

Copyright © 2026 by Ashley Lauren Monroe All rights reserved. This memoir reflects my personal experiences and recollections. Certain names, identifying details, timelines, and characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals. Any similarities to actual persons are unintentional. No part of this book may be reproduced without permission. 1	<u>Dedication</u> To my parents, for loving me through every version of myself, even the ones that felt lost, quiet, or unrecognizable. You never stopped showing up for me, even when I didn’t fully know how to show up for myself. Your steadiness gave me something to hold onto when everything else felt uncertain, and your love helped guide me back to who I am. To Emily, my best friend, my constant, my safe place, and my truth-teller. You saw things I couldn’t, or maybe wasn’t ready to see, and you never turned away from me because of it. You stood beside me without judgment, without pressure, and without ever making me feel alone. Your friendship carried me through some of the darkest moments of my life, and I will never have the words to fully explain what that has meant to me. To the people who stood beside me and fought for me, especially when I didn’t yet have the strength to fight for myself. You helped me find my voice again, piece by piece, and reminded me that I deserved to be heard, believed, and protected. To every victim of abuse, the kind you can see, and the kind you can’t. The quiet kind. The kind that makes you question yourself. The kind that slowly takes pieces of you until you don’t recognize who you 2	<u>Prologue</u> “Stop minimizing what you’ve survived. You say “I’ve been through some things” like it was a mild inconvenience. Like what you carried didn’t require strength to carry. Like what you survived wasn’t genuinely unsurvivable by lesser versions of people. You rebuilt yourself from incomplete pieces with no instruction manual and no audience. You healed wounds in a world that never slowed down to accommodate your pain. You kept going on days when stopping felt like the only rational option. That is not ordinary. That is not small. That is a specific kind of remarkable. Own it fully. You earned it.” 4	<u>Chapter 1</u> June 2022 The anticipation of this particular Friday had been building for over a week. I had just finished another school year and was stepping into summer break. This one had been especially difficult, challenging students, a new team, and more responsibility than I had ever taken on before. I had thrown myself into everything, trying to prove something, even if I wasn’t exactly sure who I was trying to prove it to. To say I was ready for it to be over would be an understatement. So many times throughout the year, Nick would say, “You just have to get through this year, and then next year you can quit.” And I believed him. Our business was doing well, better than we ever expected, and the plan was for me to join full-time. I would focus on graphic design, travel with him, and help build something that felt like ours. We had been saving aggressively, building a new home, planning to be mortgage-free. We had two beautiful puppies who felt like our children. And we had each other, which at the time felt like everything we needed. After such a tough year, all I wanted that weekend was to decompress. To do nothing. To finally be still. Nick’s cousin Scott was in town, in the process of moving into the house we had just sold him. We were in this strange in-between phase, packing up our life, condensing everything into a storage unit, and living partially with him while our new home was being 5	Copyrighted Material built. It wasn’t ideal, but it was temporary. Just two more months and everything would settle. Saturday, I stayed in. I cleaned, watched movies, and let myself slow down in a way I hadn’t in months. Scott, on the other hand, wanted to go out, find a bar, play pool, do something. And Nick, being Nick, wanted to make sure he had a good time. He was excited about Scott moving close and had been going out of his way lately to make sure he felt good about the transition. Nick came into the bedroom while I was doing laundry. “Scott wants to go hit up some bars and maybe find a pool hall,” he said. “I mean, go ahead if that’s what you want to do,” I replied. “Well, would you want to go too?” he asked. He always asked, even though I knew he didn’t really want me there. “No, definitely not. But if you want to go, then go for it,” I said, careful not to sound like the nagging wife who keeps her husband from having fun. “Well, I don’t really want to go. You know I don’t like the bar scene.” That part was true. When I first met Nick, he was a different person. He liked to drink, go out, stay out late. I tried to keep up in the beginning, but most nights ended with me being the designated driver or feeling like I didn’t belong. Over time, he changed. He stopped drinking altogether. He found a different 6 Copyrighted Material
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