

A man in a dark suit stands with his back to the camera, looking towards a bright light breaking through a stormy sky. Heavy rain falls around him, creating a dramatic and hopeful atmosphere. The light source is positioned directly behind the man, silhouetting him and illuminating the rain.

OUR FREEDOM

FOR
WOMEN
TOO

BY SHANNON VAZQUEZ

THIS BOOK BELONGS TO

THIS BOOK IS YOUR SAFE PLACE TO HOLD YOUR TRUTH, YOUR PAIN, AND YOUR GROWTH. IT'S A PLACE YOU DON'T NEED TO HIDE! JUST LET THIS BOOK BE YOUR REMINDER FOR THE DAYS YOU FEEL LIKE YOUR BREAKING OR THE MOMENTS YOU NEED REMINDING JUST HOW STRONG YOU ARE. KNOW THAT YOU ARE NEVER ALONE IN THIS!

TOGETHER, WE RISE.
TOGETHER, WE HEAL.

PULLED TO THE DEPTHS- SHANNON VAZQUEZ

I TELL MYSELF I DON'T NEED ANYONE.
THAT I'M DONE WITH EVERYONE-
BECAUSE LETTING PEOPLE CLOSE
ONLY BRINGS MORE PAIN.
EVERY TIME I'VE OPENED THE DOOR,
I'VE BEEN LEFT WITH SCARS.
SO I SAY I'M DONE,
AND I ALMOST BELIEVE IT.

BUT EVEN WHEN THEY HURT ME,
EVEN WHEN THEIR WORDS CUT DEEP
OR THEIR ACTIONS TEAR ME APART,
I FIND MYSELF SITTING WITH THEM
IN THEIR DARKEST MOMENTS.
NO MATTER HOW MUCH PAIN THEY'VE CAUSED,
NO MATTER HOW DEEPLY THEY'VE BROKEN ME,
I'M STILL HERE.

IT'S NOT BECAUSE I WANT TO BE.
IT'S BECAUSE SOMETHING INSIDE ME
WON'T LET ME TURN AWAY.
I CAN'T LEAVE THEM TO DROWN,
EVEN WHEN THEY WERE THE ONES
WHO PULLED ME UNDER.

I SAY I DON'T NEED ANYONE.
THAT I'M DONE WITH PEOPLE.
BUT THE TRUTH IS-
I'M NOT DONE WITH FEELING.
I CAN'T BE.
EVEN WHEN THE PAIN IS TOO MUCH,
EVEN WHEN I WANT TO PUSH IT ALL AWAY,
I STILL STAY.

THEY'VE HURT ME,
DRAGGED ME THROUGH THEIR OWN STORM.
BUT WHEN I FEEL THEIR PAIN,
I SIT WITH IT.
I TAKE IT IN,
EVEN AS IT MAKES MY OWN HURT HEAVIER,
EVEN AS IT TEARS OPEN WOUNDS
THAT HAVEN'T HEALED.

MAYBE I SHOULD WALK AWAY,
MAYBE I SHOULD LET THEM SINK ALONE-
BUT I DON'T.
EVEN IN THE MIDST OF MY OWN HURT,
I STAY.

BECAUSE NO MATTER HOW MUCH I TRY
TO CONVINCÉ MYSELF I'M DONE,
THAT I DON'T NEED ANYONE,
I KNOW I'M MEANT TO BE HERE.
I'M MEANT TO FEEL IT ALL,
TO CARRY THE WEIGHT THEY CAN'T.

EVEN WHEN THEY HURT ME,
I WON'T LEAVE THEM IN THEIR PAIN.
I WISH I COULD,
BUT I CAN'T.

I SIT WITH THEM,
NO MATTER HOW MUCH IT COSTS ME.

TO THE MEN READING THIS:

I GET IT—YOU MIGHT LOOK AT THE COVER, THE COLORS, THE TITLE, AND THINK, "THIS BOOK ISN'T FOR ME. IT'S FOR WOMEN." MAYBE IT'S THE IMAGE OR JUST THE WAY SOCIETY MAKES IT SEEM LIKE MEN WORKING ON THEMSELVES ISN'T "MANLY." TRUST ME, I UNDERSTAND. WE'VE ALL BEEN TOLD THAT HEALING, SELF-GROWTH, AND FEELING DEEPLY ARE THINGS RESERVED FOR WOMEN. BUT HERE'S THE TRUTH: WHEN I TALK TO MY MALE FRIENDS, I SPEAK TO THEM THE SAME WAY I SPEAK TO MY FEMALE FRIENDS. WHY? BECAUSE PAIN DOESN'T CARE IF YOU'RE A MAN OR A WOMAN. STRUGGLES DON'T PICK SIDES. WE ALL FACE THEM. THIS BOOK ISN'T ABOUT BEING MALE OR FEMALE—IT'S ABOUT BEING HUMAN. IT'S ABOUT FINDING STRENGTH IN THE MIDDLE OF WHATEVER STORM YOU'RE FACING. SO IF YOU'RE HERE, READING THIS, I WROTE IT FOR YOU TOO. YOU'RE NOT ALONE. WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER.

MEN THIS MESSAGE IS FROM ME
TO EACH OF YOU FROM THE
BOTTOM OF MY HEART!

MEN, I SEE YOU. I SEE THE WEIGHT YOU CARRY, THE PAIN, AND THE STRUGGLES THAT YOU HOLD INSIDE.

YOU DESERVE TO HEAR THAT IT'S GOING TO BE OKAY. YOU DESERVE TO KNOW I'M PROUD OF YOU FOR HANDLING EVERYTHING YOU'RE DEALING WITH. I GET IT—THE WORLD DOESN'T ALWAYS GIVE MEN THE SPACE TO FEEL OR TALK ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON. BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE ALONE IN THIS. IF ANYONE TELLS YOU DIFFERENT, IT'S PROBABLY BECAUSE THEY NEVER HAD SOMEONE TELL THEM THESE SAME THINGS. SO, LET'S BE THE DIFFERENCE. WE'RE LOSING TOO MANY GOOD MEN BECAUSE OF THIS STIGMA. TODAY, WE START TO CHANGE THAT—YOU AND ME, RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW. YOU DON'T HAVE TO CARRY IT ALL BY YOURSELF. I'M WITH YOU.

YOU'RE NOT ALONE.

CHAPTER ONE

MESSAGE TO THOSE STRUGGLING

I SEE YOU. I KNOW YOU FEEL LOST, LIKE YOU'RE WANDERING THROUGH A STORM THAT NEVER SEEMS TO END, DROWNING IN A WEIGHT SO HEAVY YOU'RE NOT SURE YOU CAN KEEP CARRYING IT. TRUST ME WHEN I SAY, I'VE BEEN THERE. HELL, SOME DAYS, I'M STILL THERE. BUT HERE'S SOMETHING I'VE LEARNED IN THE DARKEST OF THOSE MOMENTS—YOU'RE NOT ALONE, NOT IN THIS.

I KNOW IT FEELS LIKE NO ONE COULD EVER UNDERSTAND THE DEPTH OF WHAT YOU'RE GOING THROUGH. LIKE IF PEOPLE REALLY SAW THE MESS INSIDE YOUR HEAD, THE PAIN YOU CARRY EVERY SINGLE DAY, THEY'D TURN AWAY. I GET THAT, BECAUSE I'VE LIVED IT. I'VE SAT IN ROOMS FULL OF PEOPLE AND STILL FELT LIKE I WAS ON AN ISLAND, COMPLETELY ALONE. BUT I NEED YOU TO HEAR THIS: YOU AREN'T ALONE. THERE ARE SO MANY OF US WALKING THROUGH THE SAME SHADOWS, CARRYING OUR OWN HEAVY LOADS, AND WE'RE GOING TO FIGURE THIS OUT TOGETHER. WE'RE NOT MADE TO DO THIS BY OURSELVES. IT'S NOT GOING TO BE EASY.

LET'S BE REAL ABOUT THAT. THIS ROAD—
HEALING, GROWTH, SURVIVING THE DAY-
TO-DAY—IT'S MESSY. IT'S PAINFUL. SOME
DAYS, IT FEELS LIKE IT'LL NEVER END. BUT
YOU'VE MADE IT THIS FAR. EVERY SINGLE
DAY THAT YOU'VE WOKEN UP, DRAGGED
YOURSELF OUT OF BED, AND PUT ONE
FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER, EVEN
WHEN YOU THOUGHT YOU COULDN'T,
YOU'VE BEEN WINNING. THAT'S
SOMETHING TO HOLD ON TO. THAT'S
SOMETHING TO CELEBRATE. BECAUSE,
DAMN IT, THAT'S STRENGTH. THAT'S
VICTORY, EVEN WHEN IT DOESN'T FEEL
LIKE IT.

YOU'VE FOUGHT BATTLES NO ONE HAS
SEEN, AND EVERY DAY YOU KEEP SHOWING
UP, YOU'RE WINNING. AND I NEED YOU TO
KNOW THAT SHOWING UP—JUST BEING
HERE—THAT'S ENOUGH. YOU DON'T HAVE
TO HAVE IT ALL FIGURED OUT. YOU DON'T
HAVE TO BE 'BETTER' OR 'HEALED.' THE
FACT THAT YOU'RE STILL STANDING, STILL
TRYING, IS ENOUGH.

I WANT YOU TO TAKE A MINUTE. BREATHE.
LET YOURSELF REALLY SIT WITH THAT FOR
A SECOND. YOU'RE STILL HERE. YOU'RE
STILL IN THIS FIGHT. AND I PROMISE YOU,
THAT MEANS SOMETHING.

REFLECTION EXERCISE

WHAT ARE YOU CARRYING?

I KNOW IT'S HEAVY. THE WEIGHT YOU CARRY—IT'S CRUSHING SOME DAYS, RIGHT? IT FEELS LIKE IT'S TOO MUCH, LIKE YOU MIGHT BUCKLE UNDER IT ANY SECOND. BUT LET'S BREAK IT DOWN TOGETHER.

TAKE A MOMENT RIGHT NOW, WHEREVER YOU ARE. THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE BEEN CARRYING LATELY—EMOTIONALLY, MENTALLY, MAYBE EVEN PHYSICALLY. ASK YOURSELF:

1. WHAT'S WEIGHING ME DOWN RIGHT NOW?

2. HOW IS THIS WEIGHT IMPACTING ME—MY MENTAL HEALTH, MY RELATIONSHIPS, MY SENSE OF PEACE?

LOOK, I KNOW THAT EVEN ASKING THOSE QUESTIONS CAN FEEL OVERWHELMING. IT CAN BE PAINFUL TO ACKNOWLEDGE EVERYTHING YOU'RE HOLDING ONTO, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT FEELS LIKE YOU'VE GOT NO CHOICE BUT TO KEEP CARRYING IT.

BUT HERE'S THE THING—JUST
RECOGNIZING IT, JUST SEEING IT FOR WHAT
IT IS, THAT'S THE FIRST STEP TO STARTING
TO LET SOME OF IT GO. AND I KNOW THAT
SOUNDS SIMPLE, BUT IT'S POWERFUL. IT'S A
STEP FORWARD.

ACTION STEP: LETTING GO OF WHAT NO
LONGER SERVES YOU

NOW, I WANT YOU TO WRITE DOWN ONE
THING YOU'VE BEEN CARRYING THAT
DOESN'T SERVE YOU ANYMORE. ONE THING
THAT'S DRAGGING YOU DOWN, WHETHER
IT'S A BELIEF, A HABIT, A RELATIONSHIP,
OR A WEIGHT THAT'S NOT YOURS TO CARRY.

IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE PERFECT. IT
DOESN'T HAVE TO MAKE SENSE TO ANYONE
BUT YOU. BUT JUST GET IT DOWN.
ACKNOWLEDGE IT. THAT ALONE IS FREEING,
EVEN IF JUST A LITTLE.

I'LL BE HONEST WITH YOU—LETTING GO IS
HARD. SOMETIMES IT FEELS DAMN NEAR
IMPOSSIBLE. BUT IT STARTS WITH
RECOGNIZING WHAT'S NO LONGER SERVING
YOU. YOU DON'T HAVE TO LET IT GO ALL AT
ONCE. MAYBE TODAY IT'S JUST ADMITTING
TO YOURSELF THAT IT'S TIME. AND THAT'S
ENOUGH.

THIS CHAPTER IS FOR YOU—FOR THE DAYS WHEN IT FEELS LIKE NO ONE SEES YOU, LIKE NO ONE UNDERSTANDS THE BATTLE YOU’RE FIGHTING. I DO. I SEE YOU. AND I KNOW THIS JOURNEY IS ANYTHING BUT EASY. IT’S ONE STEP AT A TIME. ONE MOMENT AT A TIME.

BUT I’M HERE, AND WE’RE IN THIS TOGETHER. EVERY TIME YOU CHOOSE TO KEEP GOING, YOU’RE CHOOSING LIFE. YOU’RE CHOOSING HOPE, EVEN WHEN IT’S BURIED UNDER A MOUNTAIN OF PAIN. AND THAT? THAT’S POWER. THAT’S RESILIENCE. THAT’S YOU REFUSING TO LET THE WEIGHT CRUSH YOU.

YOU’VE GOT THIS. AND ON THE DAYS WHEN YOU DON’T BELIEVE THAT? I’LL BELIEVE IT FOR YOU. BECAUSE YOU ARE STRONGER THAN YOU THINK, AND NO MATTER HOW HARD IT GETS, YOU’RE NOT IN THIS ALONE.

REFLECTION EXERCISE:

TAKE FIVE MINUTES, AND WRITE DOWN THE HEAVIEST THING YOU’RE CARRYING RIGHT NOW. THE THING THAT MAKES IT HARD TO BREATHE, HARD TO SLEEP, HARD TO BE YOURSELF. DON’T JUDGE IT. JUST ACKNOWLEDGE IT.

THEN, ASK YOURSELF:

WHAT WOULD IT LOOK LIKE IF I DIDN'T HAVE TO CARRY THIS ANYMORE?

WHO WOULD I BE IF I LET THIS WEIGHT GO, EVEN JUST A LITTLE?

ACTION STEP: WRITE DOWN ONE SMALL STEP YOU CAN TAKE TODAY. MAYBE IT'S SOMETHING AS SIMPLE AS SAYING 'NO' WHEN YOU MEAN IT. MAYBE IT'S GIVING YOURSELF PERMISSION TO REST. MAYBE IT'S REACHING OUT FOR HELP, EVEN WHEN YOUR MIND TELLS YOU NOT TO.

WHATEVER IT IS, IT'S ENOUGH. AND SO ARE YOU. KEEP GOING.

THIS IS YOUR JOURNEY. AND IT'S GOING TO BE MESSY, BUT IT'S YOURS. TAKE IT ONE DAY AT A TIME, ONE BREATH AT A TIME. YOU'RE DOING MORE THAN YOU THINK. YOU'RE CARRYING MORE THAN YOU SHOULD, BUT YOU'RE STILL HERE, STILL FIGHTING. AND THAT'S EVERYTHING.

LET'S KEEP MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER. YOU'VE GOT THIS.