

THE  
PRICE  
*of*  
TRUTH

*A Chasing Peace Novel*

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## **The Price of Truth**

A Chasing Peace Novel

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## THIRTY-NINE

**IT WAS HARD TO SEE THROUGH EYES** that blinded me from my own truth. The self-betrayal ran deep, a constant reminder that I was the source of my own distrust.

As an astute coping mechanism during the past months, I had taken control over even the impossible. I'd mastered gazing into mirrors through a sightless lens, convincing myself that making contact with my reflection was a transgression worse than committing a cardinal sin. Simply because I didn't want to face the story my soulless eyes told.

Today was no different; my avoidant walls were shored up as I reached for the door's metal handle. Yet while reciting my mantra to keep my eyes averted, my resolve wavered. The temptation to steal a glance grew stronger than ever, my hand hesitating and then falling back to my side.

In that split second, when my eyes met their reflection in the door's tinted glass, everything unraveled. My world fell into dead silence; even the birds stopped chirping. Adrenaline surged through the creases in my palms as my tragic story unfolded before me.

Deep within the icy pigmentation lay the secrets hidden from me, the hardened corneas serving as faithful gatekeepers. My vibrant caramel-green strands, which once exploded into a starburst around my pupils, were now overshadowed with despair—robbing my innocence.

As it happened predictably a million times before, my anxiety tripped. The outskirts of my vision blurred, then faded into complete blackness. Only a faintly illuminated tunnel leading to my lifeless eyes remained. My nostrils flared in a desperate search for air. I couldn't pull in oxygen. I couldn't release carbon dioxide. Under normal circumstances, hitting up my maker would have been the obvious choice to pray for help, but He wasn't currently occupying a slot on my favorite's list.

Gram was my next best option for channeling. I clenched my eyelids shut, journeying back for an inoculation of hope. In my mind's eye, a much younger version of myself sat on Gram's lap, my elbows resting on the lace eggshell tablecloth beneath a birch-trimmed cuckoo clock hanging on the wall. The aromatic notes of espresso in a delicate demitasse cup tickled my sense of smell.

"My beautiful angel. Yes. You will carry this tragedy with you for the rest of your life. But you *will* survive it. After all, you're a Russo, and Russos are strong." Gram spoke in her thick Italian accent, fisting her arthritic hands in the air. "You are powerful, Karis—a wise old soul. Nothing can beat you unless you give it permission to do so."

Gram's smile from above sent happy chills down my spine, one vertebra at a time, nourishing me with valor. When my eyes opened, the landscape and nature's sounds surrounded me again. My lungs were now only half empty, each exhale carrying a heavy load of trapped anxiety.

Raising the water bottle to my lips, I chugged down deliberate gulps, the exaggerated tilt sending a river along the sides of my mouth. As I carried my forearm across my lips, I wish I could say my eyes had lost the stormy haze and returned to their emerald shade, but I didn't believe

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in miracles. There was still a long war ahead of me. But damn it! I was a Russo! And now was the time. To take a stand. For me.

Lasering into my eyes' reflection, I said firmly, "I *never* gave my permission. I'm taking the power back. All of it. You can try to hide, but I'm gonna track down the truth. One memory at a time."



I skinned through the modest opening, my back providing a soft landing for the heavy glass to settle upon. With gliding steps, I eased the door to a quiet close while scanning the waiting room. The lifeless group didn't raise a head.

Making sure the flip in my flop snapped soundlessly against the heel of my foot, I advanced toward the least populated section. The avocado green leather on the chair assisted my slide to a comfortable slump. Avoiding the arranged stacks of self-help brochures, I propped my feet against the edge of the coffee table and fanned my toes, admiring my fresh pedicure.

Choosing a polish at the salon was never just about the color. The name had to resonate with me, and selecting the shade—*Mind Haunting Blackout*—was a no-brainer. The sheen wasn't quite waterlogged black, more of a lustrous ebony with subliminal, iridescent purples and blues that reflected the light. It felt as though I was the poster child the brand's creative team tapped into when adopting the enamel's handle, which was precisely why I was sitting among the "cerebrally jacked up."

Today marked the fifth-month anniversary of that fateful evening last spring. Ever since, I'd been turned inside out. Not only had my eyes blinded me from their very purpose of sight, my *mind* had wholly *blacked-out* that decisive night.

Trying to *white-in* the memory had become my obsession. On the daily, I'd been consumed with retracing the night, hoping to dredge up even the slightest repressed memory, only to be defeated by the summer's

sunset when nothing new turned up. The irony that reigned supreme: After someone victimized me, I became my own worst enemy. I sabotaged my own memory.

Dr. Yancey spun it with more positive threads. She called it motivational forgetting, explaining how blackouts are common after traumatic events. According to Doc, entire days can be lost, even the better part of someone's life. She explained that it was my mind's defense mechanism, designed to keep me from reliving the trauma.

There was a monumental obstacle, though, that neither Yancey nor I ever mentioned aloud. My journey toward healing couldn't begin unless I knew what happened in the first place.

"You forgot," a girl sitting two chairs down said, her voice as frail as her body.

Guarded, I glanced at her from the corner of my eye. Certainly, she was seasoned enough to know communication was banned by judicial law in psychiatric waiting rooms.

"Forgot?" I asked thinly.

The girl pointed toward the wall, a stack of metal bracelets shimmying down her wrist, unveiling her scars. "You didn't let your shrink know their next headcase arrived."

"Oh, right. Thanks." As I found my way to the automated check-in system to activate the red light next to Yancey's name, the vision of the girl's puffy scars burned a hole of curiosity in my brain tissue.

It was obvious she wasn't just tinkering with cutting. These were full-fledge, *I'm ready to end it*, scars. They made my eyes seem genuinely recognizable in comparison. The pinkish-purple-toned wounds conveyed healing in the infancy stage. But what wrecked me, beyond the fact that she'd attempted suicide, was the rough jaggedness of the scars. She didn't simply pull the blade of choice straight through her tender flesh. They were indignant cuts, mapped with irregular turns, created with what would have to be slow and deep precision.

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Lowering back to my seat, my legs bounced anxiously, jostling the sketchpad on my lap. I tried to imagine the pain that took such a toll on her life that dying was the viable option. Was it a sweet surrender of sorts?

Suicide was never an option for me, for numerous reasons. The obvious, I was chicken shit. I could barely stomach a gusher when I nicked myself shaving. Still, I realized there were ways to exit other than bloodshed, but the real reason ... giving up wasn't in my long-term vocab.

"You're trying to find answers?" the girl asked, her eyes landing on my sketchpad.

My cheeks flooded with embarrassment, wishing I had faced the cover toward my lap. It revealed nearly as much as her scars, and I was certain she was doing exactly what I'd just done—trying to piece me together and draw out conclusions of her own.

There was no shortage of material for her to speculate upon. On the front cover, I had sketched a girl staring at her reflection in a shattered mirror. A single tear streaked down her cheek, the watery path curving into an unmistakable question mark. The girl's arms were stretched out to the side, pushing against the walls that seemed to be closing in on her. Did I mention that the girl could have been my doppelganger?

Normally, I would have found a way to deflect her curiosity, inserting a believable lie—which I had a knack for—but I felt connected to this stranger. We were both members of the same tribe.

"Trying to remember." Even though I was whispering, the impact wasn't lost on me. The icky bubbled up all over again.

"Welp, isn't that a bitch? I'm trying to forget." My new friend chuckled softly. "If only we could swap."

"Patent," a short, sparsely haired, middle-aged man announced as he appeared in the doorway, his eyes fixated on his legal pad.

Her unlaced combat boots rose. "Wish me luck?"

"Lots of luck, Patent. Peace in your forget." I hoped she connected with my sincerity.

“Peace in your remember.” She flashed me the universal symbol, making a V with her fingers.

*If only*, I thought to myself.

“Karis,” I said, pulling my hand into my chest. Just then, Dr. Yancey appeared, and the trio do-si-doed around one another in the doorway.

No one beamed optimism like Dr. Yancey. She was a crystal of hope. A healer, trickling promise back into my life at least once a week, sometimes twice. I nicknamed her Demon Slayer. She got a big kick out of it and told me one by one we’d destroy them all.

“Come on back, sweet girl.” Yancey waved me over with her life-infusing smile, wearing her signature red lips.

I moved toward her. From the exact spot Dr. Yancey stood, it was precisely thirty-nine steps to her *living room*. She never intruded with senseless weather talk as I counted under my breath; she knew I was busy paying homage to my ritual. And if I lost count, I’d have to start again. That’s only happened once.

“Thirty ...” The last step always proved the most haunting, the hairs on my neck standing at attention as I faced the collage of mirrors hanging on the wall. “... nine.”

Each circular mirror was framed with an antique pewter finish, all soldered together to create a large, rectangular piece of artwork. I don’t know why, but it creeped me out. Strangely, despite the piece being a collection of mirrors, I never had to remind myself to avoid eye contact. I never saw my reflection in the mirrors, just all those circles.

“Water?” Doc asked, her hands reassuringly curving around my shoulders as she stood behind me.

I raised my water bottle, my eyes preoccupied with tracking down the rungs of circles. “Brought my own today.”

Crossing her legs, Doc sat like a lady in her examining chair, wearing the most fabulous pair of red-soled shoes. I toed out of my flip-flops and

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curled up on the couch, twisting my torso so the arc of my eyes didn't land anywhere near the mirrored artwork.

I dove right in. "He's gone. Left for college."

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