

## CHAPTER TWO

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Daddy's last gift. *Thank you, Lord.* Vi gazed at the Victorian house in dire need of a facelift, then took in the land and lake surrounding the house. Twenty acres of prime land in Valiant, Texas. The only place she'd ever been happy. And the first place she ran to when life became difficult. If she were totally honest, helping host a massive dinner distracted her from the real issue. Clear direction on how to move forward was what she needed most. Deep down, she sensed the answers would be here.

Best of all, Rory wouldn't find her here. Talk about a distraction.

A gusty wind whipped the hair from her bun into an unruly frizz as she walked to the front door of her childhood home. Twisting the key in the lock, she let herself in. Stillness reigned as if the memories had left at the same time as she did—too sad to stay. A slight musty odor of smoke lingered in the air. Vi's lip twitched. Daddy had smoked his pipe outside, but the telltale scent always found its way into the house.

Her cell phone buzzed. She fished it out of her skirt pocket

and groaned. Mom again. Maybe if Vi answered, the calls would stop. A snort pushed through her nose and throat. Sure they would. “Hey, Mom.”

“Where are you?” a strident voice asked.

She shifted from one foot to another, holding back a sigh. “Same place as this morning.” Not on her way to Houston.

An impatient noise. Then, “Vi, you’re wasting your life in that awful little town. Bored out of your mind, no doubt. Rodney and I are sitting here all alone on a family holiday. He misses you, darling. Say you’ll come tomorrow. It will be Black Friday. Great opportunity to update your wardrobe on me.”

Mentally, Vi shuddered. Mom would buy styles Vi would never wear. And it wasn’t Rodney who missed her. “Mom, I enjoy living in Valiant. You’re the one who finds it boring. I can’t come at all this weekend.”

“Christmas then. You’ll be here, won’t you?”

Vi heard past the loud persistence to the desperation in Mom’s voice. Her lifestyle among society’s elite didn’t lend itself to deep friendships. Vi relented. “I’ll be there on Christmas Day.”

As if she hadn’t heard Vi’s response, Mom said, “Oh, we’ll make a week of it. Shop and dine to our heart’s content. We’ll scour the town for every little niche store—”

“I can only promise the day, Mom. After Christmas, my massage schedule fills up quickly.”

“We’ll see once you’re here.”

Mom didn’t consider massage a real job. After a firm goodbye, Vi hung up. Not quite a win—no such thing—but she’d redirected Mom’s focus on today to three weeks from now—all kinds of time for Mom to dream up outings that weren’t going to happen. Vi swallowed hard, tamping down the scream rising in her throat.

Vi's phone chirped again. She clicked a button and held it to her ear. "Hi, Paige."

"Are you headed back?" Concern etched her friend's voice.

Keeping her tone mild, Vi said, "Y'all go ahead. Eat without me. I'm fine. I need a little alone time before I come back."

"It's Thanksgiving, Vi. Everyone is asking where you are. You're going to miss something special if you don't get home." She nattered on about Rory's famous mashed potatoes, while Vi's attention snagged on the "something special." She listened, only to hear, "... Rory's also been asking where you are. He feels bad about the way you ran out this morning ..."

Right now, Vi didn't care how Rory fared in her absence. At every turn lately, the guy invaded her space. Her only thoughts about him revolved around *not* being the man's latest conquest.

"The sooner I get finished here, the sooner I'll be home. Gotta go. Love you." Vi ended in a breathy whisper. She clicked off the phone, tears blurring her vision. Oh, bother. These all-over-the-place sentiments were her primary reason for coming here. Since Daddy's death, the past she'd thought buried away forever had sprung to life with a vengeance.

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RORY'S THUMBS ached from rubbing them together. The rich scent of pumpkin pie still hung in the air. Vi had been gone for hours. Her absence gnawed at him. Paige mentioned this was Vi's first holiday without her dad. Firsts in the grief cycle were tough. It explained why her stormy blue eyes had held such pain. Without knowing, he'd yearned to comfort her.

But she ran.

He could tell her from experience the flight response

wouldn't work—not ever. She'd figure it out if she could settle long enough to catch a breath.

They'd finished prepping the dinner and waited until everyone had arrived. Still no Vi. Paige had asked him to say grace. Then everyone chowed down on the delicious holiday food. He vaguely remembered eating, but the food had no taste.

Worse yet, Paige said her last calls and texts to Vi had gone unanswered.

The afternoon's only bright spot occurred when Jesse proposed to Brenna. She glowed, and Jesse looked as if he'd bench-pressed a planet. Thrilled for his best friend, Rory couldn't keep ignoring the urgency in his spirit about Vi. He fidgeted in his chair, not hearing the conversations floating around him. Her well-being had leaped to the top of his chain.

He leaned over to where Paige chatted with two of her siblings. "Give me the address to Vi's house."

"She won't want to be disturbed." Pools of worry in Paige's brown eyes communicated she hoped he'd do it anyway.

"I'm going out there." His gut wouldn't leave him alone until he checked on her.

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VI GLANCED around the living area. She'd packed her belongings the evening of the funeral, Daddy's death still too fresh to process, and moved in with Paige. *Thank you again, God, for my housemates.*

She pulled a tissue from the pocket of her skirt, wiped her cheeks, and stepped into the galley-style kitchen. Daddy had always talked about enlarging it. The seed of an idea pushed through her grief. What if someone ushered the dated space

into the twenty-first century? Added flair and panache, but kept the quaint Victorian features?

Her steps slowed as she walked to the bedroom where Daddy had spent his last days. She turned the old-fashioned crystal knob and peeked in. The door hinge squealed in protest. Stale air greeted her.

Meds and reading glasses on the nightstand, ruffled sheets on the bed, a basket of once-clean pajamas and towels, now dusty. Everything was untouched from the last time she'd seen it. Before Daddy's final trip to the hospital. Why hadn't she returned sooner? Six months of neglect made it harder to bear.

Tears streamed down her face. The tissue she'd used earlier had turned into a soggy mess. Her boots echoed across the planked floor. As she perched on a corner of the bed, a specific knowing flashed through her being. The silver lining of death in all its redemptive glory awakened within her, and she knew without a shred of physical evidence. The most crucial part of Daddy—his spirit—had achieved freedom. Unshackled from his sick, earthly body. Because of Christ's sacrifice, Daddy had gone to a place she couldn't go yet. But someday ...

The subtle seed crystallized into a concrete plan. She would restore this place. Make it a home again—her home. Daddy had left her a tidy sum. Restoring this place would be a dream come true and provide the strength to stay. Consulting with a professional seemed the next logical step.

Solid purpose filling her, Vi shut the squeaky door with a firm hand. She strode to the wraparound porch, peering out to the lake. A gray sky had darkened the water to charcoal. Stormy white tips frothed the waves. The smell of rotting marsh reeds filled her nostrils.

Two boardwalks spanning the lake could use a coat of paint and more bracing. She navigated around unstable porch

steps. *Thank you, Lord.* Her sadness had turned a corner onto a fresh track. Renovation had crossed her mind before, but now the timing seemed perfect.

By coming to her childhood home, she'd discovered what she needed most. She would restore this old wreck and cocoon herself in, all safe and snug. Daddy's love echoed through the walls. He and this house would provide the strength and insulation she needed to live her own life. She'd always struggled for balance anywhere else. Why hadn't she seen it before?

And maybe ... it would alleviate the cost of her own poor decisions.

In the distance, a slight movement caught her eye.