

Chapter 1 of TORN
Connections #2 by Kim Karr
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Published by the Penguin Group
Release date: October 1, 2013

Chapter 1

A Thousand Years

A glimmer of light catches my eye through the partially open curtains across the room as I wake. It must be dawn because the sky is turning various shades of pink, red, and orange. Before I know it, the sky blazes with color; it's as if it's on fire—just like my body, but I push my pain aside. It's a glorious new day. And I'm here to share it with him. I look at the gorgeous lines of his body slumped over in the chair next to my hospital bed. He's asleep, but not very soundly. I study him, taking in his strong jaw, sculpted nose, and toned body. But it's his soul, his playfulness, and his amazing personality that made me fall in love with him. He's so much more than I could ever have asked for—he's my soul mate in every sense of the word.

Carefully removing my hand from his, I try hard not to wake him. Then I slowly ease myself up from the bed and make my way to the bathroom. When I return, the sun has fully risen and so has he. He's staring out the window with the curtains now completely open. I sweep him with my eyes so that I can appreciate every little thing—at just over six feet he's glorious. Strong shoulders, a lean waist, abs that seem to flex with his every movement. Arms crossed, his head cocked just so, his T-shirt tucked into his jeans haphazardly, and his stance so straight and sure.

The soft bluish-gray sky of the early morning is almost as breathtaking as the sight of him.

Trying to see what he's looking at, I only notice the fluffy clouds drifting by. They appear so white against the morning sky; they make me start to smile. But I know that's not what he's seeing right now, when a bluejay flies by and he turns around I want to erase the pain I see in his sorrowful expression and sad green eyes.

I don't want to dwell on the events of yesterday's incident, but he seems to be preoccupied with it. His mood has been somber ever since it happened. He calls it an *attack*—I prefer *incident*. After all, I'm here alive and merely bruised. I'm not going to waste my time thinking about one bad day—I'd rather celebrate the good things in each new day. But he blames himself. I haven't been able to convince him that if anyone was to blame it's me. Then again, a random act of violence couldn't have been prevented and, thankfully, I'm all right. I just want to leave the hospital and go home.

Grabbing my clothes from the chair, I throw them on the bed. I'm standing in front of him on the cold linoleum floor in nothing but a hospital gown. I make a twirling motion with my finger impatiently. "Do you mind turning around?"

Sighing, he runs his hands through his already-messy hair. "I'm not turning around. I want to help you. Seeing what he did to you can't make me feel any worse. Believe me."

I swallow the lump in my throat and try to gather the right words to respond, and help put his mind at ease. "River, it was *not* your fault. Some perverted animal, looking to get his kicks by attacking women, that isn't your fault."

He can't hide his shudder from my eyes. "Dahlia, it wasn't a fucking incident. You were attacked. If I had been with you it wouldn't have happened. I shouldn't have been sleeping. It's really just that simple."

I stand there shocked by his tone, even though I know he doesn't mean to be so harsh. "No, it's not just that simple . . .," I start to argue, but he cuts me off.

His shoulders sag. He promptly diverts his eyes to the ground and shoves his hands in his

jeans pockets. “I’m sorry, Dahlia. I don’t mean to yell. I just can’t stand that you got hurt. It kills me to see you like this, to know what could have happened to you. It just kills me.”

We’ve had this conversation twice already. I already know my reassurances will go nowhere. So I repeat myself and contemplate making my way to the duffel bag lying next to the chair to get my socks and shoes and then go into the bathroom to change. But I plead one more time, “River, please turn around.”

He’s standing in front of me with only the bed between us but for some reason it feels like we’re miles apart. He doesn’t move toward me, but I can see the overwhelming emotion in his face and in his eyes. He’s hurting. I can also hear it in his voice and his sorrow not only makes me sad, it tears at my heart.

I’ve never been shy around him. I just know that I’m covered in bruises and I want so badly to spare him the heartache of seeing me this way.

“No, let me help you,” he whispers. His tone is barely audible.

With a deep sigh I resign myself to his plea and pointing near the chair I ask, “Can you please hand me that?”

Grabbing my bag, he sets it on the bed.

As I untie the ugly green gown and slide it down my arms, he watches me. But not in an *Oh, I want to see you naked* kind of way, more like an *Oh God, I might be sick* way.

The gown puddles on the floor and I stand there completely naked in front of him. I watch as he looks at me. He scans my body from head to toe before his eyes drift back up to meet mine and he swallows.

In an attempt to lighten the mood, I pick up the hospital gown and playfully toss it at him. “Your turn to play dress-up.”

His lips finally turn up in a semblance of a smile, but his eyes are still filled with sadness. “I think I’ll pass this time, if you don’t mind,” he says, holding the gown up to him. “Green isn’t my color.”

Both of us smiling, I know he's looking beyond my bruises. At last. And all his love for me is now reflected in his eyes—it means everything to me.

He strides around the bed and insists on helping me put on my panties and jeans. I want to comment on how easy it would be for him to get in my pants right now, but I refrain. But when he ever so carefully starts to pull my sweater over my head, I can't hold back. Grabbing his hand, I press it over my heart and look at him. "See, you can touch me. I won't break. I'll even let you get to second base," I say, sliding his hand down to cup my breast.

He resists at first, but eventually sighs and brushes his thumb over my nipple. A slow grin crosses his lips. "Second base, that's it? I think I had a better chance with the pants."

We both laugh a little and I continue to hold his hand in place. His eyes burn into mine as he moves his hand to cup my cheek. Leaning into my ear he whispers, "You better stop it. You're going to get me all worked up and when Nurse Smiley Face comes in here she's going to kick me out."

He pulls back and I roll my eyes as he pulls my sweater down the rest of the way. I silently wince a little in pain. My shoulder is sore, my wrist is sprained, and my body is bruised. The doctor wanted to cut off my bracelet, the only jewelry I was wearing, because of the swelling, but I begged him not to. It's the one thing of Ben's I have left and I need it to always remind me to live my life with no regrets.

Once I'm dressed, he gently places his arms around my waist and pulls me to him. "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?" he whispers.

"You could never hurt me," I respond in a low, comforting voice.

Leaning back, he crosses his finger over his heart. "I promise I will never let anything happen to you again." The ache in his voice cuts through me and I have to take a deep breath to prevent tears. I just want to throw my arms around his neck but my aching body won't let me, so I settle for circling my arms around his waist instead. He, in turn, slips his back around mine and we just hold each other. Then he kisses each of my eyelids and rests his forehead against mine.

And with each passing second I can feel our love growing stronger, if that's even possible. We stay like this in silence until the nurse enters the room.

She clears her throat and he whispers, "Nurse Smiley Face caught us again, I'm in trouble now."

I giggle and we pull apart. She's nice, but she didn't like it that River stayed the night. And once last night when I asked him to lie next to me, she came in to check my vitals and made him get off the bed.

She takes my blood pressure one last time and goes over the discharge instructions left by the doctor—basically rest, no strenuous activities, and if I experience headaches of any kind I am to see my doctor immediately.

Once I've signed all the paperwork, the nurse calls for an orderly and when he arrives he wheels me to the door. River gets his car and we are finally allowed to leave the hospital. He decided earlier that we should spend the night in Tahoe and head home in the morning. On the way to the hotel, he looks over at me. "Did I tell you Xander and Caleb are here?"

I look at him questioningly. "No you didn't. Why are they here?"

He laughs a little and says, "What do you mean 'why'? They're here to make sure you're okay."

"But we're going home tomorrow, they could have just checked on me then."

Shrugging his shoulders, he answers, "I know but I wanted Xander to drive us back so I can sit with you."

"Oh, that's really sweet of you, but not necessary. I'm fine."

"Well even if you're fine, it's not a short ride and I want you to be able to stretch out in a backseat. I wanted to be able to be close to you. To take care of you if you need anything."

I look at him lovingly; he really does always say the sweetest things. "Thank you. But why did Caleb come? Do Xander and Caleb even really know each other?" I have to ask because it wasn't so long ago that I thought River didn't care for Caleb and now his brother is riding up to

Lake Tahoe with him.

“Yeah, of course they know each other. They’ve met a few times, actually. And since I decided yesterday to hire Caleb to install additional security in our house, I thought it would be a good idea to discuss the upgrade with him before we get home. That way he can start on it as soon as possible.”

“We don’t need additional security at home because of what happened. River, I think that’s a bit much.”

“Dahlia, I never had the security system upgraded when I moved in, so I’m just taking a precautionary measure, that’s all. You’ll be coming back to LA alone during the tour so I want to make sure you’re safe.”

Shaking my head I throw in, “I didn’t even think you liked Caleb.”

“I never said I didn’t like him.”

“No, you didn’t say it, but I felt it every time you talked to him.”

“Hmm . . . well, regardless of how I feel about him I know he’s good at what he does and when I called him he said he had time. Oh, and one more thing, Caleb or someone who works for him will be escorting us places.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You mean like bodyguards?”

“Well I wouldn’t call them bodyguards, just additional security.”

“That sounds really awkward.”

“Dahlia, I promise you won’t even know they’re around.”

“I doubt that.” I rest my head against the window and close my eyes. I find the whole amp-up-the- security thing a little absurd, but since it makes him feel better, I won’t protest.

When we get to the hotel, we learn that Caleb had our room changed and he and Xander now occupy the adjoining room next door. I want to tease River—“Yeah, we won’t even know they’re

around,” but I don’t.

The doctor gave me some pain pills at the hospital and they’ve made me so tired that I spend the rest of the day in bed, snuggled in River’s arms. I must have fallen into a deep sleep because when I wake, I look at the clock and it’s well after midnight. The first thing I do is reach for him only to find that he isn’t next to me. Looking around the room, I’m a little disoriented at first. But I see River huddled in the corner with Caleb and Xander, discussing something in hushed whispers that I can’t hear. When he sees me try to sit up and move to get off the bed, he hastily rushes over.

“What do you need, baby?” he asks in almost a whisper. His face looks worn, tired, and worried.

“I need to go to the bathroom and get some water.” I try to smile at him, but my mouth tastes like it has a wad of cotton balls in it and my body feels completely detached from my mind. I’m not sure I can actually walk to the bathroom without falling. I also feel light-headed.

“Let me help you,” he says as he moves my legs to the floor and carefully helps me stand up. But when I start to wobble a little, I grab his shoulder for support. I think the pain medication has not only made me light-headed, but also unstable.

He’s already wrapping my arm around him as he picks me up. “Dahlia, let me help you.”

Xander and Caleb look over at me, appearing worried. They stand and both say good night, disappearing through the adjoining door.

Once we reach the bathroom, River gently sets me down and removes my pants. I grip the counter and begin to regain my stability.

“Can you grab me a T-shirt?” I ask him quietly.

“Sure, beautiful girl, whatever you need,” he replies with a smile.

When he leaves the bathroom I push the door slightly closed and frown as I take the first real glimpse of myself in the mirror since I got home. I look much worse than I did earlier this morning. The bruises have turned purple, my wrist is still swollen, the scrapes on my cheek from

where my attacker held my face to the ground are crusted over, and my shoulder aches from where he shoved his knee to hold me down.

I carefully pull off my sweater and hastily wrap a towel around me. I consider a shower, but decide against it. It seems like it would require too much energy right now. I do manage to brush my teeth. Once I finish, I look back into the mirror and see that he's standing behind in the doorway with such sadness in his eyes. He walks over to me as I wipe my mouth with a towel.

"Let's put this on you," he says while pulling his long-sleeved 30 Seconds to Mars T-shirt over my head. "It will be easier to get on and off than one of yours and it will keep you warm."

I let him dress me like I'm a small child. Happy memories of my father getting me ready for school pop into my head. My dad would help me get dressed and drop me off at school when my mother had to leave early for work. I loved those days. I loved every day my parents were alive.

"You alright, Dahlia?" he asks with concern.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine."

Then smiling, I tell him, "You dressing me now just reminded me of happy times when my dad would let me pick out whatever I wanted to wear to school whether it matched or not. Since my mom wasn't home to make me change I usually wore his concert T-shirts."

He smirks, "You mean your mom, the fashion designer, didn't like it when you wore your dad's grungy T-shirts to school?"

"How did you guess?"

"Intuition," he tells me. "Personally, I think you make everything you wear look incredible, but I could see where your mom might have a different opinion."

I lean into him just to feel his warmth and nuzzle his neck. "I wish you could have met my parents."

"I may never be able to meet them, but I know them through you."

Pulling away, I smile at him and press my palms against his chest. "That means everything to me," is all I can say because it does.

He nods and we stay silent for a few moments.

“I think you should lie back down.” Carrying me back to the bed, he sets me down on the opposite side I woke up on. But I don’t care which side I sleep on as long as he’s next to me. I take his hand and squeeze it. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” he says, kissing the top of my head. “I ordered you something to eat while you were in the bathroom.”

“I’m not really hungry. I’m just really thirsty.”

Pulling the covers up over my legs, he sits beside me. “You have to eat something when you take these pills.” He opens the medicine bottle on the night table and pours two oblong, white, horse-sized pills into his palm then sets them down next to the open bottle.

“There’s no way I can swallow those.”

He laughs quickly and then stands up and walks toward the TV. “I ordered you grilled cheese and French fries to eat and a milkshake to swallow the pills with.” He opens the adjoining room door and says, “Hey Xander, just bring the food over here when it comes.”

I’m staring at his backside when he turns his head over his shoulder and catches me. He throws me a wink and I smile back. We don’t exchange words but we both start laughing and I have to say, that is my all-time favorite sound. God, I love it when he laughs, it’s soft but husky and oh so sexy.

I hold my bruised ribs in pain, and he apologizes for making me laugh.

“River, it’s okay. I want to laugh. And, really, I just couldn’t resist the view.”

He stifles more laughter and I ask, “Why did you order food and have it delivered to Xander’s room?” I pause a moment before adding, “And why are we sharing a room with Xander and Caleb anyway?”

His laughter stops and he becomes more serious. “We aren’t sharing a room with them. The door closes between us, silly girl.” As if to prove his point, he opens and closes the door in a swinging motion. Leaving it open, he walks back over to the bed and sits next to me. He cups my

unbruised cheek before leaning in to kiss my forehead. “And I ordered food to be delivered to their room in case you fell back asleep. I didn’t want the knocking to disturb you.”

“Oh, that makes sense. Well now that you mentioned my favorite—grilled cheese dipped in a chocolate milkshake—I might be feeling a little hungry.”

“Have I told you how gross I think that is, by the way?” he asks, raising his eyebrows.

“Only a thousand times, and yet every time I order it you manage to steal a bite. And don’t think I haven’t noticed you dip it in your shake first.”

Chuckling, he pinches his thumb and index finger together and says, “Well, I might like it just a tiny little bit.”

I smile at him and lay my head down on the pillow just as Xander brings in the tray of food. River points to the empty spot next to me on the bed. “Thanks, man, just put it down right there.”

“Dahlia, do you want anything else?” Xander asks.

“Just a gallon of water,” I say jokingly. “My mouth feels like a desert in the middle of July.”

He grins at me and starts to pour the liter of bottled water into a glass as River takes my giant pills, along with a knife from the tray, and comes over to the table.

“I’ll take the whole bottle, please. No need for a glass.”

Xander hands me the water as River cuts the pills in half.

“Stop looking like you’re going to someone’s funeral, Xander. I’m fine. You and Caleb really didn’t have to drop everything to come up here when we’re just going home tomorrow anyway.”

“Will it make you feel better if I tell you I came for my brother?”

I take a huge sip of water and eye him before giving him a full smile. “Since I know you’d never admit you came for me, then yes it will.”

He kisses me on the forehead. “Good night, Muse. If you weren’t such a pain in my ass I might find you funny. I might even like you.” I don’t mind him calling me Muse since he repeatedly tells me the Wilde Ones’ claim to fame is the song “Once in a Lifetime,” which River

wrote after meeting me that first time.

“I’ll keep hoping and wishing for the day you say you love me.”

He looks at me with all trace of humor gone. “I’m really glad you’re okay, Dahlia. Good night. See you in a few hours.”

Glancing over at River, he gives him a nod before closing the door. Our plan is to leave in the middle of the night to get home early enough for Xander to get to work. River comes to sit next to me and once I swallow the disgusting horse pills we share the tray of food and then fall asleep in each other’s arms.

Moonlight cascades through the windows and the stars shine bright above us as Xander drives us home. Lying on River’s lap, I am listening intently to him. He’s strumming his fingers through my hair and singing along to “Losing My Religion,” but his voice sounds sad, reminiscent of something almost. When the song finishes I reach my hand up to caress his cheek. “I love that song. I saw R.E.M. perform it at the Greek the year it came out.”

He takes my hand and kisses my knuckles. “I have a love/hate relationship with it myself.”

Xander snickers from the front seat. “Yeah, more like it had a love/hate relationship with you.”

Combing my fingers through his hair, I tug on a strand and he grins. “Why?” I ask.

He slouches a little more so I can rest my head on the tautness of his abs. His fingers tap my arm and he laughs. “When it hit the top five my dad decided I should learn to play the mandolin. He studied hit songs all the time trying to dissect them for what drove them to the top. He took note of anything different used in its production and ‘Losing My Religion’ was only the second hit song ever to feature a mandolin prominently.”

Xander starts laughing so loud it surprises me. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him laugh like that. River shakes his head. “Shut up, Xander.”

River's eyes seem to dance in the moonlight at the memory and it thrills me to see him laugh when he mentions his father. He doesn't mention him often but on the rare occasion he does it's never with any sign of emotion. I'm glad he has happy memories of his dad, like I do. I have a sudden urge to kiss him and pull his head down closer to mine so I can press my lips against his. "Tell me," I whisper, tracing the outline of one of his perfectly defined pectorals.

"Don't laugh but you know the saying 'It's all in the wrist'?"

I nod.

"It's absolutely true. Subtle, nimble wrist movements are the key to playing the correct note on the mandolin and no matter how many times I tried, I just couldn't get it down."

"Tell her the rest," Xander interjects.

River rolls his eyes. "Okay, so my dad knew I was getting frustrated and tried teaching me by using the only other hit song featuring a mandolin."

Xander laughs loudly again. "Man, I can still picture it," he manages between snorts.

I move to sit up but River reaches out to stop me and continues, ignoring Xander. "My dad was teaching me how to play 'Maggie May,' so I watched some of Rod Stewart's music videos and Xander walked in when I was practicing Rod's walk from the 'Hot Legs' video. I had decided to give up my attempts at the mandolin and decided I'd rather move like Rod."

All three of us burst out in a chorus of laughter and the vision in my head is priceless. God, sometimes it feels like my heart will burst with love for River. Everything about him drives me wild but especially his sense of humor.

His gaze captures mine and although we're having a conversation with his brother, we've somehow moved from playful touches to sensual caresses. His hand rests on my stomach and his fingers are under the hem of my shirt resting on my bare skin. I'm drawing lines back and forth across each muscle of his washboard abs. The lower I get, the heavier he breathes. Leaning down, his soft lips meet mine and I wrap my arms around his neck and press harder. We get lost in each other for a moment and a small moan escapes my throat.

Xander clears his throat. “The windows are steaming up. Could you stop acting like a couple of teenagers?” Then he turns the radio up.

It’s shortly before dawn when Xander drops us off at home. With coffees in hand we sit outside and watch the sunrise. I’m content to sit near him quietly and appreciate the company, but in the calm of the bright crisp morning River asks me, “Why are we waiting to get married?”

He kisses my hair and continues, “It seems like all I was really doing was waiting for you my whole life anyway, and I don’t want to wait anymore.”

I shift so I’m lying on my side and can look up at him. “I’m not really sure. But, when you put it that way, I don’t want to wait either.”

“How would you feel if we charter a plane to Las Vegas and get married today? I can have it arranged in a matter of hours. We can fly up there, get married, and be back here by sunset.”

“You don’t mind if your family’s not there?”

He hesitates only a moment before pulling me closer. His arms tighten around me as the green depths of his eyes stare into mine. “I won’t be satisfied until I wake up next to my wife every morning. Dahlia, all I want is you and me forever. We can celebrate later once you’re feeling better. We can even have another ceremony here, but what happened in the hospital I never want to happen again. So will you marry me today?”

He’s romantic, fearless, and full of life and I love every inch of him. I loop my arms around his neck and my lips find his. Smiling at him as the sun rises and with the Hollywood sign as our backdrop, I say, “River Wilde, I would love to marry you today.”

He groans against my mouth and the sound echoes through my skin, making me smile even more. He kisses me. Then he kisses me again. Then some more. Once we’re both breathless he moves me enough to stand up. His smile, the real one, breaks across his face. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

I have no intention of going anywhere, so he’s safe. When he comes back he has Stella firmly in his clutch. Joy radiates from him and there’s a familiar gleam in his eyes as he sits down

at the end of the lounge chair with the guitar. The slight breeze in the air blows his hair. I move toward him and rest my chin on his shoulder, my front to his back. His hot skin awakens all my senses.

I peer down and watch as his hand dances over the strings and he starts singing “You and Me.” As he plays I can feel every motion of his body as if I’m the one playing. Curling my hand around his hip I feel him shudder as heat travels through my arm. My eyes shift to his face and it’s a picture of what is real, what is right in my life, and what we have . . . true love everlasting.

He sings the final verse, “The clock never seemed so alive,” into my ear and I shiver as his warm breath grazes the skin of my neck. I could watch him play and listen to him sing a thousand times over and never grow tired of it. Not ever. He cocks his head to mine and picks the last notes on his strings as the sound of his music fills the air and I can’t help but think how lucky I am to get to spend the rest of my life with him.

A few hours later I’m sitting at the breakfast bar having just finished up a security system lesson with Caleb, when the doorbell rings. I know who it is before River has answered it. Aerie screams, “There you are! How are you?”

It’s only been sixty minutes since I called to tell her we were home and she’s already here. She runs over and I stand up slowly. My body aches much more today than it has since the incident, probably from sitting in the car on the ride home. “I’m okay—really! I look much worse than I actually feel.”

“I’m so sorry I didn’t come to see you in the hospital. Work has been crazy,” she says before throwing her arms around me in a tight embrace. I wince a little and she pulls away. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry I didn’t mean to hurt you!” Her face is full of concern—this woman who has helped me in more ways than I could ever count. Of course she’s here now. And she’s a vision of perfection in her red shift dress and black high heels, with a matching headband.

“I’m fine,” I lie so she doesn’t feel bad. I’ve talked to her on the phone so many times since I was hospitalized I think she knows more about the incident than River does.

“What’s going on at work?”

Rolling her eyes she says, “The owner’s son decided he wants to be more involv . . . ,” but before she can finish she’s giving me a speculative glance. “Why are you dressed like that?”

“Dressed like what?” I coyly ask, trying to keep my smile from exploding.

“You’re wearing a dress! In fact, you’re dressed like you’re going somewhere when you should be in sweats and lying in bed. You even have heels on. You never wear heels unless I make you.”

I glance over my shoulder to see River standing in the kitchen with Caleb. He nods his head. I’m so excited I just blurt it out, “We’re leaving this afternoon for Las Vegas to get married!”

She claps and jumps up and down with excitement then suddenly stops. “Wait a minute! You are not eloping, Dahlia London. You can’t. I want to see you get married.” She hugs me tightly again before pulling away. “Sorry, sorry,” she says, wiping the tears from her cheeks and trying to gain her composure.

I start to feel a little guilty, but rapidly try to push those feelings aside. “We’ll have a party after the band’s tour and all of us can celebrate then, okay?”

River comes around the counter and hugs Aerie before whispering something in her ear. Pulling me into his side he says, “We’ll celebrate later, but we want to get married now.”

“Is it safe for you to travel?” Aerie says with concern.

Nodding my head I try to convince her not to worry. “Really, Aerie, I feel fine. I promise.”

River kisses my hair softly. “Coffee?” he asks Aerie.

“No, you know I don’t drink that stuff. It’s pure octane and tastes like it, too.”

Laughing, he walks back into the kitchen, mumbling, “I don’t know how anyone survives without caffeine.”

River’s phone rings and I hear him say, “Xander, I told you I’m not meeting her today or

tomorrow. I don't give a shit what she wants." I give River a concerned glance and he nods at me, flashing me what I know to be his make-believe smile. Once he ends the call, he turns to me. "Dahlia, I have a few things to take care of. Will you be okay?"

Aerie shoos him away. "She'll be fine," she says and pulls me over to the sofa.

River comes over and kisses me again. "You sure?"

"I'm fine. Go already," I tell him, kissing him back.

"Okay. Caleb is in the music room if you need anything. He set up his computer in there for now. I won't be long."

Aerie and I talk for a while. Once she feels she has wrung every ounce of information from me, she stands and says, "I'll be back in an hour. Don't leave until I get back. I mean it!"

"Where are you going?" I glance at the clock.

"It's a surprise. Wait for me. Please?"

"Okay, you have an hour, that's it."

She waves at me as she rushes out the door.

With minutes to spare she returns holding a gray suit bag in one hand and a shopping bag in the other. She leads me to my bedroom.

"Every princess has to have a wedding dress to get married in," she says as she unzips the bag and pulls out the most beautiful white silk dress. Simple, yet elegant. It's a sleeveless cocktail-length dress with a deep V-neck and A-line skirt adorned with tiny pearls. There's also gorgeous, yet subtly patterned silk embroidery on the bodice, making it special enough for the occasion but not overwhelmingly fancy. It's perfect.

She sits me on the bed and pulls out a simple pair of silver high heels and slips them on my feet. "Just like Cinderella, Dahlia, you got your Prince Charming," she says as a tear slides down her cheek. She pulls one more item out of the bag for me. I look at the beautiful white band of fabric with small blue jewels all around it as I take it out of the box. "The dress is your something new, here is your something blue." It's a garter and as she takes it from my hand, she slips it on

my leg and up to my thigh; I laugh at her need to make sure I follow the typical bridal wedding traditions.

Once she has powdered and primped me, covering my bruises as best she can with makeup, she stands up and removes the pearl earrings from her ear. “And these are your something borrowed.” They are her great-grandmother’s pearl earrings, the ones I’ve always loved. I remove my earrings and insert hers, then stand to look in the mirror. Now I really look like a bride. I throw my arms around her despite the pain shooting through me. “I love you, Aerie Daniels, forever and always. Thank you so much!”

“You don’t have to thank me. I can’t have my best friend getting married in just anything. And to be honest I was afraid you might end up in your Converse sneakers.” I puff out a laugh and grab my camera. I hold it out in front of us and snap a picture. She’s been my best friend for so long, I want to remember this time with her forever.

Aerie and I say our goodbyes—she has to get back to work—and I find myself alone, thinking about how drastically my life has changed over the past year. When I catch sight of my Grammy’s pearls hanging on the mirror, I walk over to the dresser and pull down my something old. As I slip them around my neck, I have an odd *déjà vu* feeling. Today I’m going to marry the man who turned my life around; the man who taught me to love again. I thought Ben was my once-in-a-lifetime, but who knew a once-in-a-lifetime love could happen twice?

I feel so incredibly happy but a sudden sadness washes through me for those I’ve lost and I shift my eyes to the ceiling to say a silent prayer for each of them. I tell my mother and father I wish they could be here with me today. I thank my uncle for looking after me and keeping me on the right path. I think of my aunt and her mother and how they taught me that life is full of magic. Then I whisper to Ben, the man I intended to marry who was taken too soon, that I will always love him and he will forever hold a special place in my heart, as my first true love. I finish looking in the mirror and take a deep breath. I’m ready.

The battery in my cell phone is almost dead and I hope I have time to charge it. I walk into

the empty living room and head over to the kitchen to get my charger. Once I've plugged it in, I turn around and see his gorgeous silhouette framing the doorway. He walks toward me, looking irresistible.

All I can do is stare at him because today I get to marry this man.

River's mouth slowly curves into a smile. "You look amazing."

I return his smile and walk toward him. We meet in the middle and he gathers me close, whispering in my ear, "Come on, beautiful, you don't need that today."

We break apart, both of us ready to take the next step. His phone rings and he pulls it from his pocket. I glance at the screen and see it's his brother. He ignores it. I'm looking up at him while I ask, "Hey, what's going on with Xander? What was that with him on the phone earlier?"

He looks back at me and shakes his head. "You know Xander, he always wants what he wants now."

"And he wants what right now?"

"He wants me to meet with Ellie."

"Who's Ellie?"

"She's his contact for the label. Nothing to worry about now, though."

He places soft kisses on my forehead. He pulls back and gazes into my eyes with a look of adoration that I love. "Are you ready to become my wife?"

My legs start to quiver as I pull back to look at his handsome face. "Only if you promise to love me forever."

He cups my cheeks and says, "Beautiful, I made that promise to myself the first time I kissed you. I promised to love you always. How could I not?"

My tears spill over at his heartfelt words. I love him so much. He's hugging me, not too tightly, but enough that I feel his love and I know he will always be mine. He kisses me again and says, "The instant you become Mrs. River Wilde I'm going to show you just how much."

He grabs my hand and we head toward the door. "Amazing Grace" starts playing from my

phone in the kitchen just as we're about to leave and I turn back. "River, let me quickly grab that.

I don't want Grace to worry about me any more than she already has."

I drop his hand and walk to the kitchen counter to answer my phone. "Hello?"