

ASunder

BRETT ARMSTRONG

*Asunder is dedicated to the glory of God,
Who gives us a sure hope eternal in the heavens to which we look
forward.*

chapter one



“I’LL KILL YOU,” Naomi snapped. Her eyes fixed on James O’Connell so heatedly, he could feel the exposed skin on his neck warm.

Hand hovering in the air, he dithered. Those were the only three words the woman had spoken in more than an hour. On some level, he knew she wasn’t kidding.

His hand shot forward on impulse and silenced the drivel of the least interesting segment in the history of broadcast radio. He flipped to a local station, and immediately the cabin was filled with the notes of “All I Want for Christmas Is You.” James smirked. Naomi used to love that song. He remembered their first Christmas together, her singing it to him with a hairbrush. The whole song.

“Ugh, you’re impossible,” she accused. “I needed to hear that for work.”

“You’re on vacation,” he reminded her tersely, his eyes never leaving the road ahead of them. “Relax, Nomi.”

Waves of annoyance radiated off her like a sidewalk scorching under a summer sun. “You know I hate that nickname.”

James just bounced his eyebrows. He was well aware of everything that irked his wife. He had called her “Nomi” from

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their very first date, a blind one, where she had been so reserved she mumbled her name, and he thought she was “Nomi.” Some might find it an endearing and romantic nickname. Not Naomi. Not anymore.

She turned her gaze from him, her softly rounded face with its distinctly Mediterranean features taut with fury. If James’s intent had been to wound and alienate her, mission accomplished.

What are you doing? You’re supposed to be fixing things.

He started to reach for the radio to turn it back on, an overture of peace, but he stopped. He caught a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror as he drove their SUV. His red hair was shaggy, and a scruffy beard grew thick and wild, instead of being neatly trimmed. Too pale skin contrasted with russet freckles. Dark circles adorned bloodshot eyes. Wrinkles were forming on his forehead. Weary. The man James saw in the mirror was weary and battered and bitter.

No. That phase of our relationship is over. If we’re going to fix this thing, no caving in.

He caught her watching him out of the corner of her eye, anticipating him to do just that. To cave. To bow to her every wish.

Too bad for you, Nomi.

He returned both hands to the wheel. Was it his imagination, or had she just winced? She definitely scooted in the seat as far from him as possible.

The effect was huge, even if there wasn’t much room to escape each other in the cramped confines of the vehicle. Her sleek black curls stirred as she looked away, tanned arms crossed over her chest. The silky blue-green dress she wore was too tight for her comfort, and she was wearing more makeup and jewelry than a road trip merited. Even after hours of driving, the faint scent of lavender and vanilla from her perfume lingered in the space between them. Naomi had come dressed for a date. Prepared to give this her best shot. Not practical, but passionate. That was definitely Nomi.

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“Hey,” he tried, his voice tight. “I just need to focus on the directions. We’ve only been to Treehouse Grove once.”

“Maybe once was too much.”

At least that’s what James thought he heard her mutter. Pain radiated from deep within, and he knew the sting of that wound would be hard to overlook. The last time they had been to Treehouse Grove was on their honeymoon.

“Right, well, we can’t be more than an hour away,” he stated, more to himself than to her.

“It’s more than an hour away,” she challenged. “You always try to do that—make things less than they are.”

Okay...

James fixed his eyes on the road. More than two minutes of silence passed between them. He hated the charged quiet and all that it implied, but it was a struggle to rein in the torrent of heated retorts he wanted to lob.

“And then you have nothing to say. I’m so sick of it!”

You’re “sick of it”? You’ve got to be kidding me!

“Still nothing ‘real’ to say?” Naomi pressed.

Whenever their fights came to this point, it felt like his mind and body set all power to shields. Every hatch battened, every door braced for attack. All he wanted was for it to end. To be able to take a single breath of free, clear air. For both of them to just drop whatever the latest dustup was over. That never happened, though. Hence, this trip. Struggling to resuscitate the desiccated corpse of their marriage. Why had he ever thought there was any point in trying?

“Pull over,” Naomi demanded. Her brown eyes had cooled her expression, betraying complete exasperation. “I’m done. We just need to sign the papers.”

The back of James’s neck prickled at the mention of the formal divorce documents in an innocuous folder in the back seat. Try as he might to bury the vile thing under a stack of luggage, it had been looming over them both the entire trip.

“No. Dr. Peterson said to—”

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“He said to see if this trip sparked anything. Well, it did. The last bridge just turned to ash, James. It’s over. *We’re* over.”

James wasn’t able to hide the fear, the desperation in his eyes. The emotionless gaze she leveled back at him was as icy as the snow mounded on either side of the road.

Lord, please, no! Please, fix this!

Naomi wore an incredulous look and pointed to the side of the road. “I said pull over!”

The hauntingly beautiful melody of “O Holy Night” began playing. His favorite Christmas carol. This couldn’t be it. Not right now.

“What will we tell our families? I mean, Christmas is in a few days. This will blindside them. They’ll be devastated!”

Naomi gave him a muted look of something verging on pity. “My baba won’t be. He always said you were wrong for me.”

James’s heart felt ready to implode. He couldn’t breathe. Over the radio, the song echoed to him, “*A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new glorious morn ...*”

It was too much. Each note of this song about hope and joy was a painful barb. The holidays were becoming an unrecognizable debris field from his life, crashing nose-first. Weary he could relate to—he had to stop. To breathe. To think.

His eyes darted around the road ahead, desperate. What caught his attention was an off-ramp that led over and up onto a wooded hill alongside the highway. It was probably an overlook. He could stop, get out, remember how to breathe.

Without a warning or hesitation, he jerked the wheel, and the SUV bounced off the highway, skidding as it took the off-ramp too fast for a dry day, much less a wintery slush-slicked one.

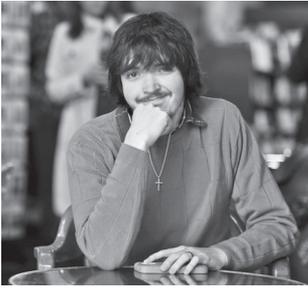
“What are you doing, you maniac?” Naomi screeched, her knuckles white from bracing herself against the violent twists and turns as the road cut back and forth up the hill and into a still more heavily wooded area that eventually became a gravel road, which terminated in a clearing.

A series of sharp jolts rocked their SUV as he had to slam on

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the brakes to stop in time. The added bumps launched Naomi into a series of curses for his incompetence and questions about his sanity. Maybe both were appropriate, but if he felt anything beyond the deadening of his heart, it was that there was something here. Something he needed to see.

about the author



Brett Armstrong has been exploring other worlds as a writer since age nine. Years later, he still writes, but now invites others along on his excursions. He's shown readers haunting, deep historical fiction (*Destitutio Quod Remissio*), scary-real dystopian sci-fi (*Tomorrow's Edge* series), and layered, sweeping epic fantasy (*Quest of Fire*). Every story is a journey of discovery and an attempt to be a brush in the Master Artist's hand. Through dark, despair, light, joy, and everything in between, the end is always meant to leave his fellow literary explorers with wonder and hope. Always busy with a new story, he also enjoys drawing, gardening, and spending time with his wife and son.