



ASTER'S  
CODA



EXPOSURE



AMY ROSENFELDT

# ASTER'S CODA: EXPOSURE

(BOOK 1)

AMY ROSENFELDT

## PROLOGUE

### HISTORIES

MY MOTHER WAS RICH WITH STORIES. THEY WEREN'T THE KIND staining paper, placed beneath images or tucked into dog ears. She didn't care for writing them down, or for publishing them and gaining a second kind of riches.

Her storytelling was traditional.

She took after bards, performing her stories, giving those words meaning. To her, that was the only way she could tell them. Every time they'd have a new edge. No two retellings of those epics were identical. It didn't matter, as long as it was told from the heart. And she *did* have heart for her family.

You could say those stories had been passed down through generations. How else would a family's history be told?

Mum was proud of this tradition. The thrills I felt didn't just come from her ancestors being warriors. Her eyes ignited with passion when she told these tales, speaking with the power of a beast.

Like many other children I buried myself in my bed as I listened. With the curtains drawn and the lights dimmed, she'd act the epics from the end of my bed.

The one I remembered best was first told to me when I was

seven, when my brother and I finally had separate rooms. Of course that meant he could stay up later, pretending to do his homework. I didn't care. This was going to be a private show.

'I saved a special one for you tonight,' she whispered as she pulled my sheets back.

My face lit up. 'Really?'

'I've waited from the day you were born to tell you. I haven't told it since.'

It really was special! That night I rushed into bed, a rare occurrence, positioning myself and my plushy tiger before her gaze. I waited for her to strike a match behind her eyes and set them alight with passion.

'This one is about the first of the warriors in our family,' she said.

'How long ago was that?' I asked, springing out of my pillows.

'Over three hundred years ago.' She hunched over, whispering, 'He'd be your ninth great-granddad.'

My tiger got strangled as excitement squeezed through me. 'Who was he?'

'His name was Raynan Aster.'

'That's a weird name.'

'It was normal in the eighteenth century. He'd think *your* name was just as weird.'

After she silenced my giggling, she told the tale. Sugar was coated on his humble beginnings as a blacksmith, his precision in his art. My heart melted over the love he had for the humble Phoebe, and I chorused as they found love even when the world dared to split them apart.

Then came the part that got me springing out of my sheets—the battle against the friend who betrayed him, Windor Konnun. I mirrored Mum's anger over his attempt to kill Phoebe. You could hear it in every gasp, cheer and laugh, fuelling the fire in her eyes until Windor had been defeated.

Nobody could tell it the same. Dad had tried, but he was just reading the story. He didn't *tell* it. He always feared that the war

stories and bloodshed were too mature, but I was never haunted by it. That part didn't matter to Mum. It was the story—each twist, each turn, each consequence. She understood it through and through, passing it on to me every night.

Even three years later, when she added that Phoebe was widowed due to the vengeful hands of Windor's brother, it wasn't as if he had ever died to me. I lived it those years later.

## ANOTHER YEAR

OUTSIDE THE FRONT DOOR WAS CHAOS. I WAS SUPPOSED TO WALK into it like thousands of others do when every January ends, but why? Knowing what would happen as soon as I'd turn the dull silver doorknob, I wasn't willing to give up this sanctuary. Not for the price of my own sanity. I stayed behind the door, not ready for the inevitable, even though my bag dragged my shoulders down with the weight of exercise books.

'What are you still doing here?' a familiar voice groaned behind me.

I turned round to find Rocco, my older half-brother, slicking his shaggy blond hair back. That mop was always a mess he never cared to clean up. He stood just outside of the kitchen doorway expectantly.

I faced the door again. 'Dad said to come when I am ready, and I am not.'

'It's just school,' Rocco said. 'Why would you worry about that?'

He had to know this already. Or maybe he needed to do a marathon in my shoes before he would get why I hated it there. I had

survived timetable confirmation already two days ago, but the full swing brought along the dread.

'Just because you managed to get on the good side of all the right people.' I rolled my eyes.

Rocco sauntered up to me. 'That's not what happened.'

I shook my head, holding on tighter to the strap over my shoulder. 'You never complained about school, and I've cried about it every month lately. Does it look like this year's gonna be any different?'

'Look, Abby.' He placed his hand on my free shoulder. 'There must be one good thing about school.'

'Getting out of it.'

'Alright then.' Rocco huffed. 'Name three *legit* ones.'

They tried to flash through my memories. But this filter Rocco put before my eyes was cracked. It never hid the fact that the strongest memories of Beauclark High hurt. Even when my cheeks cleared of tears and my chest lightened during the two months of summer holidays, I could feel phantoms of pain. They haunted me. I couldn't see beyond that hell.

Rocco sighed deeply by the time the silence needed breaking. 'Well, that's disappointing. I'll give you a challenge for today. Find those three things about school to enjoy and tell me when you get back. We need to bring the light back into your eyes if I ever want to see the sister I knew before... y'know.'

This was the second year I would be in high school without his support, and the second year the scale would turn red. At least I knew he would always be there for me, even if we weren't within the same property. But that was not enough. The challenge felt impossible after such a terrible start to the year.

'Abby, please,' he begged, tucking a strand of ginger hair behind my ear. 'We can't have this house fall apart even further.' He pulled me into a hug, and I squeezed back just as tightly, tears welling up. 'I'll make sure to keep you safe.'

'It's hard to do it from a game controller,' I said.

He pulled me straight out. 'Oh, you went there.'

My brows rose to meet his softened eyes. 'I went there.'

He chuckled and patted me on the back before making his way upstairs. 'Now go and face the day head-on.'

Easy for him to say. He practically cruised through school while I drove through a blizzard. I knew he tried to be supportive, but I doubted he had any experiences close to mine. None of those same emotions would have been felt since we went camping in Australia. His scepticism lasted a year after that snake bite, but it changed him for the better. After a year of what I went through, I felt like skin and bones.

And another year of it was right in front of me. He thought I could do this. This next step I would take would either prove my point or be the start of this change. Three things, as insignificant as I could find. It was just another baby step.

When Mum told me about the warriors in our bloodline, she'd say they feared that first step into a life that challenged them. From love to ambition, fear always had to be cut off from them. They had faced wars far bloodier than high school. Standing in front of the door, I was guilty to be afraid.

She'd want me to be like them. Not one of them was a coward none that she dared to speak of. I couldn't break that chain.

All it took to pass this first little obstacle was to take the deepest breath my lungs could carry, let my right hand rest on the doorknob, twist it hard, and pull it open. I closed the door behind me as if I left my own life behind.

I was greeted by the tropic weather native to New Zealand. The sky was overcast, as cloudy as my mind. The humidity rose in time with my adrenaline.

Dad was already waiting for me in the driver's seat, his arms folded and his eagle gaze hooked on me. I had his brown eyes, but mine were softened with guilt. He was impatient. So much for saying to come out when I was ready. I'd probably make him late for work, so he had every reason to give me that look. I ignored his stare as I clambered into his blue truck

adorned with the logos of the engineering company he worked for.

'Took you long enough,' he told me as I shut the door. 'You doing okay?'

I shuffled around in my seat as I adjusted my school skirt to sit on it.

'Not even a word. I hope you won't treat your teachers the same today.'

'You know why I took so long,' I shot a glare at him.

'And that's okay.' Dad sighed. 'Maybe you should just tell me if you need the extra time so I can let them know I'll be late, okay?'

The car's clock read 8:20. His work was ten minutes away and he didn't start until 8:45. My glare only strengthened.

So did his. 'Do you want to go back inside and lock your melodrama in your room before we leave, or are we good to go now?'

I huffed, arms folded. 'We're good.' It was never melodrama to begin with. At least Mum knew that.

His head shook with pity. The car spluttered to a start, continuing to rattle as Dad reversed out of the driveway. The truck swerved around before the gear lever changed. In seconds, we drove out of Samson Road. Dad would be headed for work, dropping me off at Beauclark on the way.

The trip there was normally a silent one. I typically watched the familiar houses as we drove by, eyes always lingering at the abandoned one at the top of our street, waiting for a sign of life to come out of it. It never did, I knew.

'Know that if you ever get too worked up, you can just come back home,' Dad told me.

That was out of character. So he *did* understand. It was an unusual habit of his that he picked up in the last month, and sometimes it didn't even feel like him. His love was tough. It was what I was brought up on, and comments like that were still slaps to the face.

Or maybe he just doubted me. Yeah, that sounded more realistic.

'I really can't, even if that was the case.' It was surprising those words even came out of me. Those stories I grew up on had me on strings.

Dad was unconvinced. 'There's no harm in it.'

'No. I *need* to do this. I can't run from the problems I've been having at school. I need to fix them.'

Despite his nod, Dad said, 'Did Rocco put you up to this?'

I shrugged. 'Maybe?'

He sighed as he found himself stopping at a red light. 'You're not the... most stable person out there.'

'Wow, thanks.'

'Don't use that tone with me!' He sighed out of his scold. 'I know I wasn't in the forefront, but I know what happened last year. I know well enough that you couldn't take it well, and that this year things *won't* get better.'

'And I thought I was the pessimist. Are you *actually* encouraging me to turn sour?'

His knuckles paled on the steering wheel. 'I'm telling you to lower your expectations. If I know anything about you, you're not going to push yourself out of your bubble of comfort that you have with the counsellors.'

'Then I'm gonna stop my counselling.'

My eyes widened. Dad and I both knew that was a leap off a cliff in my books.

I expected him to be happy, but he took a deep breath and said, 'Now I know Rocco didn't put you up to this. That was not the move I was hoping for. Especially after...'

'I know,' I cut him off. Something inside me wanted to take it back, to find that comfort Dad talked about and forever hide underneath it. But that was shadowed over by the need to prove myself. To prove me strong to my brother, and to prove my dad wrong.

And to be as great of a warrior as the ones Mum told me about. Just in a flimsy urban setting.

'I'm gonna do it. Things will be better, Dad.' There was nowhere to go but up.

'Don't expect that from day one. Maybe some baby steps instead of a leap of faith.'

But I had that faith. I was tempted to follow every bit of advice that he had, especially when they didn't come out in barks. But I couldn't. Maybe this was going to be easier than I thought. This was more than Rocco asked of me, but he'd be amazed if he'd see how far I could come in just one day. It'd be proof I could be just as resilient as he was. I'd be a modern-day warrior, with a story far less epic to tell. Unless they'd get to me...

No, that was the exact kind of thought I needed to get out of my head.



THE NEXT OBSTACLE I had to face was the school gate. Dad dropped me off on the main road for me to trek to the No Man's Land. He trusted me enough, or he knew what Rocco was doing. My brother was right; challenges were made to be completed. I power-walked to the gate.

Upon arrival my speed immediately decreased. The entrance was open as wide as a mouth, and while it was a lot easier to get past than my front door, my head was lowered and my vision fixed on one angle.

Right beside the gate, those people just had to be there. The spectators, the first ones that would see me stumble through Year 12. I bet they expected me to come, leant against the bars like they made a wall in an alleyway. And of course, they had to force me to notice them.

'Hey, Canary!' one of them called. My head was tugged like a rope to face the caller.

I glared and swallowed back a growl. *If only I could punch his teeth out.*

Nate curled a smile of satisfaction. I was like a dog to him.

They called me Canary to put me down. Every time they offered me a blow to my ego I would keep on using the same solution. My friends bent over backwards to pick me up as soon as I screamed I was down. It became instinctual from the start, Fauna and Hilary at my back like parachutes. I got used to crying like a canary, but my feathery hair was *not* yellow enough to be called one.

‘Did you have withdrawal symptoms from not seeing me over the holidays?’ I said. ‘Because you should find something better to do.’

‘How’s your mum doing?’ Nate said with a grin.

*How dare he...*

My spine curled as I waited for what more he had to add. His thin brown hair draped over those devious eyes, and while his size was nothing to make me react, his words always were.

This time they were nothing short of riling me up. ‘Is she sick of coming back from work to sort out your problems yet?’

The one right next to him, Eli, snickered. Eli was lankier than him, with thick black curls and pale skin. His eyes narrowed, soft but with sharp intention.

‘Seems like the rest of her family is, too. How long has she been crying for, you reckon?’

Ignoring the sting in my eyes and weight in my chest, I stared them down. *Don’t let them get to you.* It was a crime against my bloodline to let that happen. ‘Actually, my dad would be more than happy to run you guys over. I could do it as well, but I’m a lethal driver. You should be lucky.’

Eli said, ‘You think you can be strong for Mummy? Geoff already proved you failed.’

He truly made it hell for me here. The Polynesian brick wall made the simplest movements to scare me, as I had faced him at his worst before. Just seeing those void-like eyes stare at me as his body tensed up, my hands were shaking again.

I blinked. One tear escaped. *Shit!*

Walking past wasn’t good enough. I had to show them I wasn’t

taking their shit any more. Holding back all my emotions, I stared them down. My posture improved and my eyes stopped on every one of their stupid faces.

'I'm still here, fuckfaces. Find some other way to get expelled.'

Their eyes widened. 'Oh, she's challenging you, Geoff.' Nate turned to him.

Geoff's gaze sharpened, breaking my own. He straightened up from the bars and took three steps forward. My facade was truly gone as I took him in; his jawline that could cut, the muscular bulges under his polo, his sweaty stench. 'Then she's lucky her mum won't be here to see what I can do to her.'

Before he made a move I ran. Their laughs echoed behind me. Not caring for the tears streaming down my face, I threaded around the corner and past an oblivious gathering of students. My face turned hot and red. They didn't even know half of what they said. Those words didn't just get to me, they tore me apart.

Geoff was right. Mum wouldn't be here to see any of this—it was impossible. The reminder of that stole my breath from my lungs and drained the water from my eyes.

Once I was safely out of their sight, my back magnetised to the wall as I wiped my face dry, wavering through deep breaths. I needed to find that happy place, that sanctuary within my mind. But it would only go back to Mum.

This time it was more than stories I clung on to. More and more memories crawled out of the back of my mind.

Every December when school finished, she took a week off work and drove Rocco and me to Taupo in her blue Commodore. We'd each get a two scoop ice cream, I would forever go for boysenberry ripple and orange chocolate chip, and then we'd go to the beach by the lake, where the water was our playground. We wouldn't worry about anything except dodging splashes while wading knee deep in water, and trying to get the sand off our feet before going back into the car.

I remembered the short, snappy arguments Mum and I would

have over my studies, maths in particular—my worst subject. It was always a priority on Saturday evenings. Her methods back when she was in school contradicted the ones I had learned, mainly due to the lack of calculators and more difficult questions. We argued for hours until one of us proved ourselves right.

There was our holiday last summer in Europe. It only took us seconds to agree on whether or not we explore the Louvre or do surrealistic photos with the Eiffel Tower. We giggled whenever we stumbled with our Spanish or French, sometimes even getting the two mixed up. It was bliss to even get lost in the architecture, as if I'd climbed into the pages of one of the many classics I relished over. We never got bored of what each country had to offer, and it was the longest time I was ever happy.

But then came New Year's Eve in London.

The four of us huddled at the back of a crowd, watching as the Tower Bridge was set alight with fireworks and created cascades of colour that could blind anyone who got close. I don't know what happened, but I remember Rocco turning my shoulder and yelling over the noise.

Mum had fallen. She writhed on the ground, hands clawing at her face and neck. I thought she was choking on something, but she could talk. Her words got lost in the cheering. When we all surrounded her in a panic, they still weren't audible. Rocco tried to pry her hands away and help her, his eyes wide. Dad fumbled with his phone, gasping as he called an ambulance. Bystanders circled around us.

All I could do was sit and stare. I didn't know what was happening to Mum. My wide eyes, tears, and pale skin were a mirror of hers. It took being a strong resemblance of her to the next level. And yet with how close I was to her, how we could always talk to each other, I found no words.

With wide eyes she stared at us. Then she fell limp.

Everything clicked into a horrible machine. Mum was dying

before my very eyes. I checked for a pulse. No heartbeat came through her cold skin.

She was dead.

The night turned into a blur of crying, screaming, hospitals, and ambulances. Forensics couldn't even determine how she died. They called it an unrecognisable respiratory failure, like she was drowning but had no water in her lungs. Those details didn't matter to me. *Mum had died.*

*Stop*, I begged to myself. *Don't think about her, not now.* But like those flashes of happiness I wish I had more of, the tears kept coming. Grief made me dizzy.

I blotted my face with my fist, forcing myself to focus. All I had to do was focus, but even that was a mission. My mind was a stormy sea, not a still lake.

My face was still damp when the bell had rung to call upon my next task; getting through the school day on my own. *Fuck this.* I held my breath, counted to five, and repeated the process over and over. My patience grew thin, and as much as I hated it, I had to make do.

And so started another epic.

## BRUISES

BIOLOGY WAS THE UNNERVING DAWN TO THIS DAY. CLUSTERS OF students gathered outside the classroom, some heads-on ready and most who wanted the year to end. I'd have joined in with the latter, but I was eager to run before they'd see me.

Among them was Fauna, her braided black hair and everlasting beauty a giveaway. She clasped her almond hands as she pried herself out of conversation. Her long lashed eyes locked onto me. My forced smile was not returned. Already her motherly instincts took over.

'The hell happened?'

*Hello to you too, Fauna.* 'What always happens.'

She winced. 'They didn't target your mum, did they?'

'Gold star to Fauna Khan,' I whispered, tears held back.

She huffed and dragged me over to the classroom wall. 'Whatever, they're assholes.'

I tensed. 'Can we leave it? I don't want to cry in front of everyone.'

'You'll *at least* get your shit together before the teacher sends you to the counsellor's office again.' I glared and wished she didn't care about watching my wellbeing so much, last year even more than her

grades and her violin lessons. Her parents didn't appreciate how far they declined, only until they heard she was protecting me. Did she ever worry about herself? 'You spent enough time there last year, it's a miracle you passed maths.'

'I'm already improving,' I matched her tone. 'I'm gonna ditch their services.'

'Completely?' she gawked, even after I nodded. 'Well, we'll see how that goes...'

I frowned. 'Why is everybody turning into downers today?'

Fauna shook her head. 'No, it's your decision, Abby. I just hope it's not one you'll regret.'

Our teacher clunked open the door. The class filed in, eager to get to their designated seats. Fauna shoved me inside even though I was still a red, freckled strawberry.

Across from a wall of windows, posters, handmade or otherwise, took up every space on the wall. Many browned or frayed at the edges. Gas taps and sinks were spaced around the benches that framed the room. Tables with two seats each gridded the rest of the room, students already flocking to them.

Our teacher scribbled on the whiteboard as we passed. He was rugged, more like a man who would work in a shed instead of a lab. His chin was defined with stubble, and his charcoal hair struggled to remain smooth. He donned the typical button-up shirt and black pants that every male teacher owned. He blended in enough for me to doubt he was new to Beauclark.

Fauna sauntered to one of two tables left, one row away from the comfort of a corner.

I froze in my seat, my eyes on who just entered. Geoff shadowed over the teacher, not even looking his way. His square shoulders and thick arms took up the last of the space in the room. He met my eyes, his irises more steely than mine could forge. Nate snickered behind him. No doubt it was because of the morning's incident. My face reddened in recognition. They sat behind us. I would be their entertainment for the year instead of their phones.

The second bell wailed, the cue for our teacher to lose his enigmatic impression.

‘Now that everyone’s settled down,’ he said, blowing out the candle of noise. He paced across the room. ‘I welcome you to Year 12 Biology. I’m Mr Kane and I’ll be teaching you the best science there is out there.’

We’d all heard the seniors complain about it in homeroom. Mr Kane painted the prettiest picture he could—to most, it was a picture of shit.

‘So many of you are disagreeing with me.’ We didn’t laugh.

He illustrated his image of biology. His speech wouldn’t sway me. As he yarned on, my gaze wandered to the others in the class. Their eyes lit up, they paid attention in Biology, of all things! Geoff and Nate paid attention to me, though.

Mr Kane finally concluded at his desk, ‘I’m going to take the roll. Raise your hand when I call you.’

Getting close to the end of the list, he drew out, ‘Abby...’

I raised my hand, puzzled. Abby was among the easiest names in the world to pronounce. Still, Mr Kane stared at the laptop, bewildered at my own name. It would have been inputted as *Tacker*, *Abby Violet* as per the roll system. But what significance would my name have to him? He finally nodded at me with a vacant expression, and then got back to the roll.

‘What does he care about *your* name?’ Fauna whispered.

‘He must know a Tacker.’

I flinched as Nate inserted himself into our conversation. ‘Are you going to use him to solve your problems when you warm up to him?’

‘I bet she’ll beg him to remove us from this class,’ Geoff added.

‘Leave her be,’ Fauna spat at them before I could make a decent comeback.

My fingers curled into fists as they remained silent behind me. I knew they grinned at the thought of steam building up in my head.

Mr Kane picked up a chipped, surprisingly stable crate of textbooks. 'We'll be discussing work on page seven.'

The noise within the classroom rose. I sized up our teacher as he tossed the textbooks from side to side. In five minutes, his lack of a first impression was made. I'd never been more undecided whether I was on the borderline to like or hate a teacher.

When he was two tables ahead of ours, a trance kicked in. I never had my thoughts and emotions so aligned before, it was enlightening. My stare followed Mr Kane like wheels on the road. I tensed, my fingers dug into my palms, and my knuckles bleached. Discussions faded into an abyss.

My mind was set, I hated him. He was prey, someone who needed to be killed for my own gain. Desires filled my mind: a longing for fingers to wrap around a knife, a thirst for red to splatter the floor, a hunger for eyes to wish for mercy he'd never get.

'Abby?'

I shook my head. I was back to reality, joined by my heartbeat. Mr Kane had come to our table, and my face flushed red. The hell was I thinking about him like that for?

'Sorry.'

He smiled. 'Don't be. I just want to quickly let you know that I'll be here to help you out in any way I can regarding your circumstances. I know losing someone can be hard, but I don't want that to affect your classes. We can even do an after school interview, should you be free.'

First thing, huh? I expected all of my teachers to make a message like that, but Mr Kane made quite the impression doing that so soon. Maybe that's what he thought when he saw my name on the roll; there's the wreck student for this year. He either cared a lot about his students or worried about his grade average.

I returned a plastic smile. 'Thanks, sir. I'll let you know.'

Mr Kane turned away and distributed the rest of the textbooks. Nate and Geoff snickered, then hissing to a silence as Mr Kane gave them a look.

I turned back, evaluating the eventful minute. Fauna was equally shocked. But I quickly found out it wasn't at Geoff.

'Zoning out in the first five minutes? He called your name three times.'

I blinked and tried to forge a sane answer. 'I wouldn't call it that. Something made me want to...' I made sure to lower my voice. 'You know those violent thoughts you get out of the blue?'

Fauna snorted a laugh, one I normally would've laughed at too. 'That's what lured you?'

I wished I was joking.

When the next class came around, that was replaced by a new thought:

Mum's death made my peers believe I was made of dust and it made me more anxious with each 'How are you coping?' that was thrown my way. Would I even be able to cope without the support from a counsellor?

English brought that question along twice. It first came from Hilary while I unpacked a book. It surprised me. I had known her for seven years. We had been inseparable since we started soccer. Of course she'd know about my situation. I'd have always told her and Fauna before anyone.

I stared, her grey eyes unfazed. She looked at me expectantly as she pulled her sheeny blonde hair into a topknot. I said, 'I'm not exactly overjoyed.'

'Of course not.' She shook her head. 'Eli already said in business class you broke down just past the gate.'

My book slammed and she flinched. Eli, the bastard. Why was I dumbfounded? It's how people noticed my snitching, through his unstitched mouth.

'Don't get so uptight. You're better than he is. He's exposing your flaws to the world—'

'So everyone thinks I'm a whiny brat.'

'So *he* looks like a better person. Too bad everyone knows he's an ass.'

We nodded. She was a trusted friend, though her methods to calm me were unorthodox. For her, it made sense. Nobody associated sappiness with Hilary. She was direct.

'I hope you're still coming to soccer tonight.'

I exhaled through the first smile I made all day. 'I've missed it too much to say no.'

Hilary grinned. 'Gotta make a good first impression to be considered captain next year.'

'Speak for yourself. What makes you think I'd wanna be captain?'

'You did back in Year 10. You wouldn't stop talking about Katie, how much you aspired to be where she was.' Hilary waved her hand flamboyantly.

I leaned into her and whispered. 'We both know I was crushing on her.'

Hilary shrugged. 'Hey, it got you far regardless. Luke will at least consider you.'

'No, that's your role. You dreamed it for years! I will give it up for you.'

'How humble of you.'

The second indirect question that regarded my sanity was from Miss Werman. She was a highly praised English teacher, who arrived only last year but was reputable due to her style of teaching. She'd pick coherent topics to examine, awarding her the best passing rate in the school.

On my way out of the class, she asked me to stay behind. I hoped it would be as quick as she insisted.

'Should I wait?' Hilary said.

I shook my head. 'I'll catch up.'

The room was left to the two of us. Miss sat on her front desk next to the window. She made an effort to look professional and avoid relaxation. A serious matter was about to topple from her full lips. Her narrow eyes rested on me. As she tossed her cascade of black waves over her shoulder, she said, 'The staff notified me about your loss, Abby.'

I spat out of habit, 'I'm feeling fine.'

'Are you really?' she said, eyebrows raised.

'I'm not rocking in a corner sobbing my mother's name.' I did that for a week after we returned home, but the mention of it got me a step closer to despair.

She let out a single laugh. 'Never heard it that way before.'

'Does that mean I'll get an Excellence in creative writing?'

Her smile widened. 'You and I both wish it would be that easy.' She pulled a pen out of her drawer and started flicking it between her fingers. 'But we both know things will be getting harder for you this year, no?'

I knew the direction this was going, and I didn't want it to. I heard it once already and that was enough. 'I was never the best at English anyway.'

Miss Werman kept a stern face. 'Students who face smaller shocks than the death of a relative get declining grades, you know. I want you to know that I'm willing to help, if this becomes challenging.'

'And I can email you for an after school interview if I need help with my English work.'

Her brows furrowed. 'What kind of animal would I be to only worry about your grades?'

My eyes widened. Maybe she was as good as everyone claimed her to be.

She flicked her pen onto the desk and stood. She stood an elegant and refined head taller than me. 'I know death can draw a family either closer or further apart. I know death can put a lot of financial things into perspective. I know that an *unexpected* death can blow things far out of proportion.'

'Things already were before Mum died.'

Miss Werman's frown held in place. 'Go on...'

'You know about Geoff Latu, right?'

She gawked. 'I taught him last year. You're the one he and his friends have been taunting?'

My shoulders tensed and I nodded.

Her gaze turned to steel. 'Right... I will definitely need to have a word with him on that...'

'You're gonna need more than a word, Miss.'

'I know.' Miss Werman smiled down at me. 'Luckily I have this I can smack him on the head with.' She pulled a dictionary off the shelf behind her.

I burst into laughter. 'You'll get arrested or something, but I wanna see that.'

She grinned and slid the dictionary back. 'It can be our little secret. Now go and enjoy your break. Sorry for keeping you.'

'No worries, Miss. Thank you!'

I rushed out of the classroom. I hoped the counsellors didn't close the office for break time or a welcome back party.

The school couldn't decide if they wanted the health centre to look like a hospital or the kids section of a library. The waiting seats were brighter than my hair and in abstract shapes, but the walls and floors looked like the ones in my bathroom—grey lino, white tiles, and pale blue walls. The counselling services were concealed behind a plain wooden door with a laminated sign.

It was my barricade, too. If I knocked, I'd say goodbye to my little shell of security. If I left, I'd feel only the strain of it on my back. Both sounded terrible.

I went for the worse of the two evils. I knocked thrice on the door.

A beacon peered through the crack. The shine on his bald head was muted once the door opened all the way. My counsellor smiled at me. That smile hid sympathy too much. 'Abby, great to see you again!'

I forced a smile back. 'Hey, Vaughn.'

Why did I sign myself up to this? I couldn't do this to Vaughn of all people. This guy was genuine, willing to help conquer a test or survive the year. I was the greatest struggle he had to work with. It didn't seem right to never laugh at his ironic humour in times of tears or receive his inevitably accurate high-fives again.

They'd just have to remain memories.

'I'm sorry about your mum,' Vaughn sighed. 'Are you...'

'Yes, I am coping,' I accidentally croaked. With each inhale I noticed the tears stayed in.

'Really?' His brow line rose. He didn't smile. I expected him to be impressed, to throw a high-five my way. 'You said you were close to her before. I thought you'd be crying in front of me.'

'She'd be holding it in.'

'Of course, it's great that you're looking up to her in spite of everything.'

This wasn't just because she was hot headed, with a Google's worth of insults whenever someone got in her way. She once told me her greatest pain was that her job took her away from her family for five whole days. It was never how sore she was from working at the quarry an hour out of Rotorua, or how some weekends she couldn't do anything but struggle to sleep. It was that she missed us. Mum was tough as nails yet the biggest softie. A warrior with her heart as her shield.

'What brings you here?' Vaughn walked over to his swivelling chair across from a blood red sofa. He welcomed me while I pushed myself out the doorway as if a pane of glass stopped me.

That made it harder to say, 'I don't need counselling anymore.' My voice cracked like a vase.

So did his expression. 'Oh?'

I rapidly exhaled, braking on my words so they wouldn't tumble out. 'It's time I do things for myself.'

'Abby, this isn't a good time. After your bullying *and* your mum's death?' He frowned. He wasn't proud. What happened to him being happy every time I stood up for myself? The one thing he still had was the ability to sway me.

But I could resist if I wanted to. 'The only way to go is up, right? I look forward to defying odds.' I turned away and left it where I wanted to leave it.

'No!' Vaughn yelled. That was a first. My head jittered against the doorframe.

He collected his breaths before he explained himself without an apology. 'You can't shut yourself out like that.' His unblinking gaze didn't break once. 'Abby, you alone can't support your fall. While this decision is yours, we'll still be here. You can always come back. Don't be ashamed of having counselling.'

I paced backwards slowly to make sure we would not continue the argument. 'Then I'll make sure I won't fall. It was helpful while you were there, Vaughn. And thanks for that.' I harnessed a brief smile. 'And thanks, but I can't spend the rest of my life crawling back to you guys.' I turned.

'Abby, you don't get it.'

Vaughn was right. I didn't want to get it. Summer air welcomed me on the way out, a subtle reassurance.

'I take it didn't go well?'

Fauna halted me just past the edge of the building. I pulled my content face back into view. 'I'd never seen Vaughn so persistent on keeping me.'

'I can see why.' Hilary popped beside me. 'You're an emotional wreck who can't block a punch if she tried.'

My jaw tightened and eyes narrowed.

'No offence.'

That was exactly what I didn't want to be. I hated that truth as much as I hated Geoff and his squad.

No, I could never equal that hate if I tried.

'Have faith, that's gonna change,' I insisted, to her and myself. I wasn't used to it yet. The plaster was only just ripped off and the sting ghosted. My wounds *would* heal.

Fauna nodded as the three of us set on a walk. 'If this works out right, it'll be good for you.'

'You told me it was a bad thing,' Hilary said.

'If she'd come out in a mess.' She smiled at me. 'But she held her ground. One small step for man.' I returned that smile.

Hilary sighed. 'I still don't like this...'

'What decision of ours did you really like, Hilary?'

Their bickering continued, as usual. Their voices soon drained out.

I overlooked the dehydrated field, bustling with boys tackling each other in rugby or dodging each other in soccer. Bunches of people circled the boundaries, hugging trees and buildings.

Their games all paused. Everyone swarmed at a point like iron to magnets, leisure abandoned. The gathering became exponential and never shrunk. So did the noise. Within it, a scream.

This was viral. This was a fight.

I jumped straight onto the field, slowed by the weight of my bag over one shoulder. Hilary bounded behind me.

'Abs!' she said, 'Are you out of your mind?'

I ran on. 'Maybe.'

'I think you mean yes!' She grabbed my hand and pulled me to a stop, surprisingly strong. 'Since when did you run to fights?'

I stopped. They normally came to *me*. Why did this interest me?

Behind her, Fauna strode. 'And I thought good was gonna come from this. Abby Tacker, I've lost my faith in you.'

They agreed on something completely. That was a first.

Hilary locked her fingers around my wrists. 'Let's just go back, okay? Let's just sit in the maths block and share some chips.'

There was some form of persuasion inside my head; the soft sobs of a child or whimper of a dog. I could act as a bystander and walk away but this was like how chocolate sauce could never *not* be put on vanilla ice cream.

Like I would regret ignorance.

Wrists yanked away and bag dropped, I sprinted off. 'Abby!' Hilary yelled. With Fauna, she chased after me. I didn't stop for a thought but Fauna did. I saw her breathless with a stitch in her side. Soccer paid off. That was clear when Hilary was on my tail.

I slipped into the first layer of the crowd. She was virtually gone.

My adrenaline peaked. Every sound was orchestrated, the fight a

conductor to the watchers' voices. I couldn't see anything even if I jumped. Even when people gave me room to see, I was opposed. I'd have to shuffle my flimsy body through half of the school to make it to the core of the crowd.

Why was I unable to walk away from this like any other fight?

Prying gaps between them, I slid in between layers of bodies. Everyone smelled terrible, like they didn't wash their uniforms over the holidays. It was musky and equally strong when I blocked my nose. I squeezed through all those people, it was like being in a crowded sauna. There was heat of lava, stains of sweat that tainted my arms, and masses of reeking bodies. Not even half the school present tried to turn me to putty. Regret flooded my thoughts, but the gaps behind me closed as quickly as I made them. One way streets had never been shittier. It felt like hours until I made it to the front of the human colosseum.

I wanted the crowds to swallow me straight back in. Of course Geoff was involved, flanked by Nate and Eli, but even when he didn't regard me he drugged me into cowardice. He paced around a girl as she stood up from a crumpled mess, her words lost in the crowd, but her tone crying for help. She was shoved back again, a crude comment followed. Onlookers tried to swallow her back, but the moment Geoff got close they let go and dented the circle around them.

His target was obviously new to this school—who'd cross Geoff? Not because I hadn't seen her before, I barely recognised half the school. She was in desperate shock—a need to escape—every time I saw her face. She'd get knocked down each chance she had to stand, lost in a furrow of black tangles. I was there many times before, though this was a new record. Geoff started beating me within a month of Year 11, and I didn't want to know the catalyst of this encounter. All I knew was that she was like me.

Without thinking, I stood between them. Geoff froze. My heart stopped. I expected the worst.

'Hello, little Canary,' he said.

‘Warmest greetings, Geoff.’ I rolled my eyes and straightened myself.

Nate scowled. ‘The fuck do you want?’

‘You to just mind your fucking business and leave this damned school alone.’ I picked up the girl on the ground next to me. Her eyes were innocently wide, locked straight onto me as if I was a goddess. I didn’t deserve to be looked at so highly.

Geoff growled. ‘Since when was it your business too?’ My chest clenched.

The girl’s grip shivered on my arm, she wanted me to shield her. I wanted to shiver with her in the threatening eyeline of Geoff. A timid voice whimpered close to my neck. She didn’t deserve to be tossed to him to be knocked down again.

‘We don’t know what you’re proving here.’ Eli narrowed his eyes. ‘But you better take that’ —he pointed at the tank-like man he winged —‘as a warning.’

‘What *I’m* trying to prove?’ I gawked. ‘The hell are *you* trying to prove?’

‘We’re not proving it to you.’ Geoff folded his arms. ‘And I thought you wanted to stay clear of us.’

That sounded tempting, but that was in the past. I took this matter into my own hands despite knowing this wouldn’t work.

‘It’s you three who need to stay clear of everyone!’ I turned to the crowd around us, too enraged to feel embarrassed. ‘Fighting a girl unprovoked.’

‘You don’t know that.’

I glared back at Geoff. ‘I know that you belong in a straitjacket, you fucking monster!’

Geoff’s eyebrows shadowed over his pupils. ‘Oh, do I?’

*Where the fuck did that come from?*

His scowl curved into a grin as sharp as a sword and I shrunk. Or did he grow? Twice as buff, twice as demonic, twice as merciless. I couldn’t turn from his menacing gaze, as if eye contact kept me safe from harm.

His voice echoed as his words replayed in my head. 'You called this, Canary.'

I pushed the girl into the crowd. My eyes spotted her, I hoped she wouldn't get dragged back, but I was the new act for this audience.

Geoff's demonic eyes locked onto me as he advanced. The crowd parted, Nate and Eli cussing at those who tried to intervene or pull me back. *This was a mistake, this was a mistake.* I dared not to project my thoughts.

'If I belong in an asylum, who's gonna take me there? Surely not you.'

I tripped on a rugby boot and thudded onto the grass. *Shit!* From the ground, Geoff was far more monstrous; his size matched my fear of him. Amongst the shouts, Nate and Eli riled him up. The people behind me murmured gutless wishes to help. I couldn't blame them.

Geoff chuckled. 'Besides, you're the crazy one. Always running into us when you say you're afraid.'

Before I could scamper away, Geoff's shoe dug into my ankle and his fingers into my shoulder. He almost had claws, if his nails were longer. I peeled off the grass, forced to stare up at the demon. He grinned—the worst was yet to come.

He picked me up by the collar, the crowd gasping. 'In fact,' he said, setting me down, 'I'd like to see what *you* can do.' He took a step back and held his hands out. 'I'll give you a free shot at me.'

The crowd murmured with anticipation and my eyes darted to their eager gazes. They knew how much hatred had bottled up inside me. But it was a dumb move. I had no strength to do it, and it was something he wanted. It would probably feel like a massage to him.

Geoff looked just as surprised as the rest of the crowd to see my reluctance, my hands creeping behind my back and my eyes darting to find an escape from this colosseum. His arms dropped. 'Well, ain't that adorable.'

His fist barrelled into my gut and the crowd shrieked like a murder of crows. Breaths spluttered away. Words couldn't make it off my tongue. I could almost feel my minute breakfast at the back of my

throat, the yeasty taste of Marmite returning. I was picked up just as soon by my collar again, choked by the seams.

‘You made an easy target, Canary. Can I take another shot?’

The choir of the crowd shrunk. Only Nate and Eli could be heard, but they didn’t cheer. ‘Geoff... stop... trouble...’ That was all I could hear. Their arms wrapped around his biceps and I flopped to the ground.

Finally. Oxygen wheezed back into my lungs. The sky spun in a blur. A wretch curled in my stomach.

I was sat up. Fauna and Hilary squatted before me and outspoke each other. Fauna checked me over and threw question after question while Hilary shrieked.

Behind them, the trio forged excuses out of cowardly looks at a deputy principal. Except Geoff. He stood, head down. His eyes occasionally locked with mine.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amy Rosenfeldt is a New Zealand-based professional daydreamer. Her lifelong passion for storytelling won her the Creative Writing award at her high school and a scholarship to study communications at AUT University. She loves to dive deep into her characters' minds and discover what makes people tick, continuing to do so in community theatre and playing Dungeons and Dragons. When not crafting her next story, Amy can be found tap dancing her heart away or draining the energy out of her cat, Maxie.

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