

Reflexions

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PROLOGUE

AN INSISTENT BEEPING pierced my brain. I turned onto my side, forcing my eyes open. Through a blur, a green light bobbed. Nausea washed over me, my head pounding. I opened my eyes again and the room spun in giddy circles.

“Help, someone help me!” I tried to shout, but my voice came out as a croak.

As soon as the room steadied, I looked around. Plain walls painted pale green with a round clock faced me. A TV sat on a high shelf in one corner, the beeping machine at my left side and a nightstand at the other. I was in a hospital. But why? I racked my brain, but a thick fog swamped it. I tried to sit up, but an agonizing pain ripped through my chest and I fell back on the pillows, gasping. So, that was why I was here, but what had happened? A buzzer lay on the nightstand, so I reached for it, yanked it closer and pressed the button. That small action exhausted me and I flopped back, drained.

The door opened and a smiling nurse walked in. She picked up a chart and came over to the bed. “How do you feel now that you’re awake?”

“Awful, what happened?”

“We’re hoping you can tell us that. Your daughter and son-in-law found you unconscious in your home.”

“My daughter?”

“Yes, she’s very worried about you. You have a cracked collar bone, cuts and bruises.”

Her words bounced off a gray wall inside my brain and I couldn’t push past it. I drew my brows together and probed my mind. Nothing was there.

“I don’t remember what happened. I don’t remember anything at all!” My voice rose as panic set in.

The nurse stared at me. “Nothing?”

I shook my head. Every time I tried to climb the gray wall, my head hurt. “I have a terrible headache.”

“I’ll get you some Tylenol. A doctor will be in to see you soon.”

The nurse left and I tried once again to penetrate the fog that swamped my brain, but it was useless. The effort of doing this tired me, so I closed my eyes and slept.

A movement at the side of the bed woke me and I looked into the worried eyes of a young woman, holding a bouquet of roses. “Hello, Mom, how are you feeling?”

I struggled to sit up.

She placed the roses on the bed and helped me, propping a fat pillow behind my head. I leaned back, my eyes raking her being from head to toe. Long, golden hair cascaded down her back and her blue eyes held concern. Her jeans and baggy sweatshirt failed to camouflage a neat figure. So, this was my daughter. She was beautiful.

“I’m sore, but fine.” I said in a hoarse voice. My throat was dry with no saliva to swallow. “Can I have a drink?”

The young woman poured water from a carafe into a glass and handed it to me. “Did that man do this to you? I was so scared when we found you, I thought you were dead.”

I sipped the water, unsure how I should answer. I didn’t know which man she was talking about, but I didn’t want to say anything to alarm her, in case I remembered anything later, so I changed the subject. “Have they said how long I’ll be here?”

“No, but the doctor said that none of your injuries are serious and that once you regained consciousness, you should be able to go home.”

“Well, that’s good news,” I tried to sound cheerful, even although I didn’t know where home was.

“Danny will be in to see you later today. Is there anything you want him to bring you?”

I shook my head. “How long have I been here?”

“Since last night. After you left the apartment, I found your wallet and tried to call you, but when you didn’t answer I became worried, so Danny and I drove to your house and found you.” She placed her hand on mine. “If it was that man who hurt you, I want you to press charges.”

“We’ll see,” I said, afraid to commit myself to something I didn’t remember. “Let’s see what the doctors say first and then we’ll talk about it.”

My head starting thudding again, so I closed my eyes.

“I’ll go and let you rest.” The young woman rose and kissed my cheek. “Bye, Mom.”

“Bye, love,” I murmured and fell asleep.

The rattling of china woke me when a young nurse wheeled in a cart. She helped me into a comfortable sitting position and pulled a table on wheels forward, placing a tray on it. “It’s chicken salad for lunch followed by orange mousse. Are you hungry?”

I was surprised to find that I was. “Yes, I am thank you.”

A strong aroma of coffee wafted from a cup on the tray, so I reached for it and swallowed it in one gulp. The salad was crisp and green and the chicken moist and tender. This was the best meal I’d had in a long time—or

was it? I polished off the orange mousse and pushed the table away.

I twisted round to reach for the TV remote and a pain seared through my ribs. The memory of a man's face with a malicious expression leapt into my mind. I remembered his face and gasped. Then more images of my attack and attacker returned and I gulped back tears.

Recollections of my life swamped my brain—my home— my family—and my children. Tiredness overwhelmed me and all I could think of was how I came to be lying here...

CHAPTER 1

BRIAN

I FLINCHED AND flicked my head away, trying to avoid the clenched fist bearing down on me. Knuckles smashed into my left cheek and jaw, flinging me against the wall with a force that winded me. I slithered to the floor, dazed. My body twitched and an excruciating pain shot through my side as a foot slammed into me. The room spun and I spiraled into darkness. The next thing I felt were fingers stroking my cheek.

“Susan, are you all right?” Brian’s voice was as soft as velvet. I struggled to force my eyes open. My throat had closed and I couldn’t speak. “Susan, say something, please.”

“I’m okay,” I muttered.

He stroked the hair from my face and kissed my lips. “Let me help you up, honey.”

A pain tore through my side as I staggered to my feet with the help of my husband. He guided me to a chair and I plunked down before my knees gave way. How could this be happening? I had read about women whose husbands battered them, but I never imagined it would happen to me.

Brian reached out a hand and I flinched, scared in case he was going to hit me again. His hand gripped my chin and turned my face toward him.

“Why do you make me do this? If only you’d do things my way, I wouldn’t have to punish you. Are you sorry?”

I nodded.

“Say it!” he demanded.

“I’m sorry, Brian. It won’t happen again.”

“Good girl, now go and wash your face and we’ll have dinner.”

I stumbled down the hallway to the bathroom, managing to quell my tears until I was leaning on the closed, locked door. Great, gulping sobs shook my body and I covered my mouth with my hands to stifle the noise. I stared at my reflection in the mirror and gasped. A large, red weal throbbed on my cheek and my chin was swollen and discolored. I lifted my shirt and probed my side. A yellow and purple contusion diffused over my waist and hipbone.

Not wanting Brian to get suspicious, I shuffled over to the sink and splashed cold water over my face. I yanked the medicine cabinet open and grabbed a packet of painkillers, swallowing two with a handful of cold water. I smoothed my hair with my fingers and turned the handle on the door.

When I entered the kitchen, Brian sat at the kitchen table reading the paper. He ignored me when I donned my padded gloves and opened the oven door, placing a casserole atop a cork mat on the table and depositing the lid and a slotted spoon next to it.

Brian lowered the paper and his obsidian eyes met mine. “What? Do I have to serve myself tonight?”

A tremor of fear ran through me at the cold expression in his eyes. “N-no, of course not.”

I gripped the spoon to prevent my hand shaking and ladled chicken and vegetables onto his plate. My head swam and I felt nauseous. The last thing I wanted was food, but I forced myself to eat something. I wracked my numb brain for something conversational to say and the best I managed to come up with was, “Did you have a good day at the office?”

Brian’s fork clattered to the table and he threw me a look of disgust. “You ask the stupidest questions. Of course, I didn’t have a good day. Do you see me smiling? Do I look happy?”

I shook my head.

He shoved his plate with the half-eaten food away, scraped his chair back and strode into the den. The door slammed and I expelled my pent up breath in a large sigh.

My name is Susan Turner and during our marriage my husband’s many high commissions as a successful realtor have bought us a three bed roomed house on the outskirts of the town of Chesterton. Our fenced yard displays a variety of shrubs and flowers around a lawn, while baskets of impatiens hang from our front porch and bloom all summer long.

The small town of Chesterton is an integral part of my life. Similar to an English country village, the town straggles around a meandering river and unlike many American towns, has winding streets. Visitors often call it quaint, but locals refer to it as noisy when youth’s tires squeal as they careen around the twisting byways. I had been born and raised in this undiscovered corner of the west coast and the idea of leaving was as foreign as the Eiffel Tower.

I hung my head with closed eyes and shuddered, trying to remember when my marriage had started to go wrong.

Six years ago, on my wedding day, I had been at my happiest. Walking down the aisle to stand at Brian's side had been my dream come true. Tall, with dark blond, sun-streaked hair, my husband resembled a young Kirk Douglas. He had a well-toned body, slim waist and hips and a smile that made women go weak at the knees. I had loved him from the moment I set eyes on him and had been ecstatic when he suggested we marry.

Driving away from the reception in a limousine, he soon shattered my romantic illusions.

"Well, that's one part of your life over, Susan. Now you're mine." Brian pulled me close and curled his tongue in my ear. "You can forget all about your parents and concentrate on me."

I thought he was joking and laughed it off, but I was wrong. Although in the beginning, Brian acted loving and kind, he soon made it clear that my parents weren't welcome and that my frequent visits to them had to stop.

"You're not a child, anymore," he blurted one evening when he discovered I had spent the day with my mother. "You're my wife and your place is with me."

I tried to explain that I had always been close to my parents and being an only child, they missed me. Nevertheless, Brian was relentless in his pursuit of my exclusivity and with reluctance, I adhered to his wishes.

For the first few years, married life had been good and apart from him wanting to know my every whereabouts, I had been happy. We went to parties, the cinema and out with friends. We spent Sunday mornings in bed making love until noon and paid frequent visits to my mother's

beach house. Everything I said and did made him laugh, although now I think back, on many occasions, he criticized my way of doing things.

Our daughter, Alison, was born two and a half years into our marriage and our son, Michael, three years later, completing my idea of wedded bliss. One day everything changed. It was as if the time clock of happiness had wound down and stopped. A complete transformation took place in Brian. He became moody and difficult to please. Nothing I said or did amused him anymore.

One evening, after I mentioned an opinion my mother had voiced, he became angry and punched me in the stomach. Disbelief caused me to remain rooted to the spot and speechless. This attack was something beyond my comprehension.

Tears shone in my eyes and my throbbing side brought me back to the present. I lifted a cheesecake from the refrigerator cutting it into segments and served a large slice, sliding it over to Brian's place.

When Brian was still ensconced in the den after an hour, I ate a small piece of dessert and cleared the table. This was the way too many of my evenings turned out these days. I stacked the dishwasher and remembered the day I had ruined Brian's new, white shirt. I had washed it with dark blue pants and the color ran. Brian's face was lobster red and he took me by surprise when he raised his hand and struck me. The slap sent my head reeling and I fell hard against the washer, hitting my right side.

Horror crossed his face when he saw me doubled up. "Oh, my darling, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it, please forgive me."

He took me in his arms and I sobbed on his shoulder while he stroked my hair. That night in bed, he was gentle

when he made love to me, kissed my bruises and vowed never to hurt me again. Nevertheless, his promises were short-lived. A few weeks later, when I announced I was pregnant, a look of disgust crossed his face.

“Who’ve you been sleeping with, you little whore?” He shoved me hard against a table and grasped my wrists, twisting them until my flesh burnt. “You’re not going to palm someone else’s bastard off on me.”

With a growing sense of panic, I shook my head. “No, Brian, no! I love you, there’s no one else.” My stomach gave a sickening contraction when he opened his hand wide and grabbed me round the throat. I couldn’t swallow and my breath came in little staccato gasps. The room began to blur and I saw stars. Before I blacked out, he shook me once, making my teeth rattle and let go. I slid to the floor.

Without realizing it, my hand had crept to my throat as I relived the earlier attack. Brian strode into the living room and sank onto the sofa. He switched the TV on and tuned to a sports channel. “Have we got any beer?” His tone was churlish.

“Yes, I bought some today.” I scurried into the kitchen and returned with a glass and a can, placing them on a side table. Brian reached for the drink and took a long slug.

Each time he hurt me, I hated him, but I loathed myself even more for being weak. Brian had threatened to kill the children and me many times and I believed him. My life had become one long, living nightmare. The funny thing, was I believed I still loved him. When he was kind and loving, the memories of the times he hurt me faded and I found myself forgiving him.

I hated fighting. My parents had never fought. They had been in love from the moment they met until my father died from a heart attack a few months ago. His death hit me hard. Somehow, I had always imagined he would be around with his kind, loving ways to make me laugh and give me advice.

As an only child, my parents doted on me and I had always been included in everything they did. I couldn't get used to Brian treating me as if I were a punching bag and hurting me. Some days I wanted to get up and leave, taking my children with me, but I knew I didn't have the courage. My mother would be horrified if she knew some of the injuries I had received. She'd had a deep love for my father and they had shared 27 years of wedded bliss.

As a child at my parents' beach house, I had envisioned my marriage would be the same as theirs. I had dreamed of meeting a handsome man and getting married. After a few weeks in the sun, my skin turned a healthy shade of brown and my hair lightened with golden streaks. At one end of the beach was my favorite rock and I would run to it, climb up and dream, but my dreams hadn't been like this.

That night in bed, Brian reached for me and my insides shrank. His lips crushed mine, smashing them against my teeth. I tried to relax and respond; scared he would sense something was wrong. His hands roamed over my body and my body quivered as he tugged and bit my nipples. Tears filled my eyes and I tried to feign ecstasy when he entered me. My tears were not for the hurt he caused, but for the loss of the gentleness and love that we had once shared. Sleep didn't come easily and I lay awake long after my husband slept.

The next morning Brian was in a good mood. He almost bounced into the kitchen where Alison sat eating cereal.

“Hi, princess, got a kiss for Daddy?” Alison reached up and smacked a kiss on her daddy’s lips, squealing in delight when he tickled her. Next, he ruffled Michael’s hair and fed him French toast.

“They’re great kids.” Brian sat and reached for the maple syrup. “Honey, how would you and the kids like to go away for a few days?”

This was sudden. I gave a faltering smile and tried not to let my suspicion show. “Why yes that would be wonderful. Are you coming, too?”

He shrugged. “No, I have too much work to do.” He stroked my hair and dropped a kiss on my nose. “Why don’t you and your mom go down to the beach house, its ages since you’ve been there?”

He was a different person from the one last night. Why did he think he could give me a tender smile and everything would be all right? I watched him fidget while he waited for my answer.

“Okay, I’ll call her today. Are you sure you can’t come?”

“I can’t, but don’t worry about me, honey, I can order in pizza or Chinese.”

He gave me another small kiss and left for work. I slumped in the chair and wondered why he had suggested this break. It couldn’t be because he was considering my welfare. What was he up to? Why was he anxious for me to go away? In a way I was relieved, at least I would be away from him for a while. Whatever the reason for his suggestion, the thought of getting away was welcoming.

Michael mashed the remainder of his French toast into his high chair tray, so I rinsed a clean cloth, wiped his hands and face and called my mother.

“Hi, Mom, Brian’s suggested I get away for a few days. Do you fancy going down to the beach house?”

“Mm, okay, but what’s this all about? Why now? Wouldn’t it be better waiting until the weather’s warmer?”

“Well the weather’s still nice. Why not now?”

I held my breath waiting for Mom’s reply. Her skepticism made me wonder if she knew about the way Brian treated me. Any time I had facial bruises, I always put off meeting her until the injuries had healed.

“No reason, Susan. When were you thinking of going?”

“If tomorrow’s not too soon, I’ll pick you up at ten.”

“Okay, dear, I’ll see you then.”

I spent the afternoon laundering my husband’s clothes and packing a small bag for the children and myself. Brian was still in good spirits when he arrived home later that evening and he surprised me again.

“That new housing development on Homewood Estates is almost completed and there are still a few vacant homes. How would you like to move there?”

I was at a loss for words—a new home. “Can we afford it?”

“Sure, the last two years I’ve made a lot of dough and getting a higher mortgage shouldn’t be a problem. I’ve seen a nice three bed roomed house that has almost twice the square footage of this one.”

I glanced around the room at quality wallpaper and subdued lighting. Bold prints, lots of colored glass, shaggy rugs and brightly patterned curtains filled the

house. My top find was an old, oak table, which someone had neglected. I'd had it cleaned, sanded down and varnished. The warm wood glowed with a new shine and I had added four oak chairs with padded seats, which I had recovered in a soft, pale blue. I loved my home, but a larger house would be nice if it meant more space for the children.

"A new house would be great. When can I see it?"

"As soon as you come back from the coast, we'll go and see it together." Brian's lips were soft as he pressed them to mine. "Come on, honey, let's go to bed. I'm as horny as hell!"

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Next morning, I sang as I fastened Alison and Michael into their car seats and loaded the car with provisions. My mother was waiting with one small bag when I parked in the driveway of her Spanish-styled house.

"Wow, Mom, I like your new hairstyle." My mother, Elizabeth Sanderson, was forty-seven and a good-looking woman. "It makes you look much younger."

As we waited at a red light, my eyes ran over the stylish clothes that accentuated her neat figure. Light blonde hair hung below her ears and her bright blue eyes sparkled.

Mom turned and smiled her teeth even and white. "Thanks, but are you okay, Susan? You look tired."

I concentrated on the traffic in front, wondering if the bruise on my chin was visible. "I'm fine. Michael was up with a bad dream last night and by the time I went back to bed, I couldn't sleep." I glanced in the mirror at my son fast asleep in his car seat and laughed. I nodded at the mirror. "It's all right for him, he's sound asleep now."

Mom turned in her seat. “Poor little boy, he must be exhausted.”

“And what about me?” I pretended to pout. “I can’t take a nap whenever I feel like it.”

“That’s part of being a mother, dear, Moms need to have more energy than the kids. Mind you, you were the exception to the rule. You ran me ragged until I thought I would collapse. Thank goodness your father worked mostly from home and he was able to help me. You’re lucky, too, in that Brian has plenty of free time to help you.”

I smiled and nodded, not enlightening my mother that I seldom saw Brian. Some nights I was in bed long before he came home.

The drive to the coast took three hours and we arrived in time for a late lunch. The house at Turtle Cove was close to the beach and built on stilts. The upper floor housed a well-planned kitchen, three moderate sized bedrooms and a living room with a large picture window where I loved to sit and watch the waves crashing to the shore. An external, wrought iron, spiral staircase twisted from the kitchen down to the garage, laundry room and the silky, soft sand.

When I was a child, I had spent wonderful summers at Turtle Cove. The fresh, sea air, the endless sunshine and the freedom to run, play and dream. Many other families that stayed all summer at the beach had children, too, so these months were one long playful time for me and I wanted my children to have that, too.

“Gee, Mom, what a wonderful day.” I said, as I stretched my hands above my head.

We stood at the back of the house in a paved yard where a straight flight of stone steps led to the front door and a small foyer, which opened into the living room.

“Yes, it sure is good to be back by the ocean. Your dad and I loved it here. We bought this house soon after we got married and we’ve spent some great times here.”

Turtle Cove is a small town with a few hundred inhabitants. During the summer months, the population doubles owing to people visiting their vacation homes. One gas station, a general store and a few small businesses cater for the community, which shares a sheriff’s office and fire station with the next town of Carson’s Point. The beautiful, golden sand slopes into emerald waters and even fifty feet out, is still shallow. Romantic, flaming sunsets make a painter’s palette pale in comparison to the colors that light up the evening sky.

After we unpacked the bags and the groceries, we took a short walk along the beach. I carried a sleepy Michael while Alison paddled at the water’s edge, squealing in delight when the tiny wavelets lapped her ankles.

The gulls swooped and cried overhead, hunting the shoreline for food and I smiled as I watched my daughter hopping and skipping along the seashore. The breeze was warm and Mom and I strolled in silence, both content with our own private thoughts.

Mom was the first to break the silence. “Is Brian okay?”

“Yes, Why?” I kept my eyes fixed on the beach ahead.

“I was wondering why he didn’t come with us.”

Again, my suspicions that Mom knew more than she said niggled at me. “He’s very busy at the moment, but he wanted me and the kids to have a rest.”

“Oh, I see. That was nice of him to be so considerate.” Was that sarcasm I heard in Mom’s voice? “Michael’s fallen asleep perhaps we should turn back and put him down for a nap.”

I glanced at my sleeping son. “Yes, you’re right. We’ve all weekend to do this.”

Mom took Alison’s hand and we returned to the house where I put both children in the smallest bedroom for a nap. When I was sure they were both sleeping, I mixed a jug of Boston Cream, opened a bottle of wine and carried them down to where Mom sat on one of two lounge chairs.

“Do you remember when you and Dad bought me my first camera?” I reminisced.

“Oh, yes and boy did we start something.” Mom laughed. “You pestered your father until he nearly went crazy. You had to know everything about photography. By the time you were nine, you and he used to hole up in that darkroom of his for hours. I hardly saw either of you.”

“Yes, Dad and I had something special going there. He really taught me to love photography.” My thoughts turned to my father. I’d had a deep love for him. “It was great being able to develop and print my own black and white photos. Most of the time I take color pictures now, so it’s more economical to take them to the pharmacy. Look this way, Mom.” I reached for my old Kodak, set the focus, and shutter speed. “Say cheese!” I clicked the shutter as Mom gave a happy smile.

She reached for the bottle of wine and I covered my glass with my hand. “No thanks, I don’t think I should drink right now, I’ll stick with the Boston Cream.” Mom raised her eyebrows and filled her own. “I think I might be pregnant again.”

For a fleeting moment, I saw a frown pass over Mom’s face. “Is Brian pleased?”

“I haven’t mentioned it yet because I’m not 100 per cent sure, but my instincts tell me I am. Brian was talking about moving to a bigger house, so he may not be too happy.”

“Well as soon as you know for sure, you’d better decide whether or not a baby will put a strain on your marriage. There are alternatives, you know.”

I nodded and shuddered at Mom’s words. How much did she know? Whenever we spoke on the phone, she complained that she didn’t see enough of me and I was tired of making excuses. I loved the idea of another baby, but if Brian continued to hurt me, I might have to consider the ramifications of raising another child in an abusive relationship.

Sitting relaxed on the peace and quiet of the beach was a welcome respite from my constant worrying when Brian would next strike. Some days Michael was cranky and I put it down to the strained atmosphere in the house. The return trip was still two days away, so I decided to enjoy the short time I had with my mother and try not to think about Brian’s fluctuating moods. I leaned back, savoring the far off cries of the gulls and the rhythmic pounding of waves, trying to think of the words to say if it turned out, I was pregnant.