

Blind Faith

Sweetsbade, Book 1



Delphia Baisden

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by Delphia Baisden



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*For my family in Texas,
with gratitude for their unwavering support and unconditional love*

One

Sonny snapped awake, and not for the first time that night. He sat upright, chest heaving, sweat coating his bare skin. His eyes darted around the room, focusing on the soft glow of the nightlight plugged into the wall beside his bed. *Twenty-six and my nightlight is not only a comfort, but a lifeline.*

He turned, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, his feet touching the floor, and slowly began the practice of grounding.

Five things you can see, he recited in his head. Nightlight, bedspread, lamp, bedside table, water bottle.

Four things you can touch. Pillow, blanket, book, cell phone.

Three things you can hear. Fan, furnace, my own breathing.

Two things you can smell. He took a deep breath. My soap, my sweat.

One thing you can taste. He picked up the water bottle and took a drink. *Water.*

With each step, his tension began to subside. He knew full well why it worked, and he let it do its job. He sat there, breathing through it, feeling himself inch back to some semblance of relaxation, heavily steeped in tiredness. The nightmares rarely let him get more than a few hours before he'd snap awake again.

The first few weeks home, he'd been on the floor and under the bed before he remembered where he was. He'd absently reach for his firearm, only to realize it wasn't there. He was home, a long way from the actual setting of his nightmares.

And yet they persisted.

He lowered himself back onto his bed, pulling up the top sheet. He closed his eyes, forced himself to remain still, and waited for sleep to return.

The next morning, he emerged quietly from his room, fully dressed and outwardly ready for the day. He stopped in the bathroom to brush his teeth and comb his short-cropped, dark hair, noting the dark shadows under his blue eyes, evidencing his broken sleep. He sighed, turning off the light.

"Morning, Sonny."

He scarcely looked at his mother, Johanna, as he made his way to the coffeepot. "Morning." Not gruff or clipped, just resigned. He felt her watch him pour a cup, studying him. The feeling of it set his teeth on edge.

"Want me to make you some breakfast?" she offered.

Usually he turned her down, but today he only shrugged. "Okay."

He watched his mother make breakfast, moving about the kitchen as she cooked. The same kitchen, in the same house he and his sisters grew up in. It

felt strange, living with her now when he had enough retirement money from the Department of Veterans Affairs to afford a decent apartment for himself. But being with family in a familiar place was recommended to him by the otherwise unhelpful therapist assigned by the VA. Maybe it was better in some ways, yet Sonny couldn't help but feel that by being there now, he was tainting an otherwise happy home and their happy memories.

Johanna brought two plates over to the small farm-style kitchen table and sat across from him.

"I'm really starting to get the hang of these tofu scrambles," she commented brightly. He met her eyes and suddenly wanted to burst into tears. He choked them back, nodding, and she added, "Well, you'll have to tell me if I'm right." And just like that, he'd ruined her cheeriness with only a look.

He took a bite. "It's perfect," he said quietly. They ate in relative silence, Sonny holding on to his composure by sheer force of his increasingly weathered will.

Later that morning, he and Jo met with his sisters, Madison and Leigh, at the local Episcopal church they'd gone to since they were children to attend the Sunday service. He knew his sisters didn't believe like their mother or himself, but they'd insisted on coming along after he'd come home. He couldn't help but wonder if that was his mother's doing or if they did it of their own volition. At first it'd been endearing and sweet, making him feel loved and supported. But now he felt like he was indirectly forcing them to do something they didn't want, out of worry for him.

It's been months, he thought as they sat, in age order, in one of the middle pews. He felt the tears again, threatening as they had at breakfast. He chewed his lip, trying desperately to focus on what the reverend was saying, on his words of faith and encouragement. He felt Maddy reach for his hand, not having realized he was gripping the edge of the seat. He loosened it and let her hold it, feeling her eyes on him.

"I'm fine," he whispered. "Sorry." Out of the corner of his eye he could see her nodding, although now he could also feel the concerned looks of Leigh and his mother.

"Sonny?" Jo's hand on his shoulder doubled the ache of holding back his emotions.

"I said I'm fine," he bit out. He felt her flinch, dropping her hand from his shoulder, and felt his hatred for himself deepen.

After the service, he wished like hell he'd driven himself. He desperately needed to be alone, to let out the pressure building inside, to let himself cry. The nightmares, the guilt, the rage when anything remotely emotional threatened to make him explode, it was all getting to be too much.

"So, lunch? Should we go out?" Maddy asked.

Sonny felt their eyes before he even looked around, knowing they were assessing him for their own reactions. He tensed, steeling himself. "You guys go without me. I can drive myself home."

"Sweetie..." But he turned for Jo's car, walking as quickly as he could.

“I’ll bring her home later,” Maddy called after him.

He drove home, lost in thought, wondering what they were saying when he wasn’t there.

Not only do you behave like a petulant teenager, but they treat you like one. His hands tightened around the steering wheel.

They’re just worried, he countered, trying to focus on the lush green scenery. Spring was coming, but it rarely looked like spring this early in Maryland. It wasn’t warm, and though the greenery was coming back, the skies were still mostly gray, heavy with the threat of rain or sleet. He used to love it, relishing the hard-won springs and how everything would slowly begin to regain color and life. Now, the laden skies and lingering chill seeped into him, mixing with his inner murkiness until he was sure he’d suffocate. *Seasonal depression,* his therapist had said. *Add that to the list of things wrong with me now that weren’t an issue or even a thought before.* Post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder, seasonal affective disorder. There were other qualifiers and add-ons—*wait, there’s more!*—but Sonny couldn’t remember them all, and didn’t want to.

He pulled up to the house and turned off the car. The same old two-story house he grew up in, bearing the same light-blue paint his father had sworn matched his mother’s eyes, eyes Sonny had inherited. He’d never dreamed he’d be back here in his mid-twenties, living with his mother. Not out of financial necessity, but for his mental health and stability.

He climbed out of the car, shut the door behind him, and let himself into the house. He placed the keys on their hook, hung up his jacket, and went to the kitchen. Jo had loaded and started the dishwasher before they left. It was finished now, and Sonny opened it and dutifully put the clean dishes away.

If I can’t be pleasant to live with, I can at least be helpful. As much as he loathed feeling sorry for himself, he couldn’t seem to turn it off. *You’re an asshole to your mother, and you can’t even paste on a smile long enough to have lunch with your sisters, who tolerate church every Sunday for you.* He stopped, leaning over the kitchen sink, willing away the scathing thoughts, when the furnace kicked on.

In an instant he whirled around, dropping into a crouch, the plate in his hand shattering against the floor. He didn’t entirely lapse into a flashback, but it was a few seconds before he fully realized he was crouching in his mother’s kitchen, in the Maryland countryside, in the good old US of A, and that it was just the old furnace that had startled him. He looked down at the shards of glass littering the floor, thankful it was only one of the plain white dinner plates and not one of his mother’s beloved Old Country Roses plates.

“Fucking idiot,” he muttered, not in anger, but in anguish. He slumped back against the sink counter, covering his face with his hands. And finally, he let go, as loudly and as messily as he wanted.

“Sonny?” And suddenly Jo was there with him. He jumped, immediately shaping back up, wiping his eyes quickly. When had she come in? How much had she seen or heard?

"Shit, you scared me," he said.

"Sweetie, what happened?"

"Nothing. Just dropped a plate," he said, getting the blue-and-white broom-and-dustpan set from the pantry.

"Sonny, you're crying."

"I'm fine. I just thought it was one of your good plates, is all. It wasn't, though, don't worry," he said, trying to shake off her concern. "Don't come in here until I clean this up." Again, he could feel her eyes on him, watching, weighing what she'd seen against what he'd said.

He swept carefully, more because his hands were still shaking than anything else. He gathered the glass with the little broom, pushed it into the pan, and threw it away. She stepped into the kitchen then, coming to him at once.

"Harrison, sweetheart—"

"Here we go."

"You were sitting on the floor, sobbing," she said, this time with an edge.

"Mom..."

"Sweetie, talk to me."

"And say what?" He put the broom and pan away.

"All right, fair, you don't have to tell me about it. But what about that doctor? He's supposed to be helping you with this."

He laughed wryly, shaking his head. "They don't care, Mom." He felt the tears threatening to choke him again.

"Then talk to the VA and ask for another doctor. Or go find one not associated with them."

"What, so I have to talk through it all over again with someone else?"

"Sonny, you need help."

He turned and walked away from her.

"Sonny? Sonny!"

But he stormed to his room, pathetic though it felt, and slammed the door behind him.

At first he stood at the door, forehead pressed against the doorframe, once again losing to the tears. She was right, and he didn't hate her for it. Because this? Jumping at normal house noises? These were sounds he'd heard before and had come to find comfort in during his childhood and adolescence; they shouldn't make him hit the floor in fear. One of his sisters reaching over to hold his hand because she could sense him struggling shouldn't set his teeth on edge as he fought his emotions. His mother's concern shouldn't make him defensive and hostile.

He sat on the edge of his bed, looking around his room, trying once more to ground himself in the present and find happiness and solace in his home. This grounding wasn't just about finding things to match his senses. This was about calling upon memories assigned to each object he could see. His record collection, some having belonged to his father, some his own. He remembered asking his dad if they still made vinyl records. Sully Lakes's eyes had lit up, and it wasn't even forty-eight hours before his father found a

vinyl record store, took his son there, and bought him his first record. It had been one of Queen's live albums. Sonny remembered the twinge of disappointment, missing the crisp sound of a studio recording, but playing it to death all the same.

He stood up and went over to his albums, neatly lined up next to his turntable. He took the old Queen album from its sleeve and placed it in the player. The comforting, nostalgic sounds of rock-and-roll permeating his room, and he felt himself relax a little, the air completely filling his lungs for the first time in...days? Weeks?

He sat down in his old desk chair, closer to the record player than his bed. He leaned back, closed his eyes, and let the music lull him, first into relaxation, then into a light sleep.

Someone was touching him, grabbing his shoulder. He'd fallen asleep, and someone was shaking him awake. Was he in trouble? Was it a commanding officer? Was someone hurt? Had he tried to help someone and passed out, overwhelmed and overcome? When he opened his eyes, would he be confronted with frantic shouts and cries? Had he let someone die again? Images from the past swam in his vision, of blood and organs, pieces of a human body hanging over the side of an infirmity cot, pieces that not only shouldn't anyone see like that, but that there was no repairing and putting back in their rightful place. He flinched at that, jerking away from the hand shaking him.

Jo stumbled backward, landing against his bed, hand covering her mouth.

"Mom!" He was up at once, coming over to her. She tried to stifle it, but he'd seen the fear, the way she'd shrunk away from him at first before correcting herself.

"Damn, Sonny." She was clearly shaken, and trying to regain her composure.

"I am so sorry. I didn't mean to..." He sat down next to her, reaching for her. "Did I hit you? Let me see."

"It was just your elbow. I'm fine."

"Mom." She met his eyes, then let her hand fall. He'd struck her in the mouth with his elbow. The skin was red, but worse, there was a small cut in her bottom lip, and he could see a sliver of blood. "Y-you're bleeding."

She got up and went to the bathroom across the hall from his room. "It's not bad," she said.

He came to her. "Let me clean it."

"It's a tiny cut, Mr. Medic. I think I can handle it." He knew she wasn't afraid of him, yet he couldn't help but feel she didn't want him too close. *And why would she? You just cracked her in the face.* He wrapped his arms around himself. She finished cleaning it and turned, finding him leaning against the doorframe, staring down at the floor. "I'm okay, really. I shouldn't have sneaked up on you like that."

He closed his eyes, tears spilling down his cheeks. "I'm still sorry." He wiped his face with one hand. "You shouldn't have to worry about waking me up."

She shouldn't have to worry at all. He felt it like a lash across his chest.

"You may not want to tell me exactly what happened over there, but I wasn't born yesterday," she said, her hand on his back. He crumbled a little, and she pulled him to her shoulder. The tears came, sobs in tow, though he tried to fight them. "It's okay, baby." She kissed the top of his head.

It's not. He cringed, but she didn't see or sense it. How could she, when he was having a meltdown anyway? He'd never been further from okay.

That night, unsurprisingly, he lay awake. He wasn't sure how he'd ever sleep again after what happened earlier.

I hit my mom. The shock on her face, the fear that lingered at first when he'd tried to get close enough to help her clean the cut on her lip, ate at him, made worse by her comforting him. *I hit her, and she comforted me.*

Normally, he'd toss and turn, anxious for sleep. Not tonight. Tonight he lay there on his back, the covers pulled up to his chest, smooth and uniform in their coverage, his hands folded over his chest. He waited until Jo went to bed, his thoughts cycling from bad to worse.

When he was sure she was asleep, he sat up. He opened the drawer on his bedside table and took out the bottle of sleeping pills his doctor had given him. They acted like sedatives and were supposed to prevent nightmares, but all they did was make him dizzy and make it difficult to get going in the morning.

He opened the bottle, tapped out one pill, then two, then let the whole bottle's worth slide onto the palm of his hand.

You're really going to make your mother find you overdosed on the sedatives that were supposed to help you?

"Isn't it better than hurting her?" he muttered to himself without thinking, then shook his head. He looked at the pills, thirty of them, give or take. It would be enough. He took them, two and three at a time until they were all gone, chasing them with long pulls from his water bottle.

He straightened the folded piece of paper on his bedside table, then lay back down. He covered himself again, lay perfectly still, and waited.

Mom,

I'm so sorry. I loved you and Maddy and Leigh so much more than you all knew. Dad too. I haven't made the mistake of believing I'm going to heaven with him. I'm sorry I couldn't be better. I'm sorry I gave up. If you hate me for it, I understand. Believe me, I hate me too.

I love you, Mom. I know you may not believe that right now. I know you may never forgive me. But I do love you.

I'm sorry.

Sonny