



**STICKS AND STONES**

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# CHAPTER 1

I lock myself in the bathroom. I feel sick. A queasiness in my stomach I have never felt before. It's not just in my stomach. It's somewhere deep inside me. I can't put it into words. I sit on the side of the bathtub listening to the noises outside the door. The footsteps descending the creaking stairs. The front door closing. The sound of a car's engine. The scatter of gravel as it drives away.

I'm staring at the toilet. Any second now, I'll throw up. I can feel it. I put my hands on my stomach, trying to settle the queasy flipping feeling. The feeling is growing stronger the more I try to ignore it. I know I should do something. Say something to someone. Have another person here with me, if only to hold my hair back as I throw up. I want to call someone. But my phone is all the way upstairs in my room. My legs are so weak. There's no way I can make the trip up all those stairs.

I keep replaying it all in my head. Plus all the things that lead up to it. All the things I could have done

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differently. I think of those TV shows Mom watches. There's one that specifically focuses on sex crimes. I remember watching those shows, saying she shouldn't have done that ... she should have done this ... if that were me ...

I've just become an episode.

Tonight I understand how it's always so easy to say what I *would* do if I were put in a certain situation. But it's different when it actually happens. I know this now. I'm supposed to call someone. Call someone and say what? I've been raped? No. I can't say those words to another person. Saying those words will make it real. *I can't make it real.* Right here, right now, I feel safe in this little room. Nobody knows what happened. Nobody has to know.

I'm supposed to go to the hospital. There's something called a rape kit that doctors use to gather evidence. I remember that much from the show. I wish I'd paid more attention.

I should call the police, but I can't. I feel dirty. I can still feel him on my skin. I can smell him, a sultry mix of sweat and spicy cologne. I can feel the stickiness between my legs. It feels like bugs are crawling all over me. I can feel the heat from his mouth on me. I can feel his breath, reeking of beer.

I need it to stop.

I lunge forward. Grab on to the toilet with both hands and hurl. Before I can catch my breath, I heave again. My stomach cramps. I purge everything. The acid burns

as it comes out through my nose, making it impossible to breathe. I heave again. This time so hard my bladder empties, soaking my panties. Urine runs down my legs.

I close my eyes. Blindly grab for the toilet paper to wipe my mouth. I spit the vile taste out. Wipe my mouth with wads of toilet paper. Drop the paper into the toilet. I close the lid and flush.

I sit here and stare at the shower curtain. I don't want to move. But I have to. I'm filthy. I smell of him. The bugs are crawling and burrowing into my thighs. I can smell beer, even with the smell of vomit searing my nostrils.

I get up. Pull the shower curtain aside. Turn on the water as hot as I can bear. I tear my clothes off and step into the tub. The water burns my skin as I wash him off me. My skin is turning red and it hurts. But I have to get rid of every trace of him. I have to feel clean again. I grab a bar of soap and scrub my body.

I scrub and scrub and scrub until I have no feeling. I scrub between my legs until the bugs stop crawling. I scrub until I'm sure I've drawn blood. The physical pain I'm inflicting on myself distracts me from the mental pain.

My eyes hurt.

My nostrils burn.

Any second now I hope the tears will flow. I can relieve my eyes of this ache. My head hurts. My eyes hurt in a way that only crying will relieve. I want to cry. Why can't I cry?

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I use my dirty clothes to wipe up the wet floor. I wrap myself in a towel. Grab the mouthwash to rinse the horrible taste out of my mouth. With my toothbrush I brush every tooth until my gums bleed. I scrub my tongue until it's sore. Then I rinse with more mouthwash until all I can taste is mint.

I go upstairs to my room. My hair is wet. Sticking to my shoulders. I can feel cold beads of water running down my back.

I feel different.

I pull the sheets off my bed and stuff them into the hamper. Then I stuff my dirty clothes into it too.

Did this really happen? Did I imagine it all?

I notice the smell. My room smells like sex. It smells like his cologne. It smells as if something bad has happened here. I can't let Mom smell my room. If she smells my room, she will know.

She can *never* know.

I turn on my ceiling fan. Open my windows. A crisp breeze blows in. I feel cold. The smell should be gone before Mom gets home.

I go down the hall to Mom's room. Open the door. Look into the brightly lit space. I take Mom's robe from the back of her door. Wrap myself in it. It's soft and clean and smells like her cucumber bodywash. I toss the wet towel into her hamper. Look over to her bed.

Her bed is so comfortable and welcoming, with its

shiny green comforter covered with pink and white flowers. Matching pillows rest against the headboard. I crawl into the bed. Curl up into these pillows. I can remember being sandwiched between Mom and Dad all those years ago when they were still together. Monsters never came into my parents' room. Nothing can hurt me in here. I'm safe here.



When I open my eyes, the room is dark. I can hear noises downstairs. The TV is on. I hear Mom's favorite TV show. Clinking noises come from the kitchen. A faint smell of chicken wafts upstairs.

Mom is home.

A part of me wants to run into the safety of her arms. But I'm afraid if I do, she'll automatically know what has happened. She can never know. I get up and go to my room to dress. A glance at the clock tells me jammies will do. My room is cold from having the windows open for hours. It's disinfected now of his smell. Purified with cold air.

I go downstairs. Mom is pulling something from the oven. It's my favorite dish: baked chicken breast smothered in mushroom sauce. My nostrils take in the scent, and my stomach rumbles with rejection. My senses are telling me how delicious Mom's chicken is. How good it will feel in an empty stomach. My stomach says, don't you dare.

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“Hey, sleepyhead,” she calls before I appear in the doorway of the kitchen. “Are you hungry?”

Not really. But I know I should try to eat just a little to avoid suspicion. Avoid suspicion of what? Mom has no reason to be suspicious of anything, but I feel as if she has. That’s because I know something she doesn’t.

Something has been taken from me. She’ll notice. Maybe some food will help. Bring me out of my daze. Help me think. Or help me forget.

“I’ll have a little.”

She looks at me. “Did you eat earlier?” Knowing this is my favorite dish, she looks at me with some concern.

“Yeah, I did.” I feel the need to over explain, like I do when I lie to her. “Cassie and I shared a pizza after school.”

She nods and pulls two plates out of the cabinet. “Any big plans this weekend?”

She doesn’t know about the date. I never told her about him because I know she would never approve of the relationship. Several years ago she used to work with his dad. They had a relationship that didn’t end well. She never went into detail about it. I never asked. I just know she would never approve of me having a relationship with her ex-boyfriend’s son.

I’m distracted by the voices on the TV. I hear a woman giving the details of her rape to two detectives. I go into the kitchen. Get silverware from the drawer.

“Can we watch something else?”

She laughs and hands me a plate. “I’m sure we can find something we both can agree on.”

We bring our plates to the living room and sit on the couch. I take the remote and look through the cable guide as Mom brings us sodas and napkins.

I pick at my food. Chew on a small bite, then spit it out into a napkin. I play around with my knife and fork. Cut the food up. Take small bites that I end up spitting out into the napkin.

I can’t seem to swallow the food. My throat won’t let me. Mom doesn’t notice. Eventually I give up and dump my food into the trash can. Then I come back to sit with her. I’m looking at the TV. But I don’t know what’s happening. I’m physically here, but my mind is far away.



## CHAPTER 2

I wake up on the couch the next morning. It takes me a moment to realize where I am. The birds outside are chirping as daylight breaks. A crisp wind comes in through an open window.

I pull the blanket over me. Mom must have covered me with it last night. This is my first time waking up before the sun on a Saturday morning. I lie here and listen to the birds. Their lives are happy. Free.

I roll onto my back. Stare at the ceiling. Mom is still sleeping upstairs. She's blissfully unaware of the life-altering thing that happened in the room down the hall. This morning's haze makes me wonder if I imagined it all.

Are my memories of yesterday real? Did I blow it out of proportion?

I sit up and my stomach cramps. I press my stomach hard with my hands, as if that will make the cramps go away. But it doesn't.

When I finally manage to peel myself off the couch, I

go upstairs to my room. Everything is how I left it. I pull out some fresh sheets from a drawer. Make my bed. The sheets are crisp and clean, with a scent of lavender. I inhale, finally erasing his smell. I take my wastebasket and tidy up the room. My stomach cramps again, triggering a memory.



I can feel his hot wet skin against me. My stomach hurts as he slams into me with his hips. He's so heavy. I can barely breathe.

“Get off me,” I gasp between thrusts. “Brad, stop!”

“Hold on, I'm almost done,” he says.

I push at him, but he's determined to finish what he has started. I feel like he's stabbing me with a dull knife. Slowly cutting me. Reopening the wound again and again.

“Get off! Stop!”

He grabs my wrists. Pins them above my head. His body weighs me down. I can't move. His hips slam into mine. There are sharp pains in my stomach. Sweat drips off his forehead and into my eyes. I can't see. Can't breathe. I want to pass out. I'm praying that I will just pass out. Then his body turns rigid with one last thrust. He lets out a groan.

I feel as if my body is filled with filth.

I'm dirty. The kind of dirty I can never wash off. He leans down. Shoves his tongue into my mouth. His saliva fills my dry mouth with beer and sweat. Then he rolls over. Lies down beside me for a moment. I can finally breathe

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again. My lungs expand. My hands automatically go down between my legs. I'm wet with a mixture of sweat and blood. I want to retch.

It hurts.

My stomach hurts.

My legs hurt.

Is it supposed to hurt like this?



I check the wastebasket, looking for a small square wrapper. I look underneath my bed. All over the floor. There's nothing. I don't remember him taking the time to put one on at all. My heart thuds hard in my chest when I realize he didn't use a condom.

I do the math in my head, trying to remember my last period. Trying to remember what they taught us in health class about ovulation and the menstrual cycle. If my calculations are correct, I'm in trouble.

I grab my phone. Open my web browser. Search for ways to prevent pregnancy. A drug called Plan B pops up. I've heard of this before in a commercial or something. I Google it. Looks like most pharmacies carry the pill, and it's available without a prescription. This one pill will prevent pregnancy if taken within seventy-two hours of having unprotected sex. The only downside is the price. It costs fifty dollars. I don't have fifty dollars.

I hurry and get dressed as quietly as I can. It's still

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I look in the mirror above the sink. Stare at my reflection. My face appears thin. Pale. I look broken. I'm a fragile shell of the person I used to be three days ago. Does anyone notice? Can anyone tell what's happened?

Gravel  
Road

RURAL

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