

## ***THE STRENGTH WITHIN***

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—*Brittany Violet  
Long*

I SAT HOLDING MY KNEES PRESSED TIGHT TO MY CHEST. A warm breeze played in my dirty blonde curls. Even though it was a hot August day in the little town of Benton, Arkansas, I couldn't shake the chills that were slithering up my spine. I sat in the shade of my favorite oak tree in my parents' backyard, trying to regain my composure. The wind picked up speed and rattled the leaves loose from the tree I was cowering under. I could smell the disgusting aroma of iron and death all around me. My heart raced beneath the thin cotton material covering my chest. I rubbed my fingers in the grass trying desperately to cleanse the color of mulberry from my hands. It seemed like nothing I did could remove the dry, crusty blood that was caked under my fingernails. After the shock finally subsided, I felt a heavy tinge of guilt eating at me for not being able to save my sister. I wasn't quick enough or strong enough to preserve the innocent beauty of her life. I could hear whispers in the wind and I felt a dark presence closing in on me. I felt as if I was being watched. I pressed my palms into the hot earth and eased my way back to my feet. I started walking, not sure where my feet might take me.

I thought I was dreaming when I heard the muffled screams. I felt the weight of a muscular body settle on top of me the same time as a rough, crackled hand covered my mouth. I began to panic. The hand was hot and sticky and I could taste the salty sweat seeping into the corner of my mouth. My eyes flew open to find a scruffy man leaning over me. I panicked as I let my eyes adjust to the dim light coming in from the window. An eerie wind tousled the moon lit curtains and cooled my damp skin. He had eyes the color of dirty mop water and jet black hair that was slick with grime and oil. I tried to scream but there was too much pressure on my chest.

The blood-curdling screams continued in the bed next to me. I saw my baby sister fighting against a younger man with the same stature and dirty appearance. The younger man had his pants down around his ankles. Her hands were tied to the bed post above her head with a thick rope. Her arms were red and raw from the struggle. He was gripping her blond hair in his fist. He had some sort of marking slithering from his pinky finger all the way up his forearm. My sister's eye was black and blood was smeared across her dainty mouth. I felt helpless as I watched the man force himself on my little sister. I sobbed when reality really hit me. I watched her innocence being stripped from her as she cried hysterically.

"Please don't! Please stop! Oh god! Allison, help me! Please don't!" My sister sobbed. He thrust his pelvis into her body while she wailed in protest.

"I told you to shut up!" the younger man screamed into her face.

He picked her up off the bed and slammed her petite body into the wall. I began to thrash my body violently. I needed to save my little sister.

"Stop it! You're hurting her!" I screamed.

Her head crashed into the wall with a loud clomp. My sister swung her arms at the man and clawed at his face. The man

grabbed her by the neck and shoved her head back against the wall several times.

"No! You're going to kill her! You're a monster!" I screamed. The man let go of her neck and her body collapsed forwards in on itself. The man moved away from her as she fell head first into our cherry wood dresser. Her face hit the corner of the dresser before the rest of her bruised body hit the ground. Her head fell lifelessly to the side as her eyes rolled back and a stream of blood began to slowly pool from her mouth. The man wiped off his lips and pulled his pants back up around his waist.

I sobbed uncontrollably as horror stirred inside of me. My stomach twisted in knots while bile threatened to surface into my throat. The taste of acid swam in my mouth. I struggled beneath the man on top me but was I stuck under the weight of a boulder. The man took his free hand and began to undo the button on his faded black jeans. I could feel a large protrusion pressing against the crease of my thighs. I kicked my legs and thrashed my body beneath his hips. I was panicking because his large hand was partially covering my nostrils. I bit down on the man's hand and felt the disgusting warmth ooze into my mouth. His filthy blood tasted like metal and burnt ash. The man was enraged and shrieked in pain.

"Hold still, you little bitch,"

the man said, "do you wanta end up like your sister?"

He flipped my body over and smashed my face into the pillow. I gasped for air but I was struggling to breathe. My cotton pillow case was hot against my face. His rough hands were trying to spread my legs apart. I tried to squeeze my legs as tight as I could but they were slick with perspiration. His hand slid between my legs and violently up between my thighs. His callused fingers were hot as they rubbed against my skin. I tried to swing my right arm at the man but missed. I tried again and got hold of his hair. I yanked and ripped at his hair until he lost his focus and let out a painful grunt. I jerked my head back and felt the crunch of cartilage. I must have gotten him good because he fell backwards giving me just enough time to turn myself back around. I gasped for air as the younger man came towards me clutching a thick rope. The older man was sprawled on the floor with his face in his hands. I leapt up from the bed and grabbed the cast iron jewelry box that my sister gave me as a gift. "Stay away from me," I said through clenched teeth.

The younger man didn't listen and he continued to advance towards me.

"I mean it! Stay away from me!" I screamed. I felt the blood boiling beneath my skin.

"You're gonna be a good

girl and let Bernie finish what he started." The man said while he twisted the rope around in his hand. His muscles tightened in his bronzed forearms making his snake tattoo twist and contort. I shuddered and felt an overwhelming shiver ripple through my body starting at the soles of my feet and working its way up through my spine. I felt like I was going to throw up again. I tightened my fingers around the cast iron and took a deep breath to steady the nerves gripping at my stomach. The man began to close in on me. I jumped from the bed and lurched towards him bringing the iron box down on his head. The man stumbled forward and I leapt past him. I tried to run by the older man still on the floor but he grabbed me by the ankle and I fell to the ground. I saw that the man's nose was crooked. Dark blood oozed from his nose and streamed down his chin. I backed away from him on the ground but he was crawling towards me quickly. I kicked my legs at him viciously until I was able to kick him in the face. I got back to my feet and ran into the dark hallway. The house was empty because my parents were away for the weekend. The men must have been watching the house.

I could hear the man making his way through the hall behind me. I ran into my parent's bedroom and slammed the door. My fingers trembled as I tried to make them

lock the door. I was desperate as I searched the room. I threw things. I Broke things. A picture of me and my sister fell from my parent's dresser and shattered on the floor. I didn't stop though; I knew it had to be in there somewhere. The man was outside the bedroom door now. He was banging with all of his might and it seemed that he was throwing the weight of his body into the door as it budged with each thump.

I was searching through my parent's closet. I found boxes of useless knick knacks, boxes of pictures and clothing, but no gun. The banging was getting louder and the man was desperate to get through that door. I laid down on the cold, hardwood floor and rolled my body under my parent's king sized bed. I found a small cigar box wedged between the mattress and the frame of the bed and I knew I had found what I was looking for. I scooted myself up close to the wall just as the bedroom door swung open. Heavy footfalls advanced towards me. I watched the man's muddy black boots circle the room. Finally they stopped right in front of my parent's Victorian style bed. I gripped the pistol in my sweaty hands and tried to keep my breath low and muted. My heart was soaring. The gun felt cool and slick in my hands. My hands were shaking but I liked the weight of the pistol as I held it in front of me. The man dropped to his knees and then

brought his face to meet mine right as I pulled the trigger and put a bullet right between his eyes.

A few hours later, I found myself at my old school. I wasn't entirely sure what it was that compelled me to go there, but something about the moss covered brick and the smell of dust comforted me. The parking lot was empty and eerily silent. I stared at the small building that once upon a time seemed so massive and giant to me. I walked to the back of the school quickly as if someone was following me. When I was younger, I would come here when things seemed to go bad. I placed her fingertips along the smooth glass and pressed my face to the window. My warm breath left the cool surface looking foggy. With slight force I pushed on the glass in the right hand corner. The window gave ease and slid up. I placed my hands in on the flat surface and lifted myself up and through the window. Once inside the dark, clammy room, I stumbled around until my eyes adjusted to the light. I bumped into a life sized skeleton hanging from a silver hook and nearly gave myself a heart attack. I descended into the narrow hallway and proceeded to make my way through the dark corridor, running my fingers along the navy blue, paint caked lockers. I felt numb and cold even as memories of childhood and innocence tried to break through my facade.

I walked until I found myself standing in a huge, open space. I stared at the calm water in the pool. The dark depths of the water looked so inviting. I placed my strong hands on the smooth metal of the ladder and propelled myself up the stairs with placid strength. I thought about climbing up these same stairs when I was younger. I remembered how scary they seemed to me. I remembered the way it used to make my heart race to think about falling freely into the water. I reached the top of the ladder and gazed at the serene water below me. I unbuttoned my jean shorts and shimmed out of them. I pulled my shirt up and over my head with steady hands. I edged my way to the end of the wobbly diving board and liked the way the plank felt as it bounced slightly and gave under the weight of my body. I stood there with my arms wrapped around my once fragile body in an embrace and thought about everything that had happened. A knowing smile hinted at the corner of my rosy lips. I raised my arms above my head and felt the muscles in my legs tighten as I bent them. I felt the strength travel through my sinew as I flung my body into the air. I descended from the plank and dove towards the tranquil water. For a short moment I felt free. I was alive and I was flying. The tips of my fingers touched the water first, followed by my head and then the rest of my body.

The cool water welcomed me and embraced my body as darkness swept over.

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I found myself standing in a dark room. Turquoise illumination beamed from the center of the space. A transparent box filled with a lucid substance sat before me. I felt confusion sweep over me as a knot formed in my stomach. Tension tugged at my chest making it hard to breath. The water began to stir making the sand in the bottom of the aquarium cast a stormy cloud. I looked closer and it began to rain. My mouth tasted of thunder and blood. Blinding lights danced through the down pour as crimson sparks floated past my eyes. Sleek asphalt shimmered through the storm. A whirlwind of images screamed in protest as heavy bodies collided head on. A tear seeped down my cheek and a gasp was stuck in my throat. I tried to scream but no sound escaped my lips. A burst of lightning caused the glass to shatter in my face. Water began to pool around my bare ankles, creeping up my legs faster than I could think to move. I felt cemented in place. Horror and panic put my body in shock. Cold water splashed against my chest and numbed the fright. I could do nothing but wait as the murky water filled my mouth and settled in my lungs. My heart faltered and darkness swept over.