



beauty may be only skin deep
but scars can pierce the soul

PATTY FROESE

**EYE OF
THE
BEHOLDER**

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Patty Froese

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410

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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2012

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-61116-231-8

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To my husband, who tells me every day how beautiful
I am to him.

1

Tricia Hunter dropped her bags on the scratched wood floor of her uncle's cabin and took a deep, cleansing breath. She could already feel the potential of this place. The musty scent of old smoke from the stone hearth mingled with the tangy aroma of falling leaves. This was just what she needed, a hideaway in the middle of the autumn woods with a crackling fire, a stack of cozy quilts, and a wide window that let in a pool of golden afternoon sunlight.

Perfect.

There wasn't a mirror to be seen in the place, and Tricia smiled wryly. That was probably what she needed most, time without having to look herself in the face.

Tricia raised her hand to touch the scars running along her jaw line, her fingers moving over the puckered skin with absent-minded familiarity. As much as she hated these scars, she was becoming more accustomed to them. She hadn't made peace, exactly, but the shock was gone now, and in its place was a sort of confusion. Who was she now that she looked... like this?

She opened the door to a bedroom, and her gaze moved over the double bed that nearly filled the space, leaving room for only one tiny bedside table. Seeing no other door that might lead to a bathroom, she closed her eyes and cringed. So that actually *was* an outhouse

she'd seen. She'd hoped that there was some other explanation for the little shack, but unfortunately, it made perfect sense. A kitchen sink was going to have to do for bathing, and the air inside was already feeling quite chilly in the autumn morning. This stay was going to be more rustic than she'd imagined.

"Maybe I should have gone to a resort instead," she muttered, but she didn't really mean it. She'd come here for a reason. She had a lot of things to think through, and spas and shopping didn't leave her enough silence and solitude to hear herself think, let alone listen for God's voice.

Outside, a truck's engine revved, and she glanced out the window to see a black pickup pull into the drive. It rumbled for a moment before the engine shut off and the driver's side door opened. A tall, broad-shouldered man hopped out. Whoever he was, the outdoors suited him. The sunlight that filtered through the red and golden leaves touched his auburn hair and caressed the rugged lines of his face. He dropped a hat on his head and swung the truck door shut with a bang. When their gazes met, he touched the brim of his hat in a polite salute. Tricia pulled away from the curtain, her cheeks warming when she realized she'd been staring.

His footsteps echoed on the stairs leading to the door and she opened it before he had the chance to knock, flashing him a smile.

"Good—" he started, but then his face blanched and he quickly cleared his throat. He looked down, then brought his gaze back up with a recovered smile.

Nice save. "Hi." She tried to ignore that familiar sinking feeling when her scars evoked this reaction.

"Good morning, ma'am." He said, this time

without a hitch. "I'm the park ranger. I wanted to come by and make sure everything was OK."

"I think so." She gave him a reassuring smile for his efforts.

"Good." Whatever his first reaction, his discomfort seemed to seep away. His dark eyes moved over her face. When she raised her eyebrows, daring him to ask her about those ugly scars, he met her gaze easily.

"I'm Tricia Hunter."

"Tricia Hunter..." There was something in the way he repeated her name. "I'm Jesse Reynolds. Nice seeing you." He held out his hand. His rough, calloused fingers folded gently around hers, and he paused, expectant.

Tricia cleared her throat and released his hand.

"It's been a dry summer, but we've gotten two or three heavy rainfalls, so using the fireplace shouldn't be an issue." He nodded in the direction of the hearth. "You'll need it tonight. It's been dipping well below freezing."

She nodded and his gaze moved over her face again, lingering on the scars that crept down her jaw line.

"If you don't mind me asking," he said after a moment. "What happened?"

Tricia was used to the question. With scars like hers, people's curiosity held no bounds. She was past being offended, though. She gave him a shrug. "A highway accident."

Jesse made a thoughtful sound in the back of his throat. "It must have been bad."

"It was." Tricia raised an eyebrow. "You should have seen me before. This is after all the plastic surgery the doctors can do."

Jesse's gaze traveled over her face from the sweep of her brow to the tip of her chin. He nodded slowly, almost appraisingly. "It could be worse," he said finally.

Tricia shot him an exasperated look and turned away. It could be worse. Yes, when you thought about it, everything could be worse.

"Sorry about that." His tone was sheepish. "I don't mean to be callous."

"Well, looking like this has been an...adjustment." She turned back towards him, waiting for a reaction.

"Hmmm." There was no pity in his eyes, just curiosity.

She was used to pity. She knew how to deflect pity. This reaction was something she hadn't encountered before, and nervous chatter welled up inside of her. "People used to tell me I was quite attractive before the accident, you know. I mean, you wouldn't know it to see me now. I'm still not used to this. In my head, I still look like I did before. Like those war vets who still feel their toes when they lose their legs."

"Except you can still walk. And feel your toes."

His dry tone made her cringe. "That came out wrong..." She wasn't really shallow enough to think that her situation was on par with men who'd lost their limbs when fighting for their country, but the change in her appearance had still been a traumatic event, more so than the pain, stitches, and surgeries to correct the scarring and the hours upon hours of recovery combined. If he'd just react like everyone else, she'd know exactly what to say to him, but this ranger was throwing her off.

"Don't worry about it." He gave her good natured

wink. "I like the way you look."

"You'd be the only one." Tricia pulled a hand through her hair. "Hey, I'm sorry. I'm a nervous talker. Can we rewind and make this a little less awkward?"

"Rewind?"

"You ask what happened and I'll say, 'an accident.' And that's where I'll stop. No more messy elaboration." She laughed self-consciously.

"OK, if that's how you wanted this introduction to go. And I'll tell you that you'll need to put your garbage directly into the covered box outside and make sure it's completely shut and locked at all times to keep your site protected from bears." The flicker in his eyes turned familiar but not exactly warm. He seemed undecided on his opinion about her.

"Bears? Should I worry?" She glanced towards the window.

"Not too much, but it's always good to be careful."

She nodded. "That makes sense."

Jesse's gaze met hers for a moment. Once more she felt as if he was waiting for something, but she had no idea what it was. Did rangers get gratuities or something? It suddenly seemed possible.

"Well, I'll be around if you have any questions or need anything." He gave her a nod.

"Thanks."

He turned abruptly back towards the door. "Take care. Winter comes early some years. Like I said, I'll be around."

Tricia nodded, attempting to appear more confident than she felt

"Oh." Jesse placed his hand on the door knob. "Your uncle keeps an ax behind the door."

"I have wood." She nodded towards the pile next

to the hearth. It must have been left over from whoever used the cabin the month before, along with the half bag of plastic cups sitting on the kitchen counter.

Jesse laughed out loud and shook his head. "You'll need more than you've got there. The wood pile is behind the cabin, but you'll need to chop it into smaller pieces."

"How much do I need, exactly?" She eyed the ax uncertainly. Wood didn't burn that quickly, did it? The idea of chopping wood sounded tedious. She turned towards Jesse with a smile, letting her eyes linger on his a little longer than necessary. The movement was one of habit, a learned behavior that used to get her what she wanted. "You wouldn't want to give a girl a hand, would you..." She allowed her smile to sparkle in her eyes. "Jesse, was it?"

"That's right, Jesse." His tone was dry, and then an amused smile tugged at the corners of his lips. He rubbed one hand over his chin, the sound of his stubble against his palm rasping softly. "If I were you, I'd start chopping, Ms. Hunter." He gave her a grin and dropped his hat back onto his head. "You've got time before dark."

She sent him a tight smile and he met her gaze, his expression unreadable.

"Take care, now." He pulled open the door and disappeared into the chilly morning.

As his footsteps clomped down the front steps, she let out a frustrated sigh. Once upon a time, a man would have stumbled over himself in his eagerness to chop wood for her.

She shut the door and leaned against it. Obviously, those days were over. A brilliant smile bought her nothing. A flirtatious laugh held the promise of

something no one wanted any longer. Instead, she was left with the reminder that she had two legs and a back strong enough to chop wood. Try as she might to be a bigger person, it was annoying. She was no longer the woman she used to be, and, frankly, she didn't have to like it.

As Jesse Reynolds trotted back down the steps of the cabin, he shook his head. She hadn't recognized him...or his name. "What did you expect?" he muttered to himself as he strode across the stubby tufts of grass towards his waiting truck.

It shouldn't surprise him. She'd never seemed to know he existed, even when he was right under her cute little upturned nose.

Jesse could still see her as she used to be, tall and slender with long straight hair the color of deeply polished wood. In his mental image, her eyes had been sparkling and her smile brilliant. Of course, she had only worn her cheerleading uniform a fraction of the time, but for some reason in his mind she would always be standing there in her cheerleading uniform, pompoms in one hand and her cheeks flushed from exertion. She'd been gorgeous, and he'd loved her so much that his heart had physically ached.

He hoisted himself into the seat, then banged the door shut with more force than necessary. It felt good. That had been a long time ago that he'd loved her. Tricia seemed like the same old Tricia, trying to get the guys to do the jobs she didn't like to do. She still looked at him like she'd never seen him before in her life. Some things didn't change. Here she was in that

cabin, and she had no idea who he was. Had he been that thoroughly forgettable?

"I guess so," he muttered as he started the truck, the machine rumbling to life.

He could see the old Tricia in her features. Scars marred her features, but her beauty shone through. She'd lost something over the years, some intangible quality that straightened her spine and put steel in her eyes. And truth be told, he thought he liked her better without it.

A cold anger welled deep inside him. He gripped the steering wheel tighter, as if he could squeeze his anger out of the truck itself. He hadn't even realized his anger until she tried to charm him into being her wood boy. It wasn't even her obvious attempt at manipulation that irritated him. He was angry with her for being so oblivious to people around her, for assuming the world revolved around her pretty little self. He was angry that she'd crushed his young heart, which may have been unavoidable, but could have been done with compassion. He was angry for a lot of things in life right now, and she'd walked back into his neck of the woods with some very bad timing.

His tires crunched over the gravel with satisfying ease and he took a deep breath, trying to calm down. Jesse didn't want to console Tricia Hunter. He didn't want to reassure her. He didn't want to chop her wood, for crying out loud. He'd done enough for her in years past, and she'd never noticed. Right now, he had a heart still heavy from the loss of his fiancée, and he kept his life pulled together with a great deal of effort. What he needed right now was...

I don't know.

Jesse shook his head. He knew what he didn't

need, though. He didn't need a princess expecting him to take care of her out here in the woods. He didn't need a spoiled beauty batting her eyes at him and draining him of the last of his energy that was holding him upright.

He didn't need Tricia Hunter.

2

As the sun rose over the frost-kissed forest, Tricia stood by the kitchen sink, stared out the window, and deeply regretted not taking that ruggedly handsome forest ranger's advice to chop more wood. She stood in three layers of clothing, clutching a hot cup of tea she'd made from the one electric appliance the cabin sported—a tea kettle. The night plunged the cabin below freezing, and she'd shivered under the quilt until morning, mentally chastising herself for having thought she knew better about how much wood she'd need for one evening. Truth be told, she wasn't crazy about the idea of chopping her own wood, but it couldn't be avoided much longer.

She took a comforting sip of tea and sighed. She turned around, her attention absently moving towards the painting that sat on the mantel above the fireplace. Large and heavy, it depicted a misty lake surrounded by weeping willows, their leaves trailing in the water. In a boat near the shore perched a beautiful girl wearing a long, old-fashioned dress that slipped off the shoulder. Her hands gripped the oars, and her eyes were fixed on something just to the side of the artist's view. The expression on her face fell somewhere between alarm and curiosity. It was a strangely intoxicating scene from Sir Walter Scott's "Lady of the Lake."

Tricia didn't need the little engraved description

affixed to the bottom of the wooden frame. She recognized it from her university studies. She'd loved that poem... so beautiful and melancholy. The story of the Lady of the Lake had attracted her imagination for many years, but lately her emotional response to the painting changed. Somehow, this beautiful woman who reeled her admirer in with nothing more than parted lips and dewy eyes felt more like a cruel reminder of what she'd lost than anything else.

Tricia stifled a yawn. The night stretched endlessly, and not only because of the cold. She'd lain in bed in the blackness remembering the night three years past that had started all of this—the night of that terrible accident. Every time she'd drifted off to sleep, frightening images invaded her dreams. Lying awake was almost preferable.

If only she'd waited for another flight instead of risking the inclement weather, but the thought of missing her mother's famous home-cooked Thanksgiving dinner depressed her. So she'd bought a bus ticket to take her the rest of the way home. It was an overnight drive, and she'd settled into her seat, hoping to sleep most of the way. Cosmetics, moisturizers, skin firmers, and the like did wonders for a woman's appearance, but nothing refreshed a woman quite so much as some decent sleep. So she'd chosen a window seat near the back of the bus, used her jacket as a blanket, and nodded off.

Tricia didn't know what caused the first fishtailing of the bus, whether the driver had braked for some small animal on the icy road, or if a strong gust of wind had simply pushed the big vehicle, causing it to slide. But once it started, it didn't stop. Tricia was jarred awake to a small child's confused wail and a feeling of

falling. She hadn't been falling... not yet, at least. What she'd really been feeling was the sliding of the bus going steadily sideways.

Oh, God! That was all of the prayer she was able to compose, but it contained her fear and horror. A jolt tossed her forward. She put her hands up to brace herself against the seat ahead, and another jolt sent her back. The bus was dark inside, except for a few reading lights that suddenly started to spin. A woman's sharp scream pierced the confused rumbling. A jerking shudder passed through the vehicle and with that, everyone's fear seemed to explode into shouts and screams as the bus tipped and fell with the screech of metal against rock. The window next to her head imploded. Shards of glass and pieces of sharp rock flew into her face as they tumbled. She put up her hands to protect her face from the tearing pain. Then she fell again and everything went black.

When she fully awoke, she was lying in a hospital bed. Her recovery would be a long and painful one. Her face had been badly damaged. She'd broken bones, suffered many deep cuts and nerve damage. The doctors did what they could and even gave her follow-up plastic surgery in the lengthy months that followed.

Then, just a few weeks ago, the most prominent plastic surgeon called her into his office and gave her a sympathetic smile.

"Ms. Hunter, you survived a terrible accident. You have a lot to be thankful for. Maybe in the future we'll find some new procedures to help people in your situation, but right now we've done all we can. You're in fair condition, considering what happened to you. You really do look good, and in my professional

opinion, we can't improve upon our work."

"Fair condition." She believed the doctors would fix her, find her lost beauty under those bumpy scars and make it like the accident had never happened. Unfortunately, modern medicine could only do so much. That was what brought her to the cabin nestled in the woods, that last appointment with the plastic surgeon. It had seemed so final. The doctor had shaken her hand and wished her good luck in her future, and moved on to other patients whom he could help, leaving Tricia with the bleak reality that this was all she could expect.

So here she was in a cabin without an indoor toilet, trying to make her peace with that face in the mirror. She had to accept that life as she knew it before was over, and there was nothing she could do about it. "Lord, help me to accept the things I cannot change..." Wasn't that what the Serenity Prayer asked for? The last thing she felt about this whole situation was serene, and the last thing she needed right now were more platitudes from people who told her she had so much to live for.

For crying out loud, I'm not suicidal.

No one seemed to really understand. She had lost more than a familiar old friend; she'd lost everything. She'd lost admiration, respect, envious glances, and the key that opened virtually every door she knocked on, from friendships to top grades to her career. After that accident, she'd gone from being a woman who turned heads to being a woman who garnered pity—or worse, was ignored.

This was her life now, and she needed to accept it.

Tricia put her tea on the table and opened her laptop. She had a column to finish. She smiled bitterly

as her computer booted up. Even her career depended on her appearance. Magazines didn't hire plain women to report on beauty. A beautiful woman knew beauty products, and a stunning smile slid her through interviews with an ease that she knew other women didn't experience.

She sat in front of her computer as the icons appeared on the desktop and a little hazard sign in the lower right corner warned her that there was no Internet connection.

How did a woman with scars all over her face make herself beautiful? That was the million dollar question, and if she could answer it with some sort of cosmetic miracle, she knew that plain and ordinary women everywhere would have finally found the secret, too. Cosmetics, though, weren't going to give her back what she'd lost.

Tricia's gaze moved back towards the painting on the wall...the young woman's face drawing her attention. The large eyes, the delicate lips, the blush on her cheeks... Beauty was the ultimate virtue in poetic romance. A woman was sought after and believed to be worthy of devotion because of her matchless beauty.

For the first time, Tricia was forced to wonder about the women who didn't measure up to that standard. In the poetry of chivalry, knights and ladies, the unattractive women just melted into the background, a supportive structure of servants, laundry women, wet nurses, and nuns hidden away in stone convents.

"Who am I now?" she whispered to herself, and for the life of her, she had no idea.

Down the road flanked by golden trees, across a short bridge that spanned a babbling creek and up a lane that led to a two-story log house, Jesse Reynolds sat on a three-legged stool by the door, lacing up his hiking boots. He moved slower than usual this morning, his mind elsewhere. Sitting there, a thermos of coffee at his feet and his boots only halfway done up, he thought back to the years he'd known Tricia. It was a lifetime ago.

As a teenager, he'd been skinny and awkward, without the voluminous brain that would make it forgivable. He wasn't stupid. He got good grades, but he wasn't the ridiculously bright kid, either, doing calculus in his head and plotting his world takeover.

While other guys talked cars and cruised for girls, he loved camping with his dad. In the woods he could get away from everything—from school, from the teasing, from being invisible to the only girl he'd ever had a crush on. He liked to go to the lake with his father and sit in the rosy light of dawn in their little boat, waiting for the fish to bite. They'd sit together, their fishing poles propped between their feet at the edge of the rocking boat, and Jesse would listen to the frogs croaking, bugs buzzing, and the rare blip of a fish coming to the surface to eat.

Most of the time as he sat there in the silence of the lake, he thought about Tricia. About how she seemed to look right through him, and how if she ever stopped to get to know him, she'd see what a nice guy he was. About the types of guys she went out with—the cocky kind who had cars. He thought about what he would say to her if she ever looked at him long enough to register his existence.