



# **HARD WAY HOME**

By K.S. Stanley

*Can we be saved from ourselves?*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE

COPYRIGHT

DEDICATION

QUOTE

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER FOUR

EPILOGUE

A NOTE FROM THE WRITER

## COPYRIGHT

Hard Way Home

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Thank you for respecting and supporting the hard work of this writer.

## DEDICATION

For Jenny Manley and Julie King

Thanks for all of your encouragement, enthusiasm, support and advice.

With all my love and admiration.

## QUOTE

*Come as you are, as you were*

*As I want you to be*

*As a friend, as a friend,*

*As an old enemy.*

*-Come as You Are (lyrics)*

Kurt Cobain, 1991

Nirvana (band) © BMG Rights Management

## PROLOGUE

Hector Starks awoke with a splitting headache. For the moment, he regretted taking things as far as they had gone. The realisation of his wife's affair, their fiery argument and the resort of his physical actions.

All of this had been "his fault" when he questioned his wife's betrayal. She'd thrown the "I was right there" and "you never noticed me" japes. Hector then pointed out that his hard work resulted in their four-bedroomed home and her sparkling diamond wedding ring. She of course ignored it and began to scream and scream about all of those fertility tests. Eventually, Hector stormed out and got into his car.

He'd never felt such anger in his life, but it wasn't just that, he was heartbroken, betrayed, in mourning. A mixture of emotions, one person couldn't manifest all at one time and it led to his downfall. He remembered his mind feeling like a whirlwind when he'd lost control of his car. He'd crashed into a wall and hit his head against the steering wheel. Next thing he knew, he was flat on his back in Holy Cross Hospital, his life attached to a drip and his head bandaged from ear to ear.

*Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.*

Hector looked up from his bed and saw a figure on the other side of the ward. The figure pulled out the plugs of his heart monitor which had caused the noise and Hector's rude awakening.

"What are you doing?" Hector asked alarmingly.

The culprit ignored him; Hector knew the hairstyle from a mile away. His mane of hair was long and straggly and he caught sight of the tattoo on his neck.

It was nobody other than Brandon Rivers, the damaged rock singer. He'd gotten himself into the same predicament as Hector, except Brandon Rivers's car accident was a result of a hedonistic lifestyle.

The media had gone wild with the rock singer's story. The photographers were packed around the hospital, camping outside day and night. One of them had even climbed a tree outside Brandon's window, clicking away hungry to get a shot of him. But as time drifted, so did the media and there hadn't been a single camera or television van in sight for days.

Hector watched as Brandon pulled the IV from his arm and the motion made his stomach lurch. "That can't be good for you."

"Shut up," Brandon barked.

"Hey don't talk to me like that," Hector retorted. "You'll get caught sneaking out."

"I have to leave," Brandon whispered and he walked over to Hector's bed. The musician scanned his bedside table and unhooked the coat from his chair; the one Hector had worn when he'd crashed his car.

“Wait!” Hector said. “Stop that, give it back to me.” The pain in his head intensified and it hit his stomach. “Give it back to me.” Brandon watched him as he yanked on the coat. “P-Please, j-just give it to me...”

“I’m just borrowing it Hector, you’ll get it back.”

“Mr Rivers?” a kind yet stern voice broke out from the darkness and a shadow filled the doorway. “People are trying to sleep, I know you’re not well, but you have to go back to bed this instant.”

Brandon turned to the nurse. “Leave me alone, I have to get out of here.”

“We will let you go when you are well,” the nurse replied.

Hector pointed at Brandon. “He’s got my c-coat!”

“Mr Rivers, give it back to him.”

“I can’t,” Brandon said. “I need to get out of here.” The air turned suddenly cool. “You don’t understand what I need to do, I don’t have much time left.”

The nurse crossed her arms over her chest and she stood boldly as if she was made out of iron and steel. “You’re in here because you’re not well, I’m not moving until you get back into bed.”

“If you don’t move, then I’ll have to do something I may regret, please don’t make me do it,” Brandon urged.

“He’s crazy!” Hector shouted.

The nurse wasn’t moving. “I will count to three and if you do not co-operate, I will call security and they will deal with you. Do you understand, Mr Rivers?”

No reply came.

“Okay, one...two...”

Brandon dashed forwards and swung his body weight into the nurse, she fell and her forehead cracked on the shiny floor. Her body crashed into a heap and she moved no longer.

“What have you done to her?!” Hector cried.

“I’m sorry but I warned her,” Brandon whispered.

With those words, he fled down the corridor and disappeared.



## CHAPTER ONE

A child once nestled her fingertips along the edge of a grassy pond, staring with fascination at the gold fish and watching their mouths droop open.

*"Jacqueline come away from there,"* her father had said and he heaved her into his arms.

She remembered being tumbled into her grandmother's lap. She propped her tiny hands against her soft crinkly skin and listened to her harmonious mutterings. The child turned and noticed that her mother and father conversed in a very odd manner she was not used to seeing. Through the window, their lips contorted into seething hurtful words. After a moment, her father stepped back and struck her mother's cheek. The child winced and began to cry. Her grandmother noticed and shielded her eyes with her hands. She reared back and forth on her chair and started to hum sweet songs, willing for the child to fall asleep.

"Jackie...Jackie!" a loud crackling voice rang out and the surroundings of the supermarket seeped back into view. *"Bzzt! Need you at till pronto!"*

The woman stopped tagging bean tins, dropped her things into her basket and scurried to the front of the store. She retrieved her till key from her apron and moved into her booth.

"Next customers please," Jackie said listlessly.

A woman with a basket full of fruit barged to her aisle and plonked her things on the conveyer belt. Jackie scanned them in, helped bag and retrieved the money and soon enough automatic pilot took hold.

"What's up with you?" a woman asked on the opposite till.

"Nothing," Jackie said.

"Something's up with you."

The next customer came and the next and the next one until the timer jingled for her break. Jackie stalked out of her booth and then she watched Renee reposition the loose pieces of her dyed black hair. She reapplied her pink glitter lip gloss and popped her bubble gum simultaneously. Her eyes twitched up to Jackie's. "What is it?" she asked, clicking her hand mirror shut with a tight snap.

"You don't need to make yourself up to walk into this hole every day," Jackie said.

"That's shocking from someone that doesn't even bother to put on a tad of cover-up every now and then."

Jackie smirked and stuck her middle finger at her.

"Where are you going?" Renee's distant voice called.

"For a smoke!" Jackie called over her shoulder and she headed outside.

She found her usual spot. It was the passage way that ran from the gallery of stores to the apartment buildings where she lived and down into the heart of the city. Jackie leant up against the wall and lit up her cigarette. She liked it there especially when the wind blew through her hair.

The smoke swept out through her nose and mouth. She took another drag, raising the nicotine boost in her blood before she had to go back and do another unpleasant shift in the Shop and Drop.

She gazed up at the night sky which was dotted with grey clouds but gleamed with pretty stars. "Where did it all go wrong?" she whispered to herself and blew out another ring of smoke. Ash fell to the ground and she breathed in a retched cough.

From her apron pocket, she pulled out a scrawny piece of paper and examined it.

*Dear to whoever finds me,* it read and she knew it wasn't a great opening. She needed to work on the rest, but planning a suicide wasn't easy. She didn't know which method to choose from, she imagined the authorities finding her body on the kitchen floor with her head in the oven and she imagined overdosing on sleeping pills and a bottle of cheap wine from the Shop and Drop. That would be an easier relaxing death, falling into her dreams and never waking up.

She ran her thumb along the note, should she have mentioned anyone in it? She had no family; they were all six feet under. How would people react to her death? Would Renee be upset? Would the ambulance get to her in time?

\*\*\*

The stranger was finally coming to terms with his new body and he had finally managed to stop the scratch in his arm from seeping. The rain dripped down the alleyway walls and he was soaking right through to his new skin. The voices around him were calming once he'd confronted them. The alleyway was full of them when he'd arrived. Unemployed fathers, stark raving mad junkies and the cries of a mugger's victim. These were all past voices and they'd all played out in that particular spot.

When he'd arrived, the alleyway was crowded and he had to fight his way in. He'd hissed at the sadistic ones to leave and negotiated with the reasonable. They'd allowed him to take refuge there, as long as he didn't cause trouble. The stranger informed them that he was on business and he wouldn't be around for long. So they kept their distance and hid away, giving him time to sort himself and come to terms with his new form.

The stranger staggered to his new feet and he moved away from the alleyway. He'd heard one particular sound, a faint heartbeat as clear as day. He recognised it and followed its trail.

A woman with long fair hair wrapped herself in a thin green army jacket left the Shop and Drop on a mission. He knew she couldn't stand working at the superstore. She moved into the passageway and he saw the glow of the cigarette bloom in her cupped

hands. The smoke curled from her lips and she blew it out through her nose. If smoking could have been a profession, she'd be an expert.

The stranger kept himself hidden as much as he could but the voices flying around her hit him in waves. They were sad, angry and lonely and they clung to her for life. She couldn't see them biting into her arms and knees, not like he could. He listened to them; each and every one had their own story. There was so much emotion clouding her that he could sense their stories infecting him and he had to knock his head back to stop himself from crying.

A woman exited the Shop and Drop and she looked frantic. "Jackie!"

The woman with the voices stepped away from the wall and the stranger saw how she stamped out her cigarette and stuffed the note she held back into her apron pocket.

"What's up with you?" she asked her friend.

"You've got to come quick," the friend squealed.

"What? What's going on?" the woman asked.

"Quit the questions and come with me!" her friend grabbed her wrist and hauled her back into the store.

The stranger watched their figures fade in between the shelves and soon the voices faded away. For the moment, the stranger was glad of it. He heard the crackle of the thunder across the night sky as the rain intensified. He decided to return to his hideaway and with the sudden silence, the stranger wrapped his arms about himself and retreated.

\*\*\*

Jackie was attacked by a cloud of cigarette smoke as she entered the staff room. It wasn't a remarkable looking room; it was more of a gigantic storage area with a couple of moth eaten couches, a drinks machine and a beaten old television set. Of course, the boss of the Shop and Drop made it quite clear that he was too high in the salary bracket to socialise with them and he always conducted his affairs in his office. Supposedly, he had his own mini bar installed a couple of months ago but that was something the employees had to keep on the down low.

Jackie turned to Renee. "Why won't you tell me what's going on?"

"Just sit down and shut up," Renee replied.

Jackie did as she was told and her friend Randall approached her.

"Want a coffee?" he asked.

"Yeah, thanks Randall, could you tell me what's going on?"

He grinned, sweeping a curl of his long stringy brown hair from his face. "Just wait it out, you'll see." He went to the coffee machine and slotted the money in. He was a nice guy, he'd been working at the Shop and Drop longer than she had and he'd been the one who'd trained her up when she started.

Renee bashed the head of the television and Jackie saw the face of Lorraine Thurman flash onto the screen. The newsreader's hair was perfectly sugar spun and she consistently wore red every single night. She always wore a hoop of pearls around her neck and her ruby lips always glistened against the light of the camera.

"Here," Randall whispered, holding the plastic cup in front of her.

"Thanks. Have one of my cigarettes," Jackie said and she laid the packet on the table.

Renee bashed the television again.

"You'll break it Ren if you keep doing that," Randall said.

She ignored him, hammering her bunched fist on the head of it again and again. The white specks on Lorraine Thurman's face faded and the static silenced. The newsreader slotted her papers together and she started her evening routine with her million dollar smile.

"Good evening I'm your news presenter, Lorraine Thurman," she said eloquently. "Famous musician Brandon Rivers (lead singer and rhythm guitarist of hit band Fall Into Place) escaped from Holy Cross Hospital this evening, seriously injuring a nurse who tried to stop him from leaving. A patient on the same ward as Brandon Rivers witnessed the attack and informed the authorities that his behaviour was peculiar and different to the days before he escaped. Brandon Rivers who has played music to audiences all over the world was brought into hospital a month ago due to an injury he suffered from a car accident caused by alcohol and narcotics consumption. The patient told the police that Brandon Rivers allegedly attacked the nurse on duty with threats and seemed belligerent to her orders. During the time throughout their argument, the nurse told him to calm down and to go back to his bed, he then knocked her unconscious, fleeing the scene. If anybody sees Brandon Rivers, the police have informed the public to keep a safe distance and to call them immediately. Now, onto the sex scandal that is making headlines everywhere..."

Renee turned the volume down on the television and she turned to Jackie. "See what I mean?"

Jackie stared at the television and she replayed the newsreader's story in her mind.

"Jacks your mouth is open," Randall said, pressing his fingers under her chin.

She blinked. "Sorry."

He laughed. "I told you it would be a shock."

"So what do you think?" Renee asked, perching like a bird in front of her. "I thought I'd let you know, as you are completely obsessed with him."

"If you made a bet on me Randall you'd be a rich man," Jackie uttered.

He grinned and flicked the ash from his cigarette into the ashtray.

Jackie had seen Fall Into Place a few years ago; they were amazing then and had gone global since. Sold out concerts in five minutes, always adding new show dates, people queuing around the blocks to try and get in. Some fans would even climb the walls to get into the arena. It was truly "fandamania" when it came to Fall Into Place. If she could've

afforded it, Jackie would've loved being right at the front for one of their performances, but those seats were always sold out in seconds. She remembered the magical spell the band had over the audience. To her, she was just a floating soul lost in the sea of people. Certainly one thing she knew about standing up at a concert, everyone wants to be at the front, and they will do anything to get there. They'll push, they'll punch and they'll trample over you. Not out of cruelty, but because of their love and awe for the heroes they wanted to see.

An image flashed across Jackie's mind of an old news reel and she remembered seeing fans camping outside the movie theater to see this upcoming science fiction film. She never understood how people could be so enraptured by someone or something they didn't even know...then along came Brandon Rivers, his powerful voice, evocative lyrics and she didn't look back.

"I know there was the drink and drug problem," Jackie replied, scratching her head. "But in an interview he said he was happy that he'd been admitted to hospital to get help and now *this* happens."

Randall cleared his throat. "Maybe he didn't like being there, hospitals are horrible places."

"He could be claustrophobic?" Renee added.

"Or perhaps going cold turkey isn't working out for him," Randall said. "Druggies snap, remember."

Jackie knew he was right and she knew about the *snap* all too well.

\*\*\*

The stranger had been waiting for her as he watched the doors of the Shop and Drop swish open and the woman with the voices vanished down the passage way. The trail of sweet cigarette smoke drifted and he followed her almost like a dog picking up a scent.

*Why don't you just tell her now?* a sinister voice whispered. *Remember what you have to do.*

"I can't it wouldn't be right," the stranger responded, keeping his tread soft so he wouldn't draw any attention to himself.

*Just tell her! It'll be easier, just like ripping off a band aid.*

The woman with the voices chucked her cigarette to the wall and she hunched her shoulders as the rain caught her.

"I told you the timing isn't right," he replied.

She hurried up the steps to the apartment block and he watched her move into the lobby.

*What are you doing?*

The stranger rolled his eyes; he hated it when the voice got into his head. "Making sure she's safe."

*So when are you going to tell her?*

“Tomorrow, I’ll tell her tomorrow okay? Now, leave me alone.”

## CHAPTER TWO

The musician wrenched at the cords wrapped around his arms as he pulled and dragged the amplifier from behind him and the guitar hung off his shoulder like a heavy weight. He was soaking wet from the rain and the area was deserted, not a single soul was around. He tried screaming for help but nobody responded.

He was lost in a jungle of concrete, acres and acres of buildings and skyscrapers – there wasn't a single tree in sight. The musician came to a gallery of windows as he dragged the amplifier behind him. Words and slogans had been written across the windows in white paint.

*Junkie.*

*Fuck-up.*

*Asshole.*

*Momma's boy.*

*Failure.*

The phrases were cruel and they made him angry. Who was writing this? He wanted to kick the shit out of them and smash their skulls in with his guitar. Who had the right to scrawl those slanders about him? Who thought it was their God damn right?

He wasn't a drug addict, not anymore. That's why he went to get help and pull himself away from it, but he was on the straight and narrow, wasn't he? How the hell could he be a momma's boy if he never had one? He couldn't remember his mother; she fell off the face of the earth before he could even piece words together. He wouldn't call his life a failure, his father and his past lovers used to call him that all the time. But would you call sold out tours and number one singles a *failure*?

The musician didn't think so.

He came to a set of steps leading up to what appeared to be a parking lot. From what he could see it was dry up there and he needed to find shelter urgently. He didn't know how he was going to do it, so he held onto his guitar and stepped up and dragged the amplifier up the first step.

\*\*\*

Jackie lay across the moth-eaten couch in the staff room, a cigarette perched between her fingers and she studied the image on the television. The news station had been broadcasting nonstop with the disappearance of Brandon Rivers.

The rest of the band members were being interviewed at a press conference and the camera tracked along the table. Bobby, the lead guitarist was the most optimistic, he

seemed to lean over and answer questions even when they weren't directed at him. He was the leader, whenever there were problems; he always seemed to have a plan. Jackie had read an interview with Brandon some years ago where he mentioned Bobby.

He'd said, "Bobby's like the brother I never had, whenever all of us are at each other's throats, he's always the one to break the arguments up and tell us to shut the fuck up. We need someone like that in our band, especially when some of us are hot headed assholes."

Tyler, the bassist covered his face with his hand and he traced his finger along the table cloth. He hid his eyes under thick black rimmed glasses and a green army cap. He was the shy one of the band.

Phoenix, the drummer appeared to not mind being asked questions. He sat back in his seat with his lovely long, sandy hair draped down his shoulders. He was notorious for having a laid-back sense of humour. Nothing fazed him, he always seemed relaxed. Probably the best way to be if you were in a band as globally known as Fall Into Place.

The newsreader finally paused to take a breath and Jackie leaned forwards to listen in.

"Have you anything to say to Brandon if he's watching this?" one eager journalist shouted from the crowd.

"Come back buddy," Phoenix said.

"We need you with us," Tyler uttered, the words seemed to tumble out of his mouth.

"We're here for you no matter what," Bobby said, his voice was calm and reserved. "Always remember that."

The news station ended the interview and switched to a clip of the band in a live concert. Jackie locked eyes with Brandon as he screamed his lungs out into the microphone. She noticed how manic his eyes were as he grabbed the guitar from Tyler and smashed it into the floor. Then he hurled the shattered remains of the instrument into the speaker. There was a moment of silence until the speaker exploded, sparks flew and it lit up the back stage. The camera focused on Brandon, ignoring the sight he had created and then he picked up a second guitar and tossed it into the crowd. The live feed fuzzed and Jackie switched off the television.

"They still haven't found him, he's probably gagging and retching under some bridge I expect," Renee muttered.

Jackie shot cold glances towards her.

"Well, it's true," Renee said honestly. "He got into all those hardcore things and he must have known it was going to end in disaster."

"Hey, the guy has had a hard life," Randall replied.

Jackie raised an eyebrow and she grinned at Renee's reaction who blanched. "So have a million other people but some of them don't go shooting up drugs when things get tough." She crossed her arms over her chest in a huff. "Everything has it's expiry date."



Randall laughed. "Tasteful, Ren."

"Thanks for putting the mood down and making it more depressing," Jackie murmured.

Renee pulled a silly face. "Huh *you* should know *all* about, Jackie." She cocked her head and stared at her wrist watch. "We better go, our shift is starting."

Jackie hated it when Renee blew the whistle on their breaks. Most of the shopping aisles would be deserted yet the soft drink and alcohol section would be jammed with customers signalling their trolleys like cars held up in traffic. Lucky enough, Jackie and Renee weren't in charge of that mania.

"Hey, you two?" Randall asked as they got up from the couch. "Would you two be free to have a drink with me after your shift? Maybe a bite to eat too? I'll pay..."

"Sorry, I'm busy," Renee lied, admiring her polished fingernails.

"I'll come," Jackie said.

A smile broke across his face. "That's great, I mean, good, cool. I'll wait for you after your shift."

They said their goodbyes and moved out into store then Jackie felt the silence.

"Why did you agree to go on a date with him?" Renee asked, looking at her with a curious eye.

"It's not a date, it's a safe friendly drink with a *friend*."

Renee pressed her lips together and scoffed. "Yeah right, in your mind that's what you think. But Randall, he's a dark horse at heart..."

"Well, so am I."

"Are you actually suggesting you'd date him?"

"No..."

"Liar."

"I'm not lying! You're just frustrated because I've got the weekend off from this hole and you'll have no one to talk to."

Renee grimaced. "That's not true, there's always Lonely Leo..."

She grinned, playing with Renee was amusing. Her mood swings could easily flip from one extreme to another like a light switch. "Then Lonely Leo will be asking *you* on a date."

She watched Renee's lower lip droop, that shut her up, good and proper.

\*\*\*

It was a small bar, quiet with not many customers and it was just round the corner from the Shop and Drop. They found a booth positioned perfectly by the front window that gazed out onto the street, people walked past and rain trickled down the window pane. As soon as she sat down, Jackie sparked up a cigarette.

Randall returned with the drinks. "You sure you don't want something stronger?"

Jackie shrugged, messing with her sleeve. "Not in the mood for it."

"So what are you going to do with your time off?"

She smiled, the one thing she was looking forward to, though she'd been planning to be dead by the end of it. "I don't know yet, probably catch up on sleep, rent some movies or something."

His hand reached to hers and she froze. "You can always come and see me..."

Jackie stared down at his fingers stroking her skin. She found it comforting and then that slow dread seeped into her mind and the pit of her belly. "I'm sorry," she whispered, snatching her hand away. "I'm just not in that place right now..."

"Place? Place for what?"

"A relationship," she replied.

He laughed, obviously embarrassed. "I wasn't going to ask you out, Jacks." He took a swig of his beer. "Renee was right about you."

Her eyes widened. "Has she been gossiping?"

"When does she not? Besides I don't care whatever comes out of her mouth."

She stared at him. "Do you have a crush on her?"

"No, she's an alright sort of woman, but she's not my type." He clicked his tongue and watched her. "Why do you want to know anyway?"

"It's nothing," she said "I just had this idea that you did but it doesn't matter now - ignore it. But Renee has said *something* about me to you?"

Randall shrugged. "On occasion."

"I'm gonna kill her." She folded her hands on the table like she meant business. "What *exactly* has she told you?"

"Just that you're not happy."

She stared at him and her eyes gleamed with a wary glare. "That's it? You can see that by looking at me."

"I just... don't understand what you've got to be unhappy about, that's all."

"Look at me," she whispered, propping her elbow on the table and beginning to count the reasons. "I'm living in a place I hate, stuck in a job I can't stand, I'm tired all the time, I feel I have no energy and that my life is slowly...slowly fading away." Her thumb stroked the edge of the bottle and she downed a swig of the bitter liquid. "I have plenty of reasons to be unhappy."

Randall leaned back into the booth. "If you're feeling that way, then *do* something about it."

She sighed. "I don't know where to start."

"Right, well you said you hate where you live, so you could look in the local paper for any listings and see what's available," Randall said. "And the second part, we *all* hate working at the Shop and Drop, it sucks so I know how you're feeling and I've been there longer than you have. Seriously Jacks, you shouldn't keep this all in, it'll drive you crazy."

Jackie felt a smile break out onto her face and Randall watched her. "See, you've needed this evening with me." He passed her the menu. "I'll pay for this."

"No Randall," Jackie said. "I'll pay."

"I'm putting my foot down, so no."

They ordered with Randall passing over the cash against Jackie's protests and he bought another round of drinks.

"Don't you ever feel like that though?" Jackie asked, stabbing her fork into her burger.

"Like what?"

"Just giving up everything," she replied.

Randall spun the beer in his hand and shook his head. "I don't let things like that bother me, I mean I have done in the past, I've had my moments but I don't wallow in it anymore."

"Wow, I wish I had your mentality."

"I think there are loads of things you forget to focus on."

"Oh," she said and rolling her eyes. "And what are they?"

"Us, me and Renee. All you have to do is speak up and we'll listen."

\*\*\*

The stranger was hunched over, grabbing and chomping at a discarded Chinese meal. He munched the chicken and sucked the tangy flavours from his fingers. The alleyway wasn't as bad as it appeared, even though it looked like a grubby hole. But sleeping there hadn't broken his top ten of 'worst places to sleep.' The stranger had slept in all sorts, on silk sheets in one of the most luxurious hotels, on a beach with the warm sun caressing his cheek, even under a bridge with nothing but the cold cement to cushion his head.

He finished his dinner for the evening and he made sure he'd eaten everything as he wasn't sure of the next time he'd find something. The stranger liked to go for walks before he went to bed, so he pulled his hood over his head and headed out of the alleyway.

The second he started his walk, he felt two heartbeats, both upbeat and erratic. Two voices, both vile and one was more twisted than the other. The stranger had met and heard these sounds before and he knew they were nothing but trouble.

He saw the source of the voices. Two complete losers stumbled out of a nearby club, retching and coughing from their tank up. He felt the pain they'd caused to others, he heard their victims' screams and the hate welled up within him. The stranger kept out of sight as he watched one of them urinate against the wall, while the other swallowed the last dregs of his beer can.

After they were finished, they staggered off together. The stranger was on their trail and he felt their longing, wanting to cause pain. He drank it up as they had drunk their liquor. It had been a long time since the stranger had witnessed blood spill and he wanted to witness it again.

\*\*\*

The rain didn't cease and it had brought along the cold. Jackie pulled her jacket about herself and Randall pulled his beanie hat over his head, smoothing out his long brown curls.

"Are you sure you don't want me to walk you home?" Randall asked.

"Don't worry, I've made this journey a thousand times, you head back."

"I don't like it, Jacks."

"I'll be fine," she said.

"Well come and see me tomorrow," he replied. "Promise me."

"I promise," she said. "Now go home."

He waved her off and she began her unusually uneventful walk to her apartment. No matter what Renee had been thinking, an evening out with a friend was what she desperately needed. They had stayed in there for a few hours; she couldn't help but steal glances at the television whenever Brandon Rivers had been mentioned.

The news stations had been going crazy over his story. They'd interviewed the band again, his management and even pulled on some psychiatrists to fill time slots and over analyse the situation. She distinctively remembered a clip they had played of Fall Into Place performing at an acoustic session on some chat show.

The music had always been amazing but it was something about Brandon's eyes. He'd tipped his head, strummed his guitar and sang so sweetly. It was raw and painful, as if he was suffering right then and there. His face was fresh but as he finished the song, he opened his eyes and looked straight at the camera; his eyes seemed red and tired. Almost like he was going through some sort of turmoil or inner torment.

The odd thing was back when their first album had just been released, Jackie was positive that he hadn't boarded the drink and drugs train till later on. Supposedly at the time of that recording (before he got seduced by heroin), he was addicted to taking valium, but again it was fan talk and Jackie wasn't sure if it was true.

This guy certainly was a code she couldn't even try to crack.

Her thoughts were suddenly broken by a loud hiss; she looked up to see two men stumbling towards her. They were as drunk as Hell and they stank like a pair of dead skunks. She tried to keep her composure; acting like she hadn't seen them as she walked into the passageway.

"Hey lady," one of them jeered. "You got a light?"

"No," she said sternly, half wishing she hadn't said anything.

“What’s your name missy?” the other one shouted.

Jackie ignored him.

“Hey, I asked you a question!” he yelled, stepping in front of her, blocking her way. “You answered my pal, so answer me.”

“Karen,” she said. “My name is Karen.”

“You got a light Karen?” the first asked again.

“No.”

“Check her coat Bill, she looks like a smoker,” the rude one demanded. Jackie had already conjured up a name for him, *Rudy*, for his foul manners.

Bill grabbed her arm and Jackie twisted away from him. Rudy grasped her other arm and ripped her earphones out. He took a fleeting glance at her tape player and it dropped, smashing to the ground. Bill pinned her up against the wall and began to search her pockets. He kept his face close to hers and she smelt his stale alcoholic breath and then he grinned like a child when he found her lighter.

“You’re a little liar Karen,” Bill said, waved it in front of her. He let go of her arm and with all her might, she swung her arm out and the back of her hand cracked against his cheek. Bill stumbled backwards and Jackie made a break for it, but Rudy snatched at her coat and hurled her crashing against the wall.

“Fucking bitch,” Bill spat and wiped his throbbing lip.

Jackie crawled away on her hands and knees and Rudy placed his foot on her hand. “I’m going to enjoy this.” He smiled at her and slammed his boot down crushing her knuckles.

A screaming sound came from Jackie’s throat and tears poured down her cheeks. Rudy dragged his foot away and Bill sparked up a cigarette. The lights in the tunnel flickered on and off and she felt another presence.

“Help...me,” she croaked.

“What the... *fuck?*” Bill whispered.

Jackie looked up and she saw a figure. It stood with a stone presence. She couldn’t see his face and the hood of his coat blanked out his face in utter darkness. The figure zoomed towards Bill and slammed into him, knocking him backwards. The figure punched him and slammed his foot into his gut. Bill was down for the count and the figure aimed a right hook into Rudy’s chin, his movements were ridiculously fast and Rudy didn’t know how to react. The blow knocked Rudy’s head back and the figure slammed his other fist into Rudy’s face and Jackie heard the crunch of his nose.

“Get the fuck out of here!” Rudy shouted, falling over his feet and Bill scrambled away in their drunken stupor.

Jackie watched as they ran from the passageway and their shadows melted into the rain. “Please don’t hurt me,” she said to her mysterious rescuer and pulled her throbbing hand to her chest.

The figure turned to her; there was something about his movement that freaked her out. It was sharp and quick, agile like an athlete.

"I don't have any money..." Jackie pleaded.

"I don't want your money," he said, kneeling before her. "You're hurt."

Jackie covered her throbbing fingers. "I'm-I'm fine."

"No you're not, let me see," he said and he pried her hand from her chest. Jackie winced and he examined her. "That bastard dislocated your fingers." He glanced up at her. "I need to push them back into place."

"No I'll go to the hospital," Jackie said.

He ignored her and grabbed her fingers, the pain intensified and she felt the pressure of him pushing the bone back into the socket of her hand. She heard the click and the sensation of fire swarmed over her hand. Jackie screamed, she felt her body fall through the ground and the lights above her head blew out.

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She blinked several times for the darkness to disappear and the ceiling of her living room stared back at her. She felt warm fingers rubbing her knuckles and she gazed across to find the man who had saved her life sitting in front of her.

"Your hand is fine now," he said softly. "It'll be sore for the next couple of days, but you'll be okay."

"Thanks," Jackie said and her head was still half in the clouds. "How the hell did you get into my apartment?"

"You blacked out and I brought you here."

"How did you know where I live?" she asked.

"You told me."

"I don't remember that." She paused and her full focus cleared. "Who are you?"

The man still had on his submarine of a coat. "Promise me you won't faint?"

"What do you mean?"

He pulled his hood back from his head and she locked eyes with a ghost. "Oh my God...Oh my God...you're no no no...Brandon Rivers...you're... Brandon ...fucking Rivers."

The rock legend was in her living room.

"I'm not really him," he said.

"I need to call the police."

Brandon stopped her. "You can't, not yet."

"What are you talking about?"

"I can't tell you."

She covered her injured hand and scooted up along the sofa, keeping her distance. "You are Brandon Rivers. The whole world is going crazy trying to find you."

He pulled off his coat and she noticed the Egyptian eye on the left side of his neck. She saw the scars and the hideous bruises along his arms where he would've injected himself and she noticed something white laced about his wrist. He wore it like a bracelet, but it wasn't jewellery.

*Brandon Rivers*, had been penned on and underneath in bold block letters was the words, **Holy Cross Hospital**. She ran her gaze up and down his arm and saw the bloom of a bruise where he must've ripped his IV out when he escaped.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Jackie asked. "You should be back in the hospital, where you'll be safe, getting well..."

Brandon pinched his nose in frustration. "I'm here, for you."

"Is this some sort of sick joke? Is there a television crew filming this for a prank? Because if it is, I'm not finding this fucking funny."

He waved off her presumptions. "Don't be ridiculous."

Jackie scrutinized his face in more detail. "Your eyes are blue on television, why are they green?"

"I can't tell you why, not yet."

"Your eyes are blue, not green," she insisted.

"I'm not him," Brandon replied.

Jackie laughed. "You're talking to a hard core fan here, I've seen you in concert, and if you look around..." Brandon glanced at the four walls streaked with Fall Into Place posters and memorabilia. "I know *a lot* about you." She leaned forward trying to make sense of the bizarre situation. "Look...Brandon, you've gone through a lot in your life, if you let me ring the hospital, you can go back and get better." She glanced at her healing hand. "I really appreciate what you've done for me, helping me out with those bozos, but let me return the favour. I want to help you."

Brandon streaked his hands down his face. "You don't understand, I had to come here to see you."

"Well, tell me."

"I can't, not yet." He placed his palms together as if he was saying a prayer. "You're too traumatised. I'll tell you tomorrow, I promise."

Jackie didn't know what to think. "Why did you come here?"

"I know things about you."

That made her laugh. "That's the drugs messing with your mind." She tapped her finger against the side of her head. "You really need to go back to the hospital."

A knowing smile formed from ear to ear. "Ask me a question," Brandon replied.

"Okay, what's my name?" she asked.

"Jackie, short for Jacqueline."

Her stomach lurched and a lump formed in her throat. "You probably looked at my belongings when I was unconscious."

"I didn't actually," he said cuttingly. "How about this fact then? When you were eight years old, you fell and grazed your knee when you were playing hop scotch. You have a scar from that day..."

Jackie crossed her leg in a nervous twitch. "You need to leave."

"I can't."

"Please, stop saying that!"

"I'm sorry," he said and he wiped his brow. "I hate alarming you like this, I wish I could tell you but you'll think I'm crazy."

"What else do you know?" Jackie asked. "Tell me something nobody else knows about."

Brandon sighed. "On that same day when you fell and injured your knee, you came home and found your father hanging from the stairs." His words hung in the air. "A child should never witness a scene like that."

"How-how do you know that?" she asked

He closed his eyes. "I can't tell you."

"What do you want from me?"

"To warn you before it's too late."

Jackie frowned, not understanding a word. "What do you mean?"

"I'll show you tomorrow," he whispered back. "You should sleep, Jackie."

He was right and he'd said her name. He was sitting in her living room, he'd saved her from a pair of drunken losers and nursed her broken hand. But it wasn't him. His eyes and his voice weren't the same. Jackie edged closer to him and her hands rose, wanting to touch his face. Then she stopped, caution pulling her back. "Can I?"

Brandon nodded. "Knock yourself out." He leaned towards her and Jackie pressed her hands lightly to his face. Her fingers and thumbs stroked against the hill of his cheek bones and the curve of his lips. Her fingers roamed up to his temples and she stared into his eyes. He never looked away, he kept his gaze fixed on her.

"This is so strange," she said.

"What is?" he whispered.

"You're him, no doubt about that and you're not him either." Jackie pulled away from him and tipped her hands pensively against her lips. "How is that possible?"

Brandon placed a hand on her knee and she stared down at his comforting hand. "Tomorrow Jackie," he whispered to her. "You need to sleep first."

Jackie rose from the sofa very carefully and his hand slipped from her knee. "You can sleep on here if you like."

Brandon nodded. "Thank you, Jackie." He watched her. "You don't need to be worried."

"Why would I need to be worried?"

"I can read it in your face," he said.

"What do you mean?"



“You’re concerned that I might rob you.”

He was right and she didn’t know how to process the information. “Well, I could wake up the next morning, you’re gone and so are all my belongings. You’ll sell all my stuff to buy drugs.”

A small smile flashed across his lips. “If I was planning to do that, I’d be the worst burglar that has ever lived. I promise you, I’m not going to take anything. I’ll be here in the morning.”

Jackie nodded, trying to pace herself. Her heart and mind were going into overdrive and she felt dizzy as she walked hesitantly into her bedroom

Tell me something nobody else knows about.

When those words left her lips, she had no idea the truth would come flying back at her. She’d wanted him to stumble in failure, except he’d been right about everything, absolutely everything.

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The stranger looked around the living room and he glanced towards Jackie’s bedroom door. He walked over to the framed photographs on the mantel piece by the little fireplace and he stared at one particular visual. It was a happy photograph. A beautiful man and woman with an elderly lady, in her lap, a little girl with a cheeky grin. The child’s smile made his heart flutter and pain ripped through his forehead.

The stranger saw an image of a pond and a girl, she turned her head to see her parents through the window. They were arguing, the man took one step back and slapped the woman across the face. The stranger felt the force of the blow and he tottered backwards. The young girl began to cry and the elderly woman pulled her into her arms. She began to rock her slowly, back and forth, back and forth and sung her sweet lullabies.

He placed the photo frame back on the mantel piece and he picked up a toy next to one of the photographs. The toy was a scruffy golden bear with one button eye, the other had probably been lost or bitten off many years ago. The pain from before throbbed. It was more intense and the vision flashed before him.

The young girl was slightly older; she held the teddy bear in her loose fingers as she skipped home from school. She called for her father as she entered the hallway of her home. She heard the creak from the staircase and the little girl moved to investigate the peculiar sound. She peered up the stairs to find black polished shoes hitting gently against the wall and the body of her father twirled in the daylight. The child called for him and she dropped her teddy bear. The stranger wanted to shield her, tell her to look away, but he couldn’t – as it was already a memory.

The stranger placed the teddy bear back on the mantel piece and he moved over to the sofa. From his pocket, he pulled out the piece of crumpled paper and he read it thoroughly.

*Dear to whoever finds me,* the pain in his head had turned into a slow agonising burn. *I'm sorry,* he heard Jackie's voice and the crush of the pencil scribbling down the words. *I just can't do this anymore.* The pain scorched him and he shoved the note back into the coat pocket.

He yanked off the coat and he lay across the sofa. It was better than the alleyway, the only thing about Jackie's apartment he disliked was the memories. It was too painful, more than the stranger assumed. When he'd slept in the alleyway the night before, he'd seen past events, tramps, fights, people pissing up against the wall, but that was fainter than Jackie's apartment. As much as the objects created images, Jackie herself was the main conjurer of the visions.

The pain practically seeped from her skin.

The stranger pulled the coat over himself and he tried to focus on the sound of the rain. It was hard to ignore the voices at first but soon enough, he let the fresh comfort of sleep entirely consume him.

## CHAPTER THREE

The night was as hot as Hell, the perfect opportunity for partying and drinking. Two figures emerged from the club and made their way through the street. One particular figure's footsteps interweaved, virtually creating the number eight yet the other, left a trail of sobered agility.

*"Right I'm off,"* the straight figure said. *"See you next week, Dez."*

*"Hey Jackie, don't I get a huggie?"* Dez asked.

She hesitated. *"Okay, but I gotta go home after."*

Dez wound his arms around her and pressed his mouth against her coat shielded shoulder. Jackie felt his hands race and he rubbed the side of his face against her cheek, his lips on a mission to touch hers.

Jackie pulled away. *"Don't do that."*

*"What? Why not? It'll be fun."*

*"Because I know you don't mean it. Not really."*

He laughed and his voice cracked. *"Why are you such a god damn prude Jackie? We're old friends, so it does mean something."*

*"Then why did you make the same moves on Leanne last night? She watched him find the pre rehearsed words."*

*"I was dr—"*

*"I was drunk,"* Jackie imitated. *"Goodnight, Dez."* She turned and started down the road but he grabbed the back of her neck. *"Get your hands off me!"*

*"You're the one getting huffy when you should shut your fucking mouth and enjoy it."* He unzipped his jeans and pushed her neck down.

Jackie's stomach lurched and the nausea swelled up like a lump in her throat. She broke from him and she caught sight of his smile and that was when she felt the change.

It was like having a shade pulled back, she felt herself melting into something else, a fraction of herself she had to keep submerged. Her fists turned into a forceful punch and when he let go, she lunged forwards and pushed against his chest and he fell into the road.

A car turned the corner, its engines roaring on full blast and on towards where Dez was lying. Jackie watched, her heart racing, skipping into double beats. Dez's head flopped against the cement and he lolled to the side. His eyes widened as the car grew larger in size. A muffled scream came out of his mouth, the head lights gleamed into his eyes, he pulled himself up and he wobbled to the other side of the road.

He'd made it clean, just by a second.

He looked across at Jackie. She stared at him and her eyes turned into a deep glare.

*"So what does this mean for us now?"* Dez jeered.

*"Well I guess we aren't friends anymore."* She turned up the pathway she was originally meant to follow before all of this had happened. Jackie was already erasing him from her thoughts, her heart and her care.

*"That'll be a shame for you J, seeing as I was the one who suggested for you to come along in the first place! Everyone in the gang fucking hates you! They think you're a snidey little geeky bitch!"*

Jackie ignored him and headed in the opposite direction.

Dez stepped into the road. *"You know what Jackie, you can just go fu-"*

A horn sounded, there was a crack and then a sound similar to bone crashing on metal followed...

Her eyes snapped open and Jackie looked up at the nothing that was her bedroom ceiling. She stretched her muscles out and stared at the time on her alarm clock. It was midday, she'd really slept in, but with the gruelling shifts at the Shop and Drop - any sane person would've done the same thing.

Jackie changed and she walked out of her bedroom. She stared at the slumped body, it wasn't every day that you could walk into your living room and find a wanted rock star with loads of personal demons sleeping on your sofa.

She glanced at his clothes spread along the counter of her kitchen. Whatever the reason Brandon Rivers was in her home, he couldn't possibly be comfortable wearing that hospital gown. Her fingers trembled along the collar of the coat and her heart skipped a beat.

*The property of Hector L Starks, it read.*

Jackie opened the door to leave; Brandon turned in his sleep and yanked the blanket over his naked shoulder. Jackie turned, pulling the door to and locked it safely behind her. It felt unnaturally wonderful to have him there, almost like he was her own little secret.

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On the short walk to the Shop and Drop, the rain slammed down but Jackie's thoughts by comparison were ten times worse to try and block out. Brandon Rivers was in her apartment, Brandon Rivers was sleeping on her sofa and the most bizarre of all was that Brandon Rivers knew her name. How was that possible?

By the time she arrived, the number of customers was at its peak and she wasn't planning on staying there long unless she fancied drowning. She grabbed the essentials as fast as she could and she scanned the lane of tills and noticed Randall stooped over his cash register. He pushed in numbers, rang up the final total and Jackie weaved through the sea of customers to his booth.

"Hi Randall," she said.

His head rose and he stared at how dishevelled she was. "Hi Jacks."

“See, I promised I’d come and see you.”

He smiled through his tumble of stringy brown hair and she placed her food on the conveyer belt and Randall began the boring listless routine. “Is there something wrong?”

She shook her head. “Why would there be anything wrong?”

“I don’t know, there’s something about your eyes.” And then he saw it. “What the hell happened to your hand?”

“I had an accident last night,” Jackie replied, rather too quickly.

“What did you do? Catch it in the front door?”

Jackie giggled. “No, I...burnt it making a drink, wasn’t really paying attention if you know what I mean.”

He frowned. “Are you sure you’re okay? You look a little...panicked.”

There was a rock legend back in her apartment and the police were out looking for him. “I’m fine, but I need to ask you a favour.”

“What is it?”

“I need to borrow some clothes.”

He laughed, astounded. “Why would you need my clothes?”

She swallowed down hard and played the lie. “My heating has broken down.”

He quickly bagged her stuff. “Can’t you get your landlord to fix it?”

“No, he’s completely useless and I’m barely scraping together my rent, can’t afford someone to come and fix it just yet.”

Randall punched numbers into the cash register. “Why can’t you ask Renee?”

She needed men’s clothes and she couldn’t tell him that. “Renee’s clothes? Really Randall?”

“Okay, I get it. Fine, I’m nearly done here anyway and I’ll pop some round to you.”

“Now?”

“Well I finish in fifteen minutes, can’t you wait?”

She pictured Brandon pinching anything that was durable and sellable from her apartment. She couldn’t leave him alone for much longer. “I can’t, sorry.”

“Not even fifteen minutes?”

“Nope, sorry, thanks Randall.” She passed him the money. “Can I ask you another question?”

“Is it about why the earth is round and not flat?”

“No...but do you think if someone took heroin for a long period of time it could make their eyes change colour?”

Randall blanched. “That’s what you’re asking me?” He glanced at the row of shoppers waiting to be served. “I really don’t have an answer to that, sorry Jacks.” He scrutinized her. “Why ask me anyway? Why do you want to know?”

Jackie stared back at his concerned expression. "It's nothing, just a random thought." She scooped up her shopping and she had to get away. "Thanks for the favour, I owe you one."

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The plastic bags cut into her arms like cheese wire by the time she returned to her apartment. Brandon was awake and moving and he looked startled when she opened the door.

"Does it ever stop raining?" he asked, peering through the curtains.

Jackie closed the door and she watched him.

"Where were you?" he asked, stepping down from the ledge.

She moved to the kitchen and plonked the bags on the work surface. "Just asking a friend for a favour." She began the ceremonious routine of unpacking. "I suggest not looking out of the window if you don't want the authorities to catch you. I've got neighbours with eyes like hawks that would sell you out in seconds if they caught sight of you." She glanced to the television and his face flashed onto the television screen. "Are you checking up on your story?"

He stared at the screen, locking eyes with himself. "Yeah, something like that."

What should she say now? Do you want a cup of tea? By any chance, are you working on another album? Her thoughts had drawn to no conclusion and she turned her attention to unpacking the food. Maybe it was her paranoia but she swore she could feel his eyes burning into the back of her skull. Maybe he was laughing at her, thinking she was crazy and then she thought of a camera crew discreetly and secretly taping her every move. She put the food away, making sure they lined up and she even cleaned them just to fill the time.

"I think you should have a bath," she finally said out from the silence.

"Is that okay with you?" Brandon asked.

"Yes, it's fine. I'll make us something to eat while you're in."

*Bang. Bang. Bang.*

The sound echoed from the door and Brandon's face lit up. "Did you call the police?"

"I haven't told a soul you're here, that'll be my friend with my favour."

*Bang. Bang. Bang.*

Brandon watched her with an animal like caution and Jackie saw his fists ball up.

"Hide in the bathroom," Jackie said. "Close the door and I promise I'll get rid of him as quickly as I can." They watched each other. "Please, just get in there."

*Bang. Bang. Bang.*

Brandon moved cautiously with his eyes flickering towards herself and the door. She waited until he disappeared into the bathroom and she answered the door to find Randall clutching a rucksack.

“Hi Jacks,” he said.

“Hi,” she replied, eyeing the package. “Thanks for bringing them over.”

“No problem,” he replied and handed them to her.

She pressed the bag against her chest, taking in his scent and grinned. “Smells like Randall.”

“Hey, don’t hog those clothes just because you like the way I smell.”

“I won’t, unless I absolutely have to.”

The low hum of the light from the bathroom whirled on and they both heard gushing water. Jackie felt her heart jolt in her chest.

“Is there... someone here?” Randall asked.

“No no, I was running myself a bath.”

He frowned. “I thought you said your heating wasn’t working.”

“Not the water, I meant the shitty radiators, sorry, I forgot to tell you.”

Randall nodded pensively and he took her injured hand in his. He scanned her apartment and his voice dropped into a sudden whisper. “Are you sure there’s nothing that you need to tell me?”

Jackie’s fingers twitched against the door knob; instead she pulled on a smile. “No, nothing.”

His eyes travelled warily over her face and to her hand. “Okay then,” he replied and placed a soft kiss on her sore knuckles. “Take care of yourself, Jacks.”

“Thanks Randall, I wouldn’t know what I’d do without you.”

He grinned. “Me too, to be honest.” He gave her a meaningful wink full of tease and she made sure he was gone before she locked up. After that, she stared at her knuckles he’d kissed and then she stroked them against her cheek.

Jackie made the dinner but her nerves were frayed from the tense atmosphere. She didn’t know how to make a meal for a heroin addicted rock star. What would he normally eat? She was a fan, but she wasn’t the type to study that close and hunt through his bins. Maybe there was a fan who knew.

She thought about his physical health, Brandon would need proper nourishment, so she thought of serving him thick strips of meat, potatoes, eggs and maybe a couple of vegetables to go with it. That wouldn’t hurt him, or would it?

She was laying the table when Brandon emerged from the bathroom, he’d transformed himself with Randall’s attire and the material hugged his body. “You look good,” she said as she filled the glasses with water.

Brandon picked at the black jumper. “Thanks.”

“Dinner’s ready, sit down and make yourself comfortable.”

Jackie watched his eyes widen as he tasted the food, there was an urgency there, as if he hadn’t eaten for days. She observed the way he licked and sucked at his fingers and how he used the slice of bread like a paintbrush to soak up the grease of the runny egg.

“Aren’t you eating?” Brandon asked.

All she had on her plate were two pieces of dry toast. From the events that occurred over the past half a day or so the last thing she wanted was greasy food. Instead, she lit her cigarette and tried to act as composed as she could. "No, not hungry." She breathed in a stream of smoke. "I am...and I'm not."

Brandon looked up from his plate. "Excuse me?"

*"I am... and I'm not, that's what you said."*

"About that---."

"You know things about me," she said and she blew out a perfect smoke circle. "You were spot on with every little detail, which is a little creepy. I just want to know why you're here and why would you choose me to run to?"

"I had to come and see you."

"Why me? You don't even know me."

He giggled, smothering his fingers over his mouth. "Actually, I know a lot about you."

Her eyes turned into slits. "Have you been stalking me?"

Brandon looked insulted. "Of course not, why do you always rush to the worst conclusion?"

"Because usually that's what happens," Jackie snapped. "How did you know about my father?"

"I have a gift for knowing people's secrets."

"That still doesn't explain a lot of things."

"I can't flat out tell you why I'm here Jackie," Brandon said. "It's incredibly complicated, it's the equivalent to a button being wrapped up in a tangle of wires and the button is attached to a bomb."

He wiped his mouth and slid his plate to the side of the table. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure," she murmured, waving her hand to signal it.

"Why are you unhappy?"

The question hung in the air and the food in her mouth soured. "I'm not unhappy."

He tapped a finger against the side of his head. "Remember, I know secrets."

"What?"

"Fine, I'll be frank." He pulled something out from his pocket and pushed it across the table towards her. "Now, answer my question again."

Jackie stared at the spider trail that was her handwriting. "You went through my stuff? You son of a bitch!"

"It was on the floor."

"Why the fuck are you showing me this?"

"It's your suicide note Jackie," he said and he stared at her. "Sorry, I had to bring it up."

She stubbed out her cigarette. "It's not what it looks like and what gives you the right to go through my things?"



Brandon rolled his eyes. "You won't hang yourself because of what you witnessed when you were a child, you won't put your head in the oven because the image makes you cringe and you won't throw yourself in front of a moving truck. At the moment, you're leaning towards filling yourself up with sleeping tablets and flushing it down with a bottle of Jack Daniels or the cheap stuff from the Shop and Drop. Now, am I right?" He crossed his arms over his chest, examining her. "So yeah, you're right, I know every little detail."

Jackie swallowed. "Isn't it obvious why?"

"I want to hear it from you."

"I'm sick of it...and I want it to stop."

"Want what to stop?"

"My thoughts."

"Tell me about them," Brandon said.

Jackie downed her drink. "I can't tell you, I'm really ashamed of it."

"You won't shock me."

She pressed her lips together and she could sense that surge behind her eyes. "The thoughts...in my head...they haunt me."

"Why?"

"I can't stop imagining all of these horrible things."

"Does the name Dez mean anything to you?"

Jackie smudged her fingers across her eyes trying to hold the surge at bay. "Please, I can't talk about him."

"Who is he, Jackie?"

"Someone I knew way way back in the past, I thought he was a friend and I found out in the most horrible way how much he wasn't."

He twirled the fork in his hand. "What happened?"

"Don't you know all of this already?" she asked.

"I want to hear it from you."

Jackie sighed with exhaustion and then she nodded. "We all went for a night out after work, I used to work in a bar before I found the Shop and Drop. It was really late. Dez and I lived in the same area so we walked home. He'd had too much to drink as he usually did, I had one or two but I knew when to stop. I'd walked home drunk before and I could hardly see where I was going. Dez got too friendly with me and we started to argue, he was losing it and on the verge of hitting me. I pushed him and he fell into the road. He was vile...and then..." She slammed her fist into the palm of her other hand. "And that was that."

"How badly hurt was he?" Brandon asked.

"Bad," she replied. "Wheel chair bad."

"He won't walk again, will he?"

Jackie shook her head and she twiddled her fingers in her lap. "He's a cripple for life."

He leaned towards her. "Why does that bother you?"

"Because if we hadn't been arguing, he would've stayed on the other side of the road and that truck wouldn't've hit him." She looked at him. "So...I am responsible for it."

"No, you're not."

"Leanne and the others were very clear about that."

"Didn't you tell them what he tried to do to you?"

Jackie shook her head. "I was too scared, and plus Dez was right, they all hated me. I mean, I tried to tell them but they didn't listen to me. He'd got to them first."

"You're a naive creature, Jackie."

She nodded. "I know, I know that."

"I'm sorry," he sighed.

She frowned. "What for?"

He bowed his head. "That I'm going to hurt you." He marched to the television and tugged at the socket, the flash of the screen immediately died away.

"What are you doing?" Jackie asked, rising from the table.

Brandon crouched by the television set and splayed his hand across the side of the box and it sparked to life. Jackie's eyes darted to the screen and then to the plug, lying disconnected from the wall.

"How did you...?"

"Just watch," Brandon said pressingly.

He moved to the wall and his clothes disappeared into the darkness. The screen tweaked and crackled with the static and then a picture as clear as day stared back at her. It was her apartment.

"Brandon...? What is this?" she asked.

"Please Jackie," he whispered. "Don't make this harder for me."

She turned back to the television screen and clapped eyes on Randall; he was banging on her front door and he was shouting. The screen was mute and she couldn't hear anything but from her friend's facial expressions he wasn't happy. In fact he was in deep distress. Randall slammed his fist on the door, he took a step back and he smashed it down like a wrecking ball. He barged through her apartment and he was bellowing. She wondered if he was shouting her name. Randall kicked the door of her bathroom in and he lurched through and stood like a stone.

The scene switched to another angle and Jackie clapped eyes on herself. She was lying in the bath, the water up to her neck and the cool blade of the knife lay against the flat of her belly. She watched herself and her friend argue and Randall was pointing at the knife she hugged as dearly as a newborn child.

She'd never seen him that way before, never seething with rage; it was strange seeing him like that. She'd watched Randall for years deal with the rudest customers and not a flicker of irritation from them would affect him.

Randall and herself continued to bicker and then her friend dashed forwards, stepping into the bath. The damp grew up his legs like a sickness and she watched herself pull away from him. Then they were fighting, Randall used his arms to catch the knife in her hand and she kicked at her friend.

That wasn't her on the screen.

It couldn't be.

She was hideous and she was biting out at someone that was trying to help her.

Onscreen Jackie stopped and Randall hovered as if he was being carried by a breeze. Then, he fell back, his body fell into the bath and impaled in his chest was the knife.

Jackie shook her head. "This isn't real, I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't hurt Randall, never in a million years."

"You will," Brandon responded.

Jackie watched herself break down; she was hugging Randall's body so tightly she may have been lost out at sea. "No, you're wrong."

"I'm never wrong, Jackie. Why do you think I came here?"

"Turn it off!" Jackie yelled and her back hit the edge of the sofa. Her hands raced to her face, the tears were uncontrollable, hot and unavoidable.

"Jackie," Brandon whispered.

"Why did you have to show me this?"

He stroked her shoulder. "I had to, I'm so sorry."

"So I'm a murderer."

"Not yet."

How could he just say that to her? His words hurt like a wasp's sting.

"I had to show you," Brandon said delicately. "There was no other way."

"I won't hurt Randall," she cried.

Brandon grabbed her shoulders. "You will! Now Dez's fate was not your fault and you let it consume you. But if you keep going down the route you're following, someone will get hurt...and it will be your fault."

"That doesn't...make...any...sense!" She tried to breathe out in small streams, but she could feel her ribs cave in. Jackie heaved herself to her feet feeling the weight in her legs as if she had been tied to an anchor.

"Breathe Jackie please," Brandon said.

She pushed passed Brandon's eyes and moved into her own mind. She could see it so clearly, the cold of the night air pressing against her cheek as her feet hovered over the edge. She imagined the ground from down below streaked with the words.

**Embrace me.**

Jackie felt her arms rise as if she was mapping them out like wings. One leg fell forward, slipping clean and she drifted over the edge. The scream tumbled from her throat and she felt her body plummet.

"Jackie breathe," Brandon whispered from somewhere.

She felt arms grab and hold her. Through the mist, she opened her eyes and her hero stared back at her and his eyes were as green as ever.

“What are you?” she whispered to him.

Brandon cradled her in his arms and he wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“What are you?” she whispered again.

Brandon leaned down and he kissed her forehead. She didn’t protest as she felt her body fall back against the carpet floor and Brandon’s kiss found her lips. As she tried to say something, he became passionate and insistent. Maybe talking wasn’t needed at that moment.

His urgent hands pulled at her shirt and he ripped it over her shoulders. All Jackie could make out was a blurred image of her ceiling, Brandon’s soft skin brushing against hers and a pair of sparkling emerald green eyes.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The stranger watched Jackie sleep and he heard the patter of the rain drum against the window. He stroked a finger along the slope of her shoulder and into the dip of her hip. He'd never felt emotion like it and he didn't understand what had happened because it triggered something within him.

All of those burning kisses, words rasping against soft skin. He'd lost himself to it. He'd never experienced the way their bodies had joined and how he felt as if he'd been climbing with her and then they fell together.

Jackie stirred in his arms and he kept still as she moved deeper into his embrace. There was no anguish on her expression, not like before when he'd caught her. He felt his borrowed innards churn and his rented heart perish and glow as a delicate blissful smile washed onto her face. He pressed his thumb to her forehead and her dream filled his vision.

It was of a park, the trees and fields lush and green with life. There Jackie walked and next to her, hand-in-hand was a figure full of shadows with green eyes.

*You've done your job, the devilish voice whispered in his ear. You know what happens now, you know how this will end. You were meant to warn her, not bed her.*

He ignored the cruel jibe and his hand fell away from Jackie's forehead.

*You've crossed a line. Your kind were not meant to explore. Your kind were not meant to love.*

The voice was upsetting him and if it caught him, the voice would mock and hurt him even more. Instead, he leaned forwards and kissed Jackie's forehead and he buried his face in the crook of her neck. "I don't want to go," he whispered. "I don't want to go."

\*\*\*

The steps had turned into a waterfall and the ground below had transformed into a river, in a couple of hours the level he was on would be completely flooded. At that moment, the musician wondered what it would be like to not move from the spot and let the water rise up his arms and into his lungs. He wouldn't have to struggle, he'd just let everything go and it would be quiet and all of his worries and stresses would be over.

Maybe it was unavoidable, maybe those slogans were right; maybe he was a junkie, a fuck-up, an asshole, a momma's boy and an utter failure.

For years the musician used to blame other people for his problems, he turned to embrace the comfort of heroin because he couldn't turn off his thoughts and no matter where he went, there was always someone drowning.

When his band mates tried to hold an intervention, he wouldn't listen especially when they opened their souls to him because they were frightened he wouldn't survive and he cut them down. To him, he didn't have a problem and he didn't want anyone sucking up to him. Ever since his band made the charts, that was all people ever did. They never did that when they were barely scraping by, touring from venue to venue, deciding whether to spend their money on food or gas.

He remembered the first time he overdosed with heroin and to him, it wasn't a big deal. He didn't even know what had happened until he realised he'd missed a couple of days off the calendar.

Bobby his friend said one time when he saw him shooting up; "You know that stuff's going to kill you one day." The musician shrugged off his words and he surrendered himself to the euphoric glow.

The media had gotten him all wrong. They thought he'd crashed his car because he wanted to kill himself. He'd lost control purely because he was a drug addict. The musician always knew that he was a damaged and screwed up person. When you have a father who was obsessed with the military and who'd beat you if you didn't come first in a race, you aren't going to have the most positive outlook on life. He used to despise his mother for leaving him alone, and then as he got older, he understood why she'd thrown herself off the top of their apartment building.

The musician stopped at that thought and he got to his feet. He swung his guitar on his back and grabbed the cable of the amplifier and set off again. He'd have to get to higher ground or else he'd drown.

He turned corners, dodging out of the rain and hiked up more steps cursing and spitting as he dragged the boulder of an amplifier. He'd come to another level and he frowned at the building before him.

The Shop and Drop.

He didn't recognise it and he followed the scent of ash. He saw a woman standing by a wall smoking a cigarette. She had long fair hair and wore a green jacket, not suitable for the relentless rainfall.

"Wh-what is this?" he asked her anxiously.

The woman's stare was long and unmoving and then she slowly raised her arm and pointed at the slogan scrawled along the windows of the Shop and Drop. Just like the cruel words from before, they were written on in white paint and it frightened him as he read them.

*Wake up, Brandon.*

\*\*\*

Jackie didn't find a warm body lying next to her when she woke. She twisted the bed sheet about herself and heard the television echo from the living room. She felt a sense

of warmth when she found Brandon sat on the sofa studying the television screen. It was as if a shade or a blind had been lifted from her senses. Her apartment felt cosier and the walls glowed with colour.

She thought about her father at the time of his suicide, if only he'd had a friend just like her new house guest. Maybe, just maybe things could've been different. Maybe he wouldn't have put the rope around his neck if he'd had the opportunity to catch a glimpse of his family's future. His mother supporting his distraught wife and daughter. His wife finding refuge in the arms of another man and drinking herself into a coma. Then his daughter, working dead end shifts and finding serenity in ending her life just like he did. Would that have made him step away from the banister?

"Are you okay?" she asked, moving into the living room.

Brandon turned his head and he gave her a tired smile. "I...couldn't sleep." He indicated to the cigarette. "I thought it would calm my nerves."

"Why are you watching him?" she asked, sitting next to him as Brandon's face flashed onto the screen.

"I can see why you are a fan," he said. "He is a fascinating guy."

Jackie turned to the television where only a couple of hours before she'd watched herself slaughter a close friend. "We're quite similar in a sense...I lost my Dad at a young age, he lost his Mom, both suicides."

Brandon Rivers had come from a broken home, just like Jackie. His father was a military hard ass and Jackie believed that he played a strong part in the suicide of his mother.

Brandon turned to music in order to escape his fractured upbringing and he knew writing his own songs and playing music to an audience was his calling. His career took off with the band, soon enough he'd made enough money to swim in and he still found comfort in turning to drugs. Why? To block out the constant bad thoughts and images that haunted him?

But if it wasn't for what he'd seen and suffered through, he wouldn't be the person he'd grown to become. He wouldn't be the artist people adored him for. Maybe people had to embrace their suffering and not fear it.

Jackie turned to her friend. "Where do you come from?"

He looked at her. "Where do *I* come from?"

"Yeah, where do you live?"

"I can't tell you that, sorry."

"Well what do you look like then?"

He shrugged. "I don't have a real body that's why I had to use Brandon's."

She sat cross legged on the sofa. "Do you even have a name?"

He glanced to the fingers in his lap. "I don't have one."

"You don't have a name? Come on, that's silly, everyone has a name. I bet even the ants when they go out to work call each other by something."

"You might be right, but no...I still don't have one."

"But your eyes though..."

Brandon smiled at her. "You like my eyes."

"I do, Brandon suits them, but I bet you can't tell me why you have green eyes?"

He shook his head. "No I can't tell you, what do you think I am?"

"An angel," Jackie smiled.

He laughed, flattered and shy. "That's a cute word."

"So I'm right?"

"I can't say, but there is something I must tell you." He breathed in his cigarette and blew out smoke in one clear stream. "You can't tell anyone about me, not a soul, do you understand?"

Jackie nodded. "I won't."

"I mean it, nobody can know."

The room went silent and they turned back to the television. They watched the news file through their stories, the missing singer was still the sting of the tabloids.

"Randall is in love with you," Brandon announced.

Jackie glanced at him, noticing the eye tattoo on his neck. "He shouldn't. He's far too good for me."

"I think you knew the moment you met him, Jackie." There was a beat of silence. "He's been through a lot."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I can't disclose much but...he's had hard times in his life and he's come through it. He has a strong will...I could feel it when I was hiding in the bathroom." Brandon turned to her and he smiled. "He'll stand by your side for better or for worse, and he'd fight for you till the very end. He's the real angel."

"You're going to make me cry again," Jackie replied as she replayed Randall's death in her mind. "But what about you? What about Brandon?"

"Brandon?" he asked, arching his eyebrow. "He's asleep right now, believe me it's what he needed and he will benefit from this, I promise you."

"And the nurse you attacked?" she added.

His face filled with worry and he wiped his brow. "She will be okay, look I didn't hurt her because I wanted to, I had no choice she was getting in my way."

"I'm not saying that."

He looked frightened. "But you're asking me."

Jackie touched his knee. "Are you okay?"

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*She's getting to you, she's digging too deep, you've let her in,* the voice cursed and sang.



The stranger stared down at her hand on his knee; her skin was soft, warm and inviting as she was when she'd made love to him. He'd never felt emotion like it...

*Can't you see what she's done to you? Can't you see what you're doing to yourself? You're becoming one of them!*

"Shut up!" the stranger blurted.

Jackie scooted backwards from him. "What's the matter?" she asked, then she stopped and she touched a finger to his cheek. "You're bleeding."

She wasn't wrong either, warm fluid dripped across his lips and he tasted the bitter iron flavour. When he looked down, his fingers were streaked with blood. Feelings and emotion were virtually pouring from Jackie's skin, except they were not filled with anguish like before, they were full of love.

"Why are you crying?" Jackie asked.

"Can't I cry?"

"I've heard the saying that when the angels weep, the heavens open up and it rains."

"But it's already raining in this shit hole," the stranger sobbed.

Jackie laughed and she edged towards him. "Please, tell me why you're upset."

The stranger raked his hand through his hair. "I can sense everything you feel, I can see it running off you, I can see your dreams, everything." Pain ripped through his head and he shunted against the sofa cushion. The pain was new and excruciating. He'd felt pleasure when he'd attacked those two men assaulting Jackie in the passageway. He was lost for words when he looked at Jackie, he knew how she felt about him and he couldn't bring himself to face it because he wanted it too. The second reel of pain pulsed throughout his body and he wiped his bloody nose.

"Brandon tell me what's wrong," Jackie said.

His frustration caused the bulb from the lamp in the living room to explode. It was just like the night before as he'd watched the two bozos harass Jackie. His rising temper had jiggled with the lights in the passageway making them flicker and flash.

"I'm not Brandon!" the stranger shouted.

He heard the musician scream and he clamped his hands down on his ears. "The longer I stay and the worse this will get." The stranger wept and more blood gushed down his nose. "He-he's waking up, I need to leave, it's the only way."

Jackie had been so understanding but she looked apprehensive when he emerged from the bathroom in Brandon's hospital gown and Hector Starks's coat. The stranger noted the tremor in her hand had returned. Maybe it was the explosion from the lamp that had put her on edge, but he knew deep down she didn't want him to leave. She wanted him to stay in her apartment for the rest of her days; she wanted to keep him like her own secret. Her thoughts pained him because he wanted it just as badly. More than her in actual fact and the voices jeered at him for it.

He kept his gaze low as he handed her the clothes. "Your friend is very generous, thank him for me. Sorry, there's blood on the jumper."

“Don’t worry, I’ll deal with it.” She looked guilty when she took them from him and he saw the possibility of her future he’d shown her flash in her thoughts.

\*\*\*

The rain had decided to stay by the time they walked into the passageway. It felt bizarre that they had only met merely the night before. So much had happened.

“Thanks for finding me,” Jackie whispered.

“Don’t kill yourself,” the stranger said.

“I won’t.”

He looked into her eyes and cupped her chin. “Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“Sorry about your lamp and you need to stop the smoking, okay?”

“I will.”

He watched her and placed a delicate kiss on her lips. Jackie breathed him in and the stranger had to step away.

“I’m never going to see you again, am I?” she asked.

That question made him smile. “Who knows? I’ll see you, but you won’t see me.”

“But that’s not fair.”

He agreed with her and he felt her anger and that made him anxious. “Life isn’t fair sometimes.” He pulled up his hood and stared at her one last time. “Stay safe, Jackie.”

She nodded painfully and he turned into the rain. It lashed at him like a whip and he heard the voices giggle and chant in celebration. *Hurray! You’ve done it, we thought there was no saving you!*

“Fuck off,” he hissed as he walked. “Is this what you want? Are you happy?” He listened in for their crass response but nothing was said. He could feel Brandon fighting and it made him angry. The stranger began to pace and as the adrenaline kicked in, his footing turned into a rage filled run. It was all he could do to stop the tears from flowing.

\*\*\*

The woman clutched the knife in her shaky hands and the music hyped up the scene. She edged like a mouse around the corner and Randall felt the atmosphere change.

*Buzz!*

Randall jumped in his seat and the popcorn crashed to the floor. He watched the bad guy in the balaclava jump into view and he began to dice and carve the girl up on screen. Why did these serial killers in these slasher movies always go after the doe eyed looking girls? The victims always wore white so they looked angelic. If horror movies didn’t improve, Randall was going to go on strike. He could probably script a better slash movie than the rubbish he was watching.

*Buzz!*

He jumped to his feet. It was late for someone to come calling, it was probably one of his drunk neighbours causing more mayhem than he could put up with. Leaning up by the wall next to the door was his baseball bat.

It was always good to be safe than sorry. Randall got ready and he opened the door.

"Jacks, what are you...?" he stared in horror at his friend standing in the rain outside his front door. Not a single hair on her head was dry and her green jacket was wet right through to her bones.

"I'm sorry," she said, shivering and spluttering.

Randall grabbed her and pulled her inside. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I had an epiphany!" she said all too loudly.

"Epiphany?" he muttered. "What are you on about?"

She smiled whilst her jacket created a puddle at her feet. "You, of course."

## EPILOGUE

### SIX MONTHS LATER

Hector Starks was being discharged. He'd made a long recovery back to health from his car accident. His wife the sweet thing she was hadn't paid him a single visit, not even to hand over the divorce papers. While he'd been lying in a hospital bed, she'd cleared their home from top to bottom and fled with her lover. She'd always been an opportunist.

Hector was back at Holy Cross for his check up. The physiotherapist had taught him how to walk again and he was at the stage where he only needed one crutch.

"Take care, Mr Starks," the nurse said as he left the clinic.

He flagged a taxi outside and one pulled up in an instant.

"Where can I take you?" the taxi driver asked.

"Heather Street please," Hector replied, getting into the back seat.

The woman behind the wheel nodded and the engine growled to life. Hector watched the trees and buildings sweep past him.

He peered at the coat folded on the seat beside him; the one Brandon Rivers had stolen when he'd flipped out and escaped Holy Cross. Hector had found his escape plan bizarre yet fascinating. How would he expect to flee when the whole world knew his name?

He remembered when he'd been found and the sight of the nurses putting him back into his bed, wiring him up again. He'd kept the coat, after it had been cleaned and laundered. He could have sold it to make some money from his accident. But what had happened between them, Hector felt he couldn't part with it. Whilst he'd been on the mend, Brandon came up to his bed and apologised for his recent behaviour.

"That's okay," Hector had said. "But I think you need to apologise to that nurse rather than me."

"I have, I bought her some flowers and she's said it's water under the bridge," Brandon replied, glancing about the ward. "Everybody is being really forgiving and understanding. I thought my world was over when I woke up, but people still want to hear my music."

"Why not? You're a hero."

Brandon laughed with embarrassment and he scratched the back of his head. "Gee, I wouldn't put it like that."

"Shows you're human kid," Hector had told him, "and that you fuck up just like everybody else."

At that moment, the barrier between them came down and Hector told him everything, about his life, his career, his wife and the predicament he'd gotten himself in. Brandon told him about the pros and cons about being famous and the heaven and hell of touring in a band. From his experiences at Holy Cross Brandon had tons of material to write new songs. Hector remembered him scribbling away on little shreds of paper, it was like he had to get the words out or he'd explode.

Hector understood the isolation Brandon had spoke of. He nearly sent himself crazy conjuring up images of his wife and her bed fellows and the methods of winning her heart back. Thankfully, the painkillers they fed him kept him knocked out and he'd float in and out of dreams, sometimes for days. His wife was in some of them, she'd be kissing him, loving him and then she'd disappear. The darkness swallowed her up whole and Hector would plunge thrashing and screaming, trying to catch her.

In Brandon's dreams, it was always raining and he mentioned that the water level kept rising as if it wanted to devour him. It was strange sometimes how dreams mirrored how people felt or brought out the things people were trying to hide.

"Hey," the taxi driver said and she smiled at him from the rear view mirror. "Cheer up."

"I would if it were that easy," Hector replied.

"Have you been hurt?"

He nodded. "It's the worst pain I've ever felt in my life."

"Don't worry it will pass," she said. "Out of curiosity, what's your name?"

Hector frowned. "Why do you want to know?"

"I always ask my passengers," she said, adding a casual shrug to her response.

"It's Hector," he said, gazing at her pearly white teeth and her warm hazel eyed gaze. "What's yours?"

She smirked. "I don't have one."

\*\*\*

He was finally back to normal. He could actually and officially say his life was finally on the right track. He could hear them calling his name and the sounds of them out there could have made the walls shake.

Brandon watched as the band's sound engineer Kenny rigged him up with wires and tested his guitar. It made him think of that dream again. He could feel the weight of the amplifier as if it was still shackled to him. The dream with the rain lived in his mind constantly and it became the fuel for the band's new album. That was the only good thing that had come out of his strange memory lapse, inspiration and creativity for new songs.

"You're all set," Kenny said.

“Thanks,” Brandon muttered and he watched Kenny move towards Tyler and begin the same sound test on his bass guitar.

He still couldn’t remember how he broke out of the hospital and how he got back. But he remembered the reaction on his band’s face when they came to visit. Bobby showed him no compassion or affection and told him if he ever pulled another stunt like he did to get drugs, he wouldn’t talk to him again. Brandon tried to protest and voice his experience but Bobby walked out of the ward. The person Brandon was before would’ve held it against him, but now he finally understood why Bobby was the way he was.

His friend stared off into space from the wing of the stage, his brow was pulled down into a frown. Bobby looked as if he was about to fight someone. He was always like that, focused, strong, always planning ahead. Before each show, Brandon would be shooting up in his dressing room. Once he passed out with the needle in his arm and they were just about to go and play. Bobby pounded on the door, shouting that he’d kick it in and beat the shit out of him if he didn’t open up and that’s exactly what prevailed. Bobby crashed into the dressing room, threw water over Brandon and punched him across the jaw. He woke up and they managed to play the show. The audience didn’t have any idea what mayhem had taken place back stage.

One thing Brandon didn’t like about being clean was the surveillance. He was sick of being asked if he was okay. But he needed it; if he’d acknowledged the concern maybe he wouldn’t have nodded out at the wheel of his car and landed in Holy Cross.

Phoenix stood spinning his drumstick in one hand whilst he tapped the other drumstick against his thigh. It was like he couldn’t keep still.

“You okay?” Phoenix asked, looking over.

“I wish people would quit it with the questions,” Brandon groaned.

“Just checking buddy! Are you nervous?”

“Everyone in the audience is going to be armed with a glass bottle and I feel like I’ve got a target on my head.”

Phoenix laughed. “They are going to love you. Do you know the tickets sold out in one day?”

He didn’t know that and it gave him a sense of warmth. For a moment and then soon enough, dread, guilt and fear came back into play. “How are you not shitting yourself?”

Phoenix shrugged. “I just don’t feel like that.”

“Fuck, you should have been the front man.”

His friend grinned. “I agree, but you suck at percussion so...”

Brandon laughed and Phoenix placed a brotherly kiss of support on his forehead.

“Okay, five minutes left people!” Kenny shouted.

Bobby gathered everyone together and the band huddled into a tight circle. “Right, we’re here guys,” he said and he looked at Phoenix and Tyler. “I wouldn’t swap any of you for the world, you’re all great the way you are and I mean it. I wouldn’t want to play

with anyone except you three.” Then he looked at Brandon. “You really deserve this, I’m proud of you.”

Brandon nodded, wanting to cry and Bobby saw him quiver. Just like a guardian angel, his friend pulled him into a hug and Brandon smudged salty tears into his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry,” Brandon whispered to him.

“It’s water under the bridge pal,” Bobby uttered.

Phoenix and Tyler piled in on the hug and Brandon felt the warmth from his family. This was why he had to stop and change.

This is what he lived for now.

“I love you guys,” Bobby said and that made Brandon cry even more.

They were locked in an embrace and Brandon lost track of the time. Bobby took control and they formed back into their circle. They pressed their heads together and held hands like they were in the boy scouts.

“Right,” Phoenix said. “Let’s go and kill ‘em.”

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The arena was rammed to the hilt, there was ‘standing-room only’ and there was a reason why. Randall and Renee had been given strict instructions to get as near to the front as possible but it was the same agenda everybody else possessed.

“So what’s it like having a roommate then?” Renee asked.

Randall glanced to the bar and he saw Jackie ordering the drinks. “It’s good,” he said simply.

“Have you made a move on her yet?”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s not like that, Ren.”

She laughed. “Ha, yeah right.”

He grinned at her and shook his head. “She’s packed up smoking.”

“I know,” Renee said. “And I’ve just gone back on them, got no smoking buddy when I want to go for breaks now.” She glanced about the place. “You should come for breaks with me when we’re working on the same shifts.”

“Sorry, I’ve given up too.”

Renee blanched. “What? You too?”

“Well, why not?” he asked. “It’s to help her out and plus those things would’ve killed me in the end.”

“God you two really are like two peas in a pod! Next thing you’ll be having his and hers towel sets!”

That remark made Randall smirk with hidden delight. Jackie had never given back those clothes he’d leant her when her heating broke down. After she washed off *his*

blood, sometimes she'd sleep in them. "You can always ask Lonely Leo to be your smoking buddy..."

Renee sniggered cynically. "That'll be when Hell freezes over."

"Hi guys," Jackie announced.

"What's up with you?" Renee asked, taking her beer glass.

Jackie passed the next glass to Randall and sipped her drink. "What do you mean?"

"Buying us dinner and bringing us here," Renee said. "What's it all for?"

"To show you two how much you both mean to me," Jackie replied.

"You've caught the Randall happy drug since you moved in with him and how did you pay for the tickets?"

"She was queuing at the box office at six in the morning to get them," Randall said.

"Honestly Jackie?" Renee asked.

"Yep."

Renee chugged back her beer. "What's Randall like as a roommate anyway?"

"He's great." Jackie grinned at him. "Don't know why I didn't do it sooner."

He winked at her and sipped his beer. "So how did the job interview go?"

"Terribly," Jackie said.

"Why?" Renee asked.

"I messed up when they started asking me the scenario based questions and I started talking gibberish. I was pretty fed up after but I hadn't had an interview in years."

Randall rubbed her shoulder. "You'll do better with practice, Jacks."

"I know," she said. "Oh and why aren't we further towards the stage?"

"Because we don't have a death wish that's why," Renee stated and then she pointed to the crowd ahead. "Look, that guy's getting squashed."

"I'm only joking," Jackie mused and she rubbed her shoulder. "You silly thing."

"I know that," Renee said.

The lights dimmed in the arena and then a line of people behind them swarmed forward and the three of them were nudged further towards the stage. Jackie didn't mind, in fact she'd been aching to get closer. The urgency from the crowd was infectious and it caused Randall to grab Jackie's wrist who then grabbed Renee's elbow.

"If we die in here Jackie I'm going to kill you," Renee squealed as she was pushed in front of her friends.

Jackie slapped her hand on Renee's shoulder, keeping her close. "Deal, you can kill me if we die in here!"

"Deal!" Renee shouted back and she chugged the rest of her beer down with excited eagerness.

Jackie saw the figures move onto the stage and her heart swelled. She saw Phoenix get into position behind his drum set as Tyler and Bobby strummed their guitars to test.

"Bran-don! Bran-don!" the crowd chanted over and over again and then Jackie saw his shadow flood onto the stage.



People banged their feet, clapped their hands and the vibrations shivered up every leg and arm in the place. A beam of light laid focus at the front of the stage and Jackie held her breath. Then, almost teasing the moment, Brandon stepped forward with his guitar swung across his front. The screams whirled like sirens and Jackie's ears rattled and throbbed from the noise.

Brandon smiled, his beautiful blue eyes shimmered and he leaned into the microphone. "Hi guys, miss me?"

The crowd went ballistic and Jackie watched as his smile grew, touching from ear to ear. The ghost he'd once been had completely vanished. The dark crevices under his eyes were gone, his long messy mane of hair had also disappeared and instead, his hair had been cut into a slick Mohawk. It suited him and she saw his Egyptian eye tattoo more clearly than before.

"It's good to be back," Brandon said.

"Love you Brandon!" someone shouted from the crowd.

He grinned, embarrassed and relieved. "I love you too." He waited for a beat and then he continued. "I just want to say something before we start." He had to take a moment, it was as if he had tripped and he had to save himself before he fell. The crowd waited loyally as he drew in a breath to speak. "I want to thank Bobby, Tyler and Phoenix. You guys are the best friends a guy could have. I want to thank you for putting up with all of my shit for all of these years and for not kicking me to the curb when there was a time that was all I was good for. Thanks for this journey guys." The three of them nodded and Bobby blew him a loving sarcastic kiss. Brandon mimed a grabbing gesture and he smacked his behind with the same hand. Everyone laughed at that moment, including the serious and stoic Bobby who stuck his middle finger at him. Brandon called truce and he turned back to the audience. "But the ones I really need to thank are all of you here tonight."

Jackie clapped and she felt an arm slink around her midriff. "Enjoying it so far?" Randall whispered.

She nuzzled against him. "Loving it."

"I haven't told Renee about us."

"Best not just yet," she whispered.

"I'm sorry for what I've done in the past and I'm sorry for letting you down," Brandon said. "You all mean so much to me and I really appreciate all of the support and the love I received after the accident. You mean a lot to me, to Bobby, Tyler and Phoenix. You're the best fans in the world and you've all saved my life. You're all the reason to live for." Brandon turned back to the band and he mouthed something Jackie couldn't make out and then he turned back to the crowd. "Now...are you ready?"

"Yes!" the crowd roared in unison.

The lights flashed above Jackie and the band began to play. Brandon's voice seeped into the arena and into everybody in the place.

“You okay?” Randall asked.

Jackie thought about her answer. “Yeah, I’m really okay.” She turned her head and she stared into his eyes. “Now that I have you.” A coy smile itched at the corner of his mouth, Jackie felt his grip tighten around her and then he pressed his mouth against hers.

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The stranger had managed to get a seat by the bar. The moment the band appeared on stage he was left alone along with a couple of drifters. He’d looked for a body for the occasion, he’d stalked the streets and then he found one close enough to the arena.

The guy he’d inhabited had drunk so much at the conference in the hotel, by the time he got to his room; he passed out on the floor. He was completely out of it and that made it easier for the stranger to work on the gears of his limbs. He was a big guy, probably did a desk job and ate too much macaroni and cheese. The stranger managed to scuttle to the venue in time before they closed the doors. He paid for a ‘standing-room only’ ticket with the cash left in the guy’s pocket.

The arena was filled with voices, literal and hidden. There were so many the stranger couldn’t see the point of drowning them out. He ran his gaze along the crowd. People danced, drank and jumped and then he found her.

He knew she’d be here and she wasn’t alone. He watched her canoodle and kiss with Randall, the real angel. There was a part of him that wanted to break them apart and grab hold of her, take her in his arms and whisper all of those things he’d shared with her. His loaned heart ached as he scrutinized their movements. He swallowed the bitter taste of his jealousy and longing.

Fuck, it hurt so much.

The shots of vodka helped numb his pain and he held little sympathy for the body he was using. He was going to have a massive hangover anyway.

*You’ve done your job*, the devilish voice snapped in his ear. *You’ve got to let her be.*

“I know,” the stranger replied.

He heard the voice stop and hover. *This must be really hard for you, we’re sorry, we didn’t know. We didn’t mean to upset you. This isn’t fair.*

“No,” the stranger said. “It’s not fair.”

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The music had been unbelievable, better than before and Jackie was loving every minute of it. All she knew was standing out at six o’clock in the morning in the rain for the tickets was entirely worth it. Fall Into Place had played mostly from their new album, but the band members would occasionally shout out if anyone wanted requests.

Randall asked her if she wanted him to shout out. She didn't want him to but he shouted out anyway.

It was Brandon who heard him as the band started another song and Bobby began with his guitar solo. Brandon moved across the stage to get a better view and he stared straight at Jackie with a knowing look. Her heart jumped in her chest and she suddenly felt sick. For a moment, she thought he looked puzzled. Then her hero shook his head and laughed to himself and he dived into the song.

Jackie turned to Randall as they played and he looked back at her with a cheeky grin. But before she could tell him off, he kissed her and then she forgot about being mad at him.

It was half way through the show at the interval; Jackie decided to buy some drinks. She had to negotiate and push her way through to the bar.

"Sorry, are you in the queue?" she asked the man sat at the bar.

"No you go ahead," he said and gestured for her to move forward.

Jackie ordered her drinks but the staff were preoccupied with the previous customers.

"Are you enjoying the show?" the man asked. He reeked of alcohol and the smell reminded her of those two thugs that had attacked her.

She waited for her order and thought about not responding, but she knew the situation could get hostile very easily. "Yeah, you?"

"I am, but this is something very out of my comfort zone."

He didn't appear to be drunk or aggressive and it calmed her, but only for a moment. "Not a fan of rock music?"

"I like all genres of music but I never go to concerts or anything like that."

The man had a nondescript face. He had a bald head; a large frame and he wore a suit. He wasn't the type Jackie was used to seeing at rock concerts. He probably felt like a fish out of water.

"What made you want to come along?" Jackie asked. "Curiosity?"

"Yes I guess so, someone I used to know was a huge fan and I never really understood why she was so obsessed," he replied and he laughed. But it sounded shy and embarrassed. "But...I get it now."

"You'll have to tell her when you next see her."

"We aren't in contact anymore. Are you with anyone by any chance?" he asked.

Jackie looked at him and she got ready for whatever was coming. "Yeah, my friend and my boyfriend actually."

He put up his hands in surrender. "I'm not trying to hit on you, just asking."

She noticed the barman was finally working on her order. "Sorry, I'm not used to strangers talking to me," Jackie said.

"Why?" he asked.

"Too long to tell you."

“Glad you’ve got good company.”

She didn’t respond to that and the barman passed her the drinks. “Enjoy the show,” she said as she walked away.

“Stay safe,” she heard him call and that made her stop.

Wait, back up a second and she stood thinking as Randall approached her from the crowd. Did he have green eyes? She hadn’t paid that much attention to his face and the arena was darkly lit. But there was something that didn’t feel right; strangers didn’t talk like that, not unless they knew the person.

“Are you okay?” Randall asked.

“Yeah I thought I...” she looked back towards the bar and the man in the suit was no longer there. There was now a vacant spot where he’d sat.

*Could it have been him?* She thought about him all the time. Sometimes she dreamed about him. Whenever customers would pass her booth, she studied their faces and paid close attention to the memory of his sparkling green glare.

Randall rubbed her shoulder. “Jacks, are you sure you’re okay?”

Jackie looked around the arena and checked every person she could see. She tried to scan and examine them, but she couldn’t see anyone in a suit.

*I’ll see you, but you won’t see me.*

She turned back to Randall and she smiled tiredly. “Yeah, I’m fine, thought I got the order wrong. Let’s head back in, the band’s gonna be on again soon.”

Sometimes, she swore she’d spotted him again but there were a million billion souls with green eyes in the world. It must’ve just been a coincidence. No, it could not have been him, because lightning simply doesn’t strike twice in the same place...does it?

## A NOTE FROM THE WRITER

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading *Hard Way Home*. I hope you enjoyed it.

This was my first original story, inspired by a dream I had when I was a teenager. The story deepened and darkened when I was about 18/19 years old when I had my first experience dealing with depression and anxiety. It was a truly terrifying time for me as a young adult, it knocked me off my feet and caged my self-esteem. Whenever I chat about it now, I call it 'my dark patch.'

Jackie (the main character in this story) is an exaggerated version of myself. There are thoughts and feelings in the story which have come directly from me. Writing HWH became a type of therapy while I was sorting my life out. I was able to vent how I was feeling and observe it from a different perspective.

Depression and anxiety is nothing to be ashamed of (I wished I'd known this back then), everybody suffers from it at some point in their life and everybody deals with it in their own way. For me, talking and writing about my experiences was how I moulded my understanding of it. Whenever 'the dark patch' comes knocking, I use the same method.

Talking is the first step to recovering and dealing with depression.

Look after yourself and stay safe.

-Kateri (written in 2021)

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