

*Two Tattered
Hearts*



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TWO TATTERED HEARTS

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CHAPTER ONE

Anna Rodgers shifted her six-month-old son to her right hip and set the diaper bag and her purse on the cement porch. She jiggled the doorknob. Frustrated, she yelled, “Bobby, I can’t budge this thing. Help me?”

“Damn it, woman, can’t you do anything? What the hell’s your problem?”

After a few moments, the wooden door opened. “Thank you. Maybe we need a new one.” Anna entered and set Michael in the center of the living room floor before going back for the items left outside.

“No, we don’t. You need to learn how to use it. What’s for dinner?”

“Fried chicken, I’ll start it after I change Michael. Your day okay?”

“I’m starvin’. You didn’t leave enough lunch. What do you think I do all day, goof-off? It’s hard bustin’ my back fixin’ cars. You can’t even leave a decent lunch.”

Anna walked to the kitchen with a dirty diaper and noticed the empty beer cans on the counter. “I’ll wash my hands and then start dinner. I’m sorry. I thought there was enough leftover roast for three sandwiches. There’ll be plenty of chicken left.”

As she put the first piece of breaded chicken into the hot oil, Michael cried. “Bobby, please get the baby. I need to get this started.”

“Do I have to do everythin’, woman?”

“Never mind, I’ll get him.” Anna dropped a thigh in the oil, and grease splattered onto her arm. “Ouch!”

“Here’s the damn kid, clumsy.” Bobby set Michael on the kitchen floor. “I’m goin’ out. Dinner better be done when I get back.”

Anna cringed at the sound of the slamming door. After wiping tears streaming down her face, Anna lifted the crying infant to her breast and kissed his cheek.

“At least, we’ll be safe until he comes home. If we’re lucky, he’ll be picked up for drunk driving and spend time in jail. I’m sorry, little one. Mommy’ll get you out of this mess as soon as possible.”

When Anna heard the rumble of Bobby’s truck, she rolled over and glanced at the clock.

Two-thirty. Maybe he’ll think I’m asleep. Please, God, not another beating.

She pulled the covers to her neck and turned on her side away from the door. The sound of his boots thudding and stumbling on the linoleum floor caused her to wince.

He’s drunk. God, keep him away from Michael.

“Bitch, where’s dinner!” he bellowed down the hall.

“Shhh, you’ll wake Michael. Your plate’s in the fridge.” Standing in the bedroom doorway, Anna pulled the tie of the tattered terrycloth robe around her slender waist. “It’ll only take a few minutes to reheat.” After setting the microwave, she faced Bobby, but avoided eye contact. “I’m going back to bed. I’ll see you when I get home after work.”

Bobby grabbed her arm just above the wrist. “Stay here.”

“I get up at five-thirty. I need sleep.”

“I think we need to spend some quality time gettin’ it on.” Bobby yanked open her robe and gyrated his hips.

Please, no. “Bobby, stop. You’ll wake Michael.”

As her husband slathered wet, sloppy kisses down her neck, Anna closed her eyes. *I hate you. Don’t make me do this!*

Within minutes, Anna heard soft whimpers from the baby's room, which quickly turned to cries.

Thank you, God. With her hands on Bobby's chest, Anna pushed herself from his grip. "I'll see what he wants."

"Damn kid."

After Anna changed Michael's diaper, kissed his cheek, laid him in the crib, and covered him, she glanced toward the door. I can't go back to bed. Bobby'll be there within the hour. I'll sleep here.

She curled up on the floor and pushed her right arm between the slats, rubbing her son's back. Anna soon fell into a restless sleep.

Early the following morning, Anna entered The Creative Designs Advertising Agency and glanced over her shoulder. Through the window, she watched a man leave the bookstore and cross the street. She stepped closer to get a better look. *Hmm, he rides a Harley. That's fancy. He must have money.* She sighed and walked to her office. *Must be nice.*

"Anna, are you finished with the Johnson's ads?" a male voice called to her.

"I finished them yesterday. I'll bring them to your office." She adjusted the sweater sleeve covering her lower right arm before entering Mr. Keller's office.

As Anna left her boss's office, she glanced at her watch, thinking *I'll make these adjustments, and then it should be lunchtime.*

I'm glad the bookstore's close by. It shouldn't take long to find a book on divorce.

Anna searched the self-help section. *Good! A Guide to Divorce. This should help.* Searching the Table of Contents, she found a chapter on abuse victims. *This will have what I need.* Slowly she walked as she read.

“Ugh!” A man’s blue eyes widened as he stared at the young woman who bumped into him causing him to spill his coffee. He bent and picked up the book she dropped.

“I’m sorry.” Anna’s cheeks flushed. “I’m so sorry.

“It’s okay. At least it had cooled some. There are napkins at the deli. The clothes’ll dry.”

“I’ll get some.” Anna rushed to get them, hurried back, and started to wipe his shirt.

“Stop, you don’t need to do that.” He took the napkins from her and led her to a table in the deli section.

Anna noticed him studying the bruises on her arm and yanked down the sweater sleeve to cover them.

“Let me introduce myself. I’m Troy Whitman. You are?”

“Anna Rodgers, I’m sorry. I should watch where I’m going.” Her cheeks turned crimson.

“It’s not every day a pretty woman runs into me.” Troy held a chair for her as a grin crossed his lips. “Your book, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” As Anna forced a smile and took the offered book, she watched him sit and took deep breaths, hoping to mask her embarrassment.

That’s the man I saw get on the motorcycle earlier. Wonder what he does for a living. Maybe walks around the bookstore all day hitting on women. Probably, he’s a guy. Anna sighed and stared at her book.

“You seemed pretty engrossed in that book.” Troy turned it so he could read the title. “*A Guide to Divorce.*”

Anna chewed on her lower lip. “I’m sorry. My husband and I are going through a difficult time.”

Troy placed his hand at her wrist and pushed up the sleeve. “What happened?” When she didn’t answer, he glanced toward the in-store deli. “I’ll be right back with a sandwich.”

Troy placed a plate filled with a ham and cheese sandwich, pickle and chips in front of her. He set a coffee cup by her plate and sat. “Cream and sugar?” She shook her head, so he took a sip of his coffee. “Now, tell me about the bruises.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Anna avoided his eyes.

He reached over, pushed up the sleeve of her right arm and revealed the blue and purple finger imprints.

Anna tried to yank her arm away.

“How did you get these?”

Their eyes met.

“Those are bruises. I won’t pry, but I do care.” Troy watched for a reaction. “Is that why you’re reading about divorce?”

Tears slipped from the corners of Anna’s eyes. “I can’t discuss it.”

“I won’t force you, but I want you to know anytime you need anything, contact me.” Removing a business card from his billfold, Troy set it on the table. “Here are my numbers. I’m available twenty-four/seven.”

“You don’t know me. Why are you doing this?”

Troy ran his fingers through his short brown hair. “My mother, God rest her soul, was constantly abused by her second husband. One night, he got stumbling drunk and started hitting her. I knew she couldn’t take much more and tried to stop him. He turned his anger to me and beat me. When Mom tried to protect me, he struck her with his fist. She fell and hit her head on the corner of a table. He kicked her in the stomach a few times. She didn’t move. I picked

up the fireplace poker and hit him until he fell to the floor and quit moving.” Troy paused and released a deep breath.

“I cradled Mom’s head, realizing he’d killed her. I was ten. The neighbors called the police. The jerk tried to blame me for Mom’s death. Mrs. Sorenson, who lived next door, came to my defense. The lawyer got him off with a manslaughter charge. He spent all of two years in jail. The Sorenson’s reared me.”

Anna pressed her hand over her mouth. “I’m so sorry.”

“Maybe if somebody had offered to help, Mom would be alive today. You’re wearing a gold band and reading a book about divorce.” As Anna closed her eyes, Troy reached across and held her hand. “There’s no reason to be ashamed.” There was silence for a moment. “Do you have children?”

Anna opened her eyes and nodded. “If Bobby finds out we talked, I’ll be in so much trouble.”

“I won’t tell him. Will you?” Troy watched her shake her head and then lifted his business card from the table. “Take this. I’d feel better knowing you can call someone.” He fingered the card. “Do you have a son or daughter?”

“A six-month-old, Michael.”

“If you need to call, he’s welcome too. I know you won’t leave without him.”

Anna stared at the hand covering hers. “I need to get to work.”

He lifted her sandwich. “I think you have time for at least a few bites. I’ll get a ‘doggie bag’.”

Anna watched him walk to the counter. *Is he for real? White knights are fantasy.* She rubbed her eyes. He was still there. Is his story real or is he lying to earn my trust? I’m not a very good judge of men. After all, I married Bobby. She released a deep breath and whispered, “I wonder what he really wants.”

Troy set the white sack on the table and picked up the card. "Please take it."

"Bobby goes through my purse. If he finds it, he'll ask questions."

"Do you have anything he doesn't search through?"

"I hide my birth control pills in my briefcase."

"You hide your pills?" Troy's eyebrows rose.

"Bobby wants more children. I don't want another child. I love Michael, but he deserves better."

"There's no reason to explain." He held her chair as she stood. "Can we meet tomorrow?"

"I guess."

"Good. I'll walk you to the door." After scooting the chair under the table, he picked up the book. "I'll hold this for you. You wouldn't want Bobby finding it."

"Thank you." Anna turned to walk out.

"Until tomorrow." Troy grinned.

Troy watched Anna through the bookstore window. Her warm brown eyes had already melted his reserve and the auburn hair and the sprinkling of freckles across her nose really appealed to him. He smiled.

When he heard the rumble of loud pipes coming toward them, he turned his head. *Hmm, Gibson headers.* The sound stopped close to Anna. A tall, muscular man jumped from a customized pickup and ran toward her.

Troy stepped outside. *Who's this?*

The dark-haired man grabbed Anna's arm. "Where the hell you been? The damn daycare called. Michael's sick."

He took a few steps closer. *Her husband?*

Bobby yanked the sack from her hand, opened it, looked inside, and threw the contents on the sidewalk. "No wonder you're still fat from the baby. We don't have

money for your fancy lunches. Now, get your kid! You'd better not take him to the doctor. You wasted enough on lunch."

After Bobby climbed into the pickup and left, Anna knelt and cleaned up the sandwich, chips, and pickle. She threw them in the trash on her way inside the building.

Within minutes, she opened the door with her briefcase in hand and crossed the sidewalk. When Troy walked up, she said, "My son's ill. I need to pick him up from daycare."

"I overheard everything. Why can't Bobby get him?"

"He's busy; self-employed, repairing automobiles."

Troy rubbed the back of his neck.

"Please, I need to hurry."

"Or you'll get beaten for being late, right?"

Anna's shoulders slumped. "I need to hurry."

Troy removed another card from his billfold. "Put this inside your briefcase. I'm concerned. Call anytime."

Anna shoved the card in an out-of-the-way pouch in her briefcase and glanced toward the parking garage. "I really do need to hurry."

Troy watched her walk away, wishing she'd let him help. She was so petite she couldn't weigh a hundred and ten pounds and that bastard was twice her weight. Obviously, one well-placed blow could kill her.

He turned toward his Harley. If she stays, her son'll grow up abusing women and the cycle continues. If he hits her again, she'd better call or I'll ... shit, I don't know what I'll do.

Inside the daycare, Anna held a teary-eyed Michael on her lap as his provider said, "He's tugging his left ear. I'm pretty sure he has an ear infection. His temp's 101.5."

“I’ll call the pediatrician and see if I can get him in this afternoon.”

She carried Michael to the car and fastened the blue-eyed blond into the car seat. “Your daddy isn’t going to be happy about a doctor bill or the medicine. Why can’t he be satisfied my insurance covers most of the cost?”

With a sigh, she walked around the car and sat behind the steering wheel. *I hate my life. Every day gets worse.* When Michael whimpered, Anna turned.

“It’s all right, sweetheart. As soon as we get home, I’ll call the doctor.” She turned the key in the ignition and drove toward home.

At the last red light, Anna sat and stared straight at her house, muttering. “If I go home, Bobby won’t let me call the doctor.” She adjusted the rearview mirror and studied Michael’s tear-stained chubby cheeks. *He needs a doctor.* When the light turned green, she turned right.

“Mommy’s taking you to the doctor. I’ll deal with Daddy later.”

After Anna parked in the clinic parking lot, she paused and then reached in the briefcase. “Troy said whenever I needed anything I could call. I need fifteen dollars for the co-pay.” Tears filled her eyes.

I don’t know this man, but it’s for my son, not me. Dear God, it’s all right, isn’t it?