

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

Regardless of what has brought you to these pages, I'm glad you're here. Thank you for choosing this book.

I'd like to share with you what has brought *me* here—why I've brought myself to these pages.

As a high schooler—as a vulnerable sixteen/seventeen year-old—I experienced relationship abuse for the first time. This relationship and the dismantling of it lasted for well over a year of my life. But the danger of dating violence and relationship abuse lies not only in the time a person stays with an abuser, or even in the time a person spends trying to leave, but in the months, years, even decades that follow in which the pieces must be picked up and put back together, the memories shaken, the fear subdued.

Rebuilding oneself after the loss of humanity that inevitably comes with being involved with an abuser is no easy task. In fact, for me, it's been the longest-lasting, most exhausting, infuriating, frustrating battle I've fought in my life—one I have to face every single day. Months after I left the girl who abused me, I was still experiencing debilitating headaches (among other things) of which the onset was my relationship with her. I was sent to a neurologist whose goal was to teach me stress management techniques in order to reduce my headaches. Our first session was solely dedicated to determining what the cause of my stress was. It took her about ten minutes of questioning before she looked at me and said, "This isn't an official diagnosis, but I can tell you that you certainly seem to display many symptoms of PTSD." While I wasn't shocked, her words seemed to move me, to urge me on to something I realized I needed to do: Speak.

Back when I was seventeen, at the height of the chaos and ugliness that ensued immediately after I ended the relationship, I sat around a fire one night with my friends and told them the things this girl was doing to me. One of my friends looked at me and said, "This sounds like a book or a movie or something. Stuff like this just doesn't happen in real life." And when I agreed that the events I was experiencing were unbelievable to say the least, she said, "Honestly, you should write a book about this." After a few months of such a thought incubating in my head, one morning I woke up and said *what the heck?* and started typing away. 10 months later I had a manuscript that was over 120,000 words. 120,000 words of fear, anger, distrust, and oftentimes bitter cynicism. These were 120,000 words for me to hold in my hands and say, *this happened.*

Around that same time was when my neurologist looked me in the face and said those words—those four letters that jolted me awake: PTSD. Suddenly it was no longer about me. It was about the sixteen year-olds I could imagine sitting in that chair in three-years time as a different person, struggling to shake the headaches and the memories and the tendencies and the fear. The sixteen year-olds who would so readily take any and all the abuse thrown their way,

because they didn't know any better, or because they thought that's what love looked like. The sixteen year-olds who lost their voices and needed them back, or the sixteen year-olds who still had the opportunity to preserve theirs. That was when I decided to press on, and to hope that in the years to come, someone might take a chance on my voice and give me the opportunity to tell my story, so that any person might pick it up and see their reflection in it. So that any person might realize our lives are our own, that we are at the helm of our ship, and we *do* have the power to steer ourselves in a different direction if we find our current path has depleted our happiness.

I must once again bring up the words of my friend: "Stuff like this just doesn't happen in real life." Of course novels in their very nature are fictional, but I'm here to tell you that the story you're holding within your hands is real. The things you will read in this book are things that happen, and happen frequently among *all* people, regardless of gender, sexual orientation, age, or any other construct by which we define ourselves. Stuff like this *does* happen in real life, and it is each of our responsibilities to change it. It's my hope that every single one of us will work to make our relationships with one another safe, respectful, loving, and healthy. It's my hope that we will become aware of the dangers of dating violence and relationship abuse, so that we may work to make sure it no longer has a place in our world—so that it no longer has a place in the world of our children and our children's children.

With that being said, some of the topics addressed in this book may be challenging or triggering. This story deals with issues like abuse, violence, bullying, and suicide. Please read at your own discretion. Please also bear in mind that if you are struggling with any of these issues, you can seek help. There is no shame in reaching out.

I wish for you to take away whatever you find of value from my story, but more than anything I hope you realize the value of a story itself, including yours. Your voice is important; let it be heard.

Your story is important; tell it.