

**Excerpt from *Someone To Kiss My Scars*
by Brooke Skipstone**

Chapter One

Hunter's fingers typed furiously across his keyboard as his vision of two teenage boys having sex in a store dressing room invaded his mind, compelling him to watch.

After they'd finished, Parker stood up in a panic, trying to find his clothes among the tangled pile on the floor. "I have to go," he gasped. "I need to leave."

The other boy smiled as he sat naked on the bench. "It's OK, Parker." He stood up and found the two pairs of pants Parker had brought in with him crumpled on the bench. "You want to take these?"

"No." Parker frantically pulled up his underwear and shoved his feet into his pants. His heart raced as he desperately tried to breathe.

The boy held his shirt out for him. "Here. Stick your arm in."

Parker looked at the smiling boy, his eyes lingering on the boy's lips before forcing himself to look at the shirt being held out in front of him. The boy helped Parker fasten the buttons, but when his fingers wandered around the shirt below his waist, Parker broke away and sat on the bench to put on his socks and shoes. He tried to avert his gaze as the boy slipped on his underwear and pants. His cheeks felt on fire, and he blinked his eyes to keep tears from trickling down them. He looked at the floor and shook his head, but despite his guilt and shame he couldn't stop thinking about the orgasm he'd just had a few minutes ago. He was sure someone had heard his whimpers and groans. How couldn't they?

Parker stood, checked himself in the mirror, and started toward the door. The boy moved in front of him.

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“Hey, that was fun. Thanks.”

Parker’s chest heaved as tears moistened his eyes. “Please don’t tell anyone.”

“Just between you and me.” He straightened Parker’s collar. “Maybe we’ll see each other again sometime.”

Parker bolted from the room then tried to walk slowly and calmly out of the store while he was sure everyone watched him leave.

This was the seventh vision Hunter had been forced to watch today. About two months ago, they appeared in his mind, playing and replaying in his head until he typed them out completely. Only then would they leave him alone until the next one started.

He would hear the pounding first, like a ball hurled repeatedly against a wall, then see himself stumbling or running down a hallway inside a house past a closed door. A bedroom? The wall at the end of the hall always disappeared just as he stepped through it. The story then played like a movie in his head, this time in a department store dressing room.

Hunter thought he had seen that hallway and door before, but he couldn’t place them.

He stared at the screen as he scrolled back to the top of the story—several pages of text. He typed the time and date—April 5th, 2:15 am—then added a title: *Sexual Encounter. Store Dressing Room*. After he sent it to his printer, he raked his fingers through his wet, tangled blonde hair. His shirt felt glued to his back. After every vision his skin flooded with sweat. He rubbed his neck, trying to relax, but his brain raced, and his eyes burned. He knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep.

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So many of the stories he had written shocked him. He'd seen naked teens and adults crying, grunting, screaming, moaning in pleasure and pain. At times he could hardly see the computer screen through his tears. Watching those two boys, knowing that one had been torn between lust and shame, while the other fully enjoyed the hunt and consummation, aroused conflicting feelings, most of which Hunter didn't understand. How could he see such visions? How could his seventeen-year-old mind create these stories when he had no experience with any of these activities?

Unless he'd forgotten.

He'd been trying to remember his past before moving to Alaska. Where had he lived? Who were his friends?

What had his dead mother and brother looked like?

But no memories came.

He leaned over his desk, hanging his head between his shoulders. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept for more than a few hours at a time. Somehow, he had to find a way to block the visions from entering his mind.

He'd told his father about his trouble sleeping and being bothered by . . . what? Daydreams? Fantasies?

His father had given him a bottle of melatonin pills. Hunter had taken two at eleven and slept for maybe an hour before the pounding started again. He needed something stronger tonight, so he climbed onto a chair and pushed up one of the ceiling panels above his bed to find the small thermos of whiskey he'd hidden.

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His high school English teacher had wanted everyone to find an object at home with special memories for an assignment the next day. Until then, the fact that he had nothing from his past had merely irritated him. But now with all the stories going through his mind, all the trauma he had witnessed, he realized how much he didn't know. His past was like an empty room.

Before his father came home from work, he searched through his father's bedroom, looking for any reminder of his past—a photo, a document, a keepsake—anything. While rummaging through his closet, he found a full-length mirror on the back of the door. Hunter stared at himself for a few seconds then ripped off his long-sleeved t-shirt, revealing a network of scars across his chest and down his arms. He saw them every morning after his shower in his bathroom mirror, but they never grabbed his attention, just remnants of a bike crash on a gravel road—the story his father had told him. But now that story didn't satisfy. The lines were straight, many in rows. How could falling on gravel cause them? Maybe from the spokes of his wheels? But spokes were inches apart, and these lines were much closer together.

Wider welts marred his wrists. What had caused these? How much pain had he felt? How could he not remember?

He searched the room for an hour, being careful to return everything to its place. All he found was a Mount Rainier knife in a sheath, a small piece of whale baleen, and a book of matches from a hotel in Deadhorse, Alaska. None meant anything to him. He hid them under his mattress.

He also found a bottle of Jameson whiskey his father had stashed inside a boot in his closet. Hunter filled his thermos and added water to the bottle to hide his theft.

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Hunter sat at his kitchen table, drumming his fingers, waiting for his father to come home. His insides churned with impatience. He had to get some answers!

As soon as the front door opened, Hunter stood and peppered his father with questions. “Why are there no family pictures in the house? Isn’t there an old toy from my childhood somewhere? Why don’t I remember the first sixteen years of my life?”

His father pursed his lips and set a bag on the table with Styrofoam containers of chicken he’d bought from the cafeteria at the nearby Air Force Base where he worked as a mechanic. Joe was about Hunter’s height, still trim and fit, with pale skin hidden inside a garage all day rather than exposed to the bright sun of April.

“Why are you suddenly interested in the past?” Joe went to the sink and washed his hands.

Hunter’s head hurt, and for a second he thought he would see another vision. “I’ve been writing stories . . .”

“You’ve always written stories.”

“These are different. They invade my brain. I have no control over them. Sometimes they have people I know—like students at school I see every day. Other times they don’t. But before I actually see the story, I’m in a hallway and I see a bedroom door. It has panels—five, I think—and a silver handle, not a doorknob. It’s always closed. Then at the end of the hallway is a wall. The stories always start when the wall disappears.”

“Disappears?”

“Yeah, like it fades away. I want to know what our house looked like, the one we lived in before . . . before the accident.”

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Joe slowly shook his head. “It was just a house, Hunter. It looked like a thousand other houses.” He turned back toward the sink, slinging the towel onto his shoulder.

“Why won’t you tell me?” Hunter shouted to his back. “Could I be seeing our old hallway? Did our old house have doors with handles?”

“Maybe. I’m really not sure.”

“Why won’t you help me?”

Joe grabbed the towel and slapped it onto the counter. “Because I don’t want to remember anything about that house!” He turned around. “Nothing.” His eyes narrowed, glaring at Hunter. “And you shouldn’t either.”

Hunter felt tears on his cheeks as he stood before his father’s angry face. It revealed no sympathy, no caring. Hunter couldn’t remember his father hugging him, even touching him.

Joe’s breathing calmed a little. “For your own sake, don’t try to remember. Leave the past alone.” He set two large containers, packaged utensils, and a small cup of gravy on the table. “We should eat this before it gets cold.” He pulled out a chair and sat down.

“My English teacher wants the class to find an object with special meaning to us. We’re doing a writing exercise tomorrow.”

“All that stuff got burned in the fire at the storage unit.”

“Why was all our stuff in a storage unit?”

“Because we were moving but hadn’t found a house yet.”

“What about on your phone? Don’t you have pictures on your phone?”

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“Like I’ve told you a hundred times already, I lost my phone, and for some reason the backup failed. So my new one started with nothing—no photos, no contacts. It was a pain in the ass.”

Once again, Hunter noticed that his father was not upset about this loss. He always gave this answer with no emotion, except exasperation at being asked.

Hunter rubbed his eyes and collapsed into the other chair. He thought about his mother and little brother who had died in a car wreck on an icy road. When? Some years ago. He wasn’t sure. “I can’t remember anything from when they were alive.” His chest felt hollow. “I can’t even remember their names.”

His father looked at him for several seconds.

“Can’t you tell me?” Hunter watched his father’s lips quiver. “You won’t tell me their names?”

Joe sighed as he poked at his food. “Savannah. And Frankie.”

Hunter expected he’d feel something upon hearing their names, but the words simply passed through him. “That’s it?”

“I’m sorry, Hunter.” He lifted his eyes to meet his son’s. “There’s nothing else I can say.” He averted his gaze.

They ate in silence.

That had happened eight hours ago.

Since then Hunter had Googled her name, looking for images, social media references, anything. Pictures of girls and women appeared on his screen, but none looked familiar.

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Now Hunter lay back on his bed and took a few sips of whiskey, thinking it would be difficult to swallow, but amazingly it went down smoothly. He wondered why since he'd never drunk alcohol before. At least he didn't remember doing so. He drank another sip and felt the warm buzz creeping up his neck as his brain numbed.

He sat up, sipped, and gazed outside. A full moon lit the snow around his house in the Alaskan woods like it was daytime. He walked to the window and opened it, allowing the cold air to rush in, numbing his face and chest. He looked at the thermometer outside his window, nailed to a birch tree—ten degrees.

He could've walked through the trees without a flashlight it was so bright. And he wondered if he walked far enough out into the woods, the visions wouldn't bother him anymore. Maybe he would fall asleep in the snow and never wake up. He honestly thought about trying but felt too tired to climb out the window.

He had no idea why the visions started two months ago, but since then he hadn't touched his fantasy folder full of stories and drawings about the world of Marian he'd been creating. Hunter had always been a daydreamer and a writer. The school counselor had suggested he might be fantasy prone because for the first five months at the Clear Creek School, he'd frequently tuned out of class to write yet another story about the Tremarians, the group trying to eliminate pain and misery from their planet.

The original stories were the only things he still had from his past and only because he'd kept them hidden. He'd never shown them to his father. He didn't remember why. Did he ever show them to his mother? When had he started writing them?

He couldn't remember.

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He'd almost left them under the mattress at the only house he remembered in Washington, the last one before they moved. Something clicked in his mind just before he left his room to get into their truck to drive to Alaska. He'd lifted the mattress, removed the stories, and shoved them into his suitcase. After they'd moved into their latest house, Hunter assembled the stories into one folder, which was now in a hole behind a small whiteboard he had nailed up above his desk.

But those stories were ones he *chose* to work on. These latest ones invaded his brain like dreams at night, forcing him to watch and experience.

He looked at the whiteboard. When had he started writing those stories? Possibly before his mother and little brother—Savannah and Frankie, he now knew—had died. He hadn't read the early stories since . . . when? He had no idea. Maybe he should reread them all. Maybe he could find clues about . . . something.

He plugged in his phone and noticed a text from Jazz. *I've got something cool to show you tomorrow morning! Try to get here early—for once!* Jasmine was his only real friend at school. She had liked his Marian stories, but he hadn't shown her any since the visions started. Jazz was a genius. She could read the stories and probably figure out what might have been happening in his life when he wrote them. But first he'd have to tell her about the visions, something he'd avoided because she might think less of him. What would she think about the story he'd just finished?

He took another sip of whiskey and felt the comfort of drowsiness envelop him. Before he crashed, he replaced the thermos in the ceiling then pulled his latest story from the printer, intending to pin it to his wall where dozens of others hung. But blessed sleep

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came suddenly, and he fell onto his bed, the pages of *Sexual Encounter* drifting to the floor.

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Chapter Two

The next morning, Joe found his son sprawled sideways on the bed, oblivious to the alarm clock ringing on his desk. For a few seconds, he watched Hunter's chest to make sure he was breathing, a habit he'd forged years ago when he worried what he would find coming into his room each morning—his son curled into a ball in the corner, or bleeding from a fresh wound, or staring blankly at the ceiling.

“Wake up, Hunter! You can't be late to school every day!” Joe silenced the clock then pushed on the bed. “You want some coffee?”

Hunter wiped his eyes and pushed his hair out of his face. “Yeah.”

Joe left the room to pour a cup of coffee. When he returned, Hunter had already turned on the shower in the bathroom. Joe noticed some papers on the floor, two with heel indentations. He picked them up and found the first page with the title: *Sexual Encounter. Store Dressing Room.*

Sexual encounter? His heart skipped a few beats. What was Hunter writing about?

Joe started reading.

A teenage boy carrying two pairs of pants over his arm walked along the row of closed dressing rooms until he found a door ajar. He pushed it open and saw another boy about his age standing in his underwear. His skin was pale with just a whisper of hair across his chest. The boy with the pants stared at the other boy's abs and the trail of hair that led down from his navel into his underwear. He noticed the bulge, then pushed his eyes back to the boy's face. The boy in his underwear licked his lips, catching the perusal

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with a flicker of amusement.

A glimpse of a memory flashed in Joe's mind.

The boy with the pants blinked, snapping out of his trance and turned away.

"Sorry," he said as he backed out of the room.

"Hey, no problem. I was just getting ready to leave. What's your name?"

"Um, Parker."

"Cool name."

The boy shot a big smile at Parker. He had a nice smile, and Parker liked the way it made the corners of his eyes crinkle, deepening the blue of his irises. "You can use the room."

"The door was open. I thought no one was inside." He could feel his pulse pounding in his throat.

"You can close it now so no one else comes in." He laughed. "Might get crowded."

"You sure you're through?"

The boy walked toward him. "Hey, I like those pants." He took both pairs from Parker. "I was actually going to try this pair on but forgot to carry them back. Do you mind? We're about the same size."

Parker hesitated. He should leave now. Giving him the pants kept him in the dressing room. He had to force himself to keep his eyes above the boy's waist. He licked his lips and swallowed. "No. Go ahead." The boy took the khakis and gave Parker the

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jeans.

“Great. Hey, don’t let me stop you from trying on that pair.”

The boy slid the pants up each leg while Parker watched him. The boy smiled back at him. “Try on yours. Bet those will look good on you.”

Parker felt pressure against his zipper. His bulge would be obvious when he moved the jeans to try them on.

Beads of sweat had gathered on Joe’s forehead. He listened to make sure the shower was still on then read the next lines.

Parker kicked off his shoes, took a deep breath, then undid his buckle. He looked at the boy to see if he was watching him, but he was posing in front of the mirror. Parker turned slightly away, dropped his pants, then tried to get them off his feet quickly, but he stumbled. He cursed under his breath and reached down to pull his pants off one leg, hopping around. Then he pulled off the other. Parker quickly picked up the new pants and held them to his waist, hiding the stiffness beneath.

“I might like those better,” said the boy as he turned toward Parker and pulled down his pants. Parker’s eyes were frozen as he saw the boy’s underwear slip down his hips.

Parker dropped his pants to the floor.

Joe’s heart pounded in his chest. *How?* he thought. *How could he know this?* Joe reached for the corner of the first page as if to turn it, but hesitated. Many years ago he

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had walked in on a kid named Parker in a dressing room. He thought he had shoved that memory into a vault, never to be opened. He honestly thought he had forgotten the incident.

But now it lived again.

Joe started to flip back the first page and read the rest, but heard footsteps in the hallway.

“Dad? What’s wrong?” asked Hunter as he entered the room in boxers carrying a long-sleeved t-shirt in his hand. “You look like you’re about to faint.”

Joe took a deep breath and cleared his throat, feeling his own erection growing in his pants. He worried Hunter would notice, so he shook the papers in front of him.

“Where’d you get this story?”

“It just came to me. Just like all the others.” Hunter frowned. “Did you read it?”

Joe swallowed, trying to get some moisture into his throat. “Yeah. Part of it.” He tried to think of something to say. “Seems like I read something like this before.” He tossed the papers onto the desk. “You better hurry. You’re going to be late for school.”

Joe tried to glimpse the scars on his son’s arms and chest as Hunter slipped on his t-shirt. He didn’t see anything fresh, just the rows of pale welts, some thicker than others. Every few days he checked Hunter’s room for knives. Joe didn’t want his son cutting himself again, not only because of the wails and blood from Hunter, but also the guilt cutting through Joe’s conscience. This was one of the main reasons Joe had sought drastic treatment for Hunter a year ago.

Afterward, Joe had been able to fill his son’s head with any story he wanted. Hunter’s scars came from a biking accident. His mother and brother were killed in a

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wreck on an icy road.

Only recently had Hunter asked questions and been more skeptical of Joe's answers.

Hunter turned to grab his shirt off a hook in the wall. While Hunter worked the buttons and put on his jeans, Joe wandered around the room looking at all the papers.

“So many! How late have you been staying up?”

“Haven't slept much lately.”

Joe turned to look at his son and noticed the dark skin under his bloodshot eyes.

“The melatonin doesn't help?”

Hunter shook his head. “Seems like as soon as I write one down, another one pushes in. I thought you were going to take me to a doctor.”

“No. I never said that,” he said while rubbing the muscles in his chest. “It was just the school nurse who suggested that. What does she know?”

“She's a nurse. So why don't we go?”

Joe had already taken Hunter to dozens of psychologists and psychiatrists. Only the last one had done any good. “There's no point. What's a doctor going to do? Give you a shot to fix your overactive imagination?”

Hunter looked to the floor.

Joe turned back to the wall full of papers. “Do you have to write down every one of them?”

Hunter sat on the bed. “Like I've told you before, if I don't, the same story keeps playing in my brain. I can't get to sleep or think about anything else.” He pulled on his socks and stomped his feet into his boots. “You said you read that story before?”

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Joe felt cool sweat collecting in his armpits. He knew his face had lost color because he felt nauseous. He kept his back to Hunter, pretending to examine the stories on the wall. “Maybe. Coulda been a TV show. I don’t know.” He scratched his bristly face as he moved to another set of papers. “Kind of an inappropriate topic, don’t you think?” His eyes flashed at Hunter then back to the papers. “How can you know about such things?”

“Dad, I don’t know anything about most of my stories. At least, I didn’t. That story was pretty mild compared to the others. I just describe what I see in my head.”

“Well, if this story were a movie, I wouldn’t let you watch it.”

“I wouldn’t want to watch it, but I have no choice, same as the others. Two boys having sex. Boy and girl. Two girls. Brother and sister.”

Joe gasped. “Are you in any of them?”

“No. I see it . . . and feel it.” His shoulders slumped. “It’s not like I want to. Sometimes it’s pretty hard to watch.”

Joe picked up the *Sexual Encounter* papers. “Was it hard to watch this one?”

“It was better than watching a rape or child abuse. At least neither boy forced the other. I felt bad for Parker. He felt excited and ashamed. I’m pretty sure that was his first gay experience.”

Yes, it was, thought Joe.

“Watching two boys having sex doesn’t repulse you?” Joe peered intensely at his son, looking for any signs of disgust.

“Watching anyone have sex embarrasses me, but I’ve seen so much in the past two months, I’m not shocked anymore. Why? Does gay sex repulse *you*?”

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His eyes widened. “Not my preference.” He tried to chuckle and even wink.
“Guess I’m old school.”

At his son’s age, Joe played every sport, raced cars on weekends, and kept two or three girls interested in him. Many times in the past Joe had thought of his son as a Mama’s Boy and couldn’t help feeling disappointed in him. But he knew now Hunter wasn’t to blame.

Joe wondered how disappointed his son would be in him if he ever knew the truth about Joe’s past.

Most of the time, Joe thought he was living with a stranger, never sure what to talk about, so they hardly said anything to each other.

Until Joe read this story. He probed some more to assure himself his son hadn’t remembered anything about the wreck four years ago. “Maybe I saw this story on one of those HBO movies. Probably fell asleep and you had to turn off the TV. I’ll probably think of it later.”

“Let me know if you do.”

“Sure. You better go.”

Hunter grabbed his keys off his desk and turned to leave.

“Where do you get the names?” Joe said with a quivering voice.

Hunter stopped in the doorway, looked at his father, then shrugged his shoulders.
“I don’t know. They’re the ones people use in the story.”

“Only one of the boys in this story had a name. Why didn’t the other one?”

Hunter shook his head. “For some reason the name didn’t come to me or wasn’t mentioned in the story. Happens sometimes. Gotta go.” Hunter ran out of the house. Joe

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heard the truck engine rumble to life then move farther away.

Joe looked at the pages in his hands and realized he couldn't remember what happened next, other than the obvious. But the details were missing. Maybe he should put the story down and walk away.

But he couldn't. He had felt excited as he read, a feeling he hadn't experienced in years—an urgency, a need he couldn't stop thinking about. He had forgotten what lust felt like.

He pulled out his phone and punched in the number of his supervisor at work. “Hey, Matt,” he made himself cough. “This is Joe. I've been up all night puking. Think I need to stay home today. I don't know if I caught a bug or ate something, but I know you and the guys don't want this.” He listened. “OK. I'll call you later today.” He ended the call.

Before he turned the page, he looked at all the stories on the wall.

Would he find himself in any of the others?

Then a larger worry slammed into his gut.

Had Hunter written about his mother?

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Chapter Three

The wind flung Hunter's tangled blond hair across his mouth, hiding the hairs barely growing across his lip and chin. He still saw the look of horror on his father's face when he walked into his room. *Why did he seem scared?* Hunter decided he would talk to his father about it this evening.

He always felt his father was hiding something from him. Was there really a fire? Did he really lose his phone?

He noticed rabbits lined up on the shoulder every fifty yards or so along the gravel road that undulated through a forest of black spruce and naked aspen. It was early April in the Alaskan Interior, and humps of snow lingered among the trees, slowly revealing the death of the past few months. The already blinding sun flashed like a strobe light through the trees as Hunter picked up speed. He felt sluggish and so sleepy. For a few seconds, he phased out in the blinking sunlight. He almost heard a beat in the background—**DadadadaDadadadaDadadada**—then just before his truck missed the curve on the road, he jerked his wheel to the left, his right tires kicking up gravel from the shoulder.

He breathed again as his truck stopped fishtailing. He couldn't see the sun flashes any longer. This stretch of road had hundreds of alders and willows bent over like cat claws reaching for the pavement. The snow had weighed them down for months, and only now were they beginning to straighten up as the weather warmed.

Spring here did not burst forth with colorful life. It dripped from the melting dirty road snow and swelled into tiny buds at the top of willows, popping into fuzzy catkins

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barely visible from the ground.

Hunter had driven this road to school for the past eight months after he and his father had moved from a small town in Washington. His dad had said he wanted a change of scenery and found a mechanic's job at a remote Air Force Base near Clear Creek.

Hunter was happy to leave. There was nothing keeping him there—no friends, no memories.

They'd arrived in late July and found a house a week later—isolated, off the highway, about ten miles from the nearest school at Clear Creek.

He'd met Jasmine Williams during new student orientation in mid-August.

Jazz had chosen him to mentor, she said, because they had the same last name. She devoured fantasy and sci-fi novels and showed immediate interest in Hunter's stories about the Tremarians. No one had ever read them, as far as he knew. He remembered her first comments as they entered the gym during the Open House before school started.

"Everyone is genderless in this story?" Jazz asked. She wore a dark red, floral housedress she said she bought at a garage sale, cinched at the waist (not much of a waist) with a wide leather belt and silver buckle. Her bell-bottom jeans emerged from under the dress and covered the high-top leather uppers of her combat boots.

"Yeah," he shrugged. "Sex causes every problem in the world."

They moved to the top row in the bleachers past students, parents, and alumni and sat down next to each other.

"*Every* problem?" Jazz frowned. "I would argue against that premise, but continue."

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“Tremarians eliminated gender bias in their culture and gradually modified their bodies until their genitals became vestigial, like the appendix. You know, kinda shriveled and useless. Or at least the Tremarian’s considered themselves evolved beyond their use.”

She looked at Hunter with arched brows and a slight smile. “I know what vestigial means. So how do they reproduce? And more importantly, how do they have sex, or did they eliminate that, too?”

“No sex,” he said.

“Are you kidding me? What creatures would willingly eliminate orgasms?”

Hunter’s mouth dropped open, his face warming. “Because their leaders recognized that deriving pleasure from sex would perpetuate the abuse of women.”

“Only women?”

“Sometimes males . . .”

Hunter!

He turned around, hearing someone call his name, but saw no one in the gym paying him any attention. Odd.

He turned back to Jazz, who wore a quizzical expression and said, “Sorry.”

“Let’s look at this from a purely scientific standpoint,” said Jazz, “since I’m an aspiring scientist. I just read an article claiming that 40 percent to 60 percent of women do not have orgasms during sex with men, while men have it 98 percent of the time. Of course, because we live in such a male-dominated, conservative society, which prohibits real sex education in the schools, why would guys ever learn anything useful about a woman’s needs? The article also claimed that 20 percent or more of women do not have an orgasm their entire lives. So at least in your Tremarian world, that disparity doesn’t

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exist.” She chuckled slightly. “Though I think both sides attaining 98 percent would be preferable to both at zero, don’t you think? At least in the real world.”

He found himself just staring at her. Jazz was so smart and seemed able to talk about anything.

She stared into his eyes. “Do you think it’s OK for only half of women to enjoy sex while nearly all of men do? Is that fair?”

“No. Both should be the same, but on Marian—”

“I think you have an interesting premise, and I would love to read more of your stories, but I’m glad I don’t live on Marian. I hope that my future lover will care about how I feel at least as much as he cares about himself.”

“I hope so, too.”

Her smiled beamed. “What a nice thing to say. Thank you, Hunter.”

She leaned against him briefly, sending a flash of warmth up his arm.

Music blared out of the speakers hanging in the rafters as seven cheerleaders ran onto the shiny wooden floor, shaking pompoms as they screamed, “Go Grizzlies!”

“Oh, my God!” Jazz scoffed. “These girls are serious athletes. They play volleyball and basketball, yet they become silly cheerleaders for boys’ games. How many guys do the same for the girls’ games? Hmmm? Take a guess.”

“None?”

“Bingo! The least the boys should do is lead cheers for the girls’ games. Don’t you think?”

Hunter smiled at the mental image of the guys’ basketball team in cheerleader outfits pumping up the crowd. “Yes, I do. At least 98 percent of the time.”

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“Give me five!” She held up her hand, and he slapped it.

He liked talking to her. He never knew when she would make him laugh. He couldn’t remember a time when he had talked to a girl. “It’s fun talking to you.”

“Thank you. You’re pretty cool yourself.” She smiled at him and took off her large, round red glasses.

Hunter was struck by the beautiful almond shape of her bottle-green eyes and the thick long lashes that framed them.

“You have pretty eyes,” he blurted out.

“I know.” She put her glasses back on. “These glasses accentuate my best feature, or what I consider my best feature. Everything else about me is nonstandard and subject to jokes by the cheerleaders and their friends who are all standards. Meaning they don’t have too many freckles or zits, their bodies indent significantly above their hips, and their BMI is in the normal or below normal range. None of which, I am sure you noticed, applies to me.”

He studied her. She was a large girl, tall with a pronounced bosom, yet her hands were small for her size. Her lips, though, were luscious and painted hot pink.

She removed her glasses and then put them back on. “Which way do you like better? On?” She put them on. “Or off?” She took them off.

“Either way. I like their color. But there’s such a size difference!”

“I know. I’m farsighted. Like seriously.”

“I really didn’t notice. You look fine to me.”

“Well, thank you. You look fine to me, too. However, all those girls down there are going to think you’re more than just fine and wonder why you’re talking to me

**Excerpt from *Someone To Kiss My Scars*
by Brooke Skipstone**

instead of them. Drew and Molly have boyfriends, but Tatiana is available.”

Hunter glanced back at the floor where the cheerleaders were hopping around and cartwheeling to their chants. They all looked about the same, though two were shorter than the others. “I don’t know them. Besides, I don’t think I’m the kind to initiate conversations with strangers.”

“You don’t *think* you are? Why wouldn’t you know?”

“Because I haven’t been around my peers very much. I’ve been homeschooled.”

“Until now?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I’m not sure. Just what my dad told me.”

“He *told* you?”

He looked at her, thinking he might say, *Yeah, because I don’t remember*, but caught himself. The odd look she gave him told him he should pretend he didn’t hear her.

The music stopped, and the cheerleaders ran and cartwheeled back to the bleachers. “Where are your parents?”

Hunter lifted his arm and pointed to Joe. “My dad’s sitting over there. He’s wearing the green baseball cap.”

“And your mother?”

He looked at her, wondering if he should say anything other than *She’s gone*. But she seemed so friendly, and he had no one else to talk to.

He took a deep breath. “My mother and little brother died in a car wreck on an icy road four years ago.”

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Her mouth fell open. “I’m sorry. That must have been tough.”

Now what would he say? Make up some story about how tough that time was, when he had no memory of it? He thought she would see through his lies and wonder why he had no feelings. He’d be a jerk in her eyes.

“I don’t remember anything about it.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. Like a big hole in my life. Actually, everything before moving to Alaska seems to have disappeared.”

“Trauma can cause memory loss. People with PTSD either can’t stop thinking about the bad event or can’t remember it. Maybe it’s better not to remember.”

“What if you couldn’t remember most of your life?”

“Sometimes I think that would be a good thing.” They locked eyes until Jazz lowered her gaze to her feet with a heavy sigh. “There are a lot of things I wish I didn’t remember.”

“I’m sorry.”

She looked up at him and smiled. “Thanks.”

The new principal at Clear Creek School, Mr. Blake Bentley, then stepped out onto the basketball court to loud applause. He was a tall man in his late thirties, wearing jeans and a Grizzlies t-shirt.

He raised his microphone. “As most of you know, I graduated from this school twenty years ago. I spent too many years Outside going to college and starting my family, but I am so glad to finally come home.”

Hunter whispered, “What does he mean by outside?”

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“Alaskan for Lower 48.”

Hunter shook his head.

Jazz smiled. “You know, the states *outside* of Alaska.”

Blake continued. “I hope we get crowds this big and noisy at all our home games!”

“We would if you were still playing,” one of the old-timers hollered, causing the crowd to laugh.

“I don’t think I can keep up with our current varsity players. I’d like you all to come cheer, not laugh.”

Mrs. Christian, the President of the Parents’ Association, stood. “I still remember that half-court shot you made to win the game!”

Several shouted, “So do I.” Many clapped.

Blake then smiled. “I think your memory is a little off. I made a half-court shot to tie the game at halftime, then missed the same shot at the end of the game. We lost by two points.”

“You won the game!” shouted Mrs. Christian. “We all remember it.”

Many shouted in agreement.

“Well, I sure like it better that way!” He’d walked to the jump circle. “Where was I when I shot it? Over here?”

“A little behind the line.”

“More to your right.”

Blake moved at their direction until Mrs. Christian stood again. “That’s the spot! Right where you’re standing!” She led the applause and cheers.

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“OK!” shouted Blake. “At each home game during halftime we’re going to have a contest. Two dollars to enter. Whoever makes the first shot from this spot will get half the pot. The rest will go to the sports program.”

Most stood and shouted their approval.

“How interesting,” Jazz said. “He remembers the event as his failure, and they remember it as the best thing he ever did. How can people remember things so differently?”

“At least he remembers something.”

“He’d like to remember it differently, though. I wish I couldn’t remember some things, and you wish you could. You would think memories wouldn’t be so complicated. Things either happened or they didn’t. Right?”

“Or they get lost and disappear. How do we make memories anyway? And where are they kept?”

Jazz’s face lit up and turned red. “That’s it!”

“What is?”

“That’s going to be my science project! I’ll do something with memory—how they’re formed. Where they’re stored. Thanks, Hunter.”

He furrowed his brows. “What did I do?”

“You gave me the brilliant idea.” She held out her hand. “Friends?”

Hunter smiled and shook her hand. “Yeah. Friends.”

“That’s a beautiful smile, Hunter. You should use it more often.” She smiled back at him, pushing her cheeks into her glasses.

“I like your smile, too.”

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“Cool.”

A basketball bounced across the road, jerking Hunter back to the present. He slammed on the brakes and felt his stomach lurch into his chest. Where would a ball come from? He looked for someone walking along the shoulder but saw no one as his truck rolled slowly down the road. A house appeared through the trees to his right. He saw an old basketball goal stuck above the garage attached to the wall.

A big truck coming toward him in the opposite lane blared its horn as it plowed into the ball, popping it. The sound scared him, and he twisted his wheel, taking his truck over the shoulder toward the driveway leading back to the house.

For some reason the ball seemed important to him, but he had no idea why. He kept trying to remember a connection . . .

His hands twisted around the steering wheel as he stared blankly in front of his truck. Sometimes he thought he was going crazy. He felt he couldn't control his brain or his thoughts. At any moment people would do things and say things inside his head. Was that ball real or not? How could a real ball just bounce across the road on its own?

After looking one more time at the house, he pulled back onto the highway and soon turned on to the road toward his school.

Some things he had no trouble remembering, while with others he drew blanks. Yesterday in English class, Ms. Tucker had asked them to remember a special place from their childhood then describe it using all five senses. He'd tried and tried to think of a place, but no image formed in his mind, so he'd made something up. She'd also asked them to describe the face of a friend at school without looking around the classroom.

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He'd described Jazz's face easily but couldn't recall a friend he'd had before meeting her. Then she'd assigned the significant object, and everything he'd found yesterday afternoon meant nothing to him.

Except his folder. But all he could describe were the stories it contained, not why they were important or when he started them or why the war was over gender rather than something else.

His chest felt hollow as an overwhelming fatigue chilled his body. He saw the upcoming curve approaching, and a thrill of awareness shot through him as he pressed the accelerator, sending his truck faster toward the trees bordering the road. *I can just keep going straight and end this now.* He felt no fear, just a numbness as his eyes lost focus.

Why couldn't he be normal? He pressed harder on the pedal. Why couldn't he remember anything in his past? Why did he have to witness so much pain? Why was his brain assaulted by other people's stories when he could remember nothing of his own?

He felt hypnotized by the roar of the engine and the increasingly larger trees heading toward him. He closed his eyes and imagined he was flying.

His phone buzzed. He flinched but kept driving. It buzzed again. He shook his head, realized he might not make the curve, and felt his stomach lurch into his chest as he braked hard and turned the wheel.

He slowed down and looked at his phone showing a message from Jazz. *Where are you?*

He then recalled what Jazz had told him months ago. "There are a lot of things I wish I didn't remember."

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He'd never asked her what those things were. Why hadn't he? Because he was so consumed with his own problems he couldn't make room for anyone else's. How selfish was that?

She cared about him, was always happy to see him. Would she keep smiling after he was gone?

He turned into the curve and headed toward school. He needed to be a better friend to her.