

chapter 1
fractured

Seth grimaced, willing the *scit-scit* behind his eyes to abate. He held the edges of his mahogany desk, teeth gritted and a clawing sensation in his groin. *Get out of my bank, you asshole.*

But the ruthless father, after griping that the Barbie Doll teller must have gone to Chicago to cash his check, snapped at his frail son again. “When I tell you to shut up, boy, *that’s* what I mean!” The glaring man clenched his jaw as he stared at his cowering son. The child trembled as a patch darkened on the crotch of his jeans and then pooled at his feet.

“You pissed on yourself! Goddammit!” The Asshole Father fumed. Gail Lindley, an investment officer at the desk nearest the teller windows, assured the boy it was okay as she called for a janitor.

But Seth Berman couldn’t tear his eyes away, oblivious of what his client was saying

about the portfolio he had just suggested to her. While he stared from his desk set off a few feet from the main lobby, just behind Gail's, Asshole Father raised a threatening hand and hesitated.

Seth's eyes fixed on that open palm. The repeating *scit-scit* behind his eyes brought bile into the base of his throat. A flash of long ago nightmares danced too close—on the edge of remembering. That world separated from the one he had chosen to live, the only way he *could* live without a constant supply of hatred fueling his day-to-day.

Then the man unhinged Seth by swinging—hard. Asshole Father's palm smacked with a savage pop, slamming the child barely old enough for grade school into the bank's state-of-the-art marble wall.

A guard stalked toward the man as Seth's mouth fell open. Not out of shock that someone would so brazenly abuse a child, but out of fear that the brutal display had awakened a certain co-habitant in his brain best left sleeping. Another series of *scit-scits* sent searing pain through his eyeballs, mental needles piercing them from behind.

No, Zeus, not now, not at work...

The six-month hiatus had caused Seth to drop his defenses against Zeus, though he never missed a single dose of Zyprexa. Dr. Hoffmeister insisted the anti-psychotic meds would keep his mental roommate at bay, safely tucked in a corner of his brain as a harmless bystander. Occasional conversations, rare moments of duality, sporadic spurts of co-habitation. But for the sake of Seth's sanity, Zeus stayed away unless situations warranted his appearance.

Asshole Father jerked his son again, grunting, "Just as soon beatcha as look atcha."

Isn't that what my daddy used to say? The rare recollection made Seth gasp, causing Mrs. Hawkins, his late afternoon client, to ask if he was okay.

"Yes," Zeus whispered, a mental voice like a booming radio inside Seth's head. Unsure what question Zeus was answering, Seth fumbled across his immaculate desk for a paperclip. He

traced his fingers along the metal in a desperate attempt to streamline his brain, a trick Dr. Hoffmeister had taught him some years back.

Mrs. Hawkins said something else, but all Seth could hear was Asshole Father hiss, “I’m gonna knock you into next week.” The angry man snatched the money from the disapproving teller. “Now I need a goddamn money order, lady. Think you can handle that before Halloween?” He threw three bills at Jennifer, a six-year veteran once sweet on Seth, her pasted-on smile faltering.

For an awkward moment, Seth peered from the inside out. He trembled slightly, panicked that Zeus would ruin all he’d built at First Federal Bank & Trust. Too many times he’d had to quit jobs because of his mental roommate’s prolonged stays.

Or I guess YOU quit those jobs, didn’t you, Zeus? Seth closed his eyes as he felt Zeus’s presence fill his head, like a song so loud it echoed in his ears.

“Ah, Seth, he’s flipped the safety off, and I am SO ready. I could take care of that shithead. Go take a breather, smoke a doobie, check out for a minute or ten. Let him trip the trigger, and I’ll scoot into the driver seat for a few.”

But it’s never a few, Zeus. Seth tried to unthink the possibility of losing days, even weeks in a prolonged slip, and excused himself from Mrs. Hawkins. Ignoring the violent man’s outburst toward the intruding guard, Seth blindly made his way to the employee restroom. Much of what he could see as he headed toward a urinal was through a film, a haze of Zeus’s blue eyes blocking his view. He struggled with his fly, his left hand suddenly all thumbs. The oddity of Zeus being right-handed never made sense to Seth, but he switched hands, groaning with the pain of the impending slip.

“Oh, god, Zeus, I need time to get out of here. I can’t lose my job.” *And I’m meeting Valerie for dinner...I’ve gotta call her...*

“Hehehehe, let me, Seth. I’ll call your hot teacher babe for you.”

Another employee barreled into the bathroom, making Seth jump.

“Hey, Seth, what’s shakin’?”

“Not much,” he muttered, his voice eerily Zeus-like. Turning so his happy-hour buddy couldn’t get too close a look at him, Seth washed his hands and made a quick exit. Pausing at his desk, he straightened papers and told Mrs. Hawkins he wasn’t feeling well. She mothered him for a few minutes before leaving, sparking Gail Lindley’s always eager attention.

“I’m going to jet out of here a little early, Gail. Gonna surprise Val with flowers and a movie since Mr. Timmerman’s gone. Cover for me, okay?” He flashed a warm smile, pleased that he could muster it. *Just don’t look too close at my eyes—I don’t think they’re so brown anymore...*

“Sure, Seth. Nobody’ll care anyway. You never leave early. I might just ditch a few minutes before five myself. You take care, handsome, and tell that Valerie that she’s one lucky girl.” Gail winked at him, the heavily make-upped eyes batting so hard he worried she might lose a lash. “Shame you can’t join us for happy hour though.”

He grinned and waved, Zeus giving a hubba-hubba at the prospect of getting happy with Gail.

By the time he hit the back door, fifty-five minutes prior to his usual quitting time, everything about him was evolving into Zeusdom. A swagger so different than the usually casual gait, a shit-eating grin no one at First Federal would recognize, and eyes gleaming with a wicked intensity as equally unfamiliar as the smile.

He practically ran to his Audi, the radio in his brain refusing to shut-off, too deep into the slip to reverse the process.

“I won’t be bad this time, Seth, you’ll see. I got your back.”

Seth shuddered, twisting the Audi's keys on his finger, fumbling to punch the unlock button.

I know, Zeus, but it hurts. And you won't take care of Lexi. You don't like her, and...and...Valerie...

"Ease up. Don't pop a vessel. I can manage both bitches just fine." Zeus cackled, but quickly added, *"I promise I'll get your mutt to Valerie and take care of things."*

"But you won't," Seth groaned, as he leaned back in the driver's seat and closed his eyes. Even with them shut, he could see the other cars in the lot through Zeus's, the sun dancing in waves off the hoods.

"It's a good time for a vacation," Zeus offered, his excessive excitement adding to Seth's panic, the worry about what he would return to. And when that would be.

The time during a slip was like dead space for Seth. Fragments of it remained afterward, but flimsy, like retrieving a dream a few hours after waking. Gripping the steering wheel until his knuckles ached, he felt the tug, being pushed out of himself and into the back room of his brain. The slips always hurt—being yanked out of the driver's seat and shoved aside in his own head.

"Yes, that's it. Turn the key. I promise I'll be good, Seth, you'll see. Oh, God, yes, I'll be so goddamned good. That runt remind you of someone, Sethie? I protected you then, remember? I always had your back."

"Shut up, Zeus, please? I can't think." He shook the emerging images of his past away, grateful for the mental barrier that separated then from now—their childhood lay beyond it, and Seth never peeked if he could help it.

He peeled out of the parking lot and raced through downtown to the exit ramp onto Highway 71.

I just want it to stop...or hurry. The in-between was agony.

He opened the sunroof, the windows, cranked the classical music, and let the wind whip through his perfectly groomed hair. Maybe a gust could rip Zeus from his brain and allow him to be free.

Except Seth knew he could never *really* be separated. It haunted him every time he held Valerie as they drifted to sleep, fearful that he wouldn't wake up—that Zeus would instead.

It had taken years of therapy to understand, but Dr. Hoffmeister assured him the Zyprexa would keep him focused, intact. Years of appointments hadn't taught him much, just that no matter how good he felt, he owed it to the meds.

Just as soon beatcha as look atcha.

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!” Seth howled, bashing his palms against the steering wheel.

“It's okay, Seth, that's why you have me. That whiny kid needs to employ some extras.”

Zeus cackled, a bristling sound that shoved Seth backward a little further—the slip almost complete. He felt the transition deep inside his bones, as if Zeus changed every fiber of his body. His eyeballs felt as if spiders clawed at them from the inside out.

Don't hurt Valerie...

“Ah, Valerie Schmalerie. Remember last April, Seth? God, I really outdid myself last time. And Valerie was just fine after you got back.”

Seth's stomach rolled, and he slammed on the gas, the reality jolting him. If he drove fast enough, incited enough adrenaline, maybe he could test the Audi's ability to fly—San Paolo Pier was less than a mile to the east.

“Ah-ah-ah, no you don't, Sethie Poo. You can run, but I'm always right behind you.” The spiders scattered, the slip into perpetuity nearing the finish line.

“I can't see, Zeus—” But he didn't need to. The film slipped away, exposing repressed memories and leaving Seth with the brutality of his childhood. When his eyes became Zeus's, he

knew what was best for him. He scurried to the far corner of their brain, to the small room waiting for him, then clamped his hands over his ears and slammed the door. Safely inside, he crouched behind a desk and rocked back and forth until the rhythm consumed him. Seth would hear nothing, see nothing, feel nothing. Not if he could help it.

When Zeus was in charge, it was best not to watch. Because seeing meant remembering.