Breaking Walls
Breaking #2

Tracie Puckett
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To Dad, for all the sacrifices.
“You never answered my question back at the diner.”
“And what question was that?”
“What’s with the—”
“Chip on my shoulder?”
“Yeah.”

I closed my eyes and let Gabe’s single word resonate. Yeah. Somewhere between the static and the buzz humming through my headphones, I could still hear the way my breath caught in my throat. He’d taken me off guard with one, tiny word, a word enriched with curiosity—curiosity that nearly compelled me to answer without pause.

Thankfully, though, I took that breath.

The evening at Shae’s had started casually enough. Gabe was conscious of my uneasiness going into the dinner, so he kept the mood light with a few goofy jokes to help kill the tension. I was supposed interview him for the Herald, and he was supposed to give me some
insight on the Raddick Initiative—his lifeline, his passion, the charity-focused foundation he’d built from the ground up. Instead, though, the tables had turned, and he’d been the one asking the questions. For thirty minutes leading up to the interview, we sat and talked about everything but the paper, the article, or RI, and I’d recorded every moment of our dinner conversation on the small, digital recorder Dad bought me for my sixteenth birthday.

Even after the weeks passed, I still kept listening to that same, familiar exchange. Time after time, I listened, unable to resist the temptation to keep going back to that day. I hadn’t known it then, but pressing the record button just a little too soon gave me something precious—a moment in time, a remnant of the friendship we’d started to build . . . a reminder of the relationship we’d never even had a chance to begin.

It felt like so long ago that he’d walked away, and it’d only been a matter of days.

“Are we really going to do this?”

The recording suspended my reflection. I steadied my breath and listened to the white noise, closing my eyes as if it would somehow help me hear things a little clearer.

Are we really going to do this? There was a playful quality in my tone, a liveliness I hadn’t anticipated even when I’d first asked the question. It surprised me then, and it surprised me every time I heard it upon replay. So much had changed since the first time he’d brought up the subject of my bad attitude. You have a chip on your shoulder, Mandy. Big time.

Back then, back when we’d first met and the sheer idea of Gabe was enough to induce a full-on panic attack, I’d gotten defensive and angry. I viewed his observation as an attack, and I did what any girl as closed off as me would do—I sat back and wallowed in my own self-pity.

This time, though, I knew better than to believe he was attacking me. I knew him better. It wasn’t an attack; it was genuine curiosity. His eyes
softened with his tone, and my defenses barreled down. Yet again, as they always did in his presence, my lips took on a mind of their own, and I found myself answering his question before I had time to talk myself out of it.

“I’d say it’s less of a chip and more like a guard. A wall if you will.”

“A wall?”

“Yeah. And it’s not just me; we all have one—some have just learned to build them a little higher and thicker than others, that’s all.”

“What do you mean?”

“Walls act as barriers—they protect the good and keep out the bad. We’re all a little damaged; each one of us has a history. Sometimes that history’s good, and sometimes it’s not so great. So just like our skin, our hearts, and the blood pumping through our veins, the wall becomes a necessary part of our make-up. It’s crucial to our survival. It’s there to serve and protect our emotional well-being.”

“So they’re good?” he asked. “Or bad? I don’t follow.”

“They are what we make them. Sometimes we forget what’s worth protecting versus what needs to be released.”

Or at least I thought so. It was just my intuition. While I suspected that everyone shared that one commonality, I had no concrete evidence to support my belief—nothing besides years of observation, anyway. And when you shut yourself out for so long, observation becomes the only way of getting to know the people around you.

I wasn’t concerned that my belief was too far off, and with the way Gabe listened so intently to what I said, I wondered if maybe he thought I was right, too.

Having the gift of perspective, I kept listening to that recording, going back over our conversation and wondering if maybe Gabe had only asked those questions because he was trying to justify his insecurities—
the ones he hid behind his own wall, the ones that made him run from me.

“So how do you maintain it?” he asked. “What keeps your wall from crashing down?”

“I live by the rules.”

“The rules?”

There was a catch in his voice, one I hadn’t been shocked to hear. Other than Bailey, Gabe was the only person I’d ever mentioned the rules to and for a good reason. It was that very catch, the pause, the awkward silence that I dreaded. That quiet moment in time created a terrifying opportunity of exposure, a chance of letting someone too close to my means of stability.

He’d narrowed his gaze and looked at me in just the way I’d predicted—mouth ajar, eyebrows forced low. I’d confused him.

“What do you mean?”

“The rules,” I repeated myself. “They’re just... something I made up—a set of guidelines to live by, to follow—to make sure that everything stays in order and that nothing comes between me and that lovely wall of mine.”

There was another pause, and I opened my eyes as I listened to the static hiss from the recording and through my ear buds.

Gabe cleared his throat, and the static faded away.

“Care to elaborate?”

I squeezed my eyes shut again, savoring the sound of his voice until the moment slipped away.

“Do I care to elaborate?” I asked, trying to mask my nervous laughter. “No. Not even a little.”

Knowing that I needed to move things along—for the sake of my sanity and the article Georgia had assigned—my eyes slanted down to
the digital recorder positioned between us on the table. Gabe finished eating ten minutes prior to all things walls and rules, and I picked up my sandwich once or twice only to set it right back down.

After a minute of silence, I said, “Okay, this is weird.”

“What’s that?”

“You’re just sitting there watching me eat.”

“I’m not, though,” he said. “You haven’t taken a bite in over twenty minutes.”

I clicked the button to stop the playback and sat up straight in my bed. I didn’t need to hear any more. The rest of the recording would only reveal a long list of questions about RI, an uncomfortable conversation about Bailey, and a few too many awkward pauses as I tried relentlessly to learn more about the man on the opposite side of the table.

It was the third time I’d listened to the recording since we’d walked away from each other on Wednesday. Each time, as I sat there and analyzed every word, every breath, every change of tone, I felt my heart grow heavier with sadness.

I missed Gabe.
“You’re still not talking to me, then?” I ignored the voice behind me, not bothering to turn around as I pulled the headphones from my ears, twisted the cord around the digital recorder, and deposited both into the front pocket of my purse. “It’s been three days. Talk to me, Amanda!”

My back arched. I didn’t know why he insisted on calling me that, especially if he wanted to change the decrepit dynamic of our father-daughter relationship. After eighteen years, he should have known me better. I was fairly low-maintenance, I didn’t make many demands, and there were very few things anyone would have to do to keep me in their good graces:

1. Call me Mandy, not Amanda.
2. Treat me with common decency and respect.
3. Tell me the truth.
Dad was in trouble for violating all three, so he was carrying out the sentence of a lifetime.

“Enough with the silent treatment, already. Talk to me.”

I stopped in front of my full-length mirror, ignoring the peripheral image of my father as he leaned against the door frame. *Don’t look at him, Mandy. Don’t lose focus.* Fixing my gaze on the mirror, I ran a comb through my hair one last time before pulling it into a ponytail.

“I know you’re angry with me,” he said, and this time I turned to give him a huge smile paired with a sarcastic thumbs up. *Real mature.* Dad didn’t feel the urge to comment on my infantile reaction. He just powered through with his daily argument.

“This is absurd! If you won’t talk to me, if you won’t even tell me what I did, then how am I supposed to fix it?”

Smoothing the wrinkles from my work shirt, I studied my reflection one last time. I twisted back to the bed and grabbed my purse, tossing it over my shoulder as I left the room. He turned to follow me as I brushed by him. *Careful!*

I glanced at my watch. It didn’t even make sense that he was following me around. He was *supposed* to be asleep, because sleeping is what Dad did: every Saturday morning, he stayed in bed until the clock struck nine. It was a routine I wish I could’ve counted on. At least *then* I could’ve escaped the house without having to listen to the same, monotonous lecture I’d heard a hundred times since coming home from school on Wednesday afternoon. But since Dad resigned from his post as the town mayor last week, nothing about his schedule stayed the same—not even his sleep schedule! Now he just sat at home all day, every day, actively searching for work in the paper and on the computer. And having Dad home all the time only created about six billion opportunities for him to pester me to no end. It was getting old, fast.

Still ignoring him, I walked down the hall and into the kitchen, only to stop dead in my tracks as my gaze fell on Bailey. Seated on the counter in her white, cotton pajamas, my sister’s eyes were glued to her
cell phone. I didn’t even have to see the screen to know what she was watching; I could make out the distinctive sounds of the video just fine. *Gabe, I like you. And I know I’m leaving for California in four days—*  

“Are you *seriously* watching that again?” I snatched the phone from her hand and silenced it with the touch of a single button. She opened her mouth, eager to defend herself, but I pointed my finger in her face before she had the chance. “No! We’ve talked about this. Stop—watching—it!”  

“And yet you’re still not mad at her,” Dad said, following me into the kitchen. “Even when she repeatedly ignores your request and watches your viral video—”  

“It’s not *her* viral video, Dad,” Bailey said, and I reached around her, grabbing an apple from the fruit basket. “To be fair, it’s the creative property of the Desden Channel 2 news team, and it’s freakin’ hilarious.” She seized her phone from my hand and turned it on again—filling the air with the same, familiar sounds of my heart-wrenching admission to Gabe at the park last Monday.  

It wasn’t hilarious. Nothing about that video was funny, but there was no convincing her of that. I’d reprimanded Bailey on several accounts for watching it, and every time she claimed that she couldn’t help it; it was *too good to resist.* Apparently there were so many layers that I just couldn’t see! That was the argument.  

So what? I don’t know if it was the way I rushed the stage, the way I spilled my guts, or the way Gabe rejected me right there in front of the crowd and camera crew, but something about that video compelled her to keep coming back for more—her, and every other man, woman, and child in the tristate area. The clip had blown up, and I couldn’t even escape the humiliation under my own roof.  

“Mandy, *come on!*” Dad begged. “Talk to me.”  

“Do you two mind taking this argument off repeat for a while?” Bailey asked, looking back down to the video. “It’s a real buzz kill. I’m trying to concentrate.”
“If she would just talk to me…”

“I guess not, then.” My sister jumped down from the counter and turned to our father. “Give it up, Dad. She’s never gonna crack.”

“Then you tell me what’s wrong with her so I can apologize for whatever it is that I did. Three days is long enough. It’s time we move past this.” He looked back at me. “Amanda, this is childish and stupid. You’re acting just like your—”

“He better not compare me to Mom right now, or I swear to God I might actually scream,” I said, looking to my sister.

“Yikes.” Bailey patted our father on the back and shrugged. “You’re on your own, big guy.”

She turned out of the kitchen and walked down the hallway, disappearing into her room before shutting the door.

That was typical for Bailey, especially these last few days. She was just doing whatever she could to mind her own business and keep her nose out of mine and Dad’s daily scuffles. It was the best possible solution for everyone involved. We didn’t need her taking sides; that would only add fuel to the fire.

Dad glared at me from the tops of his eyes, waiting for the response I was never going to give him. With a small bite of the apple, I arched my brow and smirked.

“You think you’re funny, don’t you?” he asked, pulling at the roots of his hair.

No. I wouldn’t say funny, but I couldn’t lie; I rather enjoyed the torture. He deserved every last bit.

“Oh, let’s walk through this.” When I didn’t say anything, or even give him an indication that I was willing to walk through anything, he continued, “I told you on Tuesday that we were staying in Sugar Creek, and you were still talking to me on Wednesday morning when you left for school. You said thanks again, Dad and headed out the door. Then
you came home from school that afternoon and I was Public Enemy Number One.”

I nodded. Yep, that’s exactly how it happened.

“So fill in the blanks.” He dropped his hands to his sides, and his shoulders slumped in defeat. “What did I miss?”

It wasn’t so much what he missed. It was the lie he told and thought he could get away with.

*Mandy, there’s no catch to this. I’m not lying to you, and I’m not going to change my mind. You’ve made it clear that your life is here. I can’t make you go back and face those demons, especially if you’re not ready.*

Yeah, Dad turned down the acting job in California. For that much, I was grateful. It meant that my family could stay right where we belonged, right where we were always meant to be. It meant that, for the first time in my recollection, Dad had chosen to be selfless. He’d looked beyond himself and thought about the other people involved in his life-changing decision. It was what I wanted that finally mattered!

Or so I thought. Because there was Gabe’s side of the story, too, and it was a side of the story that negated everything my father led me to believe.

*I was talking to your dad before the ceremony on Monday. He told me that he turned down the job in California. I know you’re not moving.*

So Dad told Gabe that we were staying in Sugar Creek long before I ever showed up at the park on Monday. No biggie, right? It wouldn’t have been. It wouldn’t have been such a problem had Dad not specifically told me that he’d turned down the acting job *because* of what happened during the ceremony. The two stories didn’t line up. Regardless of what Dad wanted me to believe, he’d lied. Plain and simple.

“Can we please be adults about this?” Dad asked. “I need you to talk to me.”
I turned down the hall, stopped by my sister’s door, knocked, and then stuck my head in.

“I’m opening at work today, and then I have the clothing drive at the gym until eight tonight,” I said. “Jones said you guys were coming by to help out, right?”

“We’ll be there. For a little bit, anyway.”

“Great.” I shut the door. Dad was still standing behind me, his arms crossed at his chest, and a large scowl etched across his Hollywood-perfect face.

“Mandy . . .”

Nope. Wasn’t going to happen. I wasn’t going to waste my time trying to explain it to him. Dad was a smart guy. He’d figure it out sooner or later, but in the meantime, I was saving my precious breath.

If Dad wanted my time and attention again, he’d have to earn it.

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END OF PREVIEW