

# BOOMERANG

a novel

S. JENNIFER PAULSON



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# DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my parents,  
Karen and Ron Paulson.



"The greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in  
rising every time we fall."

— Nelson Mandela



# A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This novel includes depictions of sexual violence. Please proceed with caution if this is a trigger.

For anyone needing help, I encourage you to contact a national or local sexual assault crisis line or other resources available to assist survivors. RAINN (the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) offers resources twenty-four hours a day. Call 1-800-656-HOPE or visit [rainn.org](http://rainn.org).





# CHAPTER ONE

Taryn floored it on the Dan Ryan Expressway, the highway's light poles illuminating the neon-orange and white construction horses and cones framing the pothole-stricken pavement before her. Thanks to the late hour, there was barely any traffic to contend with—which was perfect, because Taryn couldn't get home fast enough.

Her thirty-minute trip had given her plenty of time to plot her grand entrance. Taryn could see herself bursting through her front door, her heart still thumping intensely, then running to find Graham to tell him what she'd learned just forty-five minutes ago. That Taryn, his new wife, had just scored the Investigative Reporter of the Year by the Illinois News Association.

But there was no Graham.

A stout, stern-faced police officer was waiting for her on her porch, sitting on the rocking chair closest to the double front door.

Taryn could tell from the man's stern expression, his difficulty bringing his eyes to hers, that her life was about to change.

And not for the better.

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Less than an hour later, Taryn was whisked into room 703 at Woodlawn Memorial Hospital. It was there that time froze. Taryn listened to the beeps beating into the depths of her eardrums, the machine commanding her

husband's chest to slowly rise up and down. They were interspersed with the buzzing of her phone—a slew of colleagues' congratulatory texts were pushing through every twenty minutes or so. Not that Taryn looked at them. She silenced her cell and tucked it into the side of her classic black Coach handbag—Graham's last birthday gift to her.

Taryn could barely recognize the mangled face. Even Graham's knees. Still knobby, protruding and tattooed with scars from a lifetime of exploits, they were torn up, bruised and bloodied. Especially that one deep gouge in his left knee from a lawnmowing accident as a teen that she lovingly called *The Hook*.

She knew the worst was inevitable from several hours sitting at his bedside, watching the clock tick, the monitors track his pulse.

Officer Anderson, who had met Taryn at her front door, had given her the lowdown in matter-of-fact, cold terminology. Something Taryn was familiar with from being on the media side of a story. But Taryn was not the journalist in this one. She was the collateral damage.

According to the police, Graham had been helmetless, riding his Harley-Davidson from Bottoms Up bar, a mere ten-minute drive from their home. At some point, he veered into the mighty oak tree in the middle of a roundabout. The skid marks confirmed he'd tried to avoid a collision. While the other driver, a female vacationer in a rental SUV, had avoided directly hitting Graham, she ended up careening her vehicle into the retention pond about one hundred feet from the roundabout. The female driver had survived—but police told Taryn the woman had been airlifted to the ICU at Midwest Medical Center. Anderson explained the woman was hanging on by a thread in a medically-induced coma.

Graham, weeks away from celebrating his thirteenth sobriety anniversary, had plowed into that tree with a blood-alcohol level nearly twice the legal limit—point-fifteen percent.

“What?” Taryn had pleaded with the officer. “He's been sober for almost thirteen years. Are you certain?”

Officer Anderson had said, yes, he was quite sure. And the bloodwork drawn at the hospital confirmed it. Graham's sobriety run had ended tragically, based on one bad decision. One bad night.

The doctors at least had a bedside manner. They had tried to explain to Taryn that her husband would never recover. He was brain dead. A shell of what he once was.

And she knew the choice she had to make. It just wasn't one she'd been expecting less than a year into marriage.

Taryn sat there for fifteen minutes, though her body and mind told her it was fifteen hours. Her mind replayed her last night out with Graham. Before this.

"I think it's time," Graham had told her, the first hint of nervousness about the subject evident in his eyes.

Taryn had been mid-slurp with her top shelf margarita, her mind preoccupied with the INA awards announcement, which was expected the next day.

Taryn had been thwarting The Baby Talk for months now, pushing it into the hollows of her brain as she'd seen Graham ogle Kendra and Tom's baby. Taryn sometimes felt like she could barely get her own shit together. How was she supposed to make a life for a baby, be responsible for a helpless little human life form? It was something she wanted someday, but not now.

A family would be later. Taryn had her plan, and Graham had agreed—and understood her stance before they married. But that didn't stop him from feeling her out every few months. He'd test her casually at dinner or during a walk around the neighborhood, just to see if Taryn had started to hear the clicks of her biological clock.

But the response was always the same.

"I'm not ready," Taryn would say. "You know that."

A crestfallen Graham would offer a meek smile, nod and embrace her firmly. She loved that she always felt safe in his arms.

“I know,” he said.

But last night, Graham seemed off. There was almost desperation in his voice. *Did Graham really want to be a father now that badly? Why the urgency?*

Taryn thought Graham had been acting out of the norm lately. She had seen his eyes get locked in a gaze at times, as he would silently stand at their back bay window, just looking.

Every time Taryn asked Graham if he was okay, he'd snap to, look her way and say, “Yeah. Just a lot going on at work. My mind's just racing. All is well.”

Taryn wasn't convinced. But whatever it was, Graham would tell her when he was ready. She wasn't worried. There were no secrets between the two. Graham was her best friend. At least, her closest confidante since Sam, almost two decades ago.

Taryn was determined. She would prove she was not only a seasoned journalist, but a damn good one. And someone who didn't just write about the community she called home, but fought for it, too. Her INA award was another one for her trophy shelf, which she'd planned to proudly display in her home office. She scored it for her reporting on a Chicago homeless nonprofit that had been using the bulk of their donations, grants and other funding for the CEO's weekend trips to the Caribbean and late nights with the C-suite at strip clubs. And the occasional eight-ball of cocaine. Her digging led to these revelations, and her series of reports led to the eventual ouster of the CEO, then the shuttering of the entire sham nonprofit.

Her work had made a real difference. And it made Taryn's heart swell each and every time.

Taryn's next step in her plan, which she'd crafted into a Vision Board as a constant visual reminder and inspiration, was to get her Master's degree in journalism. She'd snag her dream job as a syndicated columnist at *The Chicago Gazette*.

Now, none of that mattered. Her husband was dying, right before her eyes. He was already dead, she knew. Removing all the tubes and wires was all that was standing between Graham and the brilliant light that was likely beckoning him to the other side right at this moment.

Taryn had called Graham's parents and her sister, Lynn, barely able to choke out the words. Then, she'd frantically called Graham's sobriety sponsor, an older man who simply went by "Scoot," and begged him to come to them.

"Please," she said. "Help me. Help him. Help *us*."

Graham was her love. The man she'd married on that crisp autumn day last year at St. Francis' Catholic Church in Hampton Park, the golden and maroon leaves crackling under each step of her Jimmy Choo pumps.

Taryn had never felt more connected to another human being in her life as she did Graham that day.

Now, she looked at him, a heap of hurt in an impersonal, unloving bed flanked by cold aluminum rails on each side. His chiseled, handsome face was unrecognizable, the blue, black and yellowed bruises everywhere. His eyes were shut. Taryn could no longer see the piercing crystal blue eyes that had immediately drawn Taryn to him.

And now. Their three-thousand-square-foot home, sexual passion, future dreams. None of that made a heap of difference in this hospital room. She'd never feel him sigh deeply and gently kiss the crook of her neck post-orgasm again. By day's break, she would be a widow. A widow with a \$300,000 mortgage, \$17,437 in credit card bills and an empty life ahead of her.

As she continued to breathe almost in sync with the hospital machinery beeps, she thought about the Harley, the joint Christmas gift they'd bought together in December—the one that Taryn loved to ride with him, her arms wrapped tightly around his taut abs. And Graham's reluctance to wear a helmet.

It made no sense. He'd been sober for over a decade. Why, when there was so much promise, so much to look forward to, would a recovering alcoholic go to a bar and get so shitbombed? And then attempt to ride home? She'd never seen him drink anything except a zero-alcohol beer anytime they'd gone to a bar together.

"What was in your head?" Taryn wept to him during their few moments alone. "Why didn't you call me? Or Scoot?"

Taryn realized she might never know.

Once Scoot texted he was in the lobby, Taryn shot down to the elevators to meet him, bursting into shaking sobs and collapsing into his arms as he approached to hug her. After a quick embrace and bountiful tears shared by the two, Taryn grasped his hand and led him down the corridor to Graham's room.

When Scoot entered the room, his face drained white. Clearing his throat to compose himself, Scoot cautiously approached Graham, leaning his hands and weight on the metal bed rails as he hung his head and wept for a few moments.

When Scoot began to recite The Lord's Prayer, Taryn's insides felt as if they suddenly coagulated. She froze as she listened to Scoot asking to "deliver us from evil." *Had it really come to this?*

Taryn signed the DNR, intent to donate his organs. Graham had signed up to do so last time he'd renewed his license. Taryn wondered if any were even viable as the medical staff surrounded the bed alongside the family, right before the go-ahead was given to disconnect life support.

It wasn't supposed to happen this way. Despite her being five years younger than him, she'd hoped they'd grow old together, her dying first. Like that one comic strip, saying something like, "If you lived to be so many days old, I'd want to live one less day so it wouldn't be without you."

Graham was her soulmate. She was certain of it. Her soulmate who was about to depart her life.

Taryn wept as the beeps morphed into the screeching sound of a flatline. Lynn and the medical staff sniffled as their tears dribbled down their faces. Taryn sobbed uncontrollably, in tandem with his parents and Scoot.

And then Taryn just stood and stared. She never heard the “I’m so sorrys,” “My condolences,” and whatever else the medical staff around her said. She just listened as he gasped for a last time with one final facial twitch before he flatlined. Taryn’s knees buckled as soon as she heard the screeching BEEEEEEEEEEEP. She grabbed Scoot’s arm, her final thoughts battering her brain as she hit the floor, a painful blow to her right knee.

*Now I have a hook knee, too.*

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Taryn had barely been able to dress herself for the funeral, asking Lynn to scour her closet for a black dress and pumps. She buried herself under the mountain of blankets and the comforter on her and Graham’s California King-size bed. The one he’d said was too large for their needs but agreed to anyway, because that’s what Taryn wanted.

“The kids will want to sneak in and sleep with us when they’re scared,” she’d teased him, pinching his left arm.

Once Taryn had slipped on the black sheath dress, she shuffled her way to the master bathroom. She brushed through her long blond hair—the hair Graham loved to run his hands through—and secured it into a low ponytail. The simpler, the better, she thought, sweeping a minimal amount of makeup over her face—just a little bit of eyeliner, waterproof mascara and powder foundation. She slid cherry-flavored Chapstick, her standby, over her lips and slipped the tube into her tiny black handbag. She’d last used the bag at Jimbo and Patti’s wedding before stuffing it into the box labeled “purses,” nestled on the top shelf of her walk-in closet.

As Taryn gave herself one last look, her tired, swollen, bloodshot and puffy eyes and pale, dulled skin, she noticed the hollowness of her neck. She slipped her hand over her jewelry tree and clasped the silver half-moon necklace Graham had given her last Christmas. She loved how it sparkled with its tiny diamond trim—and the card he'd written alongside it, declaring, "T—I love you to the moon and back. G."

Taryn picked it up and drew it over her neck, connecting the clasp at the back of her neck. Lynn sat on the bed, watching her.

"You look nice," Lynn offered as Taryn looked at the zombie staring back at her in the mirror. She nodded, grabbed her purse, and the two headed down the spiral staircase before Taryn paused at the front door, resting her hand on the knob to open it. It felt like a thousand pounds as she pulled it toward her, slipping out the door to head to her husband's funeral.

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Less than six months ago, Taryn and Graham had stood at the front of St. Francis' Catholic Church in Hampton Park, exchanging vows for life. Now, instead of being up at the pulpit in a white, flowing dress and gazing into Graham's striking blue eyes, she slumped in the front pew.

Taryn's gaze was fixated on a 24-by-36 professional wedding portrait of Graham. He had been so strikingly handsome, the photo looked like something out of a bridal magazine. To the right of it, on a small table with a crisp white tablecloth, sat the urn with Graham's remains—something he'd been clear about in his will. A slideshow of Graham's life played across the giant TV screens—snippets of his childhood, teenage years, family vacations, and his time with Taryn.

But all Taryn could focus on was that urn. And the portrait. As the pastor spoke, her eyes and brain darted back and forth between the two.



Nothing the pastor said got through to Taryn. Her body, her brain. Everything was numb.

The sniffles and weeping of Graham's mother, Greta, and others barely registered. It was nothing more than muffled background noise in her mind.

At the funeral luncheon, Taryn brought the urn, setting it in front of the seat next to her. She ignored the occasional odd stares, touching the coolness of the container every few minutes.

"Oh, Tare Bear," a deep voice said from behind Taryn as a hand rested on her left shoulder. She instinctively turned but knew from the deep voice and nickname she always secretly despised that it was Jim Paxton.

Jim, or Jimbo as he went by, had been Graham's frat buddy at Midsouthern Florida University. She'd heard all the crude "boys will be boys" stories of Graham's buddies and their sexual conquests. Like how Jimbo, junior year, had hooked up with a slightly high, redheaded freshman they'd only referred to as "Big Red"—she was a tall woman, about five feet ten with the bulk to back it up, explained Graham, who had an affinity for blondes. The big laugh was that Jimbo had told her he needed to check if the carpeting matched the drapes (groan) and she'd told him sure, check it out—"but only with your mouth." He did, getting nothing in return, except for a tawdry tale that would seem to come up at least every six months when his wife wasn't within earshot, ending with the clincher—Jimbo was never able to confirm the matching body hair hues because Big Red was hairless. At least, in the nether regions.

Every time Jimbo leaned in to greet Taryn with a kiss, she couldn't erase the visual of him going to town on Big Red.

Today was no exception. Even as she sat with her husband's cremains. Taryn stood up and turned to face Jimbo.

"I'm so sorry, honey," Jimbo whispered as he wrapped his arms around Taryn. She felt his firm, heartfelt hug as she stood there, but she felt

cold—unable to reciprocate any kind of emotion but deadness. Cold and total deadness.

Jimbo was a screwup of sorts, but he'd recently seemed to finally get his shit together. He was newly married with an even newer baby. She couldn't help the hot jealousy that surged through her veins as she saw Jimbo and Patti, his wife, living the life she'd eventually foreseen for her and Graham. Which now would never exist.

"I'm so sorry," Jimbo said, tears spilling down his olive-skinned face as Patti, a blazing redhead herself, wrestled with their gurgling baby girl, Joy, as she stirred and bucked in her arms.

"Also," Jimbo said as he dug his right hand into the left breast pocket of his suit, pulling out Graham's iPhone, "I thought you might want this. I have the rest of his stuff from the scene at home. But I figured this was the most important."

Taryn took the phone, in its Chicago Bears case, twisting her wrist to look it over on both sides. As if it would undo the past ninety-six hours. It was surprisingly intact, considering the trauma it had silently witnessed. Taryn hadn't had the energy or the will to collect Graham's belongings the cops had scooped up at the scene, so she'd asked Jimbo to handle it. She completely forgot about his phone until Jimbo slipped it into her right palm.

"Sorry, it's dead," Jimbo said.

"Like Graham," Taryn said dully, her eyes remaining fixated on her husband's phone. She felt Jimbo and Patti wince, even though her eyes never left the phone.

"Let me know what we can do," Jimbo choked out. He was hurting, too, Taryn reminded herself.

She nodded as Jimbo and Patti moved on, leaving Taryn to do her stunned widow routine with the next funeral guest. She felt like she was floating above the funeral home, looking down at a surreal scene that surely would end soon.

But it didn't. Because here she was again. It was her mom all over again.  
And Sam.

Taryn needed her childhood best friend right now. Sam would have helped her through this hurt.

But that would never be possible. No matter how hard she prayed.



# CHAPTER TWO

Taryn's curiosity broke her that night. It was three in the morning, and it wasn't like she could sleep anyway. She liked holding Graham's phone. She felt like he was still here. That he'd walk into the room and she'd hand the device over to him. Maybe even toss it at him, even though he always scolded her for slinging her own phone onto a couch cushion now and then. The thought made her smile. For the first time in days.

Why Taryn felt the need to charge the phone, she didn't know. Maybe seeing email or text alerts come in would make it feel like he was still alive, if only for a displaced moment or two.

As soon as she connected it to the charger, the screen blew up. Everything from "I love you" messages from his mom and sister to notifications he'd been tagged what seemed like three hundred times on Facebook. She even saw an alert for her last message to him—"I have some great news. SO good. Can't wait to get home to tell you! xoxo"—sent less than an hour before she found Officer Anderson at her front door.

But Taryn didn't know Graham's iPhone passcode. So, the best she could get was a general roundup of notifications. When she tapped a notification to learn more, it was a brick wall.

It felt like too much. She left it plugged in, shut it off and meandered down to the kitchen to pour herself a hearty glass of Pinot Grigio.

Another day. Another time.

That time was ten days later, when her official Illinois News Association award arrived in the mail. Her legs felt like one-hundred-pound logs as she slowly lumbered into the house with the urn's cardboard box. She climbed the spiral staircase to their bedroom, her heart aching with the heaviness of grief. To Taryn, that award would always be tied to the day she became a widow.

Her belly gurgling, Taryn sat on her white down comforter, setting Graham's urn to her left. It rested at a forty-five-degree angle on the pillow. Sick, she knew. But she liked that he was there, no matter the form.

Taryn needed to still feel him. And his contained ashes, settled on his side of the bed, weren't enough. Taryn walked over to Graham's nightstand, where she'd left his phone. She plugged it in to charge and powered it on.

The notifications flooded in again. *Bing bing bing. Whoosh whoosh whoosh.* They never seemed to stop. She scrolled through a few—more of the same, with tributes, social media tags and a tidal wave of too much to wade through—when a calendar notification popped up.

“Lobster tats,” the Google alert popped up as a two-day warning. “Three o'clock, Lion Face Ink.”

*That's right!* Taryn started thinking about how just two months before, when they'd gone to that all-inclusive swanky resort in Cancun, they had decided they would get matching tattoos. They'd had surf and turf for dinner one night, and as Graham sipped from his Heineken Zero and Taryn downed one too many agave nectar margaritas, Taryn declared they would be get matching lobster tattoos.

“You're my fucking lobster!” she'd screeched, unaware her volume level was disproportionate to the conversations taking place in the seaside restaurant. “We're getting lobster tattoos, and they're gonna hold hands!

“I mean claws.” She'd giggled as Graham slightly shook his head before nodding at the other guests who'd been drawn away from their snapper, steak and coconut basmati rice dishes.

They'd spent the next day intermittently scrolling the internet for the perfect design. Blue lobsters, in fact, since they signified something even more rare—the likelihood of catching one was one in two hundred million. Like their love, she pointed out.

The urge overwhelmed her. She needed to see it. That perfect design they'd picked out together. Because she was still going to do it. Maybe even with his ashes. She'd heard of that. People who have their loved one's cremains filtered into the ink. That would be perfect. That way, they'd both still get the tattoos they'd decided on. Just not exactly in the way they'd planned.

Suddenly, Taryn felt alive again. The thought of stitching Graham into her skin for eternity elated her. It was the best she'd felt since he died.

Now, she just had to find that design. Graham had saved it to his phone. He'd said he'd put it in a desktop folder and would share it with her, but he'd forgotten.

Taryn knew him though, inside and out. She could crack his iPhone code and find the design he'd squirreled away. She knew it. In every ounce of her being.

His passcode would be easy to unearth. Taryn began plunking in various number combos—their anniversary, his birthday, her birthday. The anniversary of their first date. The day they'd gotten engaged. Even the day he'd quit drinking, though she really had to dig deeply into her memories for that one.

None of them worked.

Increasingly aggravated, Taryn stood up and sauntered into the kitchen. She needed vodka on the rocks to calm her nerves. She poured herself a hearty glass over ice and swirled it before taking a sip. She looked up at the framed photos set on the entertainment center, just above the TV. Their wedding photo. Graham's family reunion in the southwest suburbs of Chicago a few years ago. And the photo of Graham and his mom, her

right arm hooked under his neck, cheek to cheek. She scrambled back into the bedroom and furiously tapped the numbers into his iPhone passcode.

In.

His mother's birthday.

Of course.

"Maybe his tattoo should've been 'Mama,' " she grumbled.

But Taryn's annoyance was brief. She was in now. She'd find that design, text it to herself and have it permanently sketched into her skin in 48 hours.

She found it all right. And she found an untapped resource.

A Graham brain bank.

In a folder marked "personal" was a treasure trove. Subfolders of everything she needed to re-live him, whenever she wanted. Files upon files. Online account info, his will, his mother's, family photos. But no tattoo design.

But there was the code to get into his laptop in his Notes app, which Taryn had completely forgotten about. It had been sitting in the trunk of Graham's car. Taryn hadn't had the courage to drive it, even touch it, since his death. Taryn ran to the garage, retrieved it, and came back to the bedroom. She settled in on the bed, plugged it in and fired it up.

*It's probably on his desktop.* She tapped in the passcode for access.

Taryn felt slightly guilty going through his laptop and email. But, she reasoned, she also needed access, as Graham had managed the household finances, all from his computer. Taryn found the master file with passwords, accounts and due dates, then emailed them to herself. That lobster tattoo design was nowhere to be found.

But then something in Taryn's gut stirred when she noticed Graham's desktop had another cloud-based drive. Not just the Google one. She opened it. And started digging through hundreds of files.

None looked familiar to Taryn. She'd known about the Google Drive, as Graham would send her links to items she needed to review or sign. But



in this cloud file, there were things she'd never seen. She entered "tattoo" into the search bar.

Bingo! Sure enough, there was the blue lobster. Taryn might not have her love, but she'd have the markings of him. A tear dribbled down her right cheek. Pure elation. She'd found it. She opened his email to send it to herself.

Seeing an email notification push through her phone from Graham both warmed and decimated her heart.

Yet Taryn was pumped, feeling a real connection to Graham again. She backtracked in his cloud drive to the main folder and stumbled as she spied a subfolder that caught her attention. One she'd missed before.

"Forgiveness."

Her heart skyrocketed into her throat.

There were two documents in the folder. One document was marked "Taryn." The other, "Evelyn."

Both had been written in mid-January, about two months before Graham died. And both instantly commanded goosebumps to spread across the flesh of Taryn's arms and legs. She felt as though she'd been socked in the chest. A tightness seized her heart.

*Who the hell is Evelyn?* she muttered as her heart thumped like bass drums in her chest.

Taryn opened the file bearing her own name first. Catatonic, she didn't know whether to believe what spilled out in front of her. She didn't want to. But she believed enough to scream "Motherfucker!" before her right palm slapped the urn that sat atop her bed, sending it ricocheting across the room before it settled in a metallic twang on the floor.

This couldn't be real. The words typed into the document surely were made up. A farce. A sick fucking joke in the cruelest of times.

But Taryn knew. They were his sayings, his words. His prose, his rhythm of writing. And his desires, which sickened her to her core. The document did, indeed, list him as the "author." There was no mistaking it.

This letter was legit.

She ran to the toilet and vomited the bile that gurgled in her belly. It was all over. Her love, her dreams, her hopes.

Her memories of a man who was supposed to be everything she wanted.

Dead. Done. With about eleven-hundred words.

The man Taryn fell in love with never really existed.

But the one she married? He was gone. His life was over.

And now, she thought, so was hers.