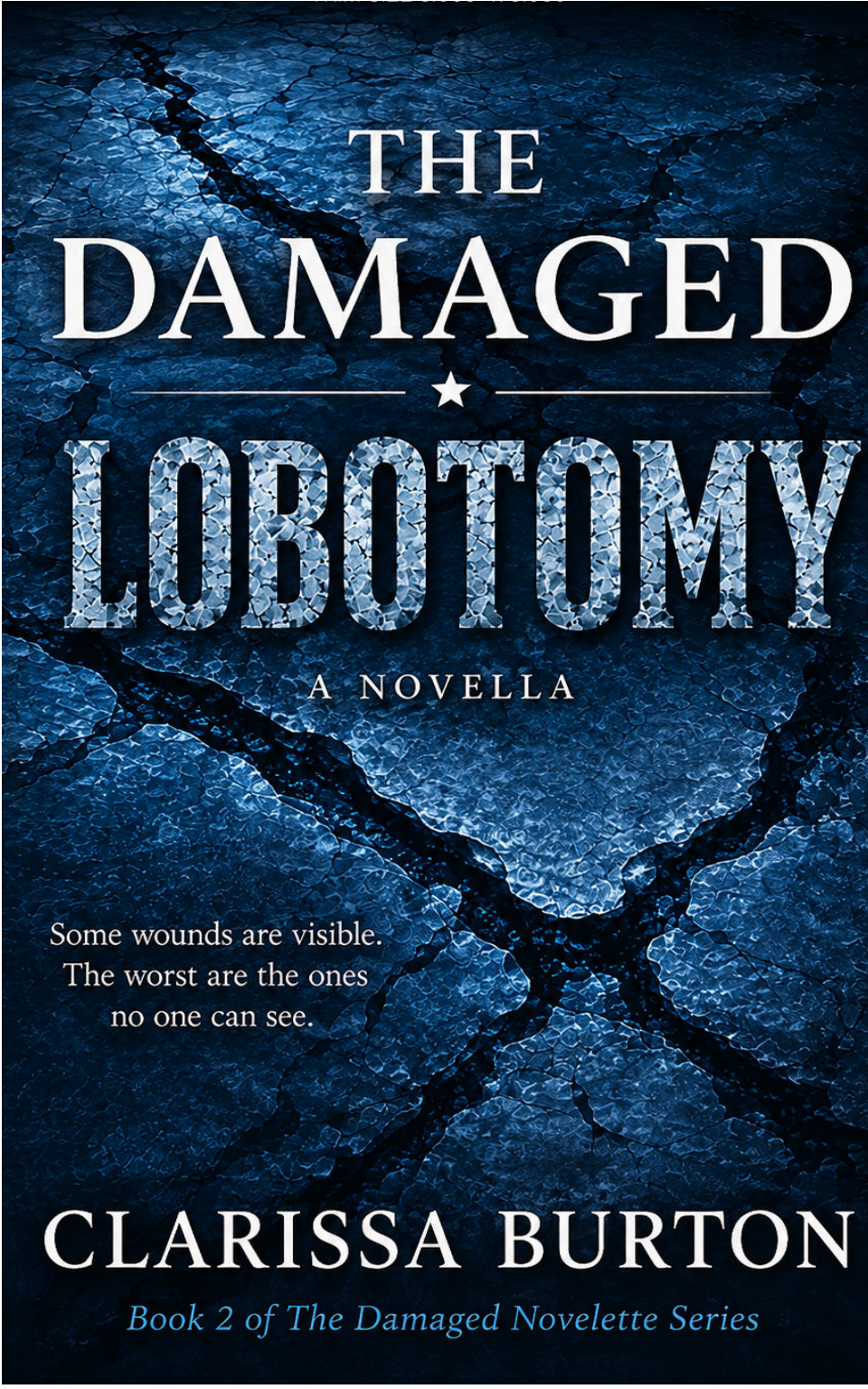




# THE DAMAGED



# LOBOTOMY

A NOVELLA

Some wounds are visible.  
The worst are the ones  
no one can see.

# CLARISSA BURTON

*Book 2 of The Damaged Novelette Series*

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Some names have been changed to protect the innocent and out of respect for bystanders or fringe people.

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# LOBOTOMY



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# DEDICATION

To every military veteran who has carried invisible wounds while walking among the seemingly unbroken — this is for you.

We are tied together by more than uniforms, ranks, or duty stations.

We are bound by the quiet battles fought behind calm expressions, by the scars no one salutes, by the courage it takes to keep breathing when the world believes you are fine.

Our damages may differ, but our bond is permanent.

Unshakeable.

Forever forged in the fire of what we survived.

---

# INTRODUCTION

The fifth floor of a Naval Hospital is a world most people will never see – nor would they want to. Up there, the air feels heavier, quieter, as if sorrow has weight. The halls echo differently, absorbing sound instead of carrying it. This is where the Navy keeps the ones who've been shattered – those whose pieces no longer fit the way they used to. Race, rank, gender, orientation – none of it matters here. Pain is the great equalizer. Trauma doesn't discriminate.

We were The Damaged.

We clung to each other out of necessity, like survivors of a shipwreck building a raft from whatever scraps floated near. In that place, surrounded by sterile walls and silent stares, we needed to know someone else breathed the same kind of hurt. We needed an alliance. No one outside those doors understood the language of psychological shrapnel or the weight of nightmares that refused to stay in the dark.

---



Our secrets had been locked away for years — buried deep, cemented over, forgotten by everyone except the souls they haunted. Now here we were, ten strangers in uniform — officers and enlisted — ordered to unravel our stories in front of each other. Stories soaked in blood. Stories impossible to forget. Stories you'd think were lifted from the darkest corners of Hollywood, except there were no actors on this stage. Only the wounded.

My story isn't uncommon, but it has been unspoken. Hidden. Guarded. Some who read this may recognize their own scars in mine. Some may be furious. Some horrified. Others may feel an uncomfortable disgust because they believed I was too strong to fall, too disciplined to break, too perfect to be damaged.

But this isn't a story written to satisfy anyone's expectations.

The truth is simple: We are all damaged. And for some of us, trying to piece ourselves back together can be more dangerous than remaining broken.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To **Dr. A.** — you believed me when no one else dared to look past the surface. Your conviction saved two lives: mine and the tiny one who was fighting inside me. Today, that baby you protected has grown into a brilliant, breathtaking woman. Her existence is a testament to your courage.

To **K.** — you listened when my voice trembled. You acted when I begged you not to. By taking me to the emergency room that night, you gave me what I could not give myself: proof. Documentation. A record that my truth existed even when I was too afraid to speak it aloud. Your determination carved a path toward survival.

To **my circle of damaged comrades** — your stories broke me open. They stripped away the last illusions I held about suffering in silence. But in that breaking, you gave me something unexpected: courage. Strength. The resolve to reclaim my humanity. We may have entered those grey walls as strangers, but we survived them bound together by the same invisible wounds.

---

# PREFACE

---

*Because some don't see the pain,  
they refuse to believe the pain. ~  
Clarissa 'Queen of the Pen' Burton  
The LORD is nigh unto them that  
are of a broken heart; And saveth  
such as be of a contrite spirit. ~  
Psalm 34, King James Version  
(KJV)*

---

Updated 2025: This series has been updated from its original publication in 2014. My personal relationship with Jesus Christ has drastically changed my brokenness to wholeness. The original story highlights a very important period in my life where the damage from a life of uncertainty, abuse, spiritual vacancy, and hopelessness had taken a deep toll. Fast forward to 2025, and I can – with absolute certainty – declare the love, peace, and absolutely grace of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So, as you read my story, remember, these events happened during a time I was my furthest away from Jesus. But guess what? He NEVER left my side.

We are all broken in some way.

No one arrives in this world fractured. Children begin as whole beings – wide-eyed, trusting, untouched by the shadows that shape the rest of us. They love without caution. They give without expecting anything in return. But innocence is fragile, and the world is full of people carrying their own cracks. Broken people break others, often without knowing, sometimes without caring. It becomes a cycle – relentless, ancient, and so tangled no one can truly say where the first fracture began.

---

Some will say the damage started in Eden, with a single bite of forbidden fruit. Others claim it's woven into our evolution – survival, dominance, the instincts of the fittest. Maybe both are true. Maybe neither. All that really matters is this: the breaking has already happened. And now we spend our lives trying to gather the pieces, trying to rebuild what was shattered long before we understood the cost.

This story – the one you're holding in your hands – began resurfacing on Friday, January 3, 2014. After more than twenty-six years of silence, my memories finally forced their way into the light. It's time. Time to face the nightmares. Time to confront the ghosts. Time to walk back into the flames so I can finally walk out of them.

I don't expect this journey to be easy. The darkness may return. The old fears may wake. But if enduring the echoes of the past is the price of claiming a peaceful future, then I will pay it willingly.

I do not write this series for pity.

I write so others might understand who I am – and why I am who I am.

I write because I deserve to live unashamed, on my own terms, without apology.

And I write for every damaged comrade who  
still suffers in silence, convinced no one would  
understand the language of their pain.

– **Clarissa Burton, EM3, USN**

Active Duty, 1985–1990

# CHAPTER ONE

## *Airman Scott*



---

*Put on the full armor of God [for  
His precepts are like the splendid  
armor of a heavily-armed soldier],  
so that you may be able to  
[successfully] stand up against all  
the schemes and the strategies and  
the deceits of the devil. ~ Ephesians  
6:11, Amplified Version (AMP)*

---



## Lobotomy

Scott lies to my left again, curled on his side with his knees tucked up close – small, fragile, childlike. Morning light filters through the narrow ward window, casting a pale glow across his freckled face. His reddish-blond curls look softer in daylight, like something untouched by the darkness that stalks him every night.

I rest on my right side, my belly a firm, round weight pressing into the mattress. My baby is quiet for once, as if sensing the stillness around us. I exhale, watching Scott sleep, hoping the demons inside his head are giving him a moment's peace.

He looks so young like this.

Too young to carry the kind of torment I've seen in his eyes.

There is an innocence in him I can't ignore – something raw and unprotected, something that makes me want to shield him even though I'm barely holding myself together. Maybe he senses that I'm safe. Or maybe he gravitates toward me because I don't demand anything from him.

---

Either way, we've formed an unspoken bond  
in this place.

Two trapped souls.

Two damaged hearts.

Two people trying to survive the nights.

## Unlawful Orders

I'm not feeling well today. The air feels heavy, my skin too tight. Stress has my blood pressure spiking again, and the baby pushes restlessly beneath my ribs.

I tell the day nurse I'm unwell. She shrugs — there's little she can do for a pregnant woman who refuses medication. Painkillers, antidepressants, sedatives — all off-limits. And I'm glad. I don't trust this place enough to accept anything I didn't ask for.

Earlier, the charge nurse tried to force a flu shot on me.

"I'm pregnant," I reminded her. "I don't want to risk anything."

"You can't refuse a lawful order," she snapped.

I walked away before she could finish her threat. My baby comes first. Always. They can write me up, punish me, call me defiant — fine. I refuse to be a test subject in their medical experiments.

But a deeper fear has been twisting in my gut since this morning. Scott is different now. And I know exactly why.

---

He left early for a “medical appointment,” escorted by two burly orderlies dressed in crisp whites. Watching him walk between them – uniform pressed, curls hidden beneath his white Navy cap – felt wrong. All wrong. Like he was being prepped for something he couldn’t understand.

He smiled at me before he left, but it wasn’t the usual bright, jittery smile. His eyes were full of something I couldn’t name. Something close to terror.

Now the ward feels colder. Emptier. Like a piece of it has been removed.

## Too Quiet

The ward clock reads 1400 hours. Scott still hasn't returned.

My baby senses my anxiety — she twists and presses against me, restless, unsettled. I breathe deeply, trying to soothe her, trying not to let fear sink its claws too deep.

I need to stop worrying about Scott, I tell myself. I need to focus on my future, on finding a way out, on building a life where no one can hurt me again.

But the truth is — the silence around his absence scares me.

I go to the common area to distract myself. I read the same paragraph of a book six times without understanding a word. My eyes drift to the hallway every few minutes.

Still no Scott.

---

## The Form

The nurse calls me to the medicine window.  
My heart stutters—I expect another  
confrontation.

But instead, she hands me a clipboard.

“I need you to sign this,” she says.

Fear spikes. “What is it?”

“Documentation stating you refuse the flu  
shot. You must acknowledge the potential risks.”

No threats. No anger. Just procedure.

She lets me take the form to the common area.  
For the first time since I’ve met her, she seems...  
human. Tired. Maybe even understanding.

I read every paragraph. Twice. It’s simple  
paperwork, nothing more. A record that I chose  
to protect my baby in my own way.

I initial every line. Sign my name. Hand it  
back.

For a moment, I feel like I’ve reclaimed a tiny  
piece of control.

---

# Still No Scott

Hours pass.

The air changes when the orderlies finally return. The door opens. The fluorescent lights flicker. Something shifts – like the energy in the ward has tilted.

And then I see him.

Scott stands between them, but he isn't...

SCOTT.

His posture is stiff.

His eyes dull.

His smile gone.

They guide him inside like someone who's forgotten how to walk. He doesn't look up. Doesn't greet me. Doesn't greet anyone. He sits on his bed and stares at the wall as if the wall is whispering secrets only he can hear.

A chill grips my spine.

Something happened to him.

Something they won't tell us.

Something that feels like a violation.

He's been altered.

Quieted.

Suppressed.

Not healed – controlled.

---

## Night Fear

I try to rest, but sleep evades me. The lights dim. The ward stills. But my mind races.

Scott has been sleepwalking into my bed every night, climbing toward me in a trance, eyes blank, body moving without him. I never feared him—only the danger of the moment.

But the orderlies fear him.

And they've decided to solve that fear their way.

As I lie there in the darkness, one thought loops through my mind:

What did they do to him?

What procedure did they force on him?

And what will they do to me if I push too hard?

My baby shifts. I place a protective hand over her.

Whatever is happening on this floor...I must survive it.

For her.

---



# CHAPTER TWO

## *The Circle*



---

*We are pressured in every way  
[hedged in], but not crushed;  
perplexed [unsure of finding a way  
out], but not driven to despair; ~ 2  
Corinthians 4:8*

---

## The Ambush

The next morning arrives like an ambush.

No warning.

No mercy.

Just the sudden blare of fluorescent lights and the grinding rhythm of the ward coming alive again.

My body aches from a night of half-sleep, turning from side to side with a belly too big for comfort and a mind too full for rest. The baby twists gently beneath my ribs—restless, sensitive to every tremor inside me.

Breakfast is a blur. Rivera mutters curses under her breath. Thompkins stares off like he's trapped in another dimension. Ski looks like he didn't sleep at all. Manning watches everyone like he's guarding invisible borders around each of us.

And Scott...

Scott is silent.

He sits with perfect posture, eyes fixed on a point just above his plate, as if he's staring through a world only he can see.

His transformation is terrifying.

---

No pacing.

No nervous chatter.

No smile.

Just emptiness.

Whatever they did to him – whatever happened in that “appointment” – has hollowed him out.

I sit beside him but don’t speak. I’m afraid too many words might push him further into whatever void he’s falling through.

# The Summons

The charge nurse calls us.

“Circle. Now.”

Everything stops. Forks freeze midway to lips. Shoulders tighten. Eyes drop to the floor. We stand in a line like inmates responding to a command.

The circle room waits for us like a trap.

I feel my blood pressure rise as we shuffle toward it. My belly tightens in discomfort. The baby kicks once, sharply – like a warning.

We enter.

Same chairs. Same grey walls. Same suffocating silence.

We sit.

I take my usual seat closest to the door – a calculated habit. The only escape I’m allowed.

The Commander arrives with junior officers trailing behind him like ducklings with clipboards. Their faces are masks of calm professionalism, untouched by the raw emotion swirling through the room.

We’re case studies to them.

Stepping stones in their careers.

Not lives.

Not trauma.

Not flesh and blood.

---



## Anatomy of Breaking

As the session begins, the Commander scans the semicircle of broken souls seated in front of him.

“Who wants to start today?” he asks.

No one moves.

The silence is thick, a living thing curling around us like smoke.

He looks at Rivera first.

“Seaman?”

She stiffens, jaw clenched, eyes burning. She isn’t ready – not today. Not any day.

He moves on.

“Major Roberts?”

Roberts’ leg bounces violently. His throat contracts. He shakes his head without lifting his gaze.

The Commander exhales, annoyed.

Then his eyes land on Scott.

My heart stops.

“Airman Scott.”

Scott doesn’t respond. Doesn’t blink. Doesn’t even twitch. He sits motionless, staring at the floor as if hearing the echo of a voice we cannot hear.

“Airman,” the Commander repeats, louder.

“You’re up.”

---

Slowly – terrifyingly slowly – Scott lifts his head. His eyes look distant, like he’s underwater. His hands tremble in his lap.

I hold my breath.

His lips part.

And in a voice flat and emotionless – a voice nothing like the rapid, jittery tone he once had – he says:

“I don’t know who I am anymore.”

A ripple passes through the room.

Even the officers pause.

Scott’s gaze sweeps across us without recognition, like he’s searching for himself in faces he can’t identify.

“They took something out,” he whispers. “I feel it.”

A chill races down my spine. The silence in the room is no longer heavy – it’s electric. Dangerous.

Scott folds in on himself, arms wrapping tight around his torso.

“I feel... empty.”

The Commander clears his throat, uncomfortable. “Airman, let’s focus on –”

But Scott suddenly snaps upright.

“No,” he says sharply. “YOU focus.”

The officers shift uneasily.



“I used to feel things,” he continues. “I used to dream. I used to be scared. Now I’m nothing. I’m—”

His voice cracks.

His eyes fill.

His breath shatters.

“I’m not me anymore.”

A tremor runs through his body, violent and uncontrollable. Rivera looks away, biting her lip. Thompkins squeezes his fists until his knuckles turn white. Manning closes his eyes in silent grief.

And I feel something inside me break — quietly, painfully.

Because Scott isn’t describing a psychiatric symptom.

He’s describing a violation.

A loss.

A theft of self.

## The Silent Verdict

The Commander finally clears his throat and gestures for Scott to stop.

“That’s enough for today.”

But it isn’t enough.

It’s nowhere near enough.

It’s a warning wrapped in trauma.

Scott lowers his head, defeated. His hands shake violently in his lap. He looks like a boy who has lost the map home and fears he’ll never find it again.

The session continues, but everything feels muted. Faint. Like static.

I barely hear the others speak.

My mind is stuck on one thought:

If they can do that to him...

what will they do to me . . .

if I fight too hard

or speak too loudly

or refuse the wrong pills?

I place a hand protectively over my belly.

They cannot have my baby.

They cannot break me the way they broke him.

Circle ends.

The door opens.

We are dismissed.

---

But something has changed.

A line has been crossed.

A soul has been damaged beyond repair.

And all of us felt it.

# CHAPTER THREE

## *The Cycle*



---

*Then they cried out to the LORD in  
their trouble,  
And He saved them from their  
distresses. ~ Psalms 107:13*

---

# The Walk Back

The Circle is no longer just a room.

It's a pattern.

A loop.

A ritual of breaking.

A cycle.

Every day, we enter that same suffocating space. Every day, the junior officers watch us like scientists observing lab rats in a maze. Every day, we're asked to bleed out pieces of trauma we've spent years hiding.

And every day, something inside one of us fractures.

The ward drains our names, our ranks, our histories.

Here, we are stripped down to symptoms and diagnoses.

Here, the cycle feeds itself.

Trauma.

Extraction.

Collapse.

Repeat.

I feel it wearing at my edges — grinding me down, smoothing me into something softer, weaker, easier to control.

But I'm still fighting.

I have to.

---

For her.

After Scott's collapse yesterday, the ward feels different – quieter, but not calmer. More like the stillness before a storm, when the air goes unnaturally still and the sky holds its breath.

Even the orderlies move differently today, their eyes flicking between us like they're waiting for another explosion.

I keep glancing toward Scott, but he's unreachable now. Wrapped in a fog so thick no one can penetrate it. His curls hang limp over dull eyes, and his hands twitch in uneven pulses.

The baby kicks in response to my tension.

"I know," I whisper down to her. "I feel it too."

# Back in the Room

We sit in the same chairs.

The same dreary grey walls surround us.

The same flickering fluorescents hum  
overhead.

But today, something new hangs in the air.

Fear.

Not just mine — everyone's.

Ski's shoulders slump with defeat.

Rivera's jaw is locked in silent fury.

Roberts' leg doesn't just bounce — it shakes.

Manning watches us with eyes that see too  
much.

Thompkins stares forward, the muscles in his  
face twitching with tension.

We're all aware of the danger now.

We've seen what happens when someone  
breaks wrong.

The officers enter, clipboards ready.

The Cycle begins again.

---



## The Pattern

First comes the question.

"Who wants to share today?"

No one volunteers.

We never do.

The silence is the first wheel turning.

The Commander's gaze moves through us like a spotlight, searching for the next crack in the foundation.

Rivera? Too angry. Too volatile.

Roberts? Too fragile. Too unpredictable.

Thompkins? Too controlled. Too guarded.

Manning? Too silent. Too steady.

Scott? Broken already. No use pressing further.

And then his eyes land on me.

"Burton."

My lungs seize.

No.

Not today.

Not like this.

I can feel my heartbeat pounding in my throat, pulsing against my baby's tiny form. She shifts anxiously under my skin, sensing my fear.

"Burton," the Commander repeats. "You've been here long enough to contribute. The group can't help you if you won't participate."

---

Group.

Help.

It's almost laughable.

This room doesn't help – it extracts.

It exposes.

It wounds.

"I'm not ready," I say quietly.

The Commander raises a brow. "Readiness isn't part of the process. Healing requires honesty."

Healing.

If this is healing, what does harm look like?

"I don't have anything to share today," I answer, trying to keep my voice steady.

He leans back in his chair, frustration sharpening his tone.

"Burton, the purpose of this group is to break down barriers. You can't sit in the background and hide."

I'm not hiding.

I'm protecting the only part of me that still feels whole.

"I'm doing what I can," I whisper.

"Not enough," he replies.

# The Breaking Point

My palms sweat.

My chest tightens.

My baby squirms as if begging me to stay calm.

And then —

“I’m pregnant,” I blurt out.

The words fall into the room like a stone dropped into still water.

Silence.

Stares.

Shock.

I didn’t plan to say it.

I wasn’t ready to reveal the truth.

But something inside me snapped — a survival instinct firing in desperation.

Pregnancy is the only shield I have left.

The only excuse they might accept.

The only explanation that fits the emotional chaos burning through me.

The Commander’s eyes soften — just slightly.

“Burton,” he says, tone lowering, “we’re aware you’re expecting.”

“That’s why I can’t do this right now,” I say.

“I’m overwhelmed. Stressed. My blood pressure is high. I’m trying to protect my baby.”

---

For the first time since I arrived here, the officers hesitate.

They consult quietly among themselves.

Clipboards lower.

Pens stop scratching.

Something shifts.

Not kindness.

Not empathy.

Liability.

No one wants to be responsible for a pregnant woman breaking open in their care.

After a beat, the Commander nods stiffly.

“That’s fine, Burton. You may pass today.”

Relief floods me so fast I feel faint.

## The Cycle Continues

They move on to the next patient.

Their wheels turn.

Their questions pry.

Their pens record.

And the Cycle continues.

But today, I disrupted it.

I didn't break.

I didn't collapse.

I didn't lose myself like Scott.

I protected myself.

Protected her.

And in a place designed to strip us bare, that  
small victory feels monumental.

As we file out at the end of the session, I rest a  
hand on my belly and whisper:

"One day, we'll get out of here."

And for the first time...

I believe it.

---

# CHAPTER FOUR

## *The Reckoning*



---

*For your lifeblood I will most  
certainly require an accounting;  
from every animal [that kills a  
person] I will require it. And from  
man, from every man's brother [that  
is, anyone who murders] I will  
require the life of man [Exodus  
21:28-29]. ~ Genesis 9:5, Amplified  
Version (AMP)*

---

## Another Sacrifice

Reckonings don't arrive gently.

They crash.

They rupture.

They demand a truth you've spent a lifetime avoiding.

And this one begins at 0900 hours on the fifth floor, with the same sterile hallway, the same locked doors, the same hollow stares from the corpsmen and nurses. But there is a shift in the air — a tension so thick it almost hums.

Something is coming.

We all feel it.

The patients move slower today, as if the floor itself is heavier beneath our feet. Rivera snaps at an orderly for touching her arm. Ski mutters under his breath, voice low and trembling. Thompkins stares at his hands like they belong to someone else. Manning stands still as carved stone, watching everything with soldier-trained precision.

And Scott...

Scott is a ghost wrapped in skin.

He shuffles behind us in small, measured steps, eyes glazed, lips parted slightly as if he's breathing through a fog. Whatever they did to him has drained him of color, of emotion, of self.

---



He is the warning.

He is the prophecy.

He is what happens to those who don't break  
the right way.

And today, the Cycle demands another  
sacrifice.

# The Command Appearance

We file into the circle room, but something is different.

A senior officer is already there —  
a Captain.

Not a junior.

Not a trainee.

Not someone here for hours toward a  
certification.

A real authority.

A presence that shifts the entire gravitational  
pull of the room.

The Commander stands beside him, posture  
rigid.

The junior officers sit straighter.  
Even the walls seem to shrink.

The Captain looks each of us over with a slow,  
calculating sweep of his gaze.

This isn't a session.

This is an inspection.

We sit.

He remains standing.

And then he speaks.

---

## “There Have Been Concerns...”

“Over the last week,” the Captain begins,  
“there have been... incidents.”

His voice is smooth but cold, clipped in that way only seasoned officers can manage – each word sharpened to a blade.

“Behavioral issues. Emotional instability. Disruptions during clinical sessions. Non-compliance with medical directives.”

His eyes move to me when he says that last part.

A cold ripple moves through my spine.

I grip the sides of my chair, my baby pressing nervously against my ribs.

“You are here,” he continues, “because you are service members who have reached a psychological breaking point. Our job is to assess whether you can return to duty.”

He pauses, letting the implication settle.

“Or whether you cannot.”

The silence becomes suffocating.

We all understand what he’s saying:

*Your future in the military hangs in this room.*

*Your fate will be decided by what you reveal – or fail to reveal.*

*Break wrong, and you will be discharged.*

*Break right, and you might survive this place.*

---

Manning shifts uncomfortably.

Rivera's jaw clenches.

Roberts' leg shakes violently.

Scott doesn't move at all.

I whisper to my baby in my mind:

*Stay calm.*

*Stay safe.*

*Stay quiet.*

## Turning on the Light

The Captain steps closer.

"We need transparency," he says. "Full cooperation. Honesty. If you withhold information, it will affect your evaluation."

It's not a request.

It's a threat dressed in policy.

He turns to the Commander.

"Begin."

The Commander nods slightly and looks to the first patient.

But before he can speak, Rivera bolts upright.

# The Eruption

"This is trash!" she snaps.

The room freezes.

The officers stiffen.

The Captain raises an eyebrow.

Even Scott's vacant eyes flicker.

Rivera is shaking — full-body, explosively shaking — as if holding her pain inside any longer might kill her.

"You sit up there with your self-righteous clipboards like we're nothing but cases to study," she spits out. "You don't care what happened to us. You don't care why we're here. You just want us to crack open so you can make your notes and go home."

Her fists clench at her sides.

"You want honesty?"

Her voice breaks, raw and jagged.

"Then tell <sup>us</sup> the truth. Tell us what you're doing to him."

She points at Scott.

Scott blinks, confused by being addressed, then lowers his gaze back to the floor.

The Captain folds his arms, unimpressed.

"Sit down, Seaman."

Rivera doesn't move.

---

“You think we don’t notice?” she continues, voice rising. “You think we didn’t see what you did to him? He was fine. Scared, yeah. But himself. And now look.” Tears burn in her eyes. “You broke him. You hollowed him out. You took him apart and didn’t bother to put him back together.”

The Commander stands. “That’s enough.”

“No!” Rivera screams. “It’s not enough! Not until you answer – what did you DO to him?”

Her voice echoes, sharp and desperate.

Ski looks away, trembling.

Roberts starts hyperventilating.

Thompkins grips his chair with white knuckles.

Manning rises slightly, as if he expects violence.

And I –

I feel my heart pounding so hard my baby flutters in distress.

The officers move in.

They surround Rivera.

They speak in calm, rehearsed tones.

“Seaman, sit down.”

“Take a breath.”

“You’re escalating.”

“Let us help you.”

Help.

The most twisted word in this entire building.

Rivera backs away, chest heaving.

And then she collapses into her chair, defeated.

Silence swallows the room again.



# The Reckoning

Slowly, deliberately, the Captain turns his gaze to me.

Not Rivera.

Not Scott.

Me.

I don't breathe.

"Burton," he says, "you've refused medications, you've avoided participation, and you seem... resistant."

His gaze drops to my belly.

"Your condition complicates matters."

My pulse spikes.

He takes one step closer.

"We need to know exactly where you stand."

The reckoning has arrived.

And it's focused entirely on me.

I place my hands over my stomach—  
protective, defiant, terrified.

"I stand," I say softly, "where any mother would."

He studies me for a long moment.

Then . . .

"This isn't about motherhood. This is about your stability."

His words slice through the room.

And suddenly I understand—

This Chapter, this moment, this room . . .

This isn't about breaking down walls.

It's about deciding which souls will be rebuilt  
and which will be discarded.

---

# CHAPTER FIVE

## *The Dresser*



---

*Behold, children are a heritage and  
gift from the LORD,  
The fruit of the womb a reward.  
[Deuteronomy 28:4] ~ Psalms  
127:3, Amplified Version (AMP)*

---

## Anchor Point

There's a cheap, wooden dresser against the far wall of my room — the kind you'd find in military barracks or a motel or any place where people aren't meant to stay long.

Five drawers.

Pale, peeling laminate.

Edges worn soft from years of use.

A single loose handle that clinks every time I open it.

I never cared about it before.

But today...

it calls to me.

My emotions are stretched thin — pulled taut by the Captain's interrogation, by Rivera's explosion, by Scott's decay, by the weight of the baby inside me who senses every tremor in my body.

I need something to hold on to.

Something stable.

Something that won't collapse under the pressure.

The dresser becomes my anchor.

---

I stand in front of it, bare feet sinking into the cold tile floor. The room is quiet except for the steady hum of the fluorescent light in the hallway.

My reflection stares back at me from the tiny metal mirror above the dresser – warped, dim, distorted. I barely recognize her:

A young woman with dark circles under her eyes. A pregnant belly stretching the thin fabric of hospital scrubs. A jaw clenched from too many swallowed fears. A soul stitched together by sheer force of will.

I reach out and rest my hands on the top of the dresser.

Its surface is cool.

Solid.

Unmoving.

It is everything I am not.

# The Drawers

One by one, I pull them open.

## **Top drawer:**

Empty, except for the faint scent of old wood and disinfectant.

It feels like my past – wiped clean, erased, forgotten by everyone except me.

## **Second drawer:**

A folded pair of white socks.

Stiff, scratchy.

Standard issue.

Impersonal.

A reminder that this place treats us like interchangeable pieces on a conveyor belt.

## **Third drawer:**

My maternity underwear, washed stiff by hospital-grade detergent, folded neatly by the night nurse with quiet pity in her eyes.

## **Fourth drawer:**

A single blanket. Thin. Rough. Useless against the cold. Like the comfort they pretend to offer us.

## **Bottom drawer:**

My one personal item: a small, black-and-white ultrasound photo.

My baby.

My reason.

My heartbeat outside my body.

---

I lift it gently, holding it in both hands.

The edges are soft from too much touching.

The image grainy, but unmistakable.

A tiny profile.

A tiny spine.

A tiny life waiting for me to get it together.

A lump swell in my throat.

“I’m trying,” I whisper to her. “I promise I’m trying.”

## The Trigger

There's a sound from the hallway – a slam,  
sharp and sudden.

A nurse yelling.

Feet pounding.

A patient screaming something incoherent.

The ward is unravelling again.

My baby shifts inside me, startled.

I place the ultrasound back into the drawer  
and slide it shut with shaking hands. My breath  
quicken. Panic crawls up my throat. The walls  
feel too close. The air too thin.

I lean heavily onto the dresser – both palms  
flat, shoulders trembling, eyes closed.

“Not now,” I whisper. “Not today. Breathe...  
breathe...”

The dresser holds me steady.

Strong.

Unmoving.

I try to sync with it –

its weight,

its stillness,

its refusal to fall apart.



## The Reflection in the Metal

When I finally open my eyes again, I meet my reflection.

But something is different.

I don't look broken.

Or defeated.

Or lost.

I look angry.

Not the kind of wild, explosive anger that Rivera carries.

Something colder.

Sharper.

More controlled.

A quiet fury simmering beneath my skin.

A realization dawns on me – slow, heavy, undeniable:

They can break Scott.

They can silence Rivera.

They can terrify Roberts.

They can shake Ski.

They can monitor Manning.

They can interrogate Thompkins.

But they cannot control me.

Because I have something none of them have:

**I'm carrying a life.**

---

A future.

A reason to resist.

A reason to survive.

I stand taller.

The dresser steadies me, but I no longer need  
to lean.

# Resolve

I close every drawer, one by one, with  
deliberate care.

Top to bottom.

Past to present.

Pain to purpose.

When I finish, I whisper:

“We’re getting out of here.”

Not a hope.

Not a wish.

A decision.

A reckoning of my own.

My baby kicks — once, firmly — almost like  
agreement.

The dresser stands silently in front of me.

Solid.

Unmoving.

Witness to the moment something inside me  
shifted.

And for the first time, I feel something  
powerful rising beneath my fear:

Strength.

---

## CHAPTER SIX

### *The Commanding Officer*



---

*Now therefore, O kings, act wisely;  
Be instructed and take warning, O  
leaders (judges, rulers) of the earth.  
~ Psalms 2:10, Amplified Version  
(AMP)*

---

The summons comes at 1300 hours.

A corpsman appears in the doorway of my room, stiff-backed and stone-faced.

“Burton,” he says. “The Commanding Officer wants to see you.”

My stomach twists.

Not morning sickness.

Not fear, exactly.

Something sharper.

A warning.

Visits with the CO don’t happen unless something big is brewing – disciplinary action, major evaluations, or decisions that change your fate with one stroke of a pen.

I slide off the bed slowly, one hand supporting my belly. The corpsman doesn’t offer help. They never do. Not out of cruelty – out of protocol. Touching patients is only sanctioned during emergencies or restraint procedures.

As I follow him down the hallway – past the nurse’s station, past the locked medication room, past the observation window where junior officers scribble notes – every step feels like walking toward judgment.

---

The CO's office sits at the end of a quiet corridor.

A door with a brass nameplate.

A room where choices are made about people like me.

Behind it waits a man who has never seen me except on paper.

My baby shifts uneasily under my ribs.

"I know," I whisper. "Just stay calm."

The corpsman knocks once, then opens the door.

"Enter."

## The Man Behind the Desk

The Commanding Officer sits with the kind of posture that only decades in uniform can sculpt — spine straight, hands clasped neatly on his desk, shoulders squared as though bracing for the weight of everyone beneath him.

His tan uniform is immaculate.

His ribbons gleam.

His expression is unreadable.

He doesn't stand.

Doesn't smile.

Doesn't greet me with anything close to warmth.

"Sit, Petty Officer Burton."

I comply. Slowly. Carefully.

He takes a moment to study me — not my face, not my demeanor, but my belly. His eyes linger there, brief but telling.

Then his attention shifts to the file in front of him.

My file.

My life, condensed into reports, codes, signatures, and diagnoses.

"You've been on the fifth floor for twelve days," he begins, voice even. "Your treatment team has submitted preliminary evaluations."

My heartbeat quickens.

---



Evaluations.

Judgments.

Decisions.

All written in rooms I wasn't allowed to enter.

The CO flips a page.

"There are concerns about your participation  
in group sessions."

Concerns.

The new favorite word in this building.

He continues:

"You've refused certain medications."

"You requested exemption from vaccines."

"Your emotional presentation is described as  
guarded, withdrawn, occasionally oppositional."

Oppositional.

Because I protected my baby.

He looks up from the file.

His gaze sharpens, like a blade turned in my  
direction.

"Explain to me why you're not cooperating."

# The Trap

The question is a trap.

If I say I'm overwhelmed, I'm unstable.

If I say I'm afraid, I'm paranoid.

If I say the ward is harming me, I'm delusional.

If I say nothing, I'm noncompliant.

Every answer is a diagnosis waiting to happen.

I take a breath and choose my words carefully.

"I'm doing the best I can, sir."

His eyes flicker — just slightly.

"That's not what your treatment notes suggest."

"I'm pregnant," I say calmly. "My emotions are affected by stress, not illness. I'm trying to manage both."

He doesn't blink.

Doesn't soften.

Doesn't acknowledge the complexity of carrying life while fighting for your own.

"Your pregnancy is noted," he says. "But it does not excuse non-compliance."

The words hit like a slap.

---

## A Subtle Threat

He closes the file and folds his hands again.

“You need to understand something, Petty Officer.”

His tone shifts — still calm, but colder.

More dangerous.

“We evaluate service members on this floor to determine whether they are fit to return to duty.”

He leans forward.

“And whether they are safe to be released.”

The message beneath the message is unmistakable:

**Your freedom is not guaranteed.**

**Your autonomy is conditional.**

**Your future is in our hands.**

He continues, voice low.

“If you refuse treatment, if you resist therapy, if you challenge the authority of the medical staff — this may result in an administrative separation.”

A dishonorable discharge.

The end of my career.

A stain on my record.

A label that follows me forever.

But worse —

It could mean losing my baby to a system that thinks I’m unfit.

---

I grip the arms of the chair, breathing through  
the pressure tightening in my chest.

## The Counterattack

"Sir," I say softly, "with all due respect, I'm trying. I'm attending every session. I'm following every order that doesn't put my baby at risk. I want to get better. I want to return to duty."

He watches me closely.

"And I want to be a good mother," I add.

Something shifts in his expression.

Not compassion—he's too trained for that.

But recognition.

Understanding the stakes.

After a long pause, he exhales.

"I will note your statement," he says. "Your evaluations will continue for the remainder of your stay."

No promises.

No reassurances.

Only procedure.

He picks up his pen and scribbles something in my file.

Dismissal.

"Thank you, Petty Officer. You may return to the ward."

---

## A Different Kind of Walk Back

I leave the office with trembling legs.

The corpsman escorts me back toward the ward, but his presence blurs at the edges of my awareness. My pulse echoes in my ears. My baby presses against me, sensing the storm still swirling under my skin.

As the doors close behind me, and the locked world of the fifth-floor swallows me back in, one realization burns brighter than all the fear:

**They are deciding my fate.**

**But I am shaping it.**

**With every refusal.**

**Every choice.**

**Every breath.**

The CO may hold the paperwork.

But I hold the will.

And I will not break the way they expect me to.

---

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *The Adjutant*



---

*An unjust man is an abomination  
to the just;  
And he that is upright in the way is  
abomination to the wicked. ~  
Proverbs 29:27, Amplified Version  
(AMP)*

---



## Without Warning

The noose of institutional pressure shows how the system closes ranks – while at the same time revealing cracks in that structure.

The Adjutant shows up without warning.

He enters the ward like a storm in pressed khakis – tall, rigid, radiating an authority that doesn't need to announce itself. His uniform is immaculate, his shoes polished to a mirror sheen, and his expression carved out of stone.

You can tell immediately: He is not here for small matters.

A hush falls across the ward as he walks past the nurse's station. Even the normally unshakable charge nurse straightens, her voice tightening as she greets him.

"Good afternoon, sir."

He doesn't answer her.

His eyes are scanning the room – searching, assessing, calculating.

Searching for me.

My pulse stutters.

The Adjutant is second only to the Commanding Officer. When he's involved, it means paperwork is moving. Reports have been filed. Meetings have happened behind closed doors. Someone, somewhere, has decided that

---

my name needs to be scrutinized from a higher perch.

And that terrifies me more than anything.

## The Approach

He walks toward me with long, confident strides.

I instinctively place a hand on my belly, grounding myself. My baby presses against my palm—a tiny, anxious flutter.

“Petty Officer Burton,” he says, voice tight and official. “Come with me.”

Every patient in earshot goes still.

Rivera’s eyes widen.

Ski mutters a quiet prayer.

Thompkins stiffens.

Roberts trembles.

Manning looks at me in a way that feels like a warning.

Scott... doesn’t react at all.

I rise slowly, one hand braced against my lower back.

The Adjutant doesn’t offer assistance.  
He doesn’t even slow down.

He expects me to keep up.

---

## The Walk Down the Hall

He leads me down a corridor I've never been down before — one reserved for staff and command, not patients. The walls here are cleaner. The lighting brighter. A world that feels separate from the suffocating gloom of the fifth floor.

We stop outside a small conference room.

He opens the door and gestures me to enter.

"Sit."

I do.

He closes the door behind us, but he doesn't sit. He just stands, arms behind his back, studying me like I'm a piece of evidence in a trial he's already decided the verdict for.

"Do you know why you're here, Petty Officer?" he asks.

I swallow. "No, sir."

He exhales.

"Your behavior has been flagged for review."

The words are soft — but the weight behind them is crushing.

Flagged.

Observed.

Reported.

Someone has been watching me more closely than I realized.

---

Or everyone has.

# The Interrogation Without Calling It One

The Adjutant moves closer, hands clasped behind him.

"You've refused medication. You've questioned staff. You've been withdrawn in group settings. And now there are behavioral concerns noted by multiple personnel."

I force myself to speak calmly.

"Sir, I'm pregnant. I'm under stress. I'm coping the best way I can."

"That is not the issue."

His tone sharpens.

"Your ATTITUDE is the issue."

Attitude.

The military's favorite accusation when they lack evidence but want compliance.

"With all due respect," I say, keeping my voice steady, "I'm not being disrespectful. I'm trying to advocate for myself and my child."

His eyes narrow.

"Your child is not under evaluation," he replies. "You are."

The distinction is chilling.

He continues:

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“If you cannot demonstrate stability, your future in the Navy – and the future of your pregnancy care under this command – may be affected.”

My breath catches.

This is not a discussion.

This is pressure.

This is a warning.

This is leverage.

And they’re using my unborn baby as part of it.

# The Breaking Point or the Bending Point

The Adjutant leans slightly forward.

“So, I’m going to ask you a direct question.”

My heart pounds.

“Are you mentally fit for active duty?”

Everything inside me freezes.

This is the question that decides everything.

If I say yes —

they’ll expect compliance, vulnerability,  
cooperation.

If I say no —

they’ll strip me of my career.

My independence.

Maybe my child.

It’s a trap dressed as concern.

I breathe slowly, deeply.

My baby pushes beneath my ribs, reminding  
me what matters most.

“I am mentally fit to care for myself and my  
child,” I answer carefully. “I’m following orders  
to the best of my ability. And I want to continue  
my service — after receiving proper care.”

He studies me again.

This time longer.

Deeper.

Searching for cracks.

---



But I do not crack.

Not here.

Not in front of him.

Not when so much is at stake.

After a tense pause, he nods once.

"I'll note your statement," he says. "But your compliance going forward will be closely monitored. Do you understand?"

"I understand, sir."

He turns, opens the door, then looks back over his shoulder.

"One more thing."

I brace myself.

"This is a system," he says quietly. "Systems look for patterns. If you want a favorable outcome... don't give them a pattern they can use against you."

The words linger long after he walks away.

## All Eyes On Deck

When I return to the ward, every pair of eyes turns to me.

Rivera arches a brow.

Ski whispers, "You okay?"

Manning tracks my breathing with soldierly precision.

Scott doesn't look up.

Thompkins nods once — a silent show of support.

Roberts shakes, too anxious to ask anything aloud.

I sink onto my bed.

My baby wiggles, soft and reassuring.

I place a hand over her.

"They're watching," I whisper. "But they're not going to break me."

For the first time since stepping onto the fifth floor, I understand something crucial:

This place isn't just about survival.

It's about endurance.

Perception.

Strategy.

And I will not be cornered.

Not by the Commander.

Not by the Captain.

Not by the Adjutant.

---

Not by the system.  
My reckoning will come.  
But it will be on my terms.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## *The Unexpected Visitor*



---

*Carry one another's burdens and in  
this way you will fulfill the  
requirements of the law of Christ  
[that is, the law of Christian love].  
[John 13:34] ~ Galatians 6:2,  
Amplified Version (AMP)*

---

## A Spark of Hope

The stakes deepen, the emotional landscape shifts, and brings in the first real spark of hope in a long time.

Visitors on the fifth floor are rare.

Most patients don't have anyone.

Some families are too far away.

Others are too ashamed.

And some simply don't know their loved one is locked behind steel doors and a thick layer of military red tape.

So, when the intercom crackles to life and the day nurse calls out:

"Burton, you have a visitor," the entire ward pauses.

Conversations stop mid-sentence.

Cards freeze mid-shuffle.

Even the orderlies look up.

A visitor — FOR ME.

My pulse spikes, a dizzy cocktail of hope and dread swirling in my stomach.

"Who is it?" I ask.

The nurse consults her clipboard, but her expression gives nothing away.

"They're waiting in the conference room."

They.

Not he.

---

Not she.

They.

Two possibilities flash through my mind:

1. **My husband.**

But no – he wouldn't come here. He'd  
never step foot onto a psychiatric ward.  
Not even to save face.

2. **The Navy.**

Someone with rank. Someone with  
paperwork. Someone here to assess or  
pressure or corner me.

But there's a third possibility.

One my heart dares to whisper.

**Chief J.**

My breath catches.

The nurse motions.

"Burton. Now."

## The Walk to the Room

I rise from my bed slowly, hand bracing my lower back as the weight of my belly shifts. The baby flutters – uneasy, sensing my nerves. I rub gentle circles over my skin.

“I know,” I whisper. “We’re okay.”

But I’m not sure.

The walk to the visitor’s room feels like moving through water – each step thick, uncertain. The fluorescent lights buzz overhead, flickering at the edges. My heart beats too fast, too loud. My palms sweat.

Patients watch me.

Rivera nods like she’s silently willing me strength.

Ski gives a small, hopeful smile. Thompkins avoids eye contact but his jaw ticks – a sign he’s worried.

Roberts trembles in place. Manning gives me a single, slow nod of solidarity. Scott... stares at his hands.

I reach the door.

The corpsman opens it.

“Go ahead.”

I step inside.

---



## The Visitor

For a moment, I can't breathe.

It isn't my husband.

It isn't command.

It isn't a doctor, or a chaplain, or a stranger  
with a clipboard.

There wasn't a 'they'. It was a 'she'.

It was **Rosalind**.

My cousin.

Strong, outspoken, stubborn-as-iron  
Rosalind – the woman who once sat with me on  
cracked Albuquerque pavement, eating green  
chile burritos and telling me I deserved better  
than the world I kept trying to outrun.

She rises from the chair the moment she sees  
me. Her eyes are wide, full of emotion she tries  
to hide with a brave smile.

"Hey, baby girl," she says softly.

My throat closes.

"Ros..." My voice breaks. "What – how did  
you –?"

She doesn't answer.

She just gathers me carefully into her arms,  
mindful of my belly, holding me with a  
gentleness that slices straight through my  
defences.

---

For the first time in weeks, I feel a real human touch without clinical gloves or clipboard judgment.

Warm.

Familiar.

Safe.

Tears burn behind my eyes.

I didn't know how much I missed being loved until this moment.

## The Conversation

We sit across from each other at the small metal table.

A box of tissues sits between us—standard issue for emotional ambushes.

Rosalind studies me.

“You’ve lost weight,” she says. “You look tired.”

“I’m okay,” I lie.

“No, you’re surviving,” she corrects. “There’s a difference.”

Her voice is soft, but her eyes?

Full warrior mode.

She leans in.

“When Chief J told me what happened, I got on the first flight. I wasn’t about to leave you alone in this place.”

Chief J.

Of course.

A warmth grows in my chest—tiny but real.

Two women, powerful in their own ways, pulling me up from the depths.

I swallow hard.

“How much do you know?” I ask.

“Enough,” she says. “Everything.”

My heart sinks—but also rises.

---

“Ros... I didn’t want anyone to know. I didn’t want to burden you.”

“You’re family,” she snaps, but gently. “You don’t burden me. You call me. You tell me. You let me be there for you.”

She reaches across the table and takes my hand.

“You’re not alone. Not anymore.”

My throat tightens so painfully I almost can’t speak.

The baby shifts.

A soft reminder that she, too, is part of this.

Rosalind rests her free hand on my belly.

“And this little one?” she says. “We’re going to make sure she comes into a world where she’s safe. Where YOU’RE safe.”

I close my eyes, fighting the wave of relief that threatens to collapse me.

“I don’t know how to get out of here,” I whisper.

She squeezes my hand.

“We’ll figure it out. Together. I already talked to Chief J. She’s working her end. I’m working mine.”

Hope sparks – small but bright.

## A Warning

Then Rosalind's expression shifts.

"I need to tell you something," she says.

A chill moves up my spine.

"What?"

She hesitates, choosing her words.

"Your husband has been calling around," she says quietly. "Trying to get ahead of why you're here. Trying to set a narrative."

My stomach drops.

"No," I breathe. "No, no—he can't—"

Rosalind grabs both my hands.

"Hey. Look at me."

I force my eyes up.

"He doesn't know Chief J and I have been here. We won't allow him to poison your reputation. I promise you that. And if he tries, I'll handle it."

Her voice is fierce.

Protective.

Deadly serious.

The kind of promise only a woman who has survived her own battles can make.

"I'm not letting him hurt you again," she says.

"Not this time."

My baby kicks, hard—like she agrees.

I swallow tears.

---

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“You don’t thank me. You let me help you.”

## A Goodbye, But Not an Ending

The corpsman knocks on the door.

"Five minutes."

Rosalind rolls her eyes.

"Tell him to mind his business."

"Regulations, ma'am."

She mutters something under her breath  
about regulations needing to mind THEIR business.

Rosalind stands, squeezing my shoulders  
gently.

"I'll be back tomorrow," she says. "And every  
day until you're out of here."

"Promise?" My voice is small.

She smiles — wide, warm, unwavering.

"Promise."

She hugs me again — longer this time.

Stronger.

Safe.

And then she walks out.

The door closes behind her.

But this time, the room doesn't feel so cold.

For the first time on the fifth floor, warmth  
lingers.

And I realize:

Hope doesn't always arrive with permission.

Sometimes it walks straight through the door.

Unexpected.

---

Uninvited.

Exactly when you need it most.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Clarissa Burton** has been crafting poetry and short stories since the age of eight. Her work has appeared in the *Charleston Post-Courier*, *The Kansas City Star*, *Flourish Magazine*, and *Kansas City Small Business Monthly*. She also publishes essays and commentary across several online platforms and is the founder of the **Queen of the Pen Books®** website.

A lifelong observer of people and systems, she believes life continually offers stories worth capturing and sharing – if one is willing to look closely enough.

Clarissa is a **United States Navy veteran** and holds a **Bachelor of Arts in Psychology** from Ottawa University in Overland Park, Kansas, **Master's degree in Business** from Webster University in Kansas City, and a **Doctorate in Higher Education and Adult Learning** from Walden University in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

She lives in the Midwest with her husband, their two dogs, and their two cats.

To schedule an interview or speaking engagement, send a request to [support@queenofthepenbooks.com](mailto:support@queenofthepenbooks.com).

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# THE DAMAGED – BOOK 3

## – THE DISCUSSION

The common room is dim, its cheap plastic chairs arranged in a loose circle – informal, unplanned. Manning sits with his back to the wall, elbows on his knees, gaze scanning the room with the same vigilance he probably carried through deployments.

Ski occupies a seat nearby, arms crossed, looking like he's holding the weight of the entire ward on his broad shoulders.

Thompkins leans forward, hands clasped tightly, tension radiating off him in waves.

Rivera sits with her ankle crossed over her knee, chewing her bottom lip – a tell that she's trying to look tougher than she feels.

Roberts stands near the wall, trembling so hard the metal light fixture buzzes louder in sympathy.

Scott... sits silently beside me, vacant and unreachable but physically present, which is more than I could say a few days ago.

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It's the entire circle...

but off the clock.

No Commander.

No officers.

No mental health staff.

Just us.

For once, no one ordered us here.

We came on our own.

And every eye eventually turns to me.

# OTHER BOOKS BY CLARISSA BURTON

Travel

Elijah's Great Race

Princess Onyx Precious Gems

Travel - The Journey Continues

Rex the Nerdy Centipede

Micah's Grumpy Day

Princess Onyx Hairy Business

The Black Family Tree (Workbook)

Creating Young Authors (Instructor's Manual /  
Student Manual)

The Damaged - Book 1 - Ignition

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