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# ***GUARDING MY SIX***

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**By: K. J. Porter**



# *CHAPTER ONE*

## *TORI*

*Three years later*

TORI MILLER DIDN'T like it. She wanted to leave. Now.

"I really don't think this is a good idea." Tori bit her lower lip as she looked at the images through the huge window into the lobby of the tattoo parlor. Each one depicted a different scene that stirred her emotions. Some were even a little scary, some cute and whimsical and other's unbelievably intricate. All beautifully crafted.

Sure, she was the one who suggested New Orleans for their last spring break before graduation, but why on earth would she even consider this! It was so unlike her.

Not to mention that her father would kill her if she came home with a tattoo! It didn't matter that she was twenty-one years old. She was his only daughter and, though he could be strict and demanding, she knew he loved her and only wanted what was best for her. How would she ever explain to him that she'd just wanted to do something for herself?

Tattoos were permanent. She understood that. If she got one where it was visible to all it could very well impact her ability to project the professional appearance she strived for. How would anyone take her seriously if she really did this?

"Come on, Tori," her roommate, Lexi, insisted. "You can't back out now. We all agreed to this. It's the last day of spring break. Our last year at SCAD. Besides, this was your idea. Remember?"

"It was a moment of insanity. I'm changing my mind," she declared as she turned away from the window of the studio and tried to make her escape. "I'm a woman. I have that prerogative."

"And you're afraid of what Daddy will do if he sees it, right?" Star, her other roommate asked. "Letting the big strong men dictate what the weak, little woman can do with her own body."

"It isn't that, Star," Tori stated matter-of-factly. "I'm having second thoughts. Tattoos are forever."

"Exactly why we should all three do this now," Star explained. "It will link us as best friends for the rest of our lives. We will always remember each other, no matter how

far apart we are or how long it's been since we talked. We will always have this permanent reminder of our sisterhood.”

Growing up in a military family of all men—her mother and younger brother having died in a car wreck when she was five—Victoria Anne Miller had wanted sisters with whom she could share her secrets. That's exactly what Star and Lexi were to Tori: sisters. From the moment they became roomies at The Hue, the first year they'd all started at Savannah College of Art and Design, in Savannah Georgia, they'd been practically inseparable.

“You know my dad didn't even want me to go to SCAD. He'd rather I'd gone somewhere closer so I could live at home with him,” Tori said, remembering the endless arguments about it throughout her senior year of high school.

“True,” Star laughed. “And then Matt got transferred to Hunter and you got your wish.”

“I hated North Carolina. It was so cold in the winter,” Tori told her with a shiver. “Then Dad got transferred to Hunter, too. I still don't know how he pulled that one off.”

“You can't escape your parents,” Lexi chimed in. “Believe me I keep trying and it never works.”

“You two should be happy you have parents that care.” Tori looked over at Star as the sadness in her voice pushed her own worries aside.

“I'm sorry, Star.” Tori was at a loss for words. Her friend had had to fight for every forward step she made. Her father was never in the picture and her mother, well, Star's mother loved her daughter but had a tendency to choose losers when it came to men.

“Look, Tori,” Star said, placing a hand on her shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “We all know that sometimes you get scared. We all do. But, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt said in his inaugural speech all those years ago, ‘The only thing we have to fear is fear, itself.’ We have to face our fears to overcome them.”

“He was talking about the depression, Star. Not getting a tattoo,” Tori pointed out, allowing Star to move the conversation away from herself.

“True.” Star said with a little laugh as she brushed back her curly dark brown hair. “But it's a really good philosophy to live by no matter the object of your fears.”

“Tori, it's not like we're trying to force you into Base Jumping,” Lexi told her as she pushed open the door and stepped over the threshold. “It's a tiny little picture on your shoulder, where nobody will ever see it unless you want them to,”

“Now, are you coming in or letting your fear of Daddy hold you back?” Star taunted.

“That’s so low. I hate when you do that.”

“I know, that’s why I use it so often,” Star said with a wide grin as she gave Tori’s shoulder a light shove, forcing her into the air-conditioned lounge of Hamilton’s Artistic and Holistic Tattoo Studio.

“You are evil. Why do I hang with you?” Tori asked, trying to hide her own grin.

The hum of a single tattoo gun permeated the silence as Tori stepped into the lobby. Nibbling on her lower lip, she weighed the options in her mind once more.

“Good afternoon, ladies. How may I help you?” the young woman at the desk asked. Her goth style did little to hide the warmth and welcome of her smile. The black tee shirt with the studio’s logo emblazoned across the front fit her tiny frame as though it were painted on and showed a wide strip of tanned flesh above low-slung black jeans. Another silver hoop with a charm in the shape of a crescent moon with a blood red stone adorned her navel. Her inky hair was chopped short, the same color as her lipstick, and she sported a silver nostril piercing.

“We would like tattoos,” Star stated, shoving Tori to the front of the line. “She’s first.”

“No problem,” the goth-girl said. “My name is Karly and I’m happy to help. Do you have anything specific in mind or would you like to see some samples?”

“Well, I, um,” Tori stuttered as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “I was wondering if you could do something like this.”

She handed the paper to the woman, who proceeded to open and study the image for several seconds.

“I’m sure we can handle it,” Karly said in a professional tone. She leaned closer, her nose nearly touching the paper. “The lines are nice and strong. We can probably make a decent copy from this same paper.”

“Um, could you add something else to it?” Tori asked hesitantly.

“Like what?” Karly asked, looking up.

“I’d like to have the phrase, *Guarding my Six*, either above or below the image. If it’s possible,” Tori explained shyly.

“Let me ask the boss,” Karly told her, then hurried away from the desk, disappearing behind a closed door.

“What was that?” Star asked. “You never said exactly what you were going to get.”

“It’s silly.” Tori’s face pinked as she looked away from her friend.

“No, it isn’t silly. Unless it’s Kermit the Frog and by the look on Karly’s face, I doubt that was it,” Lexi interjected.

“It’s a picture of the Archangel Michael, holding up his sword like he’s doing battle,” Tori said in a low voice. “That’s all,”

“With the words, Guarding My Six? That is so cool! Wish I’d thought of it,” Star stated with a pout. “Kind of like he’s protecting your back. Right Tori?”

“Exactly. It’s just something my dad and brothers always tell me. They’ve got my six.”

At their confused looks Tori chuckled and explained. “It’s a military term, for watching someone’s back. I can’t believe you’ve never heard it before.”

“I’ve heard it. Who hasn’t?” Lexi said with a smirk. “I’m just surprised you’d do something like that for your first tat.”

“Why? What else would I choose? A unicorn?” Tori asked, more than a little miffed. “I’m not a fru-fru little girl, Alexa. Is that how you see me?”

“I didn’t mean it—” Lexi’s explanation was cut short by the sound of a door opening and heavy booted footfalls approaching.

A tall, broad-shouldered man with penetrating, hazel-green eyes and dark blond hair pulled back into a ponytail, stepped out of the room where Karly had gone.

“Good afternoon, Ladies, I’m Wade Hamilton. Who’s getting this?” he asked, holding up the paper Tori had given Karly.

“I am. I think,” Tori said. Her mouth had gone dry and her throat barely worked as she took in the intricate, colorful designs that covered most of Wade’s arms. “I mean, I’m thinking about it. I haven’t made up my mind for sure yet.”

Could she be any more silly and vapid? Her courses in architecture at SCAD brought her into close proximity with tons of handsome guys and her tongue never got tied like that. Of course, with them, she’d never felt that her heart was about to jump out of her chest and land at their feet either.

“Karly said you wanted this with Guarding My Six added.”

Tori nodded, her cheeks flushing again. Even his voice did something to her as her blood warmed.

And his smile!

Wow. The man should be required by law to wear a sign that read *This smile has clothing dissolving properties!*

“I can do that,” Wade told her, his voice a deep rumble that vibrated throughout her own body. “However, it’s going to have to be a bit bigger than this little two inches by two inches picture.”

“What? Why?” Tori asked. She hadn’t wanted anything big. Just a small image of her favorite Archangel on her shoulder, looking out for her as she went through her life. It was silly, she knew, but she’d always thought of Michael, the Dragon Slayer, as her guardian angel watching over her when her father and brothers were deployed for months on end.

“Well, the thing with tattoos,” Wade began. “Is that the ink is absorbed by the skin, like a sponge, and tends to spread to the surrounding areas, no matter how fine the needle. If we keep it this small, you’ll lose any definition of facial features as well as the feathering in the wings. It would all pretty much blend together with little to no real distinction.”

“I guess that does make sense. How big would it have to be to look like that?” Tori asked, nodding to the paper in his hand.

“My recommendation, to really do this work justice, is about six maybe eight inches to get real definition. But, it’s up to you.”

Tori looked from the picture to Wade’s stoic expression. Her eyes drifted to the odd tat on the side of his neck. It was so different from the colorful, artistic designs of the rest of his ink. It looked like a headless stick figure; an image a child might have drawn. On the other side was the same type of image with the difference of a partial shape of a head; like it, too, was an unfinished, child’s project.

“Go ahead, Tori,” Star urged, dragging Tori’s attention away from Wade. “You should do it. Who’s going to see it anyway?”

Tori took a deep breath. “Can you add the line beneath it?”

“No problem with that,” Wade answered with a slight tilt of his lips.

“Okay, then. Let’s do this.” Tori let out a long slow breath as she tried to release some of the tension that had built in her shoulders.

“Give me a couple of minutes to print this up and add the line. I’ll be right back.”

Wade patted Tori’s shoulder before turning away and disappearing behind the same door he’d previously come through.

“Wow, I’m really going to do this,” Tori said with a nervous laugh. “I just hope I don’t regret it.”

“You won’t. I’ve had a tat before,” Star informed them smugly. “So, I know what I’m talking about.”

“You did? Where?” Lexi asked, her mouth gaping in shock.

“On my butt cheek. I’m surprised you haven’t seen it already. It’s a purple butterfly. Get it? Butt-terfly?”

“You are sick, Star. Sick, sick, sick.” Lexi shook her head and stepped away from them. “I’m not sure what I want, yet. What do you think, Tori?”

“I don’t know. What do you like?”

“Well, I was thinking of getting a heart with Gregg’s and my name in the middle—”

“No!” Star shrieked. “Hell, no!”

“Why not? We are in love and I want the world to know.”

“Look, Lexi. You’re a young, vibrant woman with a long, bright future ahead of you. What if you and Gregg break up? What then? You’ll have his name on your body for, like, ever. Then, what if you find Mr. Right, and he’s scared off because you have some other guy’s name marking you as his property?”

“That’s not going to happen. Gregg and I are in love,” Lexi repeated stubbornly. “We’ll always be in love. It’s transcendental.”

The wistful look on Lexi’s pretty face had Tori wanting to throw up. She didn’t like Gregg. At all. The guy was a pig and he cheated on Lexi every chance he got. He’d even made a pass at Tori once, who threatened to tell Lexi if he ever did it again.

“I think Star’s right, Lex. Maybe just a heart with a rose in the middle. Or with the stem wrapped around the heart,” Tori suggested.

“You’re just agreeing with Star because you never liked Gregg. I still don’t understand why that is. He’s always spoken so highly of you.”

Tori didn’t miss the quick shift of her friend’s eyes, a sure sign that Lexi was being less than honest.

“I’m telling you, Lexi,” Star stated. “You will regret it. What did he say when you told him you were getting a tat?”

Lexi looked away; her attention focused on the book of tattoo designs she’d picked up off a low table.

“He’s the one who suggested the heart thing, isn’t he?” When Lexi refused to answer Star’s question, Star jerked the book from Lexi’s hands. “He did, didn’t he?”

“So, what if he did?” Lexi demanded, mulishly as anger sparked in her steel blue eyes. “Tori help me out here. He loves me and said that if I did it he’d do it too.”

“Star’s right,” Tori said again, biting her lower lip as her eyes softened. “Really, Lexi. Get something else and when we get back home, tell Gregg that if he wants you to get it, then the two of you should go together and get them at the same time. That way he can’t back out.”

“I guess we could do that. But, what if—,”

“What if, nothing,” Star stated angrily. “What if you do this and he refuses to get one with your name? He wants you to do it so he can brand you as his property. Like cowboys branded cattle in the old days.”

Stepping between her two friends, Tori tried to calm the tension she could feel brewing into an all-out battle. “Look, why don’t you get the heart with the rose and when you get back home, you and Gregg can go together and have his name added to it after he has one done with your name? It’ll be something you can do together, making it even more special.”

The sound of someone clearing their throat behind them, had all three women spinning around. No one had noticed when Wade came back into the lounge, nor how long he’d been standing there listening to their little discussion.

Tori blushed, wanting to crawl into a hole. Here was the most handsome man she’d ever met staring at her like she had two heads.

Not that someone like Wade would ever take a second look at a frumpy, slightly overweight girl with an inferiority complex, she thought. But, man, she’d love to take a bite out of him.

That wayward thought, so unlike Tori, had her face turning bright red. Again.

“I think this should be what you’re looking for,” Wade finally said, breaking the tension.

He held out a sheet of paper to Tori. As she looked down at it her eyes grew wide and she caught her bottom lip between her teeth,

“This is wonderful!” Tori exclaimed. “Even better than I imagined. I want this.”

Wade’s grin widened as he nodded. “Let’s do it then.”

Before escorting Tori into the next room, Wade turned to the other two women.

“When you’ve decided on what you want, let Karly know. We have three more artists that can help you.” He turned and smiled at Lexi. “And for what it’s worth, as a man, I’d never insist, or even want, a woman branded as my possession. Think about it.”

Wade led her into another room and Tori felt the heat of his body as he stepped closer. When he closed the door behind them, Tori took in every inch of the small area.

Large, framed posters of different plants and herbs hung on three walls with a forty-inch television, the sound muted, taking up a large portion of the fourth wall. The counter tops were neatly lined with an array of different colored bottles, tubes, and equipment. Dominating the center of the room was a table, much like a masseuse's, and a stool with casters.

"There's a wrap in the bag on the table. If you'll remove your top and bra, put the wrap on opening in the back, I'll be back in just a minute," Wade instructed.

"Okay. Thank you."

Wade left her alone, but she didn't immediately do as instructed. So many thoughts and doubts crowded into her mind she was glad for the moment alone.

The most dominant thought was that she was going to be half naked! Being a curvy, slightly overweight girl most of her life, Tori was embarrassed by her large breasts and rounded hips. She usually hid her faults with dark, loosely fitting slacks and tops, despite what Star and Lexi told her about working her curves.

She picked up the plastic bag with the wrap and let out a heavy sigh as she looked up at one of the posters. She read the brief description of the plant and its medicinal uses. Intrigued by what she'd read, Tori read them all before finally pulling off her tee shirt and bra. She ripped the thin plastic bag and pulled out the wrap, holding it up to examine the thin cotton material.

She'd no sooner settled the material on her shoulders before a light tap sounded on the door. "You decent?" Wade asked.

"Yes. Come in."

He pushed the door open and smiled at her. "Don't look so scared. I promise, you'll like it when I'm done."

"I'm not scared," she lied. "I was just reading some of the posters. I'm a little surprised a place like this would have them hanging up."

Wade nodded and studied the poster closest to the door. "It's a relatively new hobby I started a couple of years ago," he explained. "I find it extremely interesting that so many of the synthetic chemicals used in medicines today, are found naturally in plants. The human body is a meticulously intricate design and needs to be kept in balance. Everything we need to keep us healthy can be found in nature."

"That's true, I guess. Um, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

“I noticed all the artwork you have on your arms. It’s beautiful. Did you do that yourself?”

“Some of it I did myself. Most of it a friend did while we were apprenticing before I got my license. Why don’t you go ahead and lay on the table? Face down, please.”

“Okay. Can I ask you another question?” She asked timidly.

“Of course,” he told her with another of those killer smiles.

“The ones on your neck. They’re different, almost child-like. Do they have a special meaning? Is it like your ad says on the door about ancient tribal markings?”

Her face turned tomato-red when she’d realized how rude the question had been. Hiding her face in her hands she turned away and mumbled an apology.

“Don’t get embarrassed. I promise, I’m not offended. I get asked that a lot. It so happens that I got these in Alaska a couple of years ago,” he explained as he moved to the counter and began choosing the tools he would need. “I’d gone up there on vacation and met this Inuit woman from a small village outside of the town where I was staying. She’s the reason I got into medicinal herbology and holistic cures. She told me about some of the ancient rituals that tribes used for healing illnesses and wounds.”

“Oh. That’s interesting.” Tori climbed onto the table, lying face down, as she tried to hide her discomfort. “Did they have a cure for acute humiliation?”

Wade laughed. A deep, rumbling sound that sent a shiver through Tori and bringing a shy smile to her own face. “Not that I know of. But they did have symbols to help give courage to warriors and hunters.”

“Maybe you can work one of those into my tattoo. I could use a little courage.” She buried her face in her arms, wondering what the heck she’d been thinking, confessing herself a coward to the man with whom she wished to bear children.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Tori could hear the humor in his voice but, it didn’t sound condescending, she realized, as she peeked over her arms to catch the indulgent grin he wore.

“I think you have the heart of a tigress,” Wade stated, still grinning. “You have a very protective nature.”

“Right,” Tori said disbelieving as she settled her cheek on her folded hands. “I’m more like a scared rabbit running from the tigress.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” Wade told her as he sat down on the rolling stool and pulled a small table close to him. “You’re stronger and braver than you give yourself credit for. You have hidden talents yet to be discovered.”

“Being as you’ve never experienced this process before,” he continued gently, tugging a pair of latex gloves onto his large hands. “I should warn you that it is *not* a painless procedure. It will hurt. So, when you need a break just speak up. It will probably take us a couple of hours before we get finished.”

“Okay. Star told me it would probably hurt a little.”

“Yeah, but where you’re getting this on your shoulder blade, it will hurt a bit more than if it were on your thigh or arm where the flesh is thicker. Just wanted to prepare you.”

“I appreciate that, Wade. I’m ready.”

“Okay. Here we go.”

Tori felt the coldness of the alcohol as Wade disinfected the area where he would be working. It brought goose flesh to her bare back, causing a quick shiver to run through her. His touch was gentle as he swabbed the pad over her skin. A moment later, she felt him rub a thick salve over the area.

“I’m using a topical analgesic to help with some of the pain, before we get started,” he explained each step as he prepared the area. “Then, I’ll put the transfer on. I’m using a rotary tattoo machine with pneumatic power. I prefer it to the coil machines because it’s lighter weight and gives me more control over the needle.”

When he touched the machine to her skin, it felt like she was being sliced with a fine-edged knife. She jumped just a little, causing Wade to pull back immediately.

“Sorry. It just startled me a little,” Tori told him. “I’m good. Go ahead.”

“Here we go.” Tori bit into her arm as Wade worked, trying to distract herself from the burning sensation on her back. “Have you been doing this long?”

“Since I was about eighteen. I used to draw a lot before that, though. When I was a kid, I wanted to create my own comic books. As I grew up, I thought about studying graphic design.”

“What made you get into tattooing?” Tori asked above the hum of the machine.

“After high school, I joined the Army. Some buddies and I got drunk one night in San Francisco and we all got tats. The artist was this huge, muscle bound biker dude that nobody would want to meet in the daylight, let alone a dark alley. But the guy had the most incredible talent. The next day I went back and started asking him a bunch of questions. He was really cool about it. Patient. Answered every question I had and even gave me some pointers.”

“Hmm. That’s nice. I guess you can’t really judge a person by their looks,” Tori said, softly.

“Nope. I learned that a long time ago, Tori.”

Tori gave soft laugh. “My father and both of my brothers are in the Army. Dad’s career and Matt and Josh are considering staying in.”

“I’m surprised. You don’t strike me as one.”

“As one what?”

“An Army brat. You don’t have that overly confident air that tells everyone around them, ‘I’m here so step aside.’”

“Oh,” Tori buried her face in her arms again. She’d never had much self-confidence and having a stranger, a very attractive stranger, point it out to her just topped off the humiliation of her many faults.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” he said, his voice serious as he leaned around to look her in the eye. “It was a complement. You have courage and confidence when you need it. You just don’t put it out there like a neon sign. It’s a nice change.”

“Um, thanks?” she said, her words garbled and practically inaudible.

They continued with the small talk, dropping into periods of silence now and again, until Wade had finished.

It took nearly three hours, Tori only needing two breaks in between, to complete the artwork. She’d decided to leave the tattoo without color, explaining that the shadows of black and gray gave it a more ethereal appeal. Wade agreed.

“Okay. That’s about it. Keep it covered for about two to three hours, don’t go out into the sun and use that cream I gave you every day. It’ll help keep the skin from drying out and prevent infection. You’ll start to peel in a day or two, but let it happen on its own. Wait until tomorrow to shower, though.”

“Thanks, Wade.” Tori pushed herself up into a sitting position, careful not to flash him a peek at her bare breasts.

“Do you mind if I take a picture of it?” he asked. “I’d like to add it to my angels and demons line, if you don’t have any objections.”

“I guess that’s okay.” Pride washed over her, that he’d use her tattoo for his portfolio, and she couldn’t help but smile.

“Thanks. Let me grab my phone. I’ll be right back.”

Before the door closed behind him, Star and Lexi rushed into the room, demanding to see her new ink. Tori gave them a proud grin as she turned around to show them. She peered over her shoulder to see their reaction.

“OMG! That is gorgeous!” Star exclaimed.

“Wow. I wish I’d gotten that one too!” Lexi squealed.

“What did you decide to get?” Tori asked, turning back to face her friends.

“I got this,” Lexi said, spinning around and lifting the hem of her shirt. There, in all of its shining glory, was a heart intertwined with roses, the stems intricately extending across the small of her back. No sign of Gregg’s name anywhere.

“You got a tramp-stamp!” Tory exclaimed with a laugh.

“Oh, stop it. Wait until you see what Star got. Show her,” Lexi commanded.

Star lifted the front of her shirt and pulled the left cup of her bra down to show the hummingbird tattoo that stretched across her breast; its needle-like beak stopping just short of her nipple.

“Oh, my God!” Tori groaned, covering her mouth with her hand to stifle a laugh. “I can’t believe you really did it. Didn’t that hurt?”

“Like the fires of hell,” Star swore. “But it’s what I wanted. Get dressed and we’ll go grab some food before we head back to the hotel to pack.”

“Wade wants a picture of my tattoo,” Tori informed them.

“Oooo! Did he ask for your phone number too?” Star asked, a lascivious grin on her face.

“No. Why would he?” Tori asked, turning away to hide the disappointment she felt that he hadn’t even hinted he was interested.

“Did you ask for his?” Star prodded.

“Star! Stop it.” Tori’s embarrassment at the very idea of asking a guy for his number had her wanting to hide in a hole and pulling it in after her.

“Tori, you are a beautiful young woman. It’s time you started putting it out there, girl. Look at you!” Star demanded. “Do you realize how many women would kill for your curves?”

“Oh, please,” Tori said, waiving away Star’s remarks.

“What? You want to look like a flat chested, tuberculin teenage boy or something? Men like when they have something to hold onto and not be afraid he’s going to break her if he gets a little overly excited.” Star winked and giggled. “Know what I mean? Where did all of that self-doubt come from, anyway?”

Star lifted Tori’s chin up to look her in the eyes. “I keep telling you that you have nothing to hide. You have the face of a pixie, the brains of a genius and the body of a Botticelli. You need to show it off and live a little, girl.”

“My eyes are too big for my face, my chin is too pointy, and Botticelli’s paintings are of fat women. Thank you for pointing that out,” Tori groused, pulling away from Star’s grip. “And what man wants a woman who’s smarter than they are?”

“Bullshit,” Star countered. “You have the wide, pure blue eyes of an angel, the heart-shaped face of a fairy and the curves of a woman that any man would love to get their hands on. Often. Stop putting yourself down, Victoria Anne Miller. I will not have you talking about one of my best friends like that. Do you hear me?”

“Fine. Now, can we change the subject? Please?” Before the words had left her mouth, Wade opened the door and smiled.

“Thanks for letting me take this picture. It’s going to be a great addition to my Special Images wall.”

Wade took his picture, chatted with them for a few minutes then left again so Tori could dress.

“I think he likes you, Tori,” Lexi whispered after Wade departed. “He is totally into you.”

“Drop it, Lexi. I’m not interested. Besides, we’re leaving New Orleans tomorrow morning. Why even bother starting something?”

“Well, now you have proof that you’re not an ogre and guys, hot guys at that, think you are totally do-able,” Star intoned. “Get dressed so we can go eat. I’m starving.”

“How can someone so skinny eat all the time and never gain an ounce?” Lexi complained. “I just think about a burger and fries and I gain ten pounds.”

“Great metabolism. And sex. Lots of hot, sweaty sex.” Star patted Lexi on the cheek, winked at Tori and spun on her heel.

“She’s insane. We should really have her committed,” Lexi whispered, loudly, to Tori.

“You both need to be medicated. Why do I even hang out with you two?” Tori asked as she pulled her tee shirt over her head, then followed her friends out of the room, laughing at their antics.

## ***CHAPTER TWO***

### ***TORI***

*Two months later.*

“COMING,” TORI CALLED out as she hurried to the door, trying to wrap the damp towel around her body. The persistent pounding had pulled her out of the shower, barely giving her enough time to rinse the shampoo from her hair.

“Come on, Baby Girl, open up?” The sound of her father’s impatient tone had her rushing through the apartment she shared with Lexi and Star, stubbing her toe on the corner of a table for her troubles.

“Ouch, damn it!” She cried out.

“Tori! What’s wrong? Open this door or I’ll break it down!” Ed Miller demanded.

“I’m coming, Daddy. Give me a second.” She limped to the door, favoring her throbbing left foot as she unlocked the deadbolt and slid the chain from its hasp. Pulling open the door and forcing a wide, happy smile on her face, she greeted her father as water dripped from her dark curling hair down her face.

“What happened? I heard you yell,” he asked, stepping into the small living area.

“I stubbed my foot on the table,” she told him as she wiped water from her eyes. “I was in the shower when you knocked.”

“I can see that,” he said, his tone full of fatherly concern. “Do you always answer the door wrapped in a towel?”

“Daddy, please, don’t start. It sounded like you were about to break down the door. What was I supposed to do? Stop and get dressed first?”

“Yes.”

Tori rolled her eyes. “Right. And then what? You’d have broken the door down. I’d have to pay for the damages and then you’d lecture me about making you wait. I can’t win with you,” she said, closing the door and resetting the locks.

“Don’t take that tone with me, Victoria. I’m your father.” He glared at her as he spoke. “What’s gotten into you lately, Baby Girl? You’ve never been this disrespectful to me.”

“Sorry.” Her contrition was automatic, ingrained in her by a lifetime of bowing to her father’s wishes.

“Now. How about a hug?” She smiled at him and gave in. She really loved her father, even when he was overbearing and demanding. He was her rock and she knew she could depend on him, no matter what.

Even being in the Army, he never missed a birthday and if he couldn’t be at a school recital or some other function, he demanded that someone record the event and send it to him so that she would know that he was there in spirit and shared the memory with her.

“I’m so proud of you, Tori. Top of your class. No father could want more from his child.”

He gave her a rib-crushing squeeze before letting her go and taking a step back. He brushed a finger over her cheek and gave her a sad smile. “You look more like your mother every day. She’d be so proud right now she’d split in two.”

“I know, Daddy. I wish she could have been here, too.”

“She was, honey. She was. Now. Why don’t you go get dressed and I’ll take you out for a special dinner?”

“What about Matt?”

“He’ll meet us at the restaurant. You can text your friends to join us after you get some clothes on.”

“Great!” She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek, the rough whiskers making her lips tingle, his familiar scent comforting. “I’ll just be a few minutes.”

Tori spun around and hurried toward her bedroom when her father’s furious words stopped her cold.

“What the hell have you done to yourself, Victoria Anne!” he roared.

*Oh, God,* she thought to herself.

She’d forgotten to hide her tattoo from her father. She knew the reaction it would cause. He’d told her enough times how a young lady never defaced her body like that. Only whores and sluts would do such a thing and no decent man would want a woman with that kind of reputation.

Tori slowly turned back to face her father’s wrath. His face was red and his eyes looked as though they would explode out of their sockets. “Answer me, young lady. What have you done?”

“I, um, got it when we went on Spring Break. You like it? It’s the Archangel Michael. See?” She gave a half turn and let the towel sag just enough that the words below the image could be seen. “He’s watching my back. It’s sort of a salute to you. And Matt and Josh, too. He’s guarding my six, like you always said you would do.”

Her father let out an explosive breath and shook his head. “How could you possibly think that was okay? It’s not a salute to me! It’s a deliberate slap in my face! After everything I have done for you, you disrespect me like this? I’m at a loss for words, Victoria. I’m ashamed of you,”

Her entire life she’d dreaded displeasing her father. When he showed the slightest dismay or anger towards her, Tori would be heartbroken for days until she’d made it up to him. The one thing he’d never said, however, was that he was ashamed of her and it nearly shattered her heart.

“Daddy, I wasn’t disrespecting you,” she whimpered as the tears flowed down her pale cheeks. “I’d never do that to you. I love you.”

She took a step towards him and reached out as he took a step back.

“You have no idea how deeply you’ve hurt me, Victoria.” He shook his head and turned away from her. “No idea at all. I never should have let you come here to school. You are too young and immature to be on your own. You can’t make smart decisions for yourself. I’ve failed you as a father.”

His woebegone manner and disappointed countenance should have worked in cowing her into doing whatever he asked. It should have made her feel small and helpless, deferring to him any, and all, decisions.

It didn't. It made her angrier than she could ever remember in her life.

"Hurt you?" she asked, breathlessly. "I hurt you? How, Daddy? I didn't do anything that would warrant this kind of a reaction from you. I got a tattoo, yes. You don't like women with tattoos, I get that. But I'm twenty-one years old, for God's sake. I'm old enough to decide what to do with my own body!"

Her voice had grown louder with each word spoken causing her father to jerk his eyes from the floor to her face, filled with shock.

"Don't you take that tone with me," he started.

"Then don't treat me like I'm a simpleton who needs to be led around by the hand and told what steps to take and where she can or can't go. I'm not a little girl. I refuse to be treated like one."

"You will do exactly as I tell you, young lady. I'm the one who paid for you to come down here and go to the school of your choice. I pay for your credit cards, your car, the clothes on your back. You will show me the respect due me."

"Fine. I'll show you respect when you start showing me the same. I have a brain in my head and the common-sense God gave me," she yelled as she placed her fist against her own heart. "You raised me. I learned a lot more than you give me credit for, *Father*. If you're so ashamed of me and disappointed in me, there's the door. Don't let it hit you in the ass on the way out."

With that last remark, Tori rushed to her room, slamming the door on her father's shocked, gaping face.

She whipped the towel from around her and rubbed it over her face, wiping away the tears that wouldn't stop falling. She pulled on her clothes as her father's voice came softly through the door.

"Open the door, Tori. Let's talk about this." His tone was softer, placating.

She refused to relent. It was a trick, she told herself. She'd never in her entire life spoken to him like she'd just done. If she didn't stand her ground now, she decided, she would never gather the courage to break his hold on her and live her own life.

She pulled a pair of running shoes onto her sockless feet and pulled open her door. Her father's pale face and sagging shoulders had an apology burning in her mouth. She shook her head and stepped past him.

“Tori, wait. Please. I didn’t mean—”

“Didn’t mean what? To call me immature? Too stupid to make my own decisions?”

“I never said you were stupid, Baby Girl.”

“Oh. So, I’m not stupid just immature. Is that why you’re so ashamed of me?”

“I didn’t mean it like that. Come on, Tori. Be reasonable.”

“What I don’t understand, Dad,” she said quietly as she faced him. “Is that it’s okay for Josh and Matt to come home covered with ink but not me. I’m your daughter just as they are your sons.”

“They’re men—don’t look at me like that!”

Tori shoved past her father, shaking her head in disgust as she ran out the door. His words of apology never reached her ears as she ran down the steps and out the front door. Her pounding feet never stopped as she made her way through the crush of downtown crowds. The hot Savannah air dried her wet face and ease the anger in her mind.

Two hours later, she finally allowed herself to stop and consider her next option. She knew she’d have to face her father. But, she was tired. Tired of running, tired of fighting, tired of trying to show him that she was old enough to make her own decisions. If she made mistakes, they would be hers. How else would she learn what was right for her?

Night had fallen, she noticed, and the crowds had thinned as she turn down Broad Street toward Bay. She crossed over Bay and wandered to River Street for another fifteen minutes, letting her mind wander.

She thought of the fight with her father and the tattoo on her shoulder. An unbidden image of Wade, the very attractive artist who did her tat, flashed into her mind. He seemed to always be there, just at the edges of her thoughts. A constant presence that warmed her and kept her from feeling lonely when she sat at home waiting for Star and Lexi to come home from their dates.

A small smile tilted her lips as she remembered the easy conversation they’d had while he worked. It had felt like they’d known each other for years. A strange yearning to hear his voice washed over Tori; a longing to see his smile.

“I must be crazy,” she said aloud. “Wishing I could talk to a guy I met one time nearly three months ago is really stupid.”

Thinking that maybe she should call Lexi and Star to let them know she was okay, she reached into her back pocket for her phone.

“Damn it! I forgot my phone.” She’d been so angry and upset with her father, she hadn’t even thought to grab it off the coffee table on her way out the door. “Man, I can’t even call for an Uber!”

Making her way back to Bay Street, Tori headed toward home. An unnatural urgency compelled her feet to move faster as she broke into a run, her feet slapping the uneven stones as she made her way up the Abercorn ramp. When she finally reached Bay, she turned right and raced along the sidewalk, her arms pumping, and her lungs burning as she flew.

Something was wrong. She knew it. She had to get there, or someone was going to die.

The thought pounded through her brain, relentlessly.

*I have to save them!*

She sped through Drayton and Bull Street intersections without consideration of the signal lights or on coming traffic. As she closed in on Whittaker Street, the compulsion increased.

*Faster! Hurry, before it’s too late!*

Ten feet in front of her a young mother, carrying a sleeping toddler and pulling a suitcase behind her, stepped off the curb against the light.

As if in slow motion, Tori watched in horror as the young mother stumbled, losing her grip on the suitcase and wrapping both arms, protectively, around her child as she fell to the ground, rolling onto her back to keep the child from hitting the hard surface of the street.

*“No! Look out!”* Tori screamed, as the woman slowly climbed to her feet.

The mother looked up at Tori, her eyes wide. The headlights of a speeding car spotlighted the woman as it came barreling towards them and she froze in shock. Without a second thought, Tori reached the woman and child pushing them aside as the car struck.

Tori didn’t feel any pain; only a sense of wonder as she flew into the air, fell onto the hood of the car and rolled beneath its front tire.

She lay there as silence surrounded her and a flash of red streaked by. The terrified woman and child sat in the middle of the street holding onto each other.

*Safe. That’s good,* Tori thought. *They’re okay, Wade. They’re safe.*

And then the darkness came.

## ***CHAPTER THREE***

### ***WADE***

WADE'S EYES POPPED open and he bolted upright. His heart pounded in his chest and his breath heaved from his lungs like he'd just finished a 20K marathon.

He'd fallen asleep on the sofa again; with the television on and his dinner untouched.

"What the hell?" he asked himself, stretching his aching shoulders. He could have sworn he'd heard someone calling to him as he looked around his sparsely furnished apartment.

The dream he'd had freaked him out. He'd had a lot of strange dreams in his lifetime, even more so since his trip to Alaska three years ago. But nothing like the one he'd just experienced.

He should be used to them by now, shouldn't he? After all, most of them were easy fixes; a whispered word of caution in someone's ear or an anonymous note to the cops leading them to a suspect. It was his way of protecting innocents. He had a gift and decided he couldn't waste it. If he could help others, he would do it.

He didn't always get to them in time. When that happened, when he was too late to save someone, it tore a hole in his soul.

But this dream? *She* was the star of this little horror story and it had his guts churning and his heart trying to pound through his ribcage.

He'd been having a hard time getting the girl off his mind since she and her friends had walked into his studio a couple of months ago. She was cute and sweet, but so were a thousand others who'd come and gone. Why was she stuck in his mind?

And why would he have a dream about her being in trouble and calling out to him for help? He'd only met her the one time.

Another question he'd been asking himself over the past two and a half months was why he decided to get the same tattoo, in the same place, as he'd given her? It was insane, he knew. But, it was a compulsion he couldn't ignore.

Wade rubbed his hands over his face, his whiskers rasping against his rough palms. He brushed his hair back from his eyes and tried to recall the dream that had put him into such a state of alarm.

Tori's face flashed across his mind. In his dream, she was running somewhere, he was sure. She was racing through the darkness as though the hounds of hell were after her; her face a portrait of panic and fear as she raced through the streets of . . . *Savannah!*

He didn't know how he knew where she was; he felt as familiar with the area as she'd been in his dream.

Then, she'd been flying through the air, his name on her lips.

The sound of his cell phone ringing brought Wade out of his thoughts and he reached out for it. It wasn't a surprise when he saw it was one of his old military buddies calling. Soldiers, even ex-soldiers, often called their brothers-in-arms in the middle of the night, when sleep was chased away by nightmares and memories.

Wade smiled as he answered the call.

"Matt. What's up?"

"Wade?" Matt asked, his voice choked.

"Yes, Matt, it's me. What's wrong?" He could hear the muffled sobs through the phone connection even though Matt didn't respond. A hard-chill shook Wade's body and a dark foreboding gripped his heart. "Talk to me, buddy. What's going on?"

"They don't know if she'll make it," Matt wept. "The son of a bitch didn't even stop."

"Who, Matt," Wade pressed. "Who's hurt?"

"My baby sister. The one I told you about. She was hit by a car and the bastard never even stopped to see if she was hurt. He left her there to die."

His stomach clenched, and he let out a heavy breath. "Oh, Jesus, Matt. I'm sorry. I can be there by morning."

"Wade, I . . . Dad's a mess. They'd had a huge fight and he's blaming himself. Josh is in Afghanistan and can't get here. I really hate to ask . . ."

"You don't have to. I'm heading out the door as soon as I get my shoes on."

"Thanks, man. I don't know what I'd do without you." The choked words over the phone pulled hard at Wade. He knew what it was like to lose someone you cared about.

They'd both lost brothers to enemy fire when they fought insurgents, never knowing if the next bullet or road side IED had their name on it.

Family was family and to lose one member was one too many.

"Hey, you've pulled my ass out of the fire more times than I can count. This is nothing. What hospital?"

"Memorial."

"I'll see you soon, Matt. She's going to be alright. You have to believe that."

Matt sniffed and cleared his throat. "Right. You're right. I just, um, I can't lose my baby sister, man. I should have been looking out for her."

"You can't think like that, Matt. You've got to stay strong for your old man until you have more answers. I'll be there in a few hours. When I get to the hospital, should I ask for Vickie or Victoria Miller?"

"Victoria Ann Miller. But we always called her Tori. Our mother started that when she was born. She wanted something not quite so common, you know?"

Wade fell back and covered his face with his free hand. *Holy shit! Tori Miller is my best friend's little sister?*

He'd never put the two names together. How could he have not known that? How could he have never met her before? Hadn't he been to their house a dozen times when he and Matt were stationed together, before Wade left the Army?

"Why didn't I know that?" he finally asked Matt.

"I guess because every time you were there, she was either out with friends or had already left for college. Why does it matter? It's just a nickname."

"Matt, I have met Tori Miller," he said, his voice low. "And her friends. They came to my studio in New Orleans."

"You're the one who did her art?" The shock in Matt's voice was high and sharp as a bayonet.

"Yeah. If I'd known she was your sister . . ." Wade let his words drift off, not knowing if it would have really made a difference one way or the other.

"What? Would you have refused to do it?"

"Honestly? Probably not."

There was a moment of silence before Matt sighed. "Then what does it matter? I just need my friend, Wade. Can you still come?"

"Nothing short of death will keep me away. I promise."

“Thanks, man . . . thanks. Just do us all a favor and don’t tell my dad you did her ink. That’s what they fought about. Right before she took off. Now, she’s, um . . .”

“She’s going to be alright, Matt. You need to believe that. Okay?”

“Yeah. Okay. I have to go.”

The phone went dead. Wade dropped it on the sofa beside him, closing his eyes.

“Son of a bitch.” He rubbed his face again, shoving his fingers through his hair and holding it back.

The tattoo on his back began to tingle, almost like the image was shifting, making it feel like his skin was crawling.

He didn’t have time for self-analysis and recriminations. He picked up his phone again and made reservations for the next flight to Savannah-Hilton Head Airport and then called for an Uber. He packed his duffle in record time and waited for his ride in front of his apartment building.

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The plane landed a little after eight the next morning. Wade stretched out his long legs as he unfolded himself from the tight space. His back ached and his eyes burned. He’d hoped to grab an hour or two of sleep before boarding the plane, but Tori’s face haunted him each time he’d closed his eyes.

When he stepped off the plane and headed to baggage claim, Matt and his father, Ed, were waiting for him.

“Hey, Matt,” Wade said, as he approached the two haggard looking men. “How’s she doing?”

“Still in a coma,” Matt said, pulling Wade into a hard, manly hug. “She hasn’t woken up for a second.”

Wade held his friend for a moment then pulled the older man into a group embrace.

The people milling around them must have sensed the sadness and worry of the three men as they kept a respectful distance.

“I could have taken an Uber or a cab to the hospital,” Wade told them after releasing his hold. “You guys didn’t have to meet me here.”

“It’s okay. The doctor told us we needed to go home and get some sleep. How could we do that?” Matt said, fighting tears.

“I didn’t want to leave my baby.” Ed Miller looked like he’d aged at least fifteen years since Wade had seen him at New Years. “But I didn’t want Matt traveling alone in such a state.”

“I know, Ed,” Wade said, clapping him gently on the back. “I’m so sorry. If there’s anything I can do. Please, let me know.”

“Thanks, Wade. Just having you here for Matt, is good enough. You’ll stay with us, of course.”

“Whatever you want, Ed. I’m here.”

“Let’s get back to the hospital then,” Ed demanded. “I want to be there when she wakes up. I need to tell her—” His voice cracked, and he broke down, covering his face as he wept. “It’s my fault. It’s all my fault.”

“It’s not your fault. Let’s go.” Wade grabbed his duffle from the conveyor, put his other arm over Ed’s shoulder and the three hurried out into the sultry morning.

They rode to the hospital in silence. Matt dropped his father and Wade at the main entrance and went to park in the already crowded lot. Ed led the way to the intensive care unit, shuffling along like a man in a fog. He looked and acted like a man of seventy rather than one in his mid-fifties.

“Ed,” Wade said, pulling the man to a stop. “I’m sorry this happened. But, you have to believe that she’s going to be alright. This isn’t your fault. You can’t blame yourself because she got hurt.”

“She didn’t just ‘get hurt,’ Wade. Someone did that to her and left her to die on the street like roadkill on a highway. She wouldn’t have even been there if we hadn’t argued. I’ve never seen her act like that before.”

Ed turned away, swallowed several times before turning back to Wade. “She’d always been so gentle, so shy. She never talked back to me like she did last night. And all because I can’t let go of the little girl she used to be.”

What could he say? There were no words that would bring comfort to the heart of a parent who might lose their child. No banal platitudes could ease the pain that must cause. So, Wade said nothing.

“It was such a shock to see that she’d gotten that tattoo. She’s twenty-one years old. Old enough to decide what she wants to do with her own body, for Christ’s sake. But, I overreacted and treated her like she was still six and she fought back . . .” Ed wiped his eyes. “She fought back. I was as proud of her for that as I was angry that she wasn’t my little girl anymore.”

“She’ll always be your little girl, Ed. That will never change no matter how old she gets.” Wade smiled as he spoke, and his words must have sunk in because his smile was returned. It was a small one, but it was a smile none the less.

“Thanks for coming Wade.” Ed gave him a clumsy pat on the back as he started to turn away.

“Look, Ed. There’s something I think you should know. Matt said I shouldn’t say anything to you about this. You’ve been like a father to me since the first time Matt and I came home on leave and you deserve to know the truth.”

Wade shoved his hands in the back pockets of his jeans, looked everywhere but at the other man and let out a long, windy breath.

“Spit it out, son,” Ed encouraged.

“Okay. You know I have a tattoo studio, right?” Ed nodded. “Well, a couple of months ago these three young women came in. They were on spring break and they wanted something to commemorate the last year of college. Something that they would remember for the rest of their lives.”

Wade watched as all expression washed from Ed’s face, replaced by a stoicism he’d only seen when the man was preparing himself for something he didn’t want to do. The last time he’d seen that look, or the lack of emotion, on Ed’s face was when Josh had told them he was being deployed to Afghanistan.

“It was Tori and her two friends, Ed,” he explained, painfully aware of the tension crackling in the air. “I’d never met her. I’d seen pictures around your house and at Matt’s, but they don’t . . . I never imagined she’d walk into my shop in New Orleans and ask for a tat.”

When Ed didn’t speak, Wade continued. “She had this picture of the Archangel Michael and that she wanted to have the words, “Guarding My Six” beneath it. Like he was protecting her.”

Ed crossed his arms and studied Wade in silence for a few seconds. “Her mother used to tell her that story about Michael slaying dragons, that he was a warrior just like her daddy. After Pat and little Mikey died, Tori used to tell me that Michael would protect me for her so nothing would ever happen to me when I had to go away.”

Wade’s eyes focused on a single tear that leaked, unnoticed, from Ed’s eye. He followed its trail as it slowly crept down the older man’s face.

“Thank you for telling me, Wade.”

“Are you pissed at me for doing it?” Wade asked, his eyes raising to meet the deep blue ones, so like Tori’s. He should know, visions of her angelic features had been haunting him since she walked through his door.

“Of course, I’m pissed,” Ed said, then patted Wade’s shoulder again. “But I’ll get over it. Come on. I want to see if there’s any change.”

As they turned to go toward Tori’s room, Matt hurried up to them and the three entered the small, glassed-in cubicle together. A nurse stood next to Tori’s bed, checking the I.V. and then jotting down notes on her chart.

“Is there any change?” Ed asked quietly.

“No. I’m sorry,” the nurse answered. “It’s not unexpected with a head trauma, Mr. Miller. The doctor has ordered another MRI for tomorrow morning if she doesn’t wake up before then.”

“Thanks, Sandy. I appreciate you taking such good care of her.”

“No problem, Mr. Miller. I’ll be back to check on her in a little bit. Try not to worry. Impossible, I know. That’s what a parent does.”

Sandy gave Ed’s arm a squeeze, smiled at Matt and Wade, then left them alone.

Wade settled in the corner, trying to shift into a more comfortable position, without success, as they waited for something to happen. His gaze frequently flickered to where Tori lay, searching for some hint that the pale, battered woman lying in the bed, wires and tubes leading from her body to the surrounding machinery, would wake soon. The constant beeping and swishing of the heart monitor and breathing machine that kept her alive, broke the stillness of the long afternoon.

They’d taken turns sitting beside Tori’s bed. Ed would read to her for hours from a book he’d gotten in the gift shop. When it was Matt’s turn, he told her stories of some of his army exploits. Some funny, some sad and some, downright scary.

By nightfall, Wade had dozed off in the chair. The lack of sleep from the night before and the long, monotonous hours of sitting and worrying if they’d ever see her open her eyes, had taken their toll on him. His eyes drifted shut and he almost immediately fell into a dream.

*He was racing through a forest, Tori breathing hard and keeping pace at his side. They were being chased. The fear for Tori’s safety had him constantly looking over his shoulder as they dove around bushes and leaped over fallen trees. He kept looking over his shoulder to see if their pursuers were gaining on them.*

*Darkness surrounded them as they ran. A deep, guttural growl of a wild animal came from the shadows. Another one followed suit as fear and rage tore through him.*

*"I won't let you hurt her! She's mine!" his dream-self growled back.*

Wade bolted up in the chair, his heart still racing and the fear of what had chased him still holding him in its grip.

He was still in the hospital room. Ed and Matt were sleeping, their heads on their folded arms on either side of the bed where Tori lay.

He rubbed his face, trying to erase the remnants of the dream.

"Jesus," he muttered.

"You okay, Wade?" Matt whispered, raising his head and blinking owlishly.

"Yeah. Bad dream. How's Ed?"

Matt yawned and sat up, looking over at his father. "Sleeping hard, from the looks of it. I'm going to go grab some coffee. Want some?"

"Abso-freaking-lutely. I think I could mainline a couple gallons of it right now," Wade said with a chuckle.

"I'll bring some back for Dad, too. He'll want some when he wakes up."

"Thanks, Matt."

After Matt left, Wade studied Tori's face. She looked so small. So fragile. The white gauze wrapped around her head hid the dark curls of her thick hair. The slash of dark brown brows seemed to intensify the paleness of her skin, where it wasn't bruised and scraped. Her full lips were slightly parted and almost colorless.

They'd removed the breathing tube earlier, telling them that she was breathing on her own. That was a good sign.

"Wake up, Tori. I'd really like to see those beautiful eyes of yours," Wade whispered. "I haven't been able to get them out of my mind since the day you walked into my studio."

Ed's head jerked up and he stumbled to his feet.

"Tori?" he asked, then turned to face Wade. "She squeezed my fingers. I felt her squeeze my fingers."

"Are you sure? You were sleeping, Ed. Maybe you just dreamed it," Wade said softly.

"No. I didn't dream it. I felt—she did it again," he cried out, overcome with hope and excitement. He leaned close to his daughter and kissed her forehead. "Tori? Come on baby, wake up. Talk to me, sweetheart."

Wade saw it this time. Her eyes fluttered as though she were struggling to open them.

“Go get the nurse!” Ed demanded. “Hurry.”

Wade rushed out of the room, nearly knocking Matt on his ass as he shuffled three Styrofoam cups, with lids thankfully, in his hands.

“What’s happened?” Matt asked anxiously.

“Your dad. She squeezed his hand. I’m getting a nurse.”

“Go,” Matt insisted as he rushed into Tori’s room.

Wade hurried to the nurse’s desk, talking fast and urgently. “She’s waking up! Call the doctor. Tori Miller is waking up!”

The nurse, a tall slender black woman with a great smile and warm chocolate eyes, made a quick call over the intercom for the doctor. “The doctor will be here shortly,” she told them as she rose to follow Wade, dragging a stethoscope from her pocket on her way. “Let’s see how she’s doing.”

As they entered Tori’s room, Ed turned toward them, a smile beaming on his face.

“She squeezed my hand twice. She’s trying to open her eyes.”

“Let me see, Mr. Miller,” the nurse, whose name tag read Shantell, said with a patient smile. “You need to let go of her hand now, so I can check her vitals, okay?”

“Oh. Yeah, of course,” Ed said as he stepped aside.

The nurse checked Tori’s blood pressure and pulse, listened to her breathing before stepping back and gazing up at Ed’s hopeful expression.

“The doctor will be able to tell you more than I can. Until he gets here, why don’t the three of you get some fresh air? Maybe go to the lounge and rest a bit.”

“No. I’m not leaving until she opens her eyes. I know she’s coming out of it and I am going to be here when she does,” Ed stated.

“Fine, Mr. Miller” She turned to Wade and Matt. “But maybe you two can go for a walk. If she does wake up, we don’t want her to be overwhelmed right away. She’s going to need a little bit of time to adjust.”

Her smile may have been indulgent, but her words had a hint of steel to them. In other words, Wade thought, get the hell out of here, now.

“Okay. Let’s take a walk, Matt.”

“Ed,” Wade said, turning to face the older man. “Give Matt a call when you know something. We won’t be far away.”

Ed nodded his assent and Wade stepped out of the room, holding the door open for Matt to follow.

Matt took a sip of his coffee as they walked down the hall, heading toward the vending machines.

“I saw her try to open her eyes,” Wade said. “She’s going to be okay.”

“You sound so sure. I’m still scared she’ll die. I should have been looking out for her.” Matt’s voice caught in his throat as he covered his mouth and squeezed his eyes shut.

“Matt, you are a good brother.”

Matt chuckled as he rubbed his knuckles over his eyes. “She’d probably have a hissy fit if she heard me say that. She used to try so hard to do everything Josh and I did when we were kids. Dad would get so mad at us for letting her climb that tree in the back yard. He’d say, ‘she’s a little girl, Mattie. Not a boy. You need to watch out for girls. They aren’t as strong as men are. They need to be taken care of.’ Then she’d get mad and demand to know why she couldn’t climb trees and go fishing and hunting with us.”

“That’s a little old fashioned, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, maybe. It’s just the way Dad was raised. Women were to be taken care of and men went off and fought wars.”

“This is the twenty-first century,” Wade laughed. “That kind of thinking was abolished with the nineteenth amendment and Women’s Suffrage movement, wasn’t it?”

“One would think. I guess it just depends on the woman. Some of the best soldiers he’s ever worked with are women. He told me that himself. I guess he just has issues with Tori being his daughter and therefore his responsibility, and ours, to take care of her. Does that make any sense?”

Wade laughed and shook his head. “Not really. But who am I to judge? She’s his daughter, true—”

“And my sister, don’t forget that.”

“And your sister,” Wade amended. “But my point is, she’s not a little girl. She’s a strong, capable, beautiful, young woman who’s trying to find her own way.”

They walked in silence for several seconds before Matt stopped and turned to face Wade.

“Is there something you want to tell me about you and my sister, Wade?”

The frown creasing Matt’s forehead and shadowing his pale blue eyes, had Wade taking a slow breath before answering.

“Honestly, Matt. I’ve only met your sister that one time when she and her friends came into my studio.” He brushed the hair out of his eyes and shoved his hands into his back pockets. “But I can’t seem to get her out of my head . . . I had a dream about her.”

“Excuse me? You’re having dirty dreams about my baby sister?” The tone in Matt’s voice was low and laced with venom.

“What?” Wade flinched and put his hands up, defensively. “Jesus, Matt. No! Nothing like that. Christ, what do you take me for?”

“You just said you had a dream about her. What the hell was I supposed to think?”

“How long have you known me? Ten years? Have I ever talked about women in such a disrespectful way?”

“Sorry. You’re right, my bad.” Matt took another sip of coffee as if to clear his head. “So, what was the dream about?”

“The night she was hurt I fell asleep on my sofa. I dreamed that she was running. It was dark out and there were a few people around but not many. I could feel her panic. She kept saying she had to hurry before it was too late. The next thing I remember is she was flying through the air and when she landed on the ground, she said, ‘They’re okay, Wade. They’re safe.’ Then my phone rang. It was you telling me she’d been hurt.”

“Holy shit,” Matt said, as he rubbed his face. “There was a young mother and her little boy crossing the street. She was carrying the kid and she tripped. She said that if it hadn’t been for Tori shoving her out of the way, that car would have hit them instead. She was pregnant, Wade. If it hadn’t been for Tori, all three of them could have been killed.”

It felt like a sledgehammer had slammed into Wade’s chest. The breath left his lungs and his heart all but stopped. Little lights flashed around the edges of his vision and he reached out for something to support him or he’d be on the floor.

“Wade? You okay, man?” Matt’s voice echoed around him like he was deep in a cave. “Wade?”

Wade drew in a ragged breath and let it out. Drew in another one and then pushed away from Matt’s grip on his arms.

“I’m fine. Let go, I just need a minute to think.”

“You sure you’re alright? You look like you just got kicked in the balls or something,” Matt observed.

“I’m fine . . . Jet lag. Tired . . . Really.”

“Yeah. Let’s get some more coffee, okay?”

“Sounds good to me, I could use it.”

As they headed toward the elevator, Wade's memory drifted back to when Tori had first come into his studio. They'd talked about the tattoo and how he'd studied the ancient art of magical tattoos in Alaska. She'd jokingly asked him if he had one that would give her courage.

*I'll see what I can do.*

That's what he'd told her. She thought he'd been joking at the time, not knowing—how could she?—that he really could work a little “something *extra*” into the design she'd chosen. It was just supposed to give her self-confidence a little tweak.

*Oh, shit, oh shit, oh shit! What have I done?*

