

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

ABBY JIMENEZ

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The

Fall

Risk

A
SHORT
STORY



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Otherwise, any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781662529085 (digital)

Cover design by Caroline Teagle Johnson

Cover image: © Tatiana Magurova, © Nadzeya_Dzivakova, © lioputra, © mayrum / Getty



*For all the women who choose the bear and all the men who
do the work to understand why. May the forest be a little
less scary one day.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CONTENT GUIDANCE

All my books are rom-coms, but I do like to include more serious topics within them that some may find triggering. If you feel trigger warnings are spoilers, feel free to skip the next paragraph. Everyone else, see below.

This story is about a woman who is being stalked by a mentally ill stranger. There are mentions of suicide, kissing cousins, and discussions about firearms for the purpose of self-defense.

Seth

CHAPTER 1

The stairs are gone.”

I stood outside at the top of the landing just beyond the door of my second-story apartment, on the phone with my best friend and gawking at a straight drop-off. The demolished remnants of what used to be steps sat piled into a metal dumpster in the carport below in a mess of splintered wood and rusted wrought iron.

“What do you mean they’re gone?” Gabe asked.

“Gone. As in someone removed them.”

Silence.

“I’m coming over.”

He hung up.

I dragged a hand down my mouth. I’d heard banging this morning, but they were reroofing the carport, so I didn’t think anything of it.

The property manager had been doing repairs—finally. The place was dated, it needed it. And we *did* need new stairs, I just thought maybe I’d get a text first?

I was searching for the number to call him when the door to the unit across from mine opened. A woman stood in the doorway. My new neighbor. I hadn’t met her yet, she’d just moved in. Pretty, around my age, maybe twenty-seven, twenty-eight. Brown hair.

Bear spray in her hand.

She balked in the threshold, looking at me like she might back up and slam the door and bolt it. Then she glanced at the missing steps and did a

double take. “Uh, where are the stairs?”

“I think they’re in that dumpster?” I gestured to the carport. “I’m Seth, I’m your neighbor. I was about to call the property manager,” I said, already dialing.

He picked up on the second ring. “This is John.”

“Hi, John, Seth in apartment sixteen. Were you aware that my stairs are gone?”

A long pause. “Your stairs are gone . . .”

“That is correct.”

I heard water shutting off. “Are there workers there?”

I peered around. “None that I can see.”

He cursed under his breath. “I’ll be there in five.”

I hung up. “He’s on his way.”

She wrapped her sweater protectively around herself. “I heard the banging. I just thought it was the carport thing.”

“Yeah, me too,” I said.

“Who do you think did it?” she asked.

“Probably a mistake,” I said, leaning over the edge.

“Uh, please, don’t.”

I glanced at her. “What?”

“That. You could fall.”

“I’m not going to fall. Trust me.”

“No, seriously, please.”

“I’m an arborist,” I said. “I spend my days hanging out in trees. I’m very good with heights.”

“Well, I’m not? And you’re making me nervous. Also, you have an injury? What if you trip.”

I peered down at my ankle. I was off the crutches now, but I was still wearing the boot. “Okay, good point,” I said. “I guess I am a bit of a fall risk.”

She looked relieved when I stepped back.

“How did you get that?” she asked.

“Dead branch coming down. I had to jump out of the way.”

“Is it broken?” she asked.

“No, just a bad sprain.”

She nodded, looking around uncomfortably.

I let out a breath and checked my watch. “I was gonna get a coffee,” I mumbled. “I guess that’s not happening anytime soon.”

“You don’t have any in your apartment?”

“Unfortunately not. I’m sorry, what was your name?” I asked.

“I’m Charlotte.”

“Nice to meet you.”

John came jogging up to the building.

When he got to where the stairs used to be, he stopped and looked around, perplexed.

“Told you,” I called.

“Son of a . . . ,” he muttered. He took out his cell and called someone. “Yeah, Guerrmo? Uh, your guys took down the wrong stairs. I said apartment *sixty*, not sixteen. I’ve got tenants that can’t get out. When are they coming back?” A pause. “*Monday*? No. It’s Friday, that’s the whole weekend. I don’t care. I don’t care, put up something temporary.” Another pause. “Let me call you back.”

He hung up and squeezed his eyes shut before turning back to us. “I think we’re going to need to put you two up in a hotel. They can’t get back here until next week, the concrete guys are already gone for the weekend, the railings aren’t getting delivered until Monday morning. The earliest I can get you stairs is Monday by five o’clock.”

“Uh, I don’t want to be in a hotel,” Charlotte said.

“I don’t really want to be in a hotel either,” I said.

“The landlord would pay for it—” John called.

“That’s not really the point? My stuff is here. I have a fish,” I said.

Charlotte was nodding.

“Well, I can’t leave you two in an inaccessible building. It’s a fire hazard,” he said. He looked around before coming back to us. “I could get a boom lift. Just so you can get up and down in an emergency.”

“What’s a boom lift?” she asked me.

“It’s that bucket thing electricians use?” I said.

She shook her head. “I’m not getting into a boom lift. Or using a ladder. I don’t like heights, there’s no way.”

“I mean, I’m okay just hunkering down,” I called. “I’d rather not be displaced.”

“Me either,” she said. “I don’t need to leave. I can stay in my apartment for a weekend, it’s just three days.”

John didn’t look convinced. “I still think I should get something out here.”

“If neither of us are going to use it, don’t spend the money on a lift,” I said. “Just get us a ladder, in case we have an emergency.”

“Can you use a ladder with your foot?” he asked.

“If I’m motivated enough, I’ll figure it out.”

He puffed air into his cheeks. “Okay. We’ll compensate you for the inconvenience. Prorate your rent. Back out the days you’re stuck up there, cut you a check for a hotel and food whether you use it or not.”

I looked at Charlotte. She shrugged. “Seems fair,” she said quietly.

“We get paid to be trapped in our apartments.”

“I’m usually trapped in my apartment for free,” she whispered.

I snorted and looked back at John. “We accept.”

Three minutes later he came back with a ladder.

“I’m *really* sorry,” he said, leaning it against the landing.

“It happens,” I said.

“Well, it actually doesn’t,” he said. “But I appreciate you guys being cool about it. Is there anything I can get you two?”

I looked at my partner in captivity. “I’m good.”

“How about a bucket and a rope?” she called. “In case we need to haul up groceries or something.”

“Or lower lotion down,” I said.

I got a laugh out of her. *Silence of the Lambs* reference. Always a good icebreaker.

“Sure,” John said. “And text me if you think of anything else.”

We watched him leave from our second-story perch. When he was gone, she turned to me. “I really hope he doesn’t get in trouble. He’s so nice.”

“It’s not his fault,” I said. “And I’m certainly not reporting it to anyone.”

“Me either. You’re not putting this on YouTube or something, are you?”

“I wouldn’t even begin to know how to do that,” I said honestly.

She smiled a little. She was still holding the bear spray.

I nodded at it. “You carry that with you everywhere?” I asked.

“It’s more convenient than my gun. Smaller too.”

I choked.

“Can we actually keep the ladder up here?” she asked.

I blinked at her. “Up *here*?”

“Yeah. It kind of freaks me out that someone can climb it.”

“I mean, it’s no different than stairs being there . . .”

“It would just really make me feel better.”

She peered up at me with soft brown eyes that I couldn’t say no to for some reason.

“Okay.”

She was too scared to get close enough to the edge to help me, so I ended up dragging it up myself, in my boot and all. Luckily, it was a lightweight one. Also luckily, I was in shape enough to do it. I can’t say that most people threw logs around for a living like I did.

“Why live on the second floor if you’re this scared of heights?” I asked, setting the ladder against the wall.

“It’s safer.”

“From what?”

She didn’t get to answer. Someone was making caw-caw bird noises from the ground. I leaned over to see Gabe standing down there, keening like an idiot.

“There you are,” he said. “Damn, you weren’t kidding about the stair thing—”

Charlotte popped her head out, and his eyes went wide. “Heeeello,” he said. “Who’s this?”

“This is Charlotte,” I said. “She lives in the other apartment.”

“Hi.” She waved.

“Hi.” He grinned up at her. “So what are you gonna do?” he asked. “How soon until they get the stairs back up?”

“Monday.”

“Monday? Shit.”

The sound of screeching tires turned us to a red Camero fishtailing around the corner into the parking lot. It came to a skidding stop under the carport. A young woman in black yoga pants and Doc Martens threw the door open, leaned into the back seat for something, and then bounded from the vehicle with a baseball bat.

She slid to a halt where the stairs used to be, panting. Charlotte looked over the ledge. “Izzy!”

“I’ve been calling!” the woman said. “You were supposed to meet me twenty minutes ago, you didn’t answer, and your location wasn’t moving, I thought you were . . . where the fuck are your stairs?!”

Charlotte blew out a breath. “I’m sorry. I got distracted, I didn’t see my phone. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Izzy dropped the bat in the grass and leaned with her hands on her knees, catching her breath. After a few moments, she looked at Gabe. “Who are you?”

“I’m Gabe, who are you?”

“None of your business.” She straightened. “You’re okay?” she called up to her friend.

“Fine,” Charlotte said. “Some workers took the stairs out on accident. I can’t leave for a few days.”

“And who’s this?” she asked, pointing at me.

“Seth,” I said.

“Seth *what*.”

“Seth Gonzalas.”

“Okay, listen up, Seth Gonzalas. If anything happens to her, I’ll fucking kill you.”

I glanced at Charlotte. “Uh . . . okay?”

Izzy turned back to Gabe, looked him up and down, made a little fake lunge, grabbed her bat, and left.

I turned slowly to my neighbor while her friend drove off. “Well, that was . . .”

She sucked air through her teeth. “I’m sorry. She gets aggressive when she’s scared.”

“Like a cornered raccoon or something?”

She bobbed her head. “More like a wolverine.”

“Hey, I’m a call you,” Gabe said from down below. “Go inside.”

I looked back at Charlotte. “Excuse me for a moment.”

“Sure. Actually I should probably try and get some work done,” she said. “It was nice to meet you.”

I nodded. “Yeah, you too.”

I went back into my apartment, and Gabe called me.

“I’m not gonna lie, the friend was low-key terrifying, and also I was sort of into it?” he said.

“Ha.”

“Why do you think there was a sock on the end of that bat?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” I said, rubbing my brow.

“Dude, you fucking scored,” he said. “You’ve got the lawsuit of the century *and* a hot chick to hang out with?”

I went to the window to look out at him getting into his car. “Okay, first of all, I’m not suing anyone, I wouldn’t do that to John. Second of all, we’re not hanging out.”

“Listen to me,” he said, going on unfazed. “Do not, and I cannot stress this enough, spend the whole time talking to her about trees.”

“I’m not going to talk to her about trees.”

“Okay. Because you do that when you’re nervous. It’s all jacarandas and dId YoU kNoW mOsT tReEs aRe mALe.”

“Okay, I get it? And also, I probably won’t even see her again.”

“What do you mean? You two are officially residents of the most exclusive penthouse in Burbank, of course you’re gonna see her again.”

My phone pinged with a text. John, outside with the bucket.

“Hey, I gotta go.”

“No trees.”

“Okay, okay.”

I went back out. John tossed me a rope and tied it to the handle of a white painter’s bucket. I hauled it up and set it by the door.

“Thanks,” I called.

“You got it. Seriously, let me know if there’s anything I can do while you’re up there.”

John’s girlfriend, Holly, came around the building in her scrubs. She was a hospice nurse. She worked a lot with a residential retirement home where I volunteered. I actually knew her before I knew John—it’s how I found the apartment.

She scrunched up her nose when she saw me. “Oh, man. Seth, we’re really sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I said.

“I’ll let the ladies know you won’t be making it to bonsai class tonight.”

“Appreciate it.”

She smiled at her boyfriend. “See you later,” she said and gave him a quick peck. He grinned after her, smitten.

I used to be smitten with someone once.

Now I was divorced. Today, actually.

It was like the universe wanted me sequestered this weekend, so I had no choice but to mull over the very strange turn that my life had taken over the last year. No distractions. No daily trip to get coffee. Think about your ex and be sad.

I went inside to see what else I had with caffeine in it so I could stave off the headache I felt creeping in. I found a depressing, carbonated but caffeinated, sugar-free soda that Cecilia left when she moved out, and I was

too practical to throw it away. I didn't like to waste things, even things that tasted like shit. I took swallows of it like it was medicine. I watered my plants. Fed my fish. Stared out the window in my bedroom at the Black Mission fig tree that was the reason I'd chosen this particular apartment after the separation last year. It was a great tree.

Divorced.

I still couldn't fully believe it.

It's hard to process something like this when you did everything right. I could say, with 100 percent certainty, that I had given that marriage everything. I was faithful, I was an equal partner, I loved her with my entire soul. I just wasn't what she wanted. What she wanted was fucked up, to be totally honest—which made it a little easier to come to terms with. But still.

Someone knocked on my door.

I set my terrible soda down and went to answer it.

It was Charlotte. With coffee.

Charlotte

CHAPTER 2

Seth had excused himself to take a call with Gabe, and I'd used that as my cue to escape. I slipped into my apartment, bolted the lock and drew the chain across, and put my back to the door.

The whole last twenty minutes had been a roller coaster of . . . a lot of things.

I actually thought for a split second that the stairs had been George. I was probably giving him too much credit. He was very good at finding me. He was excellent at terrorizing me. But removing a whole flight of stairs in half an hour? It was industrious, even for him.

I let out a breath and called Izzy.

"*Never* do that to me again," she said, picking up on the first ring.

"I'm sorry," I said, sliding down to the floor.

"Of all the fucking days when I'm not picking you up for target practice —"

"I know. It was unfortunate timing. I got overwhelmed and I didn't think to call you."

She scoffed. "Overwhelmed is right. I'm here thinking you're being murdered, and instead, you're in a tree house with a hot botanist."

"Is he?"

"Is he what? Hot? You have eyes, don't you?"

"No," I said. "Is he a botanist?"

"Yeah. He works for the city of Burbank doing tree shit. An arborist with a bachelor's in botany from Cal State."

Huh. I knew he was an arborist, he'd told me. I guess I just didn't realize it was more than landscaping?

"He has no record, by the way," she said. "And his socials are clean."

"Good Lord, it's only been five minutes—"

"I only needed two."

I rolled my eyes.

My best friend was a private investigator. Like, actually. And a very good one. I hired her two years ago when all this started. She was also a firearms instructor who taught self-defense classes. She knew mixed martial arts and had a touch of unbridled rage that needed an outlet the way working dogs needed jobs to make them tired.

She always said it should have been her that George got fixated on. *She* could have handled it. She would have looked forward to it, a reason to kill a man, her favorite thing.

If only stalkers were transferable.

We sat in silence for a moment.

"You know what's just absolutely wild?" I said. "The second I realized the stairs were gone, it was the safest I've felt in a year."

"Yeah, I could see that," she said, softer now.

I squeezed my eyes shut.

"This is not what I thought today was going to be like," I said tiredly.

"What did you think it was going to be like?"

"I don't know. I thought there'd be stairs?"

She scoffed.

"I guess I'm missing Valentine's Day on Sunday," I mumbled.

"Eh, it's stupid anyway."

"Not stupid to me."

The only times I felt truly safe going out these days were when I was with Izzy's friend group. A posse of female ex-military, active police who liked to go to brunch. "I wanted a mimosa," I moaned.

No. What I wanted was to feel normal again.

I wanted to wander a Target, walk alone on the beach. Go on dates.

The isolation was the worst part. Well, the second worst part. The first was the afraid for my life at all times thing. But I used to be social. I used to work in an office with coworkers, and we'd go out for drinks, and I'd go on vacations and have lunches with people.

Now I didn't. Now I worked from home. It was safer. Less risk than having a parking garage to walk through to get to an office, a place of business that anyone could go into at any time, a routine that could be tracked and followed.

Now, there were weeks that I didn't even leave the house. Entire periods of time where it was just me in the four walls of my apartment, alone, because going to a bar or a restaurant or even the nail salon was too much exposure.

I never felt safe.

I never slept well.

This one sick, twisted human had changed every aspect of my life.

Sometimes it felt like he had already killed me. A part of me.

And he made me weird.

He made me the kind of person who carried around bear spray, so when I did meet a cute guy, he'd be like, "Wow, bear spray, huh?" And then I'd bring up my gun.

God.

"I think I'm going to run for a bit," I said, looking forlornly at my treadmill. Maybe some weights after. Working out was one of the many things I did now to prepare myself for the potential fight for my life I might have to make one day. That and the self-defense classes I took with Izzy. I'd never been in better shape. My ass looked great—and nobody to see it.

"Why don't you go hang out with the tree guy?" she said.

"Why would I do that?"

"Why wouldn't you do that? What else do you have to do? You've got the urban equivalent of a lumberjack across the hall. And he's single."

"How do you know?"

"Bitch, I *know*. His friend is single too."