

## *31 Days*

The past month had left me with a fractured collarbone, several deep bruises, a scar on my right cheek, and the inability to smile. Having to choose which was worse was unfair for me to judge.

Besides, each injury was a small payment I gladly sacrificed to help with a debt that I would never fully payback. Maybe that was because I had no right to be concerned about myself. Not when I was the reason my boyfriend was left in a coma.

Yes, my injuries were a punishment of what I had done, and I accepted that. I accepted them because it still did not seem good enough. I was quite sure Erik's mother agreed.

“Hello, Andrea.”

I had been looking at the linoleum beige floor when the bold voice echoed in my ears. I looked up with the instinctive need to answer to the call of my name. The familiarity of my mother-in-law's voice made my skin pinch.

I closed my eyes for a split second, feeling the heavy bag of guilt that only got heavier when she was near. My shoulders rose with my inhale. I held my breath, in a reluctant need to exhale, before selfishly letting the air release with the drop of my shoulders. But the relief of oxygen didn't bring me any peace. In fact, it only brought

me more shame, to be aware of the control I held, unlike Erik, who lay dependent upon a machine to breathe.

“Barb.”

My voice held acknowledgement as my lips moved apart with the remembrance of how it felt to use them in conversation. My chin nodded, with an introduction of its own. My eyes lingered with resistance, before meeting a gaze that I could count on carrying an equal reluctance. It was my boyfriend's mother, Barb Scott.

Her perfectly, straight long blonde hair did not have a single strain out of place. Something that wasn't much different than her personality. Same to her clothes that were of the latest fashion, I could never afford.

But something she *couldn't* control was the small bags and hard lines creeping underneath her judgmental eyes. It was something I had come to know as familiar with my own. I felt as if were on a seesaw and now it was her turn to gaze at my appearance with disapproval. Her eyes carefully scrolled across my absent makeup and sloppily thrown back ponytail. There was nothing designer about my plain white t-shirt and light wash jeans. Until now, I had forgotten I had chosen the ones with the white paint stain, on my right thigh. I kept meaning to throw that pair, I had ruined, away, after Jake and I painted the living room last summer. It would have been a moment Jake sparked with laughter, but now I only sighed with self-deprecation. *Great*, I thought.

My chin followed my eye's lead, expectant of Deb's grin. Unlike me, there was an odd amusement she carried with her displeasure, as if she expected nothing better from a girl like me.

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“Any change?” she asked.

Instinctively, my fingers reached forward to lay my palm top of Jake’s tranquil hand, grasping under his motionless fingers. Just feeling the connection between our skin, made my heart race and my stomach pull.

“Same,” I said.

My voice was soft and unfocused, as my eyes moved up toward the respirator that occupied his lips. Lips I, so desperately, wished to see move. Only now, had, I realized how much I had taken advantage of the simple gesture.

In thirty-one days, not much had changed with Deb’s visits. It was almost perfectly timed that she walked into the room, grasping a white cup of coffee that she never even drank. After she would leave each day, I always found time to pour it down the bathroom sink.

As I looked back up from Jake, I found her hard gaze. It was different than I was used to seeing from my mother-in-law. It was almost a study of how I was holding her son’s hand. She opened her mouth slightly, and for a moment my shoulders opened, waiting with patience, we both seemed to need.

But from my attention, she shook her head with dismissal, wishing for me to forget the moment existed. Luckily, the moment was swept away, from the entrance of the shift nurse. I released Jake’s hand, with her radiating smile. One that I assumed normally brightened any mood around her. Any mood except for mine. I only held a cold steel of resistance toward her.

“Hello, Mrs. Scott,” she said.

Her eyes were beaming their way down to me, with the clear objective of penetrating the defensive wall of my emotions. I nodded with acknowledgement, before looking away to avoid the awkwardness of her effort.

“His pillow needs to be changed,” Deb said.

My eyes shifted back with the nurse. I was never good with names, but I was almost certain that it was Katie. I thought I recognized her petite frame and red hair.

“Oh, hello Mrs. Scott,” Katie said.

There was surprise in her soft-spoken voice. Not because she didn’t expect Deb, but because her attention had been focused on me. But I had to give Katie credit for keeping the cheer in her tone, even after *I* felt the chill of command in my mother-in-law’s voice. Of course, it was hearing Katie call Deb, *Mrs. Scott*— a title she held first- that made me feel less deserving of even having the name. Sometimes I felt as if she wanted to say that to me.

“I’m going to get some coffee,” I said.

I used my free arm as leverage, to stand, before moving my feet forward.

“Rachel,” Deb said.

My body froze with a chill of goosebumps that rose up my arms, from the sound of her voice. There would always be a power in her tone that had a hold of me. I stood in the doorway, rotating my neck so that only my head was turned back at her.

To help from exposing my vulnerability too quick, I let my gaze move toward the linoleum floor again, before reluctantly up to her blue eyes. But there it wasn’t my

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mother-in-law that I saw. It was Deborah Scott, a sympathetic woman, gazing back at a grieving wife. Me.

“I know how much he loved you,” she said.

I stood in silence, letting the words sink into my mind. Sink in from a woman, who I had always believed resented, my relationship with her only son. Resented the girl, who had swooped in and stolen him from her.

“We loved each other very much,” I said.

My voice had stammered with the emotion, I withheld in my throat. It was the first time in thirty-one days that we had broken the routine. A monotone of answers about Jake’s condition, followed with awkward silence and unnecessary coffee runs. My nose exhaled, as I turned my head straight, ready to take a break, for coffee I didn’t need.

Her voice halted my feet, while my head remained unmoving, only listening.

"I wouldn't blame you if it gave you more reason to hate you," I said.

"You made my son happy. I could never hate you for that, Andrea."

"I'm sure this might affect your opinion slightly," I said sardonically.

“Were you drunk?”

"No," I turned back around ready to defend myself with my firm voice.

It was then I noticed she had stood, inch closer to me while she studied me with a cautious approach. IT was like I was a deer she was afraid would bolt.

"Did you take any drugs?"

My jaw felt tense as I shook my head silently to her question. Finally, her body was near, her hand reaching out to grasp my bicep as she spoke.

"Then this is not your fault."

"But I--"

"No," her words interrupted me, forcing my eyes up to greet the intensity of her own. But there was something foreign about her stare. New territory I had yet to understand.

"Just because you were driving the car does not make this your fault. It was a tragic accident, yes. But not one that could have been avoided. Whether we can help it or not, you and Erik were in the right place at the wrong time that night."

My throat seemed to close with the muscle inside. My eyes angled down to the floor, feeling the slight upward movement. My hand moved slowly, to touch my lips. It was small but present.

"Erik wouldn't want you blaming yourself and neither do I." She paused as if to make sure she held my full attention. "Do not dishonor him by putting that burden on yourself. Focus now on healing. Can you promise me that?"

I nodded, bouncing my gaze down to the floor with unease.

"Let me hear you say it," Barb said. "You promise to let go of that blame." Her head turned toward Erik, smiling at the mere sight of her baby boy. "For him."

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My eyes focused over on the love of my life. Every peaceful inhale his lungs gratefully allowed him to take on their own. The way his dark brown hair was pushed aside to reveal the small scar on the corner of his forehead. The one he had gotten from his childhood friend, Jake, after a dare gone wrong.

The memories of our life left me the slight upward movement. My hand moved slowly, to touch my lips. It was small but present. It was the curve of something I had yet to feel in thirty-one days. A smile.

My exhaled sigh dropped my shoulders and days of weight as I looked back to the woman. She continued to wait patiently, her own lips lifting slightly to the new gesture she found on my face.

"I promise."