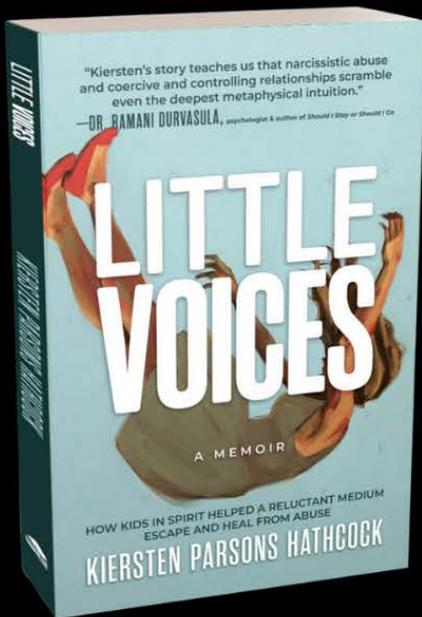


What didn't make *Little Voices*

THE ONE WHERE HE BROKE INTO MY APARTMENT BUILDING



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Spring 2016 – The Beginning of the Final End

He told me he was in Los Angeles for a bit before heading my way for an event he was required to attend in Flagstaff.

According to him, had it not been for the event, he would've avoided the entire state of Arizona. He made it very clear that he loved me, and always would, but he didn't want to see me. In fact, he told me repeatedly that he'd be booking a hotel room.

I felt relieved that he wasn't planning on staying with me, but I still had a few of his things, which made for a nice excuse to see him one last time. I didn't want him even setting foot in my apartment complex because I feared more cops coming to the door. I couldn't risk that. I pictured a scenario where I delivered his boxes to his hotel, and we were able to say goodbye.

For some reason, I felt I needed that closure because we were always splitting up during a fight, but in hindsight, I was desperate to see the side of him that I knew loved me. I couldn't imagine my life without him after loving him so deeply and passionately. I'd never felt so much pain, like fire coursing through my veins.

I knew I needed to stand my ground and not cave into his wishes, whatever they may be. I'd finally realized I spent our entire relationship caving. I was done, or at least that's what my mind said.

We avoided talking on the phone because that always led to a huge argument. Instead, we texted back and forth. He didn't tell me exactly when he would be coming to town, but I knew when the event started. Much of what we'd do after a break up was think about the good times, and share those memories back and forth. It was simultaneously comforting and devastating. I drifted off to sleep looking at a photo of us we'd taken in the early days. For the first time in a while, my heart felt hope that maybe down the road, there was a chance for us. My intuition said otherwise, but I was now an expert at ignoring my inner voice.

I could see that it was still dark outside when my alarm went off the next morning. I made my way to the bedroom door that led to the balcony, and I peeked through the blinds to see puffy snowflakes slowly falling to the ground, illuminated by the street lamp. Sure enough, it had snowed about two feet overnight. I wiped the sleep from my eyes and flipped the light switch so I could start my morning knowing I'd need extra time to dig my car out from its wintery parking spot.

Just then, I heard my phone vibrate. It was Tony. *I see your light is on.*

My heart stopped. I sat motionless staring at the phone. Was this a joke? Wait . . . was he really here *right now*? He would have had to drive all night because the last message I got from him was from Los Angeles. I quickly went to Instagram, the place where he loved to post photos from his road warrior treks, and saw a photo of snow with a caption that said something about how long and hard the drive was from LA.

I held my breath and typed, *Are you here?*

I am. I drove all night thinking about you, and decided I had to see you.

Knowing intuitively this was one of those moments where I would normally cave, I decided to stand my ground. I'd never told him I didn't want to see him. Ever. This time, I did it partly because I felt I should hold strong, and partly because I was scared to death the fighting would start again. I couldn't risk being kicked out of the apartment complex or go through another domestic violence visit from the cops.

I called him. “Baby, I didn’t know you were on your way. Why didn’t you tell me? And I thought you didn’t want to see me and that you were getting a hotel? Of course, I want to see you, and was planning on trying to see you at your hotel, but I just . . . I just can’t let you stay here.”

Deafening silence filled the air before he finally spoke.

“I drove all this way in the dark through a fucking snow storm and now you won’t even let me in! True colors, Kiersten. True colors. I know everything I need to know now.”

“Baby, why didn’t you tell me you were coming, and that you actually *did* want to see me?” I asked. “Honestly, I’m so scared that we’ll fight again and get loud if you come up.”

“No, I don’t think it’s that,” he shot back. “That’s bullshit. Scott is there in your apartment, isn’t he?”

“Oh my God, no! He’s at his house like he always is. No one is here. I’m just in shock that you’re here, and I’m scared we’re going to fight. I’m so tired of fighting.”

Just then, it dawned on me that it didn’t sound like he was in his car.

“Tony, where are you?”

“I’m down the hall from your apartment near the elevators.”

I immediately started sweating. I was counting on the fact that the apartment complex exterior door key that I shut off when I shipped his things was not going to work if he ever tried to get in without my knowledge. In rare moments of clarity, I did smart things like that. Also, after three of my intuitive friends all shared their out-of-nowhere visions of him clocking me in my nose and blood spewing everywhere, I finally started to acknowledge the fact that his rage could turn physical. I didn’t want to believe it, but he’d even told me about how he punched through a wall in anger one time. It was one of the key reasons I had the fob deactivated.

“I couldn’t get in the main door with the key fob,” he replied. “But the gate door was open slightly. Did you turn off my fob key?”

“No, no I didn’t,” I lied through my teeth fearing what would happen if he knew the truth. “There must have been a glitch. I’m coming to you.”

My plan to not cave was out the window, and now he was angry. I opened the door to my apartment and peered into the hallway. “Tony?”

I could hear the rustling of bags down the hall so I started walking in that direction.

We locked eyes and I immediately regretted opening the door. His eyes were a mix of black and fire. His entire being was radiating anger.

“I swear I just heard your door open and shut—like Scott just left,” he said in a voice that was trying to mask the rage he was feeling inside. “I know he was with you! Where’s my stuff, Kiersten? I can’t fucking believe you!”

“Can you please just come in? It’s inside my apartment. Just please come in. I’m so sorry.”

He stormed past me and opened the door to what was technically his home—our home—for a year. In a quick motion, he scooped up a large box marked *TONY* and started toward the elevator. Of course, there was more to carry than one box, so I had to make the decision as to what to do next. The side of me that wasn’t scared of him was taking over. I felt the buzzing sensation on my hip, again.

I quickly put my shoes on and followed behind him with the rest of his things. He wouldn’t look at me or talk to me during the elevator ride, and I’d never seen him so mad, yet so quiet. We stepped off the elevator in silence. I trailed Tony to his car that was parked in a bed of two feet of snow. I watched as he opened the side door and threw his box on the seat. Next, he

forcefully grabbed what I'd brought down and threw it on top of the first box and slammed the door.

He stared back at me with a look that said he never wanted to see my face again. He got in the driver's seat, slammed the door, and peeled out, leaving me standing alone on the snow-covered sidewalk.

I stood there for a few minutes trying to wrap my brain around what had just happened as tears streamed down my face. A mix of snow and guilt coated me, rendering me motionless. I couldn't take one step. Not one step. I couldn't believe what I had just done.

My attempt to stand my ground left me feeling empty and sad. He'd driven all night, and I turned him away. I was trying to be so strong, and now it was over. Yet again, he left angry. The closure I sought was nowhere in sight. All I wanted was to see him, and do it all over again differently.

I sent him messages all morning while I sat in my cubicle at the university telling him how sorry I was that I let fear take over. Fear that we would fight, and the cops would come again. He didn't answer for a long time. I knew he was preparing for the event so I left him alone, but later that night, I couldn't take it anymore. He was in town and I was going to find him. I drove around manically trying to find his car parked out front of a shitty hotel. I never found him, and he wouldn't talk to me.

It was torture knowing he was there in town yet I couldn't reach him. The next morning, I went to work sending more messages asking if he was okay and telling him that I was worried and sorry. He finally answered. I told him I'd been driving around trying to find his car. Apparently, I'd forgotten about a few motels down the road. He said he'd already left his motel and was making plans to stay at a friend's house that night.

Finally, he accepted my apology. We wrote back and forth throughout the day—I could feel him letting his guard down. I begged for another chance to see him, and he relented. Tony accepted the fact that I was scared to let him stay with me, and he apologized for making me feel that way. It wasn't something he could deny because he openly talked about getting a handle on the anger issues that he said had all but disappeared before we met. In the same breath, he would also say he's from part of the country that prided itself on yelling and screaming, so it was in his DNA.

Tony knew I had every right to feel scared. After all, he'd even sought help from my therapist once because he didn't want to lose me. We talked on the phone about how when we met, we literally jumped right into a serious relationship where we were both leaving spouses. As if that wasn't enough, we added the stress of growing our businesses on top of it all. Finally, we called a truce and admitted we'd never really dated like normal people.

That night, we would date. He planned to pick me up, we'd go to dinner, and instead of staying with me, he would drop me off, and go on to stay at his buddy's house. Once again, excitement and longing replaced excruciating pain and fear. The pendulum had swung in the opposite direction and I felt high. My entire body vibrated with excitement.

As I got ready for our dinner date at a local Italian eatery, I thought of all the things I needed to do to prepare for the night to mitigate the chances of another colossal breakdown. I silenced my phone, hid messages from Scott and other people he didn't like, prepared to be cognizant of eye contact, and trained myself to resist looking around the restaurant. I didn't want that look from him that said I wasn't focused on him. I couldn't take another blow up.

I was down to the lowest weight I'd been in years, eating sporadically, and puffing on cigarettes like a veteran smoker while desperately trying to find grounded calm in between panic attacks. I was a fucking mess.

I knew we both wanted to stare into one another's eyes and see what we saw three years earlier. Thankfully, we did just that. Dinner was beautiful because we didn't fight. But I cried through much of it while he held my hand. He teared up, too. He was sweet and tender throughout the night and even dropped me off at my place as we planned, even though I'm sure he could feel me caving.

He asked me to come to his event the next day to spend time with him in the booth. I knew I'd have time to myself because the kids were staying with Scott all weekend. Tony kissed me goodnight, holding onto me like he never wanted to let me go, then drove over to his friend's house who had an extra bed for him that night. (Years later, I'd learn that he was putting the moves on his friend's roommate, making her feel so uncomfortable that she locked her bedroom door that night.) When he got settled in across town, he called and told me how wonderful it was to be with me that night. He said he was sad that we never had the chance to properly date. He told me that no matter what our future held, he would love me then, now, and forever. I was his soulmate, TNF.

When I arrived at the event the next day, Tony introduced me to his booth neighbors and event producers as his better half. It felt good to hear him praise me, and talk positively about us. That night and the night after, he stayed with me before he had to head back up north.

We played, laughed, loved, and talked about the good times. He made sure I knew how hurt he was that Scott was moving into the complex. It broke my heart to know what once was our home didn't feel like home to him anymore. With that said, I knew I couldn't and wouldn't change any of it. I understood where he was coming from, but I wouldn't choose between my kids and Tony. No matter what I felt in my heart for him, it didn't change the fact that I knew I was doing the right thing for Noah and Grace.

As I watched his car disappear on his way out of town, I made a mental note to freeze what I was feeling at that moment. I felt love for a man who I knew was just as wounded as me. I rationalize that finally I'd pinpointed the problem. Our wounded sides were wreaking havoc and had been since we met. In that moment, I felt hope... again.

OUT 9/16/22

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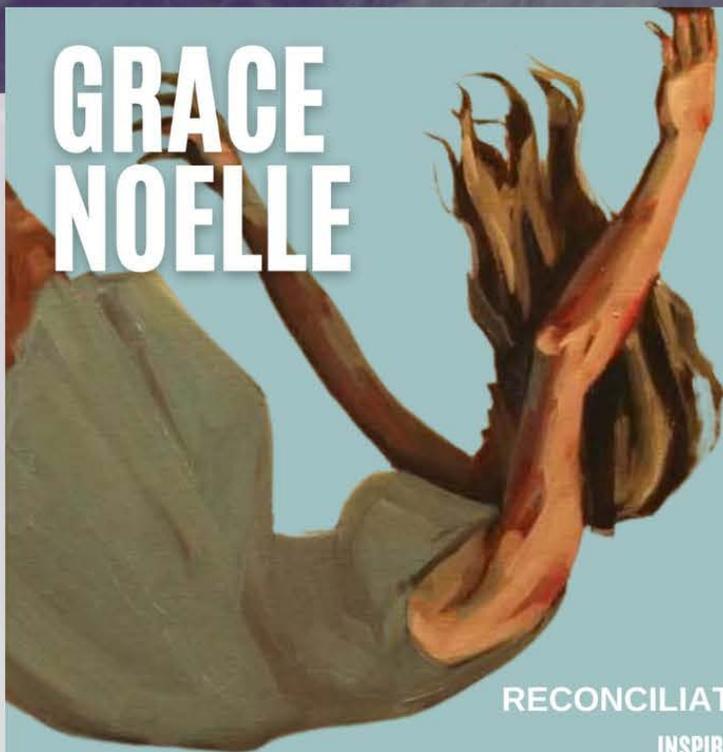
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