wonderful as that night had been, this was the sexiest, boldest thing she had ever done. And that fact alone had her hanging on the edge of a powerful orgasm. But she did not want to be alone. She wanted them to come together as her hand and mouth increased the pressure and speed on his cock.

“Fuck, Alicia! Please, I can’t hold out much longer, sweetheart,” Jon swore as his hips jerked a faster pace.

She smiled around his dick as she nodded her head. “Then don’t,” she managed to gurgle without ever releasing his length from her lips.

Jon roared as his fingers in her hair tightened almost painfully. His hips now pounded against her face, almost burying his entire length in her throat. She gagged a bit before reminding herself to breathe through her nose, to loosen her throat, and go with it.

The pace of her fingers on her clit increased too. She applied more direct pressure as she felt her body tighten. She pushed herself over the precipice as she shouted around his cock, entirely buried in her throat now.

Thankfully, it came out as nothing more than a gurgle. She was glad as she felt his hot seed filling her throat and mouth to overflowing. If not for his cock and come, her screams could have woken the dead. Their shared orgasm seemed to go on forever as he sagged against the edge of the lavatory for support.

Alicia was not sure how long they stayed like that. The tiny jerks of his cock in her mouth seemed perfectly timed to the powerful aftershocks of her release. When she finally found the strength to move, she dropped back onto her bottom, sitting on the cold bathroom tiles at his feet. She looked up; those eyes that she could never forget danced with laughter, and dare she Hope joy.

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“That was certainly a surprise,” was all Jon seemed to be able to say.

“A good one, I Hope,” she blushed.

Jon held out his good hand for her. Pulling her to her feet to stand in front of him, he brushed a soft kiss across her cheek. “No,” he paused until her eyes that were filled with shock and perhaps fear, held his. “No, sweetheart, that was not a good surprise. That was a mind-shattering blow job of one.” Her pretty face relaxed into a smile.

“Now, since you’ve broken the ice with some kick-ass cock sucking skills, would you care to join me in the shower?” He wiped a drop of his cum from her cheek where it had somehow landed.

“I’ll wash your back if you wash mine,” she teased.

He inhaled and took a baby step towards trust and faith in this woman, in them. “I’d like that. My back is the one area I have the most trouble reaching. I’ve even had a couple of hospitalizations over the years when it cracked and became infected.”

“Yeah, I wondered about that when I was reading on the internet about...”

He could not contain his curiosity, “You read about burn scars on the internet?”

“Well, of course, I did. I wanted to understand what you had been through.” Alicia dropped her eyes, “Then it became more about learning what I could do, how I could help. I mean, if you want, that is.”

He bent and placed a soft kiss on her forehead, “I would not say I want, but yes, sweetheart, if it doesn’t bother you too much, I would appreciate the help.”

“Only if we can occasionally have hot shower sex, or you’ll let me suck your cock.”

“Oh, I think that could be arranged. Although as hot as I found it watching you finger your pussy, I’m dying to taste you again.”

“Not enough room in here for that. But tell you what, how about we shower and then you teach me how to massage the moisturizer properly, and we can retire to the privacy of our room for something a bit more comfortable.”

Jon was not sure what to make of what had just happened. Shit, it was even better than he remembered. But he was still struggling. As much as he wanted to believe all that bullshit about love not being tied to appearances, he lived in a world where children burst into tears at the sight of his face, where adults ignored him rather than face their insecurities and prejudices.

He had a choice to make. The same one he had struggled with all day: play it safe or go all in. Was that really a choice at all? “I think that is an excellent idea, sweetheart.”

He watched her strip off the gauzy sundress that had swirled about her all day, a tempting game of reveal and conceal over her head. Plain white bra and panties on her were as sexy as anything from those expensive lingerie shops though she seemed to blush as she reached

behind her and released the fastener. The bra slid down her arms revealing breasts that were a bit larger than that night. He fought the need to reach out and touch them. There would be time for that later. The bathroom offered neither the space nor comfort for the things he had in mind.

She was blushing by the time her fingers slipped inside the elastic waistband of her panties. He loved the way she bit her lower lip and looked up at him from beneath hooded eyelashes. “How about we do this at the same time?”

Jon shook his head, “Not this time. I want to enjoy watching you.”

She sighed, and the pink stains on her chest, neck, and cheeks deepened almost to scarlet. But she complied, pushing the white scrap of nothing down her legs and kicking them aside. Her hands on her hips, she looked at him. “Okay, your turn now. No more excuses.”

He laughed. It felt good to laugh with her. Had he ever laughed during sex before? He did not think so. But as liberating as it felt, he was determined it would become a regular thing. He was not as graceful as she was, pushing his boxers down.

While undressing was more straightforward, he still struggled with his damaged left arm being virtually useless. “Sorry,” he mumbled as he stared down where his still hard cock had caught the cotton material, making the simple task more complex.

She stepped forward, her slightly chapped hands reaching inside to grasp his cock as her other one worked in tandem with his good one to complete the job. She gave his cock a couple of strokes, “We might have to allow extra time for these things in the future. It seems things keep coming up that distract me.”

He laughed as she reached around him to turn on the shower, adjusting the water temperature. “Is that good for you?”

Jon was confused at first. How could Alicia doubt that her hand slowly stroking the entire length of his cock was anything but good for him? Then he realized she was asking about the water temperature. He reached out with his good hand, “Yeah, that’s fine.”

“Only fine?” she teased again as she quickened the pace of the stroking.

Jon placed his hand over hers, and as hard as it was, incredibly hard, he stilled her motions. “You keep doing that, sweetheart, and we’re never gonna make it to the bedroom.”

“Would that be such a bad thing, jarhead?”

Jon leaned down; his tongue traced the outside of her ear for a moment before he blew softly into it. “Yeah, it would. For what I have in mind. That tub or the toilet seat are not big enough for me to spread those silky thighs and bury my face in your cunt for an hour or two. A bed will be a much better option for both of us.”

He loved the slight hitch of her breath at his words, but he appreciated the shiver that ran through her whole body even more as he bit gently into her earlobe.

“If you insist then,” she teased as she reached behind him and grabbed a washcloth. She went for the shower gel but stopped and looked up at him. “Is this okay?”

Jon was unsure where he got the sense of mind to think, let alone answer her question. “No, too many perfumes and too drying. Inside my case next to the sink.”

Alicia smiled and nodded as she opened the old-fashioned leather shaving kit and found the rectangular plastic container with the bar of soap in it. She held it up, and he nodded as she opened the box and spread soap on the washcloth.

“Turn around. Let me get your back first. Cause it seems I keep getting distracted with your front,”

He turned and braced his hand against the cool tile wall as the washcloth and her hands began to rub tenderly across his shoulders. If there was a heaven, this was it. The soft roughness of the cloth could not hide the warmth of her touch beneath. The only problem was how slowly she moved, back and forth until it was almost torture, and he groaned.

“Is that good or bad?” she leaned forward to whisper against his cheek. Her hard nipples just brushed his back.

“Both, sweetheart, both,” he could not resist turning his head enough to capture another taste of her sweet lips. This had to be a dream, right? No way were they both naked in the shower with her hands moving slowly across his back and lower still.

Then she did the unthinkable as she dropped once more to her knees, her hands firmly kneading his buttocks as the cloth lathered it. Down his legs and calves, “Lift your foot,” she demanded as she watched each of those.

“Now turn around, Jon.”

His mind replayed the image of her on her knees earlier with his cock in her mouth, and he almost came on the spot. He sighed, unsure if they would ever make it to the bed this night. “Darling, do you have to torture me like this?”

“Oh, most definitely,” she smiled up at him as she knelt on the cool porcelain of the tub. This time she worked in reverse, the cloth wedging gently between each toe, then up to his calf, across his thighs. Jon watched her, memorize each tiny movement, memories to store up for later. When reality struck, and he was once again all alone.

He practically collapsed against the cool tiles when those dainty hands caressed the insides of his thighs, coming up to tenderly move the cloth across his balls that tightened and lifted at her caress. “Fuck,” he whispered in sacred prayer.

“If we manage to get around to it tonight. But who cares? We have the rest of our lives. I’m sure at some point, we’ll take the edge off this thing between us long enough to fuck our brain out, right?”

The combination of her innocent smile and dirty words had him lacing his fingers through her hair, even as she brought the soapy rag up and began running it up and down his still hard length. “Damn it, Alicia, I can’t take much more.”

She just chuckled, “Or what? What you gonna do? Pin me against the wall and fuck me right here?”

Her words were all it took, the image too enticing as his hand gripped her just beneath the arm, lifted her to her feet. He turned her and pushed her head forward until it rested against those tiles that seemed like hot coals burning through his memories.

He wedged his foot between her legs and kicked them apart. He stepped into that space, his fingers lacing through hers on the wall, his cock brushing against the round globes of her bottom, then slipping quickly between her slick folds. He moaned in her ear, “Tell me to stop, sweetheart.”

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Alicia smiled in pure joy. Maybe there was something to this trusting the goddess shit. That had undoubtedly gone better than she could have imagined. She could only pray that this night would be more of the breakthrough they needed.

Maybe she should slow things down. It had been seven long dry years since she had sex, real sex. With this man. But damn it, she did not want to. And her body was more than ready. It had been for days, weeks.

“Fuck me, Jon. Fuck me, here. Fuck me now,” she pleaded or commanded, even she was not sure.

She felt him surge forward. Her body opening like the first rose in spring for his hard cock. She sighed as she pushed her bottom back to meet his forward motion. The head of his cock firmly embedded in her wet cunt. Her fingers flexed rhythmically on the wall, tapping out the perfect chorus as her ripe body sored to the heavens. Her orgasm hit her hard and fast.

“Holy fuck,” he breathed against her ear as he fought the intense contractions of her body around his throbbing length. “Damn, sweetheart, you’re even tighter than you were that night.”

“Shut up, jarhead, and kiss me before I wake this whole damned house with my screams.”

He chuckled as he bent his head to do just that. But Alicia was not in the mood for tentative or tender. She wanted this man. She had dreamed of this moment for seven years, her favorite fantasy. And she wanted it all. She bucked her hips faster and harder, even as her tongue plunged into the recesses of his mouth.

She took the lead, and she kept it. Some part of her still frightened that Jon would change his mind, reject her again. His fingers flexed and tightened around hers. His lips drew back just enough to whisper, “Baby, please. It’s too much. Fuck, I’m already on edge, and I just came. What do you do to me?”

“Shut up and fuck me,” she gave no quarter. Her hips moved faster as she felt the last couple of inches imbed inside of her. “Please, please, Jon.”

He moved deeper and faster, pounding into her. Pushing them both higher, their orgasms hit them fast as they clung to one another beneath the chilly spray of water. Their lips melded to one another; their cries stifled in the kiss.

She clung to him. Complete for the first time in seven long years. But this night was not over. This was not a ‘no strings attached’ charade. This was the beginning of the rest of their lives. And that meant it was time for honesty. “I love you.”

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Jon shook his head as he reached around her to turn off the water that was now cold, as cold as the dark void in his soul. He wanted to believe her. Wanted to believe that it was possible. That it was that simple.

But this was not some dream, some fantasy he made up. This was real life, and that had not come easy for him in a long time. Perhaps never. Love was not something he had a helluva a lot of experience with.

He was silent as he turned his back, using the excuse of reaching for a towel to compose his turbulent emotions. He brought it to his own face, not to wipe away the water from the shower, but his tears.

What did he say? How did he respond? It would be too easy and completely honest to simply say, ‘I love you too.’ But would that get them anywhere? Would that solve anything? Was it the new beginning they needed?

“Jon?”

He heard the insecurity in her voice. That was not what he intended, what he wanted. He did love her. He had from the night that this woman took a broken and battered soul into her arms and bed. But they needed far more than a quickie in the shower to build a life together, a family for their daughter.

He leaned down and wrapped the towel about her shoulder. He brushed a tender kiss across her forehead. “We should get dried off. We can talk better in our bedroom.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Alicia turned away, her back to Jon and the door. She adjusted the towel, slipped it from her shoulder to wrap about her chest, and secure it between her breasts. Over her heart. She would swear that it was broken except for the loud, solid rat-a-tat-tat she felt pounding in her temples. She hugged the towel tighter, like a shield, some protection from the cold of his response.

She had played her hand and lost. What now? If she could not convince this man of the truth, what future did they have? And most importantly, what about Hope? What about their child? She leaned her head against the cold tiles and felt the hot tears cascade down her cheeks. The only man she had ever said those words to...and that was his response?

“Go ahead. I’ll be there in a minute.” She needed some time alone to consider her options. Did she have any?

“Sure. I’ll take my stuff and get ready in the bedroom. I’m sorry.”

Alicia waited until she heard the click of the door closing before she sunk to the cool recesses of the tub. Until she gave her tears free rein. She held back the sobs, though she wanted to wail like the mothers she had seen at that wall, the ones who had lost sons, husbands, and lovers.

She, too, had lost. Lost something precious. She had lost her dreams. Dreams of marriage and family built on honesty, respect, and most of all, love. What now? Did she ask Jon to leave? Make some arrangement like so many parents did to share custody of their children?

How would she explain any of that to Hope? She could not bring herself to cut him out of their child’s life completely, not now that they knew one another. Did she walk in that room, head held high, and pretend that nothing had happened? That she had not said those words? That she did not feel them?

Why had she done it? Why had she taken such a risk? Why hadn’t she just waited, bided her time, taken things more slowly? She laughed, and it had the ring of a crazy woman to it. When it came to Jon, she had never played it safe. She had taken a stranger into her bed and her heart. The only one-night stand of her life. And from that came the best thing that had ever happened to her, Hope.

What now? Her heart hammered with each beat, her head pounded as she rose from the tub. She leaned against the wall as she stepped out. She hugged that towel even tighter as if her life depended upon keeping it in place. She went through the motions of brushing her teeth. Even then, she swore she could taste him, taste Jon’s come overpowering the mint.

What now? Each step of her bare feet on the dingy brown shag carpet in the hallway. That carpet had been there all her life. She should have replaced it long ago. She paused outside of Hope’s room. Did she dare look in? How could she not? Hope was at the center of it all. She could not forget that. What was best for her daughter was the only thing that mattered?

She closed the door softly and leaned her head against it. What now? That damned voice echoed in her heart and her head. She trembled as she took the dozen or so steps down the hallway. Dead woman walking, what now? The blood in her icy veins seemed to chorus.

She paused outside her bedroom door — their bedroom. Her head leaned against the solid wood. It seemed the only stable thing in her world just then. She felt like she ought to pray, but to whom or what she had no idea.

What now? Wasn't that a prayer in itself? She turned the knob of the door and prepared to face the reality of what now.

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What now? Jon knew that he had fucked up. Big time. But how did he make this one right? Was that even possible?

He sat on the end of the bed with the towel wrapped around him. His head almost touched his chest. Despite the warm shower that had loosened the contractures, he felt the tightening and pull from the unusual position. But at the moment, the slight pain helped him to focus.

What the hell did he do now? What could he possibly say to make this one right? And when things were going so well.

Going well? He laughed; an earth-shattering porn star blow job in the bathroom was a helluva a lot more than 'well.' And the way that Alicia had responded when he fucked her in the shower? It was better even than that night, and that was saying something.

Then she said those three little words. And he had ruined it all. What now?

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Alicia closed the door behind her quietly. If it were any solace, Jon looked almost as miserable as she felt.

He was still stunning. Sitting naked, except for the towel, on the foot of her bed. Their bed. Was it still? Did she want it to be? Hell, yeah, that was not even a question.

The question was: how did they do this? How did they make a family when she loved him, and he didn't love her. Or at least, was not willing to admit it. Or even accept the love she offered.

She clutched the towel tighter between her breasts as she covered the short distance between the door and where he sat. "Do you still want to show me what to do? How to help?"

She stared at the ugly brown shag carpet. She should think about buying new. Right now, she wanted to think about anything but what happened in that bathroom. Well, at least at the end. The rest of it was kinda nice. Kinda nice? Hell, it was mind-blowing. At least her orgasms were.

And she had thought that Jon was as into it as she was. But maybe that was just a guy thing. Perhaps it was true. Maybe guys did not care as much about who sucked their cocks as long as they got sucked.

His fingers touched hers, laced through them, and tugged her forward gently. He buried his face in the rough terry cloth of the towel. "I'm sorry," was all he muttered against her stomach.

She just held him, wrapped her arms about his scarred shoulders and back, and held him close. It was a start, right? Something? Maybe not the words of love that she ached to hear, but it was better than nothing. Better than pretending to be asleep to avoid an uncomfortable situation?

She swallowed back tears, "It's okay," she lied. "Show me what to do so I can help out." That would be something useful, a good place to begin, Alicia assured herself.

"It's okay. You don't have to," Jon's grip on her remained tight.

Alicia pulled back out of the embrace and knelt on the floor at his feet. Her hands tenderly cupped his face, "I know I don't have to. I want to. Jon, I want to. If we're going to make this work, even if the only reason you're doing it is for Hope's sake, then we need to talk. We need to find common ground, and we need to stop trying to protect ourselves."

She thought that he was going to continue arguing. The silence stretched out for several long moments. But then he nodded his head and passed her a jar of cream. He showed her the motions to use and how much pressure to apply, surprisingly a lot. By the time that they got to his mid-back, Alicia was gaining confidence.

The burn scars' ridges might feel stiff and rough beneath her fingers, but she could almost feel the flesh loosen with each stroke. This area was redder and drier. The scars were less healed than the others.

"That's the hardest area for me to reach," Jon whispered as she added a touch more pressure to her slow, circular strokes.

She continued the massage for several long moments; both of them lost in their thoughts. The monotony helped to clear her head. One thing kept coming back to her: Chase Logan's words, "It's not up to you to convince him that you love him. He's gotta come to terms with that himself. All you can do is offer your love freely."

She had and look where that got them. What now? It seemed that was the question that controlled her life, especially when it came to Jon. Did she pull back, play it safe, and pretend she never said those words? Or did she keep offering her love freely?

Wasn't that what she was doing now? She could have climbed into bed and hugged her side as she had done the past few nights. Refused to talk or pretend nothing had happened. But she hadn't, and she knew that she wouldn't. Maybe she couldn't.

She finished up, mindful not to overdo it. Then she bent and kissed the top of his head. “I guess we should get some sleep. It’s been a big day, and tomorrow I’m sure we’ll have a tired and grouchy little girl to deal with.”

She stood up and tucked the jar of moisturizer back in his case on the dresser. She grabbed a nightshirt from her drawer.

“Leave it.”

She turned back to face him, “Please.” He stared at that ugly brown carpet, not meeting her gaze. “Please, I’d like to hold you. Naked. If that’s okay?”

She nodded but realized that he did not see because he was still examining that damned old carpet. “I’ll keep this at the foot of the bed. Just in case Hope needs something during the night.”

He looked up and gave her that lopsided grin, “Yeah, I never knew how much having kids changed you.”

She laughed as she threw back the covers and climbed into her side of the bed. Should she scoot over, closer to the center? She did not have time to decide because his good hand reached out and pulled her there anyway.

She leaned her head in the crook of his shoulders and neck. At least tomorrow morning, she would not be embarrassed and pretend that was not how she had slept. “Good-night, Jon,” she squirmed a bit closer.

She felt the warmth of his breath as he kissed the top of her head, “Don’t think I have forgotten. I still owe you a few dozen orgasms and a couple of hours with my face buried between your legs.”

He sighed, and his arm about her tightened, “But I guess you’re right. Today had been a big day. And tomorrow will be here sooner than we think. Nite-nite, sweetheart.”

\*\*\*A month later\*\*\*

Jon watched the girls run and climb in the park. As if the world could be that perfect. As if nothing mattered. Oh, for the world to be so simple.

But his wasn’t. Oh, sure, since that night, they had not only been sharing the same bed but burning up the sheets of it, too. Hell, his sex life had never been better.

Almost every night, he waited up for Alicia to come home. He often ran her a bubble bath, or they shared a shower. Whether it was her massaging the creams into the scar tissue or him rubbing the knots from her tight shoulders or tired feet, it almost always got around to sex.

He had kept his promise to her - a couple of times, actually. His head buried between her soft thighs, like that apple pie, made him wish for his sense of taste.

He half-smiled; of course, she had returned the favor a few times herself. Damn, the woman was talented with her mouth and hands. But he knew the truth; the reason why the sex was so fucking fantastic was that Alicia put her heart and soul into it.

Honestly, he did too. Trying to show her with kisses, caresses, and his body what he could not bring himself to reveal with words. But there was still a tension between them as if both were walking on eggshells or a field of landmines.

He knew he needed to do something about the situation. This was his fault, after all. Alicia had put herself out there, taken a risk, and he had blown it to hell just like that IED had the SUV that day.

“So, what the docs say about your arm, dude?”

Chris’s question brought him back to the present. That was the other thing that was bothering him. He had been back to the VA twice. The doctors were adamant. Not only was his bad left arm not improving, but it also seemed that the circulation to his remaining fingers was deteriorating. That, of course, decreased the feeling in them, increased the chance of injury to them, and even infection. That arm needed to be amputated. Soon.

But he had been delaying that decision too. Trying to come to some closure, but he wasn’t sure what with.

Was it some epiphany with the survivors’ guilt that seemed to plague him even more? What right did he have to love and happiness when it was his decision that had cost other good men their lives that day? Some of them had wives and children too. Why should he be granted the opportunity to watch his Hope grow up when they never would? And why should he receive mind-shattering blow jobs when they would never hold their wives or love them again?

Fate was such a suck-ass excuse for being happy at the expense of others. Or that was what he had been telling himself for five years. Or was it that he was wasting the opportunity that Fate had given him? That he was half living. Going through the motions while playing it safe. Perhaps enjoying all the benefits without any of the responsibilities? Those three little words hung over his head like a guillotine.

It had been weeks, and he needed to do something. ‘Shit or get off the pot,’ was the expression that his first Gunnery Sergeant had used. Chad Wilson had always said that there came a moment when you just had to make a decision because not making one was usually worse.

Maybe that had been his problem that day? Perhaps he should have decided to turn around? But they had their orders, and no matter the feeling in his gut, he and his man had all been trained to follow orders.

But he could not go back to that day, no matter how much he might want to. He could, though, make the decisions that faced him now.

“They want to amputate.”

“So, what’s new with that? The question is: are you gonna let them?” his friend pressed.

He nodded his head slowly, finally coming to the only logical decision there was. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“You guess? Come on, man. What’s wrong with you? You have a beautiful little girl and a woman who loves your sorry ass. Why do you still have your head up your ass?”

Jon sighed heavily, then turned to look at his friend. “That’s the problem. Alicia does love me.”

“And you’re still an ass? So caught up in the past and guilt that you can’t accept her love and just be fucking grateful?”

Jon chuckled and shook his head, “Kacey must make a killing off that swear jar.”

His friend slapped him on his shoulder and laughed. The sound rang across the park with joy, “Let’s just say she’s planning a trip to Disney World in Florida before the baby is born. But that’s not the point. This isn’t about me and my potty mouth. What’s up with you?”

Jon shrugged and looked at the ground. The grass under their bench was wearing thin, just like he knew Alicia’s patience would one day. “She told me she loved me. That night after the wedding. Commitment ceremony, whatever the fuck.”

“You better watch it; Alicia will be getting rich off your sorry ass too if she starts one of those damned jars.” His friend watched their little girls playing for a long moment. The silence just hung like the heat of mid-day over the desert.

“I was on the other end of that one, friend,” Chris kept his eyes firmly ahead on the girls as he spoke. “I might have spent a lucky thirteen years in the Marines, but before that, I’m the product of a couple of tree-hugging, free love hippies.”

Jon’s brow furrowed as he tried to manage how someone made that transition. “I was ever bit as idealistic as my parents. I spent a whole year bumming around the world, helping in places most people never even heard of. Then another four years at college. But none of it seemed right.”

“I wanted to make a difference. Do something important. I got caught in one of those recruiting stings on campus just before I graduated. I signed away eight years of my life without consulting my parents.”

Chris chuckled, “Yeah, that went over like a fart in church. Not that I have ever been in many of those. But after getting over the initial shock of my decision, my parents have always supported my choice.”

He hit the wheels of the chair, “Even when I ended up like this in a chair and no working dick. They never once said I told you so. But trust me, the thought went through my head lots - that I got what I deserved. That I should have never been over there, defending some rich fuckers’ rights to rob other people of their oil.”

He shook his head and looked Jon directly in the eye, “But I’m getting off the point. Those words were ones I heard a lot growing up. My parents said them to us kids all the time. At least two or three times a day. And they weren’t shy about saying them or showing them to one another either.”

“So, when I came to realize how I felt about Kacey and even Noah, it was the most natural thing in the world just to blurt it out.” He began laughing and shaking his head. Even their daughters looked up from the swings just to make sure everything was alright. Chris just waved at them, and they went back to playing.

“That one took some serious explaining. I was worried for a few minutes that Noah would have the guts to throat punch the cripple. But like I told him, I might not swing both ways, but love comes in all kinda forms. So, hell, yeah, that man probably saved my miserable life, gave me something to fight for, and brought the girls into my life, fuck, yeah, I love him.”

He shook his head, and those grey-blond curls that hung to his shoulders danced about them, “But what surprised me was that those words made Kacey just as uncomfortable.” He paused for a long moment, once more, lost in his thoughts and memories. He finally met Jon’s gaze, “It ain’t just us guys that have a corner on survivors’ guilt.”

Chris sighed, “She’s afraid that she’s betraying Thomas’s memory by caring for Noah and me. It was a rough patch, pretty touch, and go there for a while. And trust me, I was beating myself up pretty good over being such a loudmouth.”

“So, what happened?”

Chris waved for the girls to join them, “Nothing happened, dude. I learned to pour my love into that little girl. Noah’s come around. A bit, at least. You know those half hugs that guys give one another. And our friendship seems stronger than ever.”

“But Kacey?”

His friend shook his head and stared off into the clouds. Jon would have sworn he saw tears there, “What do words matter anyhow? She’s with us. We’re a family. And the baby will cement that. Isn’t that what’s really important? Actions, not words?”

It was the same argument that Jon had been having with himself for weeks. What did it matter whether he said those words? Or even if she ever did again. What mattered was that they were there for one another and their daughter?

So, why did watching his friend laugh while he wrapped the sweater about the little girl make his chest so damned tight? That argument hadn’t held much weight before, but after this latest conversation, it seemed even more hallow—just another thing to add to his growing pile of things to regret.

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Alicia was putting Hope to bed when Jon got out of the shower. Alison had insisted on closing the again tonight. While Jon appreciated the extra time it gave him with his family, he felt guilty; like he was forcing the woman from the only home she had known for years.

Jon sat at the end of the bed they shared. He wore only the towel wrapped about his waist as he rehearsed what he would say for the hundredth time that day. He wanted to get this right. A man only proposed once. That other one did not count. Somehow he had known even then his marriage would not last. This one would. It had to.

He had left this one too late. He had done everything all wrong. You fell in love, then proposed, got married, and had children. He still had not figured out what order he had done it all in. But there was no denying that the proposal and marriage were coming last. And he was running out of time there, too. The doctors were pushing for the surgery as quickly as possible.

“Okay, so what’s bothering you?”

Jon had been so caught up in his thoughts that he had not even noticed her standing in the doorway. She frowned as she closed that door behind her and came to sit next to him on the bed. Her hand reached out, taking his mangled one.

The doctors were right. The damage to the nerves and circulation in that hand and arm meant that the sensation in it was never quite right. But now, if he were not watching her clutch it, he probably would not have known she touched him at all.

“The doctors want to amputate it.” That was not how he had planned to begin this conversation.

“Yes, we’ve talked about that before.”

He shook his head, “No, I mean now. Well, not now. Not right this minute. But soon.”

She inhaled deeply, “How soon?”

“They haven’t given me a date exactly. But as soon as they can arrange it. In the next couple of weeks, for sure.”

“I thought it took months for those sorts of things with the VA?” He watched the light dawn in her expressive dark eyes, “Oh, it’s that bad?”

He sighed as he turned to wrap his good arm about her. “It is not life-threatening,” at least not yet, he left unsaid. “But I have lost all sensation in it, and they say the circulation is just as bad. There’s no Hope now of it improving.” That was harder to admit than he had thought.

She nodded as she studied the old brown shag carpet that he had come to love as a symbol of home. His home – with them. “Okay, so we knew this might happen, right? We just need to prepare Hope for it. How long will you be in the hospital? Will she be able to visit you there? Will you need to stay at the rehab center for long the way that Chris did?”

Her questions came at him so fast that his head hurt. He had been so focused on the proposal and arranging a quickie wedding that he had not considered how they would handle their daughter. He did not even have answers to half her questions.

“If things go well, I shouldn’t need to be in the hospital for more than a week or so. Not since I live locally now and can go back easily in an emergency. I think it is the same with the rehab, though I’ll need to check. But it seems it would be cheaper for them if it could be handled outpatient. And you know how the VA is about anything that saves money?”

“As for Hope visiting, I think so. I mean, other guys always had their families and kids visiting. So, it shouldn’t be a problem. Only during certain times, though, of course.” He sighed, “As for how to tell her, I don’t have any idea. I was hoping you would.”

She nodded and smiled, though he could tell it was forced. “The truth works best. Or so I’ve discovered.” She blushed, “Well, most of the time.”

It was his opening. To bring up the idea of marriage. Well, to propose. Alicia had been the one to bring up the idea of marriage all those weeks ago. Reaching behind him under the pillow where he had hidden the small black box, “Speaking of which...”

He was going to do this right. He dropped to one knee in front of her as he fumbled with his one good hand to open the damned box. Yes, it was time, past time for this surgery. He finally managed to snap the lid open, “Alicia Marie Flores, would you do me the honor of being my wife?”

Jon watched the tears gather in her eyes as she reached out tentatively for the box. But they were not the tears of joy he had Hoped to see there. Her hand trembled as she took the box from him and closed the lid. His heart stopped as his Hope died.

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Alicia had dreamt of this moment. He had been right. Since she was a little girl, Alicia had wanted nothing more than a happy marriage and children. If she had gone about it in a roundabout way, nothing had changed that dream. Not since the moment she looked into those eyes and saw her past and future rolled into one.

But not like this. It was all wrong. Sure, she had been the one to casually toss out marriage as the most natural solution to their complicated situation. But over the weeks since that night in the desert, she had come to Hope and believe they could have so much more than mere convenience and great sex.

Love.

She had Hoped and, at moments, thought they were getting to it. That ‘playing house’ was more than just the easy path for their child’s sake. But this was something else. She saw that in those eyes that had always held her heart since that first gaze across the table. She had felt his pain then. And she did now.

She closed the lid of the box. Though she could not bring herself to hand it back to him or answer his question. At least not yet. “The truth, Jon. I want the truth. What is this all about? Why now? And just how dangerous is this surgery?”

She watched his shoulders slump as he exhaled deeply. He rose from the floor and came to sit beside her on the bed once more. He stared at that ugly brown carpet. She really ought to replace it.

When he spoke, she heard the slight tremble in his voice. He still would not look her in the eyes, “It is as routine as these things go. I swear it, Alicia.”

“But?” She had to know the truth, all of it.

“But life is never routine. It is not that simple. Nor that sure and safe.”

She heard the pain behind those words. She knew that he spoke of so much more than this situation or even his wife’s death. Though he often tossed and turned, mumbling in his sleep, he had never spoken about it. Whatever it was that changed his life over there.

When she asked Chris, he had dismissed her concerns, saying that Jon would tell her in his own time, or not. That sometimes, some things were best left in the past. But that was not good enough for her.

But hearing the depths of that pain now made her want to take this man, this hero, into her arms and body, to offer what respite and solace she could from those unspoken burdens. She resisted that urge, knowing that if she did, she might never get the answers she needed.

The silence stretched between them like the gulf that was growing rather than shrinking as she had Hoped. She resisted the urge to fill it with words, with more questions.

Just when she feared that they had reached an impasse, he looked up. His gaze held hers, pleading for understanding as much as his words did. “I know I did this all wrong. I’m sorry about that, too. You deserve so much more than I can ever offer.”

He paused and looked down. Her eyes followed his to the mangled hand that was the issue of the moment. Her heart quickened, and she fought the urge to give in, to offer him the assurance he needed as silence once more echoed off the walls of their bedroom.

When he looked back up, she would have sworn those eyes glistened with tears. She could almost hear them in his voice as he spoke, “Please. Please, I know this is not how you dreamt of this moment, what you wanted. I’m not...”

He stopped and stared at that disgusting brown carpet again. His pain was hers. And just when Alicia was sure that she could not take anymore, that she would succumb to his pleas, spoken and unspoken, he lifted his face.

“The truth is that I need to know that if something did go wrong, you and our little girl would be taken care of.”

Alicia wanted to scream and argue. She had managed for seven years on her own as a single parent. What made him think that she could not again? But the pain in his voice kept her from speaking, and his hand covering hers as they clutched that tiny black box spoke louder than his words.

“Please, Alicia. I might not have much to offer you or our little girl, but let me do this. Let me give you my name. I need to know that if the worst happened, then you and Hope would have the assurance of my pension and insurance.”

He sighed and chuckled in a tight sort of way that made her curious, “Besides, if worst came to worst, I’d sure as hell rather have you calling the shots than my mother.” He gave her a tight smile as he squeezed her hands around the rigid velvet box, “Please understand.”

How could she not? How could she not succumb in the end to the pain that rolled off this man as profoundly as it had that night?

But she could not bring herself to say the words. To give her consent to something that was so much less than her Hopes and dreams. So she merely nodded and forced a tight smile as she felt tears gathering in her eyes.

He beamed at her, nonetheless. She did not hear much of anything else he said as she turned her head and allowed the tears to course down her cheeks. Washing away those Hopes and dreams. Even if what he said made sense, it was not enough. Not enough for her broken heart anyway.

## Chapter Fourteen

Jon was thankful that Alicia insisted on this being an informal affair. That meant he did not have to struggle with that damned tie again. Although he would for her. But the buttons on his shirt and belt buckle were proving more than challenge enough with only the one good hand. Hell, even buttoning and zipping his khakis hadn't been as easy as before. If there had been any doubt in his mind about the surgery, there wasn't anymore. With no sensation and little circulation, that hand was useless.

He stared into the bathroom mirror of the hotel room. His mother had insisted that he stay with them in the posh resort in Palm Springs. Her excuse was that it was bad luck for the groom to see the bride on their wedding day. But as always, the great Marianne Buford Walker Tyler had a hidden agenda. They had not been back here half an hour when she knocked on his door.

He had cut short her diatribe on why this marriage was 'another of his mistakes' with the announcement that Hope was his child. But he had regretted it almost before he had finished the sentence. It only served to launch the women into an attack on Alicia's character and supposed scheming to pass her bastard off as a Tyler. Of course, his mother's racism and classism were just below the surface with comments like 'those people.' It had turned into another of their yelling matches.

Until J. T. had arrived to negotiate a truce. His 'perfect' big brother swooping in to save the day – again. The only good thing was that his beloved baby sister was eight and a half months pregnant and could not make the trip. His mother, brother, and J. T.'s family were bad enough. Priscilla, J. T.'s equally 'perfect' wife, at least in the eyes of Marianne Buford Walker Tyler, was almost a clone of his mother and sister. A woman with 'breeding.'

Jon rested his scarred cheek against the cold, damp mirror. Why had he invited them? But he knew the answer to that one, too. This was his public declaration of war against his mother. He had already spoken with Kacey and downloaded the forms from the VA. Even before the ink was dried on his marriage license, he would be signing a new will. And the VA papers would be in the mail first thing tomorrow. After all, this was about protecting his family. Or so he kept telling himself.

And part of that was establishing his intent with his family. If the worst happened, he knew that his mother would contest the will. Hire the best lawyers and do her best to make certain that Alicia and Hope were left with nothing. Not merely from his grandfather's trust that she controlled, but his VA benefits and his cabin as well. He had been frank with Kacey about the whole thing, and she assured him that she would make sure it never came to that. But still, this public spectacle could be used in court, too.

"Jon."

Shit, just what he needed. His unimpeachable, superstar big brother. But to be fair, J. T. had not sided with their mother last night. Instead, true to form as the renowned U. S. Attorney

for the Southern District, Texas, the man had brokered a temporary cease-fire with the woman. Didn't he, at least, owe J. T. something for that?

"I'm coming," he gave up on the button he had been struggling with. It would just have to do. Or maybe he could get Chris to help out before the ceremony? He and Alicia had foregone any attendants, other than Hope and Amy. Amy was serving as flower-person and their daughter as ring-bearer. But if he had had to choose a best man, this time it would have been his new friend rather than the man on the other side of the door, related to him by DNA only.

He paused with his hand on the doorknob, trying to prepare himself for another round of his family's interference with his life. But if Marianne Buford Walker Tyler had sent his brother to deliver more of her vitriol, he'd show the man the door just as quickly as he had their mother. He turned the knob and opened the door.

J. T. leaned against the door frame, his dark blond head bent. When he looked up, Jon noticed the deep lines on his forehead and around the mouth, perpetually set in a frown like their mother's. "If you've come here with more..."

His brother held up his hands and took a step back, "I promise, that isn't why I'm here."

Jon shook his head and turned back into the hotel room. He was not convinced. How many times had the exalted Marianne Buford Tyler Walker sent this man to do her dirty work? Almost every time, her bullying had failed to get him to toe the line.

"I'm not listening to another of your speeches about family honor, J. T. We both know that honor has nothing to do with it. Money and power are all this fucking family ever cared about. And..."

"Jon, I meant it. I'm not here because of mother." His brother dropped his head and stuck his hands deep into the pockets of his suit pants.

The silence stretched out until it made even Jon uncomfortable, "Why are you here then, J. T.?"

His brother's smile was tight and forced as he finally looked up sheepishly from the carpet. "You probably won't believe me, but I came to wish you well."

Jon plopped on the foot of the unmade bed. J. T. was correct. He was having trouble believing him. After a lifetime of sibling rivalry, much of it fostered by their parents, it was difficult to imagine anything else.

But J. T. was an attorney. A powerful and well-thought-of one. He could make the difference. "If you mean that, brother, then I have a favor to ask."

J. T. chuckled, "Why do I feel this isn't going to be as easy as all that?"

Jon did that half-smile that was getting surprisingly easier as the muscles in his cheek became more used to the stretching. They had done that for him. His daughter and her. They had

given him something to smile about. Not merely for the first time in five years, but perhaps in his whole, fucking, messed-up life. Now he would do what was right by them.

“I want you to witness my new will today.”

“Woe, you don’t mess around, little brother. Would you mind explaining?”

It was Jon’s turn to glare at the plush beige carpet. It wasn’t as nice as that old brown shag stuff at his home. His home? Well, technically hers. Theirs? He wasn’t sure. Why had he allowed his mother to do this – again? He knew her schemes, divide and conquer. Wasn’t it the same old game she always played? Sow seeds of doubt laced with those knowing smiles. Then step back and watch the weeds choke out everything good. But not this time.

“I go into surgery on Thursday.”

Those lines in J. T.’s face deepened. “Another one? Does mother know? What for this time? More grafts? I thought the last round was the last?”

Jon shook his head, “No, mother doesn’t know. And I want to keep it that way. At least until you leave town.”

He looked his brother directly in the eyes as he spoke this time. If there was any chance of salvaging a relationship with the man, it had to be on his terms. “They’re amputating the left arm above the elbow.”

J. T. collapsed on the foot of the bed next to him. Silence filled the air once more, but this time it did not bother Jon. He could anticipate all his brother’s questions. They were, after all, the same ones he had struggled with for so long.

“The nerve damage and circulation in it aren’t getting better the way they hoped. In fact, it’s getting worse. The doctors have been pushing surgery for close to a year now. I just couldn’t decide.” He shook his head, “No, that’s not right. I didn’t have any reason to choose. Anything to live for. Not until I walked back into that diner and saw them.”

J. T. nodded, “I don’t want to argue with you. We’ve spent a lifetime doing that. But are you sure?”

Jon chuckled, “About the surgery? This marriage? Or that Hope is my child? It doesn’t matter. The answer to all those questions is the same: yes. Yes, I’m sure. The doctors say it will take some time, more physical and occupational therapy, and probably more patience than I have left. But eventually, I’ll be able to do more with a prosthesis than I can with this stub.”

“As for Hope, yes, she’s my daughter. And I don’t owe you or mother any further explanation than that. So, yes, I’m certain about this marriage, too. It might be a bit late, but I’m doing the right thing for my family. Including changing my will.”

“I realize what I’m asking of you, J. T. I know that if the worst did happen, mother would contest this will. Claim coercion or some such shit. But Alicia doesn’t even know about my

trust fund. She thinks this is about VA benefits and next-of-kin for medical purposes, and those do play into it. But damn it, my child has as much right to that money as yours or Clarice's."

"I trust that our friend Kacey has written as iron-clad a document as possible. But we both know that mother will throw the best lawyers in this country at Alicia. By you being one of the witnesses, it strengthens the claim. That a family member and another attorney knew of my intent would go a long way with the courts. But we both know if mother ever finds out..."

"She'll be livid."

"Actually, I was going to say she'll have your balls."

J. T. smiled and laughed; this time, when those lines deepened, they didn't age him beyond his years, though. "Yes, there is that. But I figure I have let you down often enough over the years. This seems like the least I can. Just do me one favor, try not to die. I would rather it not come to that."

"Trust me, I'm going to do my fucking best not to. For the first time, I have something worth living for." Jon would have sworn that some shadow or trick of the lights made his brother look almost forlorn.

"I'm happy for you, Jon. Honest, I am. If anyone deserves that, it's you."

"I don't know about deserving it, but damned, I'm not going to be stupid enough to look that gift horse in the mouth again," and he honestly meant that. No matter what his past held, they were his future, and looking back would get him nowhere.

"Okay, then, we better get moving. Priscilla and the children should be ready by now. Mother went on ahead to collect Alicia in a limo. They'll meet us at the courthouse."

"Mother went to pick Alicia up?" His heart pounded, and those elephants took up residence on his chest again. "I'll be lucky if she shows up once the formidable Marianne Buford Walker Tyler gets those vicious claws into her."

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Alicia stared at the woman in the mirror. Was that indeed her? Strands of hair on either side of her face were braided, interlaced with desert flowers, and drawn back into a ponytail that hung down her back. A wreath of more flowers set atop her head. Her dress was a natural muslin sundress that fell in waves above her knees in front and almost to the floor in the back. A bouquet of more wildflowers sat on the dresser, tied with a cream-colored ribbon to match her dress.

Perhaps it was not the lavish white wedding dress that she had once dreamt of, but it fit. Not just her body but her life...and this situation. It was not a situation. It was a wedding. The beginning of her married life.

So, why was she still haunted by those doubts? Even after succumbing to Jon's pleas and the insecurities in those blue eyes, she had been fraught with them. So much so that she had asked Mandy for Kaitlin Danver's number. She had already had two hour-long sessions with the woman. It was enough to get her this far. But she wasn't sure if it would get her down that aisle or those words passed her throat.

She heard a knock and turned away to get it, but Alison was already half-way down the hall. "I'll get it. You finish getting ready. It's a bit early, but maybe that's the others."

Unfortunately, it was not her friends. But her soon-to-be mother-in-law. Jon had tried to warn her. But Alicia was not sure there were any words to adequately describe Marianne Buford Walker Tyler. The closest she could come was a mix between the queen and Alexis Carrington. But possibly nastier?

Jon had repeatedly apologized for inviting his family, even before they showed up last night. But he insisted that in the long term, it would be best to confront the situation head-on. Especially since he believed that his mother would rush in the moment, she heard about his surgery and try to take over. Alicia had agreed with his logic and the decision.

Until the women, his older brother, and the man's whole family had shown up at the diner in the middle of a Saturday night dinner rush. The woman insisted that they all have a bridal dinner at the resort where they stayed in Palm Springs. An hour's drive? With a six-year-old who was already overly excited about the wedding? On one of her busiest nights?

Heck, she had broken with tradition and even closed the diner today. She could not remember the last time they had done that. Even on Christmas and Thanksgiving, they came in during the late afternoon to serve dinner to those without families, the poor, and the homeless. Not even after her Grandmother's death had she closed it. She knew that having everyone back here after the funeral was how her Abuelita would want to be remembered. She had even planned to do the same for her reception. But Steve, Sarah, and Mandy insisted they did not want her working on her wedding day.

Her wedding day? To that woman's son? Alicia swore she was about to throw up. What had she done? What had she gotten herself into?

"Is that what you're wearing, dear?"

Yep, those were the words she would expect from this woman.

What she did not expect was the confection of sunshine to race past her down the hallway and wrap her little arms around the woman's too thin waist. "Abuela."

She was eternally grateful that her daughter's face was buried in the woman's designer suit. Because the look on the woman's face would freeze ice on an August day in Death Valley. She lifted her chin, pasted a smile into place, and walked towards them. Her voice was far chipper than she felt as she unwound those little arms, "Hope, sweetie, we should let Mrs. Tyler have a seat while we finish getting ready."

"Abuela, Mama. If Jon is my Papa, then she is my Abuela now."

The woman tugged at the bottom of her black suit jacket. Her countenance was probably unnaturally tight from all the plastic surgery. Still, Alicia did not dare tell her how unattractive she looked with that expression on her perhaps once pretty face. “Yes, child, you should listen to your mother. The car is waiting. We need to head to the courthouse soon.”

The woman lifted her nose just a bit higher, if that were possible. “I suppose a courthouse is better than some questionable Vegas chapel, like last time.”

It was not the first time that the woman had made certain Alicia was aware this was not Jon’s first marriage. But she had known the truth of his marriage from that first night. Did this woman? If she did, then Alicia was guaranteed that Marianne Buford Walker Tyler had used that against her son. She was determined not to give this woman any further fodder against him.

“Please, have a seat. We shouldn’t be much longer,” she smiled down at her daughter but was saddened to see that the twinkle of excitement was dimmed just a bit. No, she would not allow this woman to do this to her child. Or her husband.

The woman looked around and tugged more on her jacket. “Actually, would it be possible for me to use your facilities?”

It took her half-a-heartbeat to realize what the woman meant, and she had to fight hard not to laugh at the woman’s ostentation. “Sure, it’s the door at the end of the hall. Straight ahead. Hope, are you ready? Have you brushed your teeth and washed your face?”

Her daughter gave her a knowing look, “Of course, I did that before I put on my new dress, Mama.”

“Alright then, let me just grab my bouquet from the bedroom, and we can head out.” Alicia forced one of those fake smiles as the woman turned down the hallway.

She followed her soon-to-be mother-in-law, though Alicia slipped into her room, their room now. She looked at the neatly made bed that she had shared with Jon for over a month now. Was this the right thing? Sure, between those sheets, they never had any problems. And there was no doubt that Jon was everything that Hope needed.

No, despite that woman and her own mixed feelings, this was the right choice. The only way, as Jon said. She faced the woman in the mirror once more as she inspected more than just her appearance. She would just have to learn to live with things the way they were.

She picked up her bouquet with resolve and turned back down the hallway but was disturbed by another knock at the door. Alison barely opened it when a perfectly coiffured Sarah burst through the doorway, dragging a very pregnant and exhausted-looking Mandy and a slightly pea-green Kacey. “The calvary has arrived, girlfriend.”

But it was the confident and serene young blond behind them whose smile did the most to reassure Alicia. Kaitlin had offered to officiate at the ceremony as she had for their friends. But Alicia could not bring herself to accept the woman’s offer. This marriage was, after all,

more of a business deal than the great love match that Steve, Sarah, and Mandy or Kaitlin, Chance, and Chase were. No, a courthouse was a more appropriate venue to seal this deal.

She felt the tears gathering even as the bile rose in her throat. She turned back down the hall just in time to brush past Marianne Buford Walker Tyler in her mad dash for the one bathroom in the house. She just hoped that she did not get vomit all over her wedding dress. This wedding was turning into enough of a disaster as it was.

But bless her, she loved Sarah even more as she overheard her loud dismay, “Oh, darling, we must have a fashion word. Black at a wedding? This time of year?” If anyone could put that woman in her place, it was Sarah.

## Chapter Fifteen

She had done it. Alicia had somehow made it down that aisle and mumbled her assent to this farce. She toyed with her glass of champagne. She had taken barely two sips in the past hour. She had not felt this sick since... No, she couldn't be. Well, of course, she could be. But now was definitely not the best time.

She looked towards the pool where her daughter, Amy, and J. T.'s middle son were splashing on the steps. Did timing really matter? Tomorrow, she'd buy another of those tests. But she still had to get through today. She sat her glass down on the mosaic table next to her. Without alcohol. Just in case.

"Are you okay?"

Alicia could not bring herself to lie to Kaitlin. But neither was this one of their counseling sessions where she unpacked her fears and insecurities. So, she simply smiled.

"What did you say you do, dear?" Marianne Buford Walker Tyler was doing her absolute best to make everyone uncomfortable.

Katie turned to the older woman with that same smile, "I took over my mother's foundation after her death."

"Really? The Tylers have always been involved in philanthropy. Of course, the Walkers and Bufords as well. It is, after all, our duty to help the less fortunate. Perhaps we've heard of your little foundation?" The woman brought her flute to her lips as she stared over the rim at Kaitlin.

"Perhaps you have. The Danvers Foundation has been active in advocating for the rights of the oppressed for a quarter of a century. My mother was a strong ally for the gay, lesbian, transgender, and poly communities."

Alicia wished she had a camera to capture the look on Marianne Buford Walker Tyler's face at that moment. But it was Sarah who picked up the baton as well as grasping Katie's hand and giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Yes, our Katie and the Danvers Foundation has been such a blessing to me as I transitioned."

Alicia was a bit shocked by her friend's words. She knew that Sarah rarely shared such intimate information with anyone. It had been quite some time since the woman had been misgendered.

"Transitioned?" It was J. T.'s wife who stepped into it. Alicia tried to remember the woman's name but honestly thought of her as more of Marianne's mini-me.

Sarah turned with a smile to Priscilla; Alicia was almost certain that was the woman's name. "Yes, dearie, I wasn't born this fabulous." Her friend leaned in as if sharing a secret, and Alicia supposed in some way she was, "I was born with one of those penises."

The woman's gasp was audible before she downed the rest of her champagne. Was it her third or fourth? "You mean you're a cross-dresser?"

Sarah threw back her dark head and laughed, "Oh no, sweetheart, I moved past that years ago. I am as much a woman as you are."

"I hardly think so," Marianne Buford Walker Tyler mumbled as she brought her glass up again.

"And attitudes like those are what my mother fought her whole life. Mrs. Tyler, people are people. We all have the same fears, doubts, and insecurities. We also have the same capacity for joy, compassion, and love. No matter the color of our skin, how much money is in the bank, what we were born with between our legs, or whether or not our sex organs agree with what is in our head."

"Joy Danvers message, the one that I am privileged to continue, is that sex is more than a mere physical act of procreation. It is communication. A word which is derived from commune. Through sex, we commune with one another and with the divine forces within ourselves. My mother believed and taught me that nothing done in love can ever be a sin. Can ever be wrong. Love is the divine power within us all. However, we choose to share that is no one's business but ours and our partners."

At some point, their little women's group had broadened. Alicia smiled at the two men who now flanked their wife. Once again, Chase and Chance wore sleeping babies on their chests.

But even former SEALs were not enough to silence some people's prejudices, "That is not how this world works, dear. Such deviant behaviors have never been acceptable in our societies. Both governments and religion have always had rules and laws against such..."

"Actually, Mrs. Tyler, you are wrong. There is ample historical evidence of the acceptance of homosexuality, transpersons, and poly relationships throughout our pre and early written history." Kaitlin reached out and squeezed Alicia's hand, "I will be happy to email you those references as well as copies of my mother's book and my own. But we are not here today to debate the nature of love but to celebrate the union of your son and his family."

Steve, too, had joined their group, resting his hands on Sarah and Mandy's shoulders. "Would you care for more champagne, Marianne?"

"Yes, please," J. T.'s wife bubbled more than the beverage, though perhaps it was those four glasses of bubbly that spoke?

"I think you've had quite enough, Priscilla. If you'll excuse us," the older woman placed her hand on her daughter-in-law's elbow, helping the younger woman to her feet.

Sarah waited until the women had entered the house before she lifted her hand to her red lips and patted her lashes, "Well, I never."

Steve leaned down and captured them in a heated kiss before smiling and winking at Mandy, "I know for a fact that you have, darling. And that you like it."

The whole group erupted into laughter. The tension broke before they began to disperse. Of course, the babies choose that moment to wake, demanding their dinner.

“Excuse us. I think that Sky and Joy want some Mommy time.”

“What my Katy-Did is trying to say is that these little hellions want boob,” Chase laughed.

“Then give it to them. No need to go hiding, dear. Unless you would rather, that is.” Sarah played the consummate hostess.

Kaitlin took one of the babies in her arms. Alicia was never sure which one since the family had chosen not to gender their children, preferring neutral colors and clothing. Her mentor and friend adjusted the layers of her clothes to accommodate nursing. “Thank you, Sarah. I was bolder when they were younger. But once they got to be a year, well, few understand the value of extended nursing and child-led-weaning. Even feeding our children has become another societal taboo.”

The next half-an-hour was filled with discussion on the issue and others related to parenting. They were equally intrigued when the topic turned to self-directed learning and democratic schools. Alicia lost herself so much in the exchange that she did not even notice that her mother and sister-in-law had not rejoined the group but instead taken up residence in chairs on the other side of the pool.

But she did catch when Jon nodded to Kacey, and he, his brother, and Steve slipped inside for several minutes. She had a good idea what was going on in there, but given the way this day was going, Alicia was not sure she wanted any part of the on-going Tyler family battle. Did she have any choice, though? She was a Tyler, too, now. As was her daughter. So too, would be any other children they had. But looking over at the other two women, Alicia wondered how that would even be possible?

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Jon shifted from foot to foot as Kacey set the documents out on Steve’s desk. The past eighteen hours had shown him how important this was. But would it be enough? If the worse came to worst, would this be enough to protect his wife and child from that woman?

He realized then that somewhere in less than a day, Marianne Buford Walker Tyler had gone from his mother, admittedly a poor one, to ‘that’ woman. He looked across the room where J. T. seemingly studied every book on the shelves. Anything to keep from looking at him? Was that anything new in his family? Where did he stand with the man, his brother? Or his little sister, for that matter? Did he even care?

He studied the other two people in the room. He was not especially close to either Kacey Turner or Steve Saunders. It was not because he had anything against either of their lifestyles. His mother’s prejudices had never sufficiently taken in his mind that questioned everything. But Kacey, Steve, and Noah all worked long hours. So it was only natural that he had gotten to know Chris and Sarah better. Still, he trusted them enough to ask their help with this.

“Okay, Jon, I have made the changes you requested to the will. But...” The woman looked at his brother’s back before she continued, “But after meeting your mother, I downloaded another form. It’s a Declaration of Paternity. We’ll need Alicia to sign it as well, but once she does, it gives you full parental rights and responsibilities for Hope. You can even apply for an amended birth certificate that lists you as her father.”

“No blood tests or anything required? We have talked about me adopting her. If things go okay with the surgery, I mean. But don’t we have to go to court or something?”

Kacey shook her head as he observed J. T. turn around to face them, “No, signed by both of you and notarized this document supersedes all that.” She looked at his brother as she spoke this time, “We know Alicia. Our family does not. But I am obliged to tell you that this document is virtually irrevocable.”

“Meaning?” J. T. directed the question to his friend.

“In California, even if DNA results later showed that Jon was not Hope’s biological father, the Declaration of Paternity makes him so legally.”

J. T. turned to him, “Jon, you know how mother feels...”

“Steve, will you ask Alicia and Kaitlin to join us?” The man stared at his brother for a long moment before nodding and leaving without a word.

“J. T., I’m sorry now that I brought you into this. You’re welcome to go back outside with the others. But I’m going to sign the declaration as well as my new will. Marianne Buford Walker Tyler made her feelings abundantly clear on this matter last night. But so did I.”

“I will not begin my marriage based on distrust. There is no doubt in my mind that Hope is my daughter. And I don’t need or want a DNA test to prove it to that woman. I don’t want to place you in the middle any more than I already have. But I hope that we are adult enough you won’t run tattling to Mommy.”

His brother, if the man had ever been that, shook his blond head and sighed heavily. “No, if this is what you want, I owe you this.”

“You don’t owe me anything.”

“Yes, yes, I do. For all the times that I did not stand up for you. For all the times that I was her patsy, trying to convince you to do things her way. And yes, for running to the illustrious Marianne Buford Walker Tyler and snitching you out. I won’t do that this time. You have my word.”

“And if you want, it would be my privilege and honor to witness the will and declaration. I know it can never make up for those other times. But believe it or not, baby brother, I’d like another chance to be your brother, and maybe one day even a friend.”

Jon was glad for once that his tear ducts were no longer functional. His brother’s words seemed so genuine that all he could manage was a slow nod as the others entered. Even Steve’s study seemed a bit cramped.

“What did you want, Jon?” Alicia frowned.

Jon asked Kacey to explain it all to his wife. Alicia nodded her head a couple of times before asking, “What do we tell Hope?”

He was not sure who she addressed the question to, but Kacey answered. Which was good considering he had not even thought about that dilemma. “At this stage, I would recommend

nothing. Children rarely see their birth certificates. So, that gives you a few years to figure out how to handle the issue.”

Alicia nodded again, then she glanced across the room to his brother before turning back to him. “Are you sure about this? Honestly, Jon, if your Family needs a DNA test to be comfortable with things, I’m sure we can manage something without Hope even knowing what it means.”

He shook his head and answered her with the truth that even he had tried to avoid. “No, not even a DNA test will make the great Marianne Buford Walker Tyler ‘comfortable’ with our child or our marriage. And frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn. You and I, and one day Hope, are all who need to know the truth. All this is about legalities that we both Hope will never be necessary but that I can’t afford to ignore. This is the fastest and easiest way to do things, sweetheart. Will you sign it? If not for me, then for Hope?”

The rest was over in only a couple of minutes with signatures and seals, handshakes and hugs. Jon steeled himself as J. T. held out his hand. He shook it quickly. While he was grateful for his brother’s assistance and more so for his promised silence, only time would tell how genuine the man was about the rest. He was a bit shocked when his brother embraced Alicia, “Welcome to the family. If you can call it that.”

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Alicia's mind was elsewhere as her friends talked about baby showers, homebirths, and breastfeeding. If what she suspected was true, she should probably pay closer attention. While she was not so sure about the whole water birth thing, she had learned more today from Kaitlin about breastfeeding than she had the nurse in the hospital after Hope was born. She had somehow struggled through sore nipples to nurse her daughter, but once she had gone back to work, it had become more than she could manage. But next time, maybe...

“That’s a mean thing to say. Take it back,” Alicia looked up in time to see Amy push Jon’s nephew into the pool. Thankfully they had all been cooling their feet in the shallow end. So, the boy was in no real danger. But her daughter was in tears.

Before she or Kacey could make it to the other side of the pool, Jon’s mother was there. Mrs. Tyler helped her grandson from the water, passing him to his mother before turning on the girls.

“How dare you?”

“But he said...”

“A lady never resorts to violence. Your behavior shows your poor breeding, lack of the social graces, and discipline.” The woman reached out and took both girls by the ears, dragging them from the pool.

“Get your fucking hands off my child,” Chris had made it around the pool faster on four wheels than they could on two legs. Though perhaps, she and Kacey were both frozen by the events that were transpiring.

“If you had taught the child proper manners, then none of this....”

“I have taught my daughter to defend herself. Come here, lollipop.” Chris held out his arms, but Amy shook her head, clinging to Hope. Until Jon pulled their daughter from the woman’s grasp, then the girl ran and flung herself on his lap, burying her little face in his Hawaiian shirt.

“And you of all people should know better than to allow that urchin to associate with such people. Jonathan Edward Tyler, your father and I taught...”

“Taught me that appearances were more important than honor. That drinking, adultery, and nagging were what marriage was all about. That brotherhood was a competition. That power and money were more important than honor, compassion, or justice. Need I go on?”

Jon bent down and cradled his crying daughter, “It’s alright now, Hope. I’m here. It’s okay.”

Chris drew his daughter back and brushed the tears from her eyes, “This isn’t like you, Amy. I trust you not to resort to violence except when absolutely necessary...”

“But Daddy, that boy called Hope a bastard. He said that Alicia was...” The little girl’s eyes found hers, and Alicia’s heart stuttered to a stop at what she saw there. “Mommy says that word is miscoginis... You know that word, Mommy. He said that Alicia only wanted to get her claws into Jon for his money.”

Kacey stepped within inches of Marianne Buford Walker Tyler. There was no sign of the friend that Alicia had laughed and cried with. The other new mother making it on her own even before her husband was killed in action. This woman looked every bit the hard-hitting assistant district attorney that she was reputed to be. Alicia was glad she was a law-abiding citizen.

“Mrs. Tyler, I am vaguely familiar with Texas law on child abuse. But let me remind you that you are in California now. And touching another person’s child is assault.”

“If that child had not bullied and abused my grandson, then...”

“And if you had not filled a child’s mind with such hate and prejudice, none of this would have happened. Those are not words that seven-year-olds come up with on their own.”

From the looks on both women’s faces, Alicia feared that her wedding reception was about to become a very bad episode of the Glorious Ladies of Wrestling. Not that she would mind seeing ‘that’ woman pushed into the pool in her designer suit.

But Steve and her brother-in-law appeared at the women’s sides at that moment. “As always, Mrs. Tyler, your presence is...” Steve shook his dark head and sighed before looking towards Jon, then addressing his brother. “I think it would be best if you took your family and left, J. T.”

The other man nodded to Steve then turned to look at Jon. Alicia almost felt sorry for the man. There was something about J. T.’s eyes. Then she realized what it was. She had seen that same pain in her husband’s blue depths so often. The pain was evident in the man’s trembling voice as he looked back and forth between Jon, Steve, and around the pool at the others, “I’m sorry. So sorry.”

Alicia could not stay to witness any more of the disaster that was her marriage as she turned and ran for the bathroom. It had been more than seven years since she first learned it was surprisingly easy to cry and vomit at the same time. But this was not how she pictured her wedding day.

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Jon sat on the end of their bed. His head in his trembling hands. Why had he done it? Sure, he knew all the logical reasons, but shouldn't he have seen that it wouldn't really matter? That his mother, no, 'that' woman would never accept the woman he loved or their child. Just as the great Marianne Buford Walker Tyler had never accepted or loved him. He wasn't even sure anymore that she genuinely cared about J. T. or Clarice.

But it was not his mother nor his brother that he was angry with. It was himself. He had failed. Again. Just like he had that day. Maybe Alicia and Hope had not died or been burned beyond recognition. But he knew all too well that scars on the soul hurt just as much. And right now, he feared that woman had killed something even more precious to him. Any chance of love and happiness with Alicia.

The look on her face as she ran from the pool. He had wanted to follow her, but Hope was still inconsolable in his arms. As Sarah tried to bundle his nephew in a towel, Priscilla had jerked it away, muttering something that sounded like freak. J. T. had disappeared into the house to get his daughter, who thankfully had been napping the whole time, while his oldest son just stared at the ground with his hands shoved into his suit pockets.

Steve had physically stepped between Kacey and that woman. Jon was still trying to figure out the look that passed between them. Sure, the scene she had caused was terrible. But that level of animus seemed to go deeper.

While he and Chris handled the little girls, Kaitlin Danvers-Logan had followed Alicia inside. It was probably for the best. Two hours later and he still had no idea what to say to her. How to apologize. She was still trying to calm their daughter and get Hope ready for bed.

This night was so different than he had planned. He and Chris had organized a surprise sleepover at their house for the little girls. And Jon... He had carefully planned and rehearsed how he was going to spill his guts to his wife. How much that night had meant to him. How he had come to recognize that he loved her before he had even stepped back inside that diner. How much these past weeks had meant to him. All his hopes for a future with them...

Instead, she had ruined it all. Once again, Marianne Buford Walker Tyler had destroyed his life and any hope for happiness he had. And he had let her do it. He had failed at the most essential part of being a husband and father – keeping this family safe. And he had no idea what to do now. How to make it right? If that was even possible.

“Hey, Jon, have you seen Hope's toothbrush?”

Her eyes were still swollen. Alicia looked pale. And the smile on her face was as fake as most of the jewelry his mother wore. It took him a moment to even process what she was saying. But when her words hit him, it was as deafening as that IED had been. He clenched his hands at his side. He could not manage to force a single word from his throat as he stood and pushed past her. This time he might kill that woman.

## Chapter Sixteen

Alicia laid her head on the stiff white hospital sheet. It was over. According to the doctors, everything had gone perfectly, even better than they expected. Jon had come around enough in the recovery room for them to move him back to his room. Of course, the anesthetic still had effects. He had been out for much of the past couple of hours.

She had sent Hope home with Chris and Kacey. They had discussed the whole thing with their daughter, Mandy, and their friends. Even Mandy felt that their daughter would be better off in the waiting room with the adults than trying to fit in at school. So, the little girl had read or colored.

The surgery itself had been shockingly short. Less than two hours. Another couple in recovery. Jon had come around enough to kiss Hope and tell her that he loved her before Kacey and Chris whisked the child away to pick Amy up from school.

Alison was filling in for her at the diner for the next few days. They had hired another waitress, too. They had found the woman through a woman's shelter. Kira upheld the pattern of the struggling single mother and was delighted to have found a job that allowed her son to come to the restaurant after school. The boy was a bit older than Hope and Amy, but he had taken up the role of big brother, helping the girls with homework.

By the time, DeShawn graduated and hopped on his bike in less than a month, the woman would be ready to take Alison's place. Well, at least as a waitress. Alicia knew that no one would ever take the woman's place in her heart. Ali had been her first adult friend, perhaps her first 'real' friend ever.

Everything was falling into place. It was all such an anti-climax after that disastrous wedding. After Jon had fled without a word on their wedding night, Alicia had finished putting Hope to bed. But the moment her daughter was asleep, she had collapsed into tears. Alison had overheard her and come into the bedroom. Her friend had been there for her once more when he had not been. Eventually, she had cried herself to sleep. Alone. On her wedding night.

She had awoken just before dawn. Jon sat silently on the side of the bed. At first, she had tried to pretend she was still asleep but eventually, the need to pee had won out. She would have gotten a shower and gone into the restaurant, but Alison was opening and managing the breakfast shift that morning. Reluctantly, she had decided it was probably best to get it all over with before they had to get Hope ready for school. She was determined that their daughter never witness them argue.

When she had finally found the courage to go back into the bedroom they had been sharing for weeks, Jon was still sitting there, toying with what looked like a plastic baggie. Something about the absolute defeated slump of his shoulders had deflated the anger that had raged through her since he walked out. On their wedding night.

She slumped to the bed next to him. They had sat like that for a couple of minutes before he passed that bag to her. Alicia had frowned when she saw what was inside. "I don't understand. Where did you get this? I gave her one of the unopened adult ones and promised to get a new one today."

When he looked at her with those blue eyes, her world shifted. “Marianne Buford Walker Tyler took it when she went to the bathroom yesterday. She intended to run the DNA test that I refused to agree to.”

She had shaken her head, “But I told you that’s okay. If your family needs proof Hope is your daughter, I understand.”

“No. I won’t begin our marriage based on distrust.”

“Jon, that’s not how I see it.”

“No, sweetheart, you don’t understand how ‘that’ woman works.”

“Oh, I think I got a mouthful yesterday.”

He had given her that quirky smile she loved so much and taken her hand in his. “Even if she did not fabricate the results, and she might. There would come a time when she would say or do something about that test to drive a wedge between us. Make it look like I doubted you or that the test was my idea. As bad as yesterday was, that was only a small taste of what Marianne Buford Walker Tyler is capable of.”

“And I don’t want any part of that or her coming between us or around Hope. I Hope you can forgive me. I should have never invited them to the wedding. I should have known by now that it would be more trouble than it was worth.”

Of course, she had forgiven him. And demonstrated just how much by taking him into her arms and body, doing all she could to soothe his pain. It had been everything that a wedding night should be. Even if it was a bit delayed. And in some trick of the early desert dawn light shining through the bedroom window, she had almost believed that she saw love shining in those bright blue eyes and felt it in every tender caress.

There had been plenty of repeats in the days leading up to this surgery. Ali had insisted this was their honeymoon and pushed Alicia out of the diner every chance she got. Jon had hung around too as if he could not stand to spend a moment away from her. Hell, she would have sworn he half-mumbled those sacred words as the drugs put him to sleep before the surgery.

She brushed a tender caress across the worst scarring on his cheek as tears coursed down hers. “Oh, Jon, what are we going to do now?”

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When Jon usually woke from surgeries, the first thing to hit him was pain. Not this time. It was her sweet smell, gentle touch, and those words. He had made it. The doctors had assured him that he would. But some part of his fucked up psyche had feared he did not deserve a Happily Ever After. Was that the survivor’s guilt talking? Or his childhood and family traumas?

It did not matter now. He had made it. And hopefully, he would have another forty or fifty years. Because even a millennium with this woman would never be enough to show her. “I love you.”

Could she even hear him? He knew that his voice was always scratchier and muted after surgeries. Those damned tubes down your throat did a number on anyone's vocal cords. But especially his mangled excuse for a voice box.

She gave him another of those tight, fake smiles. There had been a lot of those the past few days. "Hey, you're awake. Can I get you something? The nurse said, you can have a few sips of water this time." She reached for the ugly plastic cup at the side of his bed.

Jon shook his head, "No." He was uncertain what to do now. Yes, perhaps she had not heard him or understood his slurred words. But what if she was ignoring him? After everything that had happened, he certainly did not deserve her. Did he try again? Did he have the courage?

It wasn't like he'd had much success with love. Hell, if his first wife had not been bad enough, even his own mother had never really loved him. How could an amazing woman like this? But she was his wife now. And maybe he had convinced her to marry him for their daughter's sake, but did that matter?

Sure, he remembered her words. That confession. But he had rejected her. Well, perhaps not rejected, but he had not had the courage then to share his true feelings. Besides, that was before she had seen his fucked up family, dealt with the illustrious Marianne Buford Walker Tyler. That woman could kill anyone's love.

He wanted to reach for her, but he was practically as helpless as a baby at the moment. One hand was gone, nothing but white bandages above the elbow. And the other was tied to a damned board with a tube coming out of it. Hell, there was a clear plastic bag of pee on the side of the bed. Damn, he always hated this bit. It was humiliating, degrading, and dehumanizing.

And he hated her seeing him this way most of all. He wanted to be her hero. A man worthy of her. But he realized perhaps too late that he never had been. Even that first night, when his face was handsome, his soul had been as scarred as he was now.

So, what did he do? As she said, what now?

He studied her face for some hint, some vestige of that love she had professed, some Hope 'that' woman had not been able to extinguish.

Alicia gave another of those fake smiles then dropped her head. "You don't have to say that."

"Say what? That I love you?" She nodded her head but still would not look up. "Yes, yes, I do. I should have said it that night. When you first told me. But..."

He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. He had no other choice. He had to go all-in with this one. "But I didn't feel worthy. Hell, I still don't. Between my fucked up family and survivor's guilt, I might not ever."

He felt frustration thrumming through him. He wanted to lift her chin and force her to look him in the eyes. Even if he wasn't sure that he wanted to see the truth in her dark eyes. Maybe they should wait to have this conversation until he was out of the hospital? But that didn't seem right. This moment felt special. Like it could be some fresh start for them. An opportunity that might not come again.

“Look at me, please.” His words were all he had right now. He Hoped they would be enough.

And they were. Though the tears glistening in her eyes ripped his gut apart. “I fell in love with you that night.”

She sniffled and brushed the back of her hand across her face, “When I told you how I felt?”

He shook his head, “No, in the diner, the night we met. When you refused to take the bait, didn’t offer me pity or sympathy. It scared me. And I ran. Until I couldn’t run anymore.”

“They say your whole life flashes before you. But all I saw was you. When that IED went off, you were the last thing I thought about, sweetheart. And when I woke up in that hospital bed, you were the first thing. Memories of that night were the only thing that kept me from...” Jon practiced those damned deep breathing exercises. Those were words she did not need to hear.

When he finally had himself back under control, he looked at her again. There were more tears. Was that a good thing or bad? But he had come this far. He had to finish.

“Every time I came to the VA, I thought about the diner. That last time, I just couldn’t resist. I was afraid it would be gone. An abandoned building, empty and alone like my life. I was so fucking relieved that it wasn’t. But I didn’t expect you to still be there. I thought you’d be a shrink somewhere. And I sure didn’t expect Hope. But there you both were.”

“I know I’m doing this all wrong. What’s new? At least according to ‘that’ woman, I never do anything right. I know we are already married and have a child together, but if you let me, sweetheart, I’d like to court you. Is that even a fucking word anymore? Whatever they call it, I want the chance to show you how much I love you. To prove that I can be the type of man you and Hope deserve. Will you let me, darling?”

Those tears were coming faster now, but the quick way she nodded her head gave him Hope. Hope for a future. And her words when they finally came sent his heart soaring.

“I fell in love with you that night, too. It was those memories and our daughter that got me through Abuelita’s death. Every time that door opened, and I saw a uniform, my heart skipped a beat. That day when I looked into your eyes, eyes I would know anywhere, it almost burst.”

“Part of me was scared. What if you discovered the truth about Hope? I worried you would take her away. And yes, you have changed our lives. But for the better. I was living in denial about how much our little girl needed her daddy. And Jon, you are an amazing one.”

She leaned down and kissed his scarred cheek, “If this is time to come clean, then you should know you’re going to be a daddy again.”

“You’re pregnant?”

She nodded, “All those prayers Hope says every night must work.”

“Maybe. Or perhaps it has more to do with my insatiable lust for my wife? Two down and four to go?”

Alicia laughed, “Let’s see after this one. I’ll grant you that the Flores family has almost dwindled out, but...”

“Then let’s repopulate it.”

“What? I don’t understand. Even if we had that half dozen, wouldn’t they be Tylers?”

“Why? Who says? It’s not like I want those people anywhere near our children.”

“J. T. ...”

“My brother has always been Marianne Buford Walker Tyler’s puppet. Yeah, he was half decent at the wedding. But he left with them...”

“You should know that J. T. has been calling and texting all day. Jon, he’s genuinely concerned about you. And he has been nothing but kind. He has repeatedly apologized for the things that George said and asked me to tell Hope how sorry he was, too. I know that things have not been good between you. Even he admits that, but please, don’t we all deserve second chances?”

“I don’t want to talk about J. T. now. I want to talk about us. Our family. Our future. But if it means that much to you, I promise to keep an open mind about the man.”

Her smile was radiant, “That’s all I ask. Now, what the heck are you talking about? Are you saying that Hope, this baby, and I should keep the name Flores? I mean, I guess that is common enough.”

“Maybe I am just too old-fashioned, but I always thought I would take my husband’s name when I got married. Although, to be fair, as you said, we haven’t done any of this in the ‘normal’ way. I don’t think we’ve ever even been on a date?”

“Then that’s the first order of business. The moment I get out of here, we’re going on a date.”

“Don’t be silly. We’d have to arrange babysitting and someone to cover the diner and...”

“I am going to romance my wife until I convince her that loving me is the smartest thing she’s ever done.”

Alicia leaned down until their foreheads touched, “I knew that the moment I turned the key that night, Jon. And never for a moment, not even during the hardest moments of my pregnancy when I felt all alone and scared, did I ever doubt that. You freed something inside of me. Changed me. Made me a better person.”

“Ditto, darling. I’ve never been any good with words, but those sound about right.” He was able to lift his head just that fraction of an inch. Just enough to capture her lips. He poured his heart and soul into that kiss. As he had with all those others. Trying to tell her with his touch what he had been too frightened to with words.

But all that was behind them now. This was a new day. A new beginning. He reluctantly broke the kiss and held her gaze once more as he spoke, “And yes, I want you and all the children we have to be Flores. I don’t want them shackled with the expectations that come with the Tyler name, at least in that woman’s mind.”

“But how would you feel if I took the name Flores too? I mean, Kaitlin is always talking about those matriarchal societies where the lineage is traced through the mother. What says we can’t do that?”

She drew back and stared at him for a long moment. Then Alicia laughed, and the melody sang to the core of his soul, “Not a damned thing, Jon Flores.”

Jon smiled at the sense of new Hope which burst in his heart. She might have said ‘no strings attached,’ but she had woven a tether of love around his heart that night which had withstood a bomb blast, despair, and depression. In the end, it had drawn him back. To that diner. To this woman. To Hope. And to a new and brighter future. And Jon was damned glad for that string.

## Epilogue

Jon Flores watched the children run and play. Of course, as tweens, Hope and Amy were beyond all that. Instead, they hung out on the sidelines with their tablet, probably watching some video. But Justice and Valor were in the thick of things, laughing and smiling, with Sky and Joy Danvers-Logan, Tommy Turner, and Journey Saunders. All of their friends had come to celebrate this day with them. Even Alison had traveled all the way from Alaska with her new family.

His eyes drifted to the chairs on the other side of the pool. They were back, too. Of course, over the last five years, things between him and J. T. had improved so damned much. You would almost think they were brothers. More so than they ever had been. But then again, his brother was not the same person. How much of that was all the things he had been through? And how much was his partner's doing? His oldest nephew certainly was not the same.

But it was the shell of the woman reclining in the wheelchair that had been the hardest for him. He would not have done it. But Alicia had insisted. And he would do anything for his wife. Even that. Certainly seeing 'that' woman like this was... A part of him screamed that she deserved this for all the hate, animosity, and prejudice that had been her life. He knew, though, that Alicia would be disappointed in him. So, for her sake, he was trying. Doing his best to forgive, even if forgetting was not possible.

His wife... Jon knew that if his tear-ducts worked, he'd be crying. Unashamedly. Five wonderful years. Three more children. He had taken over managing the diner, so she could pursue that other dream. She had completed her training as a counselor and was part of the Danvers Foundation's Reconciliation network.

And every damned day, when he woke beside her, he thanked whatever was out there that he had been given a second chance – to come back to the woman he loved and the child he did not know he had and to make things right. He would always question the decisions he had made that day and mourn the good men he had lost. He had good friends who understood that - Chris, Chase, Chance, and others in the veterans support network that the foundation sponsored.

She was right. As she usually was. As blessed as they had been, how could he not extend forgiveness to 'that' woman? Or what was left of her.

“Are you ready to begin?” Kaitlin tapped him on the shoulder.

He nodded as he bent to kiss the almost blond head of the Flores family's latest member. After the twins, they had decided that their family was complete. Three sounded like a good number. And with all the other changes in their lives, they feared they could not give another one the time, attention, or care that every child deserves. But Honor was as determined to join the battles for the destiny of this insignificant little planet as her big sister had been.

Or that was the new age mumbo-jumbo way of looking at the failure of Alicia's pills. He was half-beginning to believe that shit himself. Especially when he looked at this latest little blessing, a better world for everyone.

He followed Kaitlin to the edge of the property, where it had once been nothing but desert. It was not the artificial green and lush of some lawn, but slowly they were reclaiming the land. It was another of the Regeneration projects supported by the foundation, the Reconciliation network, and a significant part of the children's learning at the new democratic school which Mandy Saunders had founded.

When he looked at this strip of land, it reminded him of his life. It would never be that artificially perfect lawn, but the costs of creating and maintaining those things were not sustainable. Just as the price of forcing our children into conformity and 'normality' never was.

But that did not mean this land was barren. By working with the natural environment, fostering native plants, and using Traditional Ecological Knowledge shared by their First Nations friends, this place was teeming with wildlife. It even provided food sovereignty to their community's economically oppressed.

Jon felt that same sense of renewal and connectedness as he stepped inside the circle of friends. Alicia and Hope entered from the other side. As they approached the center, even Valor and Justice slipped in to join them. His family. The Flores. A new beginning. Taking the best of the old ways and the new to create something better. A family and a community worth fighting for. Not with guns, but with words and actions. A new way of fighting old injustices.

"We gather here today to celebrate love. Jon and Alicia's love for one another. A love that fosters and builds family and community. It has been my honor and privilege to know this couple, to work with Alicia for the last five years. I have watched their struggles and witnessed the victory of love in their lives. They have become a shining example of compassion and forgiveness to us all." Kaitlin looked around the circle of close to a hundred people that they had met over the years. "Alicia, would you like to begin?"

He saw the tears in those dark eyes, but this time he knew. Those were happy tears. Most of them had been over the past few years. Sure, there had been a few sad ones, a couple of angry ones. There always was in this life. In this world that was still struggling with injustice, prejudice, and inequality. But they faced that all together, as a family, just as they were now.

"When you walked into the diner that night, I had no idea where this road would lead. The only thing I knew for certain was the pull I felt to you. To the pain, I saw in those blue eyes. When you walked back into the diner seven years later, those eyes pulled me to you again. I promised you 'no strings attached.' But the universe had other ideas."

Alicia smiled and squeezed Hope's hand, "And I am grateful every single day to it and you for that." Being honest and open with an eleven-year-old had proven shockingly easy. Kids were never as dumb as parents and society think they are. He should have remembered that from his own childhood. Their daughter had shrugged, laughed, and said something about karma biting them in the ass. And that was it.

"Today, I officially rescind that offer." She pulled the rainbow ribbon from her hair and held out her hand.

Jon took it without hesitation, “I told you that night there was no such thing as no strings attached.” He smiled and winked at their eldest, “I just didn’t realize how prophetic that was.”

“But you’re wrong, sweetheart. You and our family are not strings. You’re a lifeline. My lifeline. The thing that tugged me back from death, physical and psychological more times than I could ever count.”

“I knew that night that you were the best thing that ever happened to me. And every day when I wake up beside you, whether it is a good one or bad, I know that as long as you are by my side, everything will be alright.”

He took her hand, and together they passed the ribbon to Kaitlin. “It is my pleasure to honor and consecrate the commitments made by these two people. May the goddess bless you both with many years of happiness, love, and joy. Today and into the next life, whatever that may be.” She intoned as she wrapped the string around their joined hands.

Their children interlocked their arms around them. Jon half-turned to make sure that Honor was not crushed in their family hug. Their circle, their community moved in slowly, embracing all the Flores. As one by one, they came up to congratulate them.

The last was his brother J. T. and his family. Well, most of them. His middle child George still refused to visit after the divorce. But after years of court battles, J. T. had finally been granted unsupervised visits with his daughter Laura.

Jon inhaled deeply, steeling himself for whatever was to come, as he looked down on the woman in the wheelchair. He, of all people, understood what Marianne Buford Walker Tyler must feel, trapped in a body that had betrayed her. But as much as Jon knew it disappointed Alicia, compassion for that woman was still incredibly hard for him. He wasn’t there yet.

But he admired his brother. After everything that woman had put J. T. through, his brother had still stepped up, taking the woman in and providing the intense care she needed after the stroke. Even when he and Clarice would have exiled that woman to a nursing home, J. T. and his partner had intervened. Jon knew the strain they were under, given the situation. And he was slowly coming to terms with the idea that he and Alicia would share that burden. But he wasn’t there yet.

She was thinner, older, and of course, the left side of her mouth dropped. He felt the shooting pain in his chest as if looking in a mirror. Of course, her hair and makeup were immaculate. Her grandson and J. T.’s partner made certain of that. He wondered what the great Marianne Buford Walker Tyler must feel about that.

But they would never know. The stroke had left his mother without speech or even the ability to form many of those thoughts into coherent words using assistive technology. The most she could manage these days was the rare three-word sentence, but it mainly was yes or no.

Jon felt her gentle hand on his shoulder. He knew how much this meant to his wife. They had been talking about this for months. But was he ready? Could he do it? He turned and saw her smile of encouragement. He had sworn once that he would spend the rest of his life becoming the man she deserved. Did he have a choice?

He leaned forward, wrapping his prosthetic arm around the woman who had given him life, if not love. “Mother.” It was as far as he could go. He hoped that it would be enough for his wife. The one person who mattered. The only one whose opinion he truly valued.

Jon saw them. The tears. In eyes that were a reflection of his own. That woman looked from him to Honor, then Alicia. She lifted her good right hand to brush over the sleeping baby’s head. That hand gripped his. He was surprised at the strength remaining in her one working hand, though he knew all about compensating. “Sorry.”

One word. One slurred word. And he was supposed to forgive a fucking lifetime of pain and fuck yeah, mental abuse? He wanted to rage at the injustice. He wanted to scream in anger. He wanted to run away from it all.

But he knew he could not. This moment was it. The culmination of their lives’ work. All that he and Alicia stood for, everything they worked for and believed in. It all came down to this. How could they teach their children or others that the power to change the world began with the person in the mirror if he did not live that himself?

That did not make the words, “You’re forgiven,” one bit easier to say. Hell, they sounded almost as choked as hers had. But Jon had gotten them out. And in the process, he had freed something inside of himself. Forgiveness was not about that woman. It was not even entirely about him. It was about Honor. About doing the right thing even when it hurt like hell.

That woman nodded her head slightly. Her lopsided smile reflected his own. They could not change the past. But they could create a better future. Jon felt that gentle squeeze on his shoulder and saw the tears running down Alicia’s face as she turned to J. T., “We thought maybe Marianne could stay with us for a couple of weeks; give ya’ll a bit of a break.”

Jon felt the kick to his stomach. Not an emotional one, but an actual physical one as their eight-month-old daughter looked up at him with those same eyes. Though genetics said otherwise, Honor had been born with the same blue eyes that woman, J. T., and he shared. “Okay, I get it. Now, I see why you had to come into our lives.” He kissed her dark hair and caught Alicia’s smile as she discussed the details with his brother.

He had told her that night that life did not work like that. That there was no such thing as no string attached. But he had meant every word, every vow he said today. This had been his lifeline since that night. She had been it as that IED exploded, and his flesh seared away. She was there through all the surgeries and therapies. And now, he knew that she would be there through whatever was to come next.

That together with their friends and family, they could make a difference. This world might never be perfect. But it could be different. She had shown him that. With Hope, Honor, and Valor, it could be more Justice in the future.

## About the Author...

### Real-life, hot sex, deep meaning...

Tara Cox lives in 'beautiful sunny Swansea, Wales' with her favorite romance hero, Prince Charming, Cooking Monster, and husband – techie guru Alan Cox – and her wonderfully autistic youngest daughter, @PanKwake. Besides, being a homemaker, writer, and blogger, she fills her day with photography, sewing, quilting, urban farming, and homesteading.

Tara is the no-holds-barred author of a broad range of fiction, from novels to short stories. Her characters are REAL, not size zero 20-somethings or billionaire playboys. Even her millionaires, Marines, shapeshifters, and SEALs bear scars: seen and unseen. And those are just the beginning of their complex, REAL life problems like grief, mental health, and body issues. Her stories are as dark and twisted as life itself, but always with a happy ending, whether for now or ever after.

Her writing style is best described as Jane Austen's free indirect discourse meets Fifty Shades, getting deep inside the minds and motivations of her characters. Even with her hotter than HOT sex scenes, this is not your typical erotica. But for those readers wanting 'more,' few writers deliver on that like Tara's literary erotica.

Tara writes in a wide array of genres and is a perfect sexy chameleon, able to bring you hot content no matter where she lays down her pen. From sweet romance to deep and dark BDSM, she does it all, and with swagger and style. Be it military/war, sci-fi, suspense, historical, romance, or erotica, her recipe is simple.

*Mix REAL life challenges with equal parts love, laughter, and tears then top liberally with lots of hot sex.*

It's a pretty good recipe for fiction - and life.

In her previous 'lives' Tara has been a stay-at-home mom, a fundraiser for charities, a bank teller, a waitress, a personal trainer, a preacher's wife, and even a stripper. It is from this plethora of experiences that she draws her strong characters and complex storylines.

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