

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white sleeveless dress and a long red cape, is walking through a field of tall, golden-brown grass. She is looking to her right. In the background, there are rolling hills and a small house with a chimney. The sky is a dramatic, fiery red with large, dark, billowing clouds. A single black butterfly is flying in the upper right corner of the sky.

Butterfly Red Sky

Book 1 of the *Red Butterfly* series

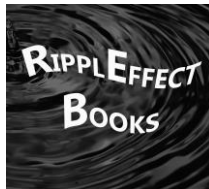
AUBREY MOORE

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This caterpillar does not just *simply* grow wings

First, it must alter its mind; transform the very being of itself

It must climb the tallest tree, the highest mountain

Swim the deepest of oceans

Walk through the fiercest of flames

And then, if it chooses, this caterpillar can become a butterfly

– Aubrey Moore, *Red River Run*

A Dream

The cold wind blew as I tugged my jacket closer to my body. I waited outside the drugstore for the drop-off. The town was quiet at 9:00 PM except for a few standing in line for the last showing at the movie theater, and the drunks lining the local bar. The rest of the town was quiet. I watched as the autumn rainclouds began to blow away, releasing the stars from the heavens. The sliver of the thumbnail moon shone down, creating a slight cast upon the wet pavement. Stragglers from the bar began to lurk in the shadows, looking for trouble, whistling at me from across the street.

“Hey baby, looking for some fun?” the older men yelled.

What was I doing here? I thought to myself. I was only sixteen, too young for a girl to be out alone in the dark, but I needed the money and I was willing to risk it all.

The man I was waiting for in the lifted black diesel truck finally pulled up to the curb and rolled down his tinted window. The men from across the street walked away—maybe they knew who the dealer was and knew not to mess with any of his employees.

I approached, thinking it would be a quick exchange, but he motioned for me to get in. As I hopped up in the passenger seat my

lungs became heavy from the smell of cologne and cigarette smoke. I coughed a few times and slammed the door shut, cracking my window for fresh air. The light from the roof of his truck wasn't coming on—surely in his line of work he'd disable it.

No words were exchanged as he reached over to his glove box, his hand inches from my knee, the dim light exposing the shadows in his face. I still didn't recognize him. He threw a rolled-up brown paper bag on my lap.

“Here's the money,” I said as the man took the envelope, looked inside, and stashed it under his seat. \$3,000—all in hundred-dollar bills. I had counted it five times before the exchange. I contemplated stealing the envelope—running away with it, stop what I knew was wrong, but I couldn't. The money was too good. In a few months I'd be doubling what I was making.

When I went to reach for the handle of the truck to get out he stopped me. “I'm supposed to drop you off at another house next.” He reached over me and shut the door, then rolled my window up.

“Todd didn't say anything about that. I'm just supposed to get the drug from you and get it to him.”

I began to panic. The man started to drive off.

“Relax, Maya, it'll be quick.” His voice was deep and cold as he kept his head down and out of sight. How did he know my name?

I tried to explain again I was just the mover and nothing more, but he wasn't listening. He turned his radio on to a classic rock 'n roll station and clicked the volume button up, humming along to the words. He began to drive haphazardly through downtown, turning corners too fast against the soaked roads. Speed up, slow down, the cycle making me nauseous along with the smoke and diesel smell.

“Pull over; this isn’t right,” I demanded. “I need to call Todd.”

The man kept driving, accelerating his speed the more I resisted. I was in trouble.

He pricked me with something sharp in the neck. When I looked over, I saw him push hard down on the plunger of a syringe, releasing a yellow liquid into my body. The truck turned the corner on the last street before the woods that surrounded the city and sped up even more. My arms and legs turned to mush as I tried to open the locked door. Darkness settled over the trees lighted by his headlights, and the road went on forever.

A girl around my age stood in front of the red barn in the distance, her white nightgown and face covered in blood. Chains were wrapped around her wrists like snakes.

“Help me!” I mouthed, but the words couldn’t escape my lungs. She could run for help, save us both, but she didn’t move. Her long brown hair hid her face.

“This is going to hurt.” The man laughed as he dragged my body through the brush, pulling the chains circling my wrists. He had dressed me in a white gown, like the girl in front of the barn. Stickers poked through the thin material, making me bleed, the gown no longer white. I looked up to the cold night sky. The stars guided my sight through the black field.

He dropped the chains; the blood flow returned to my arms. The faint sound of his radio in the distance and the crickets chirping were all I could hear in the quiet of the night.

He kicked me again when I tried to get up to get away. I dug my fingers in the dirt for a rock or stick that I could defend myself

with—nothing. My body had been taken by a man that smelled of cigarettes and aftershave. I was numb, waiting for my life to be over as he pushed down on my neck, choking the last of what was in me.

The sky turned red, and I was now losing sight of the stars. I had risked it all—and for what? Death? And then a glimpse of beauty in the thick mess I had gotten myself into. A butterfly flew around my head—a beautiful butterfly with wings the color of the reddest rose and the blackest of nights. Time slowed. As I reached for it, my world began to fade and death settled over my eyes. My last breath. And then I was nothing; nothing but the winged creature in the ruby red sky.

One Leg at a Time

My phone alarm went off, reminding me of the hours I didn't sleep, all my limbs still achy from tossing and turning. I woke from a nightmare every night at 11:11 PM for the last ten months. The memory of my life before this time was still gone—vanished. Would I ever get it back?

Doctor Rivera would be excited to hear the new development of my dream at our appointment later. Finally it was starting to come together. Maybe now that I was getting more pieces of the dream she'd be able to give me more suggestions to recover my lost memory.

I looked down from my window at one of Denver's busiest streets below. The snowflakes were thick today; another storm blew in from the night and covered the sidewalks and cars parked along the street.

I tripped over my sketchbook and stumbled over my pencils I unknowingly let fall from my bed when I finally fell asleep in the night. I cringed at the snap of the broken wood and slowly opened the pouch to reveal a few casualties. Numbers 5B and 7B were goners. I'd need to buy another set before art class Monday.

One leg at a time, I said to myself as I put on my workout sweatpants, just as Fay told me. In the last month I was able to dress myself without any help, a small feat to the average person. For me, after my accident, one leg at a time was a triumph.

Today was Friday, November 18; I crossed out the date on my ocean-themed 2005 calendar and smiled. Next week was Thanksgiving, which marked the last week I'd have to go to physical therapy. I was ecstatic to have overcome the ten months spent recovering.

It also marked one month until my eighteenth birthday. My adoptive mother had a birthday party already planned. She was going to invite Doctor Rivera, Fay, and a few others I met through her physical therapy gym, and the neighbors across the hall from our apartment. I imagined what colored streamers and balloons she'd use. She wanted to make it special since I had spent my seventeenth birthday in the hospital in a coma.

Ben clanked his spoon on the bowl of hot cereal fresh out of the microwave. Tanya had him on a special diet of whole grains, chicken, and salads, which he loathed. He splattered some of the oatmeal on his dark blue work shirt and swore under his breath. He never swore in front of us, but I'd catch him in times like this and laugh. My adoptive father looked up at me as he wiped his mess with a damp paper towel. "Good morning, Maya." His voice was tired.

"Morning, Ben. Having a little trouble?" I smirked. The wet spot on his shirt frustrated him more. He nodded and reluctantly started to eat his breakfast. I sat next to him on the other barstool with my bowl of cold cereal.

His face was scruffy; his thick blond and brown hair still a mess from the night. He was only forty-five, ten years older than Tanya, and already started to get arthritis pains in his back and hands.

“I’m getting too old,” he joked. “I can’t even make a bowl of cereal anymore without wearing it!”

“You’re just tired.” I nudged his arm.

“Yeah, well just you wait—getting old sucks.” We laughed.

Tanya came out of the bathroom and kissed us both on the cheeks. She looked radiant, as always, even in just a spaghetti strap shirt and yoga pants. Ben grabbed her hand and pulled her down to kiss him on the lips. I admired them for a minute as Tanya ran her long fingers through his hair.

Tanya was part Native American, black, and Irish, which made her Ben’s golden gem—he treated her like one too. She bent down to the fridge to get her health drink. She was eating more fruits and veggies and going to the gym every day to keep her body fit in anticipation of getting pregnant. She and Ben had been trying for the five years they were married. No luck, yet.

Two black bird tattoos emerged from under her shirt on her back, her symbol for her parents who both died in an accident in her early twenties. She didn’t have any other family besides Ben and me. She and I connected so well despite only “knowing” one another for less than a year.

“I was your age once,” she told me when I asked about getting a tattoo for my birthday just a few weeks before. She wouldn’t mind—Ben on the other hand would send out the Army, Marines, *and* Air Force, and have a strike team take down the tattoo artist before I could get through the door.

“Did you sleep okay last night?” my adoptive mother asked. I envied her dark majestic eyes and her long, straight black hair and short bangs. She was always concerned on nights she knew I didn’t sleep—when the nightmares took over. She often would have to shake me from the dreams, her eyes scared when I finally woke. She’d tell me I was screaming, calling out for help, crying. Night terrors, she called them.

“Another bad dream. I’m alright, though,” I assured her. I didn’t want her or Ben to worry anymore. I would be an adult soon; it was time I started getting over the “terrors.”

She moved the hair from my eyes and smiled. “How’s your knee?”

“Stiff. Fay will straighten me out today, though.” I chuckled. It had been three months since my second reconstructive surgery on it and the pain especially hit hard on cold mornings.

“Were you able to finish your math homework?” Ben asked, knowing I stayed up late to finish part of my GED course. If I stayed on track, I’d finish with my GED by March. I wasn’t able to attend high school with all my physical therapy appointments—three days a week for four hours—I’d miss too much school.

Tanya and I watched episodes of *Gilmore Girls* just so I’d know the ins and outs of what I was missing. TV drama was a cheap thrill. I always pictured myself as the smart girl—like Rory—who had friends and a handsome boyfriend. Who was I before I lost my memory? Who had I been for the first sixteen years of my life? Was I just the quiet, shy kid like Ben and Tanya said I was? Did I really not have any friends? None at all?

“I finished; just need to schedule an appointment to take the final with the proctor in two weeks.” This would mark the end of my math courses.

“We’re so proud of you,” Tanya congratulated me and Ben agreed.

“Wait until I pass first,” I joked.

“You’ll be just fine,” Tanya assured me. She finished getting ready in their master bedroom while Ben and I finished our breakfasts. He looked at his watch and tapped it a few times. It only worked periodically, even after replacing the battery five times in the last month. I didn’t know why he still wore it, maybe a hint for Tanya to buy him a new one for Christmas.

“Shh,” he whispered and poured the rest of his cereal down the drain, turning on the disposal to hide the evidence. “And don’t say anything about the donuts I’m getting on my way to work.” He kissed me on the forehead and winked. I nodded and told him I’d keep it a secret. “Let us know how physical therapy goes today,” he said with enthusiasm. They were also excited it was coming to an end.

“I’ll call you right after,” I promised.

Before anyone else could sneak into the only bathroom in our apartment, I quickly made my way in and shut the door. Tanya’s makeup was scattered across the counter. I looked at myself in the mirror, glaring at the dark circles under my green eyes. Another sleepless night left me looking ghostly.

I brushed the bedhead away from my long brown hair and took off my workout shirt. The ugly scar on my chest from my car’s windshield glass looked exceptionally red today—possibly from my tossing around in the night. I rubbed Vitamin E on it and let it dry. I didn’t like the stickiness it left after I got dressed.

I looked at all the scars across the top half of my body and wondered if the driver in the other car ever thought of me after they fled the scene, if they ever felt remorse for hitting me. No witnesses—the person was free to go, never to know what happened to the girl in the overturned car on the side of the highway. Never to know the true pain I felt each day of my recovery—me not knowing who I really was, only the stranger in the mirror.

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