

## Prologue

“No pulse,” one of the firefighters announced as he leaned further over the body in front of him, a blaze of burning car lighting the street behind them. His hands immediately flew to her chest where he started chest compressions at a somewhat odd angle; one side of the woman’s rib cage was already broken.

A paramedic jogged over and for the next five minutes they worked on her together, blood slowly trickling out of a gash over her right eye and oozing out of a wound in her abdomen. It pooled underneath her and in the dull glow of the moonlight, seemed as black as the night sky above them.

“She’s gone,” the paramedic sighed, peeling his hat off and wiping his brow with his sleeve. “There’s nothing we can do for her. She didn’t stand a chance, no one could have survived that.” He tossed a glance over his shoulder to the wreckage behind them.

Small shards of glass glittered all around them, haphazardly strewn throughout the entire intersection. Two wrecked cars were artfully placed in the middle of the roadway, doors buckled, frames twisted, windshields smashed, engines crumpled. The deep green truck had been pulled away from the passenger side of the small white sports car—currently engulfed in flames—to allow the rescue team access to the woman, apparently dead, a few minutes beforehand, but deep perpendicular ruts in the asphalt and

an unearthly pool of fluids—the intermingling of gasoline, oil and water—between the two cars proved they were at one point virtually joined together.

The firefighters had been on the scene for a little over forty-five minutes and were only then starting to get things under control. The cars had been wrenched apart, the passengers extracted, their vital signs checked, two of the three determined to have only minor injuries, and the flames reduced to the point where it was no longer all hands on deck.

Kitty-corner to all the action, two more paramedics sat on the curb talking to a man already in a neck brace, his arm in a crude sling, repeating over and over that he hadn't seen the white car and that it had come out of no where. Behind them, yet another man was begrudgingly being tended to, refusing to answer any questions, instead spewing a litany of concerns over the woman who still wasn't moving.

Through a pair of latex gloves the paramedic brushed a blood-soaked clump of hair away from the woman's distorted face and frowned. Sympathetically, he moved to close her eyes to spare her from the horror all around her when he thought he saw her eye twitch. "Guys!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. "Need some help over here!"

Lauren Tinsdale looked at herself in the mirror for the first time since the accident and wasn't sure how she felt. Although the image in front of her was a somewhat attractive one, her attention was immediately drawn to the bold scar that ran from her right eyebrow, across her temple, and disappeared somewhere in her thick mane of sandy blonde hair. It wasn't the only scar still horribly visible, but it was the one that bothered her the most.

“Don’t worry,” her older brother Josh joked, following her gaze, “it’ll fade in no time.” Josh was standing with his hands tucked into the front pockets of his obligatory doctor’s lab coat, admiring his own handiwork. While his partner, Dr. Janice Bowden, had done the bulk of the original reconstructive surgery and all the more recent follow-up work, he still considered himself Lauren’s doctor.

“Not... worried,” she lied, speaking slowly so that she was able to get the right words out in the correct order. She tilted her head up to see the cluster of scars along her neck. The truth was she was worried about everything. After all, what was there not to worry about? The days stretched on like a cold, harsh winter and blurred together like rain on a stormy window. There were no sunny days to look back fondly on, nor any hope of better things to come.

The last nine months of her life—only three months of which she remembered—had been this hospital, a thought that disgusted her about as much as the bowl of low-grade tapioca pudding sitting pathetically on the brown tray of food the nurse had brought in. She ate here in bed, watched the same 13 channels on the same television mounted a few feet away, used the same small, cramped bathroom and looked out the same window. The only time she left this room was to be taken in a wheelchair down to physical therapy where, for an hour a day, a small Irish woman encouraged her to push herself as she became accustomed to walking again. The months she spent in a drug-induced coma had left her leg muscles atrophied, but that was the least of her concerns. Since regaining consciousness, she’d had to learn to do everything again. She’d learned to walk, to talk and to write, and while her spelling always had been bad, at least now she had an excuse.

“Alright Lauren, that’s enough for now,” Dr. Bowden sighed, steering her back towards the bed. “You really shouldn’t be standing up for this long yet.”

Behind her, her parents shuffled out of the way, giving her and Josh, who was helping her to hobble around, anything but a wide berth.

Every muscle ached and her head throbbed dully underneath the layer of painkillers the doctors were slowly trying to wean her off of. She had been in a varying level of discomfort since she’d woken up and everyone at her bedside was aware of it, yet none of them could really do anything about it. Edie, her mother, wrung her hands together almost constantly, the worry written all over her face. Bill, her father, seemed to spend all his time with one arm around his wife and the other stretched out, ready to catch Lauren should she stumble or fall. And in a way, she wanted to fall; she was so exhausted trying to put on a happy face for them that she wanted to give up. But how could she disappoint the only people who had come to visit her in the hospital?

Her mom had dutifully brought her paper cups of herbal tea every morning and, once they’d been given the all clear from Lauren’s therapist, slowly started sprinkling the seeds of Lauren’s past, hoping that something would jostle back into alignment whatever wires had come undone that left Lauren unable to remember a single thing about the past thirty-two years of her life. Her dad didn’t do a whole lot more than read the newspaper as they talked, a concession he’d made when his professional psychiatric opinion clashed with the advice Lauren’s HMO-provided psychiatrist had offered up. Bill had been a board-certified physiatrist for over thirty years and had helped those with every type of mental disorder, but now when his only daughter needed

him the most, he was relegated to the sidelines. He had taken a leave of absence from his own practice so he could be at Lauren's bedside full-time, which she found equally as overwhelming as it was amazing.

Although neither Dr. Bowden nor her brother had wanted her to be up and about this much, Lauren had talked them into walking her over to a mirror to let her take a look at herself as, per their strong suggestion, she'd been kept completely unaware of what she looked like, an easy enough feat given that she'd undergone a total of twelve surgeries since waking up and there always seemed to be one part or another covered in bandages, and sleep-inducing medication pumping through her veins. What should be the last reconstructive surgery she would need for a while had taken place a few days prior, and now that the bruising and swelling had subsided there was no reason to keep Lauren from getting the first look at the new her. Of course, she had no frame of reference, not remembering anything before May 18<sup>th</sup>, the day she woke up.

Since then, she'd been ravenously hungry to find out anything and everything about her old life and the accident, a feat that was turning out to be far more difficult than she had anticipated. Josh turned a strange shade of green every time Lauren asked him about the brain injuries she sustained and was hesitant to tell her much about her day to day life, always claiming he had to rush off and check on his other patients. She was able, however, to get a few small nuggets out of him, and even more by peeking at her chart when no one was around to stop her.

Marigale, Tinsdale/Bowden's newest post-operative care nurse, was notorious for accidentally putting paperwork down somewhere then wandering off without it, so it hadn't taken long for Lauren to read her medical dossier cover-to-cover.

Once she'd read all the charts—information gleaned in snatches and nibbles—she understood why no one had wanted to tell her what had happened. The previous August she'd been in a car crash that had left her in a coma, with a cracked skull, a broken nose, a dislocated jaw, the entire right side of her face smashed in, five broken ribs, a collapsed lung, a ruptured spleen, three cracked vertebrae, and countless torn ligaments and muscles throughout her partially-burned body. She'd overheard one of the doctors on her case say once that she was lucky to be alive. Josh let it slip once that they actually pronounced her dead at the scene of the accident.

What Lauren didn't know, however, was that the damage had been so severe her own brother had thrown up when he first saw her outside the emergency room and, as they wouldn't have been able to sit by her bedside anyway, he forbade their parents from seeing her in the ICU's burn unit for almost a week until the swelling had gone down. It had been the hardest week of any of their lives, Josh torn between not wanting his parents to see their youngest child in such gruesome shape and wanting them there in case they lost her forever. Needless to say, none of them cared how she looked when she finally woke up, they were just glad she could wake up. Lauren, on the other hand, was obsessed with the way she looked. Her dad had muttered once it was because it was the one thing she'd been denied.

"I... don't... I-look the... same, do I?" Lauren asked hesitantly as she nestled back into bed. The startled looks on everyone's faces said so much more than any words ever could. Not that anyone said anything.

Eddie and Bill traded sorrowful looks, Dr. Bowden excused herself from the room and Josh just stared at her frankly as he sat down on the edge of the bed. Sensing the tension, he

immediately switched back into surgeon mode, a transition she was noticing he was getting better and better at as her recovery progressed. “No, you didn’t have those scars before. Your nose isn’t the stately nose you grew up with, but then again, you’d been complaining since you were twelve that you wanted a cute little button nose. Given the opportunity, I granted your wish, even if you don’t remember asking for the chance.” He tapped his baby sister on her new nose and smiled proudly. “Other than that, you look the same.” And just like that he switched again. “You’re still short enough that we wonder where all the Tinsdale genes went. You’re still frightfully skinny. And, like mom, you’re still beautiful.”

“Liar,” she spit sarcastically, running her right hand over the cobweb of scars on her left hand. The scars there were the least severe, the shadowy byproduct of hundreds of shards of glass embedded in the palm of her hand and one small, slender line where they’d had to insert fixation pins into her hand to keep some of the smaller bone fragments from re-dislocating.

“Okay, sweetie,” her mother sighed, bending over to give her a kiss on the top of the head, “I need to get going. I’m having lunch with Sylvia. If that’s okay with you. Are you going to be okay? I can stay if you want me to.”

She asked Lauren that same thing every time she got ready to leave, and every time Lauren lied. “Go. I’ll be...” her brow furrowed as she searched for the right word, the four letters teetering on the tip of her tongue. “...Fine.” Lauren lit up proudly having accomplished this small task.

“I’m going to run, too,” Bill smiled, tossing her brother a quick nod. “I have to attend to some pressing matters.”

“J-josh, can I, umm, t-talk to you?” Lauren meekly asked, holding onto his hand so that he couldn’t leave.

“Sure. Can I walk them out and then I’ll be right back?”

Nodding, she released his hand and watched as her hospital room emptied out, glad to be alone for the time being. As soon as her family was out of sight, she hobbled back over to the mirror and reevaluated herself. Her thin lips stood in contrast to her full, rosy cheeks. She smiled broadly and then curled up her lips so that she could fully examine her white teeth, especially her right upper canine tooth, the one that had been knocked out during the car accident. Deciding that it looked alright, she then closed her mouth and studiously stared into her own eyes. A deep green, they were exactly like Josh’s and her mother’s, and she was glad to see that although she didn’t recognize herself, she recognized traces of the Tinsdale bloodline. Her skin was a dull pink and far fairer than that of the rest of her family, so pale, in fact, some of the two-week-old scars on her neck were hardly visible. Trying to console herself, she smiled again and only then noticed the right side of her face felt heavier and her smile didn’t curl up quite as well as it did on the left side.

“Back in bed,” Josh barked authoritatively.

“I am...” She had to pause here to actually figure out how old she was, a chore that required a lot more effort than she ever would have thought was necessary. Josh was used to waiting for her to process and formulate her thoughts so he smiled patiently. “...Thirty, eh, w-one years old,” she sighed, repeatedly trying to even out her smile. “I am tired of, umm, being treated like a, uh, child.”

“I am your big brother and I can make you do whatever I tell you to, until the day we die.” Seeing Lauren needed more than a big brother, he switched into doctor-mode. “Don’t forget, I’m the one prescribing your pain meds right now, so you’d better be good.”

Watching her crawl back into bed for the second time in five minutes it was obvious he wanted nothing more than to make all of this go away. There was a sadness behind his eyes that hadn't gone away in all the time he'd been at her bedside, perhaps the byproduct of the stress of having to keep it together as both Lauren's doctor and brother, or perhaps something entirely unrelated.

"You, uh.... never really answered, umm, my question," she said, pulling the covers around her shoulders. "Do I look like the old me or not?"

Josh let out a long, heavy sigh. He was too tired to beat around the bush with her. "It depends."

"On?"

"...On how analytical you want to be."

"I, ah, have an... ummm... a.... I have an..." her face contorted with the effort it took to locate the right word. "...Idea," she said at last. She paused as she formulated the next sentence. "Why don't you, um, just let me, uh, see a, a picture of the old me and let me, uh, decide for myself."

Josh shook his head slowly. "Funny. That's the one thing Dad and Dr. Binns agree on. They don't think you're ready for that yet. They say it's still too soon after the accident for you to be forced to confront any remnants of your old life. They say the shock might have adverse effects on your treatment."

None of this was news to her. Dr. Binns, a middle-aged woman she saw every Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, was doing everything she could to ensure the smoothest transition between her new and old lives, and insisted that the benefits of patience couldn't be underestimated. "So, I look, um, so little like, eh, the old me that you guys are, um, scared I'll freak myself out?" she probed.

“If you want me to put it in laymen’s terms, then yes. But not because of the surgery, or anything,” he quickly added, relaxing as he flopped down on the foot of her bed, “it’s just that you used to be such a perfectionist that none of us have a single picture of you without makeup on. Remember what Grandpa calls you...?” he asked casually, forgetting for a split second that she didn’t remember.

“No, I, eh, don’t actually,” she teased. She tried to force a smile but couldn’t muster the enthusiasm.

“His little glamour puss.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Until I saw you the day after the accident, I don’t think any of us had seen you without makeup on in over thirteen years.”

Lauren smiled self-consciously, unsure why it was so easy for her family to let go of the old Lauren, when they actually knew her, and so hard for her to accept the person she was then. Perhaps it was the way her family talked about her past. She couldn’t help but feel it bordered on ‘awkwardly detached.’ “Ok-kay.” She spoke the next phrase slowly, hoping she could get it out without having to stop and think. “When do I get to go home?”

Her brother grinned proudly, knowing what an accomplishment it was for her to have done what she just did. “In about two or three days.”

Her pride was quickly replaced by a sense of uncertainty. “Josh. Please tell... me something, uh, more, umm, about the old me.” This was a game she played with him as often as she could. Whereas her mom would tell her things like “in college you majored in photography” and “you were your high school valedictorian,” Josh would tell her the good stuff like “the first time you got drunk, you came home and threw up on the dog,” and “the first boy you ever kissed was

named Grant.” Somehow none of the stuff that her mom had to tell her about her was nearly as important as what Josh had to say.

“You are just as pretty now as you were back then.”

“Josh, I mean it. You have, eh, no idea how, um, it feels to, ah, know nothing about yourself. Please.”

He knew what she was fishing for. She wanted to know how the accident and nine reconstructive surgeries had reshaped her face. “No.”

“Josh!”

It was clear from the look on his face it was killing him to see her this way, but he knew there was nothing he could do. “No.”

“L-look, Dr. Tinsdale,” she spit, emphasizing the fact that as her physician he did owe her a certain amount of information on her condition, “please tell me, uh, what you had to, er, to fix.” Instinctively, she knew her cheekbones were different and she brushed her fingertips along them.

“When you get home.”

She was suddenly tired and realized she didn’t care any more so she responded with a simple “okay.”

“Alright, I need to get back to work. Is there anything I can get you before I go?”

“I don’t suppose you, uh, c-could find me a small... um, hand- handheld mirror, could you?”

“Lauren Tinsdale, you are the most important patient here at the Offices of Tinsdale/Bowden, plastic surgeons to the stars. Of course.”

Josh left quickly afterwards and she spent the next few hours trying to relearn all the lines in her face.

The next year and a half of her life was as chaotic for both her and her family as her teenage years had been.

Torn between wanting to trust the advice of the people around her, and at times questioning if these people ever really knew her, it had been eighteen months of battles, some big, some small. She fought with her parents over having to stay with them for the first year of her physical therapy. She fought with her physical therapist over the near-torturous exercises she had to do, the small Irish woman pushing her until she was near breaking. She fought with herself, trying to remember something, anything, of the life that had been taken from her.

The one person she fought with the least, however, was the person who made her life the most difficult, Dr. Binns. She hated those sessions with her. She despised being told over and over again that she had to take things slowly, and while she was supposed to be practicing patience and had been awarded the luxury of time in her recovery, she was quickly growing uncomfortably, irritably restless with everyone. ...Absolutely every single person she met. If they knew about the accident, she hated the pitying looks they gave her and their overabundance of advice. If they hadn't known, she was disgusted that they assumed she was stupid or slow because it took her a while sometimes to find the right word and sometimes she used the wrong word altogether.

The hatred she was developing of herself was worse though. She looked at the world around her, full of people who had no problem remembering simple things—where they put their house keys, which of many appointments they were supposed to go to first that day, or the name of the street they lived on—and she frequently swelled with loathing for her situation and her inability to conquer it.

Perhaps worse, she was quietly ashamed that she didn't seem to have any friends. No matter who she shared a

room with—the insurance salesman who had spent six days in the hospital bed next to her after falling off his roof attempting to install a satellite dish, or the small woman who only spent one night away from home, coming in for a quick tummy tuck before her next tropical vacation—her roommates had each had a steady stream of well-wishers. In the ninety-three days she'd been at one of three hospitals in the San Francisco area, or the nineteen months she'd lived with her parents, she'd had exactly zero visitors who weren't related to her and even fewer letters or calls.

But there was an upside to it all.

Her parents and brother had always been cautious not to talk to her about the time in her life between college and the car accident. She knew the reason they didn't want to talk about that time had less to do with the therapeutic benefits of not burdening her with a framework she and her life were supposed to fit back into, and more to do with the fact that something very, very bad had happened to her. Every time she tried to talk to Edie about it, her mom's eyes would turn cloudy and unfocused, and even if they suddenly changed the subject to a happy one, Edie wouldn't be able to smile for a few minutes. The corners of her mouth may have been obligatorily tugged upwards, but there was no joy in her expression.

While her mother had offered her very little, Lauren had been able to read even less in her dad's reaction to that time period. Without another word, he would excuse himself and leave the room. He would not return for at least fifteen minutes, and when he did, he always brought with him the smoky smell of his favorite scotch.

Her brother was perhaps the strongest of them all, and not even he could deal with the memory of that time. At the mention of it, his jaw could clench and his eyes narrow.

Lauren sensed it would have been a mistake to push him so she never did. One of the skills she had developed the fastest in her new life was to simply go with the flow when things got tough and not create any further drama. It was a blessing, she forced herself to believe, that she never had to know what they knew.

She had a blank slate, a fresh start, a new beginning, everyone had told her, and so on the two year anniversary of her accident, eager to finally get started living her life, she announced to her parents and her therapist that—against their advice—she was leaving San Francisco and moving to Dallas, Texas.

## One

“What the hell?” A voice groaned loudly from somewhere behind her, each syllable punctuating the air.

Lauren froze at the harsh, gravelly tone, simultaneously disturbed that anyone could get so upset over having to wait a few extra minutes in line at a deli and thankful that someone was giving a voice to the same words she'd just been thinking.

She had been inching her way forward in line at Mr. Pickle's deli, her stomach rumbling, faithfully following the carefully choreographed lunchtime dance. That is, until it had come to a stop roughly five minutes ago. Before, orders were placed, money was exchanged, patrons shuffled aside to wait, food was prepared, neatly folded brown or white paper bags were handed over the counter, hungry citizens stepped out of the way and then the cycle repeated itself. It wasn't until the precise moment Lauren was about to place her order that, for absolutely no apparent reason, the dance stopped.

The cashier chose that moment to answer the phone that had been begging for attention far as long as she had been in line, then chattered momentarily with whoever was on the other end, took down an order, hung up the phone, nodded quickly at Lauren as if to indicate she'd be right back, then disappeared into the back of the shop, leaving the front counter unmanned and the line growing restless.

At first, only a few polite smiles were traded amongst the patrons, then the smiles gave way to whispers and finally the whispers yielded to barbed comments. With her small Kate Spade clutch pressed tightly against her side, Lauren used the extra time to peruse the menu, rocking back and forth on her toes, torn between having something sensible like a

salad or something wholly filling like their famous BLT. As she contemplated the decision, she tapped her newly manicured nails against her front tooth, then quickly stole a glance at her watch to make sure she was going to stay within the allotted time she had for lunch. Still new to her position as a low-level editor at a local fashion magazine, she didn't dare abuse her time away from the office.

That's when the man had spoken up.

Surrendering to her curiosity, she looked over her shoulder again, hoping to kill even a fraction of a second by flashing an appreciative smile at the man who had, if only for a moment, dissipated the frustration clouding the room. The man, well into his forties and dressed in far more casual attire than most of the folks in line with them, looked down at her quickly when he sensed her movement and then did a double take, a stare that would have lasted longer had the cashier not returned at just that precise moment.

"Sorry 'bout that," the girl apologized unemotionally. Everything about her seemed to scream "college student," from her fresh hipster look—red, thick-rimmed glasses, too much eyeliner, baggy shirt and unbelievably tight jeans—to the "only going through the motions" attitude. "What can I get ya'?"

Lauren placed her order quickly, handed over the requisite amount of cash then stepped aside to wait for her order, casually surveying the scene. Mr. Pickles, she'd learned, was somewhat of a Dallas institution and it came by its name honestly. Dale Pickles had opened it in the thirties and it still had that old-time feel about it. All the fixtures seemed as old as the establishment itself, held together in spots with duct tape and bailing wire. There were no seats, only a bar-height counter that ran around two walls, a self-serve coffee station run on the honor system, two kettles of

soup—also self-serve—but most importantly, it had a selection of meats and cheeses that would make any foodie swoon. No, it wasn't the atmosphere, the less-than-friendly staff, or the nonexistent seating that turned the lunch “hour” rush into a three-hour violation of “maximum capacity” fire codes here, it was the food.

Needing a solid surface on which to stuff her change back into her purse, she gravitated towards the sideboard intended for self-service coffee. She plopped her purse down beside a carafe marked CREAMER and in front of a basket of artificial sweeteners, pausing instinctively to smooth down the front of her Ralph Lauren viscose jersey, paisley-print wrap dress.

No sooner had she clipped the clasp of her wallet closed and secured it inside her purse, than an imposing figure was reaching across her for the sugar shaker, either not aware or not caring he was invading her personal space. It was the man who had, only seconds before, been standing behind her in line. Slightly alarmed by the proximity of a man well over six feet tall and built for a life of hard labor on a construction site, she took a small step away from him, her lips tugging upward in a placatory, apologetic grin.

Judging from the expression on his face, he hadn't even noticed her slight rebuff. He was studying her with an intensity usually reserved for tax returns and there was something in his glare that frightened and excited her at the same time.

The deep brown, nearly black hair on his temples was fighting a losing battle, already giving way to a few grey hairs, the likes of which had already ravaged his goatee. The lines of his facial hair were trimmed back so that the whiskers seemed to sweep along his jawline, accentuating the strength of his face and giving instant credibility to the

strength of his character. The only thing soft about him seemed to be his clear blue eyes, hidden behind a row of thick black lashes. They stood in stark contrast to the golden tan skin of the face of a man who worked for a living. In those eyes there was a tenderness and vulnerability that neither the ring of flames tattooed around his wrist nor the deep tenor of his voice could overpower. In those eyes there was a lifetime of surprises and the promise of an unrelenting protection of all the things he held dear.

Reeling from the implicit attack of having him so alarmingly close, Lauren picked her way through the room, doing her best not to draw any attention to herself, a skill she had finely tuned in her two years of trying to hide the scar on her temple—and herself in the process—still visible through her makeup. That scar had changed her more than just physically as it was more than an imperfection, it was a glaring reminder to her and everyone who laid eyes on her, that something in her life had gone horribly wrong.

Despite the fact she typically styled her hair so that a wave of curls cascaded over the crease in her skin, it had become second nature to needlessly massage that temple in a weak attempt at keeping others from seeing the jagged line that ran down her forehead. Despite refusing to let Josh fix this particular reminder of the event that had changed her life, so sick of being operated on by the time Tinsdale/Bowden had gotten around to the “merely cosmetic” procedures, she, nonetheless, wished it wasn't there. Her hyper-consciousness of its presence tainted every interaction. Every time anyone looked her way, she was convinced they were staring, whether their gaze drifted to her right temple or not. Then when they looked away, she felt certain they were disgusted by her slight disfigurement.

Every time a stranger smiled civilly, she thought they were just over compensating for their repulsion.

Keeping her eyes glued to the floor, she inched past body after body, slowly easing closer and closer to the other side of the deli, waiting patiently, but nervously, for her sandwich.

Although her first instinct had been to get as far away from the man as possible, she now found herself watching with interest as the man from whom she had just scurried away dumped an inordinate amount of sugar into his coffee, gave it an aggressive stir, then eased the plastic cap back onto the cup.

“Order number 233,” a disembodied voice called over the din. “Order 233. Ham sandwich on wheat.”

Lauren looked down at her receipt and saw there were nine more orders standing between her and lunch. While she waited, she pulled out her iPhone and tried to play a game of Sudoku. She couldn't focus though. There was something about the man across the room that plucked at her curiosity. He, ironically, had lost interest in her and was slurping his coffee while thumbing through one of the free *CarTrader* publications littering the establishment. Not even pretending to be interested in her iPhone screen, she watched as he flipped back and forth among the pages, taking a momentary interest in something therein, then moving on. Every time something caught his eye, he pulled the pages closer to him and squinted at the teeny tiny writing beneath the ad, the creases around his eyes deepening.

“Number 237,” the disembodied voice called again. “Order number 237.”

The man cast a glance at the scrap of paper in his hand then, realizing they weren't anywhere near ready to call his number either, turned his attention back to the magazine.

Absentmindedly, he put his coffee down on the counter, readjusted the cap on his head, then picked the cup back up.

The last few years of her life had been filled with so many questions about so many things, the truth often paling in comparison to her initial assumptions, she had stopped asking for the real stories about the people she met and let her imagination fill in the gaps. As she watched the man across the room, she couldn't help but invent a story for him as well.

Based on the clothes he was wearing—torn jeans, a well fitting t-shirt and scuffed up boots—and his taut forearms, she immediately decided he was the foreman on the construction job that was going on across the street from her office. She could just see him in the minutes that had led up to their meeting. ...Calling to his crew that it was lunchtime, them all dropping whatever tools they'd been using and wiping the sweat off their brows, trading good natured insults as they made their way back to their trucks to gather up whatever food they'd brought with them that day. ...This guy realizing he'd left his lunch at home that day, but "it's okay," he'd told the guys, who all had the greatest respect for their boss, "I'll just run down the street to that deli." He'd then asked the guys if they wanted anything and left, promising to be back as quickly as he could. He'd done his best to stay in the shade of the buildings as he'd walked the four blocks, getting more than his recommended daily allowance of natural vitamin D on the job site every day. He might even have promised his girlfriend or wife—there had to be a woman in his life, Lauren assumed; no man that good looking could still be single—he'd wear sunscreen at work, but he didn't. He had an image to maintain. He'd walked into Mr. Pickles, folded his hands across his chest as he'd stared at the menu and thought. Somewhere along the line,

he'd seen a girl with a scar along her forehead, but although he knew it was rude to stare, he couldn't make himself look away. Little did he know, that same girl was now watching him.

Yet another number was called, and this time the man rocked forward on his feet, then eased his way to the counter to pick up his order. Lauren let out a quiet groan. She had ordered first, why was his food ready before hers?

"Number 242," the voice called a split second later. "Order number 242." That was her.

Eager to get out of the deli, she dashed over to the counter as fast as she could without drawing additional attention to herself, grabbed the white paper bag then headed for the door. As she passed the sidebar where just minutes before she had reorganized her purse, she looked down long enough to spot the napkin dispenser and swipe a few before her attention was grabbed by something else. A man's wallet.

She surveyed the room but didn't see anyone who looked like they had misplaced their wallet, so she picked it up, flipped it open, hoping the driver's license would be right on top. It was. Her eyes darted to the photo and she was somewhat amazed to see the same face she had just been studying. Looking over her shoulder, she flipped the wallet shut, both looking for the man so she could return it to its proper owner and hoping she wouldn't see him.

Unfortunately, she did. He was just walking out the door, a cup of coffee in one hand, a white paper bag identical to hers in the other. After only entertaining the thought of leaving the wallet where she'd found it for a split second, she scurried after him. By the time she had gotten to the door the man was about three storefronts away, weaving through the crowd.

“Excuse me,” she called without much conviction.

When he kept walking, she tried anew. “Excuse me!”

Still nothing. “Excuse me!” she tried again as loud as polite society would dictate. “Sir?”

A few heads turned, but not the head she was currently chasing down the street. Seeing the man wasn't stopping and she wasn't gaining any ground, she knew she had no choice. She flipped the wallet open again, feeling faintly like she was violating his privacy and glanced down at the name on the driver's license. “Mr. Butler!” she called loudly enough that her soft voice should have carried that far. “Mr. Butler!”

Still nothing. Seeing that he was about to cross to the other side of the street and a barrage of cars was heading their way, she knew she'd never catch up with him unless she took more drastic measures. “RAY BUTLER!” she screamed, wincing at the sound of her own voice.

That was all it took. The man froze, mid-stride, and looked cautiously over his shoulder, trying to figure out who had just called out. Seizing the opportunity to close the gap, she adeptly wove through the crowded streets, keeping her eyes locked on the man who, thankfully, was about half a head taller than most of the people around him.

Finally, his eyes locked on hers and the honed curiosity turned straight to what she could only guess was repulsion. Instinctively, her hand flew to her forehead and she rubbed away an imagined headache with her right hand, holding out the wallet with her left hand. When she was close enough to speak without yelling, she tried for the second time that day to flash him a placatory grin. “Sorry,” she ineffectually apologized. “But, uh. You left this at the deli.” She thrust the nylon wallet further towards him. “Thought you might want it back.”

The man looked down at the wallet, astonished to recognize it. His own hand flew to the rear left pocket of his jeans and he was shocked to find the pocket was empty. Looking back down at her, he reached for it and for a heartbeat neither one said anything. Although she wasn't expecting a long drawn out display of gratitude, she was hoping to get was a simple "thank you." But he said nothing. Instead, he just stared at her and the scar she was doing her best to hide.

"You must have set it down when you put sugar in your coffee," she offered, trying to unravel the deeper mystery behind his eyes.

"Yeah," he sighed finally, the spell broken.

Around them the town sprung back to life. The red light stopping traffic a few feet away turned green, releasing an onslaught of traffic. Horns honked in the distance. Radios blasting every different kind of music screamed past. They were bombarded with snippets of irrelevant conversation, but neither one of them said a word to the other. They likely may have stayed standing there for quite some time if a mother pushing a stroller down the street with one hand, the other holding a cell phone pressed to her ear, hadn't pushed the stroller straight into Lauren's ankle.

Ray Butler quickly reached out, his hand landing softly on her shoulder to steady her as she flinched in pain.

As if something inside tripped when the contact had been made, her thoughts sprang to life. "Hi," she purred with a newfound sense of calm.

He hadn't lowered his guard any, but he smiled. "Hi." His gaze flicked to her forehead again.

She had been about to make some snippy remark about him staring at her scar when something stopped her. If she hadn't known better, she would have sworn a shiver of

recognition passed over him. Those glacially blue eyes were locked on her the way they had been at Mr. Pickles. Although the most overwhelming emotion projected on his face was one of relief to have his wallet returned to him, there was a profound sadness to his eyes, and that sadness was echoed in the faint lines around his eyes which, no doubt, made him seem older than he really was. “Do we know each other?” she blurt suddenly.

“What?”

“The way you're staring at me is kind of freaking me out. Have we met? Were you at Purgatory the other night?” she asked, referring to the club she'd been to with a friend the previous weekend.

“No,” he chuckled distantly. “I definitely do not know you.” There was some other lingering emotion in his laugh, an emotion Lauren couldn't put her finger on. Was it arrogance? Disdain? Repulsion? Or simply a healthy amusement in the situation? “Should I know you?”

“Dunno,” she spit. “No. I... So why are you staring at me like that?”

Ray Butler shrugged. “Am I staring?”

“Yes.”

He cleared his throat before he continued. “Well, I apologize, your royal highness. I didn't mean to offend you by making eye contact with you. I won't let it happen again.”

Although he had been nothing but hostile towards her so far, something in his smile allowed her to relax. “The scar bothers people, doesn't it?” she sighed, uncertain as to why she was asking a perfect stranger for insight into the world around her. But then again, maybe that's why she was asking him. He had no obligation to protect her feelings. And maybe that's what she was looking for: a harsh dose of

reality and someone to finally stop pandering to political correctness.

“No,” the man chuckled again. “To tell the truth, I was staring at you because you’re rather attractive. ...When you’re not scowling at perfect strangers.” His deep voice was surprisingly melodic despite being gravely with such a sour undertone.

“Oh.”

“And the scar is hardly noticeable.”

“Oh.” Needing something more substantive to say, she spit out, “I’m Lauren, by the way.”

His previously frozen expression softened and the ice in his eyes melted as he nodded to himself. “Well, thank you, Lauren, for returning my wallet.”

“You’re welcome, Ray.”

Amused by their exchange, Ray smiled again. “Well, look, Lauren. I’d love to stand her on this corner and talk, but I need to go.”

Flustered by this statement she took a deep breath and tried to collect herself. Something about being on that corner, having that conversation, felt so right, more right than she had felt at any point in the last couple of years, and he was going to leave. Her mind whirred as she tried to come up with something clever to say, something that might make him stay. At the same time, it was clear he wasn’t interested so she knew she had to play it cool. But it was difficult appear dispassionate when a man looked the way he did. “Oh. I—”

Ray raised a hand to cut her off. “I have to get back to work.” It had been a lie, of course, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say that would explain why he had to leave. And he did *have* to leave. This girl was magnetic, her anxiety charming, the way she fiddled with her hair

intriguing, the nervous way she spoke his name charismatic, and the endless mystery behind her eyes titillating. Yet all those things were right at the top of the list of things he didn't need in his life.

“Oh.”

Slipping the wallet into his pocket, he turned to go, raising the hand still clutching the cup of coffee in a friendly wave goodbye. “See you around.”

And with that he left.

Or at least tried to.

“Ray?”

“Yes.”

Her next words tumbled out before she had a chance to think them through. “What is it you do for a living?”

Appreciating her attempt at prolonging the conversation, but failing to turn around, he waved over his shoulder. “See you around, Lauren.”

And he was gone.

Over the course of the next four months, Lauren ran into Ray six more times. Each time they met he seemed less aloof and slightly more interested in prolonging the interaction. Not that that really said much. He had a long way to go before he even approached friendly.

The first two times their paths crossed at the deli, Ray only nodded as he brushed past her, a gesture which would have seemed merely congenial had he also not stopped on his way out the door to glance back at her over his shoulder.

The third time, over two months after their first conversation, he mustered up a grunt, which she supposed meant something equivalent to “hi,” but his expression had remained far too stoic for her to have ventured to say anything in return. Instead, she smiled demurely, grateful

she didn't have to formulate a response. There were no words, after all, that adequately addressed the fact that he scared her in the best possible way. She supposed he merely felt obligated to acknowledge her presence as she had returned his wallet instead of throwing it unceremoniously in the trash or letting it get picked up by someone who may have had less than honest intentions.

They weren't friends, she reminded herself each time the sting of rejection pierced her heart; reuniting someone with their own personal property was hardly grounds for anything more than civility. Nevertheless, she couldn't shake the feeling that there was something that connected them, some inexplicable bond that always drew her gaze to his and ignited a burning desire for him to be closer to her anyway possible.

She was just about to write him off completely, however, when their conversations accidentally entered into double-digit syllables. It started when the heel of one of her vintage Dior shoes got snagged on the rubber floor mats just inside the front door and, when it snapped off, Ray was quick to tease her about hobbling around the deli. It was only a quick quip, something about her limping like a drunk sailor, but it got him talking. One sentence led to another and soon he always had something to say to her. Still, no matter what the topic, no matter how obvious it was that they both wanted to get to know one another better, Ray could scarcely look at her squarely for more than a second or two, always seeming to be interested in something off in the distance, over her shoulder or on the ground. Anything but her. He asked her questions about the weather, how she took her coffee and her favorite kind of soup, but nothing personal, even after she started to ask him increasingly personal, but benign questions. ...All of which he answered immediately and

concisely. And no matter who started the exchange, she was never the first one to say goodbye; he made sure of that. Yet there was always a distant sparkle in his eyes when he left, like he was in on some joke he didn't feel like sharing.

Furthering her suspicion that he wasn't as uninterested in her as he pretended was that their schedules were slowly, but surely synching up. Although Lauren always breezed through Mr. Pickles at 12:15, Ray's previously spotty attendance was becoming more regular, and after a few months it seemed that more often than not, he was there, either a few positions in front of or behind her in line.

In fact, she looked forward to seeing him—defiant grin and all—now, and days when their paths didn't cross, she felt as if she were missing out on something. He had almost become part of the surroundings. The first thing that always hit her when she walked into the deli was the deeply comforting smell of the freshly baked bread dancing in the air, partnered with the sweet undertones of homemade cookies. Then she would see the brightly splayed neon signs for a handful of different types of beer. ...Then feel the traction of the tiles on the floor, different from the smooth concrete sidewalk, its pull not only physically slowing her down, but also quelling the perpetual narration in her head. After that, of course, she'd see him. Always dressed the same well-fitting jeans and a t-shirt that was neither baggy nor loose. The stretch of the cotton simultaneously called attention to his taut chest and impressive upper arms, and disguised a small gut, likely the result of a lifetime of avid beer drinking.

Although she would liked to have thought she saw something in him that no one else say, she wasn't the only one who had taken to regularly admiring him. He had a presence about him that demanded attention and a fair

share of the female patrons were more than willing to oblige. Most were rather sly about the fact they were checking him out, glancing at him from around the chip rack, watching him from a distance or sneaking a quick peek as they brushed past him, swapping knowing nods with their girlfriends, but a small portion were less covert, openly ogling his butt swathed in Wrangler jeans, clucking their approval as he walked by, and batting their eyelashes in his direction every chance they got.

Lauren didn't know how he could be so oblivious, but he never seemed to catch on to the fact that so many women found him so utterly captivating.

And across the restaurant, Ray wasn't sure how she could be so oblivious to the fact that she was the only woman who ever held his attention for more than a heartbeat or two. Or maybe it did make sense, he occasionally wondered. Although he had tried to make conversation with her, on some level hoping it might lead to more, something always stopped him. A little voice in the back of his skull screamed "no" every time thoughts of her drifted to mind. Who could blame a girl for not wanting to engage a man who started and stopped conversations as easily and efficiently as he turned on and off the kitchen sink?

No, Ray didn't always seem to pay her much heed their paths crossed, but when he did—with a passing remark about the food, a borderline-inappropriate comment about how good she looked in whatever she was wearing that day, or a quip about politics—it was unsettling. His steely glare from six-feet, four-inches high always left her stunned. It was as if his baby blues could see straight into her soul so it was those eyes she sought out as quickly as she could every time she opened the door to the deli.

All The Little Pieces by Devina Douglas

Lauren was finally getting used to their brief exchanges, internalizing that it would never be anything more when, on the seventh time they ran into each other, things changed in a most unsettling way.

All The Little Pieces by Devina Douglas