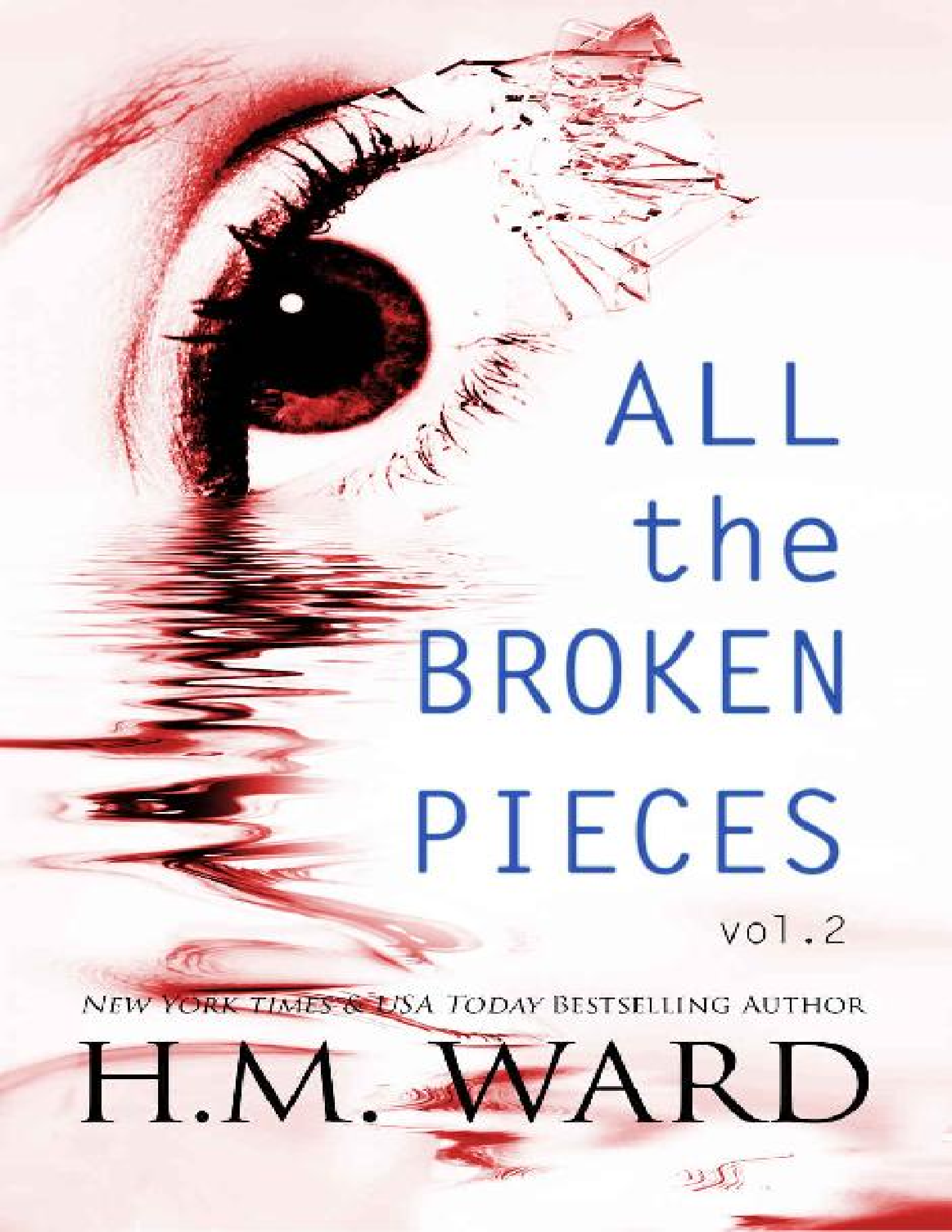

ALL the BROKEN PIECES

vol.2

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

H.M. WARD

ALL THE BROKEN PIECES

VOLUME 2

H. M. WARD

LAREE BAILEY PRESS

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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LAREE BAILEY PRESS

First Edition: April 2020

ebook: 978-1-63035-241-7

paper: 978-1-63035-242-4

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TERMS & SLANG USED IN ALL IN THE BROKEN PIECES SERIES

Ever wonder what the heck an idiom means? Never heard a slang term before?

Below is a list of the most commonly used verbiage in this series and the meaning in plain English.

Asshat (v): Demeanor and actions that are unattractively dickish.

Awesomesauce *(adj.)*: A way to describe something that is beyond awesome with a dash of excitement. Typically said by women.

Name-ism *(n)*: Typically two common turns-of-phrase that were mashed together to create a new, more pungent meaning.

Babylon *(n):* A township on Long Island where Avery grew up. There are million-dollar homes on the waterfront to tiny Cape Cod houses.

Cleavagefest *(adv):* When a woman's breasts are thrust up and smashed together so tightly that it infers a sexy party may be imminent.

Cray Cray *(adj)*: Super, over-the-top crazy.

Deer Park Avenue *(n)*: A heavily congested road that runs through several towns on Long Island.

Guido *(n)*: An Italian young man.

Guidette *(n)*: An Italian young woman.

L.I.E. *(n):* The Long Island Expressway, or Interstate 495, is a six-lane road the runs East/ West on Long Island that ends in Manhattan.

Skankzilla (adj): A woman who is part godzilla and part skank.

Slutified (v): When the amount of skin a piece of clothing covers is severely decreased to reveal more skin.

Squee *(v):* A squeal of glee. Try it. You'll like it.

Tramperella (adj): A promiscuous woman who has access to Cinderella's royal closet and slutified the garments.

To all those with a broken heart and endless hope. Hang in there…

YOU GOTTA KNOW THIS BEFORE YOU READ!

READ ME, BABE!

Thank you to everyone who supported this project! Before you start, a quick heads-up.

THIS SERIES IS FAN-DRIVEN. So I'll release a new novella when enough people ask for another book via reviews and social media. When tons of people ask and are involved, the next book comes out fast.

So if you like the idea and love the book, make sure you do both! Having that bit of reader involvement makes a huge difference in the success of a series. It'll also make sure you don't miss any voting that occurs as the series progresses.

Last thing—there are **'Easter eggs' in this book**. One per chapter. An 'Easter egg' in this case is a hidden bit from one of my other books. It can be anything from DEMON KISSED to DAMAGED 3.

An example would be seeing a Trystan Scott poster or passing by Ivy's high school in Demon Kissed. This is a fun game for those who have read all my books. If this is your first book of mine or you haven't read everything, it doesn't affect the way the book reads at all. It's just fun hidden surprises. I did this on a smaller scale with SCANDALOUS and STRIPPED. Have fun with it! 😊

This series has been three years in the making. It's tense, raw, and dark. I almost didn't publish it, but you guys cheered me on, so here it is. Thank you so much! Happy reading!

You can join in the discussion via my Facebook page: www.facebook.com/AuthorHMWard.

For a complete listing of Ferro books, look here: http://hmward.com/books/

Thank you and happy reading!
~Holly

ALL THE BROKEN PIECES

VOLUME 2

CHAPTER 1

Everyone is afraid I've gone off the deep end. They didn't see me grieve. They have no idea what I endured or how I survived. Somehow, I returned to our empty house. Alone. Don't get me wrong. I was alone while Zach lived here. We were still married, but not in love. Actually, we couldn't stand one another. What began as pure love turned rancid somehow. Before we left on the trip, we barely spoke. His hackles were always raised. No word went uncriticized. Somehow, I went from being everything he wanted to everything he despised.

The thing is, I don't think I changed. But how could that be if we were so close at one point? How could his love become so tainted that his voice dripped with resentment and scorn?

'People don't change.' They say that before you marry someone. Better really love this person, because you can't change them. People don't change.

Then, when we hit the scream-o years of our marriage.

People told me, 'It happens. People change.'

What the Hell? Pick one. People either change or they don't.

At the moment, I don't know what I think because I never got the chance to figure it out with Zach. The decision was wrenched from my hands. He died a moment after we screamed at one another. The vein on the side of his temple bulging as his words became razors. I swallowed those jabs in the beginning. When he'd say things to me that were little barbs. Then the words became lances and he aimed true.

Our marriage didn't erupt in flames until I fought back. There was this hope inside me that if Zach could see things my way—maybe he'd understand how much he hurt me. Maybe he wouldn't pour salt on my wound. It must have been an accident. He wouldn't harm me on purpose.

Toward the end, that was all he did.

All I did.

Anger swells inside my chest as I hobble, trying not to fall over. Half my life was stolen from me. A freak accident with Zach. Zara in the wrong place at the wrong time. Death looms like a goblin in the night.

There's no one to blame. That makes it harder, because not everyone sees it that way.

The family where I was always welcome turned on me. Now that place is filled with jagged memories with sharp corners. While Zach's brother Tim reached out, tried to feed me, and include me—his mother was another story. She was pissed. Livid with me for losing her son.

"You had no right going on that trip with him. You hadn't been a wife to him for months—not in any way that counts. His pity cost him his life." She spit those words at me more than once. I can see the slits of her eyes, and the cruel curve of her mouth as the words slew me.

When she learned that I didn't bring his body home to be buried in the family plot, all hell broke loose. There was no greater sin than abandoning her child on some "godforsaken" island. Just because other people call it paradise doesn't mean she would.

Venom. For not bringing him back.

Venom. For failing him as a wife.

Venom. For not giving her grandbabies.

For being a viper.

For having no faith.

"You're a hollow shell of a woman! You're barren in every way possible. Satan broke the mold when he made you. All your smooth lies and charm. Zach never had a chance. You're a blight on this family. I wish you every ounce of pain and misery you caused us to return to you tenfold. Even that is too good for you, you heathen whore." She knew she didn't need to etch those words onto a stone tablet because she carved them onto my heart.

Zach must have told her we were having trouble before we left on the trip. In the end, the fighting didn't matter. I'd win.

Lots of women confess, rather stupidly, that death is a lot easier than divorce. Less messy. Those people have no clue the amount of self-hatred that can build. At least if Zach was my ex, I could wish him well and walk away.

There's no closure this way. No way to resolve past arguments—things that were said. I'm left wondering what he really thought of me. Whether he loved me or hated me because I really couldn't tell at the end.

I didn't know.

And now I never will.

Zach's family still doesn't understand why I buried him there on Grand Cayman. They think I had a choice, but I didn't. The truth is, I made several bad choices while trying to deal with the loss. I put him in the ground and fled. Tim was there. At the airport. Not the grave. He picked me up. Took me home. He asked why I didn't wait. I yelled a lot. Tears were everywhere.

That night... It was one of those times where we were both so fucking lost in grief that the only way out was by clinging to another person. I hate that it was him. We don't talk about it. Ever.

It's nearly 5am and I can't walk because of the glass in my foot. Plus, I need someone who can help close up the window pane. Shit. There's no one else to call. I've got less than two hours to get the shards out of my foot and get to work. Careful not to shove the glass any deeper, I inch toward the phone in the foyer, sliding my heel across the floor. There's a phone, a real land line, on a table with a vase full of pink peonies.

I suck it up and punch in his number. For once, I'm glad I have a landline. Otherwise, I'd have to go all the way back upstairs to grab my cell. I press the receiver to my ear and wait. It only takes two rings before he answers.

His voice is thick with sleep. "Abby? What's wrong."

"Hey, I'm sorry to wake you."

"No problem." He was groggy, his voice raspy a moment ago, but the sleepiness is replaced with urgency, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing major. I'm okay—"

"No you're not, or you wouldn't be calling me at the butt-crack of dawn—"

I sigh and consider hanging up on him, but I feel really weird. I don't know if it's from seeing my own blood or the adrenaline wearing off. "Right. Listen, I'm not fine—"

"—which we already established. What's wrong?"

"Stop talking!" We both huff for a second before I press on. "Listen, something came through the window—"

"And?" the question hangs in the air.

"And I kind of stepped in the glass." I groan inwardly. For calling him. For asking for help. After a pause, I hastily add, "I can get it myself. I shouldn't have called you."

"Right, because you can see the bottom of your foot so well…" his voice is playful now instead of curt and anxious. "Anything you need, babe. Just ask me."

There's dead air. Neither of us says anything. I swear I can hear him smiling as a frown eats my face.

"I hate asking for help."

"I know…"

Silence. Gruff starts that have no words. Just weird back-of-the-throat sounds as I try to ask him for help. "Any chance you could —?"

He cuts me off. "No problem." I can hear him moving around. "I'll be right there."

I must make a weird noise because he asks in a more concerned tone, "Seriously though. Are you all right?"

My voice is completely even. Flat. I don't answer his question. "There's a word on it."

"What?" Tim stills, and the only sound I hear is his quick breathing.

"The weight. The metal dive weight that came through the window. There's a word carved into it." I look at it for a moment, feeling the heft of the metal in my hand.

Quick footfalls are followed by a car door slamming. He's already on the way here. He lives a couple of blocks away. The groan of an engine as he shifts gears. "Wait until I get there and then we can—"

I cut him off. Cradling the weight in my palm, fury boils inside my chest. "I don't get it. Who would do this? A kid wouldn't have… a rock, maybe. But a dive weight?"

His tone is careful. He senses my mood as it shifts from strong to fragile. “Maybe it’s just a coincidence?”

I’m so tired. So sick of this. “There’s no such thing.” Not after the day I’ve had. Not after the things I’ve seen.

I slump back against the wall and slide down it slowly until my butt hits the floor. A pool of blood forms at my heel. It’s slick and sticky. I stare at my pale ankle, tilting it to the side and looking for the cut. Fear tickles the inside of my belly and licks at my spine. For the first time in a long time, I feel something other than pain.

CHAPTER 2

Waiting for Tim, I watch the crimson pool on the floor by my heel. The blood conjures a memory. My mind is immediately caught in it, tossed around like a ball lost in the tide.

There was so much blood. And they all thought I had something to do with it. My throat tightens, and my hands fly to my neck. My fingers press in hard. There's no air.

A voice buzzes in my ear and I realize I'm still holding the phone. I don't care anymore. I can't go through this again. The anniversary of Zach's death brings them back—Zach and Zara—year after year, like an inescapable plague.

The phone is pressed to my forehead, denting the skin. Someone is talking, urgently saying my name. It barely registers.

"What?" I mutter, spent. I rise, rubbing my hand over my face and gently pad a few steps back to the foyer with the cordless phone still pressed to my head. A dazed feeling is sucking at me, trying to pull me under. The only thing holding it away is the nervousness churning in my stomach.

And the voice in my ear…"You said she shows a lot of promise." Tim continues prompting me, "Have you heard from any of the colleges she applied to?"

My students keep me sane and he knows it. Tim baits me with topics I can't resist, trying to distract me, but all I see is red. It covers the dive shop walls, thick and dark. My mind is in a different time, a different place. Bits of plaster float through the air, falling like pieces of snow. I tip my head back against the wall and close my eyes.

Tim's voice is in my ear as I do everything I can to stay on my feet. But I can't. Before I know what's happened, I slide back down the wall, and slump to my side on the cold floor, eyes fixated on a shard of blue glass. Ocean blue.

Like that Facebook picture of Zach taken by the dock.

God, what's happening to me? I remember every fucking detail. Every agonizing moment. But I can't remember seeing that Facebook picture before. Why can't I recall that image? Did I block it out? My guts curl tighter and my insides feel like a knot. I can't breathe.

Then Tim's there, arms around me. He sits me up, asking me questions. I can't find my voice. The muscles in my cheeks twitch as I try not to lose it. When he sees my foot, the decision to involve the police is out of my hands.

He insists. "It's not a tiny cut. You need a medic. Just let them come."

I don't protest.

CHAPTER 3

The older cop is thick through the middle with deep set eyes and dark skin. His head is shiny and devoid of hair. "Ms. Taylor. Did you see anyone?"

Tim says something and the cop barks at him to let me answer. Then he says it again, softer. I lift my gaze and realize that I've met this cop before. He thinks I break my own windows. This man doesn't believe someone did this to me. He never does.

"No," I answer flatly, avoiding his dark gaze.

He makes a sound in the back of his throat and breathes out loudly through his thick nose, clogged with thick hairs.

His partner, a younger man with skin the color of bleached bone and dirty blonde hair, palms the weight. He flips it over a few times in his latex covered palm. "Do you recognize what this is, Ms. Taylor?"

"A weight that goes on a diver's belt." There's no strength in my voice. I stare blankly, ignoring the flashing lights and flurry of people moving around me.

"There's a word on here." Young cop says it like a question.

"I saw." My gaze is locked on the floor. They didn't find anyone in the house. No sign of entry. Just the broken window.

"Why would someone tell you to stop, again? Stop what?" Old grumpy cop makes another sound in the back of his throat and glances at the young guy. He doesn't let me reply. "Do you own one of these dive belts with the weights?"

My shoulders curl in further and I close my eyes slowly, pressing them together. Wishing he was gone.

"Yes, you know I do. You know it was my husband's. You know he's dead. You know all this already…" it sounds like I'm going to rant, scream, say more, but when I run out of breath, I stop talking. I can feel it. The cops don't believe me.

Tim rises and walks away from me to confront the detective. "This is ridiculous! Can't you do something? She's bleeding this time, for Chrissakes!"

"Of course," offers young cop , "we can try to get to the bottom of this. I'd go pull the footage from your surveillance cameras, if you'll supply the account information, Ms. Taylor."

I nod once, curtly, and request my cell phone so I can pull up the recording. Tim bounds up the stairs to grab it from my bedroom, and then offers it to me. I unlock the phone and open the app. I have the camera set to record when there's movement only. There's a list of old videos of me coming and going. The mailman. A UPS delivery. But tonight. Nothing is between sundown and Tim entering followed by the police.

"I don't understand." I glance up at Tim. "There's nothing here."

Tim snatches the phone out of my hand before the old cop can look at it. His face becomes drawn as he flicks through the settings and then flicks the screen. His shoulders crumple for a second before he meets the police officer's gaze. "The cameras went offline tonight."

I grimace. "It didn't get anything?"

Tim shakes his head, and shows the cop. "There's a message generated by the app that the camera went offline during the night."

"So, someone unplugged it?" The old cop asks, not caring if he sounds technologically impaired.

"Probably not. These send recordings to the cloud via the Internet. It probably lost the connection. We can confirm that," young cop answers, scribbling on his pad, and then, looks up and asks me, "Did you take any medications tonight?"

I know where this is going. Tim tries to defend my honor, but there's no point. I hold up a hand for him to stop. "It's all right. I took a Valium."

"Anything else? Alcohol maybe?" The younger cop is burning a hole in the side of my face, but I don't look at him. I know what he's going to think. He's just like the rest of them.

"Earlier in the evening, yes. But that's not relevant here." I try to keep myself in check as the medic finishes patching up my foot.

The medic is a guy with a sharp widow's peak and bleach blonde hair slicked back with gel. His eyes compliment his expression—one of concern. It's rare that anyone looks at me like that anymore.

The medic interrupts, "Ms. Taylor, this will be throbbing once the shock wears off. Are you sure you don't want to go to the ER? You might need some pain medication at the very least."

Young cop glances at Tim. Their gazes meet before Tim's arm juts up. He points toward the door. "There's no way in hell she's throwing things through her own front windows! That's custom glass! Why would she break it? That's an asinine assumption!"

The medic takes advantage of Tim's tirade on the cops and uses the commotion to lean in and whisper in my ear, "If you're in danger here, just squeeze my hand, Ms. Taylor. I'll insist you go to the ER." He waits like that, his hand next to mine long enough for me to act.

I try not to laugh. "I'm okay."

He inhales slowly and nods. "As you say, then. Keep that foot up for the next few days. The cut wasn't too long, but it was deep. Don't drive for the next few days."

It dawns on me that the medic thinks Tim did this to me and covered it up with a broken window and a fake story. With zero footage from the cameras, there's nothing to prove otherwise.

It's the scars on my face. People assume someone slashed me. Like a damsel in a horror film. No one realizes I was in an explosion and got this token to mark me for life. It stands to reason if I have a slash on my face that Zach would have one on his body. That picture…

Part of me wants to explain what really happened, to save Tim, but I'd rather not get into it.

I begin to answer, "I have to work—" but my protest is cut off.

"Have a friend drive you or take an Uber. Seriously though, try to rest." The medic lifts his bag of supplies and says something into the black box on his shoulder. It crackles back a response as he walks out the door.

I remain where I am on the couch with my foot elevated, the skin on my sole patched up and no longer trailing blood around the house.

The police don't believe me, so I don't bother calling them anymore. It's Tim, the idealist, who always thinks this time will be different. That a new set of cops will see someone is tormenting me, but they never do. The detectives have an unspoken understanding of my guilt and feel this is me crying out to repent.

Finally, young cop leans his chiseled face in closer, lifts his dark brows, and asks me softly, "Is there anything you want to tell me?"

My eyes cut to the side and meet his. He's crouching next to me and is as young as they come. There's a sincerity in his golden gaze that's usually absent with me. "I didn't see anyone. I was asleep and then stepped on the glass."

He watches me for a few minutes more and then nods his head. "Sometimes the local kids get into trouble when the weather turns warm. With summer rolling around…" he trails off, as his eyes leave mine. There's no way it was kids and he knows it. Zach's dive belt was in the basement and taken as evidence last time this occurred. His forehead creases and he looks back at me. "They might do things like this on a dare, and—"

Young cop is barely twenty-five, if that. He slips me a card. Detective Lance Gotto. A phone number is typed out below it.

His voice is soft, "Call me if you need anything else. That's my cell, understand? If you need help." He sighs, and runs a hand through his hair.

The way his gaze falls on my face, the way those thick lashes lower, bashfully. He rests his hand on the back of his neck for a second, adding, "I'm sorry I can't be more helpful. If you need anything, just call or text. I'll help however I can." His eyes bore into mine, searching for truth, but only find hollowness.

When I was younger, before Zach, I would have responded to this guy—to his type. He wants to help me. That's sincere. He says nothing more about the pills, nothing about the previous calls for the same problem.

Always the same type of weight. Always with the same message. The same word. Scrawled and scratched into the metal by the same hand.

STOP.

CHAPTER 4

Once my foot is patched up, Tim produces the bottle of Xanax. Sheepishly, he hands them back to me. We argued a few days ago over the meds I'd been taking. He saw them in the bathroom and freaked out. I've accumulated a small pharmacy. The doc gave me anything that I asked for to help me sleep.

Tim holds the bottle in the air between us. I don't take it. He finally huffs, "You're really rattled. Take it."

"I don't need it now, but thanks for not judging me and all." I take the bottle from Tim and limp into the kitchen.

He follows behind me. "I'm not."

"You are."

He sighs deeply and stops in the middle of the room. "I'm just worried about you. And this shit doesn't help."

"Tim." I say his name sternly. It's a warning that this topic is closed. "I hardly ever take them, okay? If you need to know so badly, I have them around to knock me out on the weekends if I can't handle the insomnia anymore. It's not like I'm going to eat the whole bottle. I'm not nuts."

He lowers his head, nodding. "I know you're not. I'm sorry."

Stopping in front of the Keurig, while stuffing the pill bottle into a drawer, I ask him if he wants a cup of coffee. An olive branch. Apology accepted.

Tim clears his throat as he settles into an old whitewashed chair at my tiny table. "Yeah, I'd love a cup."

I feel his eyes on my back. "Just say it. You're starting to think I'm busting my own windows with my husband's dive weights."

"Wait, those are Zach's? How do you know?" Tim looks horrified.

"Because I was there when he bought them. A bunch of the same size squares thread onto his old belt—which I no longer have. They probably think I buried extra pieces of the belt in the yard like a psycho."

After starting the machine, I turn and lean back against the counter, watching him. His dark eyes are filled with pain and there's a matching pinched brow that indicates his level of worry is in ulcer territory.

He sighs softly. "No you wouldn't. You're not like that. I don't think you'd destroy any of those panes, either. I was there when you put them in and know how much you adore them. You talked about Craftsman style entryways for two hours. If you were smashing stuff, you'd break something you didn't care about."

"Gee, thanks." My voice is flat, but I'm not wounded by his words. Tim is a little too honest at times.

"It's the truth. Besides, you have enough pain, and cutting your foot open like that on purpose would be insane—and you're not crazy." His gaze lingers on my face, tracing the scar that's deepest and runs from my lower eye all the way down my cheek and to my jawline. Sometimes it throbs so badly I need narcotics. Other times it's silent, unable to feel anything. The nerves sustained a great deal of damage.

I fold my arms across my chest and let my shock of gray hair fall over my face, hiding the scar. His gaze meets mine. I confess quietly, from beneath a wall of hair, "Everyone is worried about me. They all treat me like I'm some time-bomb ready to blow."

"I don't." His statement is firm, but then his forehead crumples. "Do I?"

"No, what you do is different. You see someone taped back together and you're wondering when the adhesive will fail." The Keurig hisses when the pot of coffee is finished. I grab two cups and head over to the table, pouring Tim's first.

Tim looks upset with himself. "Abby…"

"No, listen. I know what you think. It's on your face every time you come over. You think I'm fragile. Do you know how hard it is to be strong when everyone around you thinks you're weak?"

I tip the coffee pot and watch the dark liquid stream into my Elsa mug. A remnant of a former life when I loved to laugh, when I enjoyed any type of art, and when life was still magical. I set the coffee pot down and hold the warm mug in my hands. The inner rim says I LIKE WARM HUGS.

Tim watches me gripping the mug, his mouth pressed into a thin line. "I'm sorry. You're strong. I know that."

I lift a hand and shake my head. "It's too early to have smoke blown up my—"

He cuts me off, "It's not smoke. I mean it. You're strong. I see it in you every day, Abby. Other people would have fallen apart under less strain, but you keep going."

"There's no other choice. I couldn't stop if I wanted to." I arch an eyebrow at him and then return my gaze to the black coffee in my happy mug.

"Yes, there is. That's the part you don't see. Other people give up. You're fighting. You're trying. Pills, nightmares, and all—you don't give up." His words are so sincere that I can barely sit across from him.

My eyes are anywhere else, avoiding him at all cost. The numbness in my chest twists as a foreign sensation fills me and more words tumble forth from his lips. He continues, "I've seen people who gave up. I've watched them fall apart. That's not what's happening here. You're miserable because you're fighting. You're stronger than you realize, Abby."

The knot in my throat tightens and when I try to swallow a sip of coffee, I choke on it. Napkins are thrust toward me, but he knows what his words do to me. Tim is one of the reasons I haven't fallen apart. Not yet. I press my eyelids together and force myself to look at him. I'm this mess of a woman, a hollow shell of what I was when we met.

My voice is soft and I can barely say it, but I manage, "Thank you."

"I'm here for you, Abby."

"I know."

He nods and glances around before shoving himself upright. He pushes the only other chair towards me, directing me to put my foot up. "I'll clean up the broken glass and the blood in the foyer. I can have the glass guy here later today, after you're home from work, to

seal that broken pane. I know it won't be handmade, but it'll keep animals out until you're on your feet again. Maybe you should make the panel?" He baits me, knowing how much I once liked working with glass.

I shake my head. "Nah, I have other projects in the works. I'll have to save up and commission another pane next Fall." A moment of silence passes as Tim collects the cleaning supplies from under the sink. "Do you know what worries me the most?"

Tim stops, straightens and meets my gaze. He shakes his head softly, and whispers, "No."

"Summer. No kids. No work. Nothing to occupy my thoughts. I'm dreading it."

He offers a knowing smile, one filled with remorse because it's not something he can fix. "Lets go somewhere. Do something. We can travel until you need to be back next Autumn."

His response shocks me. "That's crazy. I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"I don't have the money for one."

"I do. What's your next objection? And it can't be that you won't accept my money. A trip is cheaper than your therapy bill." He smirks at me.

"I don't know…I just can't pick up and go. Tim, that's crazy."

"Why?" he presses, standing there with the broom and dustpan in his hands. "Going on vacation isn't nuts. It's actually an annual kind of thing."

"Yeah, but you're leaving out something big." He glances at me, waiting for an answer. "Your mother. She'll have a stroke, and—"

"That's not true. She'll be glad we're happy." I snort because he's so totally wrong.

"No, she won't. She hates me."

Tim shrugs. "Sorry, I must have been thinking about her feelings for me. Either way," he swats a hand in the air.

A moment of silence stretches between us. It's ridiculous to object on the prude front, but he's Zach's brother. I already crossed a line with him. I don't want to do it again. It feels like betrayal. "Tim, it won't look right. People will say we're…"

"Together? So what?" He watches the way my face pinches in pain and quickly adds, "Bring your friend, Vi. I'll bring someone too. Better?"

"Maybe." I press my thumb to the wedding band that made it's way back onto my finger. Fear won out and I shoved it on in case I had to use the I'm married and my husband will beat your ass card on the intruder. The glass breaker. The invisible wifi killing asshole who's been messing with me.

STOP. Stop what?

He nods once. "An eight-week road trip to anywhere we want to go. Some time away will do you good, you'll see."

As he wanders off to clean up the mess in the foyer, I start thinking about where we could go and the things we could do. It's the first time in a long time that I've been able to see past the aching, lonely days.

CHAPTER 5

By the time the sun spills over the treetops, I'm on autopilot until I realize I can't drive. I consider it for a moment, as I dangle my keys in my hand. They said don't drive, but didn't really explain why. I can walk—it's more of a limp—but I'm not putting that much pressure on the ball of my foot where the gash penetrated the deepest. The medic also shot a pain killer into my arm. Then there was that Xanax. Damn. The last thing I need is a DWI, so I tug my phone out of my purse.

I thumb the screen to life and flip to my Uber app. There's a car around the block. I request it and go wait by the front door as I balance my purse on one shoulder and my massive satchel on the other. I wedge the bag between my hip and the door to ease the way the straps cut into my shoulders.

Staring at nothing, I watch the quiet street slowly waking. The houses are all in neat rows of capes and ranches with dew covered lawns and manicured flowerbeds. The one I'm standing in is an old arts and crafts style relic. It could be pretty, but it's too dilapidated. I feel like it looks. Worn out. Gutted. Beyond repair.

A screen door separates me from the world. Through it I can feel the morning air. It's already sticky, with the promise of another blistering day. In school buildings with no air conditioning, that means it's going to be a long day. My classroom feels like a furnace. It faces the wrong way for the breeze and the right way for the sun to blanch the wooden bookcases under the windows.

Remaining perched in the doorway, I glance down at the broken window pane, now taped in place with cardboard. The pane isn't

even by the doorknob. Why break that one? It's weird. A burglar wouldn't do that. But I have no idea who would.

I don't know how to explain away the word. STOP. Or the repetitive occurrences. So I don't try. But something about the word, the writing on the weight, makes my stomach twist. I can't tell if it's a premonition or an echo of a past I'd rather forget. No one could survive that pain twice, of living through an explosion and having your body thrown through the air and skewered with flying debris. So I try to pretend it never happened.

While that works okay for me, it is not acceptable for others. Her wig must be burning, because at that moment, her name flashes across the screen of my phone.

MOTHER TARA

I reject the call and shove the phone in the side pocket of my purse as it chimes that the car is arriving. The driver rounds the corner in a rust colored Buick.

It's a tank.

The thing looks like it was stored in mothballs. It's the type of car that cops drove thirty years ago.

Tugging my phone back out, I glance at the screen to confirm that it's my ride. The driver's name pops up.

K'Teal.

I sigh. A Millennial.

CHAPTER 6

Millennials make me feel old. This one probably has a huge chip on his shoulder and is going to tell me how Gen X screwed him over by opening too many Applebee's. Apparently, my generation of slackers-turned-workaholics are the reason the world went to shit.

Clutching my purse under one arm and my Vera Bradley ginormo bag under the other, I step outside and maneuver the fussy lock on the old door. The house had stood here for over eighty years before the hurricane took a bite out of it and left the lower half rotting in water.

This house was a dream once. Zach and I loved this style and since the bones of the home were still good, we bought it. I push the thought of him away. Try not to remember the dark hair and bright blue eyes. But it's still there, along with his voice. I can hear his deep timbre slide over me as the memory hits me hard. I force it back, shoving it away.

Swearing under my breath, I twist the key harder. The brass bites into the side of my finger and I slip, leaving a thin gash on my skin. The rusty lock doesn't like to turn and slip into the opposing jamb. It's not usually this bad, but when the humidity is high—like now—it gets stuck.

The driver is perturbed, and I'm sure my star rating just dropped a point. If I get one more bad rating, no one will pick me up anymore. I should talk to him, smile, be nice. I don't look like a total trainwreck this morning. My dark hair is smoothed back into a low ponytail at the nape of my neck. Coupled with a floral print dress, I

look a little cute. Even though I'm sure I'm twice his age. Stop thinking. Just smile.

When I turn, I step right into a lanky man in a KEEP AUSTIN WEIRD tee-shirt. The scent of pumpkin spice is wafting off of him. I stumble back into the door, shocked, and murmur, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were there."

The man presses his fingers to his chest and bows as if we're in a different century. "My name is K'Teal, Ms. Sabba. Let me help you with that." He reaches for the key still hanging in the door, presses his other hand to the frame, and twists. The lock slides into place effortlessly. "Beautiful house, by the way."

I gape at him, forgetting to speak. I know he got my name from the app, but hardly anyone uses that name anymore. I didn't have the heart to change my legal identification, but somehow when the rings slid off my third finger and found their place in my chest of drawers, the maiden name slipped back into place. Unofficially of course, because actually doing it, saying what happened when people ask—and they always ask—would pull me down faster than being encased in concrete.

K'Teal reaches for my shoulder bag with my brick of a lesson plan inside. "I can grab this. It looks heavy."

Snapping out of my stupor, I clutch the strap and pull away from him. The hem of my skirt flutters by my knee as my hair comes over my shoulder. "That's okay, I've got it." Then I add, sarcastically, "I didn't realize Uber offered valet service."

The guy has a young face, and is in serious need of a shave. Some guys can grow a mountain man beard that all others of their sex unabashedly envy. We're talking Santa territory with thick, shiny hair that's full and long. With these men, there's so much beard that they've got to use product that no self-respecting guy would ever put on his head. That's what causes beard envy amongst males. I'm not a fan of facial hair, so I don't get it at all. It looks like putting testosterone on display for all the world to see how virile a man is without actually exposing his junk.

Zara and I used to laugh, call it 'junk face.' God, I miss her.

The Uber driver standing in front of me, he's no mountain man. Splotchy whiskers pepper his cheeks in calico colors, from a reddish blonde to dark brown. It's as if patches of hair were singed off, because those bare spots are totally smooth. No stubble. Other places

on his jaw and neck have unequal patching of various lengths and colors.

A backwards ballcap covers his sandy hair. Dark roots peak out from behind his ears, along the line of the baseball hat. He kicks the toe of his sandal on the sidewalk and then grins up at me, sheepishly. “I overstepped.” He raises his hands at me, showing he meant no harm. “But, it’s all about personalization. I mean, that’s what Uber is all about, right?”

Getting into a car with this guy seems a little silly. I could drive. I think. That lightheaded feeling isn’t so bad anymore, but the slight tilt when I turn my head too fast holds me in place. I shouldn’t drive. If I hit someone, I’ll never forgive myself.

All inflection has left my voice. The crazy vibe leaks off of this guy in waves. I think his main cylinder is cracked. “I thought they were about giving people rides?”

K’Teal turns and walks me back to the relic of a car, and then opens the door to the passenger side. To the front seat. Maybe I’m antisocial, but it’s weird. Fuck. I can’t take another hit on my rating or I’ll have to switch to Lyft and they’ve got fewer drivers here.

The thought of sitting up front has my stomach in knots. I don’t know if it’s the pain meds making me queasy or the feeling that I’m signing up to be kidnapped. He’s not that bad, is he? I glance at him. Backwards ballcap, mangy beard, flannel shirt over a tee, coupled with denim shorts and socks with sandals. Definitely from Austin?

K’Teal tips his head to the side, catches my eye as I’m about to request the back. “The best seat in the house. This old beast of a car is the least green thing I own, but you gotta see how I counter its massive carbon footprint. Climb in.”

Portland. Totally.

I do as I’m told, curiosity getting the better of me. K’Teal rushes around to the other side and then jumps in with added exuberance and starts the car. He flicks on the GPS for Uber and then turns on a dash cam.

K’Teal points at the mini dash camera, beaming with pride, “My vlog. You don’t mind, do you? Ah, shit. I’m sorry. I was supposed to ask you first and then sit you up front.” He slams his palm into his forehead, and swears softly.

CHAPTER 7

A vlogger? K'Teal is a video blogger? Does Uber even allow that? I glance at my watch and nod.

"Sure. Why not?"

"Awesome," the guy trembles with excitement. Think chihuahua going on a car ride.

I lift a finger and add, "As long as I get to work on time."

I don't mention that I hate cameras or pictures of myself. Or the fact that this guy seems like he forgot his meds. Or maybe he took them all at once. Who vlogs from a Buick? I offer a sympathy smile which restores the man's former confidence.

As we travel down the roadways at parade float speed, he tells me about his appreciation for pumpkin spice and sporks. "I used to keep a collection in the backseat, ya know, something for riders to look at while they traveled, but my ranking started to slip."

"From sporks?" I can't hide my shock at the direction this conversation has taken. My eyebrows have climbed over my forehead and are traveling down my neck.

"Yeah, I mean what else could it be? The car is pristine and I'm a safe driver." He bats a finger at an air freshener shaped like a pumpkin hanging from his vent. "And who doesn't like pumpkin spice? They should make it year-round. I mean, why wait until fall?"

I glance over at him, wondering if he's for real. "So you like it?"

"Understatement!" Glancing at me, he exclaims something that sounds like 90's surfer slang, and continues, "I mean, hell, yeah!" Excitement shatters what's left of his composure and I'm treated to a sincere grin that swallows his entire face. "The coffee is the best, al-

though I really enjoy a good pot of tea. I bought up what was left on Amazon a few months ago. It's long gone." He tips his chin up toward the ornamental pumpkin hanging from the rearview mirror and chortles. "I might hafta eat the air freshener soon."

I snort a laugh. The sound shocks me. I haven't giggled, chuckled, or done anything that could be considered laughter of any sort since Zach died. The sensation of it shocks me. The foreignness of the feeling, the way my belly clenches as if I am going to hurl, but it's like joy broke free from somewhere unknown to me and spewed out of my mouth. It's weird.

I don't realize I'm smiling until K'Teal beams back at me. I let the slight smile fall, and point to the camera with the red light blinking on top. I know it's recording, but I'm not sure why. "So tell me about your Vlog." We only have three more turns until I'm at the school, which should take less than five minutes -- but at the rate he's driving, Miss Daisy could walk faster.

K'Teal nods with a sheepish grin. "That's my moneymaker, dog. All this driving people around just pays the bills, but the vlog is the dream. I can interview riders, we can talk about stuff that matters like whether or not napkins are really important. I say no, but some of the grannies that ride, they use fabric." His eyes widen and he talks directly to the camera. "Remember that, homies? That was some serious shit."

I find myself repressing the urge to smile. He tips his head toward me. "So, for posterity, what do you do for a living?"

Shyness chokes me and the normal frankness in my voices lessens. "I'm the art teacher at the high school."

He nods slowly, bobbing his head like a dashboard dog. "So you teach kids how to make awesome graffiti so they can express their true inner self."

Weird segue. I glance at the camera, and then at K'Teal. "Uh, no. We focus on more traditional art—drawing, painting, sculpture, and that kind of thing."

"Oh, so encouraging our viewers to show up and help spray their visions onto the building would be—"

"A misdemeanor. Don't do that." I'm pointing at the video camera sternly, the way I would if a student did something out of line.

More head bobbing from K'Teal.. "What advice would you give my viewers, for those who wanted to find their inner artist?" He fin-

ishes his question as he pulls up into the circle drive at the school. The big yellow buses are already there, releasing students en masse.

"Work in a medium you love." I hastily add, "in a place that's legal. For you K'Teal, I could see a spork sculpture that somehow embraces what pumpkin spice means to you. I gotta go." As I reach for the door, he applauds my answer and talks to the camera.

"Wasn't she an amazing rider? She really was. We don't get artists in here every day. You inspired me, Ms. Sabba. I'm going to live my art." He pumps his arm in the air as I slip out of the car. When I'm on the sidewalk, ready to slam the door shut, he adds, "Do you think you could give me five stars for this ride? I bet you've never had another one like it. What do you say, Ms. Sabba?" He tips the camera toward me as he asks.

"Yeah, sure." I hold up my phone and press the rating.

The man explodes with mirth and then tries to act like it's no big deal. His expression returns to forced professionalism and he nods gratefully. "You made my day, Ms. Sabba. Now go in there and win over the future minds of America and tell them why they only need one utensil."

CHAPTER 8

After getting through the school day, Vi offers to drop me at the doctor's office. I'm sitting shotgun in a cherry-red Mustang Cobra that is not a midlife crisis car, at least according to Nonni. It's living.

Vi pulls into a parking spot, and throws the car into park. "You sure you don't want me to wait?"

Shaking my head, I push open the door and stand, bending at the waist to see inside the low profile car. "No, don't be silly. I'll grab a car. There's no reason for you to wait around." I slam the door shut as she slides the window down.

Leaning across the car so she can see me, Vi points bright red nails at the door to the doctor's office. "You sure this guy is helping? I mean, it's been a while."

Vi refused any help when Zara died right next to her. She wears a plastic smile and keeps going so fast that she can't stop to think. I'm the opposite. All I do is think.

"It helps, Vi. Or I wouldn't go. Tell Nonni I'm fine."

Vi laughs, knowing I don't believe in Nonni, but she adores me anyway. "Nonni says stop lying to your friends!" The engine revs and her car disappears from sight before I'm to the door.

***

Dr. Patel's office is testosterone themed. Everything is brown leather from the supple couch to his impeccably upholstered chair. Even the walls are sheathed in panels of hand-stitched hides, tanned to the perfect shade of copper, to make the room feel warm and appealing. The feint scent of leather and sweet tobacco comes from a lit

candle by the post-modern slit of a small, narrow window. The natural light slices through the rectangular shaft and stains a bright spot on the dark wood floor. It's the only hue in the place that is toward the upper end of the shading spectrum. Near white. Almost.

I'm sitting at the far end of the couch, fingers folded, hands in my lap, waiting for Dr. Patel to look up from his notepad. I've been seeing the man since I buried Zach on Grand Cayman and came home without him. His family was pissed, and since Zach's family was my only family—and my best friend Zara died months prior—I needed to find a way to endure their grief while I battled my own. In the end, we decided my action of burying my husband down there was a childish thing to do—selfish even. When I said this to Zach's mother, she finally dropped the open hostility toward me. Although, it's still there, every word barbed like she still thinks I'm Satan's spawn. Since my parents died decades ago, there's no one else. No other family. No one to say that I'm not Satan's lost heir.

Even after coming to that conclusion with Dr. Patel, that burying my husband on the island was selfish, and believing it, there's still a part of me that feels like it was all right for me to mourn my husband the way I wanted to without anyone's permission. He was my soulmate. I was the person who was ripped in half when he died. Zach was the happiest I'd ever seen him during our time in Grand Cayman. I didn't care for the raised concrete bins that the locals consider graves, it felt like leaving Zach in a cellar, but he's at rest in a place that brought him joy. That's the reason I did it.

The second explanation is too dark to mention. I'd rather be thought selfish than a coward, but the way he died was abrupt and horrifying. His family screamed at me for not getting to see Zach and say goodbye, but I saw him—and I wish to God that I didn't.

The man I loved was gone. The remains were a charred vessel that testified to a painful demise that I would not wish on my worst enemy. I can't un-see that. There's no way to remove the memory from my mind. The way his jaw locked open, silently screaming—never ceasing—with no flesh left to touch, to comfort, to wish well in the afterlife. His lips were gone, eyes and cheeks burned away. Maybe I am selfish, but I didn't think his family should have to endure that pain. That was anything but selfish. Dr. Patel didn't see him. His death wasn't normal, but they act like it was the equivalent of a bad car wreck. It wasn't. It was so much worse.

No, those memories are mine. They haunt me because I was there when he died. I was close enough to feel the ground shake. A cinder block wall divided us, and I was standing in front of a mirror hung on the wall when it happened.

As I sit in his office, my fingers are on my face, touching the scar along my cheek. The nasty gash that was too wide to heal properly. I swallow hard and consider how to tell Dr. Patel what I've seen. He's going to yell at me, but I need someone smarter than I am to explain away that picture.

"Abby," Dr. Patel's voice has a velvety, rich sound. He could have been a lounge singer with that caramel skin, dark hair, and those sad knowing eyes. He lifts a perfectly tapered brow at me. He manscapes. He has to. Patel and K'Teal are at opposite ends of the man spectrum with style and hygiene. "What was so urgent that you had to see me right away? What's happened?" He locks those obsidian eyes on me, waiting for an explanation.

I swallow hard and reach for my bag. I stuffed a school laptop in there so I could pull up my Facebook page and show him. As my fingers brush the cold plastic casing, I start to explain, "It's the end of the year and I was inviting parents to the Spring Awards and Art Show."

He scratches something on his notepad. "Yes, the Spring Program, correct?"

I nod and flip open the lid to the laptop. Dr. Patel doesn't look up from his notes. "Right. Well, the school prefers that we invite parents using social media since it costs less than printing out flyers to send home. The invites go directly to the parents and we have no—"

His dark gaze lifts and his head cocks to the side slightly, as if trying to mask his disappointment. "You went on Facebook?"

My pulse is pounding in my ears, drowning out the sound of his therapeutic white noise. I hold his gaze and answer firmly. "I did. It's part of my job, and I was doing fine."

"You didn't go looking through old pictures?" His voice is flat. Disappointment is etched across the planes of his face.

"No, I did not. I took care of the invitations and finished setting up the event. When I closed the window, Facebook sent me a 'remember when' post." Damn it, he's going to say it's the same thing when I tell him the next part. I plow ahead anyway. The need to say

it is too great and someone has to tell me it wasn't real. I have to hear it.

Continuing, I confess, "I scrolled down for a moment, maybe 4-5 pictures."

He pinches the bridge of his nose with his long fingers and then exhales slowly. "Abby, we talked about this. You're not in a place where you can reminisce yet. Every time you look backwards, you start walking backwards and get trapped in your own melancholy. You know this. This will be the fourth time this behavior repeats—"

I'm shaking my head, clutching my laptop so hard my fingers ache. "No, this is different. I wasn't doing that. Facebook showed me the memories, but the reason I wanted to come in today—the reason I'm so upset—is because I saw him."

Dr. Patel can't hide his shock. His head jerks back slightly. He tries to hide it by continuing the movement, glancing at the ceiling and continuing into a stretch. When he relaxes, he tosses the notepad behind him onto his desk and places his hands on the arms of his chair. "What do you mean, you saw him?"

I'm trying so hard not to lose it and start crying. My lips are twitching and my hands feel unsteady, but the more I try to hold still the worse the shaking becomes. Sobs are forming in my chest because I can't stand the thought of falling apart again, but I have to know why this image came up—what it means.

I press my lips together and then shove the laptop toward him. He takes it but doesn't look at the screen. "While I was looking at the memories, the page refreshed and a new picture of Zach showed up at the top. I've never seen it before."

"Abby, we've talked about this already. Social media sites have algorithms and they play out in ways that are meant to draw in more use from each profile. They were showing you an image you haven't seen in a while to get you to—"

I cut him off and point at the computer. "No, it's not an old picture. It's not one I took on our trip—"

"Abby," he tries to cut me off, but I won't let him.

"—but it is Zach and there's a massive scar down his side. There's a scar." My hopes are on the last word. I cling to it, even though it's coated with fear and apprehension.

Dr. Patel blinks at me. He understands what I'm saying. He spits out, "You think you saw your dead husband on Facebook?"

I nod once, too afraid to admit it.

Dr. Patel glances down at the screen and inhales slowly before meeting my gaze. “Isn’t it possible that this is just another glitch? A family member uploads a picture from a previous trip and tags him. It makes it look like Zach’s account is active again, even though it’s not. Remember that? Remember how upset you were when you saw movement on his page? Or the time a new message appeared in your personal Facebook messages from Zach? But it wasn’t new, was it?”

“No, but—”

“It was an old message and the system glitched, highlighted it, and bumped it to the top so you’d see it. Abby, this is more of the same. Facebook doesn’t know he’s dead so they keep trying to get you interacting again.”

My voice is sharper and I become more adamant. Stabbing my finger into the arm of my chair, I protest, “Dr. Patel, that’s not it. There was no tag. It was on his account, on his page. It fed through to my wall.”

Silence. Then, “Are you certain?”

“Yes.” My brow is pinched together so tight that my head throbs. My heart is about to snap again. I feel the fissures opening up and I can’t stand it.

“Absolutely, one hundred percent certain that there was no tag at all? That his mother or brother didn’t load the picture?”

“I’m certain. Tim wouldn’t do that and his mom doesn’t hate me that much anymore.” Doubt takes hold and now I’m not sure. A tag could have shown through to my feed as well, but someone would have had to tag me. I didn’t’ see one. There was no caption, no post. Just the picture.

I shake my head and lean forward in my chair. Something inside me fights it, that this wasn’t just an old picture being reposted. “But the scar. He didn’t have that scar before he—” my voice catches in my throat, “when I knew him.”

Dr. Patel’s dark brows knit together as he carefully touches the pads of his fingertips to one another, tapping them twice before speaking. “Is it possible that the man you saw was someone else?”

“It was Zach.”

“How do you know? Did you see his entire face?”

“No.”

"Then how do you know?"

I bristle. He doesn't believe me. "Because I have eyes and I'd know my husband's profile anywhere. It was him. Please. I brought the computer so you could see for yourself. I need to know how else that picture could have gotten there because otherwise I'm losing it. Dr. Patel, please look." I hand him the computer, placing it in his hands.

There's an awkward moment where he isn't sure if looking is enabling me or if I need more serious help. Either way, he decides and looks down at the screen. His eyes search the page and then he shakes his head. "There's nothing here, Abby."

I bounce up from the couch and cross the room in two strides before pulling the laptop from him. "It was at the top. I just saw it."

"You're under a lot of stress, Abby. Maybe it wasn't what you thought?" His voice is kind, but it's filled with concern that makes me tread carefully.

I hesitate, standing in the middle of the room with the laptop balanced on my forearm, scrolling, looking for the picture that spooked me earlier, but it's not there. I click to Zach's page. Nothing. Then I go to Zara's. Nothing. His mother's. Pictures of pies and pintrest repostings. His father's. Old cars. His brother's, Tim's. Sports. Work. He checked in at my place in the middle of last night.

"Tim was at your house late last night?" He gives me a look that implies too many things.

I ignore his question and backpedal. Trembling, I slide my foot a step away from him. "Where is it?" I try a few more clicks, refresh the page, and go back to my feed. The memory time-jumps pop up, framed in orange like always, but that new picture is gone.

"Abby…"

My stomach twists so tight that it wrings all the air out of my lungs. A repressed shiver takes hold and I tremble as tears roll down my cheeks. "I saw him."

The voice in the back of my head has gone quiet. I broke her. She doesn't wail at me to shut up, that he'll think I'm crazy. In the moment, I feel insane. I thought I saw a dead man and I came here to have the image explained away. I never expected the picture to disappear.

Dr. Patel is next to me, although I don't remember him standing. He leads me back to the couch. "Are you still taking your medicines,

Abby?"

I nod and bury my face in my hands, ashamed. What's happening to me? Did I see that picture or not?

"Perhaps we should consider increasing the dosage." It's not a question this time. I hear him scribbling in his pad before he adds, "And the police were at your house early this morning, is that right? Is that why Tim was there?"

I wipe my eyes and look up at him. "Yes. Someone broke my window."

"I see. How many times has this occurred now?"

"Three."

He makes a sound in the back of his throat and nods slowly. "And all these dive weights have a word on them?"

"You know they do." I snap.

There's a beat of silence before he asks me, pointblank, "Do you need to stop something? Let's be real for a moment. I want to ask you a serious question." He pauses making the tension in the air thicker for the bomb he's about to drop.

I straighten my spine, certain I'm not going to like where this conversation is going.

CHAPTER 9

Dr. Patel steeples his fingers, then asks calmly as he watches for my reaction. "Are you a liar, Abby? Is it possible you're lonely and need the attention? After everything you've been through—"

My eyes narrow into thin slits and very pointed words form in my mind. I bite them back as I rise and grab my purse. Cutting him off, I spit out, "I suspect you already know the answer to that question. I also suspect you know that it's difficult to lose a loved one, so when social media starts reviving their account to make them appear alive—it's more difficult than you can comprehend. You've not sustained this type of loss, not in this culture. It will happen to you one day and when it does, you'll be met with jeers and ridicule rather than empathy because that's what you doled out!" I'm across the room, hand on the doorknob, when he speaks.

"Abby, I had to ask." He calls out after me. "Please understand that I needed to make sure you're safe when you leave my office."

My palm is still attached to the knob when I look over my shoulder and glare at him. "You didn't have to say it like that."

"Yes, I did. I needed to see an emotional reaction that was the correct level, considering the stimulus. Abby, Ms. Sabba."

"Don't call me that—"

"Please," his voice softens, pleading with me, "sit down. I need to explain something to you."

Part of me wants to say "fuck you," walk out the door, slam it, and never come back. But his reply seems so rational and the lack of emotion coming from him now makes me think this isn't bullshit.

Besides, I'd storm out of his office only to call an Uber and wait on his curb. Swallowing my pride, I turn and retake my seat on the couch, clutching my purse on my lap. My spine is ram-rod straight and my face is blank.

Dr. Patel puts his notebook down and catches my eye. "Abby. You're at a dangerous junction between being able to distinguish reality from memories. The lines bleed together in your grief, and to some extent that's anticipated and helps one achieve normalcy. Eventually it recedes when the person's grief fades and the memories are clear and have a sense of nostalgia with them. The memories are recognized as distant recollections of the past and embraced as such."

"I know what a memory is." I glare at him, defensive to the core.

He nods, not unkindly. "Have your nightmares stopped?"

I don't answer. I just stare at him and breathe, wishing to God I was stronger than this weak woman I've become.

He nods slowly, in that bobble-head way of his. "It's to be expected. You endured a traumatic experience. You lost your husband in the process, and your best friend died a few months prior. The support system you'd seek at times like this is missing. The human mind is a complex thing. It will create what it needs most, and you need a close friend, someone who understands you."

I counter, "I have Tim. I have Vi."

"Do either of them have a similar relationship to what you had with Zach or Zara?"

"No two friendships are the same." I know what he's getting at, and that intentionally being obtuse won't help matters.

"Rightly so. No two people are the same. However, you've sustained a great loss. To function at any level, you've most likely pushed away those who were close to you and could have filled that role." He pauses for my response, but when I say nothing he continues. "Lean on them more. Force yourself to do it, otherwise you won't like the road you're headed down."

"I can't. I—" I'm about to make really good reasons why I'm not up to being vulnerable with more people when he cuts me off.

"You must. And there is one other thing I want you to do for yourself, to avoid the path you're straying toward. You must be able to recognize what is real and what is not. Memories are not real.

They can seem real, but they are not tangible in the present. Do you understand what I mean?"

I glare at him. "Yes." I'm not an idiot. That picture was there.

"When memories appear while you are awake, and seem to be real, I want you to identify them, spell them out in your mind, and then decide—real or not real? If it is not real, take the thought, the memory, and mentally cross it out. Let's practice. Imagine a pet you had as a child. Can you do that?"

I don't want to do it, but I comply. "Yes. Cheri. My poodle."

"Can you see her coat, the way it shines? Can you feel her curly mane and catch her scent?"

I nod. "Yes, it's there."

"Good. Good. Now, spell her name in your mind. Then take a thick black marker and cross her name out. Cross out the thoughts of her scent, her coat, her breath on your face. Do you see it?"

"I see it."

"Cross it out. Push the thoughts back into the slot of your mind reserved for memories."

I'm there with her, on the staircase of my parent's house before they passed away. I'm with my poodle, and laying my head on her side as we watch mom cook dinner in the kitchen. ~~I can smell Cheri's strawberry shampoo, feel her curly coat as I twist it around my finger, and her warm doggie breath against my cheek.~~

I nod when I've done it. "How is this supposed to help me?"

"It's differentiation, Abby. It will keep memories from trying to become something more. Right now your memories are vying for dominance. You cannot let them. Do you understand the consequences of allowing that to occur? You won't be able to distinguish reality any longer. You won't be trusted with children. You'll lose everything if you need to be hospitalized to work through this. It's much better if you can do it privately. Promise me you'll do this and take it seriously."

I stare at the closed laptop on his table. I need to accept that picture was a memory. There was no scar. I imagined it. I can do that.

I can.

"Abby, your freedom lies on the other side of accepting the truth. I know you've heard the saying, 'the truth will set you free.' In your case, it is the road to freedom. Strike out your demons, control your

fate. You get to decide how this story ends. Which conclusion will you choose?"

"Freedom." The word consumes me as every piece of grief that clings fervently to my being tries to cling harder. For a moment, I can breathe. For a second I can picture what it might feel like to not be crushed by numbness every day of my life. My soul drips with failure from heartbreak that won't mend. I lost too much.

Throat tight, I manage to rasp out the rest of my thoughts while wringing my hands, "I want freedom more than anything I've ever wanted in my entire life. I want to close my eyes and not see the gory remains of the man I once loved. I want to move forward with whatever is next. I want that so badly, but how do I get there when I'm drowning in grief?"

The kindness in his voice is filled with patience. He tilts his head to the side, watching me closely. "It will pass. Time will see to that."

Silence fills the room because there are too many thoughts to get the words out. I break away, and stare at the leathery wall. My palms pass over the backs of my hands again and again, as I try to unlock my jaw and force out the words.

My voice is tight, barely there. "It's already been a long time—longer than most people I know."

A soft smile covers his features as his dark brows inch together. There's no pity in his voice, it's different. Something else. "Abby, your husband's passing was more traumatic than anything most people will ever experience. You were there, and it covered you in scars on the inside and out." He lifts a finger, indicating the marks on my cheek. "Stop being so hard on yourself. Look forward, Abby. Strikeout the things that threaten to undo you. Can you do that?"

Nodding, I confess softly, "I can. I will. I don't want to cry anymore." I want to smile again, even if it's selfish. I want to be free of the crushing guilt that strangles me when my head hits the pillow every night. There was a time when joy filled my body and I laughed. Lips parted, I shift my eyes back to his and draw in a breath. "I want to move forward."

Admitting the desire to move on feels like betrayal. Zach is gone because of me, because of that day and my decisions. My nasty words. That argument. We wouldn't have been there in that shop at that time if it weren't for me. That's been something I can't release even though everyone says it's not my fault.

It doesn't matter, because I know if it weren't for me, Zach would be alive. We'd be hating each other and divorced like normal people. But maybe not. Maybe we would have worked through it. Found a second chance. Been happy. Moving on is freedom, but saying I want to move forward feels like such an egregious sin that nearly claws out the tatters of my heart to confess. It's weakness, not strength. I'm so weary that I'd do anything to not feel this way anymore.

Dr. Patel leans forward in his chair, as his brows lift slightly. "Are you serious?"

I nod once and swallow hard. "Yes, but I'm not sure if I can do it, and failure will make things so much worse. How am I supposed to do it? Even if I wanted to move on, I don't know how."

The stifled smile on Dr. Patel's face whispers of pride, although I'm not sure why. He pulls out his tablet and taps the screen a few times as he explains that he's giving me new prescriptions and changing the dose of one, making it slightly higher than before. "This will help you not fall apart when you have a setback. Abby, life is filled with forward and backward movements. Backsliding is not failure. It's part of life, but these will help you adjust. Routines are important. Keep them. With summer coming, you need a plan. Oh, and the acclimation period for the new medicine can make you feel sleepy. Best not drive for a few days."

CHAPTER 10

I should have tapped on a different Uber option. What was I thinking? K'Teal offers a throaty laugh before leaning toward me in the front seat of the old car, bobbing his head in amazement. "Pumpkin spiced kettle corn is the best, man. I can't believe you haven't tried it!"

Resisting the urge to pull away and jump out the door of a moving beast of a car, I force a fake smile. It screams awkward. The tight laugh I offer in reply doesn't help any. Then I find my thumbs rising in unison. "It sounds amazing."

"It's fucking dope. You have no idea what you're missing, dog. Imagine the perfect blend of salty and sweet. Then add in the pumpkin spice and," he groans in a way that sounds too sexual as he pulls on the steering wheel, taking us around a corner.

Almost home. Almost home. I chant the phrase repetitively in my mind and continue with my plastic smirk. The vlog camera is freaking me out. K'Teal goes on and on about kettle corn. I'm only half listening when we're finally on my block. He belts out a massive chuckle and slaps the steering wheel. "Dude, there was popcorn everywhere. And it stuck, man! All over the walls. It was crazy. I thought cooking using the pressure cooker would have been swicked, but alas," that massive smile of his fades," it wasn't. That was the last of my spice stash too."

My eyebrows have crept over my hairline at this confession. My neck cranes forward, toward him. "You tried to cook popcorn in a pressure cooker?"

"Yup." He chuckles as he pulls over in front of my house. "Epic fail. Lid wasn't locked or some shit like that. I couldn't even eat it. It was like, raw kernels covered in sugar and spice. Kinda like you." That huge grin returns as he bobs his head, agreeing with his own profound assessment of me.

When his lips part, the smile slides off his face as he looks past me toward my home. "Dude, your door is open."

Twisting in my seat, I turn to glance at my house. Another pane of blue glass is missing from the spot next to the front door. It's on the ground, shattered, with the door standing open no more than an inch. Fear laces around my throat and tightens. I can't swallow. I can't explain. I can't even contemplate who's doing this to me.

Heart pounding, I mutter an expletive without realizing it. My stomach twists as I go for the car door handle, just as K'Teal throws the car into park. I'm out the door and hobbling across the grass, before he can say otherwise. I know he's calling me. Saying STOP.

STOP. STOP. STOP. If there's another freaking weight with that word scratched into it—I don't know what to do. My lower eyelids flutter upward as I try to repress tears of frustration. But as I get closer to the house, that's not it. I'm afraid. I don't know who is doing this to me and no one believes that it's actually happening.

My mind reels as I close in on the house. Wondering if it'll be trashed. Tim was supposed to be here. God, what if he's hurt? What if he's dead inside? I couldn't—my breath hitches in my throat. No. Don't think that. Don't. He has to be all right…

And the cameras. Maybe they caught it this time. The wifi worked. It had to. I can't live like this. I can't have my safety ripped from me twice in twenty-four hours. Ice fills my veins and I swear I can't run fast enough.

Part of me wants a confrontation, hoping the person is still inside. Part of me is terrified. But both parts agree that they want this over. I can't live like this. I can't. I need to slow down, but I can't.

I can't.

I can't.

I don't stop despite K'Teal's warnings. "Awh, shit. Don't make me a hero!" He yells from his car door, standing in the street watching me like I'm running to my death. His voice becomes a muted echo. His shouts go unheard. The man blurs into the scenery and all I see is that cracked door.

My cracked life.

My cracked soul.

STOP. I see the words scratched on the weight in my mind. The memory from this morning.

But I can't stop. Hurling my body forward, I rush on, heart pounding.

I'm steps from the door. The cobalt shards glitter in the afternoon sun. Anger and fear collide within my veins, racing through my heart and charging my steps so that I don't feel the pain in my injured foot.

I can't tell what I feel. I want to move on. I said that to Dr. Patel, but this sucks me back.

Back to Zach.

Back to the island.

Back to the explosion.

Back to the pain that's too much to bear.

I slam my hands against the front door and it swings open. Slams into the wall with a thud. The knob breaks the sheetrock at the foot of the stairwell. Sapphire colored window fragments glisten up at me. I sweep my head right and left looking for the object that broke the glass. Looking for the intruder before barreling through the front door, expecting the worst.

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