

VIE

(PRONOUNCED V)

There she was. Like a summer's day. Like your favorite sweatshirt that always made you feel like you were pulling on an old friend instead of just a sweatshirt. Like the losing streak that finally ends with a victory over the rival. A big victory at that. Like smiles with a Band-Aid and a kiss on your boo boo. Like ... Love.

Of course, I went to her house first. I sat outside so long I was scared Neighborhood Watch was going to descend on me. The grass. Grass. It's just grass. Same in every yard. But this grass was different. This grass I had rolled in. Loved in. Her Japanese red maple. The porch. The windows. The roof. And everything else. I took it all in. Summoned my courage. Left the car. Got halfway up the sidewalk and went back to the car. Got to the front of the car, turned around and got all the way to the porch this time. I stopped but didn't turn back to the car. I took several deep breaths then started up the stairs like I was wading through molasses as I climbed each one. Shaking, I rang the bell. I rang it again. Maybe it is out of order. I knocked. I knocked. I knocked with force. I peeped in the window and saw no signs of life.

"She's not home." I turned to see Bex Canter. Surprised she would speak to me. Surprised she was there. She was there. In the adjoining yard. Trying to decide if I was worthy of more information than, *She's not home*. I understood my place and her hesitation, but I couldn't understand what she was doing there. It had been a while since I had been here. A long while. I guess nothing stays where you think it should when you walk out. When you don't settle for burning bridges; you burn down a whole damn town and watch the people in it try to put out the flames from your rearview mirror as you get the hell away as fast as humanly possible. Regardless of past burnings, I had to find her. Now. I knew there was only one way to accomplish that: speak to Bex Canter. "Hi, Bex. Do you know where she is?" She surveyed me, and pulled her arms around her for protection from the likes of me. "Please. I really need to see her."

Bex nodded. Exhaled. "Asheville. A couple of days hiking and ... stuff."

Stuff. It hung in the air. She's in Asheville so stuff could hang in the air without explanation but with perfect understanding for me and understanding that because of me she didn't give particulars. *Stuff. She's hiking and ... stuff*. "Thank you, Bex," I said with genuine gratitude as I walked toward the car.

"You need money?" The question startled me. I guess it shouldn't, but it did. Like that was the only reason I'd look for her. I summoned myself to haughty and turned to look at her expecting to be burned with her self-righteous finger pointing, only to be shocked to see nothing but concern for me wafting off of her. "You need a hot meal or anything before you drive there? I didn't mean to insult you. I meant did you need some gas money to get to Asheville. Hotel money. Stuff like that."

I couldn't remember the last time anyone looked at me with concern. And the last place I ever expected to find it was in the eyes of Bex Canter. I would love a meal that wasn't served in a bag. Some hospitality. Some friendship. Some company. I wouldn't love it; I needed it. Unfortunately enough of the past few years still followed me around like when a skunk got in my house when I was six. For years I could open a drawer and be met with that stench, that reminder, that momentary nausea. Sometimes I wondered if it was really left-over stench or left-over psyche of that feeling of people moving away from

the smell, but moving away from me. Holding their noses. Waving their hands. For years when someone moved away from me for lots of reasons that had nothing to do with skunk stench, I'd coincidentally open a drawer and swear it was there. Now I had been left uncared for so much, I didn't know how to accept hospitality. I moved away.

I tried to go about the moving away like a normal human being would, "Thank you for the offer, Bex, but I'm fine. I appreciate you telling me where she is."

Bex smiled and said, "She'll be glad to see you."

I got in my car feeling very uncertain if she would be or not. Hope had left me scarred up and disappointed too often for me to fully believe she would be glad to see me. Still I set off toward Asheville.

I stood outside of her favorite restaurant. There was a group of them. Eight, to be exact. Pouring wine. Passing plates and trying each other's meals. Laughing. Her life had continued without me.

They were paying the checks. I put gum in and chewed for a few seconds and got rid of the gum. I didn't want anything in the way of talking to her. They all finally piled out. One of them saying, "I'm so stuffed." "It was del ...". She stopped. She stopped speaking. Moving. Thinking. Seven people around her seemed to fall away. One took her hand. They all looked at me. Were they all going to come over and take a swing at me? Protect their beloved Paige from me?

She pulled her hand away. She started walking toward me. Her curly auburn hair not as bouncy as I remembered, but it was clear she had recently gotten off of a trail. There was a neatly done bandana made to be a headband to keep it out of her face as she hiked. She had always hated putting it up completely, feeling like it had less personality than it did. Her hair had always had personality. Of course not as much personality as those haunting green eyes coming my way. Locked on me. Scared that I was there but more scared I would run away. The closer she got to me, the more she quickened her pace to get to me. I braced myself. I was willing to accept any punishment. Any beating. Her arm raised. I closed my eyes. I could accept any punishment, but I couldn't watch her deliver it to me. Then. I opened my eyes when I realized she hadn't hit me. She hugged me. Her arms were around me. I unclenched my arms that were wrapped so tightly around me. I hugged her too.

I wanted to stay here forever wrapped in her arms. Ignoring the sweat and smell from her hike.

"I love you," released from me tearfully. "I'm so sorry." She put her hand to the back of my head. Auburn curls that matched hers pressed down as she did. She tried to speak. She couldn't. The tears were coming too forcefully. So she slightly pulled away. Only enough to kiss me as the wetness on our faces mingled uncertain what wetness belonged to me and what to her. "I love you," I said again. I wanted to make sure she knew I meant it. I wanted to make up for all the years I hadn't been able to say it to her. *That's bullshit.* I was able. She would have always taken my calls. She never sold the house so I could always come back. *Acceptance and reality:* I wanted to make up for all the years I hadn't said it to her. All the years I didn't call.

All the years I moved away.

“I love you, Vie,” finally released from her. “I’ve always loved you. Always.”

My first trip to Asheville I had been carried in a pouch strapped to her like a little kangaroo baby. “Slowest hike of my life because I was still recovering from the pains of you making your debut to the world,” she had teased with a big smile as River and I looked at pictures. Dad stepped in and said, “Well, there was that and that four year old we couldn’t seem to shake. We tried to leave you in the woods, River, but you found us every time.” River gave him her dazzling smile then teased, “I knew early on no one else was going to love a child named River. The two crazy enough to name me that were the only two crazy enough to watch me grow.” Dad hugged her. I smiled at my sister. Her dimple sparkled. We could never decide which of us got the worst name. Her with River or me with Genevieve. At least they had the decency to call me Vie. Genevieve is a lot to live down on the playground, but also one of those names that makes you seem commanding and sensual as an adult. I remember the first time I tried out being big enough to be called Genevieve. Only sixteen, but that’s not what my fake ID claimed. Oddly enough as much as I put into making that night happen, I can’t remember his name. Or the other his’s name. My first time with two men at once. Sucked one while the other fucked me from behind. I had something to prove. I had too much to prove. The reason I burned down the town.

River’s first time. She had been nineteen. Old enough to understand herself and her needs and making love for all the right reasons, like she had been with him for three years and they loved each other completely.

River. They had named her well. She was always flowing peacefully.

Vie. She was always ... I don’t know. I’m still trying to figure it out. That journey led me back to my mother. As she held me now outside of a restaurant in Asheville, I wanted to climb back in that pouch from when I was a baby and have a chance to appreciate her and be the person she had given all of her for me to be.

Mama pulled away. My eyes met with Maureen’s. She looked happy for Paige, and cautious for Paige.

There were a dozen kids running around our house. We were that house. The one every kid on the street seemed to flock to because of my mom. She was so cool and laid back. She always kept snacks on hand. Always had real juice pops in the freezer. Always had homemade lemonade. We had the sprinkler hose going back and forth in the backyard, and all of us were running through and jumping over. We were all various ages, and that had been the magic of our house, age didn’t matter. All kids were equal and welcome. I ran inside for some lemonade. She was hugging someone I had never seen. “Hi,” I said as they hugged. Mama turned and smiled. “Vie, this my college roommate, Maureen. Maureen, this is my daughter, Vie.” Maureen smiled at me. I liked her immediately. “Paige, my stars, that child is 12 years old. She was 2 yesterday, I swear.”

I didn’t think her seeing me this time was going to be quite as pleasant.

I focused back on my mother. She was smiling and crying. More controllable now. “Are you looking for me, Vie, or ...” she trailed off. Or ... if this was just a coincidence, it would kill her, that’s what the trailing off was saying for her.

“I am looking for you, Mama. I went to Durham first, but Bex told me you were here.”

She looked relieved that I was looking for her. “Where did you leave from to go to Durham, Baby?” I’m sure she had a million questions. That one probably seemed a good place to start.

“Tucson.”

She smiled. “Well, you did always enjoy the sun. I’ve never been to Tucson. Did you like it there? How long were you there?”

“Only a few months. The sun was nice. You look good, Mama.”

“Thank you, Vie. You look ...” she paused for a long time allowing the moment to completely sink in before she continued, “like you can’t tie another knot in your rope.”

We hadn’t seen each other since my father’s funeral. She had begged me to come home. “That isn’t my home anymore. This is my home,” I spat at her. River got right in my face, “Don’t yell at her again.” River that I thought I would never have a difficult time with looked at me like she wished I had died with him or more accurately instead of him. “I’ve had it with you, Vie. Dad was her best friend, and look how you’re treating her at his funeral.” I opened my mouth. “I swear to God you better not say it. I will be a Raging River if you do. She’s been through enough. Most of it because of you.” I ran out of the house. I didn’t return for four days. There was a note. *Vie, we had to get back to Durham. We had to get back to work. We waited as long as we could. I made you some meals and put those in the fridge. I know you’re grieving, Baby, but I’m here for you. I am. I love you so much, Vie. Please call me soon. Mama.* I picked up the phone. She answered. “Thank you for the meals.” Then I hung up. That had been seven years ago. Seven destructive long grueling knot tying years.

“Do you want to go somewhere just the two of us?” Mama asked. I looked over at Maureen. I should have been a better person in that moment. It could have been my first step toward redemption. But redemption would have to wait. I hadn’t seen the person I loved with all of me in seven years. Tearfully I nodded. She turned to look at Maureen across the street still in front of the restaurant. All of them were still there. “I’m going to spend some time with her. Go on back to the chalet with everyone else. I’ll call you later.”

She followed me to the car then took the keys from me. She drove to Biltmore and got us a room. She showered as I lay on the bed. A bed. It was quite a nice feeling instead of sleeping in the car at a rest area. As I lay on the bed, I tried not to think about the scar on Bex’s face. I’d never been forced to see all the damage I caused as I was making my very dramatic exit from Durham. There weren’t many actions I had done that I could be proud of. The only one I could be proud of was occasionally dropping a postcard in the mail addressed to Paige Turner. She had delighted in that becoming her name when she married my father. It made me think of her moving me off of her medical books so she could turn the page. I was always in a Duke shirt hanging around her while she studied. I learned to listen to my own heart by playing with her stethoscope. I grew up wearing scrubs and standing in front of my mirror practicing saying “stat” and “code blue” and “time of death”. I wonder when I stopped listening to my own heart. The one action I could be proud of in the past years of sending her the postcards was so she knew a doctor had never said “time of death” about me. Even that I couldn’t really be proud of. The only word on the postcard besides Paige Turner and her address was “Vie”

PAIGE

I got out of the shower hoping my daughter would still be in the room when I opened the door. As anxious as I was about that, I took an extra-long shower to wrap my head around that she's here. She came looking for me. I made a resolution that anything she's done, anything she's been through, I'll find a way to make peace with. She came looking for me. Hopefully that means she's done moving away. My heart broke looking at her. I was filled with so much relief and gratitude and love just to see her. But seeing her also broke my heart. It took several moments to even recognize my own daughter. A blind person could see she'd had a rough seven years. I dried off. I grabbed a robe and wrapped it around me. I summoned my courage.

She was still there. She was asleep. Such a hard sleep like she hadn't slept in weeks, maybe months, and there in that peaceful sleep was a hint of the Vie who had stolen my heart the moment she was born. I moved her to take off her leather jacket. She didn't stir at all she was so passed out, but in the process her shirt moved up. Directly above her low-cut jeans was a scar. Too long. Too high up. Too jagged. Someone had butchered my baby. I could fix that scar. That was my specialty, the reason I went to medical school - to fix scars from burns and accidents. To give people themselves back. But as I looked at my baby and her scar, I had a feeling giving her herself back was going to take a lot more than fixing a scar on her stomach. Emotional scars. There wasn't surgery for that. There was slow, slow process. Trial and error. There had to be a desire to get better. I ran my hand through her hair. *Oh, Vie. Where have you been? Why did you let someone butcher your stomach? How do you go from the best in your class at The Sorbonne to ...* I couldn't finish. I didn't have the details to finish.

Where did I go wrong? Trey, I'm glad you never saw our baby like this.

I grabbed my phone, and walked into the hall. "Hey, Mama. I was just thinking about you. How much cilantro do I put in the tilapia stuffed bell peppers? I'm trying out your recipe tonight."

"Fourth of a cup. River, I need to tell you something."

"Is everything okay?"

"Vie is here."

Silence. Finally, "Here, like in Asheville with you?"

"Yes. She doesn't look good, River."

"Do you want me to come there?"

"Not now. I don't know anything at all yet other than her last stop was a few months in Tucson."

"What did Maureen say?"

“Nothing. I didn’t give her a chance. Vie was waiting for me outside of Tupelo Honey. I went to her and then left with her. She looked worn-out so I got us a room at Biltmore.”

“Well, spare no expense for the prodigal child,” River complained into the phone.

“River, please. I want her to be safe. I don’t know what she’s been through. It’s hiking season and fall here. The busiest time in Asheville. I didn’t want to go through the hassle of making sure there was occupancy at other places. I knew there would be a room here.”

“I’m sorry, Mama. It’s so long we hoped for this, then you settle into acceptance that she’s never coming back. Now she’s here.”

I took a deep breath and said, “Yep. Now she’s here. I guess another reality needs to settle in for us. River, she’s going to need us both. Maybe you more than me. There’s a scar on her stomach. It was done all wrong with no care.”

“That must have been hard for you to see.”

“Very.”

“Ok, Mama. Let me know when and where you need me.”

River. The easy child. Of course she was the easy child. We thought we created ideal for River and Vie (and us). I looked down at my baby covered in devastation, and realized ideal is a figment of imagination.