

BEAUTIFUL FRAGMENTS



VANESSA EVETTS

This is a four-chapter teaser.

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

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Chapter One

Sophie's narrowed eyes burned with hate as a familiar face worked the crowd. If she had thought to bring a knife, she would have plunged it into him over and over again, right here on the dance floor, and laughed as he bled out. No one would have stopped her. Taking that beast down would be an act of heroism.

She watched as he darkened the space between them, fantasising what it would feel like to smear his blood on her face, like a Native American in the movies, then dance around naked, singing to the gods. The corners of her mouth twitched at the thought. But there was no knife, and her treacherous hands lay at her sides, utterly useless.

The sharp sound of glass shattering at her feet broke the spell and launched her further into the crowd. When a sticky, wet sensation spread across her back, Sophie spun around to glare at the young waitress spurting off an apology. She silenced her with a dismissive gesture and turned back to the mass of bodies surrendering themselves to the perversion of night.

This was the place it all began. Her torment. Her nightmare. Her death.

Air rushed her bare legs as drunken patrons spun around her, battling to stay upright. She joined their communal trance, her body launching itself backwards and forwards of its own free will, as the drum bass vibrated through the soles of her feet.

Sophie stood alone in the middle of the crowded dance floor, swaying as if possessed, her eyes squeezed closed. Flashing lights decorated the darkened room and pulsed through the thin barrier of her eyelids.

For the first time in what felt like forever, she was free. Right now, she wasn't an object to be used, she wasn't begging for anything or being beaten into submission. There were no horny patrons shaking their money in her face or yelling at her to take her clothes off. No perverted old men groping her with their ugly,

calloused fingers. No sweaty hands over her mouth to keep her silent while they claimed what they thought was theirs. No one was calling her 'whore' or spitting at her feet for committing the sin of trying to survive. And no one was telling her that her young daughter, who was sleeping at home alone, would have been better off if she'd never existed.

They didn't have that power right now. Not even her guilt, or words of hate and self-loathing, could pierce the haze tonight. The music had claimed her as its own.

Sophie plucked two shots off a tray as a waiter brushed past her. She ignored his protests, downed them in rapid succession, raised the glasses high in the air then watched as they fell to their fate on the polished-concrete dance floor.

Stepping over the shards and back into the music, Sophie allowed the tequila to infiltrate her wounded soul.

She had entered the club tonight ready to end it. Her life had become something she was being dragged through, kicking and screaming. There was nothing left. She was like a wraith, empty and void of life. She'd lost count of the number of times she'd been beaten or raped, and the drugs no longer quenched her thirst for salvation. All hope of escape was gone. He'd made sure of that.

This was the final act ... her end, and she had come to peace with it. Earlier tonight, she'd taken to the street to murder the last remaining pieces of her soul, and she had. One john, one pill, one drink at a time. Society's foul needs were never sated.

Sophie's body shivered involuntarily as a cold wind swirled around her, a foreign presence in the sweltering club. She'd known why before she opened her eyes. Trent had seen her.

There was no escape, even if she'd wanted to, which she didn't. Tonight was the night. What could he do to her that hadn't already been done? There was no other way she could be broken.

How did it come to this? She heard the whisper of her heart, the desperation calling out from the trenches as she watched her enemy advance.

Her foster mother's words echoed around her.

You made your bed, now go lie in it.

Her body convulsed with fright when she remembered the sound of the door slamming in her face. She'd just discovered she was four months pregnant with Lacie, and then she was homeless. Even that woman, who called herself a mother, had never once reached out to see if Sophie was safe. She would be horrified to know how true those words had been and how many beds she'd had to lie in.

Sophie shuddered when Trent's hand slipped up under her skirt. "Save some for me, sexy."

He owned her. His fists had proved it over and over and over again. She had no other choice.

Sophie felt his hand on hers briefly and the deposit of something in her palm.

"Enjoy," he breathed against her mouth, his putrid breath invoking a visceral response.

Bastard, you'll never touch me again.

Sophie clenched her fists and watched as he turned towards the bar, then opened her palm and studied the little white pill.

No. There's another way. What about Lacie? There was an urgency in the whisper this time, a sliver of hope begging to be heard, but the little pill spoke to her too. It would help her forget. It would take away the burden of her broken life.

This was her only escape, the only way to save her daughter, because the only thing she knew to be true was that Lacie was better off without her.

Drop it. Run!

She silenced the desperate plea screaming from within as her hand moved to her mouth.



"Somebody help me! She just collapsed."

Sophie ignored the panicked voices ringing out around her, trying to enjoy her final release, this freedom she'd paid for with her life. She watched as the darkness rolled in, absorbing the haze, drowning out the music still ringing in her ears. Then came pain ... groping at her, reminding her how worthless she'd

become. *No. I don't want to remember, just let me die in peace. I need peace.*

"Help me! Call 111!"

"No police! Get that tramp the hell out of my club!" His voice boomed out from somewhere far away, and yet its vehemence snapped at her heels.

"Emma!"

Sharp nails dug into her arms, dragging her off the floor. Sophie fought against the forceful grasp until her very strength abandoned her. She released a heavy breath and stepped out of his clutches once and for all. It was over.



"Emma ... wake up!"

The screeching voice tore through her eardrums. *Shut up!*

Someone took hold of Sophie's shoulders and shook. *No! Stop touching me!*

"Emma, it's me, Sam. Please wake up."

"Give her some space, Sam." A calm voice rang out above her and the shaking stopped. "She'll wake up when she's ready."

Sophie clenched her teeth when she heard the familiar sound. Superiority, dislike, judgement. Most people tried to hide it. This woman had it in spades.

Sophie's mind was a blur. Images and conversations flashed on the darkened screen of her eyelids, but she couldn't seem to make sense of anything.

"Emma, I found Lacie at the neighbours. She's safe, so you focus on getting better, okay."

Lacie.

That one word changed everything. The hazy veil of oblivion was torn to shreds as memories from the club and every night before that came rushing back like a live link.

What have I done?

Sophie tried to breathe, but there was something in the way. Her eyes sprang open as her hands grabbed at her throat.

I don't want to die. A debilitating fear took hold as painful realisation dawned. *Oh God, Lacie! My baby.*

Her desperate eyes narrowed in on the nurse. *Help me.*

"Calm down, Emma, let me do that. Cough for me, that's it." The nurse pulled Sophie's shaking hands away from the tubes.

Sophie gagged as they withdrew from her throat and nose. "Water."

"Slowly, Emma," the nurse said, holding a straw to her lips. "Just take small sips or you'll be sick. Your poor body has been through quite enough already."

There was that sound again. The angry, broken child in her wanted to scull the whole cup, to say, 'up yours, lady', but the woman in pain obeyed. Sophie couldn't stop the tears coursing down her cheeks. Her eyes stung with the effort. She glanced up at the nurse intending to say thank you, but she couldn't. Not when she knew that judgement lurked behind the woman's kindness.

"Glad to have you back with us, Emma. You gave us quite a scare."

Stop calling me that. She bit down on her protest and nodded.

"You have a loyal friend here. She hasn't left your side."

Sophie turned towards Sam. There was no mistaking it. She reeked of her brokenness. Nothing could have been clearer. Sam was everything Sophie hated about herself. An addict. A prostitute. A drain on resources. Her lifestyle was written all over her gaunt face. If her pale skin, bold makeup and empty eyes weren't enough of a clue, her clothes completed the perfectly crafted masterpiece of her misery.

Sophie's heart sank; she looked at Sam as she would her own reflection, with disgust. Shame painted itself on her face.

"Why Sam, why?" she pleaded, clamping her fingers around her friend's wrist. "How could you?"

Sam placed her hand over Sophie's and squeezed, fresh tears streaming down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, I couldn't let you die. I just couldn't."

“How could you?” Her lips quivered with whispered accusation.

“I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.”

Sophie shook off Sam's hand and turned away, closing herself off from the world to grieve the death she so desperately needed.

2

TWO WEEKS LATER

“I’ve come for Lacie,” Sophie announced when the stranger opened the door.

“She’s asleep. Why don’t you come in?”

“No. I want my daughter now,” she answered, not willing to engage with this woman who seemed to think she had some claim on her child.

“As I said, Lacie is asleep. She’s had an emotional few weeks and needs her rest.”

“How dare you? She’s mine!” Sophie spat.

The woman exhaled through pursed lips as if to blow away Sophie’s accusation, then her expression softened. “Sophie, your daughter hasn’t seen you in two weeks. Do you think ripping her out of her bed in the middle of the night would be the best plan?”

Sophie opened her mouth to argue but recognised the immovable position in the woman’s eyes and realised this was one battle of wills she wouldn’t win. She exhaled a reluctant surrender.

“Come in. It looks like you’ve had a rough ride too. I’ll make you a cuppa.”

Sophie hesitated at the door as if an invisible barrier was denying her entry.

“Come on, Sophie. Come in from the cold.”

Sophie bit down on her anger that this stranger had presumed authority over her and stepped through the doorway into her home. What else could she do – push past her with force and kidnap her own daughter?

“I’m Joy.” The woman motioned into the lounge. “Take a seat. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Sophie entered the warm room and curled herself onto Joy's couch. She tucked her knees up under her chin and squeezed her arms around them, her anger, her hate, her exhaustion and pain twisting together into one tight ball of despair and confusion.

What the hell am I going to do now?

Lacie might be happy here. Safe. It had been two weeks, she'd be used to not having her mother around by now. Let's face it, she'd been pretty used to that already.

She'd be better off if you just left and never came back.

There was no coming back from this, despite what the doctors and counsellors had said. Her life was in tatters and she didn't know how to fix it.

Sophie unfolded herself and stood, determined to walk out of her daughter's life forever; to do the right thing for the first time in her miserable life. But before she made it to the door, Joy walked into the room, placed a steaming cup of tea in front of her and sat down.

"Sit down, Sophie. Drink your tea while it's hot."

She clenched her teeth and sat down obediently.

Part of her hated the woman for interfering and taking her daughter from her. The other part knew she should thank her, but the words wouldn't come.

You're bloody useless. You can't even say thank you.

"I haven't called the authorities."

Sophie tensed. "I haven't done anything illegal!"

"So, leaving your six-year-old daughter home alone all night is legal, is it?"

The sharp words and her own guilt coloured Sophie's cheeks red.

"I don't plan on calling them, but there will be some guidelines," Joy continued.

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

"I'll tell you ... shall I? I'm the one who found your child screaming your name in the early hours of the morning ... I'm the one who stayed with her all day waiting for your return ... I'm the one who fed her, clothed her and made sure she had a safe place

to sleep ... the one who held her in my arms as she cried out for her mumma every night for the last two weeks. And yes, I'm the one who *didn't* call the police or child protection services to report you." Joy paused. "Do I need to continue?"

"No." Sophie didn't need to hear what a terrible mother Lacie had. She'd heard it every day since her daughter's birth. Her own conscience screamed it at her every time she left the house, every time she allowed a man to touch her, every time she placed a pill on her tongue or a needle in her vein. She knew.

She rubbed her arm as if the action could erase the memory of her depravity. It wasn't enough. She needed a shower, she needed to scrub her skin until she was raw and bleeding.

"Lacie loves you," Joy said. "And Sophie, despite how you feel about yourself, that alone is worth fighting for."

"She'd be better off."

"Maybe ..."

Even though Joy's words echoed her own, the truth of them hit their mark, and the pain was immense.

"... but you wouldn't be ..."

Sophie felt the warm touch of tears and bit the inside of her cheek. The thought of living her life without Lacie – the only part of herself she liked – split her heart wide open. Joy was right. Sophie knew that without Lacie to anchor her she would be dead.

"I don't know how," she murmured under her breath.

"I do. Let me show you." Joy placed her cup on the table. "It's never too late to change your life, Sophie. Not while you still have breath. I can help you if you'll let me."

"I don't know."

"What don't you know?"

"I don't know you. I'm better on my own."

"Is that right? How has that been working out for you so far?"

Sophie narrowed her eyes at the infuriating woman, clamped down on her venomous response and focused on the art of breathing, as the counsellor had shown her.

"I'll think about it."

"Okay, but while you do, Lacie stays here."

“What the hell? You can’t do that.”

“I didn’t report you, Sophie. But knowing what I do, it’s now my responsibility to ensure she’s safe. Until I know that, she’ll not be returning to your home.”

“You can’t take my daughter away from me. She’s all I have.”

“I know. I’m not taking her from you. I’m making sure she grows up with a mother. I will not stand by and watch you kill yourself in front of her. That’s something your child would never recover from.”

“Why the hell do you care?”

“I care for Lacie and, believe it or not; I care about you.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know more than you think.”

Sophie inhaled an angry breath, ready for a fight, but something in Joy’s expression gave her pause.

As if claiming her victory, Joy stood and moved towards the doorway, then turned back to face her. “I’d like you to stay here, to be with Lacie. I’ve made up the spare bed in her room. The second door on the right. It’s your choice. Believe it or not, you do have one.”

Sophie was stunned. “What could you possibly have to gain from this?” Her words brimmed with blatant accusation.

Joy pressed her open palm to her side and exhaled a long breath before answering. “I know Lacie would love to wake up beside her mumma in the morning.”

Sophie’s fingers tightened around the warm mug as Joy disappeared from view.

Run, leave Lacie here, she’d be better off. She’d forget about you in time. No... take Lacie with you ... run ... No ... stay.

For the next hour an internal battle raged, the flickering flames in the old brick fireplace her only companion in the silent night. She hungered for peace, for direction, for hope, but all three were drowned out by the violent and accusatory barrage of her thoughts.

You will never be enough for that little girl. You will only bring her pain and suffering. She’d be better off without you.

Sophie stood, walked towards the hallway and braced herself on the door frame, tears streaming. She glanced at the front door.

Do the right thing. Leave her in peace.

She turned and focused her attention on the bedrooms as Joy's words infiltrated the darkness.

Lacie loves you ... I'm trying to make sure she grows up with a mother ... You have a choice ... It's never too late to change your life.

Sophie closed her eyes and breathed in the promise. She should walk away, that was the right choice for Lacie. She stepped out of the lounge, vacillating between her two options, neither one bringing her the peace she craved.

I'm the one who held her in my arms as she cried out for her mumma every night for the last two weeks.

Sophie swallowed the rumbling threat of the emotional storm brewing inside her. She couldn't lose control, not here.

She brushed fresh tears from her face and turned towards the bedroom. She couldn't do it. She couldn't abandon her. She couldn't allow Lacie to grow up thinking she wasn't enough, that she wasn't loved, that her own mother didn't want her.

Sophie knew she wasn't what her little girl needed, but she was all she had, and she couldn't cause her baby any more pain.

When she caught sight of Lacie sleeping soundly, the breath caught in her throat. *I'm sorry, baby.* She closed the bedroom door and took a step closer.

Your daughter has had an emotional few weeks and needs to rest.

Remembering the warning, she retreated, removed her clothes and slipped into bed. Once she was comfortable, she glanced around the room for the first time and saw a framed poem above Lacie's bed.

As her eyes travelled across each line, the words weaved themselves through her thoughts. She lay there awake, watching the gentle rising and falling of her baby's chest and hearing those words playing over and over in her head.

I used to be afraid of the dark. Used to.

3

Sophie woke from a fitful night's sleep to a joy-filled sound.

"Mumma!" Lacie's enthusiastic welcome reached deep into her soul and filled it to the brim. "You're home!"

Home.

Sophie lifted the bedcovers as Lacie leapt into her embrace. She buried her face in her daughter's hair and inhaled the familiar scent.

"I missed you." Lacie's warm breath whispered against her skin.

"I missed you too, baby. I'm sorry I was gone so long."

Lacie studied Sophie's expression. "Are you better now?"

Sophie squeezed her daughter to her chest and kissed the top of her head, relishing the feeling of her in her arms. How could she have even considered leaving her? "I will be now I'm back home with you."

A contented sigh filled the space between them.

"Did you have fun with Joy?"

"Yes, she's real nice. We went to the park and she took me to her church. It was fun. Why don't we go to church?"

Sophie's brow jerked. "I went a few times when I was little, but I didn't like it."

She probably shouldn't tell her six-year-old what she really thought about church. A hive of hypocrites. People who privately do all the things they condemn and judge others for, then, from their pulpits, tell everyone else they're going to hell. People who preach love then close their senses off to the stench of hopelessness and need in the world around them.

Lacie's quiet voice broke through her silent protests. "Why didn't you like it? It was fun. We sang songs and played games; I even got a treat for being new."

“That’s good, Lace, I’m glad you had fun. Church wasn’t like that for me.”

“Maybe Miss Joy will take us again. You might like this one.”

“Maybe.” *I seriously doubt that.*

Sophie heard a quiet knock on the door and was thankful for the interruption.

“Good morning, sleepyheads.” Joy pushed the door open to reveal a breakfast tray of food which she placed on the foot of the bed. There was juice for Lacie and steaming hot tea for Sophie, as well as two bowls of porridge complete with brown sugar.

Sophie’s stomach growled. “Thank you.” The word felt foreign on her lips as she reached for a bowl with gusto.

“You’re welcome,” Joy said. “I was going to cook a big breakfast for us all, but I thought you’d prefer something gentler on the stomach.”

Sophie received the message loud and clear. *I know more than you think.*

“Good morning, Miss Joy,” Lacie said, interrupting the uncomfortable silence. “I was telling Mumma about church.”

“Were you just?”

Sophie tried to ignore the rising nausea, focusing her eyes on the porridge in an attempt to avoid eye contact with Joy. The last thing she needed right now was someone else telling her she needed to repent and be saved.

“All right, ladies ...” Joy said after Lacie had finished her download. “I’ve got some errands to run this morning. I thought you might like to head home and collect a few things if you’re going to be staying here.”

Sophie tensed, remembering their conversation the night before. She raised her eyes to Joy’s and gave a curt nod, before Joy retreated, leaving her alone with Lacie. She and the monstrous pit of nerves that erupted in her abdomen. If only it were that easy.

“Are we really going to stay here, Mumma? Oh, that would be so fun!”

Sophie lowered her bowl to the tray and turned to face Lacie. "Would you like that?"

"Yes please, Mumma. I like Miss Joy."

Sophie knew Trent would come looking for her. She hadn't paid off her debt; it was unlikely she ever could. It was like that by design. The drugs kept them subservient, indebted and aware of the impossibility of another life. The most she'd have was a few days, maybe a week, before they found her. Staying here would ensure Lacie wouldn't be left alone again.

"So, can we stay?" Lacie bounced onto her knees.

Sophie reached out to steady the tray. "Careful, Lace."

"Well?"

I can help you if you let me. It's never too late ...

Sophie squeezed Lacie's hands in hers. "Let's do it."



Sophie's phone vibrated against her leg. She ignored it, pulling an overnight bag out of the top of her wardrobe. "Lace, pack your favourite clothes, a few books and your snuggly. I'll come and help you in a minute."

Leave me alone.

It had been ringing all morning. She made the mistake of picking it up the first time, and now the words were replaying in her head.

"He wants to see you, Emma."

"I don't care what he wants."

"Please tell me you're kidding. You know you can't just leave." Sam's voice was strained as if she were trying to be discreet.

"I'm not going back. I'm done, I'm out."

"They'll find you; they'll find her; you know they will."

"No, they won't. Stop calling me."

Sophie hung up and switched the phone to vibrate. Sam was insistent. She frantically rummaged through her drawers and threw a random collection of clothes into her bag. She flipped her

mattress over, reached inside and retrieved a wad of cash she'd been storing for this exact moment. She was on her way to the freezer to collect the only thing that gave her any leverage when her phone vibrated again. This time, she obeyed the voice screaming in her head.

Answer it.

"Damn it, Sam, I said stop calling me!" she barked down the line.

"Emma, I'm so sorry! They know ... they know everything. I'm so sorry." Sam slurred.

Oh my God.

Guilt reared its ugly head, but there was nothing Sophie could do to help her friend. It was too late. All she could do was heed her warning.

"Get out, Emma! They'll kill you. They know about the books. Run!"

An aggressive threat echoed down the line before Sam screamed and the line went dead.

"Oh my God!" Sophie dropped the phone, picked up her backpack and ran to Lacie's room. "We need to go right now!" Terror echoed in her voice as she shoved Lacie's collected items into her bag.

Lacie stood frozen. There was no time to tread gently.

"Snap out of it. We need to go now!" Sophie grabbed her daughter's arm and ran out the back door.

"Mumma, you're hurting me." Tears trailed down Lacie's paled face.

"I know. I'm sorry baby, just keep running. We're going to miss the bus."

"What bus? I thought we were staying with Miss Joy."

"The plan changed. We'll call Joy later."

"No! My legs are tired. I want to go to see Miss Joy."

"Damn it, Lace, listen to me. We can't right now."

"No!" Lacie ripped her arm from Sophie's firm grip.

Sophie glanced up and down the street, fear raging. They were coming, right now. She knew they'd kill her after what she'd done, and Lacie ... she didn't put that past Trent either.

"Baby, I'm sorry. We can't stay here; it's not safe."

Lacie stomped her foot and screamed. "I want to go back to Miss Joy's!"

"All right, Lacie," Sophie said, trying to hide the edge in her voice and give herself a second to be a mother and not a woman fearing for their lives. She kneeled and cupped her daughter's wet cheeks in her hands. "But first we need to catch the bus."

"No, you're lying!" Lacie dropped her backpack and ran back towards the house.

"No! Lacie, stop!" Sophie caught her in a few strides and threw her small frame over her shoulder. Once she'd gathered their bags off the sidewalk, she started running.

Lacie's fists pounded her back. "Put me down!"

"Stop, Lacie. Please. We just need to get to the bus, then I'll put you down. I promise."

"I don't want to go with you."

"I'm sorry." Sophie's face contorted with emotion as she listened to her daughter's heartbroken pleas. *What have I done?*

By the time she reached the bus stop, Lacie had exhausted herself and stopped the violent assault on her back and eardrums. Sophie approached an elderly woman waiting on the bench. "Excuse me, what time is the next bus?"

The lady studied her face and the little body she held over her shoulder. "In about five minutes."

"Thank you." Sophie walked around the back of the bus stop and lowered Lacie to the ground.

"I don't want to go."

"I know, Lacie. I don't want to go either, but we don't have a choice." Sophie exhaled and glanced around before returning her attention to her daughter. "Can I let you go? Will you stay with me?"

Lacie nodded.

"Thank you, baby. I'm real tired."

“I’m sorry for hitting you.”

“You don’t need to be sorry; I hurt you. I didn’t mean to. I was just scared. Will you forgive me?”

Lacie paused as if considering her response, then nodded. “Why are you scared? Why do we have to leave?”

Sophie felt sick. She couldn't tell Lacie everything, but she had to do something to earn her trust back. Her flaming lungs and the throbbing ache in her body was proof that she wouldn't be able to catch her daughter if she chose to run again.

She lowered herself to the ground and spoke in a whisper. “Lacie, Mumma did something ... something I thought was right, and some bad men are really mad at me. They know where we live, so we need to go somewhere else to be safe.”

“We could go to Miss Joy’s,” Lacie offered.

“No, we need to go further away, where they can’t find us. Just until I can fix it. Do you understand?”

How the hell am I supposed to fix it without the books?

Sophie looked back up the hill, calculating how long it would take her to get to the house and back with the evidence, when the lady rounded the corner of the bus shelter.

“The bus is here, dearie.”

Too late.

She picked up their bags and offered her hand to Lacie.

Lacie hesitated, kicking her shoes against a clump of grass. The bus’s brakes released and a sense of urgency took over.

“Please, Lacie, please trust me.”

Finally acquiescing, Lacie took Sophie’s hand.

“Where to, miss?” the driver asked impatiently.

“What’s your last stop?”

“Waikanae.”

“We’ll go there.” Sophie pulled a fifty from her bag while he printed the tickets.

The driver shook his head. “You don’t have anything smaller?”

“No.” *Just take the bloody money.*

He grunted and held out her change.

“Thank you.” Sophie led Lacie to the only available seat and sighed a heavy breath. *Great.*

“Are you all right?” the woman probed.

“Yes,” Sophie lied.

“What about you, sweet girl?”

Nosy old woman.

“No.” Lacie's chin quivered.

Damn it.

“No? Oh dear. I sometimes find having a good chat makes me feel better. I'm Beryl. What's your name, young lady?”

Lacie frowned when Sophie shook her head. The lady watched on with interest.

“Is this your mummy?”

Sophie bit down on her protest. *Good move, old lady.*

Lacie nodded.

“And do you live with your mummy?”

Custody battles ... check.

Lacie nodded.

Beryl removed a notebook from her purse, jotted something down, tore the page out and pressed it into Sophie's palm. Then she focused all her attention on Lacie. “Well, it sounds like you're going on an adventure.”

Lacie's brow tightened. It didn't look like she was keen on this kind of adventure.

“That's right,” Sophie replied, trailing her hand down Lacie's hair then twisting it around her fingers.

“Adventures can be fun,” Beryl added. “Where are you going?”

“I don't know,” Lacie responded, her eyes downcast. “We just had to get on the bus.”

Sophie felt a touch of regret teaching her daughter not to keep secrets, but then she remembered why she was so resolute about it and was proud of her little girl for having the confidence to speak her mind to a stranger. She hoped in the future it would mean her daughter wouldn't be as easily manipulated as she'd been.

Beryl nodded. “Well, that’s the first step, isn’t it. I’m going on an adventure too.”

“What kind of adventure?” Lacie asked.

“I’m going on a story hunt.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, I believe there are hidden stories all over New Zealand, just waiting to be discovered. When I find them, I write them into children’s stories and share them with the world.”

“Like what?”

Lacie was quickly distracted by Beryl retelling stories about ‘Runaway Kiwis’ and ‘Curly-Wurly Roundabouts’. Sophie stared out the window and listened to their murmured conversation, thankful for a few moments to process her thoughts and formulate some kind of plan. She didn’t know what came next, but Waikanae wasn’t nearly far enough away.

4

Joy placed the groceries on the bench and flicked the jug on. She'd only been gone a few hours but was exhausted from the effort. She wandered down to the spare room and tapped her knuckles on the closed door.

No answer. She opened it and peeked in hoping to see the girls huddled up in bed together.

The first flame of panic sparked.

She's done a runner. You shouldn't have left them.

Stop. She admonished herself for her rush to judgement, deciding to have some faith in the young mother. She opened the curtains and turned to study the room. The beds remained unmade, and the breakfast tray still lay at the foot of Sophie's bed. It was then Joy noticed Lacie's teddy tucked under her covers, and the red leather purse peeking out from underneath Sophie's pillow. A tangible sense of relief filled her.

She resisted an instinctual urge to make the beds and pick up the washing off the floor, as she made her way out of the room with the breakfast tray in hand.



Joy woke, startled by an intense sense of dread. Feeling the heat of the midday sun on her face, she forced herself up and studied her watch. Three hours had passed.

Something's wrong.

She shook off the feeling, trying to gather her wits, and made her way back to the spare room, actively ignoring the sharp pain radiating through her abdomen. She'd spent months ignoring it;

maybe it was time to admit it wasn't going away. She dismissed the thought. Right now, she had bigger fish to fry.

The room was empty.

"Sophie, where are you?" she asked out loud as if she was nearing the end of a long game of hide-and-seek and was trying to convince children to come out and eat dinner, an edge of irritation and worry in her voice.

Go home and collect a few things if you're going to be staying here.

Of course. So why couldn't she tame the doubt that had taken up residence in her chest? Something wasn't right, she could feel it in her bones. She gathered her keys from the hall table and ran out the front door. Her legs were heavy. It felt as though she was battling against an unnatural force as she made her way up Sophie's driveway.

Oh Lord, please protect those girls, she prayed in whispers.

Sophie's front door was wide open with visible mess spilling out from the hall. Joy hesitated outside the door when deep, murmured voices echoed from within. The invisible bungee cord attached to her waist gave a strong tug. She exhaled, braced herself and surged forwards. Lacie could be in there. Without another thought, she entered the house and raised her chin in defiance.

"Sophie!" She announced her presence and allowed the golden drug of adrenaline to speed through her veins.

The house went quiet.

Joy closed her eyes and focused on the simple act of breathing. Inhale, exhale, inhale ...

Rapid, angry footsteps infiltrated the silence, vibrating through the soles of Joy's shoes. A familiar prayer rose up inside her. *As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*

"Sophie, is that you?" she called out again, opening her eyes in time to see large, black combat boots rounding the corner. She narrowed her eyes at the heavily tattooed monster of a man who wore them as he glared at her with violent intent.

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded, his voice laced with venom.

Oh Sophie, how deep are you in? “That, you impolite imp, would be none of your business.” Protective fury rose up inside her.

A hearty and violent laugh filled the space as two more bodies joined the first. One was clearly a prostitute, her tortured eyes telling of her turmoil. The fresh bruises consuming her face, neck and arms tugged on Joy’s heartstrings. *One at a time.*

Her focus shifted to the other occupier of the hall. She knew enough to recognise his authority. He was the one to watch.

“Where is she?” he asked, taking over.

“Being that you’re the ones who’ve ransacked her house, I could ask you the same question.”

Joy read the silent communication passing between the two men. They would be using force to scare some answers out of her. *Like hell you will.*

The muscle took a step, his fists clenching at his sides.

I will fear no evil. Joy took a step forward and raised her head in defiance. “I do not scare easily,” she challenged, narrowing her eyes at the boss while ignoring the other man’s advance.

“We’ll see about that,” he said, encircling his monstrous hands around her arms.

“Where is she?” the boss demanded.

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Joy rebelled.

The muscle released her arms, shoved his palm against her throat and squeezed. Joy closed her eyes and focused on the supernatural strength building inside of her.

Now.

Joy jerked her knee up hard, making contact with the man’s groin. She took deep, measured breaths as the large man’s legs buckled, releasing her from his tight grasp. The boss’s jaw gaped as his henchman moaned at her feet.

“I’m not one of your girls. You lay one more hand on me, and I’ll make you wish you hadn’t.”

A hand wrapped firmly around her ankle and pulled, trying to shake her off balance.

She kicked out hard with the other foot. Blood spilled between the man's fingers as he cradled his newly broken nose in his hands. Joy smiled with satisfaction and stepped back out of reach then raised her head in triumph and narrowed her gaze down the hallway.

"As I said ..."

"You stupid bi- ..."

Joy laughed. "I've been called worse."

The boss smirked, giving Joy a quick once-over. "I don't doubt that. We'll find her, don't you worry. She has something that belongs to me." The boss reached over and grabbed a handful of the girl's hair and forced her to the floor at his feet.

Joy wanted to rip that scrawny head off his neck and be done with it. She'd known too many men like him in her life. "I don't doubt you'll try. But believe me when I say if I lay eyes on either of you again, I won't stop at aching balls and a broken nose." The flicker of courage Joy had felt earlier had become a blazing inferno of rage. She wanted to make him hurt and was fighting every instinct to lunge at him.

Get out now.

She heard the warning as the boss' hand disappeared into his jacket. Violent curses echoed from the house as she slipped out the front door. She spun around, expecting one or both of them to have followed her out. They hadn't.

The adrenaline rush she'd experienced had taken a dive, her courage giving way to fear. She quickened her pace. Less than a minute later she slid down behind her bolted door, her body aching. She held her hand to her heart and tried to focus on her breathing as tears streamed from her eyes, but all she could hear was the deafening roar of terror for her, and for her girls.

Somewhere between her forced inhaleds and exhaleds, she managed to voice the prayer of her heart, labouring on each word as if it was her last.

"Lord, provide a way for them, alert kind-hearted people to their needs. Help Sophie accept their help. Show her your love,

Father, keep them safe. Please, Lord, keep those precious girls safe. Hide them and hide me from view.”

When no more words were forthcoming, Joy leant forward to stand, but before she'd taken her first step, a searing pain ripped through her abdomen and her world went black.

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