

Introduction

“It is better to be hated for what you are than to be loved for what you are not.”

—André Gide, *Autumn Leaves*

I am a woman with a past. I never met a door I didn't open. Like Eve in the Garden of Eden, I bet it all on firsthand experience. The only question now is what to tell the broad-shouldered man across from me. He is not right for me—too old, too already-done-that—and I am, improbably now at thirty-eight, determined to start a family. We don't add up on paper, yet his vivid sky blues, leveled at me patiently, waiting for me to speak, pull me in. Soft warmth suffuses through me and despite myself, I see a future. Telling him is only right.

A forgettable sports bar with a summertime Formula One race blaring from each television is the crossroads of my past life and unlikely future. We are alone in the restaurant but for the beer drinkers and occasional margarita skirts lapping the bar. Above our table, a solitary fixture beams its spotlight onto our unfolding passion play, and I hear my cue.

“I need to tell you some things about my history,” I start and then hesitate as self-protection battles honest disclosure; I am no stranger to rejection.

“Okay.”

He doesn't react visibly, but I know these church boys, so sheltered, so naïve. I'm afraid he will never see me the same way again. My insides, a moment ago so soft and warm, twist into a sinking, dull heaviness. I am no stranger to panic either. At least that's what I would have called it at fourteen had I been able to feel anything after the bomb went off in my life.

My face shows none of the apprehension welling up in my chest. I know this because my

gift from the trauma, the silver lining that embroiders its bittersweet edge around every wound, is the ability to project a strength and a confidence so absolute they reveal nothing else. If what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, what almost kills you makes you near invincible. Pretending for years afterward, even to myself, that everything was fine, that I was fine, had solidified into a facade of smoothest granite. Under our bright spotlight, all he sees is a very put-together brunette, a woman who's quite sure of herself and her place in the world. He is, paradoxically, both correct and beguiled.

We met at church, which makes it even more difficult to say the things I have to say. Late to the party of organized religion, I am not haloed in the blushing aura of goodliness he may expect. My crown, rather, is one of hard-fought life experience woven with Siamese twin strands of gratitude and remorse. Every awful, disturbing, exhilarating moment made me who I am, including the ones for which I will have eternal sorrow.

I want to tell him that I ache for many of the things I've done but harbor secret glee for others, certain scandalously thrilling experiences that happen only on the edges of propriety. I need him to understand that some things were done out of emotional pain or the scraggly search for meaning, and some were done out of the darkness of ignorance, but many were done because I hungered for and don't regret the experience. I need him to see that I am not the person I used to be, and yet I vaulted each wave with the same courage and integrity I possess now.

I find his eyes, and he is still there, still patiently waiting. It is now or never.

"I've been divorced," I say, testing the water with my easy one.

He breaks into a broad grin, so handsome with his salt-and-pepper hair.

"Don't feel like the lone ranger on that!" he chuckles somewhat ruefully.

“You as well?” I ask, and he assents his membership in the middle-aged dating club.

“Yep.”

I close my eyes and dive all the way under.

“I’ve also been with lots of men . . . and women . . . I’ve done illegal drugs and had problems with alcohol . . . I cut myself when I was in college.”

Exposing the Xs on my wrist, I extend my arm into the space between us. He glances at the faded white lines before coming back to my face.

The next one, the only one for which I am truly ashamed, is the hardest.

“I committed adultery,” I offer quietly. “Not when I was married, but . . . it was still adultery.”

I own my past, have repented for much of it, but can undo nothing. Unwaveringly he studies me as I finish my tour de force.

“I had an abortion . . . I worshipped the Goddess and did tarot-card readings every day for ten years . . . I toyed with witchcraft.”

My voice has returned to its clear, steady role of carrying forth the cue for his next line in our drama. I have given my best effort, and my apprehension drains away. It is what it is. Either we go forward or we don’t.