

Whisper

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Excerpt

A tequila-loving, *badass* uses her power to save others until she discovers the toll it's taking on her body. Now she must figure out what she really wants in life before the clock runs out on her.

1 - Impact

I love my ride—just me, two wheels and an engine. Pure freedom. But this trip isn't about all that—this trip is about saving my life.

I release the clutch and lean the bike. Exit 293. Finally, I'm here. Christ, I'm almost in Wyoming. Maybe I drove too far.

I roll into the Hermit Gas Station, Colorado's last stop, according to the sign. I park near the pump, mentally drifting in a haze of white lines, spinning wheels, and rolling highways. My fingers don't move on command. My muscles are wrapped so tight across my shoulders it's like the hand of God squeezing me upright on the seat.

Criminey, Whisper, turn off the engine, hop off, and set the damn bike on the kickstand.

I stretch my limbs. Remove my helmet, my gloves. Fluff my hair.

A guy pumping gas stares at me. He's got that familiar look on his face, the one that says, 'Dude, you're a chick?' If he were with someone else or if anybody else were around, he'd say, 'No way that tiny-ass girl can handle that ride. An 803cc Ducati Scrambler, that's an audacious piece of machinery.'

"Do you need help?" he asks.

I hold in a chuckle and shake my head.

The old-dad places the pump in the cradle, smiles. "Long ride?"

I smile in return because now I'm the one staring, not him. "Two days' worth."

I pull my sleeve through my leathers and polish the hand-painted freedom flag on the tank. I use the side mirror and the same sleeve to wipe away my smeared make-up. Great, now I have charcoal half circles under my eyes, real attractive. I rub my reflection on the chrome cap with several swift jerky motions, as if I can wipe away the last two months.

I walk toward the building with my insides shaking. This ride's harder than I expected. Even my skin hurts. I find two ibuprofens in my pocket and dry swallow them.

Near the counter, inside the store, I sift through a rack of maps.

“You might want to park that thing.” The clerk doesn’t bother to look up from his book. “Storm rolling in. Gonna get real dark. Motel’s up the road.”

“How far?” I grab a map of Northern Colorado.

“Couple miles. Center of town.”

“What town? Where am I?”

The guy stands, towering over me. “Sparrow. You’re in Sparrow, Colorado.”

“How far is Vassardale?”

“Where?”

“Never mind.” I push a ten-dollar bill toward him.

He stares at the freshly inked tattoo on the inside of my finger, *Whisper*.

I shove the money closer. “Here, for the map.”

Outside, the damp road is now peppered with white. I saddle up and ride slowly down the street, coasting the bike—looking upward. Snowflakes float down toward me. Mesmerizing me, as if I’m the only person on the planet soaring through a tunnel of pinpoints—a time warp moving faster and faster, propelling me into a trance.

An air horn blasts.

I wobble the bike, over-correct and lose control. A rush of adrenaline ignites every cell in my body. Somehow, I remain upright, and now I’m on a collision course with a big rig. I twist the throttle and shoot forward for a nanosecond. Then a high-pitched whining sings out from the Ducati’s motor. The back tire spins.

Black ice!

The big rig’s horn belts out another ear-splitting shriek. A burnt-rubber smell wafts through the air. I pump the throttle again.

No traction. No time.

I lay the bike down. My teeth grind together on impact. My left leg jams between the engine and the ground, and I slide with the motorcycle’s weight on me. The peg gets stuck in a pothole then I jerk to a stop. Pinned under the bike, I rotate

my head toward the truck. Crap. I'm in its direct path—I yank off my glove and snap my fingers.

Everything—I mean *everything in the world*—abruptly stops. Except for me.

I put the entire universe on hold so that I'm saved from my own stupidity. I know better than to ride in bad weather. Now I'm stuck under the motorcycle, under the rig's front bumper.

The pressure in this timeless void envelops me with a tightness around my lungs that forces me to breathe in shallow spurts. That's a big part of my problem, but in this moment it's my solution. I gotta move or I might suffocate.

Can't lift the bike.

Can't climb out.

I rock back and forth, trying to free my leg. I shove the bike further into the rig's front axle.

I turn my calf so that my toes shift. I slide out of the boot and break free. Shards of pain rip up my leg, and the salty taste of blood fills my mouth. Wearing a sock on one foot and balancing on the other, I scan the area. If I can stop the rig, I can save my bike. I see a gas station up the road, but that's too far. Trees, bushes. . . Shoot, I can't even walk.

I hop the few yards to the curb and carefully place my helmet on the ground. I find a stick longer than my leg and drag it over. I shove the stick under the motorcycle. The bike's lodged beneath the rig's frame. It doesn't budge. As if it's a consolation prize, the boot comes loose. I drop my foot into the worn leather and step down.

Pop.

Instant tears, bone-on-bone pain. I fall to my knees. "Clock-stopper bullshit."

No way to save the Ducati, I crawl to the curb. With the air too dense to breathe, I close my eyes and snap my fingers.

The immediate world re-launch is like an explosion. I cover my ears as the diesel horn picks up where it left off—screaming. The big rig pulverizes my bike.

Once, twice, three times, each double-row of tires crunching metal. I squeeze my travel pack to me as my mangled motorcycle spews across the road.

The blasting air horn grows louder. I lift my head—the rig doesn't stop. With tires smoking and brakes screeching, it keeps coming.

“Oh, God.” I leap to my feet, broken ankle jammed in my boot—beyond throbbing. I hobble to the fattest tree and struggle with a one-legged climb, then grab a thick limb and pull upward. I throw myself over the branch and hug the tree. My fingertips brush together, but I don't stop time because the trailer swings wide to the left. I'm safe.

The gigantic tire smacks my travel pack and helmet. “Wait, no!” The rig bounces over the curb—tips, lands upright, and finally immobilizes with a loud *sssshhhhhh*.

2- Sparrow

A tall guy, a daddy long legs wearing a loose beanie the way a hipster would, leaps out of the truck's cab.

He rushes to the front of the rig, drops to his knees and peers underneath. He jumps to his feet, spins around, searching. Then he stoops over and vomits. I assume he's looking for my blood and guts.

He stays bent that way for a while. Pukes some more. Wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Gross. Scans the pavement. His eyes dart from my ripped travel pack to my helmet. As if he knows I'm in the tree, he then rises toward me.

Poised with my fingers in a snap position, I hesitate. What if it doesn't work? Nobody's in danger—but the threat of discovery is enough for me so I snap my fingers.

Instant compression wraps around me like a wet suit, while a deafening silence sweeps the air. All time has stopped, and that guy will never know about me.

I climb down and limp to the wreckage. Lower myself to the pavement where I sit among the pieces of metal that used to be the best motorcycle I ever owned. I try to maintain my cool as if Mother's standing over me, wagging her finger telling me, "Don't cry." But a gut-wrenching howl escapes my lungs.

Crawling bugs on my cheeks stop me cold. I slap my face and discover they're tears not bugs. During the *snap*, some things are different then in real time—I learn as I go. It's not normal runny snot in my nose either—more like a thick mound of goo.

I shake off the teary moment and shuffle painfully through the debris until I find the Ducati's partially crushed trunk. With a scrap of the bike's frame, I pry open the encasement. I take out my insurance papers and registration.

My laptop, red book, and the letter are untouched. *Thank God*. I wasn't so lucky with everything else. My clothes lie scattered across the pavement, covered with a mix of oil and dirt. I roll everything into my ripped bag.

Where's the bike's frame with the VIN number? I don't see that piece anywhere in this tangled mess. Maybe it got destroyed.

On the sidewalk, I find the prying stick from earlier. Clutching the top, I use it as a cane and stab at the asphalt until I'm in front of the guy who drove the truck. He's almost a foot-and-a-half taller than me. Hunched over, frozen with his face level to mine. On pause in mid-blink, behind a set of thick eyeglasses, is an amazing pair of blue eyes with specks of yellowish-green and sparkling, gray tones. He's younger than I thought and paler. A smattering of facial hair covers his chin. He's got baby skin.

I take his wallet from his back pocket and find his driver's license. Nick Valentine lives in Sparrow Mountain. He's twenty-three years old? He looks sixteen. I flick the edges of his license. It looks real. It feels real. I shove it in my pocket.

Inside the fold of the wallet, I find a wad of cash that doesn't come close to replacing my Ducati. Three hundreds and a twenty. I take every cent. "For what you did to my bike."

I hesitate. Slide twenty dollars back inside his wallet and jam it in his pocket. At the curb, I stuff everything into my ripped pack and tie it closed. I load up and grab my helmet.

I make my way across a large vacant lot, maneuvering my bad leg through lumps of snow and trash. My ankle slows me down, but so does the sludginess of the void. When I can't stand the relentless pressure any longer, I snap my fingers. All compression around my body disappears. The sudden re-launch of the world propels me forward.

I hear the slight whisper of my voice echo from the void. "For what you did to my bike."

"I see you," a guy yells.

I assume it's Nick Valentine since nobody else is around. But how does he see anything? A tingle crawls up my spine. I jab the stick at the ground, trying to move faster. Then I stop in front of a hand-carved sign on the corner that says, *Welcome to*

Sparrow, Colorado, a Local Ski Secret. Shhhhhh. Flecks of snow dust an empty road behind me.

I hobble along Main Street in this quaint little mountain town that looks unnervingly like an empty movie set. One road. No people. Blue awnings, brick buildings. Along the row of shops, the smell of coffee leads me toward The Mountain Beanery. But at the far end, a half-lit neon tequila sign grabs my attention.

Carrying my helmet weighs me down. I turn the scuffed freedom flag away from me. A zap of cold air sends a million pointy stinging slivers through my foot and up my leg while fresh beads of sweat cover my lip. Leaning against a building on a Burr's Real Estate sign, I read the handwritten note taped inside the window to take my mind off this shit. 'Closed. Off-season hours: Whenever I'm here.'

Coffee or tequila—that's an easy decision.

At the Cave Bar & Grille, I wrestle with the heavy door, step inside. The smell of stale beer engulfs me. My makeshift cane slaps the floor, and I stumble when I attempt to pick it up.

An old guy comes around the bar and places the stick upright in the corner. He lifts my ripped bag off my shoulder and stares at the tire mark across the leather strap. Then he guides me to the bar where I sit. My escort has a full head of gray hair, a wild moustache, and a large belly that doesn't stop him from maneuvering with skinny-guy agility.

His giant hand pats the cushioned stool next to me. "Put that leg up here." He gently lifts my foot.

Tears form in my eyes. "That flippin' hurts."

He gets a bunch of towels from behind the bar and puts them under the boot. "How'd it happen?"

"I landed wrong hopping off the bus."

He takes a closer look at the purplish-green skin bursting through the laces. His eyes shift to my face. I wait for him to call bullshit, but he stares at my hair as if

he can't look away. I know the whitening took place. The *snap* makes the strands grow faster, too.

"Can I get a shot of tequila?" I ask.

"Of course." He steps behind the bar and grabs a bottle of Patrón.

The pub is lined with old-fashioned wood paneling that's covered with all the usual bar signs: Budweiser, Blue Moon, Cuervo Gold. Beyond the few tables and scattered chairs, a warped dartboard hangs above a dusty old jukebox.

The only other customer is another old guy across the room, who yells, "Jack, another Scotch."

Jack, the large man looking after me, I suppose, slides a shot of Patrón my way.

I slam the drink and pucker. "Any lime?"

He stares at the tattoo on my finger. "Whisper, is that your name?"

I nod because I don't feel like explaining, and even if I did tell all, the idea behind my new name, my new life, wouldn't make sense to him.

He slides a slice of lime over on a napkin, fills the shot glass and winks. "I'm Jack."

I gulp down the familiar burn and wait a few seconds for the warmth—my version of a homemade quilt on a rainy night in front of a fireplace.

I tug on the boot, and white-lightning pain zaps me from my toes through my spine to the tip of my head. Holding my breath, I wrestle with the lace, shimmy the heel back and forth. I finally just yank it off. I slump over and almost pass out.

"It's busted. You need to set the bone." Jack hands me a chunk of ice wrapped in a bar towel. "For the swelling."

I place the homemade ice pack on my ankle. I'm screwed. Only one foot working—I'm so screwed.

He pushes another shot toward me. "Hospital's a ways. But I know a guy."

I throw back the alcohol and gesture for more. He gives me a double. I drink and suck on a lime. My insides begin to mellow, a smooth, liquid feel that melts through my veins. "A local guy? Like a medic?"

Jack nods. Two faces and four eyes float in front of me. I blink and shake my head. Must be the altitude because I've only just begun.

Jack yells to the old guy, "Go get your bag."

3 - Pure Pain

I open my eyes to ceiling tiles and start to sit upright on some kind of table. Jack restrains me. "No, no, no. You're in my stockroom, remember?"

No. I don't.

The other guy from the bar wears a white coat. Close up, he looks old enough to be dead, with leather skin and slits for eyes.

I spit out a bandana. Where did that come from?

"Hold that. You need to bite down," Jack says.

Cases of booze line the walls and close in on me—spinning. Attempting to steady myself, I shut my eyes and grip the table.

"Boyd, you gotta just do it," Jack says.

My eyes pop open.

"Hold on. This will kill her. Besides, she's awake now." The old man looks at me. "Aren't you?"

I want to say yes, but nothing comes out.

He bends over, his mouth close enough to touch my ear. "I'm Boyd Hammersmith, old friend of Jack's. Gonna fix your ankle."

On his white coat: Hammersmith Veterinarian, 24/7

A vet?

“Calm down. He’s the best medical man I know,” Jack says.

“Only going to hurt like bloody hell for a second . . . or two.” The old man hesitates, smacks his lips together. “Then the worst part should be over.”

I motion toward a bottle of Cuervo Gold balanced on a stack of boxes.

“More?” Jack says. He hands me the tequila. I lift my torso and take a big swig.

“Gonna need at least five weeks to heal.” Boyd brushes my leg with his fingers.

Red-hot pain flashes through my bones. The room spins faster, an *Alice in Wonderland*, down-the-rabbit-hole type of spinning.

“Ready?” Boyd asks.

I take another chug, hand the bottle to Jack. Put the bandana in my mouth, and situate myself. Boyd grips my leg, squeezes, and yanks—real hard. The ceiling tiles distort. I hear someone shrieking in the most agonizing way.

Tell her to shut up.

“It’s over,” Jack yells.

The woman screams louder.

“Stop it!” He waves the bandana at me. “Whisper, stop.”

Me? I’m screaming? I take a deep breath. Release my fists. Loosen my jaw. My eyelids grow heavy. So heavy . . .