

THEN SHE ROARS



VANESSA EVETTS

This is a three-chapter teaser.

Note: This novel is written in NZ English, which differs slightly from UK and US English.

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Chapter One

You want to be comfortable when surgeons are throwing poisonous words around like confetti.

Cancer. Mastectomy. Chemotherapy.

I wasn't. My glutes were as numb as my mind, seated in this old chair, which probably used to have padding before it was compressed to death by thousands of others while their lives were being torn down around them.

Death. There's another one. Terminal.

My teeth clenched as if trying to grind down the news to make it more palatable.

I always wondered what it would feel like sitting in a room like this. A stark, white, sterile room, void of colour, void of hope. What it would feel like hearing the words that so many before me had heard, seated in this very chair. I wondered how many of them had died.

I imagined tears, screaming, the scraping of chairs, threats of second opinions ... not this. Silence. I couldn't talk. I had no words. My mouth was sealed by shock, but my mind wouldn't cease firing grenades.

Survival rates. Treatment. Nausea.

I couldn't distinguish between the surgeon's words, the reality, the truth of my diagnosis and my own thoughts doused in panic and set alight.

They're wrong. The tests, the doctor. I definitely don't have cancer. I eat organic food, most of which I grow myself. I don't drink caffeine – much – or coke or alcohol. I've never smoked or

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done drugs. I run marathons, for God's sake! I literally torture myself, day in and day out, to be healthy and strong and whole.

My body is a temple ... my temple ... clean and pure.

Pure? Hmm. I guess it depends on who's judging.

I have sex ... good sex ... maybe that's it. Maybe God is smiting me down for all the sex, but surely he understands. I'm a 36-year-old husband-less woman who has needs.

No, God doesn't care about sex. Surely.

The surgeon was talking again. I pretended I was listening. No, I actually tried. "Bring a friend next week ..."

My monkey mind took over. *A friend.* Yes. I needed to find a friend. A friend with vodka. Maybe a smoking friend. I should try that ... smoking. I never have, but I have cancer ... my body's already dying. Hell, scrub that. I should find a friend with a joint. A smoking-hot friend with a joint.

The surgeon's voice broke through again. "Chemo ... getting time off work ... nausea. Six cycles, every three weeks, all going well."

All going well? I think the horse has bolted there. That's why we're both here, isn't it? Because it's not going well.

"BRCA gene ... surgery ... TRAM flap ... implants ... decision."

I didn't like those words. I replaced them. *Orgasm. Sex. High. Chocolate. Paris.* That felt better. I wondered if I could get the surgeon to say those instead.

"Can I still have sex?"

He was in the middle of saying something serious. "Sex?"

Tick. "Yes ... sex," I repeated slowly. *Do I need to spell it out?* "It's important to me."

"Well ..." He paused to study me. "In my medical opinion, I'd encourage as much sex as you can for as long as you feel able and willing."

"Are you able and willing?" The words snuck out of my mouth before I could filter them, my monkey mind switching it up a level. I smiled sweetly, committing to the crazy.

He coughed, covering his mouth. He was in his late forties, maybe early fifties at a push. Mature looking and yet, there was

an edge about him. I could sense it.

I scanned his body with imaginary X-ray vision. I concluded he had tattoos underneath his perfectly tailored suit. Big ones wrapping around his secretly ripped torso.

Another cough drew my attention. "With my wife ... yes."

I read apology in his eyes and maybe a hint of— "You want one?"

"What?"

"A wife ..." I leant back to give him a good view of my attributes.

He laughed – kind of. It was more like the laugh burst from his mouth without invitation. He was nervous. I was making him sweat, tempted even. He raised his hand and tapped the white gold ring on his wedding finger. "You're a few decades too late, I'm afraid."

I nodded dismissively. "Pity."

His cheeks blushed and he changed the subject. The colour looked good on him. When he started using words I didn't like, I shifted uncomfortably.

"You need to get better chairs in here. You can't tell people they might be dying when their butts hurt. It's not cool."

"Fair point." He rested his elbows on his knees.

"Do you have any tattoos?" I asked.

"Yes." He turned back to his desk to gather up the paperwork I had to take home to read.

"Will you show me?"

"No."

"No? Oh well, that's a shame. I think I'm done here." I stood with purpose, picked up my handbag and walked towards the door.

"Avery," he called from behind me.

Are we using first names now? "Yes, John," I replied. "Have you changed your mind?"

He laughed and shook his head. It was pity now, wrapped in kindness. He closed the gap between us and handed me the paperwork. "Have you got someone—"

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“To have sex with?” I finished his sentence, committed to the charade.

“If that’s what you need, but I mean a friend or family member who can support you.”

“Oh. Yes.” I nodded. One smoking-hot friend with vodka and a joint coming right up.

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I clung to the charade until I reached my car and slammed my palms against the driver's side door, the molten heat of anger melting the mask I'd worn during the meeting. I buried my face in my arms as rage streamed out of me in a torrential downpour of tears and profanity.

After the fire that killed my parents, I'd made a pact that I'd never allow myself to be here again in this place where anger reigned ... where my whys were loudly voiced and never answered. I'm not sure why I kept crying out to a god that never hears. But I did, screaming into the darkness that wraps its ugly hands around me and squeezes in the loneliest part of the night.

"Take someone else," I pleaded as I slid into my car and locked myself inside.

Who? Who would you have take your place? A child, an uncle, a grandmother? Your brother?

No.

I slammed my fists into the steering wheel, protesting my own mind's devil's advocate. *Damn it!*

"A violent criminal. A rapist or a killer, someone who beats their wife and children. Take them instead of me. Surely their lives are not worth as much as mine. I help people; I save lives. They ruin them!" My own humanity, my own conscience, was screaming to be heard above the accusation in my thoughts, but

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I had no way to hear.

I laid the challenge down at the feet of the god of my parents. The god I still resented for letting them die.

I'd do it if I was you.

I would. I could easily trade an innocent person's terminal diagnosis or tragedy for theirs. Why not? Give me one good reason why you wouldn't do it if you had the power. You'd be doing the world a favour.

Go on, God. Please.

Silence.

Yeah. I didn't think so. I couldn't be disappointed. Not really. How could I be when I had no real expectation of a saviour? No belief that I had a right to a miracle or that they even existed?

This death sentence was mine and mine alone. No serial killer was going to drop dead in the street and take my place.



I drove home on autopilot, then collapsed onto my bed, abandoned by my own strength and will to fight. I closed my eyes and let the hopelessness take me, drawing me into its deep caverns.

I felt his presence before my eyes saw him dancing around the flame, bones rattling at his feet. He was here for me, to destroy this beautiful life I'd built. I watched in horror as he raised his fearsome face and laughed. He was the ultimate killer, giddy with my lifeblood.

I needed to turn away, to run, to find my way out of this nightmare, but I was mesmerized by the evil in his eyes, by the flexing of his muscles, by the way he revelled in his power.

I didn't notice his advance until his filthy claws raked down my perfectly made flesh, branding my skin with his mark, staking his claim. A toe-curling screech filled the cavern. My own voice raging in agony. *Run! Get out!*

I shoved him, spun around and ran back through the darkened tunnels. I couldn't let him have me. I pressed my palms to my ears to silence the thundering footfalls behind me and the

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gnashing of his teeth ringing in my ears.

Light pressed against the darkness and I startled awake, gasping for air. My sweat-soaked sheets had me trapped in their twisted limbs. I kicked them off in a panic. The first tears came hard and fast as I escaped the nightmare's clutches and retreated to the bathroom.

I grasped the vanity to steady myself, then lifted my face to study the woman in the mirror. "It's okay. You don't have cancer."

It was just a dream. It was all just a dream.

I watched as she mouthed it back and decided to believe her.



Two hours later, I strode into the lobby of my office building, my thermal cup warming my hands, and I knew. I'd seen the hospital papers strewn over the bench this morning, and I could feel him in the air around me, waiting to feed.

I glanced around, watching people file past, purposed, busy, oblivious. I shook off the cold shiver that ran up my spine as I entered the vacant elevator and narrowed my eyes. "Back off, you bastard!"

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The countdown had begun. It was exactly seventeen-and-a-half hours until I got hooked up to a bag of poison.

I was torn. My appointment was booked, and yet I wasn't convinced I'd turn up. There's plenty of research out there that claims chemo is the reason you die ... that people who have alternative treatment survive longer and have a lower rate of recurrence, but really? It could be a heap of hoo-ha, disproven in a few years with a pointless apology to the dead. *Oh sorry, you should've had the chemo – our bad.*

Or maybe they're right. What if they're right? What if the poison is what kills me? What if I make the wrong call and it costs me my life?

The surgeon gave me a speech about the title 'cancer' covering a multitude of diseases, that every case is different, that what works for one doesn't work for another. When I pressed him for less invasive options, he told me chemo was my only chance of survival.

Yes, filling my body with poison every three weeks for months, then hacking off body parts, was the only way I could stay alive.

Was that the life I wanted? Was it worth spending months or years sick and miserable? Was it worth feeling like half a woman?

For what? A life with no guarantees?

I didn't know.

Should I be fighting to win a few more months of the life I love – to live it how I love it? Or should I let them fight for me – maybe slow the spread, maybe reduce the tumour, maybe give a miracle a chance to occur?

Maybe they're wrong. *They're not.*

I wondered how long I could live ignoring the beast inside me. I felt fine right now.

Should I just ... live? Enjoy whatever life I have left? Could I, knowing what I know?

"Your 10am is here, Dr Bishop."

My receptionist and best friend's presence at my door snapped me out of my ruminations. "Thanks Sally. Give me five, then send her in."

Focus.

I wasn't the patient here. I was the one who was meant to have all the answers, but today, all I had was questions.

I emptied my glass of water, refilled it from the jug on my side table, then walked towards the door to welcome the young mother.

She'd brought her baby. Ralph.

Who names a baby Ralph? Wreck it, Ralph ... ha, strangely appropriate under the circumstances. That's inappropriate. I shook off the thought. He's just a little baby.

He cooed in his capsule. I traced my fingers along his alabaster skin. I couldn't help myself.

"He's so beautiful, Georgia."

"Yeah." She glanced down when she thought I wasn't looking, her expression blank, then lowered the capsule to the floor and sat with a heaviness I recognised. I followed her lead.

"I don't feel it."

"What?"

"Anything. I don't feel anything. I'm a terrible mother."

I wanted babies ... two – maybe three? I would have been a wonderful mother – I just know it. But I had a hostile womb ...

imagine that? A murderous womb that slaughtered anything in sight, and now my boobs were out to get me. I should've been a man. *Focus.*

“I thought I'd be amazing. I'm a teacher; I love kids.”

I nodded but remained silent.

“I've wanted a child for so long. I prayed for him ... what's wrong with me?”

My throat swelled with emotion.

Come on, Avery, you're the doctor. Be professional.

I took a quick sip of water to flush the crazy out and handed Georgia a full glass.

“There's nothing wrong with you, Georgia. We've talked about this.”

“I don't get it, Dr Bishop. How can I not love him? He's lovely.” The young mother glanced at her newborn son. “I can see it – I just can't feel it.”

I studied her tears. When she brushed them away and looked at me, I offered a gentle smile. “Give it time, Georgia.”

“He's already nine weeks old. Nine weeks. What kind of mother doesn't want to hold her baby? All the other mums can't get enough, can't relinquish the sight of them or the weight of their babies in their arms. It's all they can talk about but ... I ... I don't get it. I want to love him; he deserves a mother who loves him.”

“Georgia, I know you feel alone – like you're the only mother who's ever felt like this. I promise you're not. Many mothers struggle with postnatal depression. It's more common than you think.”

My words fell on deaf ears. She turned towards the window.

Damn it, girl! How many times do we need to go over this? Take the damn drugs!

I observed her before I allowed words to form on my lips – making sure the ugly, judgmental thoughts remained safely under lock and key. “Georgia, I really think it's time to see your GP.”

“No.”

“Listen.” I leant in. “Ultimately, it’s your choice, and no one can force you to do anything you don’t feel comfortable with, but you need to know, postnatal depression is curable and temporary. I don’t believe battling through this on your own is in your best interest or Ralph’s. Will you think about it?”

“I shouldn’t need drugs to love my baby.”

“Loving your baby isn’t the problem, Georgia. I know it feels like it is, but having postnatal depression is not a failure on your part as a mother. It’s a mental illness, a common one, and it has a medical response. There’s been a disconnect somewhere in your brain, and you need help to hit reset. Medication may help you do that, or your GP may have some other ideas.”

Georgia shook her head refusing to accept it wasn’t her fault.

Why was she being so stubborn about this? “How’s home life?”

“Fine.”

“Is Michael helping out?”

“When he’s home, but that’s hardly ever. He’s taken extra shifts – can you believe it?”

“Did he say why?”

“He said it was because we needed the money now we’re down to one income, but that’s not it. He’s just had enough.”

“Enough of what?” I ask, but ... I got why he wouldn’t want to hang around.

“Me. He’s sick of me handing him the baby and disappearing. He’s sick of having to get up at night to give him a bottle after working all day because I refuse to breastfeed or cuddle my own son. He’s sick of my moods, the tears and the mess. He hates that I won’t look at him.” She glanced down at Ralph, then rung her hands out on her lap. “I just can’t ...”

Oh, Georgia. “He doesn’t understand. Have you spoken to him about how you’re feeling?”

Georgia shook her head and started rocking the capsule with her foot when Ralph stirred. “He thinks I’m not trying. He told me to stop being so selfish and get over it, that it wasn’t about me anymore.”

“Why don’t you ask him to come with you next time?”

“He wouldn’t come,” Georgia said despondently.

I looked up at the clock above the door. I had one more chance. “Georgia, to get better, you need support. You need Michael on your team. And there’s no way he’s going to get it if you don’t talk to him.”

“I’ll try.”

I nodded. That was progress, at least.

Time was up.

When Ralph let out a squawk, I told her she was welcome to feed him in the waiting room, but she shook her head. “He can wait.”

I watched them leave, two separate lives moving in the same direction, and hoped something would shift to bind them together before it was too late.

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