

THE
BIRD WITH THE
BROKEN
WING

*When mortals make mistakes they're forgiven.
When angels make mistakes they're forsaken.*

D. L. Richardson

The Bird With The Broken Wing

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Prologue

She was a chronic worrier—

“I have a bad feeling about this, Ben.”

—and a touch melodramatic.

“This is suicide. It’s also stupid, morally wrong, and pointless. And did I mention suicide?”

Ben wasn’t listening. He was reaching a hand inside the open neck of his shirt. She’d spent enough time with him to know he was touching the cross on the necklace that had once belonged to his dad.

“Detached, that’s how you make me feel, Ben. Like I’m watching your life through a window.”

Striking up an old conversation about how she felt isolated was hardly creative, yet the feeling of not belonging with him was stronger than ever. She gave a heavy, audible sigh but Ben wasn’t taking the bait.

“A bubble. I live in a bubble.”

“Relax.” Ben closed his eyes as he sucked up a deep, dusty red breath like he was meditating on Mars. “Everything will be all right.”

As well as a chronic worrier and a touch melodramatic, she was also an eternal optimist. So she looked around in case she was missing something, but all she saw was proof to the contrary. She, Ben, and a few hundred others were in a convoy, crossing a desert that appeared to be empty, yet the drivers had dodged gun and mortar fire since they’d passed over the border an hour ago.

What this land must have looked like when it had been fertile with lush, green

trees and wide, blue rivers was hard to imagine, but she tried. Her eyes had closed for a second when a burst of gunfire to her right jolted them wide open again.

She scowled at him and said, “We signed up for non-combat jobs, remember?”

She wondered if punching him in the head would do any good. Probably not. If her bubble-hands were too weak to smash through the invisible wall surrounding her, they’d be like wet rags against his thick skull. Plus he was wearing a metal helmet and she was likely to break more than a nail.

“We’re meant to be back home making trucks. That’s what we were promised we’d be doing. Jeez, Ben. Think about your mom.”

Perhaps he was. Perhaps many of the soldiers on the truck were thinking about loved ones they’d left behind. Many of the men and women seated on either side of her wore grave expressions on their faces, though she only caught glimpses of them when they thought nobody was looking. She could understand why they were scared. She couldn’t understand why any of them were here.

Maybe a sense of duty impelled the others to enter a war zone. Responsibility to Ben was her only motive for being here; she certainly hadn’t come for the ambience. And she would rather have thrown herself under the truck’s heavy wheels than dodge her responsibilities. So with a dramatic sigh—in case during the past minute Ben had suddenly developed the ability to take a hint—she settled back into the role of accepting what she couldn’t change while wishing that she could.

A round of cheers sprang up from a group of soldiers at the back of the truck, a malevolent presence screaming as if newly born and demanding to be fed. She shivered and huddled closer to Ben.

It can be the brightest day, but fill it with just one dark soul and the day is ruined.

She made a mental note to keep well clear of these soldiers. She hoped Ben was smart enough to do the same.

Finally Ben spoke.

“I’m here to keep my homeland safe,” he said.

The tremor in his voice was at odds with his bold statement. She wanted to tell him he could’ve made trucks at home, but because his eyes were fixed on his boots she succumbed to the rhythm of the back-jarring ride across the pothole-filled road and held her breath, hoping it wouldn’t be her last.

Their convoy of flatbed trucks was carrying hundreds of troops, weapons, ammunition, Abrams tanks, armored personnel carriers, and Humvees to the compound, their base for the next six months. With any luck they’d move out faster than they were moving in. Their convoy was doing twenty miles an hour, but she felt as if ants could have passed them.

She wanted to laugh as she pictured tiny insects kicking up orange dust, flipping the bird at the drivers and shouting obscenities. Instead, she bit her lower lip. This was neither the time nor the place to flaunt her eternal optimism. Besides, she wasn’t entirely sure she had any cheerfulness left in her.

“I still don’t see why we’re here,” she mumbled.

What made the trip seem slower, she realized, was the lack of perspective. Much like an ocean without any land mass to help judge distance, this desert seemed to stretch endlessly ahead of them. If only the drivers would go faster; it had to be harder to hit a quicker-moving target. She was tempted to grab Ben by the collar and pull him off the truck, but the heat was around a hundred degrees, and with all the gear packed on them—M-247, M-249, backpack, flak jacket, radio, helmet, goggles—it would’ve been like sprinting around inside an oven.

Sand began to whirl in all directions, marching up and down the convoy as if sizing it up to establish whether it could be swallowed whole. This was the most dangerous time for the convoy. The trucks had to slow to a crawl or risk running into each other or off the road. Their only saving grace was that the enemy was exposed to the same elements. So while the soldiers couldn’t see a thing, they also couldn’t be seen. At least that was her hope filled theory.

Time continued to crawl so that after thirty minutes, and since the convoy of soldiers hadn't been killed by unseen enemy fire, she and everyone else began to relax and make conversation.

Their chatter came to a halt when the flatbed truck passed a burned-out tank on the side of the road. Everyone stared open-mouthed at the wreck. Nobody could speak. Nobody could look away.

Despite wanting to peel her eyes away out of respect, she was as enthralled as the rest of them.

She wondered if everyone wanted to know the same thing she did. Had the tank internally combusted from the constant battering of the sun? Nice concept, she thought, but this damage had been caused by man. Judging by the looks on their faces, everyone knew this was the case, and when the eyes of the soldiers around her hardened she guessed they had silently asked another question.

Was this one of their tanks or the enemy's?

They lowered their eyes and turned their heads away, providing her with the unspoken answer.

"Do you think they got out before it got hit?" she asked Ben.

He didn't respond, but from the rear of the truck one of the loud-mouthed soldiers yelled, "Oh yeah, you're gonna get it now, you freakin' sons of bitches."

A round of cheers followed. Even if she'd known what insults to hurl at these soldiers to quiet them down, she reminded herself that she'd sworn moments ago to steer clear of these men. So she kept her gaze forward and her mouth shut.

Like a good soldier.

A ripple of self-loathing rose and lodged in her throat. She'd never have guessed it would taste so foul.

Outside, the sand was swirling, picking up speed as though being thrown about by a crèche load of bad-tempered toddlers, and pretty soon both the ground and sky were painted flame orange, crackling like an open fire. She was afraid to breathe. Soldiers pulled down their goggles to cover their eyes, but this action

was a useless defense against the sand that bit into their exposed flesh.

And still the convoy crawled toward their destination.

The dust finally cleared and the convoy came to a stop outside a large concrete compound that was a series of buildings within four cement walls. Without a word, she and everyone else began unloading the contents of the flatbed trucks—smaller trucks, enough guns to keep the war going for centuries, tanks, food, water and whatever other supplies they'd need for the next six months.

Breathing was difficult. This was the most physical work she'd performed in ages. When she stopped for a break, resentment at the lies welled inside her. Tears stung her eyes.

"Forget home sweet home," she complained silently, "this place is home *sweat* home."

Each and every soldier was drenched from top to bottom from the exertion of working under the glaring sun. Their sweat filled the air; she could have sworn she was in a sauna. Optimism dripped off her forehead. She wiped at her brow and was surprised when her hand came away wet, not with sweat but something else.

No tears. I will not cry.

At least she would not spill tears for herself when others deserved them so much more.

After half an hour, a few companies got into the smaller trucks and disappeared, perhaps to do their hard labor in another section of the growing heat. Another hour after that, once everything had been unloaded, the company she and Ben were assigned to was ordered into one of the smaller trucks, and they too left.

A sergeant with silver hair and eyes was seated in the front. He looked the type who was too mean to have ever had a pet. For long.

"You pussies will stand guard at the hospital for the next twenty-four hours," the sergeant bellowed. "You will each do two twelve-hour shifts, one shift inside

the hospital, one outside.”

“When do we get time to shoot the enemy?” the kid next to Ben asked. For one so young his eyes were hard, like steel.

“Don’t be fooled. The enemy is out there.” The sergeant’s gravelly voice roared as loudly as the aircraft parading over their heads. “If you ladies find yourself in a threatening situation, well, you know what to do. Are you pussies prepared to protect your fellow countrymen?”

A roar of cheers engulfed the truck. The sound clutched at her heart. If the enemy hadn’t known they were here before, they were well aware of it now.

She wanted to reach for Ben’s hand and hold it tight, but fear kept her immobile.

“Shoot first and ask questions later. That’s what he means,” the kid next to Ben said, inching his way closer. “You ever shot a bear? They come at you even after you’ve pumped ten rounds in ’em. I’ve heard it’s the same with these bastards. You shoot ’em and shoot ’em, but they keep coming at you with guns and knives. All the while cursing at you in the Devil’s language. You got to be careful not to touch ’em either. Their blood is poison.”

“I doubt we’ll shoot anyone at a hospital,” Ben replied with a scowl. He moved along the bench as best as he could without falling off the edge. The kid must have gotten the hint because he kept quiet after that.

Unaffected by the searing heat outside, the truck chugged along until it rolled up outside a hospital that had weathered grenade blasts and gunfire till it resembled a thousand-year-old relic.

For some, this was their first time on foreign soil. For others, this was simply another day at work. Yet everyone jumped off the truck and danced boxer-like on their feet as though something invisible was going to jump out from the air and snatch them.

The sky above was on the go with Apache helicopters, hellfire missiles, dust, and jet stream. On the ground was a different story. The air barely stirred. No

sign of anyone or anything with a pulse let alone the dreaded enemy. Aside from one or two civilians she could see sneaking peeks at the soldiers from around corners of shattered buildings, the street was empty. So why could she feel the distinct presence of something out there? Watching, waiting, and blistering with hatred at this invasion.

“Each and every one of you signed a contract with the U.S. Army, which means your asses belong to me,” shouted the sergeant. His eyes scanned the soldiers with no more than a passing glance, as though he already considered them obsolete. “Your mommies can’t help you now. So if any of you pussies don’t want to be here, you can kiss my red, white, and blue behind. Now secure the building and welcome to hell.”

Chapter One

The DANGER sign was normally enough to keep Jet away.

Not tonight.

She peered into roiling seas below, seeing only moonlight dancing on the waves trapped in the Warriewood blowhole. She’d never been so close before. Usually she watched the crashing waves from the safety of the road, fifty feet above, where cautionary signage warned the unwary of slippery rocks and certain death.

She stood with her back against the cliff, bare feet gripping the slick ledge while sweaty hands clung to the rope tied there by thrill seekers or, perhaps, potential suicides. When the waves flicked up and turned, diving toward the rocks, they cracked as loud as gunfire, but she didn’t flinch or loosen her grip. Instead, she closed her eyes and waited, like a lover bracing for a kiss.

A wave shot up, slapping cold, wet fingers against her cheek.

“I guess I deserved that,” she whispered, as was her habit to talk to herself when she needed counsel and there was nobody around to provide it.

She swiped at the salt water stinging her cheeks, laughing until she remembered her mission. What was funny about contemplating her final dive?

Waves came in sets of seven, building up in strength each time. She wiped the salty water from her eyes and returned to staring into the blowhole. What if the next set carried the wave strong enough to take her? Would she sink into the abyss below and disappear into a world where breathing underwater was necessary? God, she hoped so. And not because she wanted to be a mermaid.

Not that she'd ever get to be anything whether actress, singer, or flight attendant. All her dreams were shattered, thanks to Lucas.

Gazing up to a sky filled with pinpricks of twinkling light, she whispered, “Star light, star bright, tell me what to do.”

Sometimes the little voice in her head gave her advice, but not this time. Or maybe the pearls of wisdom were silenced by the frantic beating of her heart, banging against her eardrums.

The sea offered no resolution, but continued to dance, aloof and beautiful under an audience of stars. All that was necessary for her to join the dance was to let go of the worn rope. Maybe fate would creep in with the tide and make the decision for her. Maybe the slow scrape of rock against rope would part the aging strands. But the rope was strong. It wouldn't break. The decision was hers and hers alone

She might have let go, and falling might or might not have made her happy, but she never got the chance to find out. Up above, a car door slammed and a cackle of voices broke the solitude. No longer able to spend time alone with her humiliation, she climbed the cliff—itsself a risky operation—and headed home.

The house was dark and quiet. As she opened the front gate, she shook off the grim fantasy that the house was waiting to swallow her whole. At least her

parents were still out, which was one small blessing. Their absence left her with a few hours to mentally prepare for the verbal thrashing she was about to cop.

“No matter what, I’ll never be ready to face them,” she said as she walked along the path.

Disillusionment stabbed deep within in her chest as she jammed the key into the lock on the front door. She let out a loud grunt when it wouldn’t turn.

“Stupid lock. What’s wrong with you?”

After fighting with the lock for another few minutes, she figured it’d been changed or bolted from the inside while she was out so she squeezed past azaleas and hydrangeas on her way around the side of the house where she slid the window frame to the bathroom window and shimmied her way inside the house.

When she landed on the tiled floor, she kicked over the laundry hamper. She stubbed her toe on the vanity so she sent a stray sock hurling through the air in retaliation.

Her lips quivered, and she gulped back on a fresh bout of tears. “God damn it! Surely they’re meant to be there for better or worse.”

Even overlooking the fact that she was confusing wedding vows with parental responsibility, she had a point. They were her parents. If ever a time existed to remind them of their duty to fix or forgive her mistakes, now was as good as any.

But she was getting ahead of herself. Maybe they wouldn’t find out her terrible secret. Maybe they wouldn’t kill her. Maybe her worries were all for nothing.

She climbed up the stairs to her bedroom (if it was still her room. For all she knew her parents were checking out pet stores to buy something bred for obedience) and made herself a pledge.

“If I have a text message I’ll do it,” she whispered. “If I don’t... Well, we’ll see.”

A game of chance to be letting a cell phone decide my fate, she thought. But she saw no other choice. And while switching off her phone or throwing it out the window seemed like the two best options, both were social suicide. Instead, she hurried up the stairs and scanned for messages, finding eight. None were what

she'd call pleasant.

No backing out now. A promise is a promise.

Rummaging through her parents' closet produced two bottles. One contained vodka, the other sleeping pills. She unscrewed the caps to both and sat on her bed.

No backing out of what?

Drinking herself into oblivion? She was hardly an expert on the subject. What few friends she had were as apprehensive of drugs and alcohol as she was. Correction. As apprehensive as she used to be. She touched the vodka bottle to her lips and took a tentative sip, the hard glass rim clattering against her teeth. As the hot liquid burned her stomach she reminded herself that she had made a silent pledge.

No backing out. No backing out.

It became a chant as she swallowed large mouthfuls. Her belly churned as the vodka hit.

Get a grip. Not like this is your first time at getting wasted.

Her hold on the bottle faltered.

First times always had an unrealistic emphasis placed on them. The first bicycle. The first kiss. The first warm rush as alcohol hits the blood stream, bringing sense from the senseless.

The first sexual encounter...

She bit the bottle's rim, taking gulp after gulp, and everything began to make sense. She had to go through with this; she couldn't live a second longer with the humiliation.

She took a break from drinking herself into oblivion only to hit the stereo's remote control. Cranking out of the speakers was her favorite artist, Pink. She loved the music so much she'd decorated her room in as many shades of pink as she could find. Fuchsia. Magenta. Candy. Even salmon made it into the ensemble by way of a throw rug. Usually Pink's hard-hitting lyrics did the trick, channeling

her sour mood to something else. Her stuffed toys mostly. Not this time.

“Don’t hate me, Teddy,” she whispered, picking up her favorite toy and jamming her face into his soft belly.

Then, hit with a fresh wave of humiliation, she shoved the stuffed animal under the pillow so it couldn’t witness, or judge, her behavior.

Her chest burned from vodka, and shame pierced her insides. Despite having cried for days already, more sobs shook her. A calmer part of her wondered how she had more tears left to shed. Yet she wept from a hidden reservoir stashed deep inside her. Though her stomach heaved and begged “no more” she continued to guzzle vodka. Three-quarters through the bottle, she opened the container containing her mom’s sleeping pills, which she then tossed down like M&M’s.

As the CD ended, two empty bottles fell to the floor. Less than a second later so did she.

Her fall took her to a place where it was quiet at last.

* * *

Jet woke without any sense of how long her blackout had lasted. Long enough for her to wake up in a room nothing like she imagined a detox clinic would look like. This room resembled a North Queensland holiday resort. Highly unlikely she was so far from home. Her dad might have had a change of heart and coughed up the cash for a recuperating holiday, but a trip to North Queensland required a boarding pass. So unless plane trips were being handed out for free, she was somewhere on the southern side of the Sydney Harbor Bridge. Perhaps Bondi or Coogee. Smiling, she decided she didn’t care where she was. She was miles away from home and school and that was all that mattered.

She surveyed the room with interest. The floor and walls were the color of bleached coral. The wood furnishings were pale blond. The sofa and armchairs were covered in a beige-on-beige, striped fabric. Beige looked good in brochures and magazines, she realized, but the “drained of color and life” look was just sad. Only paintings of emerald palm fronds, scarlet hibiscus flowers, and azure water, strikingly bright against the dull neutrals, gave the place any vitality. Perhaps the beige furnishings were designed as a backdrop for the paintings and scenery.

A full-length mirror on the wall marked where the dining room ended and the sitting room began in the open living space. She screwed up nose up at the mirror. How horridly old fashioned, she thought, like something from the Tudor period, with a thick, gold frame and engravings on all four sides that resembled eyes. Possibly of Egyptian origin. The mirror was ugly and out of place. But she was both repulsed and obsessed with it.

She tore her gaze away from the mirror and looked over the rest of the room. A galley kitchen gleamed with white counters and stainless steel appliances. A set of glass sliding doors led to an outside balcony, where young palms in cane planters framed the view of the distant ocean. A big screen TV, its surface blank, was fixed to the wall. These were the sort of things she’d have expected to find in a resort.

There were two things in the room as out of place as the ancient mirror. On the sofa sat a young girl who was sucking on the end of her black ponytail as though it contained hidden calories. And on an armchair next to her was a guy with a broody look on his face.

Jet guessed the girl was a year or so younger and the guy a year or two older. The girl was a chubbier, less stylized version of Jet herself. She’d have considered the girl pretty if the hairs on Jet’s nape hadn’t lifted in suspicion.

The guy carried the handsome, haunted look well even if his hands and face appeared as if they’d spent too long in the sun. His hair might have been strawberry blond, but his head was closely shaved with only stubble poking out of the top and from his chin. Wearing khaki pants, a grey shirt, and hiking boots, he

looked as if he'd be more at home in a desert or a jungle.

She guessed he was a soldier based on his ramrod posture.

"I'm Rachael," said the girl. "This is Ben."

Jet felt Rachael's eyes watching her intently. Jet stared back.

Rachael slipped her hands into her lap and curled them in a ball. "We weren't expecting you, but welcome."

While Rachael seemed surprised to see Jet, a flicker of the eyes was the only sign Ben gave that they were all on the same planet. When Jet followed the trail to where she thought his gaze was fixated on, she found his attention was fixed on the gold-framed mirror.

Was it supposed to be doing something?

Better he's zoned out than to think I've lost my charm, she thought.

"And you are..." Rachael asked.

"Impressed," said Jet. "What is this place?"

"It's a healing center."

Jet wondered if her father would have put her somewhere this flashy if he'd understood why she'd taken an overdose. More likely he'd have stashed her somewhere with tall towers, patrolling ogres and hair plaiting classes.

Rachael shot an odd look in Ben's direction, and Jet picked up on the glance, yet she couldn't tell if the young girl was seeking approval or hiding something. But Jet really didn't care either way, which surprised her. She usually enjoyed gossip and intrigue. Being the brunt of gossip and intrigue had kind of stripped the fascination for it out of her.

"It's nothing like I imagined," Jet said. She did a slow cruise of the room, touching things as she went. Cool, hard, shiny, soft. Everything was real, all right. Frowning, she added, "I also figured it would be a lot more crowded. Are we the only ones here?"

Rachael's gaze didn't lessen in its intensity. "The others are around somewhere."

“I’d better have my own room.”

Rachael shrugged her shoulders. “That would be the opposite of constructive. Sorry. You’ll have to share a room with me.”

She didn’t sound too thrilled about having a roommate and Jet realized the sentiment was mutual. At least at home, Jet had her own room, at the end of the hallway and far from her parents’. The privacy was the only thing she liked about her home life.

Jet slumped into the empty armchair opposite Ben; he was still staring at the mirror as if it would magically transform itself into a TV. He didn’t move, not even when she began waving her hands in front of her face.

“What’s the matter with him?” she asked Rachael.

Rachael’s face crumpled in what Jet took as defeat. “He’s usually more talkative. But we’ve just finished Group. I guess he’s tired.”

“Group?”

Instead of explaining, Rachael reached under the coffee table and pulled out a book the size of a personal diary, which she pushed across the table. “We’re supposed to write everything in this journal. Our thoughts, feelings, fears, our name—”

“Julliet Jones. Jet for short.”

“—so we can talk about what we’ve written.”

“That’s not a rule, is it? I mean, I don’t gotta hand this in at the end of the day?”

Rachael shook her head. “Nobody else has to read it. Unless you really want to—”

“I don’t really want to.”

“—and it would be wrong to snoop—”

“Totally.”

“—but you do have to bring something to the session for discussion.” Rachael tilted her head and lifted her gaze upwards as if she’d just remembered

something. “If you don’t mind, I’d like to lead the sessions. Ben is still uncomfortable talking about what happened so we have to watch what we say.”

“Can’t say I blame him for vagueing out,” Jet said. By this time, her mind had left the conversation entirely and she was scanning the room for the TV remote. “Talk is overrated.”

“Spoken like someone who has something to hide. Look, the fastest way out of this place is to heal the mind. And the best way to heal the mind is to be honest with it. And the best way to be honest with the mind is to talk openly, without opinion or judgment, about why we are here.”

Rachael’s last remark snagged Jet’s attention. “What’s with this ‘we’ business? I know why I’m here. Why are you here?”

Instead of answering, Rachael gave a self-satisfied smile. “I asked you first. What is it you believe you need to do to be well again?”

The girl’s smugness sat on Jet’s skin like a pesky mosquito. Anxious that things be set straight from the beginning, she looked Rachael square in the eye. “I don’t have to get well again because there’s nothing wrong with me. My father has recognized my cry for attention for what it is and has rewarded me with a vacation.”

“A what?” Rachael almost choked on a loud, snorting laugh. “Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer Disneyland? Now that’s a vacation.” She shook her head and took a deep breath. “Sorry. I don’t know what’s come over me. I’m usually not so—”

“Smug?”

“Irritable.”

Rachael pursed her lips and folded her hands in her lap, looking too stiff and formal, like a giant old-fashioned doll. Jet found it creepy.

“Denial slows the healing process,” Rachael said. She fixed sapphire eyes on Ben and lowered her voice. “I shouldn’t say this, but he acts as though nothing traumatic happened to make him erase six months from his mind.”

The hairs on Jet’s arms bristled at the way Rachael was talking about Ben like

he was invisible, which was generally considered rude and disrespectful. She was about to say something when a thought struck her.

“He’s not deaf, is he?”

Rachael shook her head. “No. He just can’t remember the war.”

“Can’t remember, or won’t talk? Make up your mind.”

Rachael’s lips tightened till they were a grim line on her face. “His memory is deeply repressed. Nothing seems to be working to loosen it.”

Ben still hadn’t acknowledged her, and Jet was becoming cranky. Here she was, sticking up for him while Rachael treated him like a second-class citizen, and he wouldn’t even make eye contact with her. Where were her parents so she could demand they place her in a treatment center with well-mannered patients? They should have been here. Surely they wouldn’t have waived their rights to lecture her to death.

Come to think of it, she told herself, where were the swarms of doctors and nurses hell-bent on extracting the essence of childhood out of them?

Jet gave her temple a few quick taps with her index finger, driving off the weird feeling that tickled her bones and returned to the conversation. “Maybe he’s brain dead. You know, took a piece of shrapnel to the head.”

She hoped this wasn’t the case. The longer she stared at him, the more she realized that he was even more gorgeous than at first glance. If his hair was to grow out a little and the sunburn was to fade from his face...A niggling feeling in her stomach told her this was neither the time nor the place to reflect on his physical attraction. But how could she look at a rainbow and not admire it?

“He’s not brain dead.”

Rachael folded her arms across her chest. Maybe she wanted to appear intimidating, but to Jet the girl came across as sulky. Jet’s anger softened, until a moment later the smug expression returned to Rachael’s face, and she said, “Let’s get back to my original question. What brings you here?”

Jet wanted to punch the girl in the face. If self-righteousness was an infectious

disease, then Jet vowed to get as far away from Rachael as possible. Maybe Jet wasn't perfect, maybe she had regrets and she'd made mistakes – the biggest mistake had landed her in this place – but she wasn't the type to shoot a reproachful stare at a stranger and expect them to be thankful for the judgment.

Jet stood and pointed at the book still sitting on the table. “Well, as I haven't written anything in my journal, I can't participate in Group, can I? So I'll go and see if this place has a pool.”

Chapter Two

To say that Rachael had been surprised to see Jet standing in the room was an understatement. At the sight of the young woman, panic had filled her. This place wasn't big on fanfares but a newcomer to the group seemed like something she should have known about.

“I wonder why she's here,” she whispered. She shook her head in amazement as Jet disappeared down the hallway in search of a pool as though this place was a resort. “Can you believe her? A pool.”

“Are you jealous?” Ben asked.

Rachael bit her lip. How much of the conversation had Ben heard? She realized she'd need to choose her words carefully from now on. Or stop thinking out loud.

“Of course not,” she said. “Why would you even suggest it? I just don't like change. It disrupts things.”

“Change is meant to be good. You know, a sign of progress.” Ben's smile suggested he was teasing her.

She rarely liked to be teased but it was almost worth it to see him smile.

“Change isn't about progress,” she said. “It's about keeping the wheels of

commercialism and capitalism turning so there's continual economic growth, which, by the way, is spinning humanity out of control. Change brings nothing but setbacks."

She shook her head while lifting her chin in stalwart resolution.

Ben rewarded her outburst with silence.

"Besides," she added sulkily, "we were doing fine, just the two of us."

His shrill laugh sent icicles through her veins. "Speak for yourself. I think even you have to admit I haven't been doing so well."

Her smile faltered. Negativity was more dangerous than change. Negativity was a force like a vortex with a habit of drawing anyone nearby into it.

I am an eternal source of optimism.

She lifted her cheeks into a huge smile, though using those muscles hurt so much. Before, when only the two of them mattered, it had been perfectly fine to walk around all day with a sour face.

"You need a change of perspective," she said. "Maybe we should watch DVDs and make comparisons with our lives against the struggles the heroes are facing."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Nah. And why are you talking like the *TV Guide*?"

She scowled, ignoring his attempts to change the subject. "We could watch *Saving Private Ryan*. Isn't that your favorite movie?"

"You know I have trouble remembering stuff like that."

"Full Metal Jacket?"

Ben shook his head.

"Starship Troopers? Predator? South Pacific?"

He shot her an exasperated look. "Rach. Watching a bunch of people get blown to bits seems to me the least likely way of unlocking repressed memories."

"It's just a thought." She paused, pursing her lips. "Ben, I want you to be happy. Please try it. Doctors say positive thinking is the most powerful method of healing of them all."

"Maybe the doctors you've seen," he mumbled under his breath.

She clenched her fists. Boy, she wanted to hit him on the head. With something heavy, too, heavy enough to crack open his skull and set his deepest memories free because his forgetfulness was becoming more and more frustrating with each new dawn. Especially when she was sure his memories were on the verge of spilling out like a flood. And he seemed to be the only thing holding back the flow.

“I just think she’s the type trouble follows,” Rachael said. “I’m entitled to my opinion, aren’t I?”

She unclenched her fists, the blood draining away until her fingers were bone white. Her vision glistened as her eyes filled with tears. She squeezed them shut to stem the flow. She knew why she was upset at this newcomer’s presence here; she just didn’t want to admit it to herself.

She was jealous.

Ben gave a gentle laugh. “You’re jealous.”

If only loving him didn’t hurt so much, then she wouldn’t have these crazy, and unfamiliar feelings running around insides her, causing her mind and her heart to question why each of them was here.

“I’m only watching out for you,” she whispered. “Is that a crime?”

She opened her eyes in time to see his face clouded as if shadowed. Why it clouded, she didn’t know. But it did.

“I don’t need you to look after me.” He stood and stormed over to the mirror, then put his forehead on the glass and closed his eyes. When she thought he was never going to speak to her again, he whirled and shook a clenched fist at her. “I don’t need you or anyone else to look after me.”

She didn’t flinch. Ben would never hurt her.

“You’re in a rotten mood today,” she muttered under her breath.

He could barely remember his name some days, and now he was declaring his independence.

She closed her eyes. *I am an ocean of wellness in mind, body, and spirit.*

“At least she’s pretty.”

Her back stiffened. Comfort had made her forget just how perceptive he could be. At least there was nothing wrong with that part of his brain. Still, his comment about Jet’s attractiveness hit a nerve. Already exhausted from Group, Rachael’s eyes again began to tear up.

Ben crossed the space between them in one stride. When he sat, he winked at her. “But not as pretty as you.”

“You’re a jerk.” She was laughing as she threw a cushion at his head. She never could stay mad at him.

Jet broadcasted her return to the room with a loud slam of the door. “What’s so funny? By the way, this place sucks.” She leaped into the armchair and swung her feet onto the coffee table. “I mean, there’s a pool on the roof but the gate is locked. Whose stupid idea was it to do that? What are we supposed to do till it opens?”

“Why would there be a pool on the roof?” Ben asked, curiosity crinkling his face.

“At last, Soldier Boy is awake. Good, because I’m starved. When do we eat around here?” Jet swiveled her neck as if searching for something, scowling when she couldn’t find what she wanted. “What is the time?”

“A hair past a freckle but the freckle’s catching up,” Ben said, grinning.

It was such a stupid, simple thing for Ben to say, something from his childhood, but Jet’s eyes lit and Rachael’s eyes tightened with worry. Reason told her the new girl was no threat, but the soft twinkle in Jet’s blue eyes that gripped at Rachael’s stomach told her otherwise. And now Ben had the same pathetic twinkle in his eyes.

“We’ll eat soon,” Rachael said. “And we get to eat whatever we want. Isn’t that right, Ben? We can have hamburgers, hot dogs, pizza.”

He shrugged. “Been a while since I had a good slice of pizza.”

“So what do we do till we eat?” Jet waved a finger at Rachael. “And don’t tell

me we sit around here talking about our feelings, because I'm not interested."

"Talking is pretty much all we do. It helps us to figure out how to get better."
Rachael bit her lip and wrung her hands together.

"Jesus, you never give up, do you? What a waste of time your psychobabble sessions are. Look at this place, it's amazing."

Ben sat up. "I wouldn't go that far. Anyway, what sort of things are you interested in?"

Jet leaned across the coffee table. She flicked black hair off her shoulders and tilted her head to the side. "I'm interested in all kinds of things. Like you. Are you here on vacation?"

Ben seemed to be drawn by her attraction. He leaned over the coffee table until his head was inches away from hers. As though an invisible shield surrounded the two of them, Rachael felt as if her body was being pushed by this invisible shield deep into the sofa.

Ben's eyes had a dreamy hue to them. His upper lip twitched as though attempting or hiding a smile. "My memory isn't so great. How about you tell me why I'm here?"

"Well, you're an American soldier, so I'm guessing your plane got shot down over the Pacific Ocean, you have amnesia, and now you're stuck until you can figure out how to get home."

"Now that you're here, maybe I don't wanna go home."

Rachael put her hands on her face. She wanted to scream and cry at the same time. She was right about Jet bringing trouble to the group. It had followed her in and had set something off inside Ben that was the biological equivalent of Superglue.

Chapter Three

Ben had lied when he'd said Jet was pretty. She was hot. And she had an awesome smile, the kind that could blindsides you. Maybe it was or wasn't love at first sight, but Jet's smile filled the hole in his heart and for a brief moment he didn't care that nothing could fill the deep well in his head.

Rachael didn't laugh the way Jet was laughing. Jet's joy seemed to erupt from deep within, and her eyes glowed like rare gemstones. Even sapphires weren't so vibrant. His mom had once told him that blue gemstones promoted peace. Was this why he could have listened to the soothing melody of Jet's voice forever?

Maybe he was besotted with her Australian accent. He'd met a few Aussies in the army. Always telling tall stories and coming across as jokers the way they dropped vowels off words to make fewer syllables. Those Aussies sure travelled around a lot, he thought with a chuckle. They were everywhere these days.

Still, he figured he must look like a schmuck, nodding his head and hanging onto her every word, but at least while she was chattering away, a clear space sat on the spot inside his head that was usually cluttered with the ashes of bad dreams.

His inner asylum didn't last long. Jet said something about hating to have her hair cut, and the little bug inside his head clocked on. It began tunneling down toward the cluttered part of his brain. There, it sifted through rubble and held up a memory of the time he'd enlisted in the army. He'd come home wearing a combat uniform and with all his hair shaved clean off. His mom had gotten so upset she'd run out of the house screaming. It had annoyed him at the time. Joining the army was the one thing he'd done for himself, and she'd carried on as if he'd eloped with his cousin.

The little bug scurried off again to sort through another pile of junk and this time it found a memory from a few months before he'd enlisted. On the fridge

was a yellow note with DINNER IN OVEN written on it. Like all of his mom's notes, it hadn't meant what was written on it. She'd once written OFF TO WORK NOW, forgetting that she hadn't worked at the motel for over a year. Still, he'd checked the oven to be sure, only instead of his dinner cooking in the oven, he'd found his sneakers simmering away, shrunk to half their size. At the time she'd blamed a head cold for muddling up her brain, and Ben had believed her because his mother never lied.

His bringing home a pretty girl would be something to occupy his mom's mind, he thought. She would be as fascinated with Jet as he was. She could get caught up in planning a wedding and christening and birthday parties. Even if nothing more than the planning kept her busy, at least it would be something.

Ben shifted his attention the way a car shifts gears—down, up, a little to the right, up or down again. He admired the way Jet was sitting on the armchair. It had nothing to do with the way the sleeve of her T-shirt slipped off her shoulder and exposed a trio of beauty marks. It had to do with the way she was blocking the images he saw in the mirror.

No, not quite images actually, but floaty things passing in and out of his vision, enough that he wondered if the mirror was haunted. Stupid really. He should take Rachael's advice and not look. But he'd become addicted to staring, and the more he told himself not to, the more he couldn't stop.

Rachael said residue from the spray cleaner made the glass appear milky. But that couldn't be right. His mom never used commercial cleaners. She was old-school, mixing vinegar with water. Her solution left the glass top of the dining table so clean...

Frowning, Ben stood up. Something was wrong with the layout of the room. His face drained of color as realization hit him with a sharp slap.

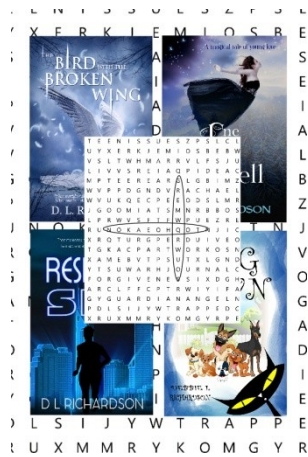
“Who moved the table?”

I hope you enjoyed this taste of "The Bird with The Broken Wing". It's easy to purchase the complete book to find out what happens to Rachael, Jet, and Ben.

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