

## CHAPTER THREE

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Vi squinted for a better look. A black dachshund with a saggy middle, her enlarged nipples dragging on the ground. Intent on her mission, the little dog paid no attention to Vi. Ever a softie for new moms, Vi surmised the dog’s puppies must be nearby.

The stray went to the back of the house. Vi followed, careful to avoid clumps of weeds and crumbles of sidewalk concrete, only to find the dog had disappeared.

“Mama Dog,” Vi crooned, trying to coax the dog into reappearing. The wind whipped harder. Out of excuses, she sighed aloud. No use putting off the inevitable. Her friends needed her. At least Paige did. Her stomach yowled as if in agreement.

The wind brought a distinct chill, raising prickles on her bare arms. Vi rubbed her temple. The sip of bitter coffee she drank earlier had only been a teaser. She’d return triumphant, and make her own pot of brew. Vi would stay immune to Rory’s friendly overtures, concern, or any other feelings on his

part. From what little she'd noticed, the man didn't lack for female attention. She sniffed. The men in her life had proved dismal failures, Daddy being the lone exception. With him, she'd felt protected.

And after she'd eaten a piece of pumpkin pie, she would tell the others about her restoration idea. Test the waters, so to speak. She was so hungry even Rory's mashed potatoes sounded appetizing.

High-pitched yips sounded close by, making Vi's mouth stretch in a smile. Mama Dog's puppies. Tall yellow grass brushed her legs as she hurried toward the noise.

She spied two squirmy black creatures, and then a buzz of activity swarmed around her ankles. Minuscule missiles spiraled around her skirt, flying into her hair. Fear petrified her movements.

Gasping for air, she splayed a hand across her face. With the other, she clawed at her hair, lurching away from the collective menace—one step, then another. Tiny barbs stung her arms and legs, then protracted like super-long needles.

She stomped instinctively, desperate to dislodge the bees.

*Crack!*

Boards gave way beneath her. Windsack-style, her arms flailed. One foot slipped, then the other.

She fell. Everything went dark.

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RORY SPIED Vi's yellow car parked in a driveway of sorts where she'd lived with her dad. The old Victorian beckoned him to come and explore. However much it piqued his curiosity, he first had to find Vi. The holiday meal he hadn't tasted turned to concrete in his stomach.

Where would she go? He stepped onto a driveway badly in need of fresh pavement. “Vi! Can you hear me?”

Dry brown leaves blew with no rhythm as the wind sharpened. A chill dampened his skin beneath the hoodie. A dog barked close by. Rory strained to hear. His prosthetic chugged to keep up as he ran to the source of the noise.

Not far behind the house, a small black dog stood sentinel-style, barking incessantly. Rory’s gut clenched. Could it have to do with Vi? He’d heard of dogs playing the role of guardian angel. “Easy, there. What’s upsetting you?” The animal shied away as Rory approached. Then it turned, scampering into the weeds.

Rory took in several things at once. Flat boards. A jagged hole. He drew even with the hole and peered inside, his eyes meeting darkness. Pulling out his phone, he knelt on his good leg, shining the phone light into the hole. His heart lurched when he recognized Vi’s purple shawl. Her eyes turned violet when she wore it.

“Vi! Can you hear me? Vi!” Not a muscle moved. She lay unconscious; her red hair flowed over her shoulders. The anxiety Rory had felt all morning roared to new heights. *Lord, help!* His fingers punched 911. When a person came on the line, he explained the circumstances and gave the correct address. As he clicked off, the person on the other end insisted he stay connected. *Sorry. Not happening.*

Frantic to find a ladder, he rose. “What the—” Something jabbed his hand, and a buzzing noise flew around his head. Ducking, he stumbled away to study his palm. A sting. As gold and brown insects swarmed, he ran, his mind computing the circumstances. Vi had fallen into the hole. She was unconscious either from the fall or—he clicked a number on his phone. Holding it to his ear, he spied a decrepit outbuilding. He hurried toward it as the phone rang.

“Have you found her?” Paige’s whispery voice dripped with fear.

“Yes. Is Vi allergic to bees?”

Her soft gasp highlighted his worst suspicion. “That’s a yes?” Then, “I’m at her place and nine-one-one is on their way.” He stood before the shed door. No lock. *Thank You, Lord.*

“What can I do?” Paige asked.

“Confirm the address with nine-one-one.” In his haste, he might have spouted off the wrong one. “And Paige—” The words choked their way past his tight throat. “Pray it’s not too late.”

Rory crammed the phone into his pocket. He grabbed a dust-covered ladder, then sprinted to his car as if his boots were on fire. Clicking his key fob to open the trunk, he grabbed the red first aid kit and rummaged for an EpiPen. Having seen anaphylactic shock firsthand with his brother Mark, Rory found it hard to breathe past the fear crawling up his throat. The wind whistled in his ears as he dashed back to the hole.

The instrument clamped between his teeth, Rory stuck the ladder down the hole, then stepped down, rung by rung, alert to every creak. A damp, moldy smell assaulted his nostrils. Spider webs swept across his face and clung to his beard. He blinked and continued to descend, leading with his natural foot. For the thousandth time, he thanked God he still had two good knees. Flesh and blood joints made climbing more manageable. He’d had a rock wall installed at the gym, scaling it regularly to understand and stay in touch with the limits of his prosthetic. For times such as this, apparently.

His boot hit a damp, slick surface. The wall felt slimy under his hands.

Body weight balanced, he pivoted in the cramped space. He pulled out his phone, flashing it around for a visual of the area. The narrow opening at the top fanned into a bowl shape no

more than eight feet across at the bottom—an old, abandoned cistern.

Vi lay inches from his feet.

When he kneeled, moisture seeped into his pants. Goosebumps rose on his arms. How long had she been down here?

“Vi, can you hear me?” He shone the phone light next to her face. When she didn’t respond, he nudged her collarbone with his fingers. Angling his body closer, he lifted a limp hand—clammy to the touch. A chill curled around his spine.

“Wake up, Vi. Talk to me, babe.” He’d wanted to say those words for a long time, as if they were good friends who chatted often. The truth existed as something quite different. Even within the intimacy of their tight-knit group, she’d always evaded him. He took a deep breath, savagely cutting off the musings. Just as well. They could never be more than friends.

Rory forced his emotions into a detached state. He noted facial swelling and rash-like symptoms. The shadows hindered any closer inspection. He pressed two fingers against her carotid artery, bending lower as if to hear her pulse. When weak bumps vibrated beneath his fingers, his breath swooshed out.

She stirred the tiniest bit and wheezed. Not getting enough air. *She needs help now.* He scooted into a better position, uncapped the blue lid of the EpiPen, and wrapped his fist around the cylinder. Beset with a desire to preserve her modesty, he smoothed her skirt and injected the EpiPen through the fabric into her outer thigh. She could fuss at him later. He gripped it until it clicked and gave thanks when it released properly. “You’re on the mend, Vi.” His lips moved silently as he commanded her body to cooperate with the injection.

The state of her hair tugged at his heart. When he pulled it away from her face, a bleeding lump on her forehead appeared. He inhaled sharply at the deep cut. Small wonder she'd fallen unconscious.

Rory's shoulders slumped in relief when sirens sounded in the distance. Then Jesse's head appeared at the top of the cistern, diminishing the light. He turned and yelled for a flashlight, then peered back into the hole. "How is she?"

"Non-responsive. Full-blown anaphylaxis. Probably a concussion. Plenty of scrapes and bruises. She'll hurt all over and have a doozy of a headache. Accumulated layers of leaves and debris here at the bottom may have cushioned her fall."

"You remembered how to use it?" Jesse perched on the ladder, directing the light at the discarded EpiPen.

"Some things get buried so deep you can't forget." Rory pressed two fingers against her neck again. Her pulse imitated a faulty light bulb. Not the response he wanted. He took hold of her icy hand.

Topside, Vi's dog bayed a long mournful note. Rory looked up at Jesse's lined face. "She's in bad shape—what's taking nine-one-one so long?"

"Paige and Brenna went to flag them down. It's a maze if you don't know the way."

Rory continued to monitor Vi until more faces appeared, blocking the gray sheet of sky behind them. A brighter flashlight shone around him. An official-sounding voice called down, "Sir, we need you to climb out so we can assess the situation."

Rory rubbed his beard. His emotions were swinging trapeze-style. They had the equipment and the know-how to get Vi out of this blasted hole, yet he didn't want to leave her.

For her sake, he would.

He rose carefully and glanced down. His breath caught at her still form. Her hair, normally bright enough to kindle a fire, had darkened in the flickering light. The vibrant color had disappeared from her lips. He placed his good foot on the bottom rung and murmured, “Hang in there, Vi. I’ll catch up with you later.”