

BY

ASHLEY BOSH

Fragments of US

CHAPTER 1

The Day Everything Changed

It's been over four years, but I still wake up like I did that first morning—breath caught, chest tight, as if grief itself is lying on top of me, pressing down, reminding me he's gone. The mornings are always the hardest. The silence in the house is a constant weight, one that hovers over everything like a storm cloud that refuses to move on. No matter how many nights I've spent trying to sleep through it, the ache hasn't dulled. It's still here. Still filling the spaces where Tyler never even stood long enough to stay.

I roll out of bed, careful not to wake Lennon, though I'm not sure she's really asleep. She hasn't been in a while. She still asks about him sometimes, with wide eyes and a voice too innocent to carry that kind of emptiness. But how do you explain to a four-year-old that someone can leave before they ever even meet you? That love isn't always strong enough to stay?

Tyler left on a Tuesday. People always expect heartbreak to come on a stormy night or some dramatic weekend. But no—he walked out in the middle of a quiet morning, while I was eight months pregnant and folding laundry that smelled like baby detergent.

He just left a note beside the coffee maker:

"I'm sorry. I can't do this."

That was it. No goodbye. No "I love you." Just a half-creased receipt from the gas station, flipped over and scribbled on like it meant more than it did. I still have it—tucked in the back of a drawer.

I stare at the crumpled note every time I open the kitchen drawer. It's not much—just a scrap of paper, coffee-stained from where it was left too close to the mug Tyler used to drink from. I don't know why I keep it. Maybe it's because throwing it away feels like losing the last thread of him, the last piece of something that I still don't quite understand. Maybe I keep it because it's the closest thing I'll ever have to closure, and the hardest thing is knowing that it doesn't mean a thing anymore.

The mornings, though—they're the worst. The stillness is a reminder. I think that's why I wake up with that knot in my stomach every day. It's like my body knows before I do. It knows the emptiness that still lingers, the absence of the person I thought I would always have.

This morning feels different, though—quieter, heavier, like the air itself is waiting to see if I'll break again. It's the kind of morning that fills me with dread but also a strange sense of resolve. It's the first day of my new job—the one I never asked for, but the one that's supposed to pull me out of this mess.

I sit up slowly, my body aching in places that have nothing to do with age and everything to do with the weight of starting over. Each joint protests as I stretch, as if even my own body is resisting this change. I feel the heaviness in my bones, the fatigue that never quite fades, the constant need to remind myself that today is not yesterday, even though it often feels like it is.

The ache isn't about age—it's deeper than that. It's the kind of ache that comes from years of holding everything together with threadbare hope. From sleepless nights curled around a silence where a man used to be. From lifting the weight of a child's world while yours quietly crumbles.

It's the toll of pretending, surviving on autopilot, of being forced to begin again when you never asked for it to end. The act of "moving on" feels like a betrayal sometimes—like I'm somehow dishonoring everything we had. But I have no choice. I have to move forward, even if it feels like I'm dragging the entire weight of the past behind me.

Lennon stirs beside me, and for a moment, I forget everything. I forget the ache, the heaviness, the pressure of starting over. I simply watch her as she shifts in the bed, her tiny hand searching for mine. She sneaked into my bed again last night, as she often does now. I don't have the heart to stop her. Not when she looks at me with those wide, innocent eyes, asking silently if I'll still be here when she wakes up.

Her fingers curl into the edge of my shirt like she's afraid I'll vanish, just like Tyler did. I kiss the top of her head, trying to soothe both of us, though I'm not sure who needs it more. "Time to get up, sweetheart," I whisper, the words coming out softer than I intend.

She groans and tucks her face into my side, the warmth of her small body pressing against me in a way that makes my heart ache. "Is it daycare day?" she asks, her voice still heavy with sleep.

"Yeah," I say, brushing a lock of hair from her face. "And it's Mama's first day at the new job."

Lennon's eyes peek open—soft, amber brown like her dad's, but somehow more tender. She gazes up at me with a sleepy frown. "Do you have to go?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper.

I pause. That small, uncertain voice splits me in two. The last thing I want to do is leave her. But I have no choice. "I do. But I'll pick you up after snack time, just like always," I promise, my own voice breaking in places I don't want it to.

Her little hands reach up, touching my cheek. "Will they be nice to you?" she asks, her eyes wide with worry.

God, she kills me.

"I think they will," I say, swallowing hard to keep my composure. "And if they're not, I'll come home to the nicest person in the world. That's better, right?"

She smiles sleepily, a small curve of her lips that, for a moment, makes everything feel bearable. That smile is the only thing that's kept me from falling apart completely, from completely losing myself in the mess of it all.

I drop her off at daycare, the warm, loud building that smells like finger paint, Play-Doh, and vanilla wafers. The familiar chaos greets me—children laughing, a teacher calling out to her assistant, the hum of life continuing without pause. Lennon doesn't cry. Not today. She's growing braver, too. She's learning how to face the world without me holding her hand every second, even though I know it's still hard for her.

I wait in the car for a full three minutes after I drop her off. I tell myself it's to catch my breath, but the truth is I need the time to steady myself. I need the silence to remind me who I am, to remember that I can do this—even when it feels impossible.

By the time I reach the office, I've already talked myself out of it twice. But I go in anyway. The building is all glass and echo. It's so modern it feels like the future walked in and forgot to invite me. My flats click against the polished floor, the sound too loud, like they don't belong here. It feels like I'm walking into a world I never asked to be part of—a world where success is measured in ways I can barely comprehend, a world that feels too shiny, too perfect, too untouchable.

I glance around. Everyone looks confident, slick—like their lives are tidy. They don't seem to carry the weight I do. I clutch my bag tighter and step toward the front desk, my movements slow, calculated. This isn't a place for people like me. But I'm here anyway, aren't I?

"Emery Blake?" a voice calls.

I turn, startled, and see a woman holding a clipboard. She looks like she stepped out of a Vogue office—high ponytail, perfectly winged eyeliner, posture like she could slice through glass with her gaze. She doesn't smile, but she doesn't sneer either.

"You're with DevOps," she says, motioning for me to follow.

I nod, forcing my legs to move, my feet following her like I'm on autopilot. Because I have to.

Every step feels like stepping into a life I never chose. Not wrong—just unfamiliar, like returning to a house after someone's left and finding the silence louder than anything. This isn't the

future I dreamed of. But it's the one that arrived—uninvited, unyielding.

My fingers tighten around the strap of my bag, my heart beating a little too fast to ignore. Still, I move forward—through halls that gleam too brightly, past faces that don't yet know me—carrying the kind of quiet courage no one claps for.

Lennon needs to see a mother who doesn't flinch. A woman who keeps going, even when the ground feels unsteady.

If I walk like I belong here, maybe belief will follow. They say "fake it till you make it," and for now, that's the best I can do.

Because strength doesn't always shout.

Sometimes, it's simply what remains when everything else has fallen away.

The conference room door clicks shut behind me, and the echo follows me as I step out into the sterile hallway. I swallow, trying to rid myself of the sensation that's been hanging in my chest since I first saw him—Julian Ward, the man who will be my boss, though that word feels too heavy, too permanent, too much for someone like him.

The meeting was what I expected, and yet... not. He'd been distant, cold, like a man who'd turned off every emotion but the ones that kept him functional. His voice had been clipped, like a broken record that skipped on the same few notes. Efficient, but not warm. Never warm.

I glance at the clock above the office door as I pass—it's later than I thought, and I need to head back to the daycare before I'm late. But something keeps pulling at me, keeping my feet rooted to the spot for just a moment longer. That strange feeling—like something familiar and unfamiliar at once—hasn't loosened its grip on me.

"Emery." His voice calls from behind me, not quite warm but far less distant than it had been during the meeting. I turn, feeling the weight of his gaze even before I see his face. His posture hasn't

softened, but there's a slight tilt of his head, an acknowledgment that he notices my presence more now than before.

“Is something wrong?” I ask, the words slipping out before I can stop them. I’m not used to anyone paying much attention to me in this office. Julian Ward is hardly a man who gives away anything.

He doesn’t immediately answer. Instead, he looks at me, really looks at me this time, like he’s trying to figure something out. I don’t know why, but the weight of his gaze makes me shift on my feet. The silence stretches longer than it should. I’m not sure I like the way he’s studying me—like a puzzle he’s determined to solve, piece by piece.

Finally, he speaks. “You didn’t really fit in there, did you?” He gestures toward the conference room we just left. “With them. They’re... different.”

It’s not an accusation. Not really. More like an observation, one that feels oddly perceptive. Too perceptive for a man who barely said a word to me a few minutes ago. For a moment, I just stare at him, unsure of what to say. I haven’t quite figured out how to be here, in this world of glass walls and minimalist furniture. He doesn’t seem to belong here, either.

“I’m not sure I do,” I say, my voice steady even as the words twist in my gut. It’s the truth, but it feels like I’m confessing something. As if admitting a weakness that I haven’t yet found a way to hide.

Julian gives a brief, almost imperceptible nod, as if he understands. But I don’t know how. He’s probably got everything in his life lined up—his career, his future, his purpose. I’m barely holding things together.

“I can relate,” he says after a beat, his eyes softening just a fraction. There’s an undercurrent to his voice now, something more human. Something that makes my breath catch in my throat. For a split second, it feels like he’s talking about more than just the job. Like he knows what it’s like to be out of place, to be struggling with an invisible weight that no one else can see.

I swallow hard, shifting my weight from one foot to the other. “It’s just... hard, you know? Pretending like I have it all together.”

He watches me carefully, as if choosing his next words carefully. “You don’t realize how strong you are until strong is the only thing left,” he says, the words coming out quietly, but with an almost deep heaviness. It’s a strange thing to hear, especially from someone like him.

I blink, a bit taken aback by the way the words land between us. For a moment, we both stand in the silence, as if those words are meant for both of us, not just me. I wonder if he’s speaking from experience. If he’s been holding on to something, too.

His gaze flickers, like he’s suddenly aware of the weight of what he said, and he clears his throat. “Anyway... it’ll get easier,” he adds, his tone softening, but still distant.

I nod, even though I’m not sure if I believe him. Or myself.

“I hope so,” I say softly, though the words feel hollow.

“I think you’ll find it does,” he replies, his voice more clipped than before. Then, without another word, he turns away, his shoes clicking sharply against the polished floor, leaving me standing in the hallway, feeling a little more exposed than before.

I don’t know exactly why his words have unsettled me, but they have—perhaps because, for the first time in what feels like forever, someone has looked past my tired smile and the practiced resilience and seen the real, authentic Emery. Not just the mother piecing together the fragments of a broken life, not just the woman forcing herself through the motions of each day, but the person buried beneath it all—the one still quietly clinging to the hope that survival might one day feel like living again.

As I stand there, watching Julian disappear down the hallway, something shifts in me—not certainty, but the faint sense that I might be able to get through this. Even without answers, maybe it’s enough to know that strength doesn’t always look bold or fearless. Sometimes, it’s just the quiet decision to keep going, even when everything feels like it’s falling apart.

The next few hours pass in a blur. I find myself sinking into the rhythm of the office, forcing my body to move through the motions while my mind keeps wandering back to Julian's words. "I can relate." Did he mean that? Did he truly see me, or was it just something he said out of politeness?

I don't have time to figure it out right now. Lennon needs me. Always. So, I focus on the one thing I can do well: being a mother. Being the person who holds it all together, even when the cracks are getting harder to hide.

As I pack up for the day, my mind is already shifting back to home, to Lennon's warm little arms, her innocent smile, and the way she tucks herself into me as though the world could fall apart, but I'll always be there to catch her.

The drive back is short, but by the time I arrive, the sun is dipping low in the sky, casting long shadows over the streets. My heart beats a little faster as I park the car, thinking about the moment when I'll pick Lennon up from daycare and pull her into the kind of hug that says, *I'm still here*.

Still, something tugs at me—a quiet pull, like a thread being drawn from somewhere deep inside. It's that small, persistent voice that insists this day was different. That somewhere between the unfamiliar hum of this office, the uncomfortable silence of that meeting, and the way Julian, however briefly, acknowledged me, something was set in motion. I don't know what to call it yet, but whatever it is, it's there now—planted, steady, and beginning to grow.

And as I walk into the daycare, Lennon's smile lights up the room like a beacon, and I know—this is where I belong. For her, I'll keep pretending I have it all together. For her, I'll keep showing up, no matter what.