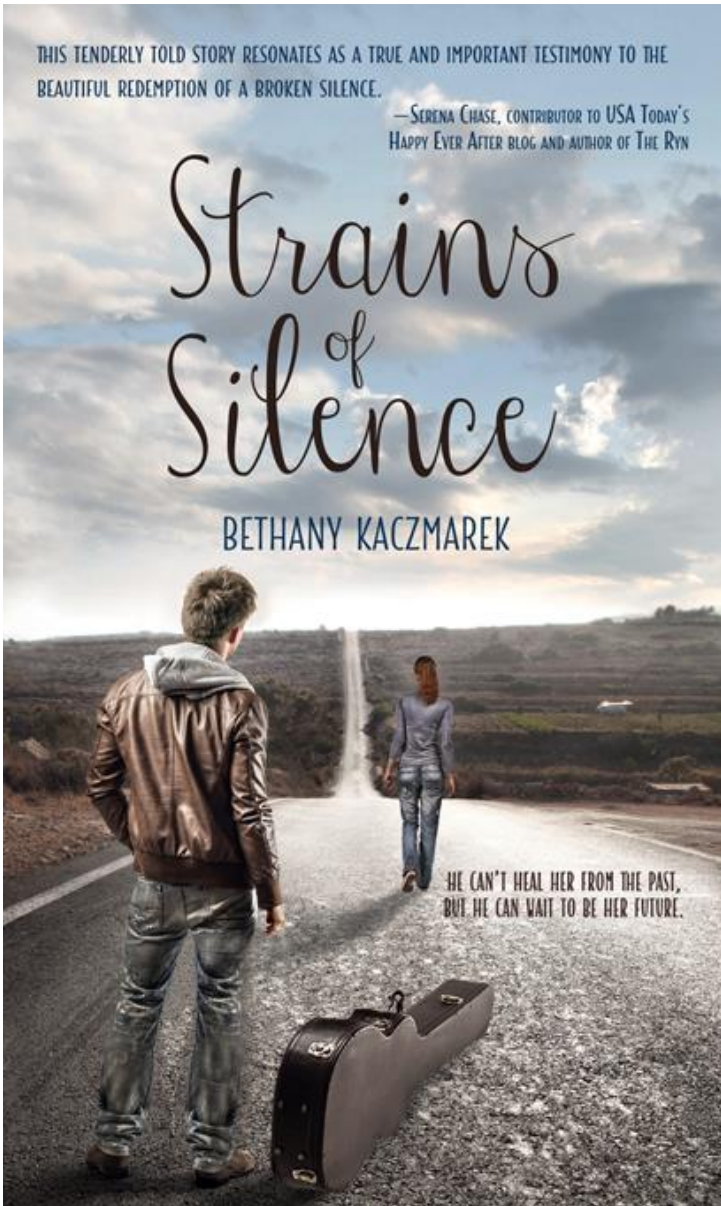


THIS TENDERLY TOLD STORY RESONATES AS A TRUE AND IMPORTANT TESTIMONY TO THE BEAUTIFUL REDEMPTION OF A BROKEN SILENCE.

—SERENA CHASE, CONTRIBUTOR TO USA TODAY'S HAPPY EVER AFTER BLOG AND AUTHOR OF THE RYN

# Strains of Silence

BETHANY KACZMAREK



HE CAN'T HEAL HER FROM THE PAST,  
BUT HE CAN WAIT TO BE HER FUTURE.

# Strains of Silence

Bethany Kaczmarek

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

### **Strains of Silence**

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### Publishing History

First Harbourlight Edition, 2017

Paperback Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-966-9

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-967-6

**Published in the United States of America**

## *Dedication*

Fly the W.

To my very own baseball player, who gave me the  
courage to dance. Thank you for leading.

## *Acknowledgements*

I remember my little sister's face blinking back at me as I realized I had a story to tell. And from those earliest moments, Erynn, you've encouraged me, learned at my side, gotten me to laugh at my noob mistakes. I don't think I'd have ever had the courage to write if it hadn't been for you. Thanks for the nudge and the company.

And Sue Quinn, who read and critiqued those two early years-ago versions chapter by chapter, you sharpened me, challenged me to take what I'd written for myself and to make it about my readers. Your belief that I could do this meant so much—still does.

Susie May Warren, Karen Ball, Rachel Noto, and Sandra Lovelace, each of you has said something to me that lifted my chin and spurred me on in this endurance run. I treasure those words, and I keep on.

Jeff Bourque, honestly? This book wouldn't have become what it is without "Nothing." Weaving those lyrics into the story moved my writing in a direction I couldn't have predicted. It was God's gift to me. I wish everyone in the world knew your song, and I'm thankful that we met you on the Polish mission field so long ago.

But God had a different song to break Kasia's silence. Sarah Sharrow, time spent worshiping and seeking God's heartsong for her story, time spent praying and writing new lyrics with you—I wouldn't trade those moments for a New York Times bestseller. They were sweet, and they knitted our souls together. You were one of my first fans, and you'll always be one of my favorites.

Light Brigade, soul-sisters, you have prayed me

through every high and every low of this ride. Ronie, your friendship is a mocha latte for my afternoon slump. Marney, you know what's up. You pull no punches, you push me to excel. Judi, my kindred spirit, bosom-friend. I want to write books and characters you'll like having around as much as me (and bonus: they'll be able to be around on demand). I miss you every single day.

Mom and Dad, you loved us with grace, Truth, and fierce determination. I love you cowmootillion.

Boyfriend-Husband, some of my berry favorite things about you made it into this story, because I wrote what I knew. Your patience and grace, your ability to make me laugh no matter what's going on around me. You befriended me at a time when I didn't believe in love, and you showed me what it looked like. But you never claimed to be my hero. You just pointed me to Him. And that's what I love the MOST about you. Keep it up until we die, love.

To the Kacz clan, those dinner-table conversations and couch-snuggles and loud laughter and heartspills—they're more precious to me than jewels. I love watching you each discover your own stories. Giant, you are the Man. Bean, aš myliu tave. Short Son, I'd love you if you wore a ten-gallon hat. Smalls, you're magical with love. And Pound o' Puddin', I love your little heart. You all rawk.

Julie Gwinn, agent-friend, you are The. Best. Thank you for championing me and pushing me to write and write and write. Even if I don't have pink hair, you still tell me I'm cool. And even when I stole your pillow, you didn't leave me behind. I shall keep you. Here's to many more books to bless us both.

And to my readers, you are the reason I tell stories.

May you find the powerful, unshakeable Love that calls your heart. He's waiting for you.

## *What People Are Saying*

[Strains of Silence is] an intimate portrait of the impact abuse has on not only the victim but on the circle of loved ones surrounding her. This tenderly told story resonates as a true and important testimony to the beautiful redemption of a broken silence.

~ Serena Chase, author of *The Eyes of E'veria*  
series

"Honest, raw, and relatable, *Strains of Silence* shatters the stigma of shame, abuse and regret in one beautifully written novel. You can't help but find a little bit of healing for yourself in every page."

~ Betsy St. Amant, author of *All's Fair in Love and Cupcakes*, and *Love Arrives in Pieces*

"*Strains of Silence* gives poignant words to an unprecedented epidemic young adults face—partner abuse. Set here and abroad, readers will grow to love Kaczmarek's well-drawn characters and appreciate unique storytelling."

~ Mary DeMuth, author of *The Muir House*

"Bethany Kaczmarek engages readers with accessible, yet astute, writing. As a result, *Strains of Silence* achieves much more than a well-constructed plot; it gifts readers with life-changing principles."

~ Andrew Greer, Dove Award-nominated  
singer/songwriter



“Strains of Silence is a powerful journey from fear to freedom. This gripping, timeless story recounts one young woman’s courageous stance against abuse, and the strength she discovered lived within her when she began to believe again. “If it meant brighter stars, she would follow God into the darkness.”

~ Jackie Marushka, CEO, Marushka Media,  
Nashville

“Bethany Kaczmarek has a knockout debut novel. Strains of Silence produces intense emotion, deep characters, and forces the reader into a voracious desire to continue turning the pages. I look forward for more from this breakout novelist. A must-read, a glad-you-did novel.”

~ Cindy K. Sproles  
Best-selling author of award-winning Mercy’s Rain

Bethany Kaczmarek’s passion for millennials shines in Strains of Silence. Beautifully balancing the raw and the lighthearted, she brings to life a powerful story that will strike a chord with old and young alike. Kaczmarek is a talented author and not one to shy away from tough conversations—definitely a book to read and an author to watch!”

~Ronie Kendig, author

“Bethany Kaczmarek’s clean prose and deep understanding of her characters work together to create *Strains of Silence*, a novel at once charming and terrifying. Her portrayal of abuse is both believable and chilling, and yet she handles the subject with confidence and unflinching courage. Her protagonists are far from perfect, but they each find hope in their respective darkness. *Strains of Silence* is a gripping novel that arrests the reader from the beginning and holds them through to the end.”

~ Aaron D. Gansky, Author of *The Hand of Adonai Series*, *Write to Be Heard*,  
*Firsts in Fiction: First Lines*,  
and *The Bargain*

“Author Bethany Kaczmarek weaves music with her words. *The Strains of Silence* immediately captures the reader with a compelling story and characters who step off the page. She approaches real-life situations with believability and grace. She offers hope and honesty in such a way that makes us all remember we are loved. Definitely an author who has moved to the top of my favorites list.

~ Edie Melson, Author of *While My Child is Away* & Director of the Blue Ridge Mountains  
Christian Writers Conference





# 1

Kasia Bernolak's fiancé waited for her back on campus.

She could allow that thought, thick and smothering, to choke her. Or she could fight it. When she'd taken off that morning, left Huntington to free-climb Beekur's Bald, she'd ached for spring's vitality. Over the past year, her heart had become almost as unfeeling as the granite beneath her—tough enough to withstand the storms, hard enough to cope.

Her father always said she'd been born with sun in her hair and its heat in her veins—all hope, all conviction, all passion. But if her daddy, her *tatus*, were here now, his disappointment would fall on her like the rain had. Sudden and cold.

Her lungs burned from exertion, but she relished it. If only navigating relationships were as easy as climbing. The mountain under her feet could be conquered one foothold at a time. Even when she got jarred and bruised along the way, she could best it. The rock may be unforgiving, but it was solid, constant.

Unlike Blake. He was as changeable as the weather.

The rainclouds had finally—mercifully—moved on. They now hung above Huntington proper. She pressed her palms flat against the wet, gritty stone at her back and let her gaze trace the winding road up the far side of the valley. Any GPS would say home was a

thirty-minute drive away. But true home—with its piping hot, herbal tea, whispered Polish conversations, and strong-armed hugs—was out of reach.

Mama and Tatuś would argue that homecomings were always a good idea, but some things couldn't be undone. Apologies couldn't fix everything.

She'd probably stayed too long up here already, but the rain had slowed her climb. Rather than waste time on the switchbacks, Kasia cut through the trees wherever she could, her footfalls muted by the moss and damp earth. Near the bottom of the trail, she paused to catch her breath and listen to the chattering songbirds. She gripped the slick bark of a birch and inhaled the peace, steeped in it. The scents of damp earth and mountain laurel conjured images of better times, times when she had the freedom to lose herself in the mountains for hours.

She hiked the trail carefully as it sliced down toward the valley. A twig snapped, and a rabbit darted beneath a fallen log a few yards to her left.

*Bless it.* She recognized desperate fear when she saw it. She slowed, tugged her wet T-shirt from against her rain-slicked skin, put the previous night on replay.

It hadn't been so out of the ordinary.

At Blake's too late, curled up with him on his couch, she'd been half watching a gory zombie flick and half enjoying the familiarity of his arms around her.

Just half.

And when he'd shifted at her back—it was bizarre, really—she felt...hunted. She'd jumped up, coughed out a flimsy excuse, and left.

Would he mention that today? Or just let it hang over them like a storm cloud?



Kasia shoved open the cafeteria door and stepped inside. She took a moment to collect herself beside a small palmetto that'd been transplanted into these South Carolina mountains just like her Polish family. Her shirt had dried quite a bit on the way back to school. She tugged on it, tried to convey confidence. Strength. All the qualities she used to have.

If Blake *hadn't* waited, she could get in, eat, and get out. She needed to shower before she spent the afternoon at the homework club. Her sneakers squeaked across the floor and past the serving lines. The smell of garlic and oven-fresh bread made her stomach grumble as she scanned the room.

Blake eased back in his chair, laughing with guys from the business school. The picture of charisma.

Kasia willed her heart to match the steady cadence of her footsteps, prayed a calm façade would hide her discomfort. Under the surface, her mind composed a discordant tune, all sharp words and flat explanations.

He pointed at his classmates. "I'll catch you gentlemen later. Kasia *finally* decided to join me."

"Oh, don't leave on my account, guys," she said. A crowd could take some pressure off.

Blake shook his head. "They know I've been waiting for you. It's all good." Blake's friends meandered elsewhere. And his gaze landed squarely on her. "Drowned rat isn't your best look. Probably a good thing you missed the rush."

She balled her toes in her soggy shoes and pulled her long ponytail over her shoulder. The sudden rain shower on the bald had dulled her fiery hair to mud-brown. She looked up and noticed an empty plate

smearred with tomato sauce near his elbow. "You already ate?"

He tapped his thumb against the tabletop. "Really? You ditch me last night with no warning, you're late today, and now you're going there?"

"Sorry." She touched the hard, angular stone on her finger, held the engagement ring firmly in place.

"Sit down. I'll go get you some lunch."

She blinked in surprise, and he was gone. The air conditioning kicked on a second before ice-cold air whooshed over her damp skin.

Blake's sweater peeked out of his backpack, taunted her. A minute later, a plate clinked against the tabletop, and he slid her a fork as he sat. "Here you go."

Yum. Yesterday's chicken cordon bleu masquerading as something Italian. Her stomach wobbled. "Did they not have soup?" She longed for one of her mom's signature winter dishes—a deep purple *barszcz* or chicken *rosół* with potatoes and fresh dill.

"Sure. But I just sat down."

As she reached for the fork, her diamond caught the light and sparkled.

As if the promise of marriage were a beautiful thing.

Fear swallowed her like the pitch-black of a cave. In three months, she'd be Blake's wife. His *wife*. Every other option would cease to exist.

But to be realistic, she'd blown her chance at anything else when she gave herself to Blake. She had to make this work—to redeem their relationship.

She missed the old Blake. In the beginning, he'd have jumped at the chance to get her soup, hot tea—



anything she wanted. He'd have offered the sweater the second he saw her wet and chilled.

She could make him smile just by being herself.

He reached out and fingered the hem of her soggy shirt. "So, you were climbing again. What is it about that place? Every time you're up on that ridge, you come back with your head full."

*I have to climb to get out from under you.* "Just struggling with some stuff." She forced down a bite.

He crossed his arms and rocked back in the chair.

She didn't have time to play his game. "I might switch from Elementary to Secondary Ed. I...I feel weird about where I'm headed." It wasn't a total lie.

He squinted.

Had she played the role of blissful fiancée that well?

"We've already discussed this, Kosh. We'll travel, see the world. Dad's got big plans for me as the international liaison—Paris, Bangkok, Dubai. Your sole responsibility will be keeping me entertained."

She let the dull murmur of others' conversations fill her head, wished she could rewind, delete the innuendo. But it played back.

He wasn't talking about her music.

Did he not remember all the things he'd said made him fall for her?

Or did he simply not care anymore?

She'd been somebody—the musical daughter of that gracious Polish-American pastor from the church on the ridge. Her family had always won everyone's affection and respect without even trying.

For Kasia's whole life, music had been her driving passion—the truest expression of her faith. Her music had blessed people. Then she'd quit it all. Blake didn't

like her in the limelight.

If she still wrote songs or sang, that might bother her more. But since her well of music had dried up, it hadn't been worth the battle.

When *was* the last time she'd enjoyed the weight of the guitar, the taut strings against her fingertips? What had changed?

She should've asked those questions long before now. Doubt breathed down the back of her neck.

Blake stroked the back of her hand. "Your chicken as bad as it smells?"

"It's fine." She poked at a piece of melted mozzarella with her fork. "Do you remember that song I wrote for you the summer we met?" she asked.

"All I remember is your crazy possessive parents."

They were never possessive. Tatu's protected his girls was all. "Overnight stays weren't the kind of thing his girls did—even at your parents'."

Past tense. She hadn't been back at school long before she spent most nights at Blake's apartment.

Tatu's probably still thought she was worth protecting.

As Blake sat there people-watching, she searched for a trace of his former sweetness—the letters he used to write her! No luck. "I'll be at Heritage Acres today—running the homework club."

He sat straight. "We've been over this."

"Jen has a doctor's appointment—just today." She hadn't realized how much she missed it.

"It's pointless, Kosh. You change nothing for those ghetto kids."

Maybe she wouldn't change anything long-term, but she could certainly make them smile and laugh before they went home. Somebody needed to tell them

they could amount to something. She wished someone would offer her the same hope.

She wadded her napkin and set it next to her plate.

"Pointless." He shook his head like a disappointed teacher. "What you need to do is—"

*Enough.* She stood. "What I need to do is go. I've got to shower before I leave." She left her tray and stalked off.

"Do not walk away from me." Blake's voice kept on, but she tuned him out. He wouldn't cause a scene in front of all these people. "Presentation is key," he always said. Stupid catch phrase.

Let him feel the embarrassment this time.

She passed a guy she'd seen in the music building a few times. Kasia smiled, chin high.

For the first time in months.

Twice now, in twenty-four hours, she'd left Blake in the dust. And she sort of liked how it felt.

~\*~

An hour later, wearing a dressy T-shirt and capris, her curls barely tamed into submission, Kasia grabbed her keys off the desk and headed to the parking lot. Thankfully, the rainclouds had vanished.

Heat poured out the door of the old sedan Tatuś had given her before she left for Oconee State. Inside, she soaked in the warmth of the sunbaked vinyl. As the engine turned over, she focused on the slight vibration and the hum of the engine, rested a hand on the wheel. The car always felt safe—like a place where her dad watched over her.

She pulled out and left campus, wound along side streets through east Huntington. She decided to take

the bypass around town, merged seamlessly, hit the gas.

All she needed now was her music. A little Eric Peters would suit her nicely today.

*Thunk.*

The car shimmied and lurched to the left. She yanked the wheel right, fought against its pull toward oncoming traffic. One glance at her rearview mirror and her heart turned percussionist.

A horn blasted.

A semi swerved.

In the right lane, car after car snaked past, kept her from the safety of the shoulder.

She punched the hazard lights button, slowed to a stop, waited for an opening.

*Show some mercy, people.*

Eons later, she saluted the final vehicle, edged her car onto the shoulder, and parked.

She got out and checked all four tires. A flat. The absolute last thing she needed. At least it was on the passenger side.

She ducked in to grab her cell and touched the screen to bring it to life. Nothing but black. *Ugh.* Now she couldn't call for help or let Mrs. Peat know she might be late. Could today get worse? At least Tatus had taught her how to change a tire.

It was different now though. Last time, she'd done it with him. When he was close by, smelling of aftershave and wood chips, she could do anything.

She popped the trunk and hoisted the jack. The spare took a little finagling. She gripped the rubber and lowered it to the gravel.

With the jack crank, she pulled off the hubcap and set it behind the wheel. The stubborn lug nuts held on,

though, and the edges cut against her skin. They hadn't been this difficult to unscrew when Tatuś was here.

Kasia imagined him coaxing her with his familiar accent. *Get some leverage, Kasiu. Use your body weight when you must.* She maneuvered the tire iron, shoved down on the left, pulled up on the right. Her arms shook, palms burned. Kasia stood, brushed tiny stones from her knees and considered grabbing one of the hair bands she kept on the gearshift. Hair clung to her neck, prickly, annoying. She placed her right foot on the iron and stepped up, bounced her full 120 pounds.

The lug nuts moved about as easily as the guilt she kept wishing away.

What now? If she flagged somebody down, she might get a psycho. If she stood there like an idiot, a psycho could volunteer.

Tires crunched on the gravel as a black military-style vehicle rolled to a stop behind her. Kasia prayed for someone sane, helpful, gracious. A tall guy about her age jumped down from the driver's seat and strolled over. His hair was a mess—a haystack all gold and shadow. Laugh lines creased his eyes, and deep dimples punctuated his cheeks as he smiled.

Careful to keep her distance, she moved to the front of the car.

"Got a flat?" The barest hint of a southern drawl played in his words—more gentleman than country.

She eyed the deflated tire. "The lug nuts are too tight."

"Mind if I give it a try?" He didn't wait for an answer. He stepped onto the tire iron and used his body weight to kick-start it. For him, it worked. Of course.

"I did try that."