

Skewered Halo



Brenda Youngerman

Author of *Disrupted Lives*

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by Brenda Youngerman



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Other Titles by Brenda Youngerman

Private Scars (2006)

Public Lies (2007)

Hidden Truths (2008)

Sorrowed Souls (2009)

Restored Hope (2010)

Disrupted Lives (2011)

Meech,
The day you arrived changed my life forever.
There will never be words to express the respect and
admiration I hold for you.
All ways and always.

ONE

“I’LL BE FINE,” she assured her mother, who actually looked relieved to hear those words. “Go home, Mom. You’ve done enough already. Take Daddy and go.”

“You’ll call . . . ?” The words sort of hung in the air as her mother queried.

Diane nodded as she opened the door to make it clear this was what she wanted them to do. First her mother hugged her, and then her father. She watched as they walked down the driveway to the car and got in. She closed the door and turned the deadbolt. Her single objective was sleep.

She walked past the bathroom and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Stopping, she took two steps back and flipped on the light to examine herself. *When did those bags under my eyes show up?* She rifled her hand through her hair and thought, *I really need a haircut.* Disgusted, she turned off the light and continued the trek down the hall. Her eyes started to shift toward the pictures on the wall, and she forced herself not to look. *Don’t do this; you cannot handle this right now. Keep walking, Diane. Keep heading for the bedroom. You need to get some sleep.* She poked her head into each bedroom as she walked by. Old habits were hard to break. Her

breath caught at the sight of the empty beds, but she tried to remain focused on her task: getting to bed.

She pulled an old comfortable T-shirt over her head and slipped into faded blue pajama pants. Knowing that she had no commitments in the morning and could sleep in as late as she wanted allowed her to breathe a huge sigh of relief. *Should I take the sleeping pill the doctor prescribed?* Toothpaste frothing out of her mouth, she decided not to and see if sleep came without it. She turned the lights out, climbed into bed, and closed her eyes. Sleep did not come. Once again her mind replayed that nightmare of a day.

The alarm clock incessantly ringing seemed to beat in time with her headache. Prying her eyes open, she realized it was another one of those migraine-headache days where the throbbing behind her eyes would make a thunderstorm seem tame. No time for that. Kids needed to get dressed, fed, and out the door for school. She needed to take a shower, and then wake Gary up.

The morning ritual began. Turn the hot water on, brush teeth, get in the shower, do a quick wash, and out. Dry hair, get dressed, go wake up the kids. Make sure the coffeepot has started brewing, put out the bowls for cereal, and put out the cereal and milk. Go back in the bedroom and wake Gary up. Scurry the kids into the kitchen, make three lunches, and swallow a cup of coffee. Tune out the kids fighting with each other.

The sound of breaking ceramic caught her attention. She looked over in the corner and saw the angels in a heap on the ground. She shrugged and said, "I'll clean it up later. Come on, we have to go." The kids grabbed their bags and headed for the car.

She yelled into the bedroom, "Gary, remember it's your day to pick the kids up from school!"

Thirteen hours later, she pulled her car back into the garage. "Where's Gary's car?" She tried to push the feeling of panic down, as she quickly shut off her motor and raced into the house through the door that led from the garage to the kitchen. The house was dark.

“Gary? Tyler? Kyle? Meghan? Anyone? Is anyone home?” She called their names as she raced from room to room, turning on lights as she went. The only thing that greeted her was emptiness.

She sat down on a kitchen chair and placed her head in her hands. “Think, Diane! Where could they be?” The sound of her voice echoing in the empty house only made it worse.

She desperately tried to keep the panic at bay, but when Gary did not return home by 10:00 she called the police. “I . . . I . . . think that something has happened to my husband and children.”

“What makes you think that, ma’am?” the 911 operator asked.

“Well, when I came home they weren’t here. They should have been, and they still aren’t home.”

“So do you have an emergency, ma’am?”

Diane thought about it and answered, “I guess not.” She slowly hung up the phone, staring, trying to figure out what to do next.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. She turned the light back on and went to get the sleeping pill. Even though it had been six months, she still couldn’t sleep.

Damn you, Gary Montrose.

Diane woke with a start. Confused, she didn’t know what day it was or where she was. That had been happening often. She lay in bed with her eyes closed to get her bearings, and then everything came flooding back. *I am not letting this get to me again!* She flung back the covers, and with determination in her step she turned on the hot water in the shower.

Stepping in, she let the water pummel out of the showerhead onto her tightly stressed shoulders. She adjusted the hot water knob until it wouldn’t turn further, allowing the heat to penetrate her aching body. Slowly adjusting her head to allow the warmth to work its way into the taut muscles of her neck, she began to relax. As the tension gently dissipated, tears began falling down her cheeks.

Not for the first time, she disgustedly looked at the mold growing

on the ceiling and along the cracked tiles on the walls. Then she looked down at her feet and noticed the tiny piles of cement that held a handicapped chair from the previous owner. They had been there since they had moved in fifteen years earlier. They'd oftentimes spoken of redoing the master bath, but that, like other subjects, never came to fruition. Suddenly, she found the entire situation hysterical and began to laugh out loud.

"I swear, Diane Newsome Montrose, you need to be committed. You are loony at best." She turned off the water, stepped out, and grabbed a towel to wrap herself up in. As she stood, looking like a wet zombie, she felt woozy. Perhaps it was the change in temperature, perhaps it was that she hadn't eaten in days, or perhaps it was . . . hell, it could have been anything! She leaned against the sink until the dizziness abated.

Throwing on an old pair of sweats and one of Gary's T-shirts, she padded barefoot into the kitchen to make some coffee. Then the realization hit. She was alone. For the first time in nearly seventeen years Diane was alone, and she had no idea what to do. She started the coffee and walked the rooms of her house as if an uninvited guest into her own life.

Starting from the front door, she couldn't help but notice the safety screen. You know the type. The ones that let you see from the inside out, but won't let you see from the outside in. "I wonder what kind of chaos occurred in this house before we bought it to require the necessity of this screen, and why in the fifteen years I've been here I never felt the desire to remove it?"

She found herself right in the middle of the living room. That is, if you could call it a living room. It was much more a war zone than a living room. This was the room where the adult who held the most power would retreat to and claim victory, for the night, or the day, or the weekend. Living was the last thing that went on in that room. She smiled as she remembered the holidays spent there. Christmases with grandparents spending exorbitant amounts of money on gifts that would be destroyed within days. Weren't

parents supposed to be smarter than that? Couldn't they see through the bullshit?

She slowly wound herself down the hall to the bedrooms. The first door on the right was her son's room. Tyler had been an angel from the moment he was born. Nothing and no one could ever put out his light. Just watching his wonderment at life could crack even the hardest of shells. No one ever walked away from Tyler without a smile on their face.

When Kyle came along a year later, Tyler welcomed him with open arms, and the boys were inseparable. The room for one immediately became a room for two. Bath time became playtime. She crossed the hall to the tiny bathroom and could picture the two of them playing in the tub. Tears crept into her eyes, and she just let them fall.

She continued her journey to the next bedroom. The bed was made with a pink-ruffled spread, and there were animals waiting on the pillow. Those animals were going to have to wait for a very long time. Diane could see the tiny silhouette of her daughter drawing. "Look, Mommy, I made a pretty picture for you!" She had just smiled at her and said it was nice; she was too busy to take notice. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she went into the master bedroom and reminisced about the day they'd bought the house.

"I hate this bathroom, Gary," she'd told him. "It's ridiculous."

"I know, hon, we'll get it fixed right away," he'd promised. That never happened.

Not for the first time, and certainly not for the last, she said, "Gary Montrose! I hope you're rotting in hell!"

TWO

DIANE ISABELLE NEWSOME quietly entered the world early on the morning of March 13. She was the second daughter born to George and Irene Newsome, a working-class couple living in a two-bedroom bungalow that looked exactly like all the other two-bedroom bungalows on their block.

Diane's brown eyes, upturned nose, chubby cheeks, and cheery disposition enabled her parents to overlook her. Brittany, her older sister, had been the center of attention for three years before Diane appeared and did not like sharing the limelight. Whenever Brittany was in close proximity to her little sister, she made sure all attention was focused on her. "Mommy, my tummy hurts." Or "Daddy, can you please hold me? I love you so much!"

Unbeknownst to either of their parents, Brittany had convinced Diane that she was not really a member of the family. "When you were born, you were so ugly your real mother couldn't stand to look at you. She wanted to throw you away. Instead, she put you on our front step. Mommy and Daddy took you in. They felt sorry for you. Diane, if you ever tell them you know this story you will really hurt their feelings. So you can never cry or cause any problems here, or they will throw you away."

Diane's brown eyes were wide as she listened to her older sister tell her where she came from. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I'm older than you, aren't I?"

Diane just nodded. This was a lot for a three-year-old girl to process.

"Remember," Brittany stressed, "don't tell them you know or they'll throw you away. I don't think they have enough room for you and the new baby."

Brittany started kindergarten two months before Felicity was born. Irene used that time to prepare things. "Aren't you excited for the new baby, Diane?"

Big brown eyes looked up and nodded, "Yes, Mommy."

Every night George came home from work and asked, "How are all my girls tonight?"

Brittany was the first to run right up to him and say, "Beautiful as ever!" And she was, with blond hair that had a natural curl on her shoulders.

Felicity would screech "Daddy!" and George would pick her up and swing her like an airplane.

Irene always said, "Put her down; you'll make her throw up."

"You know, you say that every night and she never does." He laughed and leaned down to give his wife a kiss.

"Go on, wash up. Dinner is ready," Irene commanded, and they would all sit down for dinner.

This daily routine continued as the three girls grew older, minus spinning Felicity in the air like an airplane, but both Brittany and Felicity ran up to George for hugs. Diane always remained in her room during the evening ritual. No one ever mentioned it.

Brittany and Felicity both had blond hair and blue eyes like their mother, and Diane had inherited dark hair and brown eyes from their father. The difference in their appearances reaffirmed Diane's belief that she was an outsider. Every chance Brittany had she would whisper into her sister's ear, "You're nothing more than garbage. If you do anything they don't like, you will be tomorrow's trash."

When it was time to go shopping for new clothes, Brittany was always first in line for the newest styles. “Mom, I can’t go to school this year in the same thing I wore last year.”

“But there’s nothing wrong with these clothes,” Irene said, “and we’re not made of money.”

“Let Diane wear them. She won’t mind.”

Irene would turn her attention to Diane and ask, “Do you?”

Diane, always afraid to be given back, would smile and answer, “That’s fine with me.” Even though she was shorter and thinner than Brittany and the clothes did not really fit her properly, she never complained. However, when it came time to pass them down to Felicity it was a different story all together.

“No way, Mom! I’m not wearing Brittany’s hand-me-down hand-me-downs! Just because Diane doesn’t care what she looks like doesn’t mean I don’t care.”

Diane tried to hide the hurt, not that her mother noticed anyway. She had spent fourteen years living in a family while trying to avoid any conflict. Brittany demanded so much attention that it became easier for Diane to stay out of the way. She spent most of her time hidden in her room, except for dinner. She made sure if she was sick she never complained. Her homework was done on time, she got good grades, and she did everything she was told to do. It did not seem to matter anyway; no one paid much attention to her, thus reaffirming Brittany’s tale.

By the time Diane started high school, Brittany was a senior. She was head cheerleader and one of the most popular girls at the school. The night before their first day of school, Brittany warned her sister, “Diane, if you so much as speak to me, look at me, or let anyone at the school know you are related to me, I promise you that your body will never be found. Got it?”

Diane nodded.

“And if you tell Mommy or Daddy I said this, I’ll deny it. And who do you think they’ll believe? Me, or you, Miss Mousey?”

Diane looked at her sister and simply asked, "Why do you hate me?"

"Because you exist."

"But you don't hate Felicity," Diane said, "and she exists."

"She didn't steal my mommy," Brittany said and stormed off.

Diane stared at the empty space where Brittany had been and wondered what that meant.

Two weeks before her high school graduation, Diane announced at dinner, "I'm valedictorian of my class and will be giving a speech at graduation, if you were planning on attending."

Her father's jaw dropped, and her mother dropped her fork in her plate.

"That's the night of my show, isn't it?" Brittany asked. "Of course we're not going to your stupid graduation."

George glared at Brittany, looked at Irene, and asked, "Why didn't you tell me anything about this?"

"I . . . I didn't know," Irene stammered, gathering her wits about her as she picked up her fork and tried to resume eating.

"Mom!" Brittany demanded. "What's the big deal? So Diane is giving a speech."

George again glared at Brittany, but this time spoke up. "Not just any speech! She's valedictorian! A chip off the old block. I am very proud of you, Diane."

"Sweetheart, that's amazing." Irene smiled. "How'd you do that?"

Diane started twirling her hair between her two fingers and looked at her mother. She never remembered her calling her "sweetheart." "Well, I've never missed a day of school. I have straight As." She blinked and then looked from her mother to her father and then back at her mother again. "I have taken all honors classes and have been involved in service clubs all the way through high school."

"Irene, don't you even know what Diane's been doing?" George

asked, glaring at his wife.

“Of course I do, but you know there are three of them, George, and Diane has always been so, well, self-sufficient. She never needed me the way Brittany and Felicity do.”

Diane couldn't believe her ears. When she further informed her parents she was not only valedictorian but voted most likely to succeed and had been offered several college scholarships, their reactions astonished her.

Felicity, who now was in the same school as Diane, knew about the news before dinner. She said, “She's like a star at school. It's so cool being her sister.”

Brittany just sat and fumed.

“Daddy, what did you mean ‘a chip off the old block’?” Diane asked.

“You know what that means. Where did you think you got so smart? Me, of course.”

Diane fiercely looked at Brittany, not saying a word. She turned her attention back to her father and said, “Maybe after dinner we can discuss the multiple offers I've received for scholarships.”

“I'd be happy to help you with that.”

Irene interjected, “Diane, we are definitely going to have to get you a new dress for your graduation, and I want to throw a huge party for you.”

Diane looked at her mom and mumbled, “Uh, thanks, Mom.”

“We're very proud of you. Why didn't you tell us about your accomplishments sooner?” she asked.

“I . . . I don't know. I guess I didn't think they were any big deal.”

“No big deal?” Irene replied. “Brittany barely passed high school, and you're the top of your class. I'd say that's a pretty big deal.” Turning her attention to Brittany, she asked, “Brit, why didn't you ask your sister for help in school?”

Brittany defiantly stood up and asked, “May I be excused?”

Irene looked at George, who shrugged his shoulders and said, “I guess.”

After she left, Irene asked, "What was that all about?"

Diane bit her lower lip and fiddled with her napkin before clearing her throat and asking, "Can I ask you something?"

THREE

“SHE TOLD YOU that?” Irene blurted out.

George, a bit calmer, asked, “Why did you believe her?”

Diane’s eyes began to fill with tears as she asked, “You mean it’s not true?”

“Oh, Diane,” Irene said, moving over next to her daughter. “How long ago did she tell you that?”

Diane shrugged. “I guess I’ve always thought it. And every time she gets mad at me she calls me ‘garbage girl.’ But when I asked her why she hated me, something didn’t make sense.”

George interjected, “We’ll get to that in a minute. Diane. Look at me, please.” Diane turned to look at her father. “Now I want you to look at your mother.” Diane turned to look at her mother. “We are your parents. We did not find you on our step. You were never and are never going to be thrown away.”

Irene said, “It does make sense why all these years you never complained about anything. Wow, was I stupid.”

Diane said, “Mom, this isn’t your fault. She always told me if I ever told you she would deny it, and you would never believe me anyway. She was your real daughter, and I was just Miss Mousey.”

“Felicity, did you know about any of this?” George asked.

Felicity shook her head. “No, Brittany and I are not that close.”

Irene quietly asked, “How did this happen under our roof, and we didn’t know anything about it?”

“Easy,” Diane answered. “I was too scared to talk about it, and Brittany certainly wasn’t going to talk about it.”

Irene looked at George and asked, “Now what do we do?”

George answered, “I’d really like to know why.”

“Diane, come into my study and we can go over your options,” George said as the dinner dishes were whisked away.

“Okay, Daddy, let me get my papers,” she said as she rushed from the room.

“What do you want to study?”

“I’m not really sure,” she answered. “I love to read, so I was thinking maybe literature.”

George nodded. “Then what?”

“Maybe a librarian or a literature teacher.”

“Okay, have you done any research on these schools to see who has a good literature program?” he asked.

“The one that seems to be the best, to me, is St. Moray. But they are not offering the full scholarship Belle Point is offering.” She swallowed and looked at her father. “I never talked to you about this because I was never really sure if you were going to send me to college, or if I had to pay for it myself.”

He smiled at her and said, “I was just thinking the same thing when you said that. I never thought any of you were going to make it to college. Obviously, Brittany is not college material. And I always thought you didn’t like me.”

“Why would you think that?” she asked.

“For as long as I can remember, you never hugged me or came up to me . . . at all.”

Diane laughed. “That’s true, but that had nothing to do with

not liking you. I was trying so hard not to do anything wrong. I never wanted to be sent away.” She stopped talking and looked around her father’s study. “I don’t even remember when Brittany first told me I didn’t belong here. It’s just something I’ve always known. It feels so strange to find out that it was all one great big fat lie. I wonder why she did it.”

George looked at his daughter and said, “I wonder why too, but, Diane, I assure you that you are our child.” She noticed along the wall he had pictures of the three of them growing up, and indeed, all three of them were there. She had not been excluded at all. “As far as paying for college goes, we’ll take care of whatever needs to be done. If you want to go to St. Moray, because it is a better program for what you are looking for, then go there. I don’t want you to pick Belle Pointe because they are offering a full scholarship.”

“Thanks, Daddy. I don’t really want to go to Belle Point. It’s in Oregon, and I’d really like to stay in California. There are a couple of other people from school going to St. Moray, and it really feels like the right school for me.”

“Then that’s where you should go,” George said.

Diane left the study feeling happier than she could ever remember. Brittany caught her as she headed into her room. Grabbing her arm, Brittany dug her nails into Diane and hissed at her, “I heard every single word you said to them. I will never forget what you just did. If you think you won, think again. There will come a day when you will regret opening your mouth.”

Diane said, “Let go of me. What did I ever do to you?”

“You were born,” Brittany responded.

“But you don’t hate Felicity.”

Brittany said with a cackle, “She’s not you.”

Standing in front of a graduating class of 1,143 students, Diane Newsome spoke: “Tonight we close the chapter on one part of

our lives and open the door to our futures. We have successfully completed the first rung on our ladder in life. There are many more rungs for us to climb. The first steps were within a sheltered environment. The future steps we must take alone.

“High school has not only been an education academically, but has been a social learning experience as well. We have made friends here that might remain a part of our lives forever. Some of us might have fallen in love, and others of us might have been socially outcast. Let’s hope we take what we have learned here and turn it into a positive experience for the world at large. No one said growing up was easy!

“I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of our teachers and staff for their patience and guidance over the past four years. Without them we would not be the people we are today. I am sure there will be many times in the future we will look back on these days and wish we could turn back the hands of time.”

Diane stepped off the podium to a standing ovation.

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