

CHILD EYES

BY

T. RENEE ALBRACHT

“As he traveled along the roads of Judea, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him,

‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’

“‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned,’ said Jesus, ‘but this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life.’”

John 9:1-3

Prologue

Andrea

I have a theory. Actually, it is more of a hypothesis because it can never be proven. I believe Jesus shared the ultimate path to righteousness when He taught that the greatest commandments are to have no other gods before the One true God and to love one's neighbor as oneself. If we accept these as truths, we accept love as the purpose of life. Consequently, greed and vanity have no saving or healing power.

My hypothesis, based on this truth, is as follows:

Everyone who has ever lived or is yet to live is responsible for the world's despair. The Bible tells us to take care of one another and to love one another as God loves us. Jesus also teaches to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Our first fruits belong to God. The very best of what we have and who we are belong solely to our Creator. We demonstrate our faith and love through selfless giving. Failure to act as commanded gives birth to all the suffering the world forces us to endure. The responsibility for our diseases rests not with God, but within our own selfish desires. We can blame no one but ourselves.

Those who have a wealth of possessions or time and give none of it back to the world are responsible for human torment such as hunger and homelessness. Even those who have little and give nothing are responsible for this extreme anguish. Those who give but do not give all they can are responsible for their share of evils. We cannot withhold our first fruits and expect God's blessings nonetheless.

She walked into my office protecting an infant in one arm and pressing a folding double picture frame to her heart with the other. The child, clothed with nothing but a thin t-shirt and diaper, rested in her mother's embrace. The mother's dress fared little better than her child's. Her brown speckled eyes spoke of lives lived beyond her youth. Although overcome by obvious fear, she looked me straight in the eye. Standing ten feet away, I could smell the rotten stench of sweat and sorrow oozing from her every pore. Still, an unmatched beauty with olive-colored skin and thick dark hair hid beneath the grime of travel and the weariness of struggle.

Her two treasures she refused to let go. She stood on guard at the threshold of my door. As I inched my way closer, she held her head up high and never backed away. I caressed the child's greasy head and kissed her fevered cheek. The mother still stood unmoved. I smiled and reached for her picture, asking for a peek. She spoke no word and moved no muscle.

I returned to my desk. I sat and she stood frozen in time. Whether out of a sense of trust or careless unconcern, she set the child down at her feet. Without removing the photograph from the clutches of her breast, she unfolded the frame, releasing the stares of the pictured children. Still standing in the doorway, this ordinary drifter spoke with a robust and educated voice. As she described the pictures and what they symbolized to her, I realized that this young creature, although in many ways still a child, was imprisoned by the depth of her perception. I craved to delve into the details of her story.

We moved to a worn, second-hand couch, separated by the breadth of my curiosity. I watched her lips quiver as her eyes told of a life scarred by the sins of man. I stared at the woman sitting beside me as I would stare at my own reflection in the mirror. She could have been me in my youth. She embodied my physique and my manner. From my hometown. Similar family van. Visiting kin in distant places on holidays and vacations. Summer family trips. One sibling. Same

beginning. One drastic difference tore the fabric of our existence, routing our courses along different roads.

I, no better. She, no worse. The same, but with very different circumstances. One misstep took her down a road less traveled, filled with brimstone fire and gnashing of teeth.

I sat across from myself, a reflection of how God alone retains control of our destinies, deciding our paths and our fortunes, judging the strength of our souls. “I will not put before you more than you can handle,” God promises. I am no better. If anything, I am the weaker. Her story proved her superior strength. Yet He loved one no less than He loved the other.

I sat across from myself, my reflection, proving to me how God formed my own experiences to mold me into the woman I have become. Though this stranger standing in my office and I grew up to be polar opposites, I, too, can be God’s vessel to transform lives—perhaps two or three. Perhaps more. But at least one—my own.

I sat across from myself. My reflection. I understood, then, the sin of judging others before I knew them, before I ever understood their stories. I understood my own sins, why I must give to the Lord not just my money as tithes but also my time, myself. I understood that her sins are my own. I understood the interwoven nature of mankind, our unique bond under the veil of Christ. I understood the Great Commandment and I thanked God for that understanding.

I, no better. She, no worse. We did not, could not, choose our own destinies. At least, not in the big scheme of things. God is in control. He is always in control. And He does not punish. He loves and teaches.

Sitting still, I listened to her story, enraptured by the grace of God as her words poured forth from her lips into my quaking heart. I saw Christ in her eyes and knew He was present. Her eyes were the eyes of a child, yet with an unmistakable wisdom surpassing the ages.

God blessed me with a road paved with ready-mixed love to fill the potholes of daily life.
God graced her with a road of obstacles, leaving her bumped and bruised, alone in a void of
chaotic turmoil. The Lord's love alone guided her on her journey, with a voice often too soft to
hear or feel as she tripped and tumbled down the unforgiving, rumbling hills.

This is how we came to be. This is our story, hers and mine.

Chapter One

Jessica

I carry a picture of my mother and father as they looked when they were mere infants, two years of age and nine hundred miles apart. My mom, her naked skin clothed only in a loose fitting cloth diaper, caresses the arm of a plump, oversized chair embroidered with feathery textured flower patterns. The chair engulfs this premature creation. She looks straight at me. A melancholy expression of bewilderment encompasses the wide dark eyes, tiny nose, oval mouth, dark thick hair, and soft, fleshy cheeks. Those are my cheeks, you know, and my eyes and hair, too.

My dad, dressed in a white shirt, petite cloth overalls, shoes tied with flawless precision, and a miniscule identification bracelet, grasps the arm of a white wicker chair that accentuates his tiny frame. His excited and happy gaze finds amusement off to the side. His soft, light-colored hair is disheveled a bit on top, and his long face accentuates his wide, toothless smile. My mom looks uncomfortable in her soft chair, and my dad looks quite at ease in his rigid chair.

The pictures are immortalized behind the glass of two small adjoining frames held together by hinges, allowing them to fold together like a book. A crack extending from left top to right bottom weakens the glass protecting my dad's picture. A fold in my mom's picture stretches across her belly. These flaws, which have been there since the pictures first decorated my nursery my very first day home from the hospital, have bruised, but have by no means diminished, their perfection. So much is expressed in these two pictures. Even now, when I look into their child eyes, I do not see two infants from different means and circumstances. I see my parents. Those eyes are the same eyes that scolded me when I misbehaved, watered for me when

I made them proud, cried for me when they could not take away my pain, and most of all, loved me no matter what because I was their treasured daughter. I look into their child eyes and wonder if they knew me before they even knew words. I look into their child eyes, and I have to believe that not only did they know me, but they also knew what would become of me.

My earliest memory takes me back to the age of two. The way I remember it, we were on our way to Virginia to spend Christmas with my grandparents. My memory forces my eyes to squint as they swell with tears caused by the horrendous force of brutal northern winter winds. The hour grew darker, and the blizzard beating the windshield of our old, 1970s, tan-colored van clouded my dad's vision. My brother slept on a makeshift bed in the back, and fear of the weather guided me to the safety of my mother's lap. It seems this very last detail is the one solitary fact in my delusional memory.

They say I survived because I sat, unbuckled, on my mother's lap. They say, "God must have some special plan for you!" After all, I was the only one, besides the careless murderer, who survived.

Whether my dad focused his attention on the blizzard-stricken road ahead of him so as not to endanger the lives of his family or others who might have been traveling this night, or whether he simply neglected to check the rearview mirror at this precise moment matters little. The outcome remains the same. I must add that during this particular trip, I remember listening to Alabama's song, "Roll On 18-Wheeler". At least, every time I hear that song now, I am transported back to that moment.

A man, driving for about twenty-four hours straight, hoped to beat a deadline rather than stop for rest. He fell asleep at the wheel. Going seventy-five miles an hour, he plowed his big rig

right into our van, cascading it like a stack of freshly fallen snow pushed out of the street and onto the sidewalk. Our van surged forward and continued to do so as the rig forced it to turn sideways. Do you know what happens to a vehicle when it is pushed forward while the wheels are faced to the side? It tumbles around and around and around again until something stops it or it loses momentum on its own. A bridge stopped our momentum. Our van came to rest upside down against the wall of an overpass.

The initial impact somehow flung me out onto the side of the road, out of harm's way. Although I must have soared like an airborne rag doll, the doctors found nothing physically wrong with me besides minor cuts and bruises. The tumbling of the van made sport of my older brother, taking him from his makeshift bed and slamming his frail body against a wall, the roof, another wall, the floor, the wall again, and the roof again. Suitcases, an ice chest, folding lawn chairs, a card table, and various other things tumbled with him and came to rest scattered on and around him. He did not die right away, though. He was only five at the time. The rescue crew reported hearing "the soft, muffled cries of a young child." Before they could get to him, his young soul flew back home to the safety of the arms of God.

Can you not hear him crying even now? I can. My memory reminds me that I heard him even then: a child, punished for dreaming innocent dreams. Never did he doubt his own safety. What must have been going through his mind those last minutes as he lay in anguish and torment? Could he comprehend what was happening to him? Could he fathom why? Before he breathed his last breath, could he forgive his murderer?

They say my parents died almost the instant the truck hit us. The seatbelts they wore only covered their laps. The lap belt could not prevent their upper bodies from lobbing forward and from side to side. My father died right away from injuries caused when his head crashed against

the steering column. My mother died from neck injuries caused by the strain of her head whipping to and fro. They say they would have died anyway by the force of the impact the van took as it turned upside down and slammed against the overpass wall. The injuries they incurred prevented them from suffering as my brother did. For this I should be grateful, they say.

They say we were all lucky the roads were virtually empty that day. Humph...

Chapter Two

Andrea

Anyone who has ever seen those old “Feed the Children” infomercials knows the heartbreaking conditions some children around the world deal with every single day of their lives. A boy no older than ten rides a scooter with no tires around the rims. His feet endure the pressure of walking without the protection of shoes. Dirt deodorizes his body and decay destroys his baby teeth. Clean water is obsolete, and a well-balanced, nutritious meal is only a fantasy. Forget about an education for this poor boy because today’s system will not accept him without shoes on his feet and a shirt on his back. Even if he could go to school, his rumbling stomach makes concentration on schoolwork impossible. Every single one of us is responsible for this boy.

The same could be said for this young girl sitting in front of me. Jessica’s earliest memory transports her to a deserted road, watching as the unyielding hand of God takes from her the simple chance of calm. He reaches out His hand, raising storms from gentle water, swirling His finger round and round until the tidal wave of inopportunity drowns her in a sea of crashing breakers. We began the same: similar family, similar birthright, almost identical in form. One event, one accident, changed the course of her existence forever. One incident saved me from a comparable existence.

Although separated by physical age, I imagine the two of us standing next to God in heaven, looking down on two women in labor. He turns to me, points to a beautiful woman and says, “This will be your mother if you so choose.”

“Yes, Lord,” I answer. “Send me! Send me!”

“But wait!” With a brush of His hand, He clears away the clouds, revealing a review of the life awaiting me. “First you must pass the test.” As I watch the events that unfold for my future self, I sneak behind God and hide within His cloak. My sobs turn to wails. I shake with uncontrollable fear.

Then, from His other side, she lets go of God’s hand, steps forward and, with a brave, quiet voice, she says, “Send me. I will go.”

I know then that her spirit is stronger than mine. Therefore, God chooses for me the smoother road with fewer bumps and pitfalls along the way. God picks me up to comfort me, turns to my companion and says, “You shall go, my child, when your time comes, and remember, I shall always be with you.”

He turns to me, points to another beautiful woman, sets me back at His feet and says, “Go, my child. She will love you and protect you. Remember Me and how I first loved you.”

From an outsider’s perspective, I lived the ideal childhood. Three acres of wooded area surrounded our home. My sister and I had our own rooms with our own television sets and stereos. Abundant food filled our kitchen cabinets. We had a swimming pool in the front yard. I had a go-cart and a tall fort hiding high in the backyard trees that my dad and I built together. My sister and I got along pretty well. My parents’ love for us was unconditional. A kid growing up with such treasures has no right to feel unloved, unwanted, and depressed. On the surface, this appears true. Beneath the surface, it does not matter whether the kid grows up like the boy from the infomercial, the young woman now sitting in my office, or like I did. Nothing on the outside matters if the kid is not right on the inside.

The earliest memories I have are of my mistaken identity. My family visited a theme park on one of our summer vacations. The man at the ticket gate commented on what an adorable little man my parents had. He was referring to me. I swelled with pride until my parents informed the man that I was a girl. My face flushed with embarrassment.

My sister celebrated her birthday at a themed restaurant called *The Magic Time Machine* in San Antonio, Texas, where I grew up. The wait staff dressed in costumes imitating the likes of superheroes, cowboys, and ballerinas. My family sat in a booth. I sat in a rolling chair on the outer end of the table. Superman crouched beside me and told me about a cute little girl celebrating her birthday a couple of tables down. He wheeled me to that table and introduced me to her and her mother and grandmother as a nice little boy who wanted to wish her a happy birthday. My family laughed hysterically. Embarrassment again flushed my cheeks. My parents saved me from further ridicule and kept the secret this time.

One summer while visiting my grandparents' farm in Humphrey, Nebraska, I swore to my cousins that God made a mistake. I was supposed to be a boy. As I grew older, I still believed this. Although I developed my first crush on a boy while still in pre-kindergarten, I still very much lived as a tomboy. I loved sports and playing rough, and I hated makeup and dresses. I thought like a boy, talked like a boy, and walked like a boy. Everything feminine repulsed me. I viewed girls as over-dramatized wimps. I loved getting dirty, and I loved chasing and kissing boys.

Before my first day of school, this behavior gained easy acceptance. My parents encouraged me to be me. After school began, I learned that many children refuse to accept anyone different. The factory-assembly-line-mentality begins very early. We must dress alike,

talk alike, think alike, and be alike. Boys play with toy cars, guns, and dirt. Girls stay clean, stay indoors, and play house and dress-up. Anyone different will be mocked and punished.

The girls ignored me and refused my company. The boys called me names like *psycho* and *weirdo*. My sister, Emily, born three years earlier, assisted me in becoming a proper little girl. The children at school began to play with me. All those who had previously teased me and ignored me now invited me into the circle of popularity. The hurt persevered, though. When I behaved as my true self, I had few friends. When I transformed into my sister, I had many friends. In spite of that, I did not like being my sister. It took too much effort, getting up early for school, fixing my hair, and worrying about what to wear. Throughout the day I had to overburden myself with worries about my appearance and behavior. Because misery embraced either path, I decided being me required less effort.

By the time I entered the fifth grade, I had three friends and no self-confidence. Though I yearned for love and acceptance outside of the home, my bond with Jesus remained my only source of real friendship. While other children invented imaginary friends to keep them company, I had Jesus. His physical presence was next to me whenever I needed Him.

I remember locking myself in my room one evening, feeling suffocated and imprisoned. I am not sure why. I suppose I was lonely and insecure about my perceived abnormalities. Neither the television nor the radio offered relief. My breathing intensified and beads of sweat gathered on my body. I felt the room spinning as it began to close in on me.

Early in childhood, I found expression for my emotions through keeping a journal, writing letters to God, and creating poetry. On this particular night, I wrote a poem that encapsulated what I felt in my room and what I felt in my heart. The poem offered no solace for my torment on this night. My aggression escalated.

“Untrue Vision”

Looking out my window

Looking out to see

Nothing but reflections of this room behind me.

As my inner agony intensified, my best friend, Jesus, appeared to me. I sat on the edge of my bed with my hands hiding my tear-stained face. I felt Him sitting next to me. His presence calmed me. My head rose from my hands and turned to face Him. He wrapped His arms around me, cradled my head on His shoulder, and, without a word spoken, He told me He loved me. The love and comfort of this one friend made everything else bearable. Nothing else mattered as long as He was with me. To this day, no one can convince me that this experience never happened. My memory will never see anything less than the loving presence of God.

The agony of growing older in a cruel world beat my self-esteem to the point of near death. A fragile sense of personal worth cannot withstand the powers of the brute force of the factory, also known as junior high school, where anyone who does not fit in is mercilessly ridiculed and discarded. My friend, my saving grace, withered into a fantasy of a sweet memory of long ago.

In the fall of 1987, I began life inside this hellish factory. The school band became a passion for me and brought with it a new bunch of friends. Nicknamed the *band queers* and *band geeks* by the factory, I found a bond with this breed of outsiders. My new friends, though, offered little solace for my fractured self-pride. The loss of the friend I needed most still burdened me. I lacked the essentials for survival in a cutthroat world. I lacked the confidence and inner strength. Despite high grades and constant praise by teachers for creative writing works, I

never believed in my own intellect and talent. I could not see in me the value my family and educators saw; thus, I did not know how to be me. By this point, I had retreated far away from the happy and carefree little tomboy who loved and felt love. Recovering her required more from me than I knew how to give. Instead of attempting to rebuild whoever I might be, I constructed a brand new and flawless model.

During this same time, the musical genius of Bon Jovi's *Slippery When Wet* dominated the airwaves, and the adorable smile of one Mister Jon Bon Jovi stole my heart. Every penny from my allowance purchased cassette tapes, VHS videos, and any magazine with any mention of the band. Pictures of the band wallpapered my room, leaving not one visible trace of the former white painted wall. One large photo album protected clippings procured from newspapers and magazines. I knew every word to every song, every scene from every video, and every piece of information printed about the band and about Jon Bon Jovi in particular. Although I missed the *Slippery When Wet* tour, I never missed another Bon Jovi tour. In fact, the *New Jersey* tour, which graced San Antonio on January 27, 1989, marked my first rock concert and the first and only time my family ever heard me scream.

My obsession with Jon Bon Jovi delved much deeper than many children's infatuations with celebrities. This talented man became my first crush. Most of all, his success and adoration from millions were the drug my young heart craved for myself. My daydreaming began.

Before the daydreaming, my fear of rejection and feelings of inadequacy spawned a severe case of timidity. I could not look anyone in the eye, and the thought of being left alone with anyone other than a member of my family horrified me. After the daydreaming began, my sense of self-confidence, though not real, crushed the shyness. I remained quiet, however, not from fear, but because I lived in the inner world of my imagination. I used to lock myself in my

room, gather my stuffed animals—my audience—around my bed, and I pretended to be an actor, singer, or comedian. No one could touch me. My songs were the best ever written or ever sung. My skits touched the viewers' souls. My jokes brought the audience to tearful fits of laughter. People adored me both on and off stage. An entourage of people followed me everywhere.

Everything I pretended to be on my bed-stage as a child I found in the human form of Jon Bon Jovi. From what I gathered through my readings and observations, he was what I dreamed of being. He knew what he wanted and he got it. He made it look so easy. Although handsome beyond compare, he made people pay attention to the music. He was talented, smart, and determined. He had love. No void seemed to exist in his life. I wanted that perfect life for myself.

I had been rejected for being me. No one rejected Jon, or, if they did, he never seemed bothered by it. He lived a carefree existence. My rejection hurt so much. Being me caused too much pain. I wanted the confidence of Jon Bon Jovi. I wanted his life. By the age of twelve, the bedroom-fantasy-performer had a name and a face. I had become Jon Bon Jovi.

When I spent my days pretending to be and to have all that I imagined Jon Bon Jovi to have, I felt fantastic. People loved me, even if they only lived in my imagination. When Jon got married, I felt exhilarated. I celebrated a deeper devotion of love in my daydreams that I yearned to have in reality. I longed for the blissful and beautiful life I imagined they lived together. I craved a love that runs so deep and powerful that nothing could tear them apart: an unconditional love. I envisioned this kind of love, but I knew such a love only existed in my daydreams.

Unlike most other entertainers, Jon Bon Jovi sang of hope and perseverance. He strove hard to protect and to keep separate his personal life from his public life. He always played down his obvious good looks, focusing the critic's and consumer's attention back to the music. And the music?

He taught me to “Stick to [my] Guns” and to hold onto “(Living on a) Prayer”. In later periods, he pleaded with me to “Keep the Faith” and urged me to go after my dreams because “It’s My Life”. I have to act now. I must embrace my strength and take life by the horns now because life won’t last forever. I must “live while I’m alive”. He promised me that, although I feel like a Monday right now, “Someday I’ll be Saturday Night”.

At a time when the angry lyrics of grunge and silly boy band love songs ruled the airwaves, Bon Jovi’s encouraging anthems, reflecting the inherent good of the human spirit, saved me. I knew nothing of Jon Bon Jovi, the man. I merely borrowed his persona and created a fantasy life for myself, a life worth living.

In the end, God used his music to lead me to where I am today, to mold me into the person I have become. No more pretending. No more shame. As a child, however, the more time I spent in my daydreams, the further the real Andrea Rea Stillman drifted away. Daydreams soon embraced my every waking moment.

Chapter Three

Jessica

Virginia. Richmond, Virginia. My aunt Maggie lived in Virginia with her husband and children. My grandparents also lived in Virginia.

My parents, still rather young, never got around to creating a will. No plans were made for the welfare of their children in the event of their passing. No thought-out plans, at least nothing formalized through a lawyer, were known by anyone.

The legal system, though, adheres to the notion that other bloodline family members offer the best resolution to situations such as mine. My grandparents had no other children after my mother. No aunts or uncles there. My grandfather perished due to the consequences of decades of alcohol and tobacco abuse, and my grandmother suffered a slight stroke, reducing the reaction time of her reflexes. My father's father died before my birth, but his mother still enjoyed good health. He also had a sister, married with two children. Of course, the courts ruled that, pending acceptance by my aunt and her husband, they would take custody of me.

I enjoyed the idea of being part of a normal family with a mother, father, and siblings. Although I once belonged to such a home, my memory failed to enjoy the emotional attachment of that bond. In my child heart, my imagination allowed me to believe that this group intended from the outset to make me their own. Such dreams have been known to come true.

Maggie and Alan, my aunt and uncle, encouraged my delusion by insisting that I consider their home my home and live as a genuine member of the family. Within days of my arrival, I called Maggie *Mom*, Alan *Dad*, and little Max, *brother*. Because Taylor endured visits for no

reason other than to keep up ties with Max, our relationship remained stymied. Never would I call her sister.

Max had just turned six months old when I moved in. We became as close as any two traveling souls united in the timeless bond of history. Although we often fought like siblings, our relationship mirrored one of deep, protective friendship. I loved that little boy, and, if I harbor any regrets, it is that I ever left him alone.

They thought it best that my schoolmates not know that my life prior to enlisting in the Faulkin clan included an unfortunate stint in “homelessness” in hopes it would help me fit in unchallenged. Because Max still wore diapers and Taylor had long since graduated from high school, the story was that we had just moved into the area. Being the new kid with a family offered fewer stigmas than being the new kid with someone else’s family. I loved school and molded into a well-rounded and well-liked student. Math and science were my favorite subjects, and I excelled in soccer. Teachers praised my self-motivated quest for knowledge, and my coaches encouraged and challenged my desire to be as good as or better than the boys. I remained one of two girls on an otherwise all-male team and a league dominated by male coaches and players.

During my fourth season of soccer, while in the fifth grade, our star halfback committed one too many personal fouls. My coach reassigned me from my fullback position into the vacant halfback position, hoping to use my skill and need to prove myself to maintain our winning status. Time on the clock dwindled, and I still had not fulfilled my personal challenge to become the hero of the hour.

I announced my open position as our primary ball handler failed to break free from defensive control. He kicked the ball away from his targeted goal. I watched with wide eyes as it

tumbled and rolled in my direction. Before the ball made contact with my foot, I heard the chant of the crowd and of the coach beckoning me to race the defense and score the decisive goal. Above all voices, I heard the proud and anxious call of Alan screaming for me to “Go for it, Jess. Go for it! You can do it!” That voice I longed to please. That voice gave me courage.

I, unchallenged, carried the ball up to the goal line and fired my first and finest shot straight for the target. At the same time, the goalie reached to grab the ball in hopes of retaking control before I scored. The ball landed inside the goal line and the goalie landed beside it, grasping his arm in childish despair. I had kicked his hand while kicking the ball. Although I never intended to hurt him, the referee declared this action un-sportsmanlike conduct, took away my score, and took me out of what was left of the game. I walked to the sideline with head bent low in shame and regret.

After the game, however, Alan ran straight to me, picked me up in his arms, and twirled me around as he exclaimed how proud this moment made him. In response to my look of astonishment, he explained that he disagreed with the call and knew I never intended to kick that little boy who, he insisted, cried too much to be goalie, anyway. He told me I should be proud because I scored, no matter what the referee said, and I showed those boys, all of them, that I was just as good as they were. He hugged me again, and I hugged him in return. What a proud moment for a father’s daughter.

Unlike most two-career families, Maggie and Alan chose to make the home Maggie’s full-time occupation. Max and I enjoyed the fruits of her tireless labor. After school and after I finished my homework and chores, Maggie’s spontaneous metamorphosis into a childlike creature encouraged our loud, destructive, animal barbarism. We utilized sheets and furniture to

build wooded tunnels in the deep jungles of the rain forest. Muffling our own breath, we crawled on our bellies, searching for the exotic monsters that threatened our very existence, armed with umbrellas, ready to save the lives of billions of innocent people. Our feats came very close to ending in the destruction of the heroes as a brigade of elephants thundered past us, shattering the surrounding woodlands. We could have been killed from falling debris, or worse, from the stomp of the herd.

Maggie often baked chocolate goodies to satisfy my sweet tooth. She always let Max and me lick clean the bowl and spoon and never denied me the indulgence of the hottest cookie or brownie fresh from the oven. Although I hated cleaning the messes we made in the living room and kitchen, these precious moments of laughter and smiles carried me to a higher plane of happiness, inspiring my belief that I would forever belong. The mother in Maggie embodied the wholesome love of June Cleaver and the fun character of Lucy Arnaz. Could any child ask for more?

My first ten years with the Faulkins, from ages two through twelve, were filled with utter bliss and contentment. By the time I reached age thirteen, the struggles of puberty and independence began to substitute old childhood ideologies with growing adult ideals. Sex education enflamed curious discussions among girls about boys' private parts, French kissing, and the blossoming of our bodies into womanhood. Our shared secrets of crushes, of experiences or inexperience, and of the funny new sensations triggered when we were with a boy we liked built a deeper sense of bonding friendship and trust. The mental and physical battle between growing adult and lingering child elevated the degree of secrets shared among girlfriends.

I confided my true identity and history to my friends during this confusing time of adolescence. Because I believed the truth of my past to be a fact and not a curse, I feared nothing in revealing my long-kept secret. I was a real, live orphan. The Faulkins were not my biological family. My biological family died in a car crash when I was very little, and I had no real memory of whom they were or how they died.

Unburdening my soul changed little between my friends and me except I now fielded unending questions that catapulted me to the center of popularity and awe. I reached a new and peculiar height in the junior-high social strata.

Word of my true identity made the rounds from child to parent and back to the Faulkins and to me. I returned home from school one day to find Maggie at the dining room table awaiting my arrival. She sat with her back hunched over with both hands cupping a mug of lukewarm coffee. Her eyes gazed into the liquid as if expecting the mirage of understanding to deliver her from this moment of letdown. I walked through the door. With her head bowed low in homage to her coffee mug, she looked up to meet my stare. No smile. Her glare spoke of smoldering disappointment and sorrow, a look I had never seen on her face before.

After a moment of lifeless silence, she spoke. "I heard that you've been telling people we're not your family." Another piercing silence. "Why, Jess? Why would you do such a thing to us after all we did for you to try to make you part of our family? Why?"

I started to cry. I knew I had wounded my mom's feelings. "I didn't mean it. I didn't mean to hurt you. I love you. I love Dad and Max. This is my family, and I want you to be my real family. I didn't think telling the truth now would hurt anybody. I love you!"

She continued her lecture, ignoring my words. “Don’t you understand?” She turned her body in her chair to face me. “Don’t you understand that you are not like your little friends and you never will be?”

A fiery flash of hatred pierced my body at that moment. My skin crawled in fear. My mouth dropped and my eyes bulged. What did she mean? What was she saying? Although I refused to accept it at first, my subconscious began to piece together the meaning of her words, of her stare, of all the past secrecy.

“Those so-called friends of yours will soon abandon you just like your real family did. Just wait and see.” She used her hands to form quotation marks as she said the word “friends” and “real.” I felt myself stop breathing. “We take you in. We make you part of the family. We keep your past secret so people will think you are normal . . . and how do you repay us? You tell everyone the truth. Now they all know your stained past. Don’t you get it? Don’t you understand how cruel the world is? No one will like you now. Things can never be the same for you.”

I found my voice and protested her harsh accusations. “My friends love me and that’s why I told them. I didn’t think it would make any difference. Real friends don’t tell lies, and I was being dishonest by not trusting them with the truth. I’m not ashamed about who I am. My birth parents didn’t abandon me. They died. I did nothing wrong.” My voice grew louder, “I’m just like them. I’m not different just because I don’t have a real mother and father anymore. I’m on the honor roll at school, and I’m good in sports, and everyone likes me. Besides, why would you take me in and try so hard to make me part of your home if you didn’t intend to make me a part of your family? Then, I would be just like them. I really wouldn’t be different then, and I’d never have to leave them or you. Everything would be perfect.”

“So, was that your plan? Get the truth out there so we would feel even sorrier for you? Make them feel sorry for you?” She chuckled as she spoke. My shoulders slouched, my head fell to my chest in defeat, and my eyes searched the ground for a place to hide. She laughed out loud as she looked at my writhing body. “You really thought you were one of us, didn’t you? Sweet fool.”

She stood. Her face altered from an expression of disgust to one of pity. She held her arms out to me and walked toward me. I took a step backwards. She laughed, dropped her arms to her side, tilted her head in a gesture of merciful compassion, and, in a patronizing voice, scolded me. “We have no intentions of giving you up or sending you away. We love you even though you’ll never be a Faulkin. You’re a Hoffman—but only half. Know what that means? You look white, yet you’re not—not really. Your good daddy married a nigger whore. You’ve got her blood in you—you’ve got *them* in you.” She flicked her hand as if shooing away a bothersome gnat as she said “them.”

“You’ll never be one of us. We all love you, but you have to understand your place.” She held out her arms and looked from side to side around the dining room indicating all that they had. “We do all this for you. All of this is for you, but you will never truly be one of us. You are not really our daughter.”

She sighed and walked back to her chair. She turned back around, smiled, and shook her head. She sat down and resumed her former mood of contemplating the depths of her cold coffee. I stood motionless in the same manner as before. *Do I stay? Do I go? Where do I go? What do I do now? What now?*

After an eternal silence, she answered my hidden questions. “Your father will be very disappointed when he finds out about all of this. You better go up to your room and wait there

for him to get home. I'll talk to him first, and, when he is ready, he'll come talk to you. Just wait for him there."

I walked up the stairs to my room. I flung my plagued body on the bed, face-down, and sobbed into my pillow. What an unbelievable blow. My normal and happy life leapt into a movie scene which bore no likeness to reality. Was it all one horrible nightmare? How could this be? It made no sense. They treated me like their own child. For ten years they duped me into believing they loved me and would adopt me at some point. Now, according to the unfolding of a few moments before, I found out they never considered me to be a true member of the family. Worse than that, they loathed me. Why would they take me in if they hated me so much? It made no sense. I cried until my pillow melted under my tears.

I jumped up when I heard him come through the front door. The eerie confines of the house magnified the sound of his voice and his footsteps. I could not make out any words, even though I strained my ears with all my might. I ran, jumped on my bed, and sobbed some more. I now heard nothing but the pounding of my heart. The rhythmic blood pumping through my veins silenced my tears. A sudden calmness relaxed my nerves as a new thought occurred to me. Alan did love me as his genuine daughter. After all, he always called me his little angel and considered me to be like the daughter Taylor never was. He would reprimand Maggie for telling me those harsh lies. Maybe I misunderstood her words, or she misunderstood the intention of my actions. I sat on my bed, anticipating a happy ending to my perplexing day.

I heard footsteps as he ascended the stairs. I jumped up, cleared my face of remaining tears, and awaited his certain embrace as he entered the room. The doorknob turned. In that split second, the frightening reality of the situation reemerged. He took one step into my room. We stood face to face. My eyes pleaded with his for understanding. His cheeks burned with

impassioned rage, and his eyes glared with unabashed hatred. Not one word was spoken. He backhanded me across the face. I fell to the ground in a fit of wailing tears.

“Stop, Daddy, stop. I’m sorry, Daddy. I’m sorry. Please forgive me. Please, Daddy, forgive me!”

He grabbed my arm and pulled me off the ground. I got on my feet, but my balance proved unsteady. He held onto my arm and shook it as he spoke. “I am *not* your daddy! How dare you destroy what we tried to build for you. You ungrateful little bitch.”

He stood with his back to the door, and he caught me glancing past him. Spying on us was Max, holding his ears while crying. Alan turned around. “Go downstairs, Max.” Fright paralyzed Max in his place, prohibiting him from obeying Alan’s callous order. “Max, go downstairs!” Alan yelled. Max’s feet still refused to move. “Maggie, get up here and take Max downstairs.”

Maggie met Max in the hallway. “Alan, please don’t be too severe with her. I think she really thought . . . Maybe we should have told her.”

“Should have told her? Should have told her? What was there to tell? We treated her damn good. If I don’t punish her, she’ll never learn.”

Maggie took Max downstairs and away from the scene. Alan, still holding my arm, slammed the bedroom door shut. He threw me on the bed and told me he was going to teach me once and for all to be gracious. He straddled me and slapped me again. He unbuttoned my jeans and pulled them down. I did and said nothing. Fright and confusion inhibited any action. He undid his belt and pulled down his pants.

The instant realization of what Alan intended propelled me to speak. “Maggie!” I screamed. “Maggie, help me. Don’t let him hurt me. Maggie, Maggie!” My pleas mingled with

sounds of sobs. “Max, Max help me! Maggie!” I know they must have heard me, no matter where in the house they hid.

“Shut up!” I bit his hand as he tried to muffle my protests. He shoved my underwear in my mouth to quiet me. Then, with his forearm, he held me down across my chest and with the other hand he stuck his penis inside me.

I screamed in pain, but the underwear muffled my cries. I flailed my arms at him in a desperate effort to get him off me. Now that both his hands were free, he pinned my arms above my head to control my embittered punching.

He tore me with his forced inward thrusts. “I’m not gonna stop until you learn your lesson, so shut up.” He spoke through clenched teeth. “A girl with some manners wouldn’t hit a man who treated her like a daughter and gave her a life she wouldn’t otherwise get. I’m warning you, you little whore, you better shut up.” With those words, I quit struggling against his evil pounding. I quit screaming and tried my best to control the flow of tears.

Despite his transparent promise that my submissive silence would hasten the end of his punishment, it felt like he continued abusing me for hours. Then, he stopped, pulled out, and ejaculated all over my chest.

He raped me while I wore my favorite t-shirt. I used to wear many shirts with Christian messages. My favorite was black and portrayed the crowned image of Jesus on the front. Green letters asked, “What has God done for you lately?” Green letters on the back provided the answer. “He gave you His only Son.”

I lay there motionless as he put his pants back on. I stared at the semen stains on the face of Jesus. Ironical that my solace was silenced, crushed between the sinned-upon mattress and my back. What had God done for me lately? I no longer knew. Alan deprived me of any answer.

“You better get that shirt off. I’ll get rid of it, and, if anyone asks what happened to it, tell them you wore it out and threw it away.” I took off the shirt and put on the clean shirt he took from my closet and threw at me.

He threw my pants at me. “Put your pants on, you little slut. Or do you want it again?” He sneered. I grabbed my pants and jumped back into them, anxious to cover myself.

Alan sat down beside me on the bed. He looked lost in contemplation but showed no remorse. In a calm, collected voice, he began telling me the details of my family’s death. He did so not as a form of continued punishment, but as a simple matter of fact. No sign of sympathy weakened his recount. The story mortified my young, pure heart. Until that day, my biological parents lived as a mere mirage in my memory. Now, their love reemerged as real and as true as the pain between my legs. They knew me. I yearned for the love of the parents I could not remember, for the parents who loved me once upon a time. I knew for certain that my dead daddy never would have let anything like this happen to me. He would never hurt me, and he would kill this man for hurting me. I longed for his soothing embrace to wash away the loneliness. But, that would never be.

“Now, this is our secret. You better not tell anyone what happened.” He paused. “Besides, if you did, no one would believe you. They’ll think you’re a little slut. They’d know what I already know, that you’re a whore. No one would be your friend then. Do you want everyone to know what a little whore you are?”

I believed him. I stayed with them two more years, never telling anyone anything. My grades declined as my worthless, delinquent mentality ravaged my over-achiever mentality. My self-pity and world-loathing attitude sneered at team sports. Former friends mistook my silent

plea of desperation for a personal snub. No matter. The loss of friends to me seemed fitting for my new circumstance.

I tried to confide in one friend about the abuse I received at home. Alan had not lied. I lost all friends, even my closest. My old friend pictured on my old t-shirt kept His voice silent. I suppose He did not believe in my innocence, either. I guess the blasphemous ejaculation on his face stained our former relationship.

My love for reading escalated into an obsession. I spent every possible waking moment clinging to the escape of far-off fiction and imaginary friends. For a while, these friends saved my sanity.

After some time, even my imagination refused to contain my pent-up trepidation. The voices in the house crept deep under my skin, scratching and clawing at my nerves like a virus eating my body from the inside out. My surroundings provided no relief for the ticking time bomb in my head. I had to get away.

I started hanging out in any club I could get in, and I learned that a young and pretty girl can get anything she wants from a man. It begins with a sample or two. The euphoria attained dulls the guilt of sin, causing the sinner to crave more and more. But more commands a heftier price. Since Alan introduced me to my true nature and numbed my senses, I was a natural for the trade. As the deadening effects of drugs and alcohol decreased my feelings of self-loathing, my sexual favors increased.

My extracurricular activities saved me from experiencing emotion but did little to alleviate my troubles at home. Alan punished me for coming home late and failing to report my whereabouts. Every six weeks when report cards arrived, Alan punished me for failing to meet the academic standards set for me, those standards I used to achieve so naturally. If I failed to

clean the kitchen or complete any of my other chores as directed, Alan punished me. If ever I talked back to Maggie or fought with Max and made him cry, Alan punished me. Granted, my behavior warranted discipline, but the extent of his kind of discipline failed to accomplish discipline's goal of lessons learned and behavior modified. Since I expected the form my punishment would take, my behavior knew no bounds.

It was always the same. Maggie took Max away. Alan closed the door to the bedroom and raped me. He told me I deserved it because I lacked respect and discipline. He finished with the warning that I better keep my mouth shut, that no one would believe me if I told. Everyone would think I was a slut, and no one would want to be my friend. By the end of the second year of Alan's special discipline, though, I no longer cared. I had gone so long without friends, anyway. I believed that I was bad and inconsiderate and a slut and that I would never learn. Who cared anymore? I knew I was no good. What I *did* care about was getting even with Alan. I wanted to kill him. I escaped the pain during those moments of discipline by devising ways to get my revenge.

The Faulkins fostered me for thirteen years, seven months, and fifteen days. Alan transformed me into being his unwilling concubine for two of those years. On June 15, I prepared myself for a helping of Alan's brand of tough love. My sexual favors for male clients procured more than drugs and cash. These treasures I stashed in anticipation of my special Father's Day celebration. Beneath my pillow I hid a large, ultra-sharp butcher knife. Under the bed awaited rope, handcuffs, one gigantic dildo, and duct tape.

Maggie planned a Father's Day family dinner for 6 p.m. sharp on June fifteenth. The entire family, even Taylor, was expected to attend, bearing gifts to recognize Alan's grace and generosity as a father. I, of course, failed to show on time. When I did show, my timing could not

have been more perfect. I stumbled into the room stinking of beer, carrying a small bag under my arm just as Maggie brought out one of her delicious cakes to present as her gift to her perfect husband.

I staggered to where she stood in front of the kitchen door. “Oh, Maggie. You shouldn’t have to do so much work. Here, let Cinderella take that for you.” I forced the cake from her hands, turned as if to walk it to Alan’s seat, tripped myself, and let the cake fall in my lap as my bottom thudded against the dining room floor. Maggie began to cover her face and sob. Taylor and Max sat still, staring at the live entertainment. Alan’s face turned blazing red as he stood from his seat of honor.

I laughed and said, “Oh, Daddy. I’m so sorry, Daddy. Please forgive me.” I picked up the fallen bag and handed it up to him. “I brought you a gift. Please, Daddy, take my gift and forgive me.”

With steam on his breath, his chest heaved as he snatched the package from my icing-stained fingers. He pulled out the gift, took one look, and threw it back at me with a vengeance. I ducked to keep the thing from crashing against my skull. I laughed again, picked it up, and showed it to the family. “Don’t you want to pass it around? Don’t you like it? This is how you like me best. I thought you could keep it in your bedroom and think of me. Or you could take it to work with you and show all your friends your special angel.”

It was a framed 8x10 picture of me on my bed. My legs were spread, and I was wearing nothing but a white t-shirt with the words “Daddy’s whore” written in black marker.

“Oh, my God!” Maggie gasped.

“Nope,” I said, turning to Maggie, “it’s not God. It’s me!” I turned to Alan. “Tell Maggie what you really think about God.” I turned to Taylor. “He loves Jesus so much he decided to baptize Him in sperm!”

Taylor stood up, showing no expression, grabbed Max by the hand and walked out of the house. We all heard her drive away. I lay where I fell and laughed until I could not breathe.

Maggie ran into the kitchen, still sobbing. Alan ran to my side and screamed, “Are you high?”

“No. Actually, I am quite low. See? I’m on the ground. You’re higher than I am.” I continued to laugh.

My laughter infuriated him more and more. He grabbed my arm and yanked me to my feet. “Get upstairs. I’ll be up there to deal with you later.” With a strong jerk, he flung me toward the stairs. I laughed and skipped up to my room.

Once inside my whorehouse, I undressed and lay down on my bed with my hand planted beneath my pillow. He came into the room and shut the door. Just when he thought my outlandish behavior could become no more bizarre, Alan stared at me with a look of sheer bewilderment. He marched to the head of the bed and slapped me.

“You slut! How dare you flaunt yourself in front of our family like that!”

“Don’t you like it? This is what I thought you wanted. I’ve been a very bad girl and need to be punished.”

“You’re a whore, and you’ll always be a whore. You’ll never learn!”

“Teach me, Daddy, teach me!”

He shook his head in disgust and looked as if he were turning to leave. I thought I might have gone too far in expecting certain punishment. I changed my course to ensure his proper

reaction. “Maggie’s the slutty bitch. Not me. You married a whore and had an illegitimate child. Taylor’s not yours, is she? She doesn’t love you. That’s obvious. If you were her real dad, she’d love you. She loves Max, though. Uh . . . oh . . . unless . . . unless you punished her the way you punish me. That’s it, isn’t it? *That’s* why she hates you so much! That’s why she didn’t try to defend you tonight or even get upset! That’s it!”

Alan slapped me again. “Shut up, you whore! You have no idea what you’re talking about!”

“Sure I do. You probably punish Max that way, too! You perverted bastard. Maggie must be a prude if you need to get off on kids. Or your microscopic penis couldn’t satisfy her. You couldn’t satisfy any woman! I bet your sperm shoots nothing but blanks. You couldn’t impregnate Maggie, let alone satisfy her. I get it now! You’re not a real man so she has to get a real man and you have to get off on virgin babies! You really are a cocksucker, aren’t you? You sick S.O.B.!”

This did the trick. He jumped right on top of me and punched me across the cheek rather than slapping me again. He began his routine by pulling down his pants and whipping out his manhood. “You want discipline? You want discipline, you bitch? Don’t ever fuck with me!”

As soon as his hard penis was released from his pants, I grabbed it with one hand and held on as tight as I could. With the other hand, I brought the knife out from under the pillow and slashed with a lightning-fast, arced movement. He fell against the bed cupping both hands between his legs where his penis used to be. I threw the severed end on the ground and pulled my stash from underneath the bed. I taped his mouth shut, tied his legs together and handcuffed his hands around my bedpost. I shoved the dildo up his derriere and taped it in place. I then picked up his limp penis from the floor, untaped his mouth and shoved it in, tip first. I sealed his evil in

his mouth, careful to keep his nose free to breathe. After all, my aim did not include suffocation—even though I knew he would die if not given immediate medical attention. I wanted him to partake in and enjoy this moment for as long as possible. For my final trick, I took his wallet from his pants pocket. An artist deserves to get paid for her craft.

Once I completed my Father's Day masterpiece, I cleaned his blood off me, changed clothes, grabbed a pre-packed bag from my closet and climbed out the window. Before descending, I took one last look back and said, "If this is how this family shows love, well then, I love you, too. Happy Father's Day!"

One of my male business associates waited for me in the driveway. My plan worked with flawless execution. I climbed into the car, and we sped away. I gave one brief thought to what Maggie's face would look like when she found him. I laughed and left that scene behind me. My partner took me to an ATM where I withdrew the maximum cash it would spit out. Figuring out his PIN number proved easier than shoving a dildo up his rear end. I paid my partner his fee and watched him drive away after dropping me off at the bus station.

I took the first bus out of Virginia and headed for Mexico. I never looked back. My journey ended in Rio Grande City in Starr County, Texas, just north of the Mexican border. My biological family once lived in Texas. I was home. I figured I could stay in the States and cross over into Mexico should anything arise. All evidence of Alan's dickless dilemma pointed in my direction, but what did I care? The man deserved to die, but I reckoned that the humiliation of being discovered like that was a more gratifying revenge than his quick death would have been.

As long as I knew that he now felt the humiliation I had felt at his hand, I cared little about the chanced punishment of prison.

Chapter Four

Andrea

As Jessica shared another life altering page from her history, I found myself comparing our lives to a choose-your-own-adventure children's novel. The characters will confront obstacles and take on wild adventures no matter what option the reader makes. Some journeys, though, may be far more dramatic, but the experience still makes a strategic impact on the main character, altering his or her personality and, ultimately, setting the stage for an even greater story to come.

This day in May 1990 confronts my memory like a movie scene replaying in my mind. My mom, dad, sister, and I went to the same Catholic Church at the same time as always and sat in the same pew as every Sunday morning. We then feasted on a home-cooked breakfast of eggs and my mom's special cheese dip and tortillas. Sunday morning after church marked the one time during the week we ate together as a family.

We ate breakfast and read the Sunday paper the same as every Sunday. My mom drank coffee and read about the latest gossip in entertainment. My dad drank a diet cola and read about the latest world events. I drank a diet drink just like Dad and read the comics. After eating, Emily confined herself to her room for her routine Sunday ritual of watching television.

After breakfast, I cheered for the soon-to-be NBA champs, the Chicago Bulls, in our brand new entertainment room which used to be the carport. I cradled a basketball in my arms and stared at the television screen. I wore my red sweat pants emblazoned with the bright white lettering of Bon Jovi down the left leg and a T-shirt which read, "See Dick Drink. See Dick Drive. See Dick Die" on the front and "Don't Be a Dick" on the back in big black bold print.

My dad peeked his head in the door that separated the entertainment room from the laundry room. In a soft and nervous tone, he requested I join the rest of the family in the living room. Our family never had family meetings. Possible reasons for this gathering baffled my curiosity. The group gathered on two fluffy orange sofas perpendicular to one another. One rested against a plain white wall. The other acted as the dividing line between the living room and the dining room. My mom and sister sat on the sofa against the wall, and my dad sat on the other. I stood paralyzed in front of them, unsure of what I ought to do.

I looked at Emily for an answer, but she failed to provide one for me. I looked at my mom and then at my dad. Still, no answer. Not knowing what else to do, I sat on the arm of the sofa farthest away from the rest of the family. Unparalleled despair overwhelmed the faces of my mom and dad. Emily and I met with bewildering stares and then rotated our faces toward our parents.

The first thought to overtake me was that one of my parents suffered from some extreme illness or even faced certain death. They pleaded that they never wanted to hurt us and wanted the best for our futures. I responded by asking which one had cancer or some other potentially fatal disease. Neither? But, I thought . . . Divorce? That possibility never even crossed my mind. Why, we were the perfect family. Emily's friends and my friends all thought we had the perfect family. Everyone wanted our parents. They were considered cool, and they never fought. Never! The question, then—what happened?

Tears were slow to fall, but as soon as I witnessed the makeup streak down my sister's cheek, I, too, broke down. They tried their best to explain what happened, but we refused to listen. Emily ran to my side, knelt on the floor, wrapped her arms around me and said, "Now all I have is Andi. She's the only one I have and the only one who cares!"

I unleashed uncontrollable sobs as she stuttered these words. Was it true? All we had was each other now? Did my parents not care? My mom tried in vain to ensure us that she and my dad had always loved us and always would love us. She even tried to soothe us by confirming that nothing would change. Emily and I knew better, though. Divorce always brings change. No words could pass our lips. The pain cut too deep, and we both held each other and cried.

My emotions mutated from confusion to remorse and from remorse to anger. My denial convinced me that I embodied the power to make them change their mind. I pulled my hair using every ounce of strength my body could summon, with the one goal to hurt myself and in the process hurt my parents. “I want to kill myself! I’m going to. I really want to.” I wanted them to take it all back, the words, the pain, the agony.

My bitter childhood emotions had etched a corner into the deepest recesses of my heart, enabling me to conceal everything from everyone. This dramatic outburst marked the first my parents, or anyone for that matter, ever witnessed. I never learned how to deal with negative emotions and quickly reached a point of personal crisis. Pain piled upon pain to the point where Andi no longer existed. This pending divorce proved to be the final fatal blow, hurling me head-first, unprepared, into a hostile world. My head began to spin, my body surrendered all strength, and, with each labored breath, I ached to pick up the shattered pieces and bury them back into that lost, dark tomb of my inner being.

After a long silence, my parents uttered one simple word. Don’t. *Don’t?* Is that all they could say? I threatened to kill myself, and their response was a monotonous “don’t.” That’s not what they were supposed to say. Suicide became my light in the darkness. It became a simple solution to the pain.

“If you killed yourself, then I’d probably do the same,” my dad said. “Please don’t do this, Andi.”

“You don’t mean it, Andi. You don’t,” my mom pleaded.

All the while, I knew I would never go through with it. The fear of spending eternity separated from God overrode my present hell. The memory of my friend named Jesus lingered too close to my conscience. The tone in their responses proved they did indeed still love me and cared about me, but my battle had not yet been won. “Yes, I *will* do it!”

“No, we love you.”

I could not speak. I could only cry. That was all any of us could do. Because the communal wailing became too much for me to bear, I asked to be excused to call the one person whom I knew without a doubt cared about me and who would take the time to listen to me. Mrs. Behlingham, my eighth grade teacher and Fellowship of Christian Athletes leader, was the first person I thought about calling. It astonishes me to recall the last thing she said to me on the last day of school was, “Call me if you ever need me. Any time.” I loved her, but who would have imagined I would need her so soon?

Alone in my room, I left the torment of the past few minutes on the other side of the closed door and hoped for a positive message from God as I dialed Mrs. Behlingham’s number. No answer. My hope withered when I heard her answering machine. The grim cloud of truth crept from under the door like smoke and snickered as it beat its brutal force upon my chest. The room began to close in on me and spin the way it had during my first recollection of a panic attack. This time, though, my friend, Jesus, abandoned me.

I kept trying Mrs. Bellingham’s number every few minutes for the next two hours. Ring. Ring. Ring. No answer, just the recorder.

I lay on my bed staring at a picture of my parents that I took from the wet bar in the living room and prayed to God. My mom came in to check on me. "I'm fine," I lied, "but I'd like to be alone right now."

An hour later, my dad entered the room. "Can we talk?" he asked.

"Yes," I mumbled.

He sat on the floor next to my daybed. Dad talked about what had just happened and how it had been before. This whole mess started the previous February. Dad felt trapped in a life of lies for some time. One night, my parents watched television in their room as usual. After the news, my dad turned off the television, faced my mom and told her he suffered from a lack of marital contentment. That night they talked until the sun came up. That moment marked the first time they exchanged more than idle chat in many, many years.

My dad had just returned from a men's retreat with the church before the fateful conversation. It turned out he went to seek some guidance, an answer to his overwhelming anxious despondency. All this divorce drama hurt him as much as it hurt me. After confessing his truth, he left me alone again.

The hours rushed by with haste, but the pain never faded. My room could no longer contain my energy. I dashed out of the house eager to get away from the foreboding range of emotions and took off on my bike without leaving any hint as to my intended destination. I knew of no definite answer myself.

My pedals directed me to the Lutheran church a mile down the road. The pain caught up with me as I pulled on the locked doors of the building. The nasty truth of real life inhabited my heart, and I could feel my soul combatting with it. Something else needed to fill that void, something other than that pain.

Life-sized crosses made of huge tree limbs on the lawn at the back of the church beckoned me closer, reminding me of the friend who once suffered excruciating death for me, reminding me that He remains beside me if I seek Him. Beaten and bruised, my limp body leaned against a tree and slid to the ground as my weak knees gave way. Cupping my head in my hands, I wept again as the pounding of my heart failed to hold back the flood. I begged and pleaded for Him to come to me again as He once did back in my lonely room. I begged for Him to take this all away.

He could fix it all in a split second. I could open my eyes, forget the entire day as if waking from a bad dream, climb back on my bike, and return home to find my family partaking in their usual Sunday routines. But when I lifted my head, the unbearable pain still stifled my limbs, belittling me with agonizing fury. He hung on His cross for me to see, but He refused to hear me. His still voice was silenced against me.

I jumped on my bike and tried to outrun the grief again. My bike took me around a corner, up a hill, and back down again. Before I knew it, my best friend's house waited in front of me.

As Stephanie and I sat watching *In Living Colour* in her bedroom, I waited for her to ask the obvious, "Why are you here?" After all, I had never come over uninvited. At the commercial break, she asked the question.

"My parents, they're . . . well . . ."

"Are you okay?" Steph stared in bewilderment.

"You will never believe this, but . . ." I struggled with the words, trying to find the best and easiest way to break the news. After a pause, I told her the whole story from the beginning. "It just doesn't seem right, you know?"

My confession muted her speech. I realized right then that my story put too much pressure on a fourteen-year-old girl. "So they're getting a divorce?" she managed to ask.

"Well, they're going to separate for the time being, but they probably will."

"No, they won't, Andi. They're so perfect. They've never fought . . . have they?"

"Well, no. Not while I was around, at least."

"You see? They won't get a divorce. It's just all too unreal. It's not right."

"Yep! You can say that again."

My friend tried her best to console me, but I knew deep down my folks would never get back together. Something made me believe her, though. I needed to believe my sense of real love would somehow last. Divorces happened in other families. Moms are abused and leave with the kids. Moms and dads fight and love dies. My parents were the equivalent of Ward and June Cleaver. Ward and June never abandoned Wally and the Beaver. It made no sense.

We sat in silence once again, staring at the screen, although neither one of us paid any attention to the show. The sun began to disappear behind the horizon. "I better go before my parents get worried," I mumbled.

"Where are your parents?"

"The last time I saw them they were watching TV in the entertainment room."

"Together?" she asked under her breath.

Although I had no desire to go home, instinct warned me that my dad would soon be looking for me. Sure enough, as I turned into the driveway, I saw my dad pulling out.

"Where have you been? We've been getting worried!"

"I was at Stephanie's house."

He turned the car around and followed me up the driveway. Walking inside, I repeated my whereabouts to my mom who sat in the same spot where she sat hours ago when I first took off.

In the distance I heard my phone ring, and I ran to answer it. "Hello?"

"Hello," sympathized the angelic voice of Mrs. Behlingham, "I got home and you sounded so upset on the machine, like you really needed to talk. I'm sorry it took so long. What's the matter?"

One last time I repeated the day's events. Though the story became a nuisance to reconstruct, I knew my voice of reason must hear every detail. Like Stephanie's response, my story dumbfounded her, but I heard care and concern that assured me she wanted to help. The gentleness of her demeanor and her soft and kind words soothed the anger bulldozing my body.

"My husband's parents were separated for ten years. It began when he was a child."

I did not speak. I just listened.

"He never once gave them a hard time. He kept on loving them and let them know he cared. It was his constant love that got them back together."

Hope and wonder made me smile.

"Andi, don't stop loving your parents. They need you more than ever right now. Show them you still love and need them, too. There's a guy by the name of Smalley who is a great speaker. He does a lot of counseling and has kept couples who were on the verge of killing each other together. He has written some books called *For Better or Best* and *If Only He Knew*, which are almost as powerful as his lectures."

She assured me she would help me find the books if I could not find them. Just hearing her voice made me feel better. Mrs. Behlingham had so much wisdom.

We hung up, and I lay motionless on the floor. For the first time all day, I beat the pain. I ran through the kitchen, living room, and laundry room until I reached the entertainment room. To my surprise, my parents were still sitting side by side on the couch watching television.

My dad stood, and I took his spot on the couch. I told them all about my conversation with Mrs. Behlingham, and they seemed relieved at my sudden change of mood. I also told them about the books, but they showed not the least bit of interest.

“Will you at least try one? Please?” They ignored my plea by pretending to be engrossed in other activities.

“Please?” I begged.

“Okay,” my mom gave in. “Call me at my office tomorrow and remind me to get it.”

I remembered Mrs. Behlingham’s request always to love and show love for my parents. I sat on the couch next to my mom, asked my dad to join us, and put my arms around the both of them.

“No matter what happens, I will always love you,” I promised. Although raising only the corners of their lips, my promise ignited the first smile on my parents’ faces I had seen all day.

As time passed, I continued to call my mom each day begging her to buy the Smalley books. She assured me she ordered them, but they never arrived. Still, every day I continued to call, and every day she delivered another excuse. My mom won, and I gave up.

A month passed by, and the approaching time for the annual vacation to visit Dad’s side of the family in Nebraska threatened our secret. This used to be my favorite time of the year. The whole family—aunts, uncles, cousins, and Grandma and Grandpa—came together for a mini-annual family reunion. Humphrey, Nebraska provided an adventurous play-land for a child such

as me. The family organized hayrides in town, singing all kinds of songs and telling stories as we went, always stopping to invite neighbors and passersby to join our fun. We kids acted out amazing exploits within the boundaries of the farm. We climbed tall stacks of hay in the barn and took turns swinging high up in the air on an old, worn rope from one end of the barn to the other. We chased pigs when they got loose from their pens. We dressed up in Grandma's old clothes and wrote, directed, and performed our very own plays for the family. We even coordinated a parade for all the residents on this secluded dirt road. Because the farm was outside of town and since the nearest neighbor was a few miles away, no one outside of the family ever witnessed these events, but how they cheered for us. Every play and every parade proved to be a success.

My cousins and I loved each other and were the best of friends. They never knew about the teasing I endured from the kids back home. They liked Andi. All the fantasies I enjoyed in the privacy of my room came to life through the activities we invented to entertain the adults. They embraced, rather than shunned, my lively imagination. The adults and the kids enjoyed hearing my latest poem and my talk of replacing Tico Torres as the drummer for Bon Jovi and becoming the best female drummer in history. In Nebraska, surrounded by people who showed such great love for me, I felt comfortable and happy and whole.

That year, the entire family planned on going camping in log cabins with miles of forest surrounding us, with hiking trails, horse trails, and the family gathered around a bonfire singing with joyous exuberance and laughing while roasting marshmallows and making S'mores. News of such an upcoming vacation should have thrilled me to the point of impatient excitement. This time, however, I imagined the news of the divorce destroying the contentment I had enjoyed on every previous occasion with my family in Nebraska since my birth. Although my imaginary life brought solace to the pain of my real life in San Antonio, Texas, the Andi that came to life in

Humphrey, Nebraska, was the Andi I loved and wanted always to be. I feared the news of my parents' divorce would take this serenity away from me.

The sole person in the family who knew about the divorce before the vacation was my cousin Casey. We were the same age and tried to keep in touch throughout the in-between seasons. I told her all about it in my letters. How would she react to me when we met again face to face? How would the others react when they found out?

These issues scared me to the point that I dreaded this trip. One thing scared me more than anything else, though: When we returned, my mom would be gone. Even if nothing changed with my relatives, how could I enjoy myself knowing my mom stayed behind all alone in San Antonio, moving all her stuff out of the place she called home for so long and living alone in a new and solitary house? She got the rotten end of the deal. My parents agreed my dad would keep the house because he put so much work into it and that my sister and I would stay there close to our friends and our school, changing our lives as little as possible. Still, much of my dad's life remained the same while my mom had to start all over. I dreaded her inevitable departure.

The summer drifted by as slowly as a snail climbing an oil-stained, sleet-covered cliff. I spent my days getting lost in the mindless plots of soap operas and my nights staring at the stars, thinking, and talking to God. The expanse of night sky encompassed my hope, the endless possibilities for my future. Cloudless summer nights offered me any star in the sky that I wanted. Nothing else existed except for the heavens and me.

I sat outside the night my dad, sister, and I were to leave for vacation. My mom's sister, Joanne, came in from Dallas to help my mom move. As she walked from her car to the front door, I ignored her. I remained lying flat on the lounge chair on the deck by the pool, arms folded

across my chest, and eyes focused on the sky. My mom came out to talk to me, but, again, I continued to stare. She joined me in my search for different constellations. Clouded by unspeakable thoughts, we located one, the Big Dipper.

“Remember when you wanted to be an astronaut or a scientist?” Mom asked.

“Sure. I still want to visit space, and I still want a telescope.”

“Maybe for Christmas or your birthday.”

I heard my dad’s voice in the distance. “Let’s go, Andi. Get your stuff.”

I walked inside and saw my sister and my dad loading meat into an ice chest. I grabbed my suitcase and walked out to the car.

“Aren’t we going, yet?” I asked when I came back inside. “It’s eight, and we were supposed to leave at seven.” My excitement betrayed my eagerness to leave the somber Stillman estate.

My aunt sat on the couch in the living room, observing our actions in the kitchen. “How are you doing, Andi?”

I had grown tired of that question. “Fine,” I lied.

“Are you anxious about your trip?”

“Yes.” It later embarrassed me that I responded in such a rude manner. I love her, but I wanted nothing more than to get in the car and go.

“Ready, Andi?” my dad interrupted.

Without a verbal response, I grabbed my sister’s many suitcases and headed out the door. My dad grabbed the ice chest and followed right behind.

Outside by the car I played with my dog, BJ, short for Bon Jovi, while the rest of the family said their good-byes. We then climbed in the car and vanished.

On the road I had little to do except think. The reality that my mom would be gone when we returned pierced my already fragile frame of mind. The thought of her no longer being a part of my daily life forced a stream of tears down my face. I did my best to conceal the sobs from my dad and my sister. Those silent whimpers, though, granted me rest, and I slept until we reached the outskirts of farmland Nebraska. Within a few short hours we would reach our destination, and I grew restless.

We were the first to arrive at the campsite where the reunion would be held. Just as I thought my excitement could not be contained any longer, the family began to arrive one by one.

My cousins Casey and Jason arrived. Then my cousins Cindy and Tyler. Our unique clique earned us the nickname the “five musketeers.” As soon as all the family greeted each other, the kid clan took off into the woods. None of us knew our destination, but that made the exploration even more exciting. At times we knew we were lost and walking in circles.

When we returned, we found the rest of the family singing together in a circle without the expected campfire. We kids raided the kitchen before joining them. I caught my dad walking out of the restroom, and I pulled him aside. “Have you told them yet?”

“No, not yet.”

“Dad, you need to tell them.”

“I know, but it’s hard. Look.” He pointed out the window to where the Stillman clan gathered, “Everybody is so happy. I will, though.”

We went to join them, but the five musketeers soon gave in to their wanderlust once again.

“How’s your drumming coming?”

“How long have you been playing?”

“Are you still in a band?”

“Do you know ‘Wipe Out’?”

I answered all their questions almost as fast as they were thrown at me: “Good, two years, trying, not too well.” I promised my Aunt Sally I would learn “Wipe Out” before the next summer.

We took off and brought another cousin, Michelle, who was Emily’s age, with us to the lake behind the cabins and told ghost stories. Emily and my other cousins, either too young or who thought they were too old, stayed with the adults. When we returned from our excursion, I discovered my dad still had not told his family about the misfortune of the summer. Yet, later that same evening, he did find the strength to tell his parents, my grandparents. They treated me the same.

The rest of the vacation diverted my misery as the first day had done. Dad never gained the courage to tell anyone else about the divorce before he and Emily left. I extended my vacation for an additional week.

All too soon, life beckoned me back to Texas. Casey and Grandma and Grandpa brought me home. My mother had moved into one of my parents’ rental houses. The last time I saw that place, the exterior paint was peeling off the rotting wood, the shag green carpet greased shoeless feet, yellow moss mixed with paint once white, and the interior smelled like a sewage plant.

Now, at least Mom had the bedrooms re-carpeted and the green walls cleaned and repainted white.

Cousin Casey and my grandparents returned to Nebraska one brief week after bringing me home. My new life as a kid of divorced parents had begun. Other than the tiny fact that my parents no longer received mail at the same address, not much changed at first. My situation, as I

perceived it, somewhat improved. Now, instead of one outlet for my personality, two Andis merged into one body.

My old bedroom still showcased the gorgeous face of Jon Bon Jovi and expressed my forbidden dreams and melancholy mood. My new bedroom reflected my rustic Western dreams of riding off to a new life and embracing the hero within. Actual termite-infested tree limbs framed an old hand-quilted blanket that covered a twin mattress. An antique rocking horse decorated the sparse room. A picture of a cowboy turned away from the reality of his past to face the promise of an illusory Texas sunset accented the otherwise plain white wall. This room offered me a chance, like the cowboy, to shake the dirt from my worn jeans, to wipe the sweat from my brow, turn my back on the past that had beaten but not killed me, and to take a bold step forward to face the most beautiful of God's creations awaiting my claim upon its grace.

My mom's house became my sanctuary. I found pleasure in the monotonous adventure of channel surfing with cable television, a pleasure my dad's home never permitted. My troubled and baffled heart found solace in the quietude of a single-child home whenever Emily and I fought. Whereas I allocated equal time per life and per house, Emily needed no such escape.

During the early days of the divorce, I was enchanted by the idea of beginning my high school career in the guise of the cowboy in a new school. No one knew me in the school district where my mom now lived. I could be anybody. I could start all over. But I never could commit to taking such a drastic chance.

All was going well with minor differences that suited me. But all of this crashed down on me at once with one insignificant conversation. That conversation slapped the reality of divorce across my still-bruised face.

One afternoon, Mom and I went shopping for a new car. When we reached our last destination of the day, I joked with my mom, “That salesman is cute. You should go out with him.”

She must have taken me seriously because she said, “What would you say if I told you I was dating someone?”

“Who?”

“Remember a while back when I told you about my friend’s brother wanting to go out with me?”

“And you said if you still needed a date for your office party in May you would take him.”

“Yes. Well, he called me at the office a couple of weeks ago, and, since then, we’ve been dating.”

“Really? Cool!” I was happy for my mom and yet miserable. Because I wanted her to be happy and knowing it was none of my business, I kept my feelings locked inside. After all, I worried about her being all alone. This soothed that concern.

My dad had begun dating again around this same time. Now, more than a mailing address separated my family. As both my parents reverted to the superficial and sometimes self-centered lives of single adults, neither my mom nor my dad needed me. Yet I still needed them. Emily had her boyfriend, and, even if I had wanted a boyfriend, my parents predetermined that I could not date until I turned sixteen. No matter. I rather preferred and enjoyed my infrequent one-on-one time with either my mom or my dad when I had them all to myself. After their first step in recovery began, I found myself sentenced to weekends of solitary confinement—whether all

alone or sharing space with a parent and the date. Rather than risk hurting either parent by sharing my own feelings, I secluded myself still further into my imaginary kingdom.

My entourage accompanied my every move. Admiring eyes gazed at me with longing adoration. School became the “road.” Band class and marching band practice became rock band rehearsals. Half-time performances with the marching band during Friday night football games became live concert performances. All eyes focused on me. Kids in the audience stared at me and dreamed of growing up to be like me. My go-cart became my classic 1957 Corvette. I raced down the highway toting interviewers from *Rolling Stone* magazine and *Entertainment Tonight*. Even mundane tasks such as mowing the lawn became activities that kids traveled great distances to see, hoping and praying I would take notice of them standing outside the gate by the street and do them the great honor of stopping to sign autographs and chat. They swooned at my dirty, sweaty body. My bedroom became my suite on the road or the backstage of concert arenas.

Fantasy devoured both my sleeping and waking moments, igniting a profound force of surreal self-esteem. Andi was lost. The imaginary me stole her chance to grow up as other children do and to mature and learn as they do. The confidence of the imaginary me gave confidence to the voice of Andi, uttering words that allowed the freshman Andi to be socially successful with those in higher grades. With the others in the freshman class, around those who helped create the imaginary me that buried the original Andi, I remained as much a recluse as always.

I spoke from a voice that knew no pain or failure. On the surface, Andi maintained a simulated smile. No one noticed the truth lost deep within those child eyes. I spent my adolescent life as someone else, ignoring the me God created. My inadequacies and what I deemed to be the abnormalities of my character shamed me.

Chapter Five

Andrea

I recall the pain, agony, and hurt of the Thanksgiving holiday as well as I recall the September scene of two passenger airliners demolishing our country's Twin Towers of strength and prosperity.

Traditional Thanksgivings celebrate love as families and friends gather to thank the Lord for their many blessings. This Thanksgiving shattered my ideals of love and left me asking myself what life had offered me in return for my blessed thanks.

The day started out like any other. Escaping my bitter life, I pretended to be somebody other than myself. As usual, I thought about Jon Bon Jovi and wondered how he celebrated this holiday. I longed to meet him and to be a part of his celebrations, which I believed must contain more joviality than my present state. I let my imagination once more take full control and allowed my mind to drift to happier places and more fulfilling lives.

After Emily and I returned to my mom's house from a quick trip to the grocery store, I sat at the kitchen table eager to read my most recent celebrity magazine purchase. I spent my own money on such frivolities only when Jon Bon Jovi graced their otherwise ludicrous pages. The only articles I bothered reading and the only pictures I studied were those of Jon and the band. Just as I became engrossed in the latest rock gossip, Gary Elizondo, my mom's live-in boyfriend, told me to get off my lazy butt and help my mother.

Even though he said it with a laugh and a smile, his words pricked my remaining pride, swelling my rebellious hatred for this man's attempt to father me. Even my own father, the man with whom I share half my genes, never uttered such tactless words to me. Gary smiled and

laughed again in a vain attempt to convince me he intended mere jest with those crude words. I looked to my mother expecting her to reprimand this man for threatening her young cub. No such protection. Her laugh sounded cautious and forced as she shook her head, shielding any eye contact from me.

Even recalling this now, I must ask myself, “Why would anyone feel sorry for me? That doesn’t seem so bad!” Remember, Gary came along and moved in so soon after the divorce, causing whispered rumors to circulate that they must have dated in secret long before the announcement of the divorce. It took time to accept him and to understand he meant no ill will toward me or my family. Remember also how fragile was my state of mind. At this time, people bombarded me with suggestions about how to become somebody else. “Sit up straight and act like a lady. Cross your legs like a lady. Be a helpful young lady.” Although I continually struggled with my own identity, I knew of one certainty: I was not a little lady, nor did I have any desire to become one. I loved masculine things, and that is how I would always be. Why did everyone, school acquaintances and family alike, want to change my natural born character? Not a day went by when I did not wish the doctors proved right in telling my parents to expect a son.

I grew weary of people trying to turn me into a proper lady. So what if I refused to wear dresses? So what if I preferred boy activities to girl activities? Why must I be so different?

After Thanksgiving dinner at my mom’s, I mournfully thought about my dad, home all alone. I called my dad from the privacy of my mother’s bedroom. No answer. I figured he chose to spend the lonely holiday mowing the yard or some such mundane activity. As I lay on the floor thinking of nothing else except going home to my dad, forced to spend the first holiday since the divorce all alone, Emily came in to call her boyfriend, Bobby.

When Emily and I finally returned home, the lawn mower rested in its usual spot in the garage and the house sat eerily silent. Dad never answered the phone because he had not stayed home alone. Eventually, however, he called to let us know he left to go to a “friend’s” house for dinner and that he would return soon. Friend—code word for girlfriend. Unlike my mom, he dated more than one person at a time and never committed to any one of them.

Frustrated because both my mom and my dad, blinded by lust-filled expectations, neglected my needs, I grabbed my Walkman, got on my bike, and left. I rode around thinking of a nice, quiet place I could go to be alone, someplace other than the confining walls of home. Nobody ever plays at the park, so I headed there. I walked around an old, abandoned baseball diamond hidden across from the dried creek. Then it started to drizzle. On the near side of the creek sat a sheltered picnic area where I ran to get out of the rain. While lying on top of a picnic table, I cried thinking about my mom.

Why did she choose to ignore my needs? Why did she prefer the company of Gary over mine? Why did she have to change? What was going on with her, and why could she not see what her changes were doing to me?

Why did my dad not need me anymore? Why was I not a sufficient companion for him now? Why did we no longer play catch or watch football together on Sunday afternoons? Why couldn’t he see that I was only fourteen, not yet grown up?

How could they not understand that I was still a child? I still needed my parents. Emily was seventeen with a driver’s license, a car, and a boyfriend. She was a senior in high school, pretty grown up and self-sufficient by my standards. I had none of that. I still needed them. Why couldn’t they see that? How could they leave me alone?

After leaving the isolation of the park, I pedaled toward the Lutheran church just up the road from home, seeking the comfort and guidance of the Lord. On the way, as I steered my bike through town, I looked at all the cars haphazardly parked in front of some houses and at the empty driveways of other houses. I remember thinking how lucky all those people were to have somewhere to go. Those people had plenty to be thankful for this Thanksgiving holiday.

The road led mostly uphill from the park to the church. The remembrance of old crosses made the trek worthwhile, though. When I arrived, I stubbornly pulled on the chain-locked doors. With my feet planted against the bottom of the wooden frame and both hands clenching the handle, I leaned backwards, forcing my entire strength of body and will to open the doors. No luck. The doors refused admittance. Is this world so bad that we must lock our church doors?

“Please, Lord,” I begged, “send someone to open the doors!”

I walked around to the back to see if a window or back door offered an opportunity for me to sneak through. Then I saw them. They looked more majestic than I remembered. Three crosses constructed out of thin tree trunks, the center larger than the others, magnificently hovered over this hidden piece of holy ground. All three stretched their limbs as wide as opened arms protectively anxious to cradle the destitute in dire need of grace, the same forgotten signs that pulled me through once before. Bowing my head, I stood in front of the center cross studying my life.

Then, as the crosses encouraged, I took a seat before my Christ and bared my burdens at His feet. Lifting my eyes to take a moment’s breath, I saw a white car drive by and thought Emily might be looking for me.

“I’ll be back, Lord,” I said and walked back to the front of the church. No sign of Emily or a white car. I brought my bike away from the church doors and into view from the street

should she drive by. I walked back to the cross and sat down upon a cement block. As I took off my Walkman, I began to cry. I repeated my problems aloud for God to hear.

“So I don’t dress like a girl and I love jeans and t-shirts. So I play drums instead of a flute or something. So I slouch a lot and I’m messy. So what? Why does it matter?”

“Then, there’s my mom. I had promised my dad I would tell her how I felt a while back, but, when I did, it didn’t turn out the way I wanted it to. When I mentioned that I wanted to talk to her, she immediately suspected Gary had hurt me. First of all, why would she immediately jump to that conclusion? That’s not good. And even if he had, I doubt she would leave him. I told her that ever since she met Gary, she has been acting as if he is more important than Emily or me. Don’t get me wrong, he’s a nice guy and all, but we both feel as if she is neglecting us. Her answer didn’t comfort me.

“She told me that we neglected her so why should she be there for us? Well, first of all, she’s my mother. That’s her job. Second, I gave my life for her. She needed me. At least I thought she did. I gave up my life to comfort and to be with her so she wouldn’t have to be alone after the divorce. Not that I minded or had anything better to do, but still. She can’t say I wasn’t there for her.

“Then Gary came along, and I was left alone. Emily has Bobby. Dad has his ‘friends.’ Mom has Gary. And me? Well, I finally have cable. But, when my dad found out how lonely I was, he started spending weekends with me. He said I was most important. I don’t want him to do that anymore. I don’t want him to go through what I’m going through, feeling so alone. He should live life for himself, not for me. At least I know my dad cares, though. When I told him how I felt, he cut down on his dating. Who knows about my mom? I’ve tried to talk to her, but she ignores me. She doesn’t listen to me like my dad does. I’m just glad I can date now. They

don't want me around. Fine. I won't be around. They probably won't even notice that I'm not around anymore. I'll just disappear like Emily does.

"It's funny: I seem to give up everything for my family, and, at times, they don't care. I'm not asking for much in return, but a little gratitude and time would be nice. Just something to let me know that I am appreciated. But I am not. If I were, Mom wouldn't ignore me, Dad wouldn't bring those girls around so much and go out every evening, and Emily would take me out with her sometimes. She knows I can't drive. They all know that. What am I supposed to do? I gotta get outta here. Just wait `til I have a car. They'll never see me again. And I'll be somebody really great someday. Everyone will want to be near me. Then they'll see. Then they'll be sorry. Someday. Someday."

I sat in silence, contemplating my glorious "someday" when I swore I heard the distant winds calling my name. I knew that no human voice produced the sound, but I still heard my name as clearly as the stars on a cloudless country night. The whispering echo, like bamboo wind chimes in the distance, sent a chill down my spine, knotting my stomach and forcing my concentration away from my Lord. Excusing my fearful flight, I apologized to the Lord and told Him I had to leave before anyone worried about me. I again made the sign of the cross before leaving His Holy Presence.

The bike ride home disappointed my hopes because I again found myself alone in an empty house, no one missing me or noticing my prolonged absence. At least my chat with God made me feel somewhat better. At least for now, my fallen tears had dried by the foot of the cross.

Alone in my room, I listened to Jon Bon Jovi's "Bang a Drum" over and over again. It is an excellent song about prayer and believing in one's own strength. The words cheered me up even more.

Yes, I, Andrea Rea Stillman, am going to walk each step my own way.

For a brief interval after the thankless holiday, the topic of divorce slithered into the deepest recesses of my ignorance and denial. But my hidden despairs sneaked to the surface of my fragile being once again early one Friday afternoon as my sister, two of her closest friends, and I prepared for another exciting performance of the Fighting Panthers Marching Band at our high school football game.

As Emily drove us toward Kelly's house, emotions previously buried were revealed on Emily's beautiful face, causing panic in her younger sister. Emily signified my pillar of strength, my rock of support. If she collapsed, I would surely die.

Through sobering tears she confessed to Kelly: "I have planned my suicide. It would be so easy. It would be easier than living. I can't do this anymore. It's too hard. It's too hard." She paused.

I sat motionless and alone in the backseat forgetting to breathe. My eyes locked in an expression of morbid fear, a death grip held fast to my heart. I glimpsed into a dark and short-lived future. With my support gone, I would cease being. Only blackness stared back at me.

"I don't have the strength to do this. Life's too hard, but I can't commit suicide. I know I can't. Andi needs me. All we have is each other. I can't let her down . . . But it hurts . . . I need to see a psychiatrist. If I don't . . . I'm afraid I'll die!"

As petrified as I now felt, I breathed once again at the hope that Emily needed me as much as I needed her. She understood that she could not let me down. If she could take her pain so that I may live, surely I could do the same. But how? I knew my sister possessed more strength and courage than I could ever hope to empower. If she were this fragile, I must be in really bad shape. If she needed a psychiatrist, I must be in need of a savior.

After leaving Kelly's, we returned to the band hall on campus. I dressed in my uniform and congregated in the parking lot with the other percussionists awaiting lineup to lead our team into the stadium. As the thoughts of the events of the past hour resurfaced, my eyes swelled shut, and I once again fought back unwelcome tears. Fearing detection of the inevitable wet burst, I walked around parked cars trying my best to pass off my pain as boredom.

My close friend and fellow percussionist, Manny, noticed my peculiar behavior and attempted to find out the cause of my strife. My promise to Emily to keep the events of this day a secret forced me to lock my feelings deep inside. As Manny's concern persisted, I finally told him all. I knew his compassion secured the secrecy of my story.

Just as I began to wipe away leftover tears, the head percussionist, Ben, walked to where we stood and asked what was bothering me. Even though the relief of unburdening the secret protected me from telling another, Ben still tried his best to make me laugh instead of cry. "It's okay. I lost my doggy, too. I know how you feel, but it's okay. You'll get over it."

At the time, he did make me laugh, although I didn't know his intent. Was he merely being funny, or did he have a legitimate point to make? Either way, his words resounded in my ears for a long while after. "It's okay. I lost my doggy, too."

Ben did not lie. I did get over the tragedy of that day. I also understood the deeper meaning in those simple words, whether intended or not. A child cannot comprehend that

everyone goes through similar events. Somebody, somewhere, experienced the same sort of pain I experienced. Somebody, somewhere, actually lost her sister to suicide. Somebody, somewhere, could not hold onto her own life.

Experiences similar to and worse than my own have been dealt with many times before. Ben may not have known exactly how I felt, but I guarantee someone did and someone will again. That is the circle of life. We are all bound by shared experiences. The anguish of childhood rests in the distressing fact that children cannot yet understand their common bond with humanity. The child whole-heartedly believes that each experience endured is unique, therefore providing her with no guidance or understanding with which to conquer the situation with the least overflow of emotion and pain. Everything is an extreme tragedy or triumph.

To the children of today and tomorrow, I say, "I know how you feel. I lost my doggy, too."

The thought of suicide gripped my mind countless times in my youth. Fearing God's punishment, I never heeded those temptations, electing instead to give in to the rush of pain.

I often took a dull and rusted knife from my dad's desk and carved on my arm. I started at the inside crease at the elbow and intended to go to my wrist. Slash. Slash. Slash. Something about the dull pain soothed me. I never made it all the way to the wrist, though.

One time my dad got home while I performed my ritual cutting. As soon as I heard his car in the driveway, I cleaned the knife, put it back where he kept it, and ran to the shower. I put on a flannel shirt after my shower.

I wonder why my parents never bothered to ask me about my behavior. I mean, come on, I took showers as rarely as possible. Why would I take one in the middle of the afternoon? And,

yes, I loved flannel shirts, but why would I wear them in the middle of the summer in Texas? It's hot. They never took notice. Another proof, I thought, that no one cared.

The sensation from cutting myself with that dull blade awoke a tremor of real life in me. I felt something. More importantly, I knew what perpetrated this feeling and why it caused me to feel what I felt. It was real. I liked it even though it hurt. I refused to divulge this secret because I believed I must be really screwed up if I liked that sort of pain. But I really *did* like it. I felt more alive with each cut.

During the football game, the pain of Emily's bitterness and the pain of my parents' divorce crept upon me once again like the unwelcomed cold chill of death. The percussion section of the marching band sat close to the top of the bleachers during football games, and the ground was pretty far down from the top. Familiar faces and strangers alike nonchalantly walked underneath my seat, consumed in affairs of game activities, oblivious to the contemplated actions taking place above them.

One step, two steps, three steps. The band played an unmemorable and out-of-tune number. No one noticed or cared that I neglected my part. One missing bass drum out of four accounted for little loss. My hands clenched the railing at the top of the bleachers. The grunts of the players, the cheers and boos of the spectators, the ear-piercing screech of the cold brass, and the monotonous laughter below all converged into sounds of nothingness. Every sensation focused on a single speck of dust below my line of vision. My elbows buckled and my arms began to lift my dying body from its place.

I fell backward and landed in a seated position on the bleacher where I had stood moments ago. I heard the thud and felt my body convulse with the impact. Still, no one noticed.

The tremble shook me from my prior daze, and something directly in front of me demanded the same attention that I had given to that speck of dust. I saw no one and heard no one, but my vision cleared. This episode signified the closest step I ever took to fulfilling my fantasy of suicide. Some magnificent and overpowering force forbade me, though. I know now, as surely as I knew then, that my long-lost friend sent an angel to protect me and literally knock some sense into me. In the blink of an eye, my angel revealed the truth.

Even if my inclinations that no one loved or cared for me were true, my thoughtless actions would impact others. Imagine the horror and sleepless nights of the strangers below who witnessed my fall. The height from those old bleachers would probably only cause bones to break, anyway, and spare me death. Even so, innocent witnesses, some of whom might be children, would walk the remainder of their days scarred with the memory of my inconsiderate and selfish crime.

The Presence displayed a scene of my parents hovering over my lifeless body, their tears baptizing the ground and their sobs choking their own lives. I saw Manny, guilt-ridden and tormented with sorrowful regret that he could not console me better when he saw me crying before the game. He carried the blame of my actions with him to his early grave, destroying his future as God intended. I saw my sister as she looked on from afar. She did not cry. Her conscience could not add the burden of my death to the other burdens she already harbored. She backed away from the scene, blaming her lack of control, never to be seen again. I watched as my parents mourned the loss of two daughters. Emily and I shared none of our pain with them. Therefore, they, too, blamed themselves. Each forgot to eat and forgot to live. I saw them die long before their time. This scene took less than a fraction of a second to show me.

The vision awakened me: My life had meaning. My death would impact more people in more ways than I ever imagined. My thoughts shifted from taking my own life to saving my own life. I wanted to see a psychiatrist. No, I *needed* to see a psychiatrist. I wanted that self-confidence I never had before. I wanted to be in love with myself for the first time. By the fourth quarter of the game, I smiled once again. No one could take this miracle away from me, and no one could deny me of it. How else could anyone explain all that happened without a single person noticing or saying a single word to me? I must have looked foolish as I fell on my backside and stared to heaven. This is just the kind of action other kids love to tease.

After the game, my dad and I sat motionless and quiet in the van as he drove home. Just before we reached our exit, my nerves calmed enough to allow me to speak. “Dad, this is hard for me to say, but I have to. It’s a matter of life and death. Please just help and don’t ask why. Emily and I both want . . . well . . . we need to see a psychiatrist.”

My dad’s face did not beam with curiosity or redden with shock. “Your mother and I had talked about doing that. We thought it would be a good idea. We just hadn’t gotten around to it yet.”

I showed signs of surprise. “I will tell you that at least for me, it’s not about the divorce. I just know I will end up dead if I don’t get help.”

“It doesn’t matter what the reason is. I’ll make some calls and get you to somebody first thing Monday morning.”

Days later, Dad announced that Emily and I had an appointment with a friend of his who just happened to share Emily’s name. Emily liked her already. However, she now protested that she had no problems warranting the intervention of a shrink. The evil stare Emily sent my way after my dad repeated how I mentioned that we both wanted to see a psychiatrist would have

made a man six feet under cringe in fear of Emily's revenge. Emily agreed to accompany me on this venture only after interrogating me, ensuring that I had not shared sacred secrets with my parents.

We sat in the waiting room with trembling knees, fighting the urge to run right out of the building. Then, she called us. Together, Emily and I marched into her office as one walking the final distance to an awaiting firing squad, expecting to lie helplessly on couches as this stranger picked apart our brains, anxious to unveil our disgusting faults and broadcast them to the world.

Old television shows falsely portray this experience when they show insane patients lying prostrate on a sofa. Maybe some psychiatrists do it that way, but here I felt comfortable and like a real human being with human problems. We sat facing each other in regular chairs talking about nothing in particular. No mass of tools awaited to pick apart the incomplete and damaged pieces of my life.

Both Emilys could not stop talking. If I wanted to get a word in, I had to interrupt their ongoing conversation. In the course of their natural conversation, Emily, the psychiatrist, made me realize I was not the one getting the divorce. In fact, it was none of my business. I must refuse to allow my parents to make me feel guilty when I am with one and not the other. I come first. If they are hurt, they will get over it.

I used to blame Emily for going out with Bobby instead of spending time with Mom or Dad. Emily, the psychiatrist, pointed out that my sister responded as she should and that I should follow her example. My wants and needs come first. I am the important one. Talking with Emily, the psychiatrist, inspired my first thoughts of helping others. Maybe I could use my experience to help other kids get through theirs. I thought my story could help other kids somehow.

“You are not alone, children of the world,” I imagined my future self saying. “You are not alone. I am here. I understand.”

Self-confidence? I think after that one afternoon, I gained the strength to stand up for myself, but I still needed help to see my self-worth. “Hey, mistakes happen,” as Emily, the psychiatrist, said, “I spilled the milk! It’s the end of the world! That’s what people tend to think, but they *will* get over it.”

“They’ll get over it.” I will never forget those words from Dr. Emily. “It’s not the end of the world until it is the end of the world. Mistakes—they rarely last, and everyone makes them. Thank a person who tells you that you made a mistake. Learn from it and tell yourself you will never do that again or you will try harder the next time. Learn from it and get involved. Under no circumstances allow yourself to sit around the house just because you think your parents need you. If you cannot drive, ask your parents to take you somewhere. They probably will. Getting involved does make a difference. Sitting at home changes nothing. Accomplish something. Be proud of something. Love the you within. Make a change.”

Like Dr. Emily said, “Thoughts are facts, and facts are not always real.” In other words, just because a person may have graduated with honors from Harvard does not mean he or she is smart unless that person thinks he or she is smart.

Dr. Emily said the people who are afraid of being alone are probably afraid they will not like the person with whom they are alone. I used to be terrified when alone, not because I feared danger from the outside world. I feared the silence. I feared the rambling in my brain as it kneaded my psyche and encouraged self-destructive thoughts. I hated being alone because I hated my own company.

I understood this, then, after talking about the mistakes I made in harboring countless negative emotions pertaining to my parents' divorce. I could not regret or deny my feelings, but I should never wallow in them, forsaking my own wants and needs.

"We want the best for our parents, and we want them to be happy. Yet, we fear someone new coming into their lives. Not wanting this for them would be taking away their happiness. Let them move on. The children are not the ones getting a divorce. In fact, it is none of our business. What we have been told about it is all we need to know. We do not need all the details."

And yet, as great as that first session made me feel, I knew enough about my weaknesses to know that the strength Dr. Emily gave me would not last long on the other side of her office door. I needed more. I needed the glue to keep the pieces of my life's puzzle firmly in place.

I have always been a dreamer, or, should I say, I try to find meanings within my dreams. I woke up once in a cold sweat, and I got out of bed to write my dream down. I had a terrible dream that I could not get away from something. Emily drove while I rode in the seat beside her, heading home singing Poison's song, "Give Me Something to Believe In." Our school cross-country team ran in circles around our car when all of a sudden, other cars driving in front, behind, and on either side of us began exploding and dead, bloody bodies were thrown from them. We kept driving, but could not get away. I struggled to find a meaning flowing from the blood of the victims.

After thinking about this for some time, I realized I needed something to believe in. I believed in nothing outside of the world I lived in my imagination. I did not think much of myself. Just as the bodies kept pace with our car, my repulsive reality kept pace with my fantasy

world. I never could outrun myself. I needed help. Like Dr. Emily said, “You can’t love another until you love yourself.”

I told Dr. Emily about the dream and about my interpretation. She could not help me but recommended I see a counselor. Dr. Emily said this particular counselor would probably be best for me. To my amazement, she referred me to a woman known around San Antonio as Santa Sue, or Sue Anderson. Santa Sue collected gifts for children who would otherwise receive nothing during the Christmas holidays.

I remember both the terror and the joy of that first session with Sue. I was finally going to meet the woman whom I had admired and respected for so long, yet I still feared seeking help. As time passed, I found myself looking forward to each session.

I loved seeing Santa Sue. Other kids might be embarrassed by the fact that they saw a counselor. Some might even feel ashamed, but I would brag about it. Thankfully, my friends never gave me a hard time about it. Maybe the reason was that I told them straight out: “Hey, at least I’m getting help. Who knows? If it weren’t for Sue, I might have been dead by now.”

Not everyone supported my need to spend money to talk to a stranger, though. Emily and I walked to her car, ready to come home from my mom’s house. She unlocked the door, but before I let myself in, I said, “I love seeing Sue. You should go. She could help you out a lot.”

With one leg in the car, Emily sprang back out and glared across the hood. “I can’t believe you’re wasting Mom and Dad’s money like that!”

“They want me to go. I’m not wasting money. It’s nice to have somebody to talk to.”

“You could talk to me and not waste their money.”

“You won’t listen or help me the way Sue does. Mom is proud of me. It’s better than being like you!”

I wanted to tell her everything that filled my mind. At least I took steps to solve my problems and forbade myself from running to a boyfriend and hiding instead of facing them. She made the mistake this time, hiding from solvable problems. I wanted to hit her, and I knew she wanted to hit me, too. If Emily would have made the first move, I would have clobbered her. How dare she doubt my motivation, especially after that scene before that fateful football game.

Even though I tried to let the moment pass, the friction between us lingered. “What *about* me?” Emily questioned.

“You’re not happy. You’re around less now than you were before the divorce. Bobby and you are always arguing, yet he is your excuse to get away from us. Don’t you think Mom and Dad miss you? Admit it! You’re not happy!”

“Yes I am!”

“Sure you are,” I answered in a sarcastic manner.

I knew Emily still suffered in silence. Emily had not been the same since the divorce. She had become more defensive and often complained that my parents showed favoritism toward me.

Emily failed to realize that I could not bare my soul to people so close to me. I needed a nonjudgmental friend to share the truth of failures in my life. I needed someone objective to help build me from scratch as only one unattached can do. Emily and everyone else close to me had their own opinions of how I should act and respond to life. Although I crossed a barrier, caring for Sue as a genuine friend, I still needed her.

Sue helped me so much. By answering the questions she asked, I proved my own self-worth. Being with Sue, I learned to see my life, both present and past, as real and worthwhile. I

could reflect on how I was and how I wanted to be. The easy part was talking. The hard part was becoming the person I imagined being someday.

The one rule in counseling is to maintain professional distance. This rule is intended to preserve the sanctity of the profession and to avoid the same sorts of problems that I experienced by crossing that line. Because in my mind I considered Sue to be a friend, someone I cared about, I kept the most disturbing thoughts locked deep within my vault. In order to help me, she needed to know everything, but I never could summon the courage to set those secrets free, always afraid, always ashamed. Instead, our sessions maintained surface conversation.

“How did you lose your self confidence? Or did you never have it?” Sue asked in her warm, soothing voice.

I thought long and hard about the question. How did I lose my self-confidence? “I remember when I was in the fifth grade, the other girls were getting into make-up, hair, and clothes. I was still a tomboy with a boyfriend whom nobody liked. You know, I never had a boyfriend my friends liked. Now that I think about it, there was a time in kindergarten when I had my first boyfriend and no friends. We would always play house together. He would come home from work and kiss me. I was a housewife with a baby boy. Anyway, on my birthday, my friends told me that if he was gonna go to my birthday party, then they wouldn’t go. ‘Okay,’ I said, and my parents took the two of us out for pizza. I guess that’s when it all started. The same thing happened in the third grade with my boyfriend, Josh Hudson.”

Sue looked touched by my story, so I continued. “I was the odd one in the bunch in the fifth grade. The guys liked me because I was an awesome football receiver.”

“Receiver?”

“Yep. Every day during recess, the boys would play football, and the girls would be cheerleaders. One day the girls played with the boys. I was the only one out of the bunch to make a touchdown. The boys asked me to play with them every day. They liked me during football season, but ignored me the rest of the time. I remember two boys, Corey and Jason. I really liked them, and everyone knew it. They would walk right up to me and call me names. They’d say things like, ‘Ewe, why would we go out with you?’, stressing all the right words. I’d just stand there, so embarrassed.

“Anyway, we took a field trip to the Alamo and some other historical missions. And my so-called friends told me that if I didn’t break up with my boyfriend, Charlie, I couldn’t hang out with them. Again, I said, ‘okay’ and did exactly what they thought I wouldn’t do. I figured that if they were real friends, they wouldn’t ask me to do that. Even though I did what was right, it hurt to be left out, you know?”

“Yes. It is hard. You were pretty strong to do that in the fifth grade.”

“Well,” I smiled at the remembrance, “actually, Charlie, my other friend, Angie, another outcast, and I sat on this bench with our heads down, feeling really sad. Our teacher, Mrs. Rozenburg, asked us what was wrong. We told her. She asked us if we were friends. We put our arms around one another and told her we were the best of friends. She said, ‘I’d much rather have two really, really good friends than be friends with *them*.’ She made a nasty face and waved her hand in disgust. We looked at each other and said, ‘Hey, she’s right.’ We had a great time after that.

“Mrs. Rozenburg took us under her wing. She’d let us stay inside during recess to be her little helpers. She’d let us play, let us help grade papers, and played learning games with us. It was neat seeing what our classmates were making on papers. And we started winning every

spelling bee. We got to pick teams. The others started to complain that we always won, but she'd shrug and say, 'You didn't want them on your team.'

"She was special. She made us feel so special. I found out recently that she died. Went to the doctor 'cause she was feeling bad. The doctor told her she had six months to live. She died the next day. Cancer. I miss her. I never got the chance to tell her what she meant to me."

"I'm sure she knew."

"In middle school, I still wasn't accepted. So, in the seventh grade, I started to fix my hair each morning, dress up, and act like them. I was accepted, but not happy. At the end of my eighth grade year, I started to be myself again. I lost some friends, but I also gained some."

"That's good."

"I guess, but this year I didn't talk to any of the popular kids anymore."

"Why not?"

"I don't like the way some of them acted. Some of them judged people not by who they are, but by where they shop and how they look. One day at lunch, I was sitting with the cool group. There's this girl named Lisa. She was talking to some guys at another table. This girl, Melissa, said, 'Oh, poor Lisa. Look who she's forced to hang out with now.' As if she had no choice but to sit there. Lisa was just that kind of person. She was friends with everyone. I couldn't believe the nerve. I picked up my lunch, threw it away, and went and sat by some of my buddies from band, and never looked back. They're not all bad people; they're just not like I am, you know?"

"Do you have anything in common with them?"

“Sometimes I dress like them. Sometimes I dress in my cowboy boots and starched jeans. Sometimes I like to dress in my bleached, slashed jeans and Doc Martins. I don’t hang out with all of them. They’re too superficial.”

“All of them? Are some of them your friends again?”

“They’re all my friends, just not close friends. We don’t hang out or anything. We don’t have much in common.”

“That’s good that you still consider them friends.”

“I get along with just about everyone. Now that I think about it, I’m pretty lucky. I’m a freshman with a senior boyfriend and senior friends. But then again, they’ll all be graduating soon. Then I’ll be back where I was.”

Some of my most deep-rooted problems, such as sex and my new obsession with physical pain and suicidal thoughts, cemented themselves in my inner tomb, fearing the response such horrific revelations would elicit from Sue. My inner demons shamed my conscience into believing that these “unique” problems would scare Sue and she would abandon me. My fears limited the potential aid Sue could have provided. I continued to struggle with these demons, unable to realize my self-value and abilities until well into my twenties. Had I shared my shameful behaviors sooner, allowing Sue to work with me to heal the torment of my mind, I might have had the faith to step on the path of my destiny leading to my “someday” a lot sooner. Maybe I would have had direction in college and beyond instead of fighting the inevitable future.

As luck had it, discussing even my smallest problems somehow sparked insight into the truth of other hidden problems, cascading unexpected solutions and answers to some of my more personal issues. However, it just took a lot longer than it otherwise would have had I trusted Sue with full exposure and disclosure.

Even though my best friend remained a distant memory for some time, He sent people to look after me and to guide me. He no longer consoled me at my bedside or appeared in physical form in my moments of most dire need, but He still took care of me.

I have grown to believe that only child eyes, or an adult given a rare glimpse through child's eyes, have the innocence necessary to visualize such heaven-sent love. My child eyes dimmed as puberty paved the way for adulthood. He never left my side, though. The experience at the bleachers that led me to the safe, healing comfort and wisdom of the friend I found in Sue proved that my best friend remained faithful. The process of reuniting Andi with the body and spirit the daydreamer dominated began at these bleachers at the Clemson High School football field.

Chapter Six

Jessica

My first step on Texas soil breathed welcomed joy in a dark spirit. My thoughts shifted to improving my circumstances by profiteering the spirits of my ancient kin. The soil of Texas, spanning a view beyond the eye's sight, pumped new life through my veins, reuniting me with the soul that once dwelt in my body. My stint in Virginia escaped my memory like a distant epoch lived by someone long forgotten. My thoughts beat pure rhythmic enchantments as one never parted from the love of her family. Here, in this blessed state, my body felt and embraced the devotion ingrained in the south Texas wind.

The healing of home encouraged my youthful dreams of rocketing to success as God intended. Jessica Anne Hoffman Faulkin, reborn Mary Parker, returned to the abandoned two-year-old little girl, giving her new life. Though slow to start, by age seventeen I sobered up, obtained my GED, and traded in a life of prostitution for a steady job as a dispatcher for a trucking company. By age nineteen, I spent weeknights studying and attending classes at South Texas Community College in McAllen, Texas, forty miles east of Rio Grande City, my new home. Although not the most glamorous of livelihoods, I prided myself in these accomplishments. I maintained full control of taking care of and providing for myself. I still dreamed of chasing stars and flying away, but nothing beat the pride of independence. That, my friend, is true success.

The bricks supporting these newfound accomplishments left bare one hollow layer in my foundation. I remained alone – no friends nor family to share my dreams or witty conversation. When not at work or school, I turned to the companionship of television. Soon, my dreams unleashed my subconscious desire for love as portrayed in sitcoms and movies. The romance and lust that sweep the nation's wallets down the deep pockets of Hollywood inspired in me a delusive craving for similar companionship. Although I knew such love sprouted nowhere other than on the screen and even though I doubted the absolute existence of love, I could not restrain my urges. The utter need for a warm body to share my nights with made my small apartment grow emptier every time I unlocked the front door to embrace another evening of solitude. I spent less and less time at home.

After evening classes, I remained confined within the quiet walls of the library, studying until my eyes maintained just enough strength to steer my body home. Classless nights found me window shopping at a mall or milking a beer while listening to local bands. I had managed to discover those special places that ignored my underage status. All this activity I did alone. My desperation grew with each solitary night. I knew I was by no means unattractive. I even thought I was rather pretty. Why, then, did no one ever approach me on my lonesome rendezvous? Did I give off an aura of inapproachability? There must have been something about my inner person that repelled others. This growing self-loathing broke down my confidence and ego even more. At the height of my diminished self-estimation, I met him.

The school library housed isolated cubicles throughout the building, offering students additional solitude in the quiet of studies. I discovered that a cubicle in the library basement provided the best atmosphere for me to get work done. I called it my dungeon. No one else frequented this space unless coming to retrieve a needed book, which few ever did since the only

books in the basement were old religious works. This particular night, my brain refused to focus on any task put before it. I scanned the same passage time after time, retaining nothing. My pen left my notepad and doodled on the desk. My fingers tapped to the rhythm of the clock ticking, ticking, ticking.

My newfound lonesome anxiety had produced the side effect of my school work getting completed weeks ahead of schedule. With no dire need of forcing my brain to produce anything at this time, I left my dungeon halls. Sitting in my car, I could not summon the strength for my hand to turn the key in the ignition. I was restless with nothing to do, nowhere to be, and no one to see. Time marched on in an empty vacuum of relentless agitation. Nothing. Nothing. I am nothing. I feel nothing. Yet, I feel everything. Every pressure of human existence and the endlessness of time suffocated my thoughts. I got out of my car and began walking.

Just a few short blocks from campus resided a local coffeehouse where many of the students went to study. Such atmospheres had always made me feel at home. I ordered hot chocolate and sat outside to stare at the rising moon. In an adjacent corner sat a man engrossed in a novel, sipping his coffee. I glanced his way and noted his aloofness before becoming absorbed in my own thoughts. With a start, my mind shot back down to earth as I noticed his form standing above me. I grinned as he flipped a penny on the table and asked for my thoughts. I laughed to myself, wondering what this stranger would say if he knew my first thought was how absurd his pickup line.

“I was just thinking how bright the stars are tonight. It’s beautiful.”

He looked heavenward. “Yes. It is beautiful, isn’t it? My name’s Malcolm.”

“Mary.”

He shook my hand. "Hello, Mary. May I join you?" I was struck by his speech. He enunciated each word with such sophisticated precision.

"Sure." He sat beside me, and, for a moment, we looked into each other's eyes. We did not stare in romantic fascination. Nor did we relent to the emotion of love at first sight. We took each other in, lost in simple wonder. He was by no means a dream come true, no strapping hunk arrived to clear the table and make love to me in a fit of frenzied ecstasy right then and there. I, myself, modeled the plain look of modest womanhood, dressed in my favorite style consisting of jeans, a t-shirt, and a ball cap. No makeup, no perfume, no feminine elegance whatsoever. Yet, even without the physical prowess typical of young attraction, some sort of undefined chemistry ignited an immediate curious connection between us.

"What were you reading?" I asked in an attempt to spark some sort of conversation.

"Grisham. I have an annoying hobby of reading the book and then going to see the movie. But, of course, the movie's never as good as the book."

"Why do you bother, then, if that's true?"

"I just have to. I can't help it. I love seeing how the movie strays, and I love complaining about how they left out something important or how an actor failed to portray a certain emotion that the author describes so vividly. The problem with movies is that nothing is left up to the imagination. There is so much inner dialogue in books that regular moviegoers won't get. I hate how movies so blatantly fail at bringing a book to life, but I love tearing the movie to pieces."

"Have you ever seen a movie you liked as much as the book?"

"Sure. Have you seen *Simon Birch*?" I nodded in the affirmative. "Well, the book is called *A Prayer for Owen Meany* and is very different. But, they realized they could in no way

capture the greatness of the book in two hours, so they went a different way and were able still to capture the spirit. That was great. That's my favorite movie."

"I love the part when he tells off the preacher in church. He gets what faith is really about."

"So, I've shared one of my neurotic hobbies. What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Tell me something no one else knows about you," he said.

I sat in silence for a while. I had no idea what to say. "Well, my life's an open book. Ask me something."

He glanced around and saw that I, too, had a book with me. He peeked at my copy of Fyodor Dostoevsky's work *The Devils* and asked, "You reading that for a class?"

"No, for fun. I enjoy reading as well."

"Are you a literature major?"

"No. It's just my hobby. I love reading the old guys. The Russian authors are my favorite. I love Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. I like some new stuff, too. I really got into the whole *Harry Potter* series, but that is more for quick, mindless reading."

"Mindless?"

"I don't mean mindless as in stupid, but that's stuff I don't have to concentrate too hard on. Those are great books for reading while lounging by a pool or when there are other things going on. Like during the semester when I have a lot to do mentally, I don't want to read *War and Peace*; I want to read Nicholas Sparks or one of these teen book series. I like them, too. But, there is so much depth in Dostoevsky, so much he says without saying anything. I love it. I wish I could get paid to sit around and read all day."

“Dostoevsky? He’s so . . . dark. So is Tolstoy. Doesn’t quite seem to fit you.”

I wondered how he would know what fit me. “Yet we are a lot alike. Dostoevsky was a mastermind, a genius lost in his own mind. He knew the fate of Russia before it happened. He saw the fall coming and warned them in his works. He understood the desperation of the human spirit. Yet, at the time, people thought he was crazy. Now, they think he was a literary genius. That’s not the part I identify with, though. He struggled within himself and with his spirituality, and he reveals that struggle in his work. Tolstoy did the same thing, but it comes across differently. Dostoevsky doesn’t seem to have as good a grasp on the things that control him, like gambling. He keeps fighting the same battles. I’m just like him in that respect, the inner struggle. I get him.”

“Wow. So, you must have done a great deal of research on those guys,” Malcom inquired.

“Nope. It’s just what I get from the work,” I explained. “I could be way off for all I know, but I don’t think you can be a writer without revealing a part of yourself in your writing. It’s like any creative process: it all comes from somewhere. Even fiction is drawn from reality, and all an artist has to go on is his or her own experiences in life. There is no such thing as pure fiction given birth in the author’s mind. It’s just a truth revealed in a fictitious story. No matter how false or absurd the storyline, the emotion behind it is real.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Take your man, Grisham: He has a law background. All his books are fiction, but he bases them on the truth of law, something he knows well. Or, take romance novels: That kind of romance does not exist, at least, not for anyone I’ve ever met. Why, then, are they so popular? Well, because all women want to be desired, especially the longer they’re with someone.

They've got needs. If those needs aren't being met, they'll get 'em met by reading that smut. Or take Dostoevsky. A lot of his characters have one thing in common. They're all battling a moral or physical dilemma. None of those characters are real, but the struggle for Dostoevsky is. He deals with his own personal angst through the development of his characters. He may not find the answers, but at least he finds expression.

"Like in *Brothers Karamazov*," I continued. "Smeryakov suffers from epilepsy, and we see how he deals with that disease. Not coincidentally, Dostoevsky had epilepsy. He pulled from his own experiences. I haven't done any real study on him, but I once read somewhere that he even considered some of his stories to be confessions. With each new story, he strives for perfection, for absolute truth. He's seeking Utopia for his characters. If he can give his characters that perfection, he will find answers to his personal dilemmas. He will have conquered his demons.

"If I write a book about a character being abused and killing her abuser, it doesn't mean I have ever been in that situation. It just means that that particular storyline best suits my need to express some hidden emotion."

"And what are you hiding?" he smirked.

"Nothing, I'm just saying..."

"And you're not a literature major?"

"Nope."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty," I lied. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight," he lied.

"Grad student or young professor?"

“Neither. I have enough credits to be a senior, but I quit school for a while. You know, sowing my wild oats, trying to figure out life.”

“What brought you back?”

“A few years in the real world. I want more, and you can’t get more these days without that piece of paper.” He paused. “So, you love to read stuff written by old dead guys, but you are not a lit major. Do you want to be a writer?”

“No. It’s just my hobby. You’ve got your hobby. Mine is analyzing the hidden meaning in a story, trying to figure out what makes people tick, who a person is behind the mask he or she wears in society.” I glanced back toward the stars and smiled. “Dive into other’s mysteries and ignore my own.”

“Again with the mystery. And you’re only 20?” he chuckled. “Then what’s your major?”

“Undeclared. I have no idea what I want to do with my life. What about you?”

“Journalism, with a minor in English literature.”

I nodded my head. We sat in silence for a few moments staring wherever our eyes fell. I could not believe how comfortable I felt with this stranger. I laughed to myself and wondered how a recluse such as myself managed to step out of character with my incessant babbling. Was I that desperate for companionship that my lips burst forth at the first signs of human contact? Was he so keen toward others that he could sense my interests and excite my attention, or could he be the one I had been waiting for? My heart leapt with joy after begging for life for so long. My heart convinced my mind that the latter reason was the authentic reason.

It is all ancient history now. How cunning and suave Malcolm turned out to be. He knew nothing about literature. He had heard someone say somewhere that Dostoevsky was a dark man and that Tolstoy was a troubled man. He used this inkling of hearsay to draw me in, to believe in

his false superior knowledge. He never even attended one college class: no journalism major, no English minor, all show. And I fell for it. At the time, he was out of work, sipping coffee near a college campus, scouting his next prey. And he found me.

For the next few months, we spent all our free time together. Instead of completing assignments weeks in advance, I completed them just in time. At first, the work remained above par. Then my obsession with new romance took priority further and further away from school until I became an average student.

Malcolm was not the man I dreamed about, but he more than made up for it in the way he treated me. Every conversation mirrored the first, except that his speech became more relaxed and his words ran together, often making his speech sound lazy and much like a stereotypical uneducated redneck. He cared about what I had to say and listened to every word. We shared similar interests and dreams. He even talked of marriage.

As our relationship grew, he soon desired to take our intimate relationship to the next level. One evening, we planned to go out as normal. Our dates remained simple—dinner, a movie, and then his house for television and talk. We often made out, but it never advanced beyond that. This particular evening, we planned to meet at his house. I walked in to a picnic-style meal spread across the living room floor. Scented candles lighted the otherwise dark room. Marvin Gaye serenaded us through the radio speakers. Rose petals paved a path from the front door to the picnic blanket. Malcolm waited for me on the blanket with two bottles of coke. I smiled.

“I know ya don’t like champagne er wine so I’ve your favrit.”

He asked me to sit as he began to pull out the contents of the basket. He forgot none of my favorites. Knowing how much I love chicken, but hate skin and bones, he prepared chicken strips straight from Kentucky Fried Chicken. From Popeye's Chicken he prepared red beans and rice and biscuits. He amazed me. I had mentioned once that I preferred KFC's chicken, but loved the red beans and rice from Popeye's. He remembered and went through the trouble to prepare a meal to suite my idea of perfection.

After dinner he cleared the mess and played the movie *The Way We Were*. "I know it's your favrit," he whispered in my ear as I snuggled up against him.

We did not watch the movie much, though. We kissed, and, in that moment, I felt swept away by my hero just like the fair maidens in the trash novels I once loathed so much. The passion overwhelmed both of us, heating our cravings beyond the comfort of control. We both felt driven to be closer and closer than clothing and skin allowed. His hands crept beneath my shirt, freeing his fingers to caress my body. My heart pounded in my chest, and my stomach cramped with both longing and fear.

I had told him I was a virgin. Alan stole my sexual innocence, forsaking my future virtue. He taught me how to gain from sexual profiteering. Now, at this moment, I heard those words echoing in my ears once again. "You're a slut. Do you want everyone to know what I already know?" I was overwhelmed with the notion that Malcolm would see me naked and know the truth of my past. He would despise me. I pulled away.

"Malcolm, I don't...I..."

"What's wrong? Are y'okay?"

"I...I'm scared...I lied to you before."

"Ya lied? `bout what?" I heard concern in his voice.

“I’m not a virgin. But it...I...was too young... and...”

“An ya din’t wanna talk about it?”

“No...I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Then don’t. Look, it’s none of my bisness who you’re with a’fore me. All I need t’know is that you’re wi’me now. This guy ain’t still in your life, is he?”

“No.”

“Then, okay.” He paused. “We don’t hafta do anthin’ y’don wanna do. I love you and I’m not gonna hurt you. Do you believe me?”

“Yes. I’m just scared. I don’t know if I can...I don’t know if I’ll be what you expect.”

He smiled. “I love you. That’s enough. You won’t let me down.” He spoke these words with great precision and delicacy.

He pulled me back to him, and we lay there with me in his arms. He had never told me he loved me until tonight. Although I was still petrified, I felt safe. I pulled myself up and looked at him. “D’you really love me?”

“Yes,” he answered matter-of-factly.

“I love y’too.”

We made love for the first time that night. I did feel like a virgin. Alan gave me no choice. Malcolm did. Alan taught that love and sex hurt. His abuse, leading me to more lucrative sexual escapades, taught me that sex is a weapon. Malcolm showed me that sex can be a very beautiful and satisfying experience.

The romance in our relationship soured soon after we quenched the suspense of intimacy. Because of the whirlwind courtship and the fact that the sex still satisfied, I blamed the changing

tides on relational maturity. Before, Malcolm catered to me, not to the point of outlandish spoil, but as a show of affection. Now, if an idea did not suit his fancy, he refused it. He acted only when his needs demanded attention.

By this time, we were all but living together. I spent most nights with him. He made me feel guilty any time I chose homework or sleep over spending time with him, so much so that I neglected assignments, turned in inferior papers, and failed exams. I had received a letter informing me that I was on the brink of failing out of school. I had made a few friends at work, most of whom were male. One in particular went to school with me as well. He warned me that Malcolm was the type of man who had to have a woman barefoot and pregnant. He had to control his woman. He warned me that Malcolm was not the kind of man with whom I wanted to settle down. So eager to be in love and to be loved, I refused to acknowledge what I, too, knew to be the truth.

To ensure that I did as he said, he bought me a cellular phone. He called me at all hours and demanded an exact account of my actions. God forbid I miss his call. He quizzed me for hours to verify the details of my reports never altered. He checked my messages with regularity. Tony left me a message one day saying nothing more than he would not be in class and asking if he could get any notes from me at work. This enraged Malcolm, and he refused to believe that Tony and I were friends and nothing more. He forbade me from having any male friends.

The next afternoon, Tony asked me for a ride home from work. He lived less than one mile from me. I agreed. Waiting at a stoplight just minutes away from our destination, from the corner of my eye I saw the passenger door fly open and Tony appear to fall out onto the pavement. Thinking the fall to be some freak accident, I giggled as I turned, expecting to see Tony rise from embarrassment as he climbed back inside.

Instead, I saw that Malcolm had him pinned to the side of the vehicle, choking him and saying, “What the hell do you think you’re doing with my girlfriend?” His angry words were slow and precise.

Through choked breaths, Tony tried to reason with Malcom, “She was just giving me a ride home. Calm down.”

Both Malcolm’s rage and Tony’s unbelievable calm paralyzed any action or words on my part. A police officer just happened to be at the gas station across the street. He ran to the scene and threw Malcolm to the ground, handcuffing him. Tony slid to the ground fighting to catch his breath. After inhaling a few times, he returned to me to make sure I was okay.

I am still amazed at his friendship. A madman choked him, eager to kill rather than trying to understand the simplicity of his relationship with the madman’s girlfriend. Knowing this and surviving an attack, Tony came to comfort me.

By the time the officer had Malcolm cuffed and under control, another officer had arrived. They put Malcolm in the back of the patrol car and came to talk to Tony.

“When I came out of the gas station, I saw that man choking you. Can you tell me what started this incident?” the first responding officer asked.

Pointing to me, Tony answered, “This is his girlfriend. All I know is that the door opened, and he pulled me out and started choking me. He asked me what I was doing with his girlfriend. We work together, and she was just giving me a ride home from work. I told him that.”

“Has he ever done anything like this before?” the officer asked Tony.

“No, Sir, not to me,” Tony affirmed.

The officer turned to me. “Has he ever done this before?”

“No, Sir,” I mumbled through sobs.

“Do you know how he could have known you would be here? Was he following you?”

“I don’t know,” I cried, dumbfounded by the drama unfolding before me. I really had no idea. We all lived around the same area. It was a small town, but the whole scene still seemed unbelievable. Where did he come from?

“A witness says she saw him at the gas station over there by the blue car. Then he just started running as fast as he could toward this vehicle. She says he wasn’t even watching other traffic. Is that his vehicle?”

I looked. Sure enough, Malcolm’s car sat beside a pump at the same gas station from where the officer ran. “Yes, Sir.”

“He says he was at the gas station getting gas on his way to work when he saw your vehicle sitting at this light. He noticed a strange man inside of the vehicle, and he just snapped. He is calm now and apologetic. Does he work around here?”

“Yes. Just down the street.”

He turned back to Tony. “We have all we need here. Do you want to press charges?”

Tony turned and looked at me. I still sat crying. “No,” he sighed.

“Are you sure? We can’t take him in if you don’t press charges.”

“Tony,” I said, “Do what you have to do. Don’t worry about me.”

Tony smiled, “No. I won’t press charges.”

The police officer returned to the patrol vehicle and whispered to the other officer. He opened the door to let Malcolm out. Before he uncuffed Malcolm, I heard him say, “Against my better judgment, he’s not pressing charges. But you have to leave as soon as I take the handcuffs off. If you do not and try to confront either one of them, I will have you arrested.”

With handcuffs removed, Malcolm stared at me with a look of both disgrace and anger. He turned and ran as fast as he could back to his vehicle. He jumped in and peeled out of the parking lot in the opposite direction. The police remained at the scene until both Malcolm had gone and I had gone. Tony and I rode in silence all the way to his house. Our friendship, understandably, was never the same after that.

Later that evening, Malcolm showed up at my apartment banging on the door. I refused to let him in and threatened to call the police if he refused to leave. He begged me to see him and to forgive him. I still refused him admittance. Then, a neighbor cracked her door and warned Malcolm to leave because she had called the police. At this, I let him in. He cried on my lap determined to win my forgiveness.

“I couldn’t help myself. I saw him with you, and I just lost it. It’s just that I love you so much, and I can’t stand the thought of being without you. I can’t stand the thought of your being with someone else.”

I forgave him. This is how our new relationship worked. He did something stupid and pleaded for forgiveness and I forgave, and the cycle began again.

I knew I put myself in danger by staying with him. I knew he would never change. I knew that my lone chance of happiness and safety required separation from him. I knew remaining stagnant would bring about my own end. Somehow, though, I could not let go. He had survived thirty-two years without me, yet he succeeded in making me believe he would be lost without me. Any trouble he found himself in after I left him would be my fault because I left him. What a powerful mastery this man held over me!

Our relationship did end, however, for a time. Malcolm had a lustful desire to share me without any other man ever touching me. While I was sleeping naked in bed, Malcolm took

pictures of me and posted them on a website. These pictures somehow circulated into the hands of Virginia State Police. The past I thought I had outrun caught up with me. Because of the good fortune of my naked pictures, police linked me to Malcolm and Starr County, Texas.

A few short weeks after the posting of the pictures, Malcolm and I spent the evening watching television. A commercial for the ten o'clock news announced a story about, "a Virginia girl wanted for murder believed to be in Starr County. Police need your help. More at ten."

My heart stopped beating. A multitude of thoughts ran through my mind. Murder? I guess he died after all. How long did he last? How was he found? Have they been looking for me all this time? How did they find me? I closed my eyes, and the entire final day with Alan replayed in my mind. My head swarmed, and dizziness caused built-up perspiration to trickle down my temples.

"Are you okay?" Malcolm asked. He looked at me as if he knew. Did he know? Or was I just being paranoid?

"I'm fine. Just have a little headache." I knew I could not watch the news with Malcolm there, but I had to watch to see what they reported. What was I going to do?

Malcolm answered this for me. "Well, I'm going to bed." He got up, and I breathed a little easier.

"Tonight's top story, Virginia police ask for your help locating this girl." They displayed an old school photo. "She is wanted in connection with the murder of her uncle, Alan Faulkin." The potential trouble that caused no fear the night I ran away from Virginia now returned to haunt my stable future.

They changed to a photo of Alan held by Maggie. “I just want to talk to her. All I want to know is why?” She looked at the camera with tears streaming down her face. “We loved her like a daughter. Then, things changed. I just want to know why.” My jaw clenched with those words. The nerve of that woman pretending to be the loving and innocent widow.

The newscaster continued, “A pornographic website containing nude photos of the suspect was linked back to Starr County. Police are now searching for the creator of this website. Her name is Jessica Anne Hoffman. If you have any information, please call local authorities at (they repeated the number several times). Virginia police state that there is a reward for her capture.”

I knew right then Malcolm had somehow put my photo on that website or sold it to someone with a pornographic website. Because I never posed nude for him or anyone else, I assumed he took the pictures while I slept. My life in Starr County ended that night, but I had no idea where or how to go. I went to bed hoping the solution would find me in my dreams. I never made it that far.

I awoke to Malcolm talking with someone in the living room. The muffled voices offered little guidance as to their conversation. The tone, however, gave away their authority. I knew the police either found me out or Malcolm had given me up. Either way, I knew I had to leave at that moment. I rose out of bed and threw on my clothes. I grabbed Malcolm’s wallet from the night stand and took all the cash he had in it. With nothing but the clothes on my back and what little money I had in my pockets, I climbed out of the window and said goodbye to Rio Grande City.

Chapter Seven

Andrea

As Jessica delved deeper and deeper into her story, my mind drifted swifter and swifter in two directions. Her tale mesmerized my senses, easing my body to the edge of my seat, awaiting the next word, the next phrase, the next tale. As she spoke, I drifted into my own experiences, my own moments of self-realization, self-formation.

Jacob, my first male friend, and I snuck behind the bookcase in the back of the classroom to retrieve two huge beach balls intended for outdoor play time. Ignoring the warning from the teacher, we proceeded to bounce those temptations against the wall, certain that the bookcase blocked our sin from her view. Responding to the sound of a continual thud, she towered over us, catching us in our guilt. Our punishment: no recess and no more beach balls.

My youthful, romantic relationships progressed to holding hands as the boyfriend of the week walked me to class, wrote notes to me throughout the day, and shared his lunch with me. An occasional birthday party or school event afforded us the chance to see each other outside of the routine of school days.

And the drama. So anxious to grow up and to learn the ways of the world, our young romances modeled the wild extravagances acted out in soap operas without the heated sexual intensity. Raging hormones and unstable emotions offset the construction of stability and common sense.

Most young loves flourish with child passion. We are mesmerized at the sight of our love. Then the new grows stale as routine sets in, igniting annoyance and pointless arguments. Anger blares “he said, she said.” A public scene ends the romance with tears and a shattered heart. Two weeks and the love affair concludes. Give the heart a day or two to mend and then the game of love begins anew.

And how that game begins. We all stand as a group chatting during lunch, waiting for the bell to beckon us to our next class. She gets an idea in her head to unite her two friends. “Andi, go away for a minute.” I pretend to be annoyed with my friend running me off on some absurd errand. She looks at him with probing assurance and says, “Do you like her?”

“What?” he asks, bewildered by this far-out question.

“Do you like Andi?”

“I guess so,” he says, somewhat oblivious to what is coming next.

I return to the scene on cue, and she asks me the same question, “Do you like him?”

“I don’t know,” I say embarrassed. “I guess so.”

Our eyes meet, communicating our timid understanding of what is coming next. Two people who had no idea they “liked” each other five minutes before now hold hands and write letters declaring their affection for one another. Then the boy’s best friend confronts me in the hall between classes and hands me the customary breakup letter. Declaring how I will never get over the loss of my former love, my heart leaps in anticipation when someone else’s best friend places another type of note into my hand. It reads, “Ronnie likes you. Do you like him? If you do, meet him by the bleachers after school.”

My broken heart immediately heals when I realize this cute boy likes me. After school, standing at the gym’s back door, I look out to see him waiting by the bleachers. I walk the short

distance to meet him. "Hi," his shy voice utters. I return the greeting. We hold hands as he walks me to my bus. And just like that, my broken heart is mended and I am in the game again.

My freshman speech and drama class teacher professed to my class that the school system makes a grave mistake in allowing ninth graders to move up to high school, forcing still very impressionable minds to have to deal with, too soon, the more adult way of life, such as dating and sex. In his opinion, fourteen-year-olds and fifteen-year-olds should remain within the protected confines of junior high, allowing a safer environment for us to grow in maturity. Of course, at the time, we all took great offense to this bold statement. In hindsight, I understand his wisdom.

I began my first month of high school dating a junior. Two months into my freshman year, I began dating a senior, elevating my social status. My popularity level skyrocketed. I failed to comprehend that huge developmental differences exist between a fourteen-year-old girl and an eighteen-year-old boy. All I knew was that in high school, cars made dating possible. A boy and a girl did not have to decide immediately whether or not to become boyfriend and girlfriend. Cars and the chance to date gave mobility to my desperate urge to run away from home.

Frank and I met in study hall. My young heart swooned with pride as this gorgeous, green-eyed, dark-skinned, well-built boy began passing me notes in class and smiling at me as he awaited my responses. Fear of my possible inability to love another overshadowed my excitement at this new prospect for love. Dr. Emily's words bombarded my heart with doubt about the success of this new endeavor. "You cannot love another until you first love yourself." I fought this fear with the tactic of honesty. My notes to Frank warned him of my fear and alerted

him to the fact that the heart he sought needed the strength of a counselor to overcome its weaknesses. He still wanted to date me.

My parents forbade me from this more grown-up style of dating until I turned sixteen. I warned Frank of this additional obstacle. Instead of chasing him away with my excuses, he insisted that if we could not date, he wanted to jump ahead to the status of boyfriend and girlfriend.

We “went together” a few short weeks before my dad decided to start letting me go out alone with Frank. My dad tried to convince me that since he knew and trusted Frank I could start going on official dates.

The truth? No one wanted to feel sorry for me or responsible for me anymore. Before given permission to date, I spent most weekends home alone. Mom had Gary. Dad dated various women almost every weekend. Emily had Bobby. The weekend schedule for the family altered after the divorce. I remained the sole constant as far as the weekend routine was concerned. My family no longer had to feel guilty for leaving me home alone if Frank and I were allowed to go out.

Our first date would have varied little from that of other teens had I not cancelled it before it even began. He promised to take me to a movie and then to a party. Although I did not drink, my stomach ached with the excitement of attending my first high school party. Older boyfriends or girlfriends provided freshmen with the only means to such social events.

After school on this momentous Friday, my sister leaned against her car crying while Bobby looked on. Frank, intending to walk me to the car, walked me past the scene, protecting me from involvement in their bitter argument. After twenty or thirty minutes of tears, Emily beckoned me into the car.

Bobby climbed into the back seat behind Emily rather than the front seat next to her and slammed the car door. Less than five seconds into the drive home, this obnoxious teenager proved his immaturity by pounding the window with his fist. He proceeded to roll down the window and drum his hand on the hood of the car. Bobby sang with pompous intensity and with intentional vibrato. He escalated his insufferable behavior the longer Emily proceeded to ignore each attempt he made to get her attention.

Emily and I sat muted by uncertainty, fearful of his growing aggression. I maneuvered my eyes between the road and Emily, anxious about our safety on the road. At that moment, bitter anger absorbed my sadness and dread, and I longed to be bigger than he for just five minutes so that I could beat him up.

“No!” Emily broke her silence.

I turned my head toward her and witnessed Bobby tugging her left arm toward him through the space between the door and the seat. Could he be so full of blind hatred that he did not realize or care that his actions could cause the end of our lives as well as the end of other lives as we become victims in a fatal crash? Emily needed to focus on driving, not on freeing her arm from the clutches of her angry boyfriend. Just as she rescued her arm from his grasp, he seized it once again.

“You can’t have something back that you gave to me!” Emily screamed. Bobby attempted to remove from her wrist a watch he had given her. Emily’s continual flow of tears made my heart sink with empathy and sorrow. I knew I was powerless to help her.

“Couldn’t ya’ll please discuss this when I’m not around?” I pleaded.

“Now you’ve got your sister thinking I’m an asshole,” Bobby yelled at Emily. “Why do you always tell her only half the story and make me look like the bad guy? I want her to see how we fight!”

“It wouldn’t matter,” Emily responded. “Sisters stick together. I agree with her and take her side when she gets into a fight with Frank, and she takes mine.”

She was right. Even though I never found out what led up to this particular argument, I stuck by her side with this one. Family comes first, and, besides, my eyewitness account of his behavior condemned him. Emily, at this point, had no opportunity to give me the details of this incident. Granted, I now see the fight for what it was, typical teenage hormonal rivalry and bickering. At the time, I grieved over experiencing what I considered to be the monstrous conduct of the one I loved and cherished as my brother.

We survived the twenty-minute trek to Bobby’s house, dropped him off, and drove the lonesome miles to our own home.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that. Why does this always happen to me? Why?” Emily asked. I wanted to hug her and tell her she was a good person and that she did nothing to deserve what Bobby did. I wanted to make everything okay again, but how? I could not respond, lest I wind up in a puddle of my own tears.

I took a few deep breaths and asked, “Would you like to see a movie with me?”

“Don’t you have a date with Frank?”

“You’re more important right now.”

She hugged me and again asked why things like this always happened to her. We hugged and cried together.

“If I was big enough, I’d beat him up. Nobody has the right to treat you like that,” I managed to say through my tears.

I then called Frank to cancel our date: “Don’t be mad, but my sister really needs me right now.” The tone of his voice uncovered his disappointment, but he swore he understood. I felt terrible about missing my first date and letting down the boy my fourteen-year-old heart loved with so much youthful passion. My first date and I cancelled it to do something with my sister. She gave me the attention I sought from her since the day my parents announced their divorce. She wanted to go to a movie with me, that is, until Bobby called begging her to come over.

“I’m not going back with him,” Emily assured me before she left. “I’ll just go over there to get him off my back. I’ll be right back, and then we’ll go to that movie.”

She remained at Bobby’s house for so long that I did not know what to think. Just hours earlier, I saw a side of him that I had never seen before. Just hours ago, Emily chose to spend time with me, her little sister. When she returned, she hugged me. Her eyes revealed the same pain and hurt that had been there all afternoon.

“We were talking, and he said he loved me. I didn’t say anything to him.” That is all she had to say about her visit to Bobby’s house.

“Do you still want to go to the movies?” I asked, certain of the answer.

“I don’t know. Do you want to?”

“Only if you want to.”

“I’d rather be alone in my room.”

She closed the door to her bedroom, leaving me alone on the other side. She stayed home for the first time in a very long time, but I never heard one sound from the other side of that door. Once again, another Friday night found me alone.

I went to my room and tried to call Frank. It was close to 10 p.m., and I held onto the hope that he stayed home after I broke our date, hoping my call would lure him to me. No answer. I hung up the phone holding onto another hope that he may show up on his way home from the party. Lying in bed, I chuckled, realizing that two of my dates were cancelled in one night. At least my heart was in the right place. With this final thought, I fell asleep.

Chapter Eight

Andrea

I used to write letters to God. I described to Him my problems and asked for guidance or help. Everyone has a different way of dealing with situations. My way was by either talking to God or using my imagination. God provided relief when situations became overwhelming. My imagination frequently provided an opportunity to control situations before they became burdensome. I pretended to be Jon Bon Jovi. Sometimes I pretended to be in the future, in a time when MY poetry and MY songs have become famous worldwide and I am close friends with Jon Bon Jovi. I often closed my eyes and answered questions asked by interviewers. It became my way of escaping the real world and enjoying a life of my own, alive nowhere else but in my mind. The one obstacle to my imagination was that I used it so often that my true feelings never had a chance to be known. No one ever knew if I was happy, sad, angry, or excited. My feelings found expression in the lines of my poems. People could know how I felt by taking the time to read the depth hidden in those words.

In December, my ex-boyfriend, Peter, came over to practice for our band. However, neither one of us felt much like practicing. We talked for a while, and I convinced him to teach me how to play the guitar. I learned a few chords, none of which I remember today. We then went to my room to listen to the radio.

We sat on my bed staring at a picture of Frank and me which sat atop my radio. Peter turned to me and hinted, "I bet Frank would be upset if I kissed you."

I had a crush on Peter for a long time before and after this situation. He was the one that got away. We went together for two weeks in the eighth grade at which time I broke up with him

for allegedly cheating on me. I did not want to break up with him even then, but my pride would not allow any “man” to date another and me at the same time. One year later, I began dating Frank just before Peter broke up with the girl who broke us up. Rumor had it that Peter wanted me back. I loved Frank, but I also loved Peter. I was torn. I told Peter that I now understood how he felt having to choose between Leanne and me.

“Frank doesn’t have to know,” I said.

He leaned over and kissed me, and I did nothing to stop him. I looked up and saw Frank’s innocent eyes smiling at me. My own words echoed in my ears as I continued to stare at Frank’s unknowing gaze in that picture, taken such a short time ago. I had told Frank many times before that I would kill him if he ever cheated on me and hurt me the way Peter had. I risked all by giving in to the moment and kissing Peter.

“Frank’s lucky,” Peter said under his breath. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay. Promise me you won’t tell anyone. Not your girlfriend. No one,” I pleaded.

“I won’t. I don’t want Frank after me. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

I cheated on Frank and still got angry when he almost cheated on me. The following day, Sunday, I called Frank. We had not talked all weekend. He did not ask me how I was doing nor did he tell me he missed me. Instead, he said, “This girl at work wanted to know if I wanted to...you know. Guess what I said?”

“Sure, Babe. Anytime.” My sarcastic tone failed to yield the response I expected.

“I’m serious. I did.”

“Uh huh,” my voice droned.

“I’m serious!”

I did not know what to think or what to say. He sounded so proud of himself. If he would have told me that he did something wrong, that he was sorry and didn't mean it, we could have worked it out. But he sounded so happy, like such a conqueror.

Frank broke the silence. "I said yes, but then said no."

"Why?" I carried no emotion in my voice.

"Because of you."

My building anger took control of my undertone and elicited words foreign to my vocabulary. "Then why don't you just do your friend and leave me the hell alone!"

"Want me to? I will!" His tone rose to match mine, oblivious as to why his calm declaration the moment before would offend and upset a fifteen-year-old girl.

Should I cry or should I yell? Should I feel hurt or angry? I hung up the phone. My body shut down, and my instincts encouraged me to flee whenever confronted by alien emotions too difficult for rational thinking and reaction.

My phone rang seconds after I hung up on him, and, of course, Frank was on the other end. I hung up on him once again, and once again he called back. This time, I would not answer the phone. Frank would not give up so I gave in. We both tried to get the other to see our point of view, but, at this age, there is no handbook explaining to boys the extreme sensitivity and possessive quality that drives young girls. And there is no handbook warning girls that the excessive sexual energy of maturing boys delays the development of sensitivity.

He now wanted to break up since he thought I was acting like a child. I hung up on him once more and walked out of my room and out of the house. Like any other time when I felt restless and sad, I just started walking. The Mickey Mouse watch Frank gave me for Christmas was still bound to my wrist. I took it off and carried it in my hand. My every step weakened. I

had not eaten all day, and, at this point, I had no desire to do so. My appearance must have resembled that of a drunken fool.

Twenty minutes later, I found my way to the creek near the country club by my house. I sat on the curb looking into the reflections on the water and then at the watch. A nearby rock leaning against a neighboring rock caught my attention. I noticed a small hole between the two, and I placed the watch into it.

“If we make up,” I thought, “then I’ll come and get it. If we don’t, I’ll throw it in the lake across the street or give it to some little kid.”

Just then, Emily drove up and announced that my father and she had been looking for me. We headed home, and I told her the whole story. The tears continued falling and would not stop. My dad tried his best to console me, but I wanted to be left alone. Emily and my dad went inside, and I remained in the car. Ten minutes later, I got out and walked to the garage and got my dad’s scissors, white rope, duct tape, and sandpaper. Then, I got some sticks, sanded them, and tied them together. I made three crosses.

“God, what is happening? Am I losing him? He’s not going to come back, is he?”

I sat outside underneath the stars, waiting for my Romeo to come. Deep inside, I knew he wouldn’t.

Emily came outside and asked if I wanted to speak to my mom. I said no. She came back outside moments later. “Andi, come talk to her. She’s on the phone going insane. She’s asking everybody what’s wrong. She thinks you’re dying or something.”

“I’m coming.” To my mom I said, “Mom, I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“No.” I explained the story once again and asked, “Who’s right, Mom? Who’s right and who’s wrong?”

“Dear, a man and a woman think differently. The man thinks, ‘Well, I didn’t do it so she shouldn’t be upset’ and the woman thinks ‘He shouldn’t have even wanted to if he really cares.’ There is no wrong or right.”

“But it’s not fair.”

“Love’s not fair. Life’s not always fair.”

“I’ve never felt pain like this before. I don’t like it.”

“At least he cared enough to say ‘no.’ It will hurt. Love’s not always a basket full of roses.”

“I remember once when we got into a fight, and he wanted to come over. I told him I didn’t care if he came or not. I wasn’t really mad, but he came anyway and brought me a rose.”

“Hold onto those feelings. Write them down. Your best poems are full of feelings.”

“I was outside watching the stars and talking to God.”

“Do that.”

“I’m just so confused.”

“Go back outside. Continue to look at the stars and write your feelings. The answer will come to you. It always does.”

“Sometimes I feel like I have so much love to give and I never get any in return.”

“It’s not wrong to care. You have a big heart. Just remember that I love you and your father loves you.”

“I feel bad for not telling Dad why I’m upset.”

“He understands. Don’t worry.”

“Thanks, Mom.” Mom always managed to treat my problems with respect and advise me like an adult. She understood.

I hung up the phone, took up my crosses, and went back outside to pose questions to the night sky. “Lord, why am I fooling myself? He’s not going to come back anymore, is he? Why, Lord, why?”

It started to get cool, and I went back inside to call Frank. “Don’t talk. Just listen. I’m back to square one with my conscience. I’m not worth too much.”

“Andi, don’t say that. You’re worth a lot.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“You’re very important to me.”

“Shut up and listen.” I wanted him to hear me out before answering. “I went for a long walk until Emily picked me up, and then I sat outside like a dummy thinking you might care enough to come by and set things straight like you used to do.”

“Andi, I...”

“Shut up! I made crosses out of sticks and talked to God when all of a sudden it came to me. You don’t care.”

“Andi...” Frank kept trying without success to get a word in.

“SHUT UP!!! Then I talked to my mom, and I now understand that we’re both right and wrong. It hurts, but, since this is the way you want it, I’ll give your senior jacket back to you.”

“Are you finished?”

“Yes.”

“I do care about you. How many times do I have to tell you?”

“Sometimes a girl needs more than words to prove it.”

“What? I came to your house every weekend when I could have been getting wasted at parties. Why don’t I?”

“Because you don’t drink. You could...never mind.”

“What, Andi?”

“Nothing. I don’t want you to think I’m trying to change you.”

“No. Maybe you can help me.”

“Remember when you came over and brought me a rose?”

“Yes.”

I shifted gears. “Why did you say no to her?”

“Because I care for you.”

“Why?”

“Because you are the first girl who treats me the way I want to be treated.”

“Well, don’t you think I’d like to be treated the same? How do you think it makes me feel when you talk nonstop about your ex-girlfriends and constantly make fun of me?”

He began to see my point of view. “You’re right. If you told me Peter asked you to have sex with him and you said yes and then said no, I would be hurt.”

“SEE?” Ouch! He inadvertently reminded me that although I did not have sex, I did kiss Peter. My pride held my mouth shut.

“Andi, you’ve gotta believe me. I’m sorry. I love you.” His soft words were pleading. “I love you. Do you still want to break up?”

“No.”

After we hung up, my bitter tears tasted sweet once again. My humiliation and pain were revived back into love. I called my mom, and she understood my need to take the day off from school. I did not want my dad to know, though.

The next morning, Frank's call awakened me. He decided to skip school with me. Not often would I miss school for no reason. I was a classic overachiever, but I needed this time to get away. My mom understood that kids need to take personal days sometimes.

Frank brought me some food and a cake I had been craving for days. We watched one of my favorite movies, *Parent Trap*, and then he kissed me.

"Andi," Frank said, his voice lowering to a whisper, "sometimes I wish I could have my virginity back. I miss the innocence. It can never be my first again."

"Yes it can. It won't be your first time having sexual intercourse, but it will be the first time with someone you love."

Frank said nothing. He gave a weak smile.

"Thank you," I replied.

"For what?" he asked with dull emotion.

"For not pushing me and waiting."

"No problem."

I could feel the pain he was feeling. There was nothing I wanted more than to take his pain away. Here I was, a fifteen-year-old girl going out with a nineteen-year-old boy and already growing up faster than I wanted to. I was a child dealing with adult issues in a childlike way. This is the toughest part of adolescence, I guess, moving on to high school and experiencing new and more complex problems.

Once Frank left, I took a walk back to the creek to retrieve the one thing that most reminded me of Frank, besides the rose I kept on my windowsill. Mickey Mouse symbolized innocence—passage of time, my passage into adulthood.

Chapter Nine

Jessica

The circumstances of my abrupt departure from my ancestral home threw me into a whirlwind of chaos. Logic succumbed to my stubbornness, casting my mind northward rather than directing my feet safely across the nearby Mexican border. Unlike my getaway from Virginia, this unexpected flight allowed me no time to gather supplies and money. With nothing more than the clothes on my back and change in my pocket, I disappeared into the south Texas night, hitchhiking my way to a new life.

Ever since reading about the adventures of Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise hoboing through our great country in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, I dreamed of similar escapades. Although I imagined that the cultural exhilaration of the 1940s soared above the mindless drivel of modern society, I salivated at my chance to be a wandering pilgrim, living free and seeing God's country. As I soon learned, much had changed since the carefree days of Sal and Dean.

As I climbed out of Malcolm's bedroom window, I sprinted to the bus stop. Little did I know that buses did not run twenty-four hours a day. My eyes shifted every which way, expecting a brigade of cop cars with sirens blazing racing to my position on the street. My mind stewed in agitation, debating which road to take. I thought I smelled the scent of dogs – Police

K-9s. Were they on my scent even now? I could not wait to find out. My legs bolted me straight through a wooded field that led to the highway.

Some of the only vehicles on the highway in the middle of the night were 18-wheelers, long-distance travelers, and drunks. People are not as quick to pick up hitchhikers as they once were, even though I assumed my gender would diminish any threat to drivers, easing their tensions when debating the pickup. My sex proved to be a desired goal for lonesome men rambling down a dark, deserted highway.

At first, I managed to avoid bargaining and enjoyed laid back, quiet journeys across the vast Texas flatland. As anyone who has ever driven through Texas knows, travelers spend half the trip to anywhere driving through that state. I had no destination in mind, but, for the time being, I enjoyed the solitude of the open road. Long before I reached the northern border of Texas, however, my funds were depleted. I tried panhandling like my heroes, Sal and Dean, but nobody wants to give unearned money to strangers anymore. If I wanted to continue my adventure, I would be forced to barter. What the hell, I had done it before.

I discovered that truck drivers bestowed the best resources—constant trips, a ready-made bed in the back, and many a truck-stop dinner. Some of the men enjoyed the simple pleasure of having another human to converse with, but hard-earned money parted quickest when other appetites received their fill. We signed and sealed these silent contracts at the end of each journey. I fed him, he fed me, and we separated at the diner where I awaited my next ride.

As time drifted past, my wanderlust faded. Before I could end my farce, I knew I would need money in my pocket to settle down somewhere. At this juncture, I made a deal with my final driver. I needed money, and I cared not how I acquired it. He called his comrades over the CB to alert any takers. For fifty-dollars, a young pretty thing would service their sexual needs.

He gave the address of a nearby motel and announced the time. To save me from an all-nighter, we set the cut-off time for midnight, each man limited to fifteen minutes. That would make the possibility of eight men.

My driver got the first shot for free and the option to watch. In exchange, he provided a meal, a bottle of booze, and protection from any unwelcome behavior from the other men. Seemed fair. He stood watch with one hand stroking his penis and the other on his loaded .40 caliber gun. At midnight they all left me alone in the motel room with nearly \$800.00 cash. I took a long, hot bath, soaking away the remains of strangers, then slept until checkout time at noon. The morning found me in a new state that I now called home—California.

Chapter Ten

Jessica

I began life number four as Ruth Satterfield in San Francisco, California, hoping to make this life the last. Ruth had short, jet-black hair and a great California tan. Who would have known that the eccentricities of the West coast life would offer solace to my wandering soul?

Working profited my needs more than the futile effort of enrolling in college once again under a new name. At this rate of existence, neither Jessica, nor Mary, nor Ruth, nor anyone else I might have become would ever reap the benefits of a degree. Instead, I got a job as day dispatcher for a security company at a local college.

Most of the security guards were older men, with wives and children, aged by their responsibilities. Life forced some, like me, to mature faster in physical appearance than our years. Almost all in the department were either former police or military or wannabe police or military. One such man took a noticeable liking to me at first meeting.

After work one day, I intended to begin a workout regimen at the school gym, free for all students, faculty, and staff to use. The second shift supervisor and a new recruit named Nicholas Hensley leaned over the railing along the upper-level bleachers above the basketball court. I stopped to say hello and to introduce myself to our newest employee. Although not very tall, he had the build of a defensive end football player. His light brown eyes surrendered a tenderness masked by his physique. He captured my interest before uttering one word.

“Hey, Ruth. This is Nicholas Hensley. Nicholas, this is Ruth Satterfield. She’s our weekday dispatcher,” John politely introduced us. Nicholas and I smiled and shook hands. “What are you doing here this time of night?” John asked me.

“I was going to work out, but . . .” I cocked my head toward the direction of the weight room. “What’s going on?”

“The intramural teams are practicing tonight.” John answered. Whenever the teams made up of faculty, staff, and non-athletic students practiced, crowds of traditional and non-traditional athletes filled the entire gymnasium, shutting it down for everyone else.

“Well, so much for working out.” I turned to Nicholas. “How do you like it so far?”

“Not bad. Seems pretty easy. Do you go to school here, or do you just work here?”

“I just work here. Not much into school, you know?”

“Me neither. But, I eventually have to get sixty hours.”

“Wanna be a cop?”

The college security department maintained a close working relationship with the metro police department. Everybody in the department knew at least one police officer on a personal level, and many security guards hoped to one day become police officers themselves. One of the standard requirements called for all recruits to have at least sixty hours of college credit. That is why many of our wannabe cops took positions at the college security office. All employees received a percentage of college hours free, depending on the term of employment.

My employment at the college and my own friendship with metro officers yielded a strong desire to join the other side. Because of my uncertain past, however, that dream remained nothing more than a distant fantasy. The mere fact that I straddled this line of safety suggested that I either held delusions of successful escape or desires for an end. Maybe I just did not care.

“Yeah,” Nicholas answered. “I wanna be a K-9 cop.” He pulled out his wallet. “These are my dogs. I’ve already got them trained . . . Man, that would be cool.”

I loved his enthusiasm. He showed off pictures of his dogs like a proud parent.

“Cool. Do you know Angelo? He’s a K-9 cop.”

“No. I don’t know anyone around here yet.”

The conversation slowed as the three of us gazed at the volleyball game taking place on the basketball court below us. Something about Nicholas intrigued me. He knew what he wanted, and he made the calculated effort to achieve his goals. He looked great in street clothes. I stared at the uncoordinated girls striving to impress the boys with their lack of athletic ability, thinking only of Nicholas dressed in a police uniform. Dangerous, but I wanted him.

“Slow night?” I asked John, anxious to appear calm and collected while my hands trembled and my heart beat out of my chest.

“Pretty slow. Just showing Nicholas the campus, telling him some of the things that go on.”

I turned to Nicholas, chuckled, and said, “Slow night, then, huh?” He smiled. “Are you enrolled in school yet?”

“No,” he sighed. “I suck at school. I can’t read or write.” He said this with a sarcastic undertone, intending to be humorous.

“Well, those are my two favorite things. I’ll help you with any paper you have, or, for the right price, I’ll write them.”

He shook my hand, “It’s a deal!”

I later heard through the departmental grapevine that Nicholas’ crumbling marriage, although they were separated, continued to drive him into raging fits. She called him at work and tore his already fragile world in two. She told him that she had been with others throughout their marriage. One such lover Nicholas knew as her drinking buddy. She intended to run off with him

once the lawyers finalized the divorce. The final nail on his coffin came when she informed Nicholas that he was not the father of his younger son.

“Deep down I knew it,” he later told me. “The kid looks nothing like me. He acts nothing like me.”

“Have you ever seen his older son?” John had asked me.

“I saw a picture, but I never saw him.”

“He looks just like Nicholas. Exactly like him. Acts just like he does, too. His wife brought the kids out here one day. There’s no doubt his older boy’s his. The younger one is nothing like him. I told him to get a DNA test done. I wouldn’t pay child support if it wasn’t my kid.”

“Could you imagine being told a child you have loved and taken care of since birth isn’t even yours? And the way she told him! Heartless.”

“She’s always treating him like that. Have you ever noticed his knuckles?”

I looked at him with wonder. “No. Why?”

“Next time you see him, look. One night I was sitting in here, and I heard this ‘boom, boom, boom.’ I thought, ‘what the . . . ’ I listened again and heard ‘boom, boom.’ I went outside to look around, and Nicholas was leaning over those fence posts around the soccer field with his head down. His fist was bleeding. He’d been punching the side of the building.”

“Wow!”

The next time I saw Nicholas he caught me staring at his wounds. He curled his fingers and slipped his hands into his pockets. The stories of his strife attracted me even more. We shared a common heartache. I longed to be the one he turned to in his times of desperation. I longed to console him and help him forget his transgressors.

I left work at 2:30 p.m., and he came in at 2:30 p.m. We talked some at shift changes, but his alternating mood often pulled him away from conversation. The more his soon-to-be ex-wife tortured Nicholas, the more his personality suffered. The once upbeat and comical character withered behind the wrath of loneliness and depression.

One day, I walked toward him with arms open wide. "You look like you need a hug." We hugged for minutes.

Another guard walked by us. "Well, what'd you do to get that? Tell me so I can do it, too."

Without loosening my grip, I responded, "He needs a friend right now, and I'm his friend. That's all. You can go now."

We did not let go until we were alone. He looked at me with damp eyes. "You made me cry, you see?" His humorous tone softened. "Thanks. I needed that."

"I know. That's why I did it. Do you want to talk?"

He clocked in to work, and we talked for hours. He told me about his wife. He gave everything to the marriage. All he ever wanted was a family, and now she stripped it away. She had even called on several previous occasions trying to get him back.

"It seems that the bum she cheated on me with cheated on her. Now she says she's sorry, didn't realize what she had, blah, blah, blah. Good riddance."

"So, you going back?"

"Part of me wants to 'cause all I want is a family, but I know nothing will change. She'll never change. She gave me such a hard time about everything. I used to make \$100,000 a year at

my old job. She always got anything she wanted. When I got laid off, she called me a loser. I'd go to church every Sunday with my sister and wanted to take my kids. She wouldn't let me. She called me a sissy and said she didn't want her kids to be losers like I was. She'd say, 'what do you want to go to church for? What good has God ever done for you?'" He shook his head in defeat. "Maybe she's right. I am a loser. Go from \$100,000 a year to \$40,000. I'll never be a cop 'cause I can't go to school. I barely graduated from high school. How can I go to college?"

"You're not a loser. You still go to church. You still love both your sons and are treating both as if they're yours. You're still paying child support for both when you don't have to. And money doesn't mean much as long as you're happy. You can read because I always see you reading a Bible. You're a good guy and a good friend . . . and you're good looking. A good catch. There's someone else out there much better for you . . . I meant what I said when I told you I'd help you with the writing stuff. I took a few classes and got good grades in English. Can't help much with the math, though. Besides, you could always be a cop somewhere else. Other counties don't require the college stuff."

"Thanks."

I hugged him again. I told him as much of my own story as I could without warding off his interest. My narrative began with the tragic death of my parents, skirted around my stint in foster care, bulldozed through my tragic relationship with Malcolm, ignored my escapades from Texas to California, and ended where we sat. Ruth Satterfield carefully selected past secrets to construct her own history and abandoned all others to the lost histories of her former selves.

"That's why I feel so close to you. We have somewhat of a common past."

"I'm sorry," he said.

We sat side by side on the trunk of a patrol vehicle, staring straight ahead. Neither he nor I had any history left to share. With all of the past revealed that we intended ever to reveal, the only step left led forward. But neither of us dared to venture there.

Our friendship continued to exist only at work and only in person. The attraction, although mutual, never veered far from innocent flirting. Being the sole female working with a bunch of men, the flirtation existed on all levels. In my presence, Nicholas pretended to declare his love for me and his intention to run off with me.

“You don’t think I’m serious, do you?” he would intone. “I am. I’m damned serious.”

I laughed. Before long, though, his teasing around the guys gave him the courage to ask me out. Many of our talks centered on my interest in guns. These boy’s toys served as simple ammunition to ignite conversation. He recognized my interest in firearm safety and training and offered to take me to a firing range. Having never held a gun before, the thought intrigued me almost as much as the thought of spending time with Nicholas away from work. This first “date” sparked the beginning of our off-duty relationship.

Our second date summarized in one afternoon the perfection I had idealized in Nicholas. We welcomed a beautiful Sunday morning praising God at the First Baptist Church. My eyes had last beheld the interior of God’s home in Virginia. My heart had last embraced the grace of Christ before Alan first disgraced Him. My feet had never treaded on Baptist ground before.

My heart leapt into my throat. With my palm pressed against Nicholas’ palm, we made our way through the corridor. Many faces warmed at the sight of a returning regular, hand-in-hand with a precious newcomer. All, including the preacher, greeted me with earnest reverence, replacing all my apprehension with a sense of home. Ruth Satterfield belonged.

I cannot remember the message of the sermon, nor can I remember any particular song sung that day. I spent that hour awestruck with the miraculous presence of life and love in the air. Nicholas sang each song with a glad heart. He listened to the preaching with earnest devotion. The rest of the congregation responded in kind. Nicholas knew dark days as if they were old friends. This bondage failed to slow his faith. He talked often of Biblical truths. To see him live out these truths, even on this small level, mesmerized me. I loved him. At this moment I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him.

After church we took a long walk in the park, holding hands and talking of the past and of the future.

“Sometimes I think I wasted away what’s supposed to be the best years of my life by waiting. She didn’t wait. That’s one of the reasons she thinks I’m a loser,” Nicholas admitted his lack of sexual prowess.

“Well, there sure aren’t many guys out there who will wait until marriage, especially when she tells you she wants it. Even fewer would admit to it.”

“Sex isn’t supposed to be entered into lightly. It’s about love and commitment. When she cheated on me, I thought about cheating on her, but it just wasn’t right for me.”

“Wow, only been with one woman,” I repeated under my breath, still too shocked to comprehend the magnitude of this admission. A good-looking man overcame temptation to live according to his faith. “Were you guys separated when she cheated?”

“Does it make a difference?”

“I dunno. Some people would say that if you’re separated, you’re as good as divorced. Some say not divorced until divorced. I’ve never been there, so I don’t really know.” Knowing his ethical standard and that his divorce was not yet final, I probed to find my place.

“I’m pretty sure it’s gone on for a long time. I believe that until the papers are signed and it’s officially over, you’re still married.”

“Are you gonna wait till you get married again to do it again?”

“Uh.” He shrugged his shoulders. He looked at me and smiled, squeezing my hand as he concluded, “If I found the right person and saw a future with that person . . . but sex outside of marriage . . . it’s just . . . it unnecessarily complicates things. It’s not right.”

“Even if you’ve already had sex when you were married? But you’d know what you’re missing.”

“I didn’t say it was easy, that’s just . . . mmm . . .” he trailed off into quiet contemplation.

I wanted him—all of him. I could not get close enough to him. Hours escaped from our grasp. Days paraded as hours. Each month whisked me deeper and deeper away into love. My low self-worth refused to embrace his often-declared “I love yous.” Although I pined for the innocent and pure love Nicholas offered, I thought I lacked any value that could hold his affections forever.

Everyone loved Ruth Satterfield, but I was not she. I disguised myself as this bruised-but-not-beaten woman. I created her history. And I alone knew she did not exist.

Every Tuesday night Ruth watched law enforcement and forensic programs on cable television. She fantasized about using those forensic skills to uncover a hopeless murder case. Her boss believed in her dream and promised to introduce her to his detective friends to discuss the best and easiest ways to make her dream come true. Her friends in the metro police department agreed that she would be an asset to any police department. “Two years with us,” they said, “and you could move on to detective. They’d want you to get street experience first

and you'd be working with us!" She fantasized about this, but something deep inside forced her to turn down those offers.

I stopped her. Jessica Faulkin forbade Ruth Satterfield to chase her dreams, limiting her to live a deceitful existence. She could never truly love nor be loved by Nicholas. She could never take the steps to make her forensic future a reality. She could never live out her potential.

Jessica reached from the bowels of my inner being, clawing and strangling Ruth's good fortune. I closed my eyes and could visualize an inner duality because of all things Ruth that should have been Jessica's. That rage reached like two skeleton hands up my chest, the chiseled, bony fingers around my neck, choking, killing the existing life force that was Ruth.

Ruth weakened, but refused to die. She could not die. Jessica knew this all too well. The death of Ruth was the death of Jessica. So the fingers loosened their grip just enough to release oxygen to the brain. I walked around, a human battlefield of the mind, weak and numb.

Three existences resulted from my short-lived life. Because Jessica and Mary remained one in the same person, only two identities fought for control. Jessica quivered as a child, lost in a desperate struggle for love and acceptance. She hid behind a masked identity protecting all from the wrath of knowing her. Jessica ascertained her very presence was nocuous, just as the venomous serpent poisoned Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. She feared life, afraid of taking chances and fulfilling potentials. She dreamed of a metamorphosis into a creature the world would adore. If only people would accept her. If only they could love her. But her petrified reluctance to reveal her true identity to anyone insured anonymity from the world. Her terror blinded her from the reality that what she sought would forever remain an impossible acquisition if she refused to unveil her authentic form, imperfect as it might be. Jessica never grasped the

certainty that imperfections haunt all lives. Only those who screw up a time or two or two-thousand ever taste the staggering success of Jessica's aspirations.

Ruth, created to fill in the missing links of Jessica's meager existence, won the adoration that Jessica fantasized about. She knew God planned great endeavors for her time on earth. If she continued to put one foot in front of the other, focused on her target, walked on after tumbling down a steep embankment, and laughed at the world's futile attempts to deter her path, she could realize anything her heart desired.

But if the two, Jessica and Ruth, could not exist in unison, something worse than apathy would become their defining characteristic.

Chapter Eleven

Andrea

My biggest goal in life, much like that of almost everyone else, is to avoid pain. Listening to Jessica's story and looking back on my own past, it became clear to me that love causes the greatest pains. Ironic: The source of greatest pleasure produces the seeds of abundant grief. Since the creation of time, woman has left mother and father to seek the gratifying gifts of love shared with man. The shadow of doom hides in the love we strive to make our own. It is a futile fight. If we accept the one, we must accept the other, knowing it will rear its ugly head sooner or later.

Frank, my first love, and I intended to attend his senior prom together. At this juncture in our relationship, I began falling head over heels in love with this boy. He spoke of marriage, and I imagined a long life with him and the children we would have some day.

My bliss shared space with doubt and fear. My imagination succumbed to the terrifying notion that my love existed only in fantasy, the same as my real life. The night before the prom, my fears masqueraded as truth with his phone call.

"Is it good or bad?" I asked.

"It depends on how you take it."

Now I knew what was on the way. I should have predicted what was coming after he told me that he should have listened to his dad when he said we should slow down. I had a strong

feeling that something was about to happen. Things looked better for me. Frank began placing his arm around me and kissing me in public. Yet the feeling remained.

“I’m confused,” he answered.

“Confused? Confused about what?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? HOW CAN YOU NOT KNOW? What are you confused about?”

“I was cruising with my friend, and I asked him what to do. He said you are a nice and shy girl. I told him you treat me like I want to be treated. You’re the first one to treat me right.” I did not respond. “Hello? Andi?”

“Yes?”

“Just listen to me. When a guy sees a girl every day, he gets bored. It’s not that he loves her any less. He just gets tired.”

My dad came into my room to kiss me goodnight. “Ask your dad,” Frank said.

I paused, “Hold on.” I did ask my dad, and, like Frank, he needed time alone. Later, I called my mom, and she said that she could be with Gary and never get tired of him. I came to the conclusion that this was another one of those things that men and women cannot see eye to eye on.

Frank continued to tell me he did not want to end up like Emily and Bobby: They saw each other every day, and every day they argued.

“So, is it because you’re just tired of seeing me or because you don’t want to turn out like Bobby and Emily?” I asked.

“I don’t want to turn out like Emily and Bobby or my mom and dad or anyone else who fights like that.”

I began to relax, "Do you want to break up with me?"

"No," he answered.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

We hung up, and my emotions stayed between being happy and depressed. I got to keep him, but is that what he wanted? As I lay in bed saying my prayers, I asked for relief from the pain and for answers.

I woke up the next morning earlier than I wanted to, so I took a shower, shaved my legs, dressed, and watched my Saturday morning cartoons. I had the house all to myself. My dad was at work, and my sister was taking her ACT test. My phone rang, and Frank's voice was on the other end, "I can't come over," he apologized.

"Why?"

"I'm supposed to be home when my mom gets home."

"Oh. Do you really want to stay with me?" I asked.

"No, I'm just using you," he responded.

"Well, I need to be sure."

"I want to stay with you, okay?"

"Okay."

Half an hour later, he pulled into my driveway. He did care. His mom did not know where he was going and he was not supposed to go anywhere, but he came.

"You're going to be shocked when I tell you this 'cause I would never say anything like this."

"What?" Frank asked.

“You’re never going to believe . . . ”

Frank cut me off, “Just say it.”

“If you would have broken up with me, I was going to tell you that you just lost the best thing that’s ever happened to you. No other girl is going to be as nice to you as I am. No other girl is going to treat you how you want to be treated. No other girl will be as honest with you.”

He laughed at me and pretended he did not know what I was talking about. Frank even put his hand on my forehead checking for a fever. After years of struggling with my lack of self-confidence, these thoughts surprised and exhilarated me. If I believed in my worthiness to hold Frank’s love, I would be capable of loving and being loved. Then he kissed me. This kiss was more special than any other time he had kissed me. My love for him grew by the second.

Frank left, and my mom picked me up so that I could get ready for prom night. I had to take another shower because my hair needed to be wet in order for my mom to put curlers in. No problem. The problem was sitting beneath my mom’s beauty salon-style hair dryer, burning my skull.

Hours of painful procedures fixing my hair, putting on makeup, and dressing just right tortured my tomboy body. But when the telephone rang and I heard his voice on the other end, the nauseating anguish transformed to euphoric elation.

“Are you getting ready?” Frank asked.

“Yes . . . ”

“Okay because Danny and Tara want to leave early to go eat.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. Will you be ready?”

“Unless you don’t mind my going in a muddy shirt, biker shorts, and curlers in my hair then okay, but I need to get ready.”

Now we began to rush. We ran to the restroom, and Mom began fixing my hair and make-up. The banana clip she made for my hair looked pretty. She succeeded in putting eyeliner on my eyes. Under normal conditions, I would not let anyone touch my sensitive eyes.

The doorbell rang, and Mom ran to answer it. My nerves overpowered every inch of my body. The long awaited moment had arrived. As I looked at myself in the mirror, I again thought of something no one who knew me would believe. For the first time ever, I thought I looked pretty. I could have a lot of guys if I looked like this every day. The only guy I wanted, though, I already had.

It was time to present myself to Frank. I stood in the hallway while Gary admired me. What would Frank think? How would he react? There was only one way to find out. I turned the corner and came into view. He did not say a word. His eyes grew bigger, but no words. He did, however, manage to laugh a bit.

“Don’t make fun of me or I’m going to change into jeans and a t-shirt,” I said.

“I’m not making fun of you. I’ve just never seen you like this before.”

We took pictures and then headed for my dad’s house to take more pictures.

Emily and Bobby rode with us. We all went to my favorite restaurant, Olive Garden, to eat. Frank’s behavior impressed me. He pulled out the chair for me. He laughed at Bobby’s jokes, and Bobby laughed at his. Frank acted like a genuine gentleman. But when he got up to go to the restroom, he did not return for a long while. My doubts started creeping back to the surface again.

“Come here,” he called from another area of the restaurant. I followed him, and he led me to group of his peers. Corey, one of my freshman friends with an upperclassman date, and some of Frank’s friends wanted to see me in a dress. Needless to say, they were all impressed. So was I. Corey and I had known each other ever since elementary school, and I had never seen him dressed up either.

“To freshmen!” Corey exclaimed.

“To freshmen. You look nice,” I admitted.

“So do you.”

“I even have fake fingernails on.”

He reached for my hand and said, “Big change from the drummer hands I know.”

After an hour at the prom, we grew weary of the event. The country band had no drummer and not even half of the senior class attended. We danced seldom because Frank never learned to two-step. One of Frank’s friends gave us directions to a party and encouraged us to go. Assuming more fun awaited us there, we left the prom early.

Unsure of the exact location of the party, we followed the trail of parked cars. While searching for a place to park, we got stuck in the mud. Frank pressed on the gas hoping to free the back tire, but the wheel squealed and the smell of burnt rubber overwhelmed us. We placed a small board underneath the tire hoping to create traction. No luck. Frustrated with the turn of events, Frank floored the accelerator until the ground released the tire. He continued driving, leaving me standing shoeless in the middle of the road.

My first reaction was to call him a jerk and assume that he intended to leave me there all alone. Then I saw him heading back to pick me up. He could have picked me up first before

turning around instead of leaving me all alone in absolute darkness in a strange place. Instead of starting a fight over nothing, I mimicked the women of the movies, hiking up my dress to show my leg and sticking out my thumb. It worked. He stopped. We arrived at the party to find that we had more fun trying to get out of the mud.

“Wanna go?” Frank asked.

“I guess so.”

On the way home, I could not stop looking at Frank. I just wanted him to hold me and never let go, but he was driving and his jacket and my corsage sat in between us.

My feelings of love for him grew bigger and stronger, and I wanted those feelings to go away. I did not want to fall in love with him without knowing how he felt about me. Did he still have doubts about us? I needed a sign, something to show me how he felt about me. Frank put his tie and cummerbund behind the seat. I took his jacket, scooted over, and placed it where I had been sitting. He put my corsage on the dashboard, and I placed my head on his shoulder. I was in love. I could not deny it. This feeling was beyond all other feelings I had ever felt.

He parked the car in the driveway of my mom’s house and kissed me before walking me inside. To my surprise, my mom and Gary were still awake, watching some documentary about castles and beasts. Frank stayed long enough to be polite. While taking off my prom dress and returning to the natural tomboy, I thought about my growing love for Frank and cowered in fear of losing the fairytale come true.

Sunday, I slept until 1:30 p.m., later than I had ever slept before. As soon as Emily and I woke up, we went to McDonald’s. We were eating, and she asked me if I loved Frank more than Bon Jovi. The only things I had ever admitted loving more than Bon Jovi were my family and God. That is why I think she was so surprised when I said I did.

Sunday night, the love songs that used to make me smile and remind me of Frank and me now depressed me. I did not know if he still wanted to break up or not. I wrote this poem to tell him just how much I loved him.

“His Name Rides in the Wind”

No matter what road I travel—what turn I take,

I think about you.

No matter what time of day—what hour of night,

I dream about you.

As the rain beats upon the rooftop,

I remain here in the dark.

These love songs on my radio used to make me smile,

but tonight I feel a cold sensation.

It’s tearing me apart.

Your name rides in the wind.

You’re the echo I hear.

When we can’t be together,

I can still feel you near.

I cherish the moments we get to spend together,

hoping someday, somehow we will last forever.

*I remember how romantic you were
in your own little way
with the notes you wrote and the things you used to say.*

*Yet our love has grown older,
and I feel a need to hear those words again.*

*I just need to know if you still feel
the same as you used to.*

*I want to be as sure
as when our love was new.*

Remember Christmas day when we got into a fight?

I still have the rose you gave to me that night.

*Now we tend to argue much more than this,
and I often think you don't care.*

*Now I'll tell you what I miss:
To know you care with the feelings you share.*

*I want to believe you—I love you.
I want you in my world forever—I need you.
Just show me you care—act like you care.*

*Our perfect relationship almost came to a close,
but to remain with me is the decision you chose.
Did we stay together because of my hard-falling tears?*

Or was it because you, too, never wanted us to part?

*I would love to be with you
through all our aging years,
and remain as we were from the very start.*

*I know you have done so much for me,
and I know you say you care for me.
Just show me you care—act like you care.*

Your name rides in the wind.

You're the echo I hear.

When we can't be together,

I can still feel you near.

All I want is to be as sure as I was before.

We ended up staying together.

Chapter Twelve

Jessica

Before my infatuation for Nicholas confused my dueling selves, I believed my feelings for Malcolm reflected genuine love. Hindsight made me realize that I allowed him to govern my emotions because of my desperate need for normal companionship. Malcolm used my vulnerability to assert a sick control over me that I failed to notice until he almost destroyed me. In conversations with Nicholas, I blamed my weakness on immaturity and youth. After all, Malcolm was eleven years older than I. He should have known better than to continue dating someone still a teenager.

For some reason, Nicholas enjoyed asking questions about my obscure past. I feared that if I revealed too much, I would endanger my hope for sustained romance. I formulated storylines to satisfy his craving for deeper knowledge.

“Who took care of you after your parents died?” Nicholas questioned.

“My grandparents.”

“Were they in Texas?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s good. You didn’t lose all your family. Do you still talk to any of them?”

“No. When my grandma died, I just took off on my own. I was never really close to any other family.”

“Is your grandpa still alive?”

“I think so,” I lied. “He has a lot of health problems, and he couldn’t even take care of himself, let alone me, after Grandma died. I put him in a nursing home. He has Alzheimer’s.”

“I’m sorry. Do you want to go see him?”

“NO!” Was this an offer to take me to see my surviving kin? I had to diffuse the situation with another lie. “I mean, of course I want to see him, but it hurts too much. He has no idea who I am. They said it’s a matter of time. I just want to remember him as he was. He was special.”

“I understand. You can make my family yours.” Nicholas had introduced me to his sister, two years his senior. We got along great. His mother and father adored me, welcoming me into their home and family, praising God that their beloved son met a woman who would treat him right. They made no secret of their resentment and hatred for the woman who caused their son so much heartache.

Nicholas’ questions never got easier. Keeping up with my bogus answers proved quite a task. With every well-thought-out response, though, I felt Nicholas’ love for me growing. The damsel in distress found her prince to rescue her from the pits of nasty beasts, giving her an enchanted life to replace her sordid past.

“You’re not a virgin, are you?” That question tore at my chest like a knife of honesty ripping out my lie-stained soul.

“No.” I answered. I knew his spiritual beliefs about sex. We had already discussed his history. I knew this question would soon be unavoidable.

“Was Malcolm your first?”

“Yeah.” I tried not to lie. Before giving myself to Malcolm, I declared myself a born-again virgin, letting go of a morbid background, embracing a chance for love. Nicholas could never know about my life in Virginia. “I thought I loved him. I thought he loved me. He even talked of marrying me.”

“He didn’t love you. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to hurt you, but, if he loved you, he wouldn’t have treated you the way he did. He just wanted to control you. He wants a woman barefoot and pregnant, at his beck-and-call twenty-four seven. That’s not love. That’s not you.”

“I know that now, but I didn’t know that then. Like I said, I thought I loved him.”

“You didn’t?”

“No. I realize now that I just wanted to be in love. I was nineteen. What did I know? All I knew was that I was lonely. He came along and seemed so mature, so together. He liked what I liked. Something just attracted me to him that made me think I loved him.”

“He manipulated you. Age doesn’t matter in a relationship. A woman can date a man twenty years older if she’s like thirty and he’s fifty, and it doesn’t mean anything, but when you’re so young . . . ”

“I know. I wasn’t ‘grown up’ yet. I was still immature and impressionable. You don’t have to sell me on that.”

My annoyance level escalated as this conversation continued. I hated lying, but my identity forbade me from total honesty. Malcolm controlled me in a cruel fashion. Malcolm did abuse my trust, but I wrongly blamed him for my demise. Although owning little responsibility for the corruption of my mind, Malcolm still haunted my dreams. Could he find me? Could his lust for money and short-lived fame give him the scent of my path, leading him to me?

I longed to exploit Nicholas’ innocent desire to protect me, causing his love to bond with me forever. In order to achieve my manipulative end, my past must return to destroy me. Nicholas, armed with the protective sword of mercy, would attack and kill my foe, saving me and bonding us in sin. Even believing that the cops traced me to Malcolm, I needed him to

become part of my game. I needed the foe that haunted my dreams to seek me like a blood hound from Texas to California.

I dialed his number. “Hey, this is Malcolm. You know what to do.” He always kept the message on his answering machine simple.

With obvious hesitation, I chose my words carefully. If the cops had indeed been at his door the night I fled, he would know my guilt and could lead the authorities to me. I needed to feel him out to see what he knew. “Hi, Malcolm, it’s Mary . . . Look, I’m sorry I ran out on you like that. I can’t explain why except that . . . I . . . love you . . . and . . . well . . . I was afraid of that love. Call me.”

Before making this fateful call, I purchased a second cell phone under the name of Mary Parker listed under a false address. I may have been suicidal, but I was not stupid. If he tried to trace the phone, he could not uncover my new identity. This, I thought, safeguarded Ruth Satterfield. It did not take him long to call back.

“Mary, how are you? Better yet, where are you?” I sensed curiosity over concern in his voice. He found his winning lottery ticket.

“I’m fine. I’m in California.”

“California? What are ya doin’ there?”

“I ran. Look, Malcolm, I know I just bailed on you . . .” I took a deep breath, pleading with whomever that Malcolm would buy my lie. “Things were just moving too fast. We practically moved in together, I’d fallen in love, and that scared me. I never went to bed that night. I just left.”

“So you planned it that way?” Doubt in his voice.

“Yes. I did.”

“If you planned it, then why didn’t you take anything with you?”

He had me. Why would I plan to leave and not take anything with me? “Because,” I said, “I wanted to come back.”

“So, you planned to leave because you were scared and wanted out, but you planned to come back?”

“I know it doesn’t make any sense. I just had to clear my head. I had to figure things out. I didn’t want it to be the end, not even when I took off.”

“So what did you figure out?”

“That I still love you. I want to come home . . . if you’ll still have me.” My stomach cramped. Did he believe me? Did it matter? If he thought he could trap me, he would come for me. All of a sudden, I doubted my escapade. He now knew I lived in California. How could I manage to make Malcolm serve Ruth’s purpose without endangering her existence? No matter. The call had been made. Too late to turn back the hands of time.

Malcolm remained silent for a minute, then asked, “Why California?”

“I honestly don’t know. I just ended up here.”

“How?”

“Hitchhiked.”

“What? Are you crazy? Do ya have any idea how dangerous it is for an attractive young girl to hitchhike?”

“I know, I know. I dunno why I did that. I just . . .”

“Whatever. So, whattaya you been doin’ in Cal-if-forn-i-a?” His drawl was intended to mock me.

“Wooor-king,” I mocked back. “I work as a dispatcher for a university police department.” I did not intend to divulge that, even if it was not the absolute truth. The instant reminder of his bullying confused my intention to separate the details of the lives of Mary and Ruth.

“So, when and HOW do ya plan ta come back? Well . . . I’ve never been to Cali-forn-i-a. Tell ya what? I’ll make a vacation outta it. I’d like to see how the nuts live out there. You musta felt right at home in ole’ Cal-e-forn-e-ah.”

Uh-oh. I closed my eyes as Ruth’s logic stunned my senses. Mary still loved Malcolm. But Ruth loved Nicholas. What was I thinking? Mary’s logic persuaded Ruth to believe that reuniting with Malcolm ensured Nicholas’ future love forever, never considering how to script him into proper action. Mary wanted to go back home to Malcolm. Ruth, although unable to visualize the full impact of this fateful conversation, predicted less than a fairytale ending. If she escaped Malcolm’s certain intent to relinquish her to the authorities, her manipulation of these men might result in losing both. The play had been set in motion. No time for rewrites. All that remained was to act my dual parts.

Mary met Malcolm at the airport three days after their first conversation. He strutted through the gate deep in conversation with another woman. Mary, threatened by their shared smiles, ran to greet him and to defend her territory. Malcolm placed relaxed fingers on Mary’s waist, and, with slight force of thumb and forefinger, pushed her away. Mary stared at the overweight woman with graying brown hair, at least twenty years older. Malcolm looked at the stranger and rolled his eyes in a knowing gesture. He grinned once more, put out his hand, and told the stranger how he enjoyed their conversation. Mary grabbed his extended hand and led him away. He let out a sarcastic laugh. Neither spoke a word.

Malcolm arranged to spend two weeks in California, taking in the sights and spending time with Mary. He never mentioned whether he intended to bring her back to Texas with him. Mary never brought up the topic of returning. Her general life remained the same. Each day, while Mary worked, Malcolm entertained himself with tourist attractions and attractions of other sorts. Mary returned to his hotel room each night.

“So, why did you leave again?”

“I don’t know. Do we have to talk about it? Can’t we just start over?”

“You made me look like an idiot the night you left.”

This comment made my skin crawl. “W-wha-at d-do you mean?” I asked.

“Just after you went to bed, some of my friends came over. Din’t ya hear `em?”

I knew this had to be a trap. I felt every heartbeat in my chest. “I thought it was the TV. Sounded like cops beating on the door. Thought it was somethin’ on the news.”

“You know I don’t watch the news. Carl and Shane beat on the door pretending to be cops. They always do stupid shit like that. We were gonna go get somethin’ ta eat and I went to get ya and you were gone. Made me look like a damned fool. Didn’t know where my girlfriend went, obviously snuck out the window. And didn’t come back. Didn’t come back or call or nothing. Now that made me look even more like a freakin’ fool. You know they teased me, called me all kinds of worthless things.”

“Sorry.” I breathed a sigh of relief. He never saw the news and the men at the door were not after me. The sorrow I felt for hurting him took a back seat to my utter relief.

“Sorry? Bet you’re sorry. Told `em you were a whore and that I was through with you. Told `em I told you ta leave. Good thing you took my money. They didn’t believe me `til I told

'em I'd been payin' for you. My kept whore. They saw my empty wallet thrown on the bed. Why should I take you back now? What's in it for me?"

"I thought you still loved me."

"I thought *you* loved *me*."

"You're right. You're right. I don't know." He had me, just as Alan had Jessica. I believed in my worthlessness once again. I believed that I was, indeed, a whore. My exhilarated mood turned somber.

Malcolm looked at my downcast face with shoulders hunched down, sitting on the edge of the bed. He smiled and said, "Well, I do still love you." He lifted my chin with his coarse finger.

"Tell ya what? It'll be like *Pretty Woman*. I'll just tell 'em that you came back and that's that. Any more questions and they can all kiss my ass." I nodded in agreement. He sat down beside me, and we made love.

While my alter ego, Mary, spent so much of her time with Malcolm over the course of his stay, Ruth's time with Nicholas reverted to a few hours a day. Since we worked different shifts, I signed up to work overtime. That way, I could see Nicholas and maintain an honest excuse of having to work when Malcolm came calling. Aware that my dualities were beginning to intermesh, my charade tensed my nerves tighter than a noose around a condemned man's neck.

"Where've you been lately?" Nicholas asked while sitting with me one night in the dispatch office. "You rush out of here after work. You don't call me or return my calls. You seem so tense and preoccupied. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm just tired. Putting in all this overtime."

“And that’s another thing. You never used to work so much. Are you okay? Do you need money?”

“I’m fine. Everything’s fine. I just want to catch up on some credit card bills. They just don’t ever seem to get smaller.”

Nicholas studied my face. I turned away once we made eye contact. I felt his gaze staring deep into my psyche, analyzing the facts concealed behind my lies. “No. Something’s wrong. Tell me.”

I remained quiet with my head turned away from him. “Tell me.” He pleaded. “You used to tell me everything. I know something’s wrong . . . Look at me.”

I turned my eyes to meet his. One look at him and a single defeated tear rolled down my cheek. He wiped it away. His face grimaced with concern. “Please, Ruth. Don’t shut me out. I want to help. Talk to me.”

For a short time after running away from Texas, Malcolm sent me some nasty e-mails, cursing in anger. I never erased those e-mails. The sight of Nicholas’ anguished face inspired me to activate my deceitful plan. Time to bring my past back from the dead.

I signed onto the Internet and pulled up the old e-mails. “Look.” I motioned for Nicholas to sit close to me so he could see the computer screen. “When I left Texas, Malcolm wrote these e-mails.”

Nicholas read the following:

Wher are you Mary bitch? cant believe you left yu stuped kunt. you tooook my money wheere are you? I find you an wen I do lm going to beat the hell out of you like the hore you are. If I ever find you I willl kill you WHERE ARE YOU?

“Oh my God!” Nicholas exclaimed with wide eyes.

“The rest are pretty much the same.”

“Who’s Mary?”

“I am. That’s my middle name. He said he liked it better than Ruth, so that’s what he called me.”

“Is he still e-mailing you?”

“No, but . . . well, you know how I’ve been getting phone calls on my cell phone lately while at work?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, I’m sure you noticed me tense up.”

“Yeah?”

“Well, that was him. He started calling me again.”

“How’d he get your number?” I could see the anger rising in Nicholas as his chest swelled and his skin turned blood red.

“I dunno. The phone was under his name. Had the same phone in Texas. I guess he was able to find the new number because it was still registered to him, even though the bills come to me.”

“Does he know where you are?”

“I don’t think so . . . But,” I began, shrilling my voice with building concern, “won’t he be able to do a reverse look-up on the Internet? He found the number. Couldn’t he find me?”

Nicholas calmed down as he sensed my growing fear. He put his hand on my thigh. “If he comes near you and tries to hurt you, I’ll kill him. What do you tell him when he calls?”

“To leave me alone.”

“Why do you answer it?”

“Because when I don’t, he keeps calling and calling. He leaves messages and tells me that I better answer the next time he calls or else.”

“Or else what?”

“I don’t know. He wants to know what I’m doing and who I’m with at all times. If I don’t tell him, he gets angry.” I could not believe how easily these lies poured forth.

“What does he do when he gets angry?”

“I don’t know. He just, he just tells me to answer when he calls or else.”

My initial plan took root. Nicholas rose to the occasion and vowed to protect his princess from her evil foe. He claimed his territory, and I was that territory.

“Nick, I’m kinda scared. I mean, I really don’t think he’ll hurt me, but . . . but . . . I don’t know.”

“Give me the phone.”

“What?” Why did he want my phone? My heart raced to stay ahead of this charade.

“Give me the phone. That way, he’ll have to deal with me if he calls again.”

“Oh, he’ll call again. He calls all the time.” My plan did not include the two actually interacting. “Why don’t I just throw away the phone? That way neither one of us has to worry about it.”

“No. I’m going to make sure this thing is put to a stop. You need to tell him to leave you alone.”

“I’ve tried.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

I gave Nicholas Mary's cellular phone. I had no good excuse to keep it from him. Sure enough, Malcolm called that same night. The phone rang.

"Hello," Nicholas answered.

"Who t'hell is this?" Malcolm demanded. Nicholas and I locked heads to listen.

"Hi. I'm Nick. Who the hell is this?"

"Where's Mary?"

"You mean Ruth?"

"What? Who is this?"

"She's naked in my bed right now. I am too. We're a little busy right now. If you'd like to leave a message, please do so at the sound of the beep." Nicholas hung up.

I could not help but smile. We both laughed when the phone rang again.

"Hello," Nicholas answered.

"Who t'hell is this?" Malcolm demanded.

"I'm Ruth's boyfriend, Nicholas. Who the hell is this?"

"Where's Mary?" Malcolm asked in frustration, bewildered by the call.

"She goes by Ruth now. And I told you, she's with me."

"Put her on the go'damned phone."

"Let me see if she wants to talk to you." He spoke to me, "Do you want to talk to him?"

I nodded in the affirmative, "Hi, Malcolm."

"Mary, or Ruth, or whatever t'hell your go'damned name is, what's going on? Are you really with him?"

"No. I'm at work. Nick works with me."

Nicholas grabbed the phone back. "Now, Malcolm. We're both grown men here. Leave the girl alone. She doesn't want anything to do with you. She's with me now. Just move on."

"Listen you here you son-of-a-, put that bitch back on this go'damned phone."

"No. You listen. First of all, never call her that or anything like that again. If you want to take it up with me, you know where to find me. I'll be waiting."

"I'll do that!"

"Okay. Come on, big boy. Second, you will not call or write Ruth again. I'm going to hang up the phone now. I'm keeping it so you won't be able to reach her. If you call, you'll get me. My name is Nicholas Hensley, only one in the book. That's San Fran, California. Look me up and we'll play ball." He hung up the phone and stuck it in his pocket. The phone rang once more. Nicholas turned off the ringer.

This episode replayed over and over in my mind. Ruth basked in the rewarding outcome. Nicholas protected the one he loved. She longed at that moment to crawl into his skin, becoming one with him. Mary cringed with an utter sense of despair. She imagined Malcolm's anger and confusion at that very minute. How many questions he must have. How much fury he must be harboring against Mary, the one who called him, begging for forgiveness and another chance. All Mary's thoughts focused on running to him and straightening out this whole mess. That is exactly what she did when she got off work.

She turned the key to unlock the hotel room door. Silence inside. Dark and silent. Did he leave? She took one hastened step after another. Then she heard a voice from the darkness.

"What are you doing here?" She turned to face the direction of the voice. Malcolm sat in a chair by the window. One hand cradled a half empty whiskey bottle resting on the nearby desk. With his elbow pressed into the arm of the chair, supporting the weight of the other hand, he held

a glass filled with whiskey to the temple of his forehead. “Hmm? What is this game you’re playin’? Think it’s cute? Think you’re clever?”

I rushed to him, fell down before him, threw my arms around him, and cushioned my head on his lap. “It’s not what you think. He’s . . . he’s . . .”

“He’s what? Did you want to make *him* jealous or did you want to make *me* jealous?” He affected his demeanor by pronouncing each syllable with slow precision.

“I never told you about him because . . . because . . .”

“Because what? Quit stuttering.”

“He’s this guy at work. He insists on calling me by my first name because he says it’s not proper to be called by your middle name. He always joked around saying he was going to date me. I told him I had a boyfriend, and he’d say he didn’t care. He could love me better and take care of me better, and what good was a boyfriend if he wasn’t around? He said he’d fight for me. I didn’t take him seriously. I just thought it was harmless flirting.”

I paused, waiting for Malcolm to comment in some way. He remained still. “But it just kept on. He’d start coming into the office and sitting with me the whole shift. If a guy came into the office, he’d ask if that was my boyfriend or if I thought he was cute. Then he’d ask why I wouldn’t go out with him. It started to freak me out, but I just kept telling myself that he didn’t mean anything by it so I didn’t say anything. Then he’d tell me how he told his wife about me, and it made her mad and she says she’s coming after me. He tells her that I’m better than she is in bed, but we’ve never seen each other outside of work. He says he just likes to rile her.”

“Why didn’t you just tell your boss?” I sensed great doubt in the tone of his question.

“Because. Nick’s dad and my boss are old buddies. He always says Nick is like a son. My boss doesn’t have any kids of his own. It’d be my word against his. I just try to make do.”

He was sounding a little more convinced. After all, I did have quick and reasonable answers. “Then how does this explain tonight?”

“He’d been in there when you called. He always asked who I was talking to.”

“What’d ya tell ‘im?” His speech reverted to his rudimentary slur, telling me his anger was subsiding.

“At first I said just an old friend. Then he asked if you were my boyfriend. At first I said no. Then after the third or fourth time he asked, I told him I hoped so. He asked me if I loved you. I said yes. He said you can’t love me back because you never come around and you live in another state. He says I can’t really love you because I never talked about you and because I moved away from you. He’d ask me all kinds of questions after we’d hang up. Then tonight when the phone rang, he grabbed it from my hand.”

“When he gave ya the phone ta talk ta me, how come ya said he’s a frien’ playin’ aroun’?”

“I told you, I didn’t want any trouble. I just want to do my work and go. I don’t want any more trouble from him than I already have. Once he told me that Will, our boss, could make me go out with him. He could even fire me if I didn’t because they can fire at will. They don’t have to have a reason to fire you.”

“But I heard ya laughin’.”

“I was trying to get my phone back. Did it sound like a real laugh to you? I just wanted peace. I was scared to death of what you must’ve been thinking. It scared me so much, but he’s so big. He scared me, too.”

Malcolm patted my head like a misbehaving pet eager to be in his master's good graces once again. He chuckled. "That asshole sounded like a nut job. I needda shoim howda keep that hola his shut. I needda shut it forim."

Once again, I managed to position myself in the good graces of both my men, satisfying both Ruth and Mary.

"I never knew your first name was Ruth," he said.

Chapter Thirteen

Jessica

Andrea noticed Jessica beginning to speak in third person at this juncture of her story. The growth in power of her dueling identities confused her sense of self. To her conscious self, she struggled to piece together the interwoven webs of conflicting identities. She compared retelling the story with watching a movie where the viewer identifies so concretely with the entire plot that she feels connected to the whole instead of with just one character. Speaking in terms of “they” simplified the story in her mind, making the recount easier to portray.

Malcolm reveled in his accomplishment of controlling the will of his woman, manipulating her conditioned naiveté to bow at the whims of a simple-minded fool. This callous cretin preyed on the wounded, boasting to the world his carnivorous masculinity. Men of his kind know their inferiority to strong-willed women. His outdated and mistaken notion of the weakness of the fairer sex yielded his drive to stomp the remaining resilience from his prey, proving to no one but himself that he is a god. It was this absurd ignorance that webbed Malcolm into Ruth’s deceitful plot. She knew this man’s bark would catapult him to the center of her stage.

The very next day after the cell phone confrontation, Malcolm showed up at Mary’s work. He entered through the back door, catching Mary off guard. In the guise of bringing his sweetheart something more appetizing than her usual school cafeteria meal, he greeted her with takeout. Malcolm embraced her with a kiss as he surveyed the room around him. Nicholas was

nowhere in sight at this time. It did not take long before Malcolm's wish to strut his puffed chest in front of his prize and to engage in a battle of words with his nemesis came true.

Nicholas walked by on his way to the cafeteria. Through the glass front door of the office, he noticed an older man sitting too close to his girlfriend. Malcolm sat facing Ruth. Their legs were interwoven and his hands caressed her thighs. The door crashed open as Nicholas' rage swaggered inside. Malcolm bolted from his seat. Both men stood before each other, their faces growing red with rage as they puffed out the chests to show their strength and clenched their fists to show their mutual intent.

"I thought I told you to stay away from her," Nicholas droned with eyes of rage focused on the foe before him.

"Wanme to stay `way fro' my girlfriend, eh?" Malcolm asked in response, daring Nicholas to fight.

Nicholas caught a glimpse of Ruth's face crimsoned with dread. "Let's take this outside."

"Fine."

Ruth remained in her seat, ignoring the ringing of the phone, ignoring all else except the muffled screams of two men standing right outside the door. Curious students sauntered by the scene, anxious to witness the certain future gossip of one of their officers bullying a gruff goon.

"Yer nuttin' but a white trash hillbilly," Malcolm sneered.

Nicholas, never being one to tolerate name calling, grimaced. "A white trash hillbilly," Malcolm repeated.

Nicholas' eyes pierced through Malcolm as one facing certain death by an outraged mother bear defending her cubs from a predator. No fear. Just tunneled vision of terrorizing

destruction. Fear shivered through Malcolm's body as he stared into the violent eyes of Nicholas. His pride refused to back away, even though he knew his tormentor intended pain.

"I may be poor, but I AM NOT A WHITE TRASH HILLBILLY!" Both men moved closer and closer together. The raging verbal war continued.

"Who'dya think y'are, y'son'fa'bitch? We're goin't get married. Did she tell ya that?" Malcom challenged.

"The hell you are! She wants you to leave her alone. Why the hell don't you just leave her alone?"

"She's comin' ba't Texas with me so y'an just kiss m'ass!"

"Bull! She's too good for you. Look at you. And you think I'm a white trash hillbilly? You can't even talk coherently."

Although obvious fury sped through their veins, neither Nicholas nor Malcolm abandoned their weak verbal attacks in lieu of physical force. Back in the office, Ruth worked up enough nerve to call another officer to the scene. Mary and Ruth fought with as much violent hostility as the two men who battled outside. The tormenting pull and tug of anger warned her of the possible consequences of her need for drama.

With sirens warning of his urgent intent, John raced to the scene. Before turning the corner from his parked car to the gathering mob, he heard the war cries of Nicholas and Malcolm. He pushed his way through the students, determined to stop a humiliating school scandal. One look into Nicholas' blood-filled eyes of determination started John's heart racing with fear. He looked at Malcolm and realized the belligerent coward had no intention of backing down.

Clutching each man's chest, John used his authority to demand the love-sick soldiers to back down.

"Nicholas, Nicholas, look at me." Even toward his supervisor, his eyes glared with an unnatural abhorrence. "Nick, go inside. Go inside and see how Ruth's doing. GO." With this, Nicholas cocked his head toward the sky, turned in an about-face, and walked into the office.

John turned to Malcolm and said, "So, you must be Malcolm."

Trying to conceal his obvious relief, he answered, "Yes I am. Who the hell are you?"

"I'm John. I'm Nick's supervisor. Look, I don't want any problems. I don't know what's going on, but I do know that whatever it is, it's affecting my employees and my campus. You are not a student here. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"If that son'a bitch can stay, I'm staying. We're not done yet."

"Yes, you are." John threatened. "Nick works here and has a right to be here. I'll talk to him. If you do not leave, I'll have to have you arrested. You don't want me to do that, do you?"

Malcolm sighed, proud that he had not backed down and relieved that John had saved him from a brutal, bloody fight. "Fine. I'll leave, but . . . ahh . . ." He flung his arm in despair, unsure of what he wanted to say. He walked away confident in his small victory.

"Okay," John said to the sneering crowd of students, "There's nothing to see here. Go on your way." He followed Malcolm with his eyes until his taillights faded into growing darkness. He entered the office to try to make some sense out of Nicholas' unusual villainy.

Nicholas held Ruth as she gasped for breath through fitful tears. Her shaking limbs calmed him, returning him to the gallant, soft-hearted hero. He saw John walk in. "He was calling her a bitch. No man has the right to do that. No man calls a woman names and gets away with it. What did he tell you?"

“I just told him to leave or I would arrest him. He didn’t say much. He just left.”

“Is he really gone?” Ruth asked.

“Yes. I watched him drive away. What happened?”

“That’s the guy I told you about,” Nicholas began. “I was going to eat, and I saw him in here sitting by her. His hands were rubbing on her. I snapped.”

“Did you invite him here?” John asked Ruth.

Ruth left the embrace of Nicholas and sat in her chair. “No. I heard the back door open, looked up, and there he was. I’ve told him to leave me alone, but he won’t.”

“Why was he sitting so close to you if you didn’t want him here?”

“She’s afraid of the guy. He’s crazy. He won’t leave. Now he thinks they’re getting married. I saw. She was trying to push him away.”

With a look of doubt, John turned to Ruth. “Is that true?”

She bent her head down as she saw his questioning gaze. “Yes,” she gulped under her breath.

“Okay,” John sighed. “He knows that if he comes back around he’ll go to jail. Ruth, if he calls or comes by again, let me know. I’ll take care of it. Nicholas, *I* will take care of it.” John looked Nicholas in the eye, stressing his point. “You stay out of it. You can get fired for this. All we need is for this to come out on the news or in the paper. Promise me you won’t do that again.”

“If he comes here again, I’ll kill him.”

John forced a laugh. “I mean it,” Nicholas protested. “I’ll kill him.”

John rolled his eyes. “Don’t go around saying stuff like that. If anything ever happens to him, you’re the first person they’ll come looking for.”

John replayed the scene and the stories in his mind. He heard the recount of how this low-life monster followed her from Texas to California. The story played out like a best-selling detective dramatization. John believed the pitiful plight of his young worker. Her pleading call on his cell phone convinced him of her sincerity.

Nicholas, the gentle giant, surrendered an eerie satanic glare from his otherwise peaceful eyes. When John stared into them, he saw a beast he did not know. He feared this monster. When he looked into the eyes of Malcolm, he saw a belligerent idiot, one unable to find a green leaf on a fresh spring tree. Something smelled of ingenious deceit.

The following morning, Will, the boss, called John into his office to find out what happened. He had heard rumors of one of his officers fighting a man in civilian clothing.

“I’m still not sure. Malcolm, Ruth’s ex-boyfriend from Texas, supposedly tracked her down here. She’s been dating Nicholas. Well, to make a long story short, Malcolm came by headquarters. He was calling her names. She has told him to leave her alone. Nicholas walked by on his way to the cafeteria, looked through the door, and saw him touching her. He lost it. They went outside, and Ruth called me.”

“Did Nicholas hear him calling Ruth a bitch?”

“I don’t think so. I’m not sure. Will, something’s just not right. When I got there, they looked like they were going to kill each other. Nicholas had this look in his eyes. I’ve never seen that in him before. He looked like he would have killed the guy had I not gotten there. Malcolm looked scared to death. He wouldn’t back down, but he looked scared. He doesn’t look to me like he’s all that smart. I don’t think he was able to find Ruth as cleverly as Nicholas says. I don’t think Ruth ever told Malcom to leave her alone. I think she’s playing them against each other.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I’ve talked to Nicholas and Ruth. They have both told me their story. I know all about what allegedly happened to her in Texas and why she left. The way she tells it, Malcolm found her through the Internet and cell phone records. But she changed her name . . . sort of. She goes by her middle name here and went by her first name in Texas. It’s just a hunch, but he just didn’t look that smart. Maybe he is. I only saw him that once, but I just can’t shake this hunch. I think she’s playing them. She acts like the victim, but I think she’s smarter than anyone gives her credit for. She’s thought this all out. And then, she didn’t call me on the radio. She called me on my cell phone. I didn’t think anything of it at first, but that’s got me suspicious.”

“What did she say?”

“She told me her ex-boyfriend showed up here all of a sudden and was outside with Nicholas. She was afraid of her ex and thought he may hurt Nick.”

“Maybe she didn’t want to call on the radio because Nick had a radio. They would have heard her calling you. Maybe she was scared.”

“Maybe, but . . . I don’t know. Wouldn’t calling on the radio and letting them hear that be good? I mean, then they would know I was on my way, and they could have stopped before I got there.”

“Maybe.” Will paused to take this all in. “Either way, this has got to stop. We can’t have one of our officers in the middle of the campus fighting. Even if it was a just cause, we can’t have that happen.”

“I know. I told them that. I made Ruth promise to call me first thing if she sees or hears from Malcolm. I made Nicholas promise that he would let me handle it, and he would stay out of it next time.”

With that said, Nicholas and Ruth were asked to join the meeting. “John informed me of what happened last night. I had to hear about it first thing this morning when Thomas came by to ask me some questions. You both know Thomas. Did you know that he is editor of the school paper this year, and he saw the whole thing? I was caught off guard with nothing to say. I told him that our officers are well trained, and, if one of my officers had a need to confront someone, I’m sure he had a reason. He told me what he heard. I told him I would look into the matter, but that if he was defending another employee from being hurt, then I support that officer’s actions. Now, I want to know your side of the story.”

Ruth and Nicholas took turns sharing their versions. Both stories corroborated. An unwelcomed and feared ex-boyfriend showed up without warning. He forced himself on Ruth while calling her a bitch and a whore. Yes, Nicholas saw the struggle and heard the name calling. He could not stand by and allow a man to treat a woman like that.

Nicholas said to Will, “If I saw or heard you disrespecting your own wife like that, I’d step in and stop you.”

Will laughed at the absurd thought, “Well, that’s good to know. Now, do you understand why this can’t happen again? That doesn’t make us look too good. We have to be professional. We were lucky the phone didn’t ring in the office during that time and that we had no other incidents to deal with, but what if we had? We must always think of the best interests of the university.”

“I would have stood up like that to any of the male students to defend any female here.”

“That’s good, Nicholas, but you’re missing the point. We have to act with a certain tact.”

Will addressed Ruth. “Malcolm can never come back to this campus. Is that understood?”

Ruth shook her head and Nicholas spoke on her behalf. "She didn't invite him in the first place. If he comes back, I'll kill him."

"No you won't. If he comes back, John or another supervisor will handle it. You do your job and let them do theirs."

"How will I let John know if Malcolm just walks in?" Ruth asked.

Will and John looked at each other. John said, "If he comes in, sit so that you can push the radio button. If I hear a man's voice or anything that doesn't sound like a normal call, I'll come in immediately."

"That sounds like a good plan," Will responded. "Will that work? And Nicholas, John is to respond, not you. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir." All three said in unison.

"Now, I have to go talk to Steven, my boss, and call Thomas back with a statement."

Chapter Fourteen

Andrea

Whereas Jessica's fractured identity was compounded with each life experience, my own sense of self was evolving, due, in no small part, to therapy.

Soon it was the moment for me to visit Sue for the final time and say good-bye. It was a special day. We talked about my vacation and the fact that it had been a little over a year since the news of divorce first struck our household.

"How was your trip to Nebraska?" she asked.

"I miss my family already."

"Which side of the family?"

"My dad's side. I have cousins I am really close to. We have always talked of having a family band. My nine-year-old cousin, Jason, asked, 'You're really serious about music, aren't you?' I answered with a 'yes' and he continued by saying, 'you're going to make it.' We tried endlessly to come up with a unique name, but failed."

"Family bands can make it big in the music business."

"I finally came up with a name, though. As soon as I got home from Nebraska, I went to the coast with my mom. We were eating breakfast one morning, and it came to me—Silent Echoes. Echoes stands for us children. We are the next generation, the children's children. Silent, because every summer, the kids are in the basement watching MTV or something and are rarely seen or heard by the adults."

“That’s unique.”

“We wanted a name that would fit us, so I thought about what we did each summer.”

“Are you serious about this?”

“I would like to be in a family band. For now it’s just something fun to think about. My other cousins are seven, nine, ten, and fifteen. I’ll just wait until they grow older. My ten-year-old cousin, Cindy, is taking piano lessons. I told her to stick with it because if I had it to do again, I wouldn’t have quit mine. She likes it, though. Carrie, my fifteen-year-old cousin, has a wonderful voice.”

“Oh. Sounds like you really enjoyed your vacation.”

“I always do, but the last day there was scary. My Uncle Michael and Aunt Patricia and their children were going to drive me to the airport. It was a good hour and a half drive. Just as I was falling asleep, I heard my Aunt Patricia say, ‘uh-oh.’ That meant trouble. Then she turned to the back of the minivan and said, ‘we may get you there on time or we may not.’ Boy, was I scared! We were right in the middle of farmland. Then when we got into a city, we found a gas station. We learned that the transmission had failed. So, we rented a car. My plane was going to leave in one hour, and we had another forty-five minute drive. Everybody else slept. I tried to sleep, but there was no use. All I could do was worry and bite my nails. However, we got to the airport with plenty of time to spare. The plane loaded early, so I said my goodbyes and boarded. This was my first time flying alone.”

“Do you enjoy flying?”

“Well, normally, yes, but I was so scared. On the flight from Nebraska to Dallas, there was a stop in between. They have never done that before, and I thought I was on the wrong plane. Then the second plane made so much noise that I thought we were going to crash.”

“You had to change planes?”

“In Dallas. That part was fun. I got off the plane, bought a magazine, and then waited for the next one.”

“It feels good when you have accomplished something like that, doing something you fear.”

“Yeah.” I paused. “This may be the last time I see you for a while.” I didn’t want to say that.

“Okay.” Sue did not know this was coming, yet she did not sound surprised.

“It’s just that my parents can’t afford it. My mom understands there are things I can’t tell my parents or my sister. My dad, on the other hand, said I can just as well talk to him. I know he is there for me, but there are things I can’t talk to him about. Emily sees me as her little sister whose problems aren’t as great as her own. My parents are the same. Maybe someday my current problems won’t seem important, but now my problems are very real. I wish adults would understand that, to a child, problems are overwhelming. If they would understand that, I bet the teen suicide rate would decline.”

“Are you comfortable with calling when you need me?”

I wanted more than just to call every so often. I was about to lose another best friend. She had become what my childhood friend had been, the difference being that I could see her physical form and get audible responses, something I needed at that time since my ability to see through child eyes had vanished. “I’d really like to see you on a regular basis, but I understand the hard times my parents are having. Sometimes I just really feel like talking to you—like Sunday night.”

“What happened Sunday night?”

“I got home from the coast Sunday and decided to call Frank just to talk. He tells me he doesn’t know how he feels about me anymore. To make a long story short, he hurt me really bad. The strange thing is that Monday morning I woke up happy. Emily and I had a good heart-to-heart talk about doing what she wants to do, to follow her dreams. Then we went to the mall and to a movie. Emily made me look good, and I tried to get as many looks as I could get. The entire way home, I sang. Then Tuesday, he called and said he wanted to stay together. So, we stayed together, but I just wanted to talk to you because I knew you would listen.”

“Do you think you love him?”

“Most adults would say that I’m too young to be in love. But I do have strong feelings for him.”

“I see you as a very mature person. It seems to me that you can get along fine without him, when before it may have been too hard.”

“When he called Tuesday, I showed no sign of pain. I hurt inside, but I didn’t want Frank to know that.”

“You have grown to be very independent.”

“But very shy.”

“The way I see it, you aren’t too shy. You think about things before you speak, which might make you seem shy.”

“Yes!” I liked the idea of being a thinker, of thinking before I speak. That made me feel bolder, wiser, and not as vulnerable as being shy had made me feel.

“You are very strong. You can tell your dad all about this and say you couldn’t have done it without coming to counseling. I’m sure you could have, but you can tell him that if you want to come see me again.”

I felt like crying. Never before had anybody made me feel powerful. I had never had such a friend to show me the good in me and believe in me.

Changing the subject, Sue asked, “Do you have any friends with divorced parents who think, ‘why did they do this to me?’”

“No, but do you watch the *Young and the Restless*?”

“No.”

“Well, there’s this girl, Victoria, and she’s desperately trying to ruin her father’s marriage with Ashley. She wants him to get back with her mother, Nikki. I can’t stand to watch her. She’d do anything to ruin Victor’s new life.”

“Victor is her dad?”

“Yep. I can’t stand it.”

“Like Victoria, some kids think only of themselves instead of realizing their parents are human beings, too. It is nice that you want what is best for your family and are concerned about them.”

There was a lull in the conversation. “You know, I admire Bon Jovi very much. He’s talented and sexy, but my Aunt Janie is my true idol. She is in a band, sings, and plays bass. Janie is really cool, and she lives in California. That’s probably why I look up to her so much,” I said.

“I didn’t know about her.”

“She married my Uncle Aaron a few years ago.”

“Were you happy to have her as part of the family?”

“Oh, of course! I remember seeing her on stage in clubs in Nebraska. She may not be famous, but she has the life I want.”

“Have you ever told her?”

“No. I’m too embarrassed to tell her how much I look up to her.”

“You should write her and tell her. I’m sure she’d love to hear that.”

“I know. I should let her know I care.”

Time was running out, and we didn’t have much else to say. “Will you call me when you need me?” Sue asked.

“Yes.”

“Don’t wait until you need me. Just call.”

“Okay.”

I hugged her and was on my way. Back at home, my mom had talked to Sue and made an agreement that I would call when I needed her and, if I had not called in a three-month period, an appointment to see Sue would be automatically scheduled.

During the last meeting, I rambled on and on about nothing of great value or importance. I took my precious time with her, hoping somehow to stop the clock.

I had grown in confidence during the period I saw her. Somehow, she showed me how strong a person I could be, and she taught me never to waiver from what I believed. She taught me the value of being true to myself.

I often wonder at my determination. How did I become so strong-willed, bending for no one when I was certain in my mind how things should be? How did I become so confident in my own ability, almost erring on the side of cocky? She did that. She gave me this great gift.

Chapter Fifteen

Jessica

Being caught, or almost caught, in a tangled confusion of lies careens a pure spirit into a frenzy. The heart beats in the throat, clogging the pathway of oxygen to the starving brain. The void in the chest where the heart used to be holds the lungs hostage. The sporadic fusion of blood tingles the nerve endings of the fingertips and toes. Our life flashes before our eyes as it does for one facing the irreversible last walk toward death. We imagine fingers pointing at us in a show of mockery. The world shuns us to the deepest corners of loneliness and solitude. To face our accuser proves as difficult as facing a preacher preparing our last rites. With this, we must admit our sins and face our punishment.

The confrontation between Malcolm and Nicholas scared Ruth witless. Would the truth come out in their meandering macho arguments? Would they both turn against her? If so, what would happen to her?

When the two men failed to uncover her deception, she breathed a short sigh of relief. Then, the interrogation from her boss sent the tidal wave of insecurities crashing back upon her breast. Two near defeats cautioned her motives to steady for a time. Malcolm had not called in days, and the desk clerk at his hotel informed her he had checked out. She convinced herself that the embarrassment he suffered at her hands cast him from her shadow for good. Nicholas, determined as ever to protect his poor, helpless girl, committed himself to love Ruth forever. For a short while, Jessica and Mary withdrew to the far reaches of Ruth's subconscious.

As spring turned to summer, the majority of the students at the university took off for their summer rendezvous, and the staff members were encouraged during that break to use their vacation time. For months, Ruth and Nicholas had talked of vacationing together.

“Let’s go somewhere far away, forget about life for a while. Let’s go to Rio or Jamaica or Cancun. Anywhere with a beach.” Ruth suggested.

“We’ll see. Can we really afford that?”

“It’s not that expensive. I’ve been looking.”

“I don’t know. I was thinking about something a little simpler.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. You always talk about going to a cabin in the mountains. Let’s do that. We can go hiking, swim in a lake. You can read. And we can sit by a fireplace at night.”

“But I really feel like breaking out of my own skin. I feel like doing something vastly different for a change. It’s just been such a hard year. I have this fantasy. When I lie in bed or daydream, I imagine myself on a beach, tanning under a bright yellow sun and drinking margaritas by the pool.” I stopped there. My fantasy extended beyond this simple scene, but I could not bring myself to tell him my real fantasy of making love to an island hard-body right there on the nude beach.

“How come you never told me this before?”

“Because it’s only a fantasy. Don’t you ever feel like running away?”

“I guess.”

“Well, I do. I dream of just getting up and going. Not telling anyone I’m leaving, just go. Don’t tell work, don’t tell my apartment, don’t cancel the mail, don’t pack anything, nothing. Just go. Vanish.”

This conversation took a turn to a potential fight. “So you want to leave me, too? Go without telling me?”

I knew how to end this before it turned nasty. “No. I want to take you with me. I guess I should tell you the rest of my fantasy. I imagine you and me making love on the beach. Together, just you and me. No worries. Nothing. Just you and me in love in paradise.” I must add that we had not even had sex yet. Although I feared bringing up this subject, I feared arguing even more.

Nicholas smiled. “That sounds like a nice fantasy.”

“But it’s only a fantasy. I learned a long time ago that no matter how many miles you put between your past and yourself, you can never start over. The past follows you. There’s no escaping it.”

“That’s true.”

“But I just know that if I can live part of that fantasy without actually leaving for good, I’d come back feeling alive again. What do you say?”

“We’ll see.”

The “we’ll see” won. After months of planning, Nicholas thought that a trip back to my hometown, a visit with my “grandfather,” would serve my wanderlust better than escape. This plan sickened the pit of my stomach. I had no grandfather to go home to. I tried my best to fight the plan, but once Nicholas set his mind on something, there was no changing it.

“I have no grandfather, Nick.”

“Don’t deny him just because he’s old.”

“He’s not just old, he’s sick. He won’t remember me.”

A look of concern shaded his eyes. He caressed my cheek and kissed my lips. "I think you're scared. I understand, but I think this will be good for you. Face your fears. I just know you will feel so much better after seeing him."

"Wh...wha...what if he's..."

"If he's passed, we'll find where he's buried and bring him flowers. You need this. I know you do. Besides, I want to know all about the woman I'm going to marry someday. I want to see the place lucky enough to be called your home. I hear Texas is like a country of its own."

In that moment, with those last words, my mind drifted back to the smells and sights of south Texas. I often teased that the Texas tourist commercials stole my saying that Texas is a whole new country. I spoke those words long before the commercials came out. I believed it. No one except those from Texas understand its greatness, its holiness, its wonder. Texas, my friend, is God's country. I longed to live there once again someday, to roll around in the Texas dirt and kiss the land I craved to call mine once again. I knew I was a misplaced Texan. Everything Texas brought me to a state of unmatched euphoria. But for now, I felt unworthy to cross the border to heaven.

Nicholas caught the glimmer in my eyes and the smile on my face with the mention of the uniqueness of Texas. "See, you're smiling. You want to go, too, don't you?"

"Well . . ."

"No stalling. Texas it is. I'll make all the reservations. Just be ready to go."

Just be ready to go? That was an understatement. I called on my nemesis to surface and to help me get through this trip without losing the man who would one day make me his bride. Oh, my goodness! Did those words come from his mouth? Did he intend to marry me someday? As long as Jessica and Mary and Ruth could work together, we could pull this off.

On June 18, we boarded a plane bound for San Antonio, Texas. My feet maneuvered my numb body forward. My mind swirled as all the sights and sounds around me faded into a dreamlike blur.

“Welcome aboard Flight 728 from San Francisco to Phoenix, Arizona,” the flight-attendant said.

“Arizona? I thought we were going to Texas!” I yelped.

“They don’t go directly to Texas. We have to change planes in Arizona.” Nicholas chuckled as he informed me of our course of travel. “You look awfully nervous. Haven’t you ever flown before?”

“N-n-no. I haven’t.”

“Wow. I just assumed that since you’ve been around so much . . . ”

“Always by car. On the ground.”

I did not lie. Fate had never before forced me onto an airplane. This slight detail covered the truth of my anxiety. “No matter where you go, there you are.” I heard that line in a movie or a song once, and, at that very moment, it would not set me free. I cannot escape myself. No matter where I went or what I tried to do to reinvent myself, my self slithered behind me, lurking in the shadows, waiting for the prime opportunity to crawl out of the grave and haunt my existence, spooking any life or love held in my limp grasp.

Goose bumps covered my skin like a badge of cowardice. The airplane, the one that looked so huge just moments before as I stared at it from the safety of the terminal, confined my breath like a sealed tomb. The seats. They were too close together, clogging me between poor, naive Nicholas and a suited stranger. The stranger looked at me with hollow eyes when I squeezed between the seats, inching my way into my assigned doom. He smiled at me in a

gesture of politeness before turning his attention back to the work hidden inside his laptop. He ignored me for the remainder of the trip.

The flight attendant began demonstrating proper techniques for exiting the airplane in case of an emergency, how to use oxygen masks should we lose air pressure, and how to secure the seatbelts. I tuned her out and gazed past the busy fingers on the computer keyboard to the view out the tiny window. Men worked with mechanical intensity putting the luggage below the plane and messing with some long yellow tube connected at the bottom of the craft. I assumed this was the refueling process.

From where we sat, I could see the wing. I watched with curious attention as flaps on the wing moved up and down. My focus shifted from the flaps to the screws. What would happen if just one screw fell out? How often do they check all the little details of this plane? Would one screw careen us out of the blue sky to our deaths? What then? What good would all these safety procedures do us then? What is the likelihood that we would fall over a lake so that the floatation devices used as seats served their purpose? Why would I want to use the oxygen masks to prolong my life? So that I can witness that final moment of impact? Now I understood the emergency exits. I *would* want to jump out and die alone rather than to have to listen to the wailing screams of a plane full of dying people.

My sight was transfixed out the window as the plane took off. All my other senses failed. As the houses, businesses, and vehicles grew smaller and smaller, I thought about what would happen if the plane went down right then. I heard somewhere that most accidents happen at take-off or landing. Imagine the horror. How many innocent lives would be taken?

If we went down right now, how long would it take to hit the ground? Five minutes? Less? More? How long would that last five minutes feel like? What would I be thinking about? What would I do?

“Ruth. Ruth.” Nicholas shook my shoulder. “Hey.”

He shook me out of morbid delusion. “Oh, hey. I guess I was daydreaming.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“The clouds. Look.” I sat back against my seat to allow Nicholas to view. The stranger snuck a sidelong peek as well. “See the way they curl? They cover everything now. Can’t see anything below because of the clouds. It looks like snowy mountains. But then look over there, where the sun rays are shining on the clouds. Looks like heaven. Reminds me of Jesus. Pretty cool.”

Those rays did remind me of Jesus. I failed to notice them before through my thoughts of crashing. Nicholas sat back in his seat and smiled, leaving me to look all senses once again out the window. Jesus ascending to His throne here in heaven. Is this what heaven looked like? My gaze lifted me out of the flying craft, and I pictured myself walking on those clouds. Peace enveloped me, extending from Jesus’ sun-filled rays, touching each speck of my skin. I could feel each warm prick. The goose bumps of death transformed into the proof of life in me, on me, and all around me. Jesus stood before me. “This is home, dear daughter. Welcome.”

Home. Thousands of feet above Satan’s play land. For the first time in my life, I felt at home. I had a home. My home. For the first time in my life, I knew what it felt like to go home, but I could not stay.

A brand new kind of sorrow burdened me. The sorrow whipped me back into the confining tomb of the airplane. I could not touch my home. Jesus lived out there. The plane

carrying me teased me, showing a scene of Christmas yet to come. One day, maybe I could walk alongside Jesus once again and never have to leave. I wanted that day to be today. I wanted that short-lived peace to last forever. I wanted to hear Jesus say, "Welcome home, daughter. Here YOU are loved. I love YOU. This will be YOUR home forever."

I knew deep down that my God needed me on earth longer. He had some task for me that I had yet to fulfill. This unproven certainty kept me from committing suicide on a number of occasions. Until I completed that task, I could not go home. I begged God to let me know my duty, but He kept His reasons to Himself. "You will know when the time is right," He told me.

"Okay. I will wait, but you're going to have to help me hold on."

"Trust in Me. I will never give you more than you can handle."

"I feel like You've already given me more than I can handle. Why is it that nothing goes right for me? I can't ever get ahead. Just when things start to look up, something else happens. Why? I'm stuck. Why can't I have something, too? I have dreams. Why can't my dreams come true?"

"Trust in Me. You are My beloved child. With you I am well pleased. Your dreams, too, shall come true. Remember, I give you those dreams."

"If You give me the things I dream of, why do You always put a stumbling block in front of me? Always one step forward and one hundred steps back."

"You see only your pain right now. Seek first the Kingdom of God."

"What does that mean?"

"Do you love Me?"

"Yes."

"Then trust in Me."

“I do trust in You.”

“Do you love Me?”

“You know I do.”

“Then keep your head up and keep walking toward the light.”

“I’m trying.”

“Do you love Me?”

“I told You I do.”

“Then know that I love you and everything will be as it should be.”

“But I . . . ”

“Be still and know that I am with you always. Your time will come.”

“Ruth. Ruth.” Nicholas shook my shoulder once again. “Boy, you can really tune out if you want to, huh?”

“I’m sorry. I was just thinking.”

“Heaven?”

“Yeah, heaven.”

“Well, we’ve landed. Let’s go.”

The suited stranger had packed away his laptop and stared at me, eager to communicate his frustration and disgust. The aisle ahead had not even been cleared enough for us to abandon our seats, but he needed me to follow custom and stand with head bent down so as not to hit the compartment above, waiting and able to exit as soon as possible, saving a mere two seconds of rushed time.

Chapter Sixteen

Jessica

I often wondered what my real grandfather looked like. I wondered if I favored him in any way. The only memory I have of my dreamlike life stares back at me through the eyes of my parents in the picture I carry of them when they were babies. No one could ever convince me that they did not love me. They loved me before they even knew me. They tell me so when they look at me through those old pictures. Those eyes are the gateway to eternal heaven. When life stands still and panic attacks choke time, those eyes breathe for me. I feel as if my parents use those eyes to communicate to me from home. They loved me. They still do. If I have nothing else, at least I have that. No one can take that from me. I knew real love once.

I knew God. I talked to His Son more often than I talked to anyone else. I remember times when I felt like the world was caving in on me, like a lonesome explorer caught beneath the depths of the ocean. A billowing frond of seaweed entangled my ankle. I would kick and squirm, fighting to free myself. But the futile fight only empowered the stronghold. The grip of the unrelenting sea pulled me back each time I tried to break away. It was as if the hand of Hades beckoned me to the dungeon of everlasting doom.

With each vain kick, my fear forced the release of delicate sustaining breath. I could not hold it in any longer. Forgetting my underwater plight, I opened my mouth and drew in gallons of salt water. My lungs filled. I choked, but, without air, the chokes strangled me. Had I been able to remain calm, my hands could have reached for my ankle. Then I would have realized that my mind's terror held me in the seaweed's loose grip. One simple maneuver of the wrist would have released me to the giver of life at the surface of the sea. Fear killed me.

During my moments of like terror, Jesus acted as the hand of rescue, breathing life back into my water-filled lungs. He came without even a call. He just showed up, saved me, and held me in His arms. Just like that. No questions asked. No one can take this from me, either.

God exists. He existed in that room after Alan raped me. In my grief, at that time when I thought death the only realistic option, He reassured me and loved me back to life. I am still alive today. I never took my own life because He exists.

I have always failed to understand where my faith comes from. Lord knows no one ever taught me. No one ever showed me. I just knew Him. No matter how bad I screwed up, no matter how hard life became, I knew Him and He knew me. He loved me. Like my parents in that picture, He still loves me. For that, I am forever indebted to Him.

I needed to be grateful because I knew that my inability to suffer the truth led me again into another abysmal lie. With God's love ever before me, I still chose to sin. I determined to take control once again of my own destiny. Without conscious will, my nemesis took center stage, directing the course—meeting long-lost Grandpa.

Nicholas and I shared a hotel room just south of downtown San Antonio. One bed. As I stood in the doorway, my heart raced, calling all veins to attention. His breath pricked my neck as he stood behind me, like warm water rejuvenating life back into frozen feet. Jessica jerked to attention, smiling with an assured understanding of the task that lay before her. She crossed the threshold and set her bags next to the bed.

"I'll just sleep on the floor," Nicholas offered.

"Don't be silly. This bed is more than big enough for both of us. No need for you to be uncomfortable. I trust you."

We sat on the bed as I thumbed through a local telephone directory.

“Do you remember the place your grandfather’s staying?”

“Yeah.” Had Nicholas been observing me closely, he would have noticed my gaze focused on the “P” section of the yellow pages. “He’s at Pine Brook Manor. We’ll have to get directions, though. I’m not too sure of the way anymore.”

“No problem. When do you want to go?”

“Not today. We just got here. Let’s go get some Mexican food.”

“Sounds good.”

“I don’t care how good you’ve ever eaten. You’ve never really experienced Mexican food `til you’ve had real TexMex. I wonder if that little place by Fort Sam is still open. The smaller places are always the best.”

“Do you remember the name?”

“Juan’s Place, I think. Anyway, I know it’s right by the gates at Fort Sam. All the military guys used to eat there.”

“Let’s go.”

After dinner, we took a boat tour of the River Walk, then walked alongside the river.

“As crowded as it is around here, I can’t believe they don’t have railings along the river. I wonder if anyone’s ever fallen in,” Nicholas pondered.

“I’m sure they have. There are a lot of drunk people walking around.”

Nicholas and I walked in silence for the most part. Taking in the scenery brought me home. Mariachi bands serenaded patrons at every other restaurant. Mexican-Americans were the majority there. Even though I did not share their genetic heritage, I felt an instant connection with each one of them as if, through our gaze, we shared some eternal secret understood only by

others like ourselves. I cannot explain it. I cannot even translate that native mystery. Only the essence knows and understands. Only those like I am can look at me and hear. The secret brings with it an ancient peace, handed down from generation to generation since the first days of reluctant integration of Spaniards and Indians on the old Texas soil. Our entire storied history is played out as we exchange glances. Not one kindred spirit ever shies away from the eye-to-eye contact of our brethren.

“You’re as beautiful as your home.”

I smiled. “Thanks. You know, it’s really strange how at home I feel. I haven’t been here in years, but it’s like I never left. I feel like I belong here.”

“You ever think of moving back?”

“Sure do, but California is a part of me now, too. It’s like I’ve got two homes and I’m two different people, depending on where I am. I wish I could take the things I love about San Francisco and put them right here. Then I’d be in heaven.”

“What would you take from San Francisco?”

“Work, church, and you. Those things keep me there. If those things were here, that would be perfect.”

Nicholas and I continued to tour the streets of downtown San Antonio for a few hours before returning to the hotel. In a state of elated reverie, we turned in. Sleep conquered me before long, transporting me to sweet dreams of fulfilled life and love. My subconscious forced my mind to awaken. My sweet, innocent Nicholas positioned his naked body against my backside, and he caressed my thighs. His hand inched toward my stomach and down my leg, never reaching above or below the front of my waist. I lay still, pretending to be asleep, contemplating

what my interpretation of the moment should be. I should be offended because he took advantage of my trust while he thought I slept. Nicholas had never attempted such a bold move.

Yet I was not offended. I felt my muscles tighten with excitement. My senses pulsed with sexual frenzy. Jessica had him trapped like a helpless fly entangled in a spider's web. She got him to react to her whims. He was under her control. As his hand glided back toward my stomach, I reached for it and placed it on my breast. No need denying my lust. I leaned into him and cocked my head back just enough to reach for a kiss. Never had a kiss exuded such passionate sensations throughout my entire body, tingling every nerve ending from head to foot.

The feel of his sexuality between my legs released in me a flood of desire, ready to take him inside of me. I lay flat against the bed and he climbed on top of me.

Unlike the monstrous force of a father figure, his surprise elicited in me a sexual craving. Unlike the dictated rule of Malcolm, his tenderness held me above all fear, allowing me to abandon my shame, focusing my attention on the moment.

The next morning, we woke up still holding each other. No word or commentary translated our experience. We both understood that verbal communication confused the silent language of love. Both of our hearts spoke in sync. That was all we needed. We attempted no more.

The day greeted me as the sun greets a soldier at war on a Christmas Day. Uncertainty clouded the comfort of new romance. While Nicholas showered, I called Pine Brook Manor to inform them of my arrival in town and my wish to visit "Grandpa." My course of action was plotted before one foot touched ground in Texas. Before leaving San Francisco, I called various nursing homes until I found the perfect grandfather.

I called Pine Brook Manor and asked if a Mr. Satterfield still resided in their home. Yes. Mister James E. Satterfield still resided at Pine Brook. Finally, I found kin. I explained that I, Ruth Satterfield, was his granddaughter, confessing that, living in California, I never visited him before now. I asked how often others visited him. They stated that no one visited Mr. Satterfield. His son, Milton, my “uncle,” used to visit him regularly, but as “Grandpa’s” condition worsened, “Uncle Milton” visited less and less. Now he comes on holidays and stays for a short time. Sad, yes, but lucky for me. Taking a shot in the dark, I confided in the nurse that since “Grandma” died, visiting “Grandpa” was such an emotional strain on everyone, seeing him that way, knowing he would not remember our names.

I asked about his condition. Grandpa was still as lovable as always. The nurses loved him. He had good days and bad. Some days he remembered his regular caretakers and friends. Some days he remembered very little. Like many Alzheimer’s patients, he liked to talk about his memories of the past. And he always smiled. My luck continued.

My thoughts shifted from why this person released information on a patient just because I claimed relations and how the gods must have been smiling down on me to make this con so easy. I explained that my boyfriend and I would be in town for a few short days. My boyfriend wanted to see my hometown. While in San Antonio, I wanted to see my “grandpa.” We used to be so close and—I added a touch of despair in my tone—and he may not be around much longer. Can I come and see him? Any time.

After gorging on breakfast tacos, we hailed a cab destined for Pine Brook Manor, home of my “granddad,” James E. Satterfield.

“What does the “E” stand for?” Nicholas asked.

“You know, I’m not sure. He was always just Grandpa.”

My fake grandfather could not have fared better. The large modern manor rested in the gorgeous countryside near the hills of Bandera. Trees shaded the smooth sidewalk, made so that the elderly could stroll in the sunshine with easy use of wheelchairs or walkers. The view of each room displayed a breathtaking scene of the best of Texas. Looking out any window compared to staring at graphic paintings of the old south Texas wilderness. Bluebonnets decorated the grassy landscape. They even displayed a non-functioning rustic windmill in the background. The building resembled an oil tycoon mansion rather than a depot for ailing patients whose families either lack the means or the desire to care for their aged.

Even the inside lacked the stale hospital atmosphere of most nursing homes. The grand interior decorated the walls with vast portraits of Texas heroes, histories, and beauty. The art was of a much higher caliber than the cheap prints usually passed as decoration. Just to the right of the nurses' station was a small chapel. As it was later explained to me, preachers from varying denominations provided full services in this facility at a specific time each week. Even the most far gone patient attended service. As one nurse put it after catching my awed glance, "I guess God is the one thing none of them ever forget."

This simple statement sent a shiver down my spine as if God Himself called on my demons to bring to mind the deceit that I brought to life. The same nurse served as my guide.

"Welcome, Ruth. Nicholas. It's good to meet you." She extended a hand to us.

"Good to meet you, too." I answered. "How is he doing today?"

"He's in good spirits. We took him outside early this morning." With a smirk and a light poke in my ribs, she added, "He already had his Coke today. He loves his Cokes. He drinks one a

day and usually likes to save it for after dinner. Today, he wanted his treat early. It's as if he knew you were coming."

"Does he?" I questioned.

The nurse grew serious and took a deep breath. "Ruth, how long has it been since you've seen him?"

"I haven't seen him since they brought him here."

"Three years? Three years is so much longer with Alzheimer's patients than with you and me. We go about our daily lives, work and family and hobbies. Time flies by. With them, well, their memories aren't what they used to be. Time doesn't fly the same way. They just get worse. Were you two close?"

I struggled with breathing a response. "I guess so. I mean, I loved him a lot, and I always knew I was his favorite." Since this was my charade, I might as well create the story the way it should have been. "He used to take me fishing. He liked to go fishing at the coast. He'd pick me up from school and take me to McDonalds. I remember one time, when I was very little, I didn't like what my mom made for dinner. I snuck away and called Grandpa. He came over with a Happy Meal."

"Her grandparents raised her when her parents died," Nicholas added.

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"Well, I was so young when they died. Only two or three. That's why it's strange to me that I remember him bringing me McDonald's because I didn't want what my mom made."

"You were close." The nurse said this with such concerned sorrow. "Ruth, he hasn't seen you in such a long time. He very well may not remember you. We have a counselor here on staff.

She works with the families. Maybe you should talk to her before you see your grandfather. She can tell you more about this disease and what to expect.”

“No,” I intoned. “I know what to expect. I just need to see him.”

“Ruth, maybe you should talk to the counselor first,” Nicholas pleaded. “You’ve been through so much lately. Maybe it’ll be good to have someone to talk to.” Looking for approval from the nurse, he added, “Maybe she should even be there when we go see him. Maybe I shouldn’t be with you.”

“No. I want you with me. I don’t need anyone else. I’m okay. I’ve been preparing myself for this for a long time. Now I just want to see him.”

“Okay, but she is right down the hall, third door on your left should you change your mind.” She pointed down the first long corridor to the left of the main entrance. “As a matter of fact, it’s about lunch time. Meals are served a bit early here. Would you like to join him, or would you rather see him before he eats?”

“I don’t want to disrupt his routine. What will be better for him?”

“Why don’t you go ahead and visit with him now. See how things go and then maybe you can join him for lunch. I know you are his granddaughter, but it may be best to bring him out here this first time. That’s where most people visit. Most families find the rooms a bit claustrophobic.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll go get him.”

Nicholas and I stood in silence, both uncomfortable, but for different reasons. He worried about my well-being and doubted the justification for his presence. I worried about the reaction of a man meeting a “granddaughter” he never knew. How callous of me to prey on the emotions

of another, hurting others who believed that this poor man's memory failed to remember someone he once adored. I stared at the extra-large television screen in the far corner of the front sitting area. A few elderly women and men stared with blind interest at a Spanish soap opera.

A mother with two young children sat on a couch with an aged man in a wheelchair facing them. The middle-aged mother tried to recount stories of her youth, asking time and time again if he remembered. He stared straight ahead with pain in his eyes as he struggled to reconstruct the story. The two children found an object in the room to focus their attention, their minds racing with boredom as their inner clocks slowed to a crawling halt, turning their gaze back toward the conversing adults when they heard the mention of their names.

Men and women made their way from each corridor heading to an unseen destination somewhere down another corridor behind the nurses' station. The smell of fresh baked bread overpowered all other odors, indicating the time and place for their meals. Lunchtime already. I said that I did not want to disturb his routine. With a bit of luck, this visit would end before much longer.

The nurse wheeled out James E. Satterfield. His long legs and arms indicated that he once stood tall. His slender physique offered the hint that the man knew the meaning of hard work in his past. In my mind I imagined him plowing fields in the days before engine-powered tractors. Tilling the field, ridding his land of weeds and insects, picking his crops by hand. His family ate from the fat of the land, the fruit of their labor. I imagined pigs, pigs that I would have played with as a child. I even befriended one, riding on its back like a horse. That pig and I were best friends. That is, until Grandpa took him to slaughter. He never owned another pig again.

I imagined that I refused to eat any of the animals if I saw him killing them or if I noticed they were missing. He adored me but could not understand this queerness about me. He told me each night that our dinner came from the grocery store. Mr. Mookey or Samson or Bonkers or Crower were given to a better home to someone that would love and take care of them. I believed him.

I imagined that he took pride in this land and his work even though it was small in comparison to most farms. He made the most of his money selling fresh fruits and vegetables at the market. "Grandma" made beautiful embroidered clothing. She made fancy dresses for the young girls' birthday parties and for brides' weddings. Although poor, I always had new clothes to wear.

The grandpa I created refused to trust banks after losing what little he had during the Depression and after almost losing the family farm. He buried his money on the land in shallow unmarked graves in old coffee cans. We all believed he even hid money in the chicken coop and pigpen. He never bought one thing if he could not buy it with cash. He drove a rusted old Ford pickup truck. He said no one needed a fancy new car just to go into town. The truck started every time. "Grandpa" never traveled any further than into town, until he moved to Pine Brook Manor. I wonder what happened with the land and the cans of money. I wonder how much he had saved all those years.

The grandpa I created wore glasses for reading. "Grandpa" believed in reading the Bible together every night. He had one television set with no cable. The only program we watched was the evening news. "Grandma," however, let me watch television while "Grandpa" worked, as long as I had completed my own chores. "Grandpa" grumbled at the laziness of youth, but smiled as he did so. How he loved me.

The glasses he wore now were larger and thicker than those old small reading glasses I imagined. The nurse told me that he has lost much of his sight and hearing. I must speak up when talking to him.

“Mr. Satterfield, this is your granddaughter, Ruth. Do you remember Ruth?” He said nothing. He looked at me. I said nothing. I just smiled.

The nurse wheeled him next to an empty chair in a quieter section of the visiting area, away from the distraction of the television. Nicholas and I sat in front of him.

“He doesn’t talk too much. He’s in the late stages.” The nurse apologized for his quiet demeanor.

Even though my heart ached with fear and my palms perspired, I could not turn my gaze away from him. In the short moments that we had known each other, I created a history with him, a history centered on divine love. I started to wonder if James E. Satterfield could be my biological grandfather. After all, we shared the same last name, and we were both from San Antonio.

As my craving for family tried to convince me that fate threw me face to face with my real grandfather, reality reminded me that “Satterfield” was not my real birth name. The chances of my choosing a new name that led me back home to my real grandfather were slim to none. But, related or not, I knew him. Somehow, if only in heaven before our existence on earth, on some other plane, I knew this man. I felt at home in his presence.

“Look at him.” Another nurse had joined us to say hello to the man thought to have few relatives. The nurses talked to each other and then to me. “Look at the way he’s looking at her.

He knows you. He may not remember how he knows you, but he has that look of recognition. He doesn't look at anyone like that."

Before we left, after returning "Grandpa" to his room, the nurse said, "It was as if he knew you from someplace else, some other time. That was very spiritual. Praise God."

Praise God, indeed! God took a deceitful situation destined for disaster and blessed all. The nurses shared our story with others.

"If anyone can bring life and pleasure to another human being, even for such a short time, you can," Nicholas boasted.

More awesome than the relief of having safeguarded my secret once again was the look on James E. Satterfield's face. I made him happy that day. Maybe he did know me. Maybe we did have some spiritual connection. Maybe he was just thrilled to have company, any company. Whatever the reason, I was glad I brought him happiness, if only for such a short time.

Chapter Seventeen

Jessica

Life back in San Francisco resumed to the normal daily grind. For months after our vacation, Nicholas' commitment to me and our relationship surpassed even the expectations of the heroine in an epic fiction love novel. No romance movie or novel compared to our fairy tale love.

Rather predictably, after a time of quiet ecstasy, our love calmed to the routine of familiarity. My destiny, however, refused to permit me to rest comfortably in the normal affairs of living. Overcoming one obstacle merely unlocked the doors to the next hurdle to thrust itself in my path.

On a slow day, all activity absent from campus due to the winter break, I found myself losing my mind at work. I never enjoyed this time of year. Christmas—the time of year to spend quality time with family and to celebrate the birth of our Savior. Christmas—the time of year when even atheists and other faiths celebrate—a holiday converted to the season of commercialism.

Being without a family, I cringed at sights of jolly groups participating in all the activities that make the season so grand—decorating, singing carols, baking cookies for Santa, shopping. And the shopping—the other reason I loathed this season. We are supposed to spend this time in thankful prayer for the gift of God's Son. We are supposed to give gifts to others in remembrance of this first offering. Instead, we give to receive. We give to impress those we love or hope to love. We give to children both good and bad, playing up the role of Santa. We allow

these children to act with greedy enthusiasm, failing to teach them why they receive gifts, why Christmas exists. They grow up celebrating a meaningless holiday.

It is an excuse to take time off from school or work for a few weeks. It is a ploy for big business to make lots of money. Their annual profits, their success or failure, depends on the Christmas buying. The advertisers tell the consumer that if you love your significant other, nothing else will do except this thousand dollar diamond necklace. If you really love your man, you will buy him this state of the art gadget or tool. They convince children that if they do not find this toy under their tree on Christmas morning, life as they know it will end.

Greed. Gluttony. Materialism.

Where does Jesus fit in to our ill-fated holiday? What happened to giving real gifts? Gifts of time, of love, of help? What about the poor? The homeless? The family-less? Why do we not take our children to the shelter, give gifts to those who have nothing, teach our children to love as Jesus loves? Now that is giving. That is celebrating Christmas.

What about children whose families cannot afford that new bike? They believe they are bad, that they failed in some way because Santa, the magical man whose elves are supposed to make good children any toy they want, refused to put that one desired gift under the tree. Maybe the kid could not leave any cookies and milk because the family could not afford to waste any milk. The kid thinks Santa is mad because there was no milk or cookies. Who is the kid angry with now? Mom? Dad? Santa? Is this giving in the spirit for which Christmas was intended? I should think not. But, I digress . . . Monotonous days gave free reign to such trivial thoughts.

One day, with nothing on television except tired old Christmas shows, nothing on the radio except sappy Christmas songs, and with no one on campus to request services to keep me

occupied, I sat in my chair, spinning in circles, staring at the browning spots on the office ceiling tiles, praying for a quick passage of time through this miserable season or for at least some activity to disrupt my unmotivated boredom.

I never succumbed to the lure of obsessive internet activity, limiting my participation to e-mail communication and the occasional convenience of online shopping. However, with tight funds and with few friends to exchange e-mails, time on the internet dwindled still further. But on this miserable winter holiday, few other options offered much diversion.

I usually deleted any e-mail with unrecognizable addresses, but reading advertisements for products I did not need appealed to me more than twirling in my chair or watching made-for-television movies with actors pretending to overcome perils through the spirit of Christmas. One address taunted me from the screen like a choking hand reaching through time, the sneer of revenge lusting after a target unable to seek cover. My curiosity forbade my better judgment from deleting and ignoring the content.

Malcolm rose from the grave of Mary's dying past.

Mary ore Ruth or woever the hell you are reember me I remembr you. I remember waht ou did to me you set me up dint you bitch did you plan ti al along? i bet you did Dont worry paybak is hell

Malcolm

Adrenaline surged through my body, cutting off my air supply and weakening my limbs. I felt my body go numb, the deadness filtering from my fingertips, into my hands, through my

arms, until only the weight of terror pressed heavily upon my shoulders. I prayed for distraction. God granted my request.

As if on cue, my cell phone rang, startling me out of my trance. Caller unknown. The only people who would call me were working with me right now. I did not answer it. A few minutes later, the phone rang once more. Again, caller unknown. Again, I did not answer.

The gnawing in the pit of my stomach warned me of the caller's real identity. I checked my voicemail, ignoring my fear, succumbing to morbid curiosity as does the victim searching in the darkened woods for her assailant, the obvious wrong move of every horror film. A muffled mumbling disguised a male voice claiming to be an old friend. Both messages were the same.

This' your ole pal. Remember me? Don't think I've forgotten what you did to me you little bitch. Don't think you can mess with me and get away with it. I'm closer than you think. See you soon.

The small, cramped office began closing in on me. Craning my neck, I cocked my ear to listen to the deafening silence. Only the ticking of the clock could be heard. Then, BAM! The sudden noise of the back door slamming shut startled me to my feet. Anyone entering the office from the back must come through one door, which was supposed to be locked, walk a few feet down a shallow hall and enter through another door. I stood erect, staring at the door, waiting for my doom. Nicholas walked in.

He looked at me and noticed my stiff posture. "Looks like you just saw a ghost. You scared in here all alone or are you just really, really bored?"

I did not return his sarcasm nor did I smile. "He's back," I said. "I don't know why or where exactly he is, but he's here . . . in California . . . maybe even right here."

"What are you talking about?"

"Malcolm."

"Malcolm? What's going on?"

The e-mail still stared back at me from the computer screen. I pointed at the screen and told Nicholas to read.

"Is this the only one?"

"So far."

"He's just messing with you. Don't let it freak you out like that. Besides, you had nothing to do with the incident that took place between him and me." He paused. "What made you go out with that guy in the first place? What were you thinking?"

"People don't always come across when you first meet them the way they really are. He wasn't like that. He was sweet. He cared about me. And besides, when I met him, I was in a bad place in my life. I was lonely. And well . . . well, I don't owe you an explanation. We were together, and now we're not. Now he won't go away."

"I'm sorry," Nicholas raised his eyes to meet mine. "I'm sorry. I know." He reached for my hand and caressed it between his palms. "Anyway, I really don't think you should worry. He's just harassing you, trying to scare you." He raised my hand to his lips and kissed the tip of each finger.

"But, it gets worse." I told him of my cell phone ringing almost immediately after I finished reading the e-mail. I called my voicemail again and let him listen to the two messages.

"Sounds like someone talked through a cloth to muffle his voice. You sure it's him?"

“Who else could it be?”

“Save those messages. I think he’s just screwing with you, but we’ll see if it keeps happening. Save the e-mail, too.”

“Okay. You really think it’s nothing?”

“He wouldn’t be stupid enough to come back around here. Are you okay? Do you want me to hang out in here?”

“No. I’m okay. I’ll be fine.”

“Call me if you need me.”

Nicholas returned to his patrol, and I turned on the television, desperate to drown out the silence in spite of the lack of anything worth watching.

The disturbing phone calls and e-mails continued despite Nicholas’ assurance that Malcolm only wished to scare me, intending to punish me for dumping him in favor of a life and love I deserved. For some time, I concealed the continued abuse, heeding the advice of Nicholas. “Ignore him, and he will lose interest.” But, the messages soon focused attacks on the few people around me I loved.

Whether because of my past or because of my shy personality, I never acquired the ability or desire to be a part of a large circle of social interaction. I got along well with and enjoyed the company of co-workers, but because our relationships never extended beyond this setting, I could not call them close friends. Only three people related to me on a more intimate, personal level, Nicholas being one of them. The other two I also met at work.

Victor and Jackie were other dispatchers with the security office. Victor was also a resident student at the university. After a few months of employment, the two of them invited me to go out with them. Anxious to make friends, I accepted the invitation. We soon bonded.

Victor, although I never asked and he never admitted it, was a homosexual. He did not act as gay as the flamboyant Nathan Lane in the movie *The Birdcage*. No outward mannerisms betrayed his sexuality. He reminded me more of the soft, masculine character of Will on the television show *Will and Grace*, although not nearly as handsome.

Victor had no male friends and never had a girlfriend or even talked about girls. If we passed a gorgeous woman on the street, I would point her out and admire her beauty. He would shrug and turn away, oblivious to voluptuous breasts or long legs. Even my Nicholas, my sweet God-fearing man, succumbed to the natural beauty of the female form.

The great thing about having a homosexual friend is that it is an honest friendship. Victor liked football and all the masculine activities. We could watch football together, drink a few beers, and just have a great time. And the best part of all, the sexual tension never became an issue. I never worried that his feelings for me were turning into something they should not be. We were, and would only be, friends. We had even fallen asleep together in the same bed. He used to spend the night quite often. Not once did he make any move. Sleeping with him was as comfortable as sleeping alone. Nicholas knew that he spent the night, and he was never bothered by it.

Jackie and I scrutinized Victor's sexual preference on more than one occasion. We both loved him and never cared one way or another. It just made for an interesting debate. We wondered why straight men could not act more like Victor. He was the perfect man. If more men

were like him, we could get to know them without sex getting in the way. No pressure. Relationships would be so much easier.

Jackie and I talked a lot about sex. She was a virgin, but thought about it constantly. Like Victor, she never had a boyfriend. She wanted one, though, and wanted to have sex. She wanted the experience of the kind of passion portrayed in the movies. I assured her that the movies exaggerate the moment for entertainment value. Sex and romance sell.

She wanted to know this experience for herself. She believed that the perfect man, waiting to look with adoration into her green eyes, would carry her away to an imaginary world of perfect love, sealing his unending devotion with a tender kiss and love made on a plush bed scented with the fragrance of roses. I could tell by the way she looked at Victor that she dreamed that he could be that man.

Jackie and I talked about everything. We kept no secrets. At least, Ruth kept no secrets from her best friend. Jackie knew every detail of Ruth's life. We soon decided to move in together. Sharing expenses meant we could save some money. What a concept. Whom better to move in with than your best friend? Many people, even Nicholas and Victor, warned us against this move, protesting that people who move in as best friends, move out as the bitterest of enemies. We laughed them off, assured that the strength of our friendship surpassed statistics.

And, it did, at least until Malcolm's harassing phone calls awakened an unforeseen conflict.

Sharing one phone line meant that Jackie sometimes answered calls intended for me. The muffled voice soon turned his assaults onto my innocent friend.

Jackie? Jackie is that you? I'm coming for you, too. You should've known better than to move in with that bitch.

The e-mails also shifted focus off me and onto those I loved.

Jakee must be a hor to why else would she be frends with you and living with you? Ill take care of all of you when I com. She should kno beter then to protect you

Tell that asshole you call your boyfrind to wach his back. Nobody can do that to me and not get wats coming. He'll lern.

Soon, the e-mails ceased. Instead, Malcolm, or the culprit we all assumed to be Malcolm, left voice messages created with a computer. The one word spoken by the artificial computerized voice repeated the word "die."

The continuity of the messages of death enraged Nicholas to the point of confiscating my cell phone. Whenever the phone rang, day or night, Nicholas answered it.

"Hello?"

DIE. DIE. DIE.

Nicholas pleaded with me to report this to the police. "You have to, Ruth. He's not going to stop unless you make him."

"I know, but you said yourself that he's just trying to scare me."

"But now he's threatening Jackie and me. It's wrong, and he needs to stop. You have to go to the police."

"I know."

“Promise me.”

“I will.”

But, I never did. Instead, I allowed the harassment to continue. I still harbored fear of the law. Jackie had no fear, and, after Nicholas pleaded with her as he had tried to plead with me, she called the police to file a report. She accused him of making death threats against her. With Nicholas’ cooperation, she released the recorded messages to the authorities.

Nicholas refused to give up. “He’s threatening me, too. I made a formal complaint the same time Jackie did.”

“What? Why?”

“Ruth, what’s wrong with you? You know this is illegal, don’t you?” The irritation in Nicholas’ voice grew, failing to understand why I could shy away from taking measures against such an obvious crime. “He must really have something over you.”

“No. That’s not it.”

“Then what is it?”

“I...I don’t know.” I knew I had been defeated.

Nicholas called the police, and an officer came to my home to take down the third report against Malcolm. I told them all about our troubled past and his reappearance in town. Although I had no solid proof against him, he was the likely suspect for making the harassing phone calls and leaving harassing e-mails. The officer assured me the matter would be looked into.

To my surprise, the law reacted with swift dedication. Malcolm received a subpoena to appear in court to face charges of harassment and death threats against three individuals. Jackie took control of the issue, hiring a lawyer, pressing for swift justice.

Jackie, small and quiet, followed my lead at every turn, making no decision on her own. My pet. I had grown to consider her like a little sister, eager to act like her role model, losing her own identity to mold into the ideal older sister. She always walked one step behind me.

It shames me to admit that this built-up inequality in our relationship is the exact trait that bonded me to her with such devotion. Next to her, I felt invincible. I felt beautiful and always in control. Her inferiority made me feel whole.

Perception masks the truth. My naïve companion revealed her hidden strength when confronted by this threat. “I know he’s your ex, but I’m not going to sit around and tolerate this. This has got to stop, and it’s gonna stop now.”

Because my place of employment worked so well in conjunction with the local police department, they kept me up-to-date with the proceedings. The day I received a phone call informing me that Malcolm had been served his papers, I became claustrophobic with panic. My room, my shared apartment with Jackie, smothered me. Victor, with me when the phone first rang, noticed the obvious fear consuming me and suggested we go for a walk.

The stillness of the night air crept over my skin, reminding me of the lonesome silence of captivity, being trapped in personal hell disguised as normalcy, inertia overpowering any desire for change.

No clouds shielded the radiance of the late spring stars or crescent moon. One star after another winked at me as if they were privy to all my dark secrets. The clear sky opened my mistaken fancy, correcting my notion that past lives could be buried, that I could run away from

myself. I saw Jessica's eyes reflected from the same point in the sky. Mary's eyes met ours. We all, from different places, looked up at the same moon, uniting us as one.

We are one. I am all. Me. There is no escape. No escape for me from me. For the first time, Jessica, Mary, and Ruth came together as one, meeting in one body at one moment. We agreed to try to salvage what we could. We could not escape ourselves, but those we loved, and others, had escaped us. We must quit running. Now that we had found each other and became one, we could not run in separate directions. It was time to face ourselves. Our moment of truth had come.

Chapter Eighteen

Andrea

We all experience moments of clarity in life when we see where we have been and where we want to go. We know what we must do to correct the past and to move on to create the future we crave. There is a beautiful instant of self-realization when, in the blink of an eye, we understand that which just prior taunted and confused us. These moments do not always come in pretty packages or in our own chosen time. Most often, they come from strife when our world seems to be crumbling around us and we feel as if we are suffocating with a torrential blast. But, something amazing happens at these times. We realize just how strong we really are and know without a doubt that we can make it through the ordeal just fine, coming out on the other side even more empowered.

These moments are different for everybody. For one, it may be a divorce or death of a loved one. For another, such as Ruth, it may be the downfall of her own scheming that leads her to healing. For others, like me, it may be as simple as dealing with everyday relationships in normal adolescent settings.

While my relationship with Sue had been put on hold for the time being, Frank and I were still trying to make things right. For starters, he did not break up with me after the prom. But now, not only would he not show he cared, but he would not even say he did. We would talk about college, and he began not to care about his future or mine. He refused to let me help him, so I did the logical thing and broke up with him.

Our relationship started going downhill during the summer between my sophomore and junior years of high school. I went on my usual vacation to Nebraska. He was supposed to pick me up from the airport. As I walked to the gate, anticipating a jovial reunion, my dad and sister greeted me instead of Frank.

“We were afraid he’d forget. Good thing we decided to come,” they said.

Full of disappointment, I followed them down the terminal. Frank walked toward us in haste with a rose in his hand. No apologies. No excuses. He took me home.

Once we got to my house, he told me that, for the first week while I was gone, he missed me. He counted down the days until my return. Then, he met a new girl at work. They ended up going out together every day for the rest of my absence. He even admitted that he bought her roses. Humph . . . he brought me, his girlfriend, a single rose and gave roses—plural—to a stranger. Although he insisted that nothing happened between them, he admitted that time spent with her healed his broken heart. He no longer cared if I returned.

Although I stayed with him, I knew in my heart it was over. Our time had run out, and that was that. One night, he cancelled our date, so I went to a dance club with some friends. I met a boy named Joshua, and we exchanged numbers. I liked Joshua, but, at this point, all I wanted was revenge. I told Frank about my night.

“I didn’t touch her, though,” Frank said.

“We didn’t do anything, either!”

“Right,” he replied in a sarcastic tone.

“So, I’m supposed to believe you, but you won’t believe me?” My anger grew like fire from hell. I wanted to pull him through the telephone cord and witness the blood rush into his

green eyes. Nothing I tried helped to calm my nerves. I sat myself down and I wrote a poem dictating the story.

Too Late--Stone Cold

This is the conclusion to my many troubles.

I erase your name from my memory.

Speaking with you any further must be denied

unless the true Frank is willing to be.

Our time was my own fairy tale.

I loved you once before

but you have proven that I am nothing to you.

I wish to see you never more.

It had to be ended for there are no words

to show you care.

There's more than saying I love you.

Yes.

You need to be there.

Now it's too late.

You turned stone cold.

So now I'm moving on.

This fighting is getting old.

*If you happen to meet my Mr. Right . . .
please inform him that I'm awaiting his arrival.
For now I am too young and too smart
to stand for your denial.
I am angry and hurt by the treatment I received,
but it is important for you, Frank, to believe
that I was in love with the old you who is lost within himself.
I no longer wish to see
the substitute you gave to me.
If you return there may be a chance
for lots of love and lots of romance.
But if you are lost forever,
may we meet again never.*

Frank came by the next day to pick up his senior jacket. He left me a rose, and I left him this poem. As soon as he read the poem, he returned to talk to me.

“I was acting like a child. I’m sorry,” he said.

He had given me a rose only two other times. He told me of numerous occasions when he almost did, but didn’t. “Who wants to hear that you almost did? If you were going to, you would have!” I complained.

We stayed together, but we were still not close like we once were. I knew it was over even though neither one of us had the nerve to let go. Days later, he took me to the Towers of America in San Antonio, and all we did was argue.

Standing at the edge of the tower, looking at the great city below me, I said, "While in Nebraska, something happened to me. Like you, I missed you very much the first week. Then one day, my cousin and I were sitting on the porch shooting fireworks at ants. These two guys kept driving by, and then they stopped and talked to us. Nothing happened. They just talked and then left.

"When they left, my cousin asked me about you and if I missed you. Without thinking, I said no. That shocked me. Then I just started telling her all kinds of things."

"Like what?"

"I'm getting to that. My cousin Cassie and I are best friends. I can tell her anything. And it was like I needed to get all this stuff off my chest since I never told anyone else. I told her how we had had sex and how I feel like I'm too young. I shouldn't be having sex. I still like playing with firecrackers and running around doing kid things. I love playing with Transformers with my other cousin. I can't be a kid and be having sex. It's just not right. I still feel like I'm a kid. I *am* still just a kid. I don't want to do this anymore. I'm having to grow up too fast in this relationship. I'm only fifteen. That's just not right. You should be with someone older."

"Do you think it was a mistake?" he asked, confused by my sudden remark.

"Well, yes and no. I mean, I felt pressured . . ."

"I never pressured you!" he responded. "I told you I'd wait."

"I know, but, I knew you wanted it. Then you had to tease me about not being a virgin when we were done. I knew then that I made a mistake."

Still angered, he said, “Well, if you knew you made a mistake, why did you stay with me? Why did you still do it with me?”

“I don’t know, okay? I thought that’s what we were supposed to do. And, it’s not that I didn’t like it; I just know in my heart that it’s wrong for me right now. I’m too young to be doing this. Something happened to me in Nebraska. It’s like I got some clarity about myself. I know this is not right for me.”

“Okay, but do you have to be so innocent? I mean, can’t we do some things without going all the way?”

“YES! I do have to be that innocent, and, NO, we cannot do some things. It’s those ‘some things’ that got us into trouble in the first place.” His remark angered me. “You know? I was looking at a picture of me and you, and I didn’t look like a girl who has had sex before. Nobody knows about this except Cassie and she won’t tell. Not my parents, my sister, not even Sue knows. We haven’t done it much, but what if one day I get pregnant? Nothing is one hundred percent safe and until it is, no more for me until I grow up a little and I am ready. I’m certainly not ready to be a parent at fifteen, ruining my life and never getting to do the things I dream about doing.”

“You won’t get pregnant, and I thought sex and making love were two different things to you? Now we’re having sex?”

“No. It’s just not right for me right now.”

“You once said that if a man and a woman loved each other and thought they would get married, then it was all right.”

“Yes, I believe that.”

“What happened?”

"I'm not a woman," I thought to myself. Then I said, "I know you said you want to marry me, but Sunday I realized that you may not be here forever. We may not get married. I have given you something very precious to me."

"I know. That's how I know you love me."

"I don't see how people can do it without being in love. I wouldn't have had sex with you unless I thought we'd last forever."

"We will. I know your beliefs. I keep coming back to you."

"But I just realized that nothing is for certain. I want to wait until I'm married."

"Why can't we have fun without having sex?"

Now I was growing impatient and annoyed. "I told you why. If you want it that bad, go to someone else!" I snapped.

"I just miss the old Andi. Not because of . . . you know, but it was more fun."

I did not say one word to him the entire way home. How could I stay with a guy who did not like the new me and who did not respect my wishes? For the first time, I felt strong and proud of the person I was becoming and confident that I mattered. No one could take away my morals and beliefs.

"I love you, Andi," he said.

"But you don't like me."

"I want to stay together. I'll do my best to change."

"Change? How?"

"To show you I care and not be so rude that I hurt you."

"Do you respect that I don't want to do anything at all?"

"Yes."

“Do you like me the way I am?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Haven’t you been listening to what I’ve been saying?”

I felt a whole new love for him. Our evening was spent watching a movie and taking a late-night swim. We laughed and joked around just as we used to do. I thought I loved him once again.

It was now Frank’s turn to leave for vacation for two weeks. Our last evening together was filled with both pleasure and pain. I made him dinner, and we went out to a movie. Frank would be gone for a time that seemed like an eternity to a child.

For the first few days I was sad and lonely. I didn’t want him to go because I had a strong feeling he would no longer love me when he returned. More and more days passed by, and one evening I dreamt that Frank was having sex with more than one girl. The dream seemed so real. In my heart I knew Frank had done something I would oppose. He may not have been with another girl, but I felt something was wrong. I had no proof of this, but my anger was mighty and I sought revenge—revenge for going out with a girl when I was on vacation; revenge for his cold, heartless actions; revenge for something he might be doing.

I began not to care whether or not he returned, though his arrival was three days away. Friday night I went to a dancehall with a few friends, and I saw Joshua. The next day we talked on the phone for an hour and a half. Never before had I met a person with whom I had so much in common. We both loved music, writing poetry and stories, Italian food, and trucks.

That same night, my best pal, Steph, a girl I just met named Trisha, and I returned to the same club. Traffic was slow because of the fair, and my friend’s mom didn’t want to wait so we

got out of the car and started walking the rest of the way. We had made plans to find a cute guy in a truck and hop in the back so we wouldn't have to walk.

"Hey!" a voice called. It was Joshua. "Get in." What do you know? A cute boy in a truck. We hopped in.

Traffic was backed up for blocks, and the parking lot was full of cars. The crowd overwhelmed every available breathing space inside the dancehall. Walking around became impossible without losing friends. We tried to dance, but the crowd hampered movement on the floor. Our group spent most of the night sitting at the only empty table we could find. With more bodies than chairs, I positioned myself onto Joshua's lap. As I turned my head to look at him, he kissed me. I was aware that I had a boyfriend and that he would be returning home the next day, but I thought, "Why not have fun since he will probably break up with me anyway? Besides, Joshua's hot!"

I believed my relationship with Frank would not last. I even intended to confess my infidelity with Joshua and with Peter. He had told me once before that if he ever found out I had cheated on him he would break up with me. I counted on that.

Frank called me as soon as he got home. He came over, and, needless to say, we argued. I told him the entire truth. I told him all about Joshua, and I even told him about Peter. He forgave me. He still wanted to go out with me. I could not understand it. I thought for sure Frank would break up with me.

Things happened the same way as they did after I returned home from Nebraska. The difference this time was that the tables were turned. He begged for one more chance just as I had. Tears streamed down his face. I had seen his eyes water before, but I had never seen him cry.

The time without him made me realize how important friends are and how much I needed them. I neglected them all when Frank came into my life. When I was going out with Frank, I had acquaintances, but I lacked true friendships. Now I had more than enough friends, and I didn't want to lose them. Frank continued to beg for another chance, and my heart was still divided. I didn't want him out of my life, but I wanted a little bit of freedom.

Soon after, something I said angered him, and he stormed out of my room and out of my life. Thinking I had lost him, I made the quick decision that I still wanted him. I then wrote a poem which helped me get him back.

My Mistake

I wasn't quite sure what I wanted.

How could I treat you so unkind?

I must have been blind.

I wanted my freedom, I wanted my friends.

I thought I could not have both you and them.

I thought I had no choice but to set you free.

I'm still not sure if I did things right—

Only time will tell.

*I want to set things straight for us,
but we have already been through hell.
Maybe all we need is time.
Now what to do—what can I do
now that I have lost you?
Let's make things right.
Come back tonight
and forgive me my mistake.*

We had been going out again for less than a week when the trouble began once again.

Frank invited me to a movie. Wow! He invited me out for a change. But, one catch. His little brother had to come along. Come on! I wanted to be with Frank, not his baby brother. We needed time together if we intended to mend our fractured relationship. Each time his brother came on dates with us, the two of us ended up fighting for Frank's attention. Now, is that fair? I mean, what kind of date is it if neither the girl nor the brother can have any fun? Okay. So that was the upside of the night, the sunrise of a beautiful summer's day, the euphoric smell of a flower. And then, the flower withered.

On our way to take me home, Frank began yelling at his brother for no apparent reason. Obviously, something happened between them. I tried to calm the tense situation. "Don't get all worked up," I pleaded. "He just wants your . . ."

He cut me off and yelled again. Trying to lighten the mood with humor, I said, "Now, can I finish what I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted?"

“Oh,” he answered. “So now we’re going to argue, too, huh?”

“No. I’m just . . .” I cut myself off this time. What was the point in trying to talk now?

The boy had a temper I had never seen before, and I had no intention of testing its limits.

About halfway to my house, Frank asked if his brother was crying.

“Yes. I can hear him.”

Frank pulled off to the side of the road. Without paying attention to the oncoming traffic, he got out of the car and walked around to the other side. Speeding eighteen-wheelers passed by in the darkening early evening. I prayed he would not get hit. Frank made it around the truck without incident and said something incomprehensible to his brother.

The next thing I knew, he peeled out back onto the highway going fifty-five miles per hour onto the nearest exit ramp. We turned around and headed back toward town. After every stop, Frank floored the gas and drove like a madman. Frank, not one for hazardous driving, now sped twenty or thirty miles over the speed limit along the dark and deserted access roads. Between being frightened for my life and listening to Frank’s screaming tantrums, I figured out that we were headed to Frank’s house.

As soon as we pulled into the driveway, they both dashed into the house leaving me in the dark. I wanted to go home. I wanted to be in the safety of my own house, yet I was paralyzed in this little Toyota truck. I decided I’d risk my life walking home. Either way, I might die. However, at this point, I feared my own boyfriend more than fast cars and strangers.

I began walking down the street just as Frank exited his house with his mother following behind. He rushed to his truck and drove to meet me. When I refused to go with him and continued to walk, he pulled over and ran to my side. His mother continued to watch. “Let me take you home,” he pleaded.

“No. You scared the hell out of me. I asked you to slow down. You sped up. I warned you that if you didn’t slow down I’d walk home. And what did you do? You peeled out!”

“That was before you said that.”

“No it wasn’t,” I countered, my voice rising with each syllable.

“Get in the car.” Frank’s temper began to flare again.

“No! You scared the hell out of me. I can walk.”

“GET IN THE CAR!”

“I CAN TAKE CARE OF MYSELF!” I tried to hit him, but my conscience took control and I backed off.

“Hit me! Punch me in the face!” Frank ordered.

“Why?”

“Just do it!” he commanded.

Frank grabbed my wrist, and I screamed, “Just leave me alone! I saw a side of you tonight that I never want to see again. It scared me!”

“Is that it? Let me take you home, and you never have to see me again!”

His grip on my right wrist became tighter, and I punched his left shoulder with my weaker left hand. Anger and fright must have given me incredible strength because he let go and leaned over on the sidewalk. I walked away, and, when he straightened up, he came back toward me, I ran. He caught up with me and grabbed my wrists again. He must have seen the fear in my eyes because he sighed in a low voice and said, “I’m not going to hit you.”

We argued a short while longer when his dad pulled up next to us, “Come on, Andi, I’ll take you home.”

“Thanks,” I said, and I climbed into the car. Frank gave his dad a look that showed he was ready to kill. I sat in the back seat and forced my tears inside as we drove away.

I was headed to a place I missed so very, very much. Home. The twenty-minute drive seemed to take hours. I remember thinking, “They say tough times don’t last, and the pain goes away eventually.” I couldn’t help but wish for the future to hurry up, and I wondered how I would look back on this as an adult. There was no way of knowing then. But at the age of fifteen, being hurt by my first love was a greater pain and a bigger crisis to me than the collapse of democracy. Our president could have been assassinated, our world could have been threatened by nuclear warfare, but nothing could have devastated me at that moment more than what Frank just put me through.

I got home, and I wanted so much to throw myself upon the earth’s floor and kiss the soil beneath my feet. Instead, I asked Frank’s dad to wait as I hurried to bring Frank’s letter jacket to him. He apologized for his son’s behavior and left. I was safe at home, and, after a good night’s sleep, this experience would be nothing more than a memory.

The following morning, I woke to the ringing telephone. The light of day brought me peace, so I decided to listen to what Frank had to say. “Okay, look, put yourself in my shoes,” Frank said.

“He’s only ten, right?”

“Eleven.”

“He’s just a kid,” I said. Was he trying to blame his brother for his anger?

“When I was eleven, I could take care of myself. He never gets in trouble. He always gets what he wants, and he gets mad when he doesn’t get it. He cried until I agreed to take him home.”

“He’s also the youngest. Emily feels like you do. She thinks I get everything, and she gets nothing.”

“But that’s . . . ”

I cut him off. “It’s not your fault or his. It’s the parents’ fault. My parents still think I’m their baby, and that’s how they treat me. They raised Emily to work hard, be responsible, and stand on her own two feet. They have never forced me to get a job or take any kind of responsibility like that.”

“But is that fair? They expect me to work, go to college, take them places.”

“Then why don’t you screw your life up and run away?” I was trying to listen, but I was getting annoyed. I was the wrong one to talk to. His parents needed to hear that.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Frank shot back.

“NO! Who’s the one who tried to help you with college? Who helped you write some English papers? Who cared? And who told me to stay away?” I was fighting to win.

“I didn’t tell you to stay away.”

“You told me not to care, that it was your life, and for me not to worry about it.”

“Well, I’m sorry, okay?” his sarcastic tone voiced his disgust.

That ended the conversation. Frank said that exact phrase many times. His mocking words proved he had no remorse, and I thought he probably never cared. Again, pride kept us together. That was all that could have kept us together. All we did was argue. Neither one of us loved the other anymore, and we were both tired of trying, but, for some reason, neither one of us could say goodbye.

When our relationship finally ended, I hoped to remain friends. It is unimaginable to give so much of oneself to someone and to lose contact completely. However, that initial post-break-

up friendship lasted only a little while. Frank's attempt at humor pushed me beyond the breaking point. Every time we talked, he made sexual comments. He turned everything I said into lewd innuendos.

This went on for weeks. He swore he still loved me. At one time, persistence worked, but I had changed, and now he would understand that I could not be bullied. Frank called for the last time asking for sex, and I hung up on him. I then called my mom and told her everything. I could tell in her voice and the silence following my confession that she was shocked and a bit disappointed, but she did not say it. Instead, she talked to me as an adult and advised me how to best handle the situation. She told me to stick to my guns as far as what I wanted for me. As far as dealing with Frank, she advised me to tell my dad about my problem with him.

I told my dad everything except that we had been sexually active. My dad knew that I was serious because I never once discussed my personal life with him. When I asked him to get a restraining order on him, he refused. He wanted to take care of Frank personally for hurting his baby. I never asked Dad what he did, but Frank never came near me or called again.

I look back on our relationship, and I answer that girl who wondered what the adult her would think when reminiscing about that fading romance: Well, young Andi, I laugh and feel somewhat sorry for Frank. I find amusement in your youth. You wanted him to see things your way, but you never saw things his. Of course he'd get angry when you put on such a show in front of his mother and neighbors. I would tell you that brothers argue differently than sisters and that spats between those two were normal and not to be afraid. I'd remind you of how Frank treated his little brother ninety-nine percent of the time. I would have explained that Frank showed you time and time again how much he loved you and I would tell you not to doubt him.

Yes, a lot of teenage boys want sex, but look how long Frank stuck by you in the beginning and after you decided you wanted to be a born-again virgin. I would ask you to think before allowing your emotions to flare.

Then, I would take it all back and tell you to be who you are and to react the way you feel. After all, you were fifteen and behaving like any normal fifteen-year-old girl. That is adolescence. That is the beauty of growing pains. That is the one time in life we are allowed to act crazy without being socially reprimanded for it. You have taught this adult the beauty of living and loving. You took risks and stood smack dab in the middle of the fire. You lived for the day, and all your dreams were true possibilities. You knew who you were and did not give in to peer pressure. You had a heart of gold.

For so long you thought you were different, and in many ways you were and in many ways you were not. Embrace those similarities and differences. Keep on teaching me. The older I get, the more I will need you. The more I will need your child eyes.

Chapter Nineteen

Jessica

“Nick, we need to talk.” I found Nicholas in the same spot where I have found him on many occasions before his shift began: sitting on the second row of empty bleachers by the soccer field with Bible open, oblivious to the conscious world around him. I chose to cleanse my soul while he was bound in serene prayer—in public.

Without closing his Bible, he lifted his head to face me. “You know,” he said as if ignoring the obvious intent of my words, “no matter how crazy this world gets, no matter how crazy this world makes me, He brings me peace. Notice how still it’s been. No wind. Like the calm before the storm. I’ve been thinking about how self-destructive I am . . . with my past . . . my marriage. The warning signs were there, telling me to get out, that something was going to happen. But I always ignored them. Then, something really bad happened, and I couldn’t understand why. I feel so bad, so sorry for myself, and it takes forever to get over it. Then I get over it, and I get right back into another mistake. I’ve just been praying for sight. Not just sight, but to be able to heed those warning signs.”

Maybe he knew better than I did what words were about to pass my lips. Maybe he heeded a sign.

“I did it.” The words reverberated past my tongue.

“What?” No emotion accompanied his question.

I stood up from the bleachers, praying my own simple prayer for courage. Cocking my head toward the heavens, I closed my eyes, trying to capture the image of the night before when

Jessica's and Mary's gaze met with Ruth's. I needed the strength of all three to be capable of doing right, no matter how despicable the circumstances.

"The phone calls, the e-mails. I did it. I did it all. Even Malcolm coming here like that. I did it."

Bewilderment found expression at last on Nicholas' face. Without rising from his seat, a look of understanding shone in his eyes as he asked, "What are you talking about?"

"I knew Malcolm would be here. I didn't tell him not to. I never actually broke up with him when I left. I just left." I paused, waiting for a response. He sat, anticipating the rest of the story. "The muffled phone calls, I didn't actually do them, but I know who did. It wasn't Malcolm. A friend did me a favor. A friend has a computer that will speak words that are programmed."

"Who did the e-mails?" His voice still lacked emotion.

"I did. I made sure they were as poorly written as if he had typed them. It's his e-mail address. He never changed his password. I did those."

"Who helped you?"

"Victor."

"Victor!" Nicholas raised the pitch in his tone to match what I knew he must be thinking and feeling. "Why would he . . ."

"I asked him to. I don't know why he went along with it."

"Why would you do something like that?"

"Because I love you."

"Are you kidding me? What the hell?"

He looked as if a demon consumed his angel and then vomited her out. I tried to look him in the eye, only to bow my head in dread. I feared losing him above anything else. All my antics were acted out with the one goal of winning his heart forever. The final time I looked him in the eye, I saw the future, my future without him. Looking in his eyes at that moment, I saw a reflection of me, of whom I had become, from sitting on momma's lap on the way home from visiting my real grandparents to today, the loathsome monster, me. I wanted my momma right then. I longed to be in the warmth and loving safety of her lap once again. But . . .

"If you only knew." I said this while crying, unable to look up again. "I was afraid of losing you. There's so much I can't tell you. So much. I just wanted you to love me."

"But I did love you."

"I know."

Silence.

"And Jackie. She did this for you? She was in on it?" Nicholas asked.

"No. She knew nothing about it."

"She knew how scared you were, and she pressed charges. She did it for you because she loves you. She wanted to protect you."

"I know."

"And Malcolm. He's innocent?"

"Yes."

"Still a cretin, but innocent of all this. Do you know what that would have done to his record if he had been arrested? He wouldn't ever be able to carry a firearm or work with children. You would have ruined him."

"I know."

“And Victor. Victor. He must really love you to go along with all this. I’m going to have a talk with him. I never believed Victor was gay. I just thought he wanted you, loved you. Well, I guess I was right.”

With every truth he told me, my world spun out of control. We stood less than five feet apart, but I felt as if he were thousands of miles away. How could I do this? All I wanted was for him to hold me and to tell me that everything would be okay, that he forgave me and we would still live happily ever after.

“Please forgive me. I love you. I’m sorry. Tell me how to make it up to you. I’ll do anything. Please!”

“I don’t know you.” Nicholas closed his Bible, stood up, and walked away.

Those were the last words I ever heard him say. “I don’t know you.” I didn’t even know myself.

Practicing the investigative techniques crucial to becoming the good cop Nicholas hoped to be one day, he wasted no time inspecting each facet of my absurd tale. Nicholas called Jackie to tell her all he knew. Surprised though she must have been, she did not question the truth of his tale, nor did she have anything more to offer Nicholas as evidence of the validity or accuracy of my story. She said not one word to me the next morning when I greeted her. I could tell in her bitter stare, though, that she knew and now hated me, too.

The empty hours at work gave Nicholas much time to rage about allowing his “angel” to entrap him in the webs of her evil design. He and a coworker ignored university housing policy and entered Victor’s room unannounced and without just cause.

Victor, having just minutes before answered the whispering call of slumber's embrace, awoke to the scrutinizing stare of two familiar authority figures, both appearing broader and meaner from his view than he already knew them to be.

"Get up." Nicholas, restrained by the watchful eye of his backup, pulled him out of bed with his drill-sergeant-like voice rather than physical force.

"What's this about?" Victor asked, trying to be brave in his frightened skin.

"Why'd you help her?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Why'd you help her treat me like that?"

"Who? What?" Victor looked helplessly at the officer standing statue-like, leaning against the closed door. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Ruth told me you helped her. You made those calls on your computer."

"What? The 'DIE DIE DIE' calls?"

"Yeah, you . . . you . . . Now tell me why you helped her."

"I didn't help her. Why'd she say I helped her?"

Nicholas looked at Victor's computer lying on the desk. "What kind of computer you got?"

"Mac. So?"

"She said you have the voice program thing on your computer. She said only Macs have that ability."

"She's a damn liar."

"She has a PC, not a Mac."

"She's a freaking liar."

“Does your computer have any kind of voice program?”

“Yes, but you can get it for any computer. It’s intended for handicapped people, but anyone can get it. Why would she say I helped her?”

“She didn’t say why. She just said you did. I’d like to know why.”

“Damn it, I swear to you I didn’t help her. She’s messing with me just like she’s messing with you. What the hell’s going on? I thought Malcolm was responsible.”

“She admitted to being responsible for the e-mails and phone calls. At least, it was her plan, and you helped her do it.”

“I didn’t. Why would she do it?”

Nicholas shrugged. He had no intention of rehashing that conversation.

“So, Malcolm’s innocent? But you and Jackie already filed complaints against him.”

“I know.” Nicholas leaned into Victor, nose to nose, staring him directly in the eye. “If you’re telling the truth, you need to go to the police. I sure as hell am. I’m withdrawing my complaint and telling them all I know. I’m leaving nothing out. Be ready because they’ll come looking for you to ask you questions. If you’re lying, they’ll find out, and then you’ll have two problems. You’ll go to jail for a long time. But before you do, I’ll come back and beat the crap out of you. I don’t care what happens to me, but I will be back for you.”

With that said, the two officers left Victor alone in his room. Victor, although sweet and the best friend a person could wish for, lacked courage. He had absolutely no strength of his own, a young adult hanging onto the might of his father.

The next day, he called me, relaying his nightmare of the night before. He called me a ruthless bitch and said he never wanted to see me again. Victor then called his father, telling him the story from the beginning, ending with his conversation with me just moments before. His

father called our boss, demanding something be done. After all, the purpose of campus security is to protect the students, not to harass them.

We were all called in, one by one. First, the backup officer. He relayed his version of the story precisely as it happened, stressing that he merely involved himself as a witness, to protect both Nicholas and Victor from false accusations. He was terminated for failing to prevent the break-in in the first place, knowing the action to be wrong according to university policy.

Nicholas gave his account next, apologizing for nothing, only adding that in his esteemed opinion, Victor was a wimp for running to Daddy. Nicholas was fired for going against policy, endangering and threatening the safety of a student, and showing no remorse.

I faced the firing squad last. Will explained that, as the director, his number one task was to ensure the safety of his students. Victor's father reminded Will of the fact that his son was first and foremost a student, a paying customer, if you will, of the university. We were there to serve him. We could not have our officers taking the law into their own hands, threatening the safety of a student's life, diminishing their experience at school. I, as an employee, could not bring my personal life to work. Yes, Victor's dad calling did make the matter more urgent, but something had to be done, regardless. For the satisfaction of the university, Victor, and his family, and for the assurance of the safety and security of the university, staff, and students, all involved were terminated.

I lost everything—my job, my friends, and my love. In telling the truth, trying to reconcile my birthed self with the chaos of the present, I lost it all. My sanity filtered to the deepest threads of oblivion.

Opening the door to leave Will's office, I faced my enemies. Jackie, Victor, and Nicholas stood huddled together, obviously talking about the demon masquerading as their friend. As if on

cue, they simultaneously turned and stared at me with hatred in their eyes. I felt my body shrink into nothingness. I turned and walked out the door. I did not go home to pack. I did not stop to inquire about my last pay. I walked . . . away from the pain . . . away from my evil self . . . away from the former eyes of love turned to revulsion. I just walked and kept on walking.

Chapter Twenty

Jessica

I thought I had learned this lesson before. Nobody can walk away from herself and simply start all over again. The demons and memories of the past never go away. At least, not until we confront them head on can we treat them like the swine they are and demand that they drown themselves in the river upon command. I left Virginia to begin anew in Texas, leaving Texas to be reborn in California. Instead of the expected renewal of my soul, my past lives intertwined so jointly with my new identity that I became more confused, like a clinical schizophrenic trying to cope in a regulated society, alone and unmedicated. But I was not mentally ill. I was simply lost.

After the incident in San Francisco, with the loss of everything and everyone I held dear to me, I crumbled within myself. Every bad thing that ever happened to me infiltrated my heart in the blink of an eye as I saw the revulsion targeted at me in that office. No wonder they hated me. No redeemable quality could be found in me. Alan knew it. Maggie knew it. Malcolm knew it. Although fooled for a time, Nicholas now knew it, and I could no longer ignore it. I quit denying what everyone else already understood about me. I even began to understand why God silenced His tongue and ignored my pleas for peace and love. He knew it, too. Even the all-powerful God could not save me. I belonged to the evil one.

That was why God took away my family to leave me alone in Satan's domain—because my birth into love was a colossal mistake. Satan managed to sneak me past the watchful eye of God, giving me the earthly life intended for another. But God will not lose. Once He realized this

slip, He altered His ultimate plan. He returned His three angels back home to Him and left me to wander this hideous planet alone with no one to love, and worse, with no one to love me.

Now that my eyes were opened to the truth, I cared little for what happened to me. The pain of understanding my ultimate separation from God and mankind numbed me to the realities of daily living.

I walked with no destination. Occasionally, someone stopped to pick me up. I took a ride whenever offered. If the driver offered food, I took the food without a word and ate from physical necessity. If the driver suggested we stop to rest, I assented by keeping my mouth shut and avoiding eye contact.

We crossed the Arizona state line. I sat shotgun in his big rig hauling God knows what in the back of the freightliner. Who really cared? Sitting, passing through the desert in the cool of the truck beat walking in the arid heat, fighting the elements. I was oblivious to the vast wasteland before me and could feel the sun's rays burning my arm as it rested against the passenger window. My imagination took me away from this truck into a land inhabited only by the animals destined to prey upon this hell-heated ground. No water to cool the tip of my tongue. No chance of forgiveness and escape.

My weakened body writhed in the boiling heat. My skin blistered in the sun. No cloud cover offered one degree of relief. My eyes saw a mirage of the sea within a few paces. The sea was filled with refreshing water, all the water I could ever desire. I imagined bathing while partaking in its cooling refreshment, healing both body and mind. I used every remaining bit of strength to crawl to the sea, happy at the thought of a dream finally coming true, of God calling me child. But the closer I crawled, the farther away the sea receded. I crawled on, certain that

salvation was only one more step away. On both knees, the heat closing my throat, I reached out my arm to cup a handful of water. As my hand glided down into the pool, the image disappeared. And with it went all strength. I fell. I died. The end.

I jumped out of my daydream. The driver acknowledged the heat. Even with the air conditioning on full blast, the intense sun zapped his energy. The rays were melting the material of his jeans, burning his legs. He needed a break. How tired he thought I looked. I needed a break as well. He pulled over to the side of the road. If we went to the back, we could close the curtain, keeping the refreshing cool of the AC while keeping out the sun. Without a word, without a thought, I joined him.

On cue, he leaned over to kiss me. I did not respond. He kissed my neck. I pulled away without saying a word. My nonverbal denials angered him. He, too, remained quiet, allowing his actions to demonstrate his anger. He grabbed me by the shoulders and pushed me back against his rumpled mattress. I tried to push myself up, but he overpowered me. With one hand he held me down while he fondled me with the other, grabbing my breasts and then my crotch.

He took my hand and pushed it up against his crotch. Then, he climbed on top of me, still clothed, and pressed himself against me as he forced his tongue into my mouth. I knew what was coming, but I said nothing. I did not want him. I did not want him to do what I knew he would do. But I deserved it. I had it coming to me. He pulled my pants down and then he pulled his pants down. He didn't stick it in right away. He rubbed it against me as if he thought the feel of his penis next to my vagina would turn me on. It didn't. I was very dry when he entered me, causing pain so intense that my eyes watered. I made no noise as the tears streamed down my

face. He was not gentle. His hard thrusts caused a burning sensation as intense as the desert sun at high noon on blistering skin.

I felt the fluid drip from between my legs. Blood. My blood. The blood eased the burn. Then I felt more fluid running out of me. Not blood. He made three additional hard thrusts before exhaling and pulling out. He came inside me. The feel of his semen fleeing my insides eased the burning pain. Blood and semen. Sacrifice and salvation.

We put our pants back on without a word spoken. We climbed back to the front, and he drove on.

Chapter Twenty-One

Andrea

I envision Jessica and me standing on either side of God. She volunteers for the life I fear. God reaches out a hand to her once again, lifting her from her bitter end, reminding her of her strength of character. "Remember Me," He says as she rides through the desert heat. "Remember that you are My beloved. Go now. It is not yet your time. It is not finished."

She silences her tongue because she no longer cares what happens to her. Jessica's mind is still potent with intellect, but the confusion of circumstance immobilizes her. How many times, I, too, lost my voice. However, unlike Jessica's, my voice was silenced because of the unconcern I believed others to have or the unworthiness of my own merits.

Part of growing up is learning to say what is on our minds. As children, we have no inhibitions, no curbing our tongue from thought. This trait is learned from observation and experience. The sad part of it all is that, as we grow older and take on the norms of society, we tend to lose touch with our feelings, keeping them buried deep down inside, afraid of what others may think or afraid of a little confrontation. Though we should not go around expressing every thought freely, we should be less restrained.

Many relationships, romantic and otherwise, die because people lose the ability to communicate. People are so overcome by a morbid fear of getting into a little spat that they ignore the problem until a simple matter of who was supposed to have taken out the trash turns into legal warfare. Evil resounds louder and louder because people are afraid to stand up for what they believe in. I may disagree with some people's viewpoints, but at least those people I

disagree with have the tenacity to make their voice heard and to try to make right the wrongs they believe exist. This is a lesson I had to learn the hard way.

When I was fifteen, during my confirmation year, the Persian Gulf War began. During a church service, our children's choir, of which I was a part, sang Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA." The entire congregation rose to its feet and sang along during the line, "and I proudly stand up." Almost every member of Saint Gregory's Catholic Church cried, including me. The war meant nothing to me until that day. My faith meant nothing to me until that day. I felt very proud to be a part of America and a part of that church.

That moment of exhilarating pride died fast and died hard. During Catholic Christian Doctrine (CCD), our confirmation class joined all other grade levels, from early elementary through high school, to watch a video. I thought that, because of our salute to our country and the war effort, we were going to watch something along those lines. Instead, the great church leaders showed all of us a video on abortions. It showed three different women having the procedure during three different stages of pregnancy.

During the first stage, the doctors pulled the fetus out of the woman with a suction tube. Having had medical problems with my right ear in the past, it reminded me of my doctor sucking the drainage out of my ear. I wondered if it hurt the woman as much as it had hurt me. I was amazed that most of the fetus looked as disgusting and lifeless as the wax pulled from my ear. The only indication that a baby once lived inside of her was the tiny skull that the doctors had to crush before pulling it out of her body.

During the second stage, the baby looked like a skeleton with see-through skin wrapped around the tiny bones. The doctor used a tool that looked like pliers to break off one bone at a time and pull it out of the womb. When the doctor finished breaking all the bones, he crushed the

skull and pulled that out, too. The camera zoomed in on the table where the dead baby lay. The bones were neatly placed on the tray, positioned again in the form of a human skeleton. There was no doubt that a baby, a human being, had been killed.

During the third stage, the woman was in labor. The baby was ready to come into the world naturally. The doctor took what looked like a large pair of pliers and crushed the life out of the baby's skull. With that done, the doctor again broke limb from limb and pulled them out one at a time. The woman's body trembled as he performed this gruesome task. As he pulled out the head, blood and brain oozed out. This time, the baby was fully formed. Muscle had developed to protect his bones. Brown hair covered his little crushed head. He had ten perfect little fingers and ten perfect little toes and smooth, soft skin. There was no denying this life. She had a baby boy, a boy many people would have given anything to love.

Frank and I stopped having sex before I viewed these images. After watching the video, I knew I would have no problem waiting until I was ready for the responsibilities of parenthood. Before watching the video, I was pro-choice. Let each woman decide the best course of action for herself. After watching the video, especially the last part, I became so furious with these women. Sure, some women have legitimate medical reasons to have abortions, but an abortion should never be the easy way out from unplanned self-gratification. It should never be the solution because a couple could not keep their lust in check long enough to consider the consequences of their careless actions. And, to have an abortion during the last trimester is just plain wrong and should be outlawed. If a woman is going to carry the child to term, she should have the baby and give it up for adoption. For every child aborted, a couple mourns for the child they cannot produce. I understood at that moment that my body belongs to God, not to me. I am

God's temple. As such, I knew I did not have a choice. If God allowed me to get pregnant, whether by my own selfish actions or not, it is not my right, as God's creation, to destroy that life. After watching the video, I made it my choice to avoid that possibility altogether by remaining abstinent.

Even though the church leaders succeeded in making me view abortion as they wanted me to view it, I was enraged. The CCD coordinators had no right to show that video to small children. The priest failed in his duties by allowing his church to blatantly disregard the rights and authority of the family. By doing so, they made themselves both judge and jury, acting no better than the self-righteous Pharisees and Sadducees of Jesus' day. If they wanted high school and junior high school kids to view it, fine, as long as they got parental permission first. I knew my parents were never asked if I could watch this kind of stuff. Had they been informed, my mother would have prepared me by making sure I understood how the baby got inside the mother in the first place. She would have discussed with me what I would be seeing in the video.

Most of the younger students still had no idea how a baby got into that woman's stomach to begin with. Most of them were forbidden from watching movies which portrayed half that much violence. I hoped parents found out, united, and did something to prevent the church officials from doing something like that ever again.

Fierce anger boiled inside me. I watched the horrific expressions on the youngsters' faces as closely as I watched the video. The youngest got the closest seats. I wanted to stand up and start cursing the ignorance of the adults who were supposed to be our leaders, the ones who were supposed to be responsible for our spiritual growth and wellbeing. Their need to prove something overrode their sensibility. As Jesus said, He will hold teachers and preachers more

accountable than any others. I hoped somehow, some way, they learned from their mistake and would seek God in prayer before ever acting with such foolish disregard again.

I regret still today that I allowed my fear of the Church and my youth to stop me from voicing my opinion and stopping their actions before it went so far. I should have run out to get parents to let them know what was going on without their consent. I should have at least told my parents afterwards and asked them to help me voice my outrage in a productive and positive way. Instead, I kept silent.

Before that day, I never would have imagined questioning authority, especially the Church. After all, with Jesus Christ as the supreme boss, how can the Church ever be wrong? I learned that day that even the most perfect people are only human. Adults mess up. Our leaders make mistakes. Even my parents are fallible. Although I failed to find a voice for my anger, other than in my journal and protestations to God, I discovered the value of questioning things that seem wrong. Even though I trust those who give me information does not mean they will always give me the correct information.

Looking back, I realize that just because I was only fifteen does not mean I had no voice. The great thing about youth is that a child sees some things clearer than adults see them. Children who have yet to experience pain and disappointment in life see when situations are not as they should be. They may not understand corruption or self-gain attempts, but they know wrong from right. Their vision is not blurred by gray areas.

Even children who have seen the evil side of life still have that spark of innocence in them, alerting them to the misguided notions of adult ways. Corruption may have found them, but they have not yet been corrupted.

If only more adults would show more interest in the words of children. If only we would listen more—actually hear what they have to say—we could learn a lot.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Andrea

Throughout Jessica's story, I thought of how those who knew her would judge her, condemning her for sins they could never understand. We all must make choices between right and wrong in our own lives. It is not for us to judge how others answer to their consciences.

After my encounter at church, I found my voice, reacting to my conscience's call to bring attention to events I knew to be wrong or that could cause harm to others. With the help of one more meeting with Sue, I found the strength to speak on behalf of right and wrong.

My sister and I were closer than most siblings. We seldom argued, but, when we did, it was terrible. She reacted to situations with the full range of adolescent emotions—screaming, yelling, telling everyone in her path she hated them. Her wrath fueled all her fury. Her angry words belittled and hurt. She unleashed her embittered words before storming off into isolation, leaving those left behind wrecked by her cruelty, and with no resolution.

I avoided confrontations with my teenage sister at all costs. Unfortunately, some of her teenage antics proved too disturbing for me to deny and ignore. I was forced to make the decision of whether or not, for her own safety, to tell of her behavior or to keep her happy by keeping her secret. I finally decided I had to tell.

My sister, since getting her driver's license, waited each morning for Bobby before heading to school. She followed his truck so they would arrive at exactly the same time and have those few precious seconds before class to spend together. The problem was that he always

arrived to our house late. I hated riding with my sister, but I hated even more the thought of waking up an hour earlier just to catch the bus. I took my chances with Emily.

As the school year came closer to ending, Bobby came over later and later every morning. This particular morning, he showed up less than fifteen minutes before the first bell would ring.

On the way to school, a train was stalled on the usually inactive tracks, blocking the busy road. We had to turn around and head toward St. Luke's Elementary School in order to get around the train and still be able to get to school. Bobby signaled for Emily to do just that. She was in the middle of the road about to finish her turn when he increased his speed.

As we rolled onto the highway, my heart finally settled back in its normal place and my knees unbuckled. I could blink again. My relief lasted one brief moment. Intent on getting to school on time, Bobby drove on the shoulder of the road to pass the cars in front of him. Emily watched him as he moved further and further ahead of her. "I'm just going to stay back here," Emily said. "I would never do that."

But, as he moved further away from sight, she changed her mind and followed suit. Going one hundred and five miles per hour on the shoulder of the highway, I saw my life flash before my eyes. I remembered traveling one summer vacation to visit my grandparents. On the way, my dad watched in the rearview mirror as an eighteen-wheeler charged toward our family van at a high rate of speed. Dad pulled off onto the side of the highway to protect his family from what very well could have been the end of our lives. This quick action saved us. The truck just tapped the left bumper of our vehicle, merely busting the taillight. The driver of the eighteen-wheeler had fallen asleep at the wheel.

I thought for sure we would not be as lucky this time. After having avoided death several times in my life already, I was sure my sister and her boyfriend were going to lead me to an early grave. I could see the scene on the evening news. A pile of cars all atop one another. Bobby's truck and Emily's car, having driven with such negligence on the shoulder at an outrageous speed, eventually hitting others as if playing bumper cars and then rolling to their resting place, sat upside down along the frontage road. Our lifeless bodies dangled from our seatbelts. Other lives lost. Other lives halted. Loved ones left to mourn with angry tears because no one stopped those reckless teenagers.

Luckily, we did not die. It took us less than five minutes to make a trip that took a normal traveler twenty minutes. I stepped out of the car, threatening never again to set foot inside any vehicle she drove.

"Yes, you will," she laughed with the smirk of one who believed she was invincible. "I'm never going to do that again, but it was fun." She liked it. I bet she would do it again.

For the first three periods of the day, I could not walk without stiff movement. My legs trembled with each step. My heart remained lodged in my throat. The fear I had faced tightened and tensed every nerve of my body. It took a long time for my limbs to relax.

After school, I reluctantly got back into the car with Emily. I wanted to take the bus home, but one thing forced my destiny back into her hands. My mom had scheduled me to meet with Sue after a long absence to check on my progress. With no rush and no boyfriend to lead the way, she drove a reasonable sixty-five miles per hour. Drastic change.

At Sue's we talked about the previous Friday when the freshman class honored our band director with a "Best Band Director" plaque and a poem I wrote in hopes of changing his mind about resigning the following year. Presenting my poem to him and accepting his praise made me feel very proud and special. I shared with Sue my dream to write poetry and books for a living.

"I've been keeping a journal since I've been coming here. If Emily and I argued or if Frank and I got into a fight, I wrote down word for word what happened to me."

"Sounds like you're quite the storyteller. And what a memory to be able to be that detailed." She always encouraged me.

"I have this idea of turning my journal into a book. There's this lady I used to babysit for. She was telling me of her friend's daughter who wears black all the time and is really introverted. Her mom is really worried about her. I told my boss about how I used to be the same way, about how seeing you was the best thing for me. I said this girl may simply like the clothes, and there's nothing wrong with being introverted. I still am. But, she may also be in trouble.

"I offered to talk to her mom and tell her my story and give her some signs to watch for. For example, if your daughter is wearing flannel in summer and starts to do things out of the ordinary like take showers in the middle of the day when she hates taking showers, ask questions. That may be a cry for help. I know I did things to try to get my parents' attention. I think a book from a child's perspective could really help parents understand their children."

"That would be great. I don't think anything like that has ever been done. I think you could really help a lot of people, and not just parents. Remember when you told me how you used to think no one else could understand what you were going through? A book like that could

help kids understand they are not alone in feeling what they're feeling, that it's okay." I smiled. I was so proud that my friend believed in me and believed my dream could come true.

I rarely shared my dreams with people. I found that, because my dreams reached further than most people dared to go, they mocked me as a silly child, patting my head and saying, "Sure you will." With that sort of disappointing lack of faith, I kept my truest feelings locked away and thought, "I'll show them all one day."

Sue proved different. She convinced me I had the power within myself to make those dreams come true. I showed her many samples of my poetry and journal-to-book in progress. She praised them all, encouraging my talent. I never thought she told me what I wanted to hear to appease me. I knew she really believed in me. For that, she remains precious to me.

I spent much of my childhood struggling to assure myself that I was a normal kid, just like anyone else. Looking back, reviewing significant events, I still believe that although my experiences may have been common, I was not. I think my sister was the ordinary one. She participated in typical teenage antics and responded in a typical teenage manner. As an adult, she calmed considerably, as adults do, got married, and had kids just like grown-ups are supposed to do.

There are few things worse for a child than knowing others think his or her dreams are a waste of time and energy. I have always understood my dreams were more far reaching than my friends who dreamed of becoming mothers or teachers or even doctors. If people never strived to break out of the mold, who would we listen to on the radio? Who would we go to the movies to see? What books would we read? Who would tell us of his own dream? No Bon Jovi? No Jimmy Stewart? No Dostoyevsky? No Martin Luther King Jr.?

"Do you believe I'll make it some day?" I asked Sue.

"I've gotten to know you very well, and I've read your work. I believe you can do anything you want. You are going to do great things and go very far. You're going to make a difference with your words." She looked me straight in the eye and spoke with sincerity.

Instead of arguing with those who doubted me, I locked away my deepest longings, making efforts and dreaming of future success in private. I understood their doubt. Only a handful of children actually do grow up to be what they dreamed of being. The proof is in the final product. Then, their skeptics can all come back and say, "I knew you would make it."

"I've come to the conclusion that no matter how hard I try, I will never be normal," I told Sue.

"What makes you say that?" she asked.

"Take peer pressure. A lot of my friends do drugs. Nothing really bad, but they smoke pot every now and then. They asked me once if I wanted some. I said no. They never asked again, and they didn't care."

"I think that is unique. Most kids wouldn't be able to say no in the first place for fear of being ostracized. You stood up for what you believed from the very beginning."

"And do people generally think as much as I do? I mean, I can't imagine living my life just getting by, working at a job I hated just to pay the bills. I have no doubt in my mind that something better waits for me. But people live a lackluster life every day. Do they have big dreams, too, and they just don't come true, or are they content to dwell in indifference?"

"Probably a little of both. You do seem to think things through a lot more than most."

"And I've never felt like I fit in anywhere. It's not a bad thing. I'm not sure what it is. I get along with everyone, but I don't feel like I'm like any of them. I feel restless."

"Do you want to fit in?"

“No. I’m a loner. I like being a loner. I think if I fit into a certain type, then I’d end up being average and to be honest, I don’t want to be like anyone else. I want to travel the world. And, unlike most girls, I have no interest in getting married and having the family thing. I dream about going away to school. Then I want to move somewhere else, by a beach. Maybe Florida or California. It has to be someplace warm. I dream of someday having a small cottage in the Spanish countryside, write, and buy fruit at the market.”

“That’s quite a dream. Sounds wonderful. Do you know Spanish?”

“Well, not really. I’m making As in my Spanish class, but it’s very easy to pass and never learn to speak it, as long as you can conjugate verbs. I plan on being forced to learn it while living a solitary life in Spain.”

“I believe you’ll do all of that.”

I smiled. She believed in all my dreams.

During a moment of silence in my session with Sue, I knew if I did not speak up about what I really had on my mind, my time with her would end and I would still be left without an answer to my question. I told her about the stiff pain in my legs and how Emily’s recklessness irritated me. With fright in her eyes, she told me that I had a right and obligation to tell my parents.

“I know it’s hard. You don’t want to be a tattletale, and you don’t want your sister mad at you, but something like this is very dangerous. You could have been killed. She said she would never do it again, but if she did it once, chances are very good she’ll repeat it. Think of it not as telling on her, but as saving her life. Next time she may not be so lucky.” I knew, then, what I must do.

Later that evening, my dad took me to my drum lessons. I loved my lessons. The music I played was difficult, but the thrill I felt after accomplishing an arduous feat made it all worthwhile. That night, I mastered a beat I had been working on for weeks. Full of pride from a successful counseling session and drum lesson, I vowed to tell my dad everything.

Once we returned home, we found a note from Emily letting us know she went to Bobby's house for dinner. While Dad and I ate our own meal, I told him the details of my horrific morning. Bewildered by my tale, he called Bobby's house and made Emily come home, something he had never done before.

"What's going on?" Emily asked my dad while staring at me. "Why'd I have to come home?"

"You need to fill out your SAT form," my dad lied, buying himself some time to think.

Emily sat on the kitchen counter and asked again what he wanted, knowing he would not rush her home to do something she still had plenty of time to complete.

My dad started to explain why he called her home. "Andi loves you. You shouldn't be mad at her. She did the right thing in telling me."

I could feel the fury in her stare even though I avoided eye contact. I hummed to try to calm my nerves and then said, "Sue told me I should tell before one of us ended up dead like we could have today."

Emily yelled at me nonstop, telling me I was a tattletale and wrong for ratting on her. "You're not my sister anymore," she screamed. "I don't want to ever see you again. I hate you."

With those words, my dad spoke up. "Be quiet," he yelled. "Don't get mad at Andi because you messed up. You know that was a stupid thing to do. You could have gotten yourself killed. Wouldn't it be better to be a few minutes late to school than to be killed?"

"I'm just a teenager," she tried to reason. "Teenagers make mistakes. God, aren't I allowed to mess up?"

"Of course, but being a teenager is no excuse. You should know better. I raised you better than that. You know right from wrong. It's one thing to put yourself in danger. It's even worse to put other people in danger, too. Your sister was in the car with you. And what about all the other people on the road? What if you killed someone else? How would you feel then?"

"I know what I'm doing. I'm not going to kill myself or anyone else. I'm not that stupid."

"Nobody intends to," I interrupted. "You never know when it's your turn. What if you tried to hit the brakes, and they failed and you hit someone in front of you and they died? What then? How do you think Mom and Dad would feel if they got called to come identify your body because you were being stupid? Think of someone other than yourself for a change."

Emily cried those crocodile tears teenage girls have perfected. "I'm sorry, okay? I'm not perfect like Andi. Nobody loves me!"

My dad tried to console her, but in her defeated drama-queen manner, she pushed him away and stormed to her room. With her gone, my dad gave into defeat and walked to his own room. They left me alone in the kitchen, smack dab in the middle of controversy.

"I hate you, Andi." Those words echoed in my ears for the rest of the night. "I hate you, Andi." That declaration brought the hurt that put me to sleep.

I found voice that night, but my sister hated me. Speaking up and speaking the truth come with a price. The life of my sister, I later reasoned, was worth those hurtful words said in a moment of teenage anger. After that, I woke up early every day to catch the bus to school.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Jessica

Final destination—Nashville, Tennessee. I walked and hitchhiked all the way from California to Tennessee. The Bible belt. The belt buckle of the Bible Belt. Don't ask me why I stopped. There is no rhyme or reason to it. I merely got tired of walking.

Heading into town, I noticed a tall building. It had two long antenna-like steeples protruding from either end of the top, serving no apparent function other than aesthetic pleasure. The building reminded me of Batman's mask. I started walking toward it. I had no feeling of curiosity. I simply could not take my eyes off it, and my feet moved me in that direction.

I walked down Broadway until the road dead-ended at a river. Poorly groomed people sat on the ledge by the river. Homeless people, I presumed. One man tried to calm an intoxicated and irate man, trying to shield him from the watchful eyes of two police officers there to protect the tourists from society's lowest lowlifes. Home. Just as I had felt like walking, I felt like resting. Feeling at peace among those most in tune with my plight, I sat down on the same ledge right in the middle of the bunch. They left me alone, and I left them alone.

A gray Toyota truck pulled up alongside the riverfront. A young woman, looking a bit apprehensive, walked with determination as she met the gaze of the bewildered cops. She wore a ball cap with her long brown hair pulled back, baggy shorts, and a worn t-shirt. Although dressed in casual clothing and without makeup, she was very pretty. What was such a young, pretty girl, driving a very nice vehicle, doing here, where the "scary" people stay?

She walked to the passenger side of her truck, opened the door, and pulled out two brown sacks. We all gazed past her to see several sacks on the floorboard and seat. She looked the man

standing closest to her dead in the eye. Her eyes showed nothing but love for this old black man with tattered clothes. She held out a sack to him and asked him if he was hungry. With head bent in humble gratitude, he took the sack from her.

Others, seeing that she brought food, came one at a time to receive her offering. There were more hungry people than there were sacks. She looked in her truck and then at me. Tears swelled in her eyes, and I could hear the profound regret in her voice as she apologized for running out of food. I smiled and told her I was okay, my first words spoken since I left California. As I walked away, I could feel her pain at not being able to feed five thousand with one fish.

The first man to receive his gift still stood beside her. He started telling her his story. I smiled. One thing I understood was that those down on their luck do not trust people and they will not talk to just anyone. We do not even talk to one another. My stint in homelessness had just begun, but I knew that the longer this continued, the harder it would become to speak and to trust. This angel was easy to open up to though. She feared nothing—not the taunts of curious onlookers, not the threat of danger or the unknown, and most important, she did not fear us. She loved us. She did not know even one of us, but she loved us. I saw God's love in her eyes. For the first time in a long time, I felt close to Him. Yet, she never once spoke His name. I understood why this man felt compelled to open his heart to her.

I never heard what the man had to say. He spoke softly enough for only her ears to hear. But what he said mattered little. Many of our stories are the same. What mattered was how his godsend responded to him. She touched his arm as they talked. She held his hand as the conversation became more painful for him. She cried with him. Then, she asked if she could pray for him. He said yes. Instead of leaving him with empty promises, she grabbed his hands,

holding them tightly in her own, bowed her head, and prayed aloud. I could hear her voice choking, and I could see moisture on both their cheeks. I knew that whatever his sins, God had forgiven him then and there.

I saw what the others devoured from their sacks. She even made cookies. My travel blurred the days and weeks. For the first time in a long time, for a brief moment, I smiled and my heart felt just a shade lighter.

She returned to this same spot a few weeks later. I learned to tell the days by the crowds gathered on the streets. On weekdays, traffic congested the downtown streets, and men and women dressed in business attire walked with eyes faced straight ahead, focusing all their attention on all the activity stacked in their day. Saturdays found late-night partiers drunkenly searching for their vehicles to carry them home while tourists greeted the day eager to take in all that Nashville had to offer. On Sundays, the streets remained quiet until the lunchtime hour bustled to life. Sundays also marked the time when church groups decided to do their good will for the day. She returned on a Sunday afternoon.

This time, however, she brought no food, and she parked in the lot just east of the river next to the outdoor carousel. At first, she looked lost, walking back and forth along the river in front of us. She suddenly focused her attention on a young couple sitting at the water's edge. She sat next to the young mother and father watching a puppy play at their feet. Using the puppy as a lead-in, she attempted to open the doors to communication with no luck. The young mother looked at her accusingly and turned her body away.

She sat there for a few minutes contemplating where she went wrong after her last success at communication. I could have told her if she had asked. With food to offer, she

appeared confident and pleased to be in our presence. Now, we could all sense her anxiety when all she had to offer was conversation. After what I saw last time, I could not believe she feared any of us. I believe that this shy woman simply did not know how to instigate conversation. If I had not had the same qualms, I may have opened up to talk to her.

She quickly found her comfort zone. A group of men sitting further down the row admired her from afar. As if feeling their stares upon her, she turned to them and smiled. I'm sure she attracted the attention of men all the time. She seemed to feel more comfortable around them than with women, although there was nothing sexual in her comfort with them.

She walked beside them, asking if she could sit. Of course, no one denied her. One Caucasian man sat among half a dozen Hispanic men. Even though the Caucasian acted as translator, she did her best to focus on them as they talked and to respond with as much Spanish as she could speak. They told her they came to Nashville looking for work. They had good jobs, but they were temporary. They had come from Texas. With this, she smiled, revealing an instant prideful bond. She, too, came from Texas, San Antonio to be exact. Now I understood why I liked her so much. I felt a Texas bond with her, too.

While they talked, a church bus pulled up in the same spot that our Texan had pulled into the last time. A group of well-dressed individuals, coming straight from church services, stepped out. A man, probably the pastor, exited from the driver's side. A woman, whom I assumed to be his wife, emerged almost simultaneously from the passenger side, carrying a box of tracts. The group herded out of the back of the bus and stood cautiously behind the couple, keeping their distance from the likes of us. Without a word, the woman handed a tract to each one of us. The man walked into a small group gathered near the van and started talking about the path to

salvation. The men and women of the church kept to their tightly knit group standing behind the woman, avoiding eye contact with the lost sheep.

The woman handed a tract to our Texan. She politely took it and closely watched the group as they moved along. After observing them for a while, she turned to her new friends and asked if groups like that came here often. They nodded. She shook her head in disgust.

She made me smile again. I knew the same thoughts ran through her mind that ran through mine. This young girl, with no visible church ties, came to feed the sheep. This church group came to do their duty. They arrived in their nice clothes, spent twenty minutes preaching salvation while showing contempt, got back in their vans, and drove back to their nice homes with probably a nice Sunday meal waiting for them.

We knew nothing of this woman as far as her spirituality and faith, but she spoke volumes above that group. She spoke more of God's love for us through her actions and silence than the group did with their actions and words. Such church groups turn people like me off to religion. People like our Texan turn people like me on to Christ.

I saw right before my eyes a modern version of Jesus versus the Pharisees and Sadducees. This unknown simple woman came to the hungry and destitute, those whom the rest of the world ignores, shielding their eyes so they can pretend we do not exist. With eyes wide open, looking directly into our eyes, she walked straight toward us. She came quietly and left quietly, yet we all knew she had been there.

Those church folks came with trumpet calls and shouts of glory in their emblazoned chariots. They sang at the top of their lungs of the love and glory of God, raising their hands and eyes to heaven, not once coming down to meet us. No one can deny their condescending presence, yet we all wish we could forget.

Sunday is a busy day for both those of ill and good faith. Shortly after the polished red church bus pulled away, a white and green run-down van from another church pulled up to take as many as would fit to eat. Most of us dispersed.

Our Texan questioned if the new arrival belonged to another church and where they were going. No one got out of the bus. One individual opened the van doors, and we flocked inside. The man conversing with her answered her question by indicating that the bus took the hungry to eat. They came every Sunday. We knew that not all churches were bad and not all people in those churches were bad. "Some folks just want to feel good about themselves. Others actually want to do something. We need food. If more churches would come to us like you did, maybe we'd be open to listen to what they had to say." The translator stayed with her as long as he could. Not wanting to miss out on his only meal in who knows how long, he reluctantly left her side and boarded the bus.

As the van pulled out, I looked out the window. She sat in the same spot, watching us drive away. I felt as if I were forever leaving the comfort she brought me and said a quick short prayer that our paths would cross again someday.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Jessica

The summer sun begets a plethora of obstacles for the homeless, especially in a tourist town. Nashville, the home of country music and the beloved Grand Ole Opry, encourages an excessive number of thrill seekers and star chasers to visit. Local businesses eagerly anticipate the arrival of Fan Fair. The rows of stages set up along the riverfront to house popular local and well-known bands drive us away from our camps.

My first summer in Nashville introduced me to the powerful force of economics. The event brings a flood of money into the local economy. People make money. People spend money. Those of us who cost money, but cannot participate in the game, are swept under the rug. We are run out of town before we, God forbid, drive away active players. Metro police patrol in full force at this time, stronger and larger than normal, unyielding to our plight.

With nowhere else to go, I remained in my happy little corner, minding my own business, watching crews set up all their equipment. I noticed them gawking, but by now I had become immune to constant stares. Worse than passersby ignoring me are the ones who ogle without blinking, their eyes communicating their dire contempt for my life. Still, I had grown used to the looks.

Because their stares never fazed me, I watched on, oblivious to danger awaiting me. A police officer, hardened by his many years fighting real criminals, grabbed me by the arm, turning me so that I faced him. He ignored my startled, scared expressions.

“I told you to get outta here.” He droned.

I looked at him, my eyes quizzing his meaning. I never heard him tell me to leave.

“All ya’ll were told to get outta here. What don’t you understand?”

I still did not respond. I just stood there watching him.

“Are ya stupid? Go to the mission or something, but you gotta leave here.”

Not knowing what he meant by the mission and unsure of where else to go, I simply looked around. It finally occurred to me that there were no familiar faces anywhere near me. I recognized no one. Again, I stood without saying a word.

The officer grabbed my wrist and swung me around. With his foot, he swept my legs apart while he simultaneously grabbed my other arm and pulled it behind me. He cuffed me. The cuffs dug deep into my skin.

“If that’s how you want to be, I’ll give you somewhere to go.”

It was my first time in handcuffs sitting in the back of a patrol car. I looked up, very aware now of the activity surrounding me. Backup arrived from various positions, communicating their eagerness to act, standing with chests thrust out, displaying their power to all onlookers. Passersby stopped in their tracks, internally condemning me as a drunken good-for-nothing. *Thank God for the cops, they all think. Thank God they were here to save us from the torment of that lowlife. Thank God they saved us from her panhandling harassment, or worse, possible theft or harm.* The workers setting up the stages looked at me, relieved that I would be long gone before the beer-drinking, money-spending, music-loving crowds arrived. I turned my head away from the window, focusing my eyes on my feet, and wishing on the thinning soles of my tattered shoes that I was as low and as drunk as all those eyes assumed. At least, then, I would be oblivious to the pain.

The patrol car pulled into an alley next to a tall white building. Many men loitered or slept wherever they found room. Dirty and scary. As I watched the men move about, I finally got

a glimpse of what I must look like to so many others, to all those who watched the scene at the riverfront only moments ago. The last of any pride lingering for recognition slithered down my spine, sneaking away from this hopeless case appearing in the form of me. I am what they all think I am. I am one of them. Dirty and scary.

Once the men noticed the patrol car, whispers echoed as warnings down the long alley, cautioning them to get up and leave. They feared the police just as others fear them.

The officer opened the door, pulled me out, and took off the handcuffs. "See that door there on the right? Go through that door. They'll feed you. They'll tell ya how to get a bed." He paused to make sure I understood. "Eat. Sober up. I'm doin' you a great favor here. Let 'em help you. Just stay away from downtown. Got it?" He looked at me. I stood motionless. He must have sensed my fear because he added, "Don't worry about those men. They'll leave you alone. The ones out here are just as afraid of you as you are of them."

He got back in the patrol car and drove off, leaving me to fend for myself. With eyes wide open, cautious of every move every man around me made, I found my way to the door and to the long line of other men and women waiting to be served a warm meal.

The setup resembled a cafeteria line without the cash register at the end and without the choices. The volunteers took turns placing portions on the tray, feeling safe to look into our eyes and smile with the food counter separating us from them. I took my tray to the sparsest table in the drab room, anxious to remain apart from all others.

The room. Oh how that room smelled! The aroma of the meatloaf and chocolate chip cookies baked fresh in their large industrial kitchen fought the stench of sweat and eroding livelihoods for control of the attention of the senses. One of the workers commissioned another

volunteer to open all the doors to cool off the room from the overwhelming heat emitted from the ovens. I am sure he used this reasoning to free himself and the others from the unaccustomed odor of homelessness.

In a corner nearest the kitchen sat a table full of better dressed men and women, apparently those who make a living working for us. They conversed with another young man, telling him how the shelter functions to serve the homeless. Maybe a new volunteer? Student? New employee? At first, all I noticed was that each one ate the meal before them with greedy appetites, the same meal served to us. I figured that, if the food was good enough for them to eat, it must be good and safe for me. I started eating, then listened in on their conversation.

From what I could hear, this particular part of the shelter fed anyone who wanted to come, twice a day. All the food was donated from individual patrons and large businesses. Those who frequented the kitchen did not partake in the other programs the shelter offers. Those involved in the shelter ate meals at another location.

The young man stated his desire to interview the men sleeping in the alley after the rest of his tour. The others cautioned him against that. Apparently, they were the most hard-pressed and dangerous. Although they were not likely to harm him, they were also not likely to befriend him. The ones loitering outside saw all others as the enemy. They blamed everyone else for their plight. They were heavily into drugs and alcohol, willing to take any handouts, but unwilling to get help.

The shelter functioned on multiple levels. For those willing to work hard to better themselves, the shelter offered drug treatment programs, counseling, education, and job training. They also ensured that all recipients apply for and receive healthcare. A select group of

recipients lived at the shelter. Because the program was nonprofit and could only function based on donated income, they could not house all the participants in need.

The shelter separated the men from women and children. The large white building, the former Sears building, housed the programs for men. Another shelter across town housed the programs for women and children. They made this separation because most men, by the time they reached the point of need, were single or separated from their families. Most homeless women and children had suffered past abuse at the hands of men and were very frightened of them. Rarely would they come across a homeless family consisting of both a man and woman. They found that separation was the most successful way to rehabilitate those in need.

One of the men talking with the young man was homeless himself before becoming employed with the Nashville Mission. He believed that because of his experience and successful completion of the program, he was in a unique position to help others.

He, too, had a wife and children, a nice car and home, and a great job. He had everything any man could ever want. He loved his family very much. But drugs destroyed his life.

“At first, I was a weekend user. Then I started using a few days during the week. Before I knew it, I needed it first thing in the morning. I couldn’t work. I got fired. My wife left me, took the kids, and I lost everything. I even had a boat and a motorcycle. Those used to be my weekend hobbies . . . I knew even then that the drugs were ruining me, but I couldn’t stop. I wound up on the streets.”

He listed the names of the drugs he did. It started with marijuana, then escalated to crack/cocaine, meth, anything he could get. He could not pay bills because all his money went to feed his addiction. He lost custody of his children, only being allowed supervised visitation. As he told the story, his words transported him back through his past journey.

“I ended up on the street, living under a bridge. The street changes you. You see, that’s what people don’t get. It angers me when I hear people talking about how they won’t give money to a homeless person because they’d just go out and buy a beer instead of food. Of course they will. Anyone would if they were homeless...

“The longer you are on the street, the more messed up you get. It makes you crazy. Literally. I had a normal life just like anyone else. At first, you ask people for money. You go buy food with it. Then, you’re on the street longer. Your clothes are ragged, and you haven’t bathed in days, weeks, months. You become afraid of people.

“People are so afraid of the homeless, but what they must understand is that the homeless are more afraid of them. They’re afraid of just about everybody. The ones who hang out in public places, they haven’t been homeless too long. The ones who have been homeless for a long time are hiding.

“I used to go to the dumpsters by restaurants at night looking for food. Sometimes all I’d find was a half-eaten sandwich with mold on the edges. I’d just take off the mold and eat it.” His face grimaced as he motioned with his hands how he peeled off the mold. It was as if he could taste that souring meal.

“You even become afraid of other homeless people. If you acquire anything, even if it’s just trash, you become so protective of it. You can’t sleep, scared to death that someone is going to steal your stuff. You become more and more withdrawn.

“It got to the point where I’d get up the nerve to walk up to someone and ask them for money. Sometimes, I’d even be honest and say, ‘Look man, can you spare a dollar? I really need a beer.’ And can you believe it? I got more money by telling people I wanted to buy a beer than when I’d say nothing! Imagine that.

“And what riled me the most was when these people in fifty thousand dollars cars would drive up and tell you they had no money. What bull. They’re wearing five hundred dollar suits, and they can’t spare even one quarter?”

“Anyway, what you need to understand, what I wish everyone understood, is that those guys outside, the hateful ones, they’re not hopeless. I was just like that. Of course they spend anything they have on drugs and alcohol. It numbs them. I’d like to see just one of those people who complain about giving them a dollar in their shoes, with their experiences, with a dollar in his hand. That scumbag wouldn’t buy food. He’d buy that beer so he could escape life for even a little while. These guys would much rather sleep and be somewhere else mentally than to be fed and to feel every second of the agony of their existence. Just once . . .” He trailed off, lingering on that final thought.

With my meal consumed, I slipped out of the building, unsure of where to head next, but certain I did not want the comfort of the women’s shelter the police officer suggested and the group at the kitchen discussed. By this point, I believed God reserved that sort of help for others more deserving. Walking away from the shelter, away from the lonely men in the alley talking to themselves, I reminisced of my own drug-filled, pain-free days and longed to return. But with no money to my name, I had no idea how to get anything. And after no bathing and no change of clothes in months, I thought I had no chance of trading favors.

By this point, I understood the plight of the man at the shelter searching for food in dumpsters—partially-eaten meals tossed aside with the rest of the garbage from the kitchen, bars, and bathrooms; pieces of fatty or half chewed meat wrapped in toilet paper that must be peeled away before eating, trying to focus taste buds on filling a hungry void instead of what might have caused the tissue to become so sticky. Sometimes luck graced me, finding a box of donuts, a bit

stale, but still clean and sweet. I learned to dig for the best food garbage cans offered and learned the best places to rummage. What I had not yet been able to do was hold out my hand, palm up, open my mouth, and ask for a donation. No one ever threw away half-filled beer cans. If I wanted to forget, I must first learn to speak with a humble tongue.

I remembered the irony that people more willingly gave to the man when he told them he wanted the money for beer. I thought I would try the same tactic. The Exxon station just off the highway at the Broadway exit always brimmed with business. An endless stream of fancy cars filled the lot. A homeless man stood at the corner by the stoplight, holding his sign stating that he was homeless and hungry, hoping the drivers waiting to make a left turn would offer him a donation. I figured this spot must be safe if he worked it unbothered. Without stepping on his turf, I hoped to benefit from the same clientele.

I stood on the sidewalk, aware that the workers at Exxon would call the police on me for loitering and panhandling if I came within their view or took one step onto their property. I watched them closely, and I remained on the sidewalk. Public property.

It took me many attempts to steel my nerves before I finally confronted a car waiting to exit the station and cross the busy Broadway lanes. The driver of the maroon Ford tried to ignore me, but he forgot to roll up his window. I walked up to the driver's side and timidly disrupted his concentration. "Excuse me, Sir, but I really need a drink. Can you spare some change?"

He stared at me with a mixed look of disgust and awe. "A McDonald's right there. You can get a burger for a dollar. And you have the gall to tell me you want money to drink? A beer costs more than a hamburger." He rolled his eyes and shook his head. He found his opportunity, a break in the flow of cars, and left me standing there in my shame. I realized that the cunning of the former homeless man now working at the mission does not work for everybody. I remained

standing there, defeated and still with no money. Instead of maintaining my post at the gas station, I walked on, away from the main drag, onto side streets and alleys.

After a few attempts at solicitation at various locations, I discovered that the best place and time to receive free handouts was late at night around the bars. Drunken men and women do one of two things when a homeless person wanders around their line of vision. They either hand them whatever money they have in their front pocket, change from their last purchase at the bar, or they mock them with hateful words, sometimes throwing bottles or small rocks. The abuse, I determined, was worth it for the easy handouts requiring no spoken words.

I also learned that poorer sections of town offered more assistance than the richer parts of town. I suppose those who know the struggle of poverty at any level sympathize more readily with the plight of the destitute than do those who want for nothing.

As my money supply grew, my desire for stronger, longer-lasting anesthesia increased. I never cared much for the taste of beer but preferred it over the much more costly liquors. One joint, that's all I wanted. One quick, easy way to drift off into a happier, more carefree land. I had just one problem. I knew where to go back in Virginia. I had friends who got me whatever I wanted. Here, I had no one, no supplier, and no idea how to get one.

Then, again, I knew one place. Those scary men who talked to themselves back at the shelter's kitchen knew where to go. According to the man I overheard talking, they spent their money on drugs and alcohol. All I had to do was work up the nerve to talk to them and that would be easy enough. A few beers in me and I could walk without fear, talk to anybody.

I finally made my way back to the alley and confronted the first person who made eye contact with me. Very soon, many eyes were on me. Women did not frequent this alley, especially at night, and never alone.

He sat with a guitar in his grasp, strumming a tune and singing along. An old red cap sat backward atop his head, long dirty blond hair hung over his sagging shoulders. His white t-shirt was worn so thin that his skin showed through. Baggy, dirt-covered jeans told the tale of a man once thicker in the waist. I asked him if I could sit on an empty concrete slab beside him. "You play guitar?" I asked, eager to break the ice. "Are you a songwriter?"

He shook his head. "I'm trying to get a writing deal. That's why I came to this town. Sold everything I had to get here only to have them dumb asses on Music Row tell me to go home. I'll show them. I'll show them all."

"You homeless now?"

"No I am not," he said defensively. All I could think was that, if he was not homeless, why would he be hanging out down here? Inspiration? He sure looked homeless. "I had a home, have a home back home, but those dumb asses. They took everything away from me."

Okay. The man made no sense to me, but what did I care? I was there to find out some information, one small fact. That was all. Where or who could hook me up?

"Do you . . . do you know where I can get . . . you know?"

"I know."

He only said those two words. I waited for more, but he said nothing else.

"Well?"

"Ask anyone around here. I'm sure everyone's got something."

"I'm not looking for a handout, I just need to know who can sell it to me."

Another man listening to our conversation said, "You're cute. You don't need money."

I looked up and noticed that the eyes following me suddenly became bodies closing in on me, unnerving my level of comfort. "I'm not looking for handouts," I repeated to the new man. "I just need to know who I can go to."

"You don't NEED no money." As he said this, he pulled two joints out of his tattered front pants pocket. "We don't see many girls aroun' ere. Never no cute girls." As he said this, he hovered over me, putting his old calloused hands on my shoulders, pushing me back against the cool pavement. The guitar man never missed a strum. He hummed as he watched us from the corner of his eye. Other men crowded around, watching and waiting for something.

I knew what the something was they wanted and waited for. In that moment I learned two lessons. First, even homeless men, the most senile and delusional, feel sexual desires and need sexual release. Second, no matter how decrepit I become, as a woman, there always remains a place for me to exchange my body for whatever I need.

I never fought them. I understood a little more clearly my lot, and I accepted it. These men would rarely know the pleasure of sex. I had something they wanted, and they had something I wanted. We could work out a deal.

We each knew the trade agreements without saying a word. Before taking their turn, each man placed his offering in the growing pile. I remained silent. They finished and went on their way. Those without knew the best they could do was watch. The guitar man remained in his spot, strumming his song and humming his tune.

When all were finished, I gathered my new stash and walked away, no parting words exchanged between any of us. I was sore and tired, but relieved to have the only possession I so longed to possess. I found a quiet corner inside the doorway of the First Baptist Church across the street, my home for the night. With a match from a matchbook I had carried with me for

weeks, I lit my joint, inhaling slowly, savoring the dull relaxation coursing through my bloodstream.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Andrea

Nothing of profound significance occurred in my life after the close of my freshman year of high school. God finally had mercy on me and granted me some time of internal contemplation, free for external stimulants. No want of a boyfriend confused my focus. No dramatic life changes challenged my courage. I simply walked in the confidence of my imagination.

I longed for my high school graduation day, craving the escape from the bitter monotony of my trapped existence. June fourth, one month shy of Independence Day, marked my birth into freedom.

After tossing our hats high into the air, I strutted from my seat confident of new beginnings. He stood, surrounded by other exhilarated graduates. With no hint of my former bashfulness, I spoke to him for the first time.

“Congratulations, Mitch.”

“Congratulations.”

“How about a hug?”

He came to our high school during our junior year. Every girl loved this tall, brown-haired boy. Unlike other jocks, he never snubbed another. He always offered smiles and greetings to anyone he met. And, he openly embraced his Christian faith and virginity, declaring that he planned to wait until marriage. Although no girl cared about his Christian school girlfriend and would do anything he desired, and I do mean anything, he disregarded the helpless flirtation of girls by reminding them of his commitment and faithfulness to his love.

I, like all the other girls, dreamed of being able to call him mine. I dreamed of his loving me as he loved his girlfriend. Popular boys usually did nothing for me, and, although Mitchell Covington was the most popular boy in school, I harbored the biggest crush on him. Unlike the other boys, Mitch really was that All-American good boy with unbelievable good looks to match.

I never found a voice to speak, but I still sought his eyes. During the last months of my senior year, I wrote anonymous poems confessing my school-girl attraction. The success of my Glamour Shot senior pictures inspired me to fix myself up for school with the one goal of getting him to notice me. He noticed me, and so did everyone else. I knew he knew that I wrote those pathetic poems, but neither one of us ever acknowledged it.

But on graduation day, I found my voice. “How about a hug?” He hugged me. Mitchell hugged me and called me by name. He knew my name, and I took no shame, no embarrassment, in walking right up to him and taking a piece of him with me.

I thought I glimpsed into the life that awaited me somewhere else. In the fall I would begin school in Nashville, Tennessee, at Belmont University. I had always dreamed of going to Berklee College of Music in Boston, but I lacked faith that I could ever compete with real musicians. I figured I could hold my own with country musicians.

I lied and told everyone the harsh winters squashed my interest in Massachusetts. Either way, Tennessee afforded me the opportunity to escape myself, go to a new land where no one knew me, and start all over, reinventing myself into the model I thought suited my dreams.

But, as we all learn at some point, wherever we go, there we are. I am still Andi whether in Texas or Tennessee. I still have the same inhibitions and failures. I cannot automatically reinvent who I am just because I pick up and move.

After getting me settled into my new dorm room, my dad and sister returned home. I knew instantly that I made a grave mistake. While waiting for their plane, Emily noticed a familiar-looking man sitting near one of the gates. She motioned for us to look. My dad and I immediately recognized him as Ricky Skaggs. Pulling me along, my sister walked up to him and introduced me, explaining that I was a drummer about to attend Belmont University. He shook my hand, commented on what a good school I had chosen and what a great opportunity lay before me. He told me that his drummer was wandering around somewhere and promised to bring him to me when he returned.

After my dad and sister boarded the airplane, I sat near the window staring at the object taking my last sense of safety from me. I watched as the plane faded from view.

Ricky Skaggs kept true to his promise. "Are you Andi?" A male voice boomed above me as a hand stretched in front of my face. It was the drummer for Ricky.

"Yeah."

"Ricky told me you're a drummer. Going to Belmont?"

"Yeah."

"Freshman?"

"Yeah."

"Well, you'll enjoy it. It's a really good school. One piece of advice: take advantage of their internships."

I never took his advice. Instead of attending the first day of class, I called my mom and confessed my shame and pleaded with her to get me out of there without my having to admit my failure. Showing her amazing grace as a mother, she took the blame from off my shoulders.

While I packed up and headed back home, she told my father and the rest of the family that because the university was so costly and because we got turned down for financial aid, my parents could not afford to let me go at this time. I would, through no fault of my own, have to go to the community college in San Antonio for at least one semester until we could reapply for funding. She rescued me.

When I returned home, I found the house empty. Creeping to my room, my anxiety grew as I awaited the questions I knew my dad and sister would ask. As predicted, when they returned home, they sat on the edge of my bed to chat.

“This is a surprise. I had no idea you were coming home,” my dad said.

“Didn’t Mom talk to you?”

“Yes, but I thought I would get a chance to talk to you before you left.” My sister sat in silence as my dad continued, “I’m so angry with your mother. She had no right to make that decision. That’s why I wanted to talk to you before you left so you wouldn’t have to leave. I told her over and over again that I would get a second job to pay for your school because I know how important it is to you. That’s all you’ve talked about for so long. We’ve been arguing around and around about it.”

I could tell the lie infuriated my father, placing unnecessary blame on my innocent mother. It killed me to hear my dad speak of my mom in such a livid tone. “She,” I took a deep breath, “Mom didn’t make me come home.”

They both looked at me with wonder. “She lied for me. I failed. I was miserable, but I didn’t want to look pathetic. I wanted to be able to come home and for it to be okay. I called her and asked her to lie for me, and she did. She’s not the bad one. I am.”

My dad patted my knee. "You don't have to lie to come home. I didn't want you to go because I'd miss you too much, but I would never have tried to stop you. I'm glad you're home if that's what *you* want."

"Remember at the airport," my sister reminded me, "could you see us on the plane?"

"No."

"We could see you. You were sitting by the window watching us until we took off. I told Dad how sad you looked. You looked so lonely. Did you want to come home then?"

"Yes," I admitted.

"Did you participate in any of the activities with orientation?" my dad asked. "The night we left you were supposed to go out with one of those groups."

"I went. We went to Pizza Hut and bowling. I didn't like it. I didn't fit in. I knew then that I wasn't going to have any easier a time making friends there than I do here, but I have friends here. I have nobody there. I'm still *me* there. I've got some things to work on, and I'd rather do it here. I know I can't change just because I move away."

"Did you ever talk to your roommate?" questioned my sister.

"No. She was never around when I was around, but you could always smell her. You're not supposed to smoke in those rooms, but it always reeked of smoke. We had a floor meeting. I told them I was a drummer and everyone sort of grumbled. They didn't seem to want me to practice in my room even though there are set practice hours. It didn't feel like home."

"Maybe if you just gave it a chance," my dad suggested. "Did you even go to a class?"

"A few," I lied. "I just knew I made a mistake. Mom and I talked, and she tried to convince me to give it a chance, too, but I just knew. And I thought that if I leave now, I could still get into San Antonio College. I just have to go down there and take some placement tests."

“So when can you start? It’s not too late?”

“I go tomorrow to take the tests and register for classes. I can start the next day.”

“Well,” my dad said, “I’m glad you’re home. Don’t ever be afraid to come home, never, no matter what.”

“I still feel like such a huge failure.”

“Don’t,” Emily soothed. “Bobby didn’t stay when he went to Belmont.”

“But he stayed a whole semester. I didn’t even get started.”

“It’s okay.”

I pleaded with them. “Still, I feel lousy right now. Can we tell everyone else that I couldn’t go because of the financial aid?”

“Is that what you want?” my dad asked.

“Yeah. I don’t want anyone to know the truth if they don’t have to. Not yet. As long as no one blames Mom.”

“How about we just don’t say anything, and, if someone asks, then we’ll just tell them it wasn’t the right time.”

“What if they want details?”

“Well, then we’ll tell them the financial aid didn’t come through. That is the truth. And that you decided you didn’t want us paying for it ourselves so you decided you could go to San Antonio College for a few semesters and then go back to Belmont.” He paused. “You can go back whenever you want to whether it’s next semester, next year, or never.”

I did go back. I had to prove to myself that I was not a failure, that I could make it away from home. I started by moving to San Marcos a year after my pathetic return to Texas, a college town less than one hour away from home. After one year of going to school in another town, working almost full time, and paying most of my own expenses, I felt more like an adult ready to spread my own wings. I was growing up.

Growing up, managing a full time job and a full time class load proved too much too soon. Cutting my school load to a few classes a semester, I enjoyed life as a single young adult on my own. For a while, without even realizing it, I became one of those run-of-the-mill average people I told Sue I never wanted to be. What surprised me was that I was perfectly okay with being normal. I rather enjoyed it.

One day, my dad asked me to go through some childhood boxes. He sold my childhood home, insisting that a modest garden home on a single acre or half acre lot suited him better now that he lived alone. The upkeep on our three acre, three bedroom house proved too much for my aging father. "Anything you girls don't want, I'm going to give away or throw away," he told us.

While going through the boxes marked "Andi," I came across the journals I kept as a child, those same journals I told Sue I hoped to one day publish. I sat for hours reading and reliving moments from my past. Some stories I remembered vividly. Some I had long since forgotten. Some stories made me cry. Others made me laugh out loud.

I read poem after poem, short story after short story. Then, I found the journal filled with nothing but entries about my sessions with Sue.

" 'I've gotten to know you very well,' Sue told me, 'and I've read your work. I believe you can do anything you want. You are going to do great things and go very far. You're going to

make a difference with your words.’ She looked me straight in the eye and spoke with sincerity.” I believed her when I was fifteen and I still believed her five years later.

I took all my journals and school writing projects, leaving most of my childhood toys for the Goodwill pile. Finding those old writings reawakened my slumbering childhood dream. Keeping the voice of the original child author, I turned those old entries into a loosely autobiographical fictional novel. That novel was published before I turned twenty-one and to my delight and surprise, it became an instant success.

Even with a budding new career, I still felt incomplete. I needed to finish what I started in Nashville. This time, however, I took a companion with me on my new adventure. My boyfriend, whom I met in Austin, moved to Nashville with me to try his hand in the mainstream country music business.

While living in Nashville, I married my soul mate, confirming that my childhood ideal of love did exist. I finished school with an undergraduate degree in theology and got my master’s degree in social work.

Even though it took much longer than the traditional four years to finish college, I was proud of myself to finishing what I started and ran away from many years before. However, unlike the eighteen-year-old Andi, fresh out of high school, I no longer wanted a career in the music business. I now had a successful and satisfying career as a writer. The degree, for me, was personal.

I had absolutely no desire to work in the church, but like all other major decisions in my life, I simply followed my gut. God told me where to go, and I obediently followed. I chose theology not for future monetary gains. Rather, I chose theology in a quest for self-discovery.

And self I did discover, although not in the form I first expected. God unnerved my nights with dreams of a future so grand that my limited perception tried to ignore them. The dreams persisted until I finally wrote them down and envisioned them to be a sign of my future.

Because I enjoyed the world of academia, I followed the advice of my mother to seek a graduate degree in social work. "You have the heart for social work," she always told me. I figured my mom knew best about my life's calling.

While in school, God continued to echo past lessons in my ear. My calling became clear at last. I must use my gift of compassion to share God's love. I must get that master's degree in social work, and later a doctorate, so I would have the credentials and authority to build my HOME, the homeless center I wanted to open someday. God told me the steps I needed to take to reach that final destination. Although I wanted to know everything right then, He merely told me of my first step and the final goal. The in-between remained a mystery until He was ready for me to take the next step. For the time being, I excelled in the master's program and gave voice to the dream.

My *final* life goal? I wanted enough money to build a shelter for homeless families unlike anything ever seen or attempted before. I wanted a place families could call home, a place that would meet whatever needs they had and helped them in any way until they were back on their feet. If parents needed drug treatment or therapy, they would get it. If they needed education, they would get it. If they needed employment, they would get it. We would do whatever it took to meet those needs.

Children would return to school and receive help so they would not fall behind in their education. We would break the cycle of poverty. They would receive any other aid they needed to make them happy and successful children.

We would have parenting classes and money management classes and cooking classes. I would have an abandoned military base turned into a self-sufficient community with a bank and a grocery store and the members of the community would work there, building work experience. Children would go to public school. The center would be called HOME. I imagined two children talking after school about their evening's plans. One asked the other, "Where are you going?"

The other proudly answered, "I'm going home."

And the most important element—the center would be self-sufficient. We would have no need for and never accept federal funds or other grants which could restrict the program. The residents, as long as they put forth an honest effort at self-improvement, would have no time limits or treatment restrictions. No one would tell me how to run my program. It would be designed to end the cycle of homelessness and not simply mask it with temporary fixes.

I dreamed of building Christmas traditions at the center, having Santa Claus leave presents for all the children—and their parents—under the tree. Of course, parents must work for the gifts, but not in the usual manner. Their progress in their particular program would be the work that earned such material rewards. No children in my center would wonder what they did that was so bad that made Santa forget them. All children would know love and would know that they are good boys and girls. The parents would learn that even they are loved and, no matter their past, they too could achieve anything.

The center would also house counselors and a chapel. Pastors from various denominations would come throughout the week to perform a church service. However, religion would not be blatantly preached. God's love would reign through action and not words.

I dreamed of a successful member coming up to me and asking, "Why? Why do you do it?"

I would answer, "Because God loves you."

Actions. No empty words.

This new dream of mine, however, rested so far in the unseen future that I could never wrap my brain around how to make it a reality. But, through my religious studies, God taught me to act now. Through my schooling, He educated me about the opportunities to begin. Through my dreams, He taught me to trust in Him for the way. He would lead me in the right direction when it was time for me to know.

To those who know me, it appears I make flighty decisions. My private thought processes guide me to take what seems to be impetuous action. My resolve to attend a Methodist Church every day during Holy Week came about just this way.

Whether normal or not, my relationship with God either soars, taking me to an exultant state of euphoria, or lags, dragging my whimpering heels along a rocky ground of self-inflicted doom. My spiritual mood had yet to discover a contented medium. After graduating with a Master's of Science in Social Work, I took a job as a counselor. I now had two successful careers, but I still felt like something was missing. I felt as if there was something more to life.

The Methodist Church, the one across the street from the post office, the one I passed regularly without a second thought, one day captured my full attention. The sign in front of the church advertised daily services at noon each day of the following week in celebration of Holy Week. I knew with unfailing certainty that I must attend each service.

I grew up Catholic and now attended a Baptist Church, had never set foot in a Methodist Church nor did I know of their doctrine, but I felt in every inch of my being that, if I failed to

show for even one service, I would miss out on something profound. I had to go. I had to know the ups of faith again.

I left the office for lunch and steered my truck toward the church, trying to talk myself out of talking myself out of going. Too many times I allowed my fear to talk my feet into running away from an otherworldly, gratifying experience. I ascended the steep steps directing the lost into the doors of salvation.

A sparse group of believers were spread throughout the large sanctuary. My gaze focused on a larger-than-life cross suspended on the wall behind the choir loft. God's presence radiated out from that cross into His church body, my body, shooting out like life-giving rays of the sun.

For the first time in my life, I began to understand the meaning of the Easter Season. I understood its holiness. I knew its importance. My heart relaxed, emitting a proud nostalgia. He graced me for that moment with a glimpse into Christ's own heart as he hung on the cross to die 2,000 years ago. Even then, even before my great-great-great-grandparents ever existed in this world, Jesus loved me. Even then, He knew me. What a gift to know, even for one brief moment, the love of God through His Son, Jesus Christ.

The preacher spoke of Mary's decision to bathe Jesus' feet in oil instead of busying herself with chores. She knew at that moment that spending time in worship of the man sitting before her was more important than housework. She understood and embraced the moment. She knew that using such expensive perfume in a way others thought was wasteful was no waste. She gave the best for her Savior. She cared not of the mocking laughter of onlookers. She lived in the moment, fully aware of the man before her. Jesus, in turn, blessed Mary for her faithfulness.

The preacher ended the sermon by inviting each person present to come forward to be anointed as Mary anointed Jesus and to bless us as Jesus blessed Mary. She asked my name, anointed my hand with oil, and blessed me. She then invited us to pray in silence at the altar or at our seats. The choir sang while we prayed.

The second my knees hit the altar, a place I had never been before, the dam I erected to hold back public tears crashed down in an uncontrolled blast. I did not care who saw me cry. The whole world suddenly disappeared with my emotional barrage. Christ wrapped his love so tightly around me that I cared about nothing else except living this moment. Christ embraced me the way He did in my childhood. This was my meeting at the Garden of Gethsemane.

For the first time in my life, I knew this season. Ideas and beliefs became realities and truths. Nothing mattered outside of the bond I share with Christ and Christ shares with me. School, grades, work, not even my future mattered in the big picture. The bond mattered. I allowed myself, with the grace of God, to cry, to love, to rejoice, and to be still and silent where I knelt.

I arose just as the music ended. I turned and noticed all eyes rested on me, the only one still in prayer. Neither shame nor embarrassment clouded my euphoria. God embraced me with His love. He revived my dying soul. I rededicated my life to Him that day.

Another day the preacher spoke of the servanthood of Jesus. The first must be last and the last, first. Before Jesus preached about His kingdom, He fed their needs. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and then, once their earthly bodies were nourished, He fed their spirits. He did so in this order. Because Jesus was fully man, He understood that if our basic human needs are not met first, our minds and hearts will not be focused to hear the word of God. Our souls cannot be healed if we do not first heal the body.

To demonstrate this truth, the preacher invited us to join her at the altar. She asked us to sit along the front pew, take off our shoes and socks, and one by one she washed our feet. A new experience yet again.

I returned to my seat reluctant to put my shoes back on, wanting to linger in the moment of blessedness. As she poured water over my feet and rubbed them with her fingers, I closed my eyes, allowing God's spirit to overtake me once again. I felt as if Jesus Himself bent down to bathe my battered feet. I cannot begin to describe how humble that moment made me feel.

On the final day, Good Friday, a group of leaders gathered us all at the altar. We walked behind as one man carried the larger-than-life cross out the side door and onto the front lawn of the church. A resting place awaited the cross.

The tiny lawn was at a busy intersection. Restaurants lined the cross street. A gas station and post office occupied the opposite corner. Curious passersby slowed through the light eager to eavesdrop on the spectacle. I found my attention pulled away from the sermon and directed straight at each driver, wishing he or she would join me on the lawn, to comprehend the truth I now knew. I saw the face of Christ in each person. I smiled knowing that all of them reveal much more than they may ever know. A piece of God grows in them and through them whether they want it or not, whether they know it or not.

An instantaneous revelation manifested in my psyche. I had daydreamed about a time in the future when I could open up a center for the homeless that really helped instead of offering temporary solutions. I dreamed of becoming an instrument for God. All the experiences of the past week taught me that I must not wait for some future time to do God's bidding. I must start now. If I did not start immediately, the future would never arrive. I had a duty to perform, and I

had to start then, that Easter season. I must demonstrate God's love, the love He showed me Holy Monday, to someone. But where? When? And how?

When a question is asked in good faith, it is answered. Downtown. Sunday. Lunches. Nothing fancy.

I went to the grocery store walking on pure faith on trembling feet. I am by no means a good cook, and my own tastes are simple and bland. Well, as my favorite saying goes, "simplicity is genius." Bread, lunch meat, chips, bottled water, and dessert. I refrained from any condiments because not everyone likes mustard or mayonnaise, and even the homeless have the right to enjoy what they eat. For dessert, I baked special Easter cookies, no trouble to make. I simply cut the ready-bake cookies, placed them on the pan and stuck them in the oven.

After Sunday services at the Methodist church, I went home to gather my lunches and prayed. I knew from school projects on homelessness and simple observation that the homeless congregated downtown by the river just where Broadway Avenue ends. I knew of no other place to go and worried about going downtown. I did not fear for my safety. At least two police officers are in that area at all times. I was afraid because I knew that the Nashville Mission, a center just down the road from the riverfront, served two meals a day. I naively thought no one would want my lunches and that I would be left with two dozen sack lunches and two dozen bottles of water. But, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God directed me there. So, I prayed for strength and loaded up the truck.

As I pulled into the circle drive at the end of Broadway, I took a deep breath in silent prayer for God's lead. The officers stood to my right, curious as to why a young girl in a nice truck would stop right there. The looks of the homeless asked the same question.

I opened the passenger side door and peered from the lunch sacks out toward the people. No one came any closer to me, but all refused to release their stares. Even at this moment, I thought of backing out, curling my tail between my legs and going home. But God's will kept me in place. I pulled out one sack and one bottle of water, met the gaze of the person closest to me, and asked him if he would like something to eat. He walked up to me, took what I offered, stepped off to the side, and thanked me. The others, seeing what I had brought, began to gather around. I handed them out one by one.

They never took their eyes off me until they came face to face with me. Then, with head lowered, they took what I had to offer, thanked me, and returned to where they had been.

I ran out of food before everyone lined up got their fill. My heart sank when I had to turn the others away.

"I'm so sorry. I have nothing more."

"That's okay," they told me.

I wanted so desperately to do something. I thought about giving the others money, but I had less than five dollars on me. I wanted to treat everyone to some good food in one of the area restaurants, but, again, I had no money on me, not even one credit card. Besides, what public ridicule would they receive entering tourist eateries? I had not yet built up the strength to endure the kind of silent criticism leading this less than desirable group into a public eatery would solicit.

If only I had the power to turn one fish and one loaf of bread into enough to feed all. But I am not God. I did my best. I did exactly what God directed me to do, and I felt proud. I did not back down from God's challenge. Besides, my work was not yet done.

The old black man in tattered clothes, the first man I served, never ate his meal like all the others. He stood there beside me telling me he would save his for later. After all were served that I could serve, he walked back up to me and asked if I would listen as he talked.

“Of course. What’s your name?” I asked.

“James.”

I shook his hand. “Hi, James. My name is Andi. How are you?”

“I’m okay. You’re not from Nashville are you?”

“No. How did you know?”

“You have Texas license plates on your truck. What are you doing in Nashville?”

“Well, I went to college here and my husband’s a musician. He travels a lot.”

“I’m not from Nashville either. I’m from Chicago. My family is still in Chicago.”

“Then why are you here?” I asked. “If you don’t mind me asking. I know that I hate being away from my family. I miss them so much.”

“I had to. I miss my mom. That’s who I was living with. She’s sick, and I took care of her. But I got into some trouble and had to leave. I took the bus.”

“Are you okay?” I was genuinely concerned. Who knows what I could have done for this man, but it struck me as odd that he chose to talk to me. But since he wanted to talk, I would listen to whatever he had to say, knowing anything he said must stay between him, me, and God.

“Do you believe in God?” James asked.

“I sure do. Do you?”

“I think so. Sometimes I do, but other times I don’t know. Do you think He forgives anything? I mean, is there something we can do that He won’t forgive us for?”

“I think He will forgive us no matter what we do as long as we ask for His forgiveness and are truly sorry. Even if we murder someone. If we’re sorry and ask for His forgiveness, He’ll forgive us.”

“You really believe that?”

“Yes.”

“Would you forgive?”

“It’s a lot harder for people to forgive than it is for God to forgive. It depends on what someone did to me, I guess. But, God tells us that we should forgive others if we want Him to forgive us. I would certainly try and pray for help if I couldn’t forgive them on my own.”

“I almost killed someone.”

It astonished me that my voice and nerves remained calm. Neither he nor his story scared me. “Is that why you had to come here?”

“It was to protect my sister. She married this . . .” James struggled to find the right word to describe this man. He apologized each time he almost said a bad word. “He beat her. She’d come to me crying after he beat her. He’s messed up on drugs and . . . no woman should have to go through that.”

“I agree. Did you or your sister ever call the police on him?”

“No. We can’t. We take care of our own. We have to. No one else will. He’s been in jail before for this, but it doesn’t stop him. Things are different for us. You can’t understand. It’s just . . . we just have to take care of things for ourselves.”

James never raised his voice, although I sensed his anger with this man and his pain of being separated from his family. I still remained calm, certain of what to say and what not to say. God used me as His instrument to speak to James.

“The last time, I found him. I hit him over and over again. I wanted to kill him. I still want to kill him. I want to go back and kill him.”

“Why didn’t you?” I asked with understanding and without condemnation. Now, the fear crept into me. Should I report this to the authorities? What if he does go back and kill this man? Even though I believed this man deserved harsh punishment for his abuse, did he deserve it at the hands of another man? Could I get help for James and his sister? God quickly eased my fears by telling me to continue talking, refrain from scaring him away from opening up, and let God work.

“My sister was there. She pleaded with me. She still loves him. She got me to calm down. She took me back to my mother’s house and told her what happened. They knew that he’d kill me if he could find me. They don’t have money. My mother took what she had and my sister put herself in more danger by taking money from him to get me a bus ticket out of town. I came to Nashville because of the Mission. They can help get me work. I have to get money to pay them back and to get me a ticket home . . . I’m serious. I’m gonna kill him.”

“If you do, won’t you go to jail?”

“It’d be worth it.”

“You take care of your family, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“They need you, don’t they?”

“Yes, they do. My sister makes bad choices. I have to make decisions for her.”

“You sure do love your family.”

James smiled.

“Can I ask you something?”

He nodded.

“If you kill him, who will protect your sister?”

“He deserves to die. He won’t be able to hurt her anymore.”

“I agree. He does deserve to die, but you said she makes bad decisions. They both need you. What happens when someone else comes along or something else happens and you’re not there to protect them because you’re in jail?”

“I didn’t think about that. But I still really want to kill him. Is that bad?”

“No. *Wanting* to is normal, but it’s not the best solution. But can you protect her another way?”

“I don’t know. He deserves to die. Will God forgive me?”

“God loves you and will always love you no matter what. Will you do something for me?”

James nodded.

“Before you go home, will you think about it some more? Think about what we talked about? Pray about it. God will help you.”

“Will He tell me what to do?”

“Yes, He will. If you pray with all of your heart for Him to help you, He will.”

“How will I know what He wants me to do?”

“You’ll just know. I don’t know how to explain it any better than that.” We stood in silence for a moment. “Do you want me to pray for you?” I asked.

“I would like that.”

I grabbed his hands and held them in mine, closed my eyes, took a deep breath and prayed for God to guide James to help him do the right thing and to protect his family. I had

never prayed aloud before. As I said my prayer, tears streamed down my cheeks. Like the experience at church, though, for a moment, no one existed except me, James, and God. I felt His arms embrace James and me in his infinite love. After I concluded the prayer, I looked up and saw James crying as well. He squeezed my hands and thanked me. No one had ever prayed for him or with him before.

I left that day grateful for the glimpse into God's love and simple peace. It could be that easy if we all surrendered to God one hundred percent of our time. But try as we may, sin restricts us from such selflessness.

These simple acts are by no means the norm in my life. I fell far short from the goal I set that day of going downtown at least once a month. I only managed to go one more time in all the years I lived in Nashville. The second time, I came without food, and I was overwhelmed with fear. I cannot instigate conversation and am lost without a segue such as food.

God did use the second trip to communicate a valuable lesson to me. Shortly after my own arrival, a church van pulled up. At first, the group intrigued me. I applauded the church, any church, for taking their time to do as a group what I attempted on my own. I envied this group, wishing my own church would move beyond the building's walls out into the community. My envy, however, quickly turned to disgust.

The group never budged from the comfort of the space behind the preacher and his wife. The preacher shook hands as his wife handed out tracts. The other church members talked among themselves, fearfully ignoring those they came to "witness" to, and kept less than an inch distance from one another. After making their way down the row of homeless men and women

sitting along the ledge by the river, they joyfully broke out into song as they loaded back onto the bus to go home.

I was angry that they would come out here in the name of God and do nothing. They came here to make themselves feel better, as if they actually did something. They spent twenty minutes a few feet away from homeless people. They sang at the top of their lungs for themselves alone, a blatant show of false faith for unappreciative onlookers.

I wanted to lash out and give them a piece of my mind, but I sat silent. As the men I talked to explained, similar groups came there all the time. That is why so many homeless men and women are angry with God—*if* they believe.

Two extremes. The first experience delivered me into the presence of God's love and grace. The second experience demonstrated God's anger and frustration with His children. The first experience taught me that it is possible for us all to live together and to help one another just as the original disciples taught and encouraged. The second experience demonstrated just why it did not and will not work—human arrogance and greed. My theory was born and my life's purpose revealed to me after these experiences.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jessica

Everyone complains about the Texas summer heat, how it zaps precious energy and restricts people from living constructive lives. Work. Work. Work. Produce. Produce. Produce. We curse the heat because it stymies action.

And it gets so dry. No rain. Motorists throwing cigarettes out the window receive hefty fines because those useless butts cause dangerous roadside fires. South Texas farmers pray for just one drop of rain to save their livelihood.

When it does rain, it pours. The floods solve the problem of drought but drown the crops, driving families out of beloved homes, and further stifling productivity. No one can actively pursue life in the drowning rain.

I missed those Texas extremes. Another winter went by in Nashville. The temperature begins to drop around October and refuses to warm up until well into spring. We are too far north to enjoy warmer winters and too far south ever to see any significant snow. Nashvillians are cursed with rain and ice. I once heard that it is overcast in Nashville an average 180 days out of the year. I cannot stand that.

Local churches host what is called Room in the Inn. It is their ministry effort to help the plight of the homeless. Each church picks a different night of the week from about November through March to feed homeless individuals a warm dinner, shelter them for the evening, and provide them with breakfast. Although this is a great cause, there are too many needy to benefit from their good will every night. Those lucky enough to hook up with a church could be left cold

and hungry the six remaining nights of the week. Worse than that, nights can often be extremely chilly long before November and long after March. I loathed sleeping in the cold, wet outdoors.

At least in Texas, it is warm most of the year and dry most of the time. Climate had always made a huge difference in how I felt. As the chill of the wind blew through my bones and the wet weather seeped through my clothes, etching its way across every single pore of my skin, the hair on my arms rose and my skin wrinkled like the skin of decaying fruit. The clouds erased the sun and the stars and the rain blurred my vision, freeing the night sky to enclose around me like a coffin, sinking my sanity deeper than a six-foot grave.

When it did warm up, the beads of sweat, soaking my body in a salty stench, enlivened what remained of a withered spirit. The sunlight illuminated a path before my energized feet, carrying me to my next meal and resting place. As long as I could see an endless expanse above me and feel warm at night from the rays the sun left behind, I knew that I was still alive, and, as long as I was still alive, I still had hope. Even though I may not have always believed it, hope was always there.

That was why I would have traded the weariness of Nashville for the hellish heat of Texas summers. In Texas, the sun would keep me alive for a greater part of the winter. Even when the clouds burst their uncontrolled sobs on the Texas landscape, I would know that this, too, would pass, and that the sun would smile upon its glorious earth once again.

I dreamed about this Texas each day and night when the damp clouds controlled the sky. Why not leave and return to my home? Because I deserved my plight. The weather in Nashville suited my worth.

One year had passed by since the cop hauled me off to the shelter. The winter brought unusual snowstorms, closing down businesses and schools for endless days. Ice and sleet

laughed at courageous drivers on their way to work, braving the worst weather in history, colliding vehicles into one another, jackknifing others, causing ironic loss of productivity and money. Even the shelters closed down because workers and volunteers could not challenge the white monster for the sake of those living among it.

Local businesses took a breathtaking blow to the pocketbook, and we, in turn, took a hunger-pained blow to the stomach. I quit looking, limiting my intake to every second or third day, losing my own strength to walk through inches of snow merely to look into empty dumpsters.

Union Station, the old abandoned railroad depot downtown, became home to many of us that winter. Tall, covered walkways sheltered us from the falling drops and flakes. I found a spot right in the center between Demonbreun and Broadway for no reason other than no one else claimed that spot or any spot near it. Here, in my winter retreat, I became secluded deeper into my isolation.

At night, as my body shook with the cold grip of desperation and my stomach rumbled with the hollow whine of hunger, God took pity on this hopeless sinner and granted me a few moments of peaceful rest. For those short whispers in time, my soul vacationed on the beaches of Rio. With a smile on my face, laughter created the pain in my side. The clear blue water washing over my body inspired the goose bumps on my skin. The sand rubbing against my sunburned shoulder roused an itchy rash. The endless complimentary margaritas concocted especially for me by that cute native poolside bartender ignited the buzzing sensation swimming through my veins.

But, it was all just a short-lived dream. I awakened, as I always did, to the aching reality known as my bitter life. I was numb. Fazed by nothing, I spent entire days in a blur, sleeping as

much as I could at night, doing it all again the next day, and awaiting death to take me by the hand and lead me to my grave.

As arctic as the winter nights may feel and as hungry and destitute as we may become, there remain those who spot a lone female and care nothing about her looks or circumstances, only seeing a means to meeting their needs. By then, I was as tired of dealing with it as I am now of talking about it. The life of a lone young female living on the streets.

As I woke from a distant memory, he stood above me, legs straddling my waist. He just stared, willing me to open my eyes, controlled by the notion that I must be alert for his actions to be real. It was as if he knew that, even realizing his intentions, I would not fight, would not even move or utter a sound. My eyes must be open and blinking for him to know I was alive, that he was not screwing a corpse.

He raped me. Donald. His name was Donald. I knew that because he walked around introducing himself to strangers and other passersby.

He walked along the sidewalk by the Union Station Hotel, being cautious to avoid the valets while eyeing the incoming and departing guests. Donald looked them straight in the eyes with his head tilted down, held out his hand, and sauntered up to them on a limp left leg.

“Hi. M-my n-name is Donald. P-p-leased t-to m-meet you,” Donald stuttered. “H-how d-do you like our f-fair city?” He never had to come right out and ask for money. They always gave it to him early into the conversation, sometimes cutting the conversation even shorter than this.

Anyway, Donald raped me several times, always approaching me the same way. Afterwards, he would sit with me as if nothing happened. Neither one of us ever spoke. Now that

I think back, it was as if he thought of me as his lady. I would never cry or show any sort of emotion. We just sat there.

Donald always had something to drink, though. After a few minutes of silence, he pulled something from his coat pocket, and took a drink before handed it to me to drink. Always the same routine.

As the winter withered and spring eased the pains of frosted limbs, my strength vanished. Even Donald noticed the change. I could no longer open my eyes without insurmountable effort, and I no longer had the strength even to hold the bottle Donald handed me. He took care of me the best he could by bringing me what food he found and holding his bottle to my lips.

But, I never recovered. Donald returned to me one evening and proceeded with his usual routine. After he finished, he sat down beside me and tried to help me pull my pants back up. I couldn't lift a finger. He held the bottle to my lips. But I did not drink. He tried to rouse me, to make me understand what he was trying to do for me. I never understood. He searched for breath, but could not see any movement from my chest. Scared and confused, he left me, assuming I had already died and unwilling to take any blame from police.

By the light of day, someone noticed the homeless girl without pants lying motionless in the abandoned rail yard and called the police. When the ambulance arrived, they determined that, although alive, I had weak vital signs. Once I was revived, thanks to hospital IVs and emergency staff, I was informed that I should have been dead.

The hospital social worker assigned to my case educated me about the great opportunities for the homeless, available thanks to the great work of centers such as the Nashville Mission, as if homeless people such as myself must be oblivious to their work if we did not take advantage of their offerings. Encouraged by my silence, she offered to unite me with saints anxious to

rehabilitate. She saw me off as the mission van came to the hospital to pick me up after my release.

The women's mission social worker attempted to interview me at intake. I still refused to speak.

"What about your name? You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, but if we're going to get to know each other, I'd like to know what to call you."

I said nothing.

"My name's Kathy. Kathy Simmons." She caught me glancing at a picture on her desk. "Those are my kids. That's my son Jimmy and my twin girls Judith and Tina. You like kids? Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

I still said nothing.

"Okay. How about we get you settled in and get you something to eat. I'm sure that after a shower, meal, and some rest, you'll feel much better. I have a hard time, too, in strange places and surrounded by strangers. It must be pretty scary. But, I have to put down some name on your records, and I'd really hate to call you Jane Doe. So, what do you say that for now, until you are comfortable talking to me, we call you...Sara Jane?"

I said nothing.

"Okay then, Sara Jane, let me show you around."

For a few days, I accepted the meals, the bed, and the showers, but the social worker never relented. She made it very clear that recipients at the center must participate in order to continue receiving the basic benefits of this particular shelter. I had no intention or real ability to open myself up to this woman the way she wanted me to. I had to get out of there. I felt stifled in the shelter, as if the walls created a tomb around me, burying me alive.

Security personnel, however, monitored the building all night and day, keeping us safely tucked inside while ensuring that the negative outdoor elements remained out of doors. They did not force anyone to stay, but, for some reason, I could not bring myself to walk away in the light of day. Instead, I patiently awaited my opportunity for escape.

After less than a week in the shelter, my opportunity arrived. Listening from a hallway just to the right of the front door, hidden from the foyer, I heard the desk worker sneak away to the restroom. I used this respite to slip out the front door. Once outside, I never tried to conceal my escape or my pointless intentions. I simply walked away and kept on walking. My time in Nashville passed away into the recesses of my subconscious.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Jessica

I walked along the edge of the highway heading south, leaving another existence behind. As I walked, my shoulders sagged with the weight of inopportunity draining the blood from my lifeless veins. It felt like tiny needles pricked my fingertips. With weary legs I walked, my body growing weaker and every step inching me toward home.

“I want to touch the dust of Texas once more. I want to kiss my home goodbye. Lord, have pity on me and let me make it back home before I die. I want to be buried there.”

Just as the words escaped my thoughts, I fell to my knees and threw up. My head swirled in constant circles as vicious beads of sweat chilled my tingling limbs.

“I’m gonna die right here, on the highway in the middle of nowhere. Hmmm,” I thought, “what an appropriate ending to my life.”

But I did not die. After a few moments, my head cleared and my skin cooled. An ounce of energy coursed through my bones, giving my legs revived strength to get up and walk. And that is exactly what I did.

I kept on walking along the same path, never looking at passing cars, trying desperately to avoid the stares of helpful people willing to offer a ride to a stranger. I wanted no company. I wanted only to walk.

My weakness, I assumed, resulted from living the life of a traveling bum; nothing more. Although I did eat, I ate little—and rarely. Since fast-traveling motorists are not prone to stop along the side of a busy highway to offer assistance to one such as myself, when I could no

longer stand the pain of hunger, I walked off the highway and headed to the nearest truck stop. The busier the stop, the better.

A lot of truck stops these days have washrooms for the truckers to shower and rest, large convenience stores, and a place for them to relax and watch television, play video games, or call home to loved ones. Most even have fast food restaurants built right inside. Because of all they offer, these stops have become the havens of more than just truckers. With their bustling clientele, it was easy for a road-weary traveler such as I to blend in unnoticed, fill my pockets with what food I could, and walk out undetected. I rather enjoyed this low-risk version of supply and demand.

Although I often stole enough food to fill me, the fatigue and increasing nausea never ceased. I had walked longer and quicker before without feeling so low. I assumed the added erosion of energy stemmed from whatever sickness had afflicted me a few weeks back. Maybe I never completely got over it. Or maybe being without a home and a normal lifestyle for so long began to take its toll on me. Whatever the reason, I was overcome by a mounting dread that I would never again set foot in my beloved place of birth.

A sign along Highway 40 leading toward Memphis indicated a rest stop up ahead. With no hope left that I would reach my home and lie where my mother, father, and brother lie, I lost any motivation to continue with my journey. I decided to stop at the rest area for the night and await my death there.

I locked myself into the bathroom's handicap stall and sat in the corner. My head began to swim in circles, and I became nauseous once again. I crouched on my knees and puked. The stench rising from the toilet intensified my sick feeling, causing me to dry heave. With nothing

left in my stomach and no energy to support the queasiness rising from the pit of my bowels, I passed out.

I woke up within a matter of minutes sprawled on the floor. With knees still bent, my head rested awkwardly against the front of the toilet, my right arm was caught between my thighs and chest. My left hand, with palm facing up, peeked from underneath the stall door.

Still only half conscious, I heard a voice calling and a gentle hand knocking on the door. “Hello, hello, are you okay in there? Hello, miss?”

I managed a silent grunt.

“Oh, my God,” I heard the voice say. Her petite sandaled foot caught itself just before smashing my fallen fingers.

She ran to the door. I could hear her scream, “Billy. Billy. Go get your father, hurry.”

In a few short seconds, I heard a gruff-sounding voice. It got closer and closer as he spoke, “What is it? Are you okay? You scared the poor boy half to death.”

“There’s someone in there. She’s on the floor.”

“Is she...”

“I don’t think so. I think I heard her mumble, but, when I came in, I heard a crash sound. I knocked on the door, but no one answered. Then I . . . come look and see.”

I could hear footsteps approaching in my direction. My vision was blurred, and I could not speak. I wanted to tell them not to worry about me, to leave me alone, that I knew I was dying and wanted to die. I wanted to thank them for caring, let them know how it made me feel that a total stranger cared, but to let me be. But, I managed nothing more than indistinguishable grunts.

“I almost stepped on her hand.”

“Here, take my phone and go call 911. I’ll see what I can find.”

“Where do I tell them to come?” The woman was audibly shaken.

“We’re on 40 West about sixty or seventy miles east of Memphis. There’s a map on the wall outside. See if you can find an address on it or something.”

“O-okay.” I felt sorry for her. She sounded so worried, so concerned. She didn’t need to make such a fuss over me. If she had known me, she would have regretted all her wasted energy.

Somehow, the man managed to get the stall door open. He checked my pulse. Confident that I was still alive, he tried to talk to me. “Hey, can you hear me? Everything’s going to be just fine. An ambulance is on the way. They’ll get you to a hospital and make you all better. Are you hurt? Does anything feel broken?”

I could not respond.

“Okay. I’m gonna move you, lay you flat in a more comfortable position.”

He grabbed me under the arms and pulled me to him. With me sprawled across his lap, he placed a hand on my back, the other behind my head and spread me out on the bathroom floor. I heard him grunt as he pulled himself up off the floor. He walked to the sink, wet some paper towels, and came back to my side.

“Here,” he said. “Let’s put some paper towels under your head. I know it’s not so ideal lying on a bathroom floor at a road stop. I wish I could do better, but I bet you wish...well, never mind all that. The ambulance should be here shortly.” As he spoke, he rubbed a wet towel across my brow.

“They’re on their way.” The woman returned. “How is she?” I could feel her breath against my forehead as she spoke. “Think she’s homeless?”

“Looks like it.”

“Wonder what she’s doing here. Wonder what happened.”

“Who knows. Where’s Billy?”

“He’s outside.”

“What’d you tell him?”

“I told him a poor young girl needed our help and we could not leave her. I assured him we were okay. I had to promise him we’d stop at McDonald’s for dinner, that he could play on the playground...and maybe get an ice cream.”

The man chuckled. “He’s got you wrapped around his little finger. You feel a little guilty and...well, I’m going to go out to him and wait on the ambulance.”

The EMTs crouched around me, checked my vital signs, and talked to me. Still, I could not respond. They brought in a stretcher, secured me to it, and hauled me off in the ambulance.

Resting in my hospital bed with an IV feeding my arm, I woke up feeling healthier than I had in quite some time.

“You’re awake.” The nurse checking my vital signs smiled down on me. “You’ve been out for a several days now.” She touched my shoulder. “Hang tight, Sweetie, I’ll get the doctor and let him know.”

My eyes blinked uncontrollably for a few moments, adjusting to the bright light of the room. I wiggled my toes, bent my knees, and squirmed in place, loosening stiff joints. The blinds on the window were wide open, revealing a view of another building. A television hung in the high corner of the opposite wall. Near the exit door, another door opened to a private restroom. I had my own room. I could not help but smile. It had been so long since I had slept in a bed and

even longer since I had a room all to myself. I even had a television with a remote control that I controlled.

Just as I started scanning the room for the remote, the doctor walked in. “Looking for this?” he asked. “We’ve found that we lose fewer remotes if we Velcro them to the side of the TV when they’re not being used.”

He looked at me and smiled before scanning my chart. He sat on a stool beside my bed and said, “You were in pretty bad shape when you were brought in. Do you remember anything?”

“I . . . it’s . . . a bit fuzzy,” my first words in a long time.

“How long have you been homeless?”

“I . . . don’t know.”

He smiled, catching my surprise. “That’s okay. We have a social worker in the hospital to help people in any way we can. I sent for her. She’ll be here later. Do you know where you are?”

“No. I know I was in Nashville. Been walking for a while.”

“Wow. You’ve walked quite a way. You’re in Jackson.”

“Still in Tennessee?”

“Yep. Jackson, Tennessee. What’s your name?”

I searched my head. After so many existences, I could not recall my own name. “I . . . I don’t know.” I could not believe I did not know my own name. After so much time in seclusion, trying so desperately to lose my identity, my life, I had succeeded. But then why did I feel so sad? “I can’t remember.”

The doctor pursed his lips. “A-w-e-l-r-i-g-h-t. Well, then, I suppose you don’t know what’s been making you so sick? For one, you were severely malnourished and dehydrated, most

likely caused by your recent living arrangements and current circumstances.” He looked at me, searching my eyes for something, and asked, “Have you been feeling nauseated lately, a bit weak?”

“Yeah?”

“That is very common. You have been feeling that way because,” he looked right at me, awaiting my reaction, “you are pregnant.”

His announcement knocked the air from my lungs. The doctor touched my hand. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head. I could not believe my luck. Pregnant?

A woman peeked her head in the door as she knocked. “Am I interrupting anything?”

The doctor stood up and greeted her at the door. Addressing the woman, he said, “I just filled her in. She knows. She can’t remember her name, though.” He turned to me. “This is Mrs. Vicky Jacobson, our resident social worker. She can help you if you let her.” He turned back to the woman. “Good luck.”

With that said, he exited.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Andrea

Jessica, instead of dying like she expected, found new life growing inside her. The old mind-set of self-loathing would soon be replaced by hope. As she told her tale, her eyes sparkled with pride. Becoming a mother signified a second chance for her. It signaled the love of God still within reach. She gained a new purpose.

She could have looked upon the circumstances in which she got pregnant as her sealed fate of doom. She could have given up hope and continued on her path until she finally reached death's door. Instead, she sought this as a new opportunity to fulfill the destiny for which she believed she was created. She could raise the child with the kind of love she never knew and give hope back to the world.

Birth. Rebirth. I, myself, struggled with circumstance. When my child-self stared at me with a look of bitter disappointment, she forced me to reevaluate the course of my destiny. Do I, as Jessica could have done, walk the path of morbid disinterest, allowing the world to dictate my future, forsaking my hidden dreams? Or do I choose to give birth to the life that waits to be lived? Only I can make that decision. Only I can choose whether to let fate lead me or for me to lead my fate.

As children, we fantasize about life as independent, self-sufficient adults, answering to the whims and ideals of no one but ourselves. I thought about that child as I stared out the second story window of our living room, watching raindrops pelt the glass. The gray clouds returned a

cold gloom to a city and a life teased with the promise of springtime. This scene of nature's play carried me away to a child hidden within my fading adult ideals.

As my child-self lays in her comfortable twin bed, tucked away from reality, protected by nature and parental love, her mind wandered to grand ideas of her imagined future. Her home. My sweet home of childhood. How that child longed to fly away to a land more exciting like New York or California. But, here she remained in her home in the warmth and idle beauty of south Texas.

After high school graduation, the child's longing pulled her far away from home to try standing on her own two feet in a livelier atmosphere. She moved to Nashville, Tennessee. Safe, but different. Not quite the extreme of the congested and competitive streets of the east, but more of a challenge than the laxity of home. On her own where no one knew her, she could make a fresh start. She could run away from the dreaming child and take over the world. Although already creating a buzz in the literary world and soon to be married, she was still a child when she left for Nashville the second time, believing that going back to where she started would settle down her wander-lust.

Oh, how I longed for those subdued summer nights, alone in my room with my child thoughts and visions of a spectacular future. No one to stand in my way. No one to impede my steps—back when everything seemed possible, before corrupt societal norms challenged my ideals.

After graduating at the very top of my class in both my undergraduate and graduate programs, I had nothing more to show for it, and as I sat watching the rain, I thought to myself, *"I am not quite 30 years old, and have already achieved almost every goal I have set for myself. So, why do I feel so empty? I just need a change. I need something, but what?"*

As I questioned my future, America started questioning the safety of her future. The War on Terrorism flooded every television set in America. I watched the news coverage and became embittered because I could not serve my country. Even before I dreamed of touring with Bon Jovi, my ambitions soared higher. By the fifth grade, I mapped out my entire life. I planned to join the Air Force or Navy after high school and become a pilot. After ten or twenty years in the service, I planned to retire and join NASA, becoming the first astronaut to set foot on Mars. I even anticipated dying in space. What a way to go, doing what I love to do.

Military recruiters came to my high school. I told them of my plans of grandeur, leaving out the more ambitious goals. I even told them of my childhood disease that destroyed the eardrum in my right ear, reducing my hearing capabilities in that ear by seventy-five percent. “But,” I assured them, “my doctor says if all goes well, I can have reconstructive surgery, restoring my hearing to almost as good as new.”

“I’m sorry,” one recruiter told me. “You have two strikes against you. First, you’re a woman and women don’t fly.”

“Even though they can fly in training,” the other chimed in, “they’ll never see action in battle.”

“Second,” the first continued, “no branch of the military will take you because of your ear.”

Several years later, as I watched the reporters discussing the emerging role of women in battle, my stomach churned. They are trained to be all they can be during peacetime. During wartime, they cook and clean and go to the front line only to hand out weapons and ammunition to the men. How pathetic. As O’Neil says in *G.I. Jane*, “Nothing less, nothing more. Just treat me like the men.”

In time, I gave up the dreams of becoming a rock star or joining the ranks of Margaret Phelan Taylor and other heroes with the disbanded World War II Women Air Force Service Pilots. The other dreams—graduating from college, writing for a living, and marrying my soulmate and starting a family—all came true before I reached middle age.

I still envisioned walking along the market-filled streets of Spain, seeking the freshest fruit available, carrying my finds in my small tote back to my little cottage in the countryside which overlooked the rolling waves of the ocean. With laptop in tow, I would allow my characters to take me away with the sound of the cascading water beating the earth as a tribal drum calling on ancient spirits to awaken peace. However, I now saw this as something my husband and I did together in our golden years, after our children grew up and moved on.

I still imagined living in my beachfront home along the Gulf of Mexico in my beloved Texas. My time away from home taught me that I *am* Texas. I am all those things about Texas that my child-self dreamed of running away from. She wanted to run away from herself and become someone more exciting. My adult-self discovered that she is grand. She is empathetic to the hardships of the downtrodden. She strives to unite the ideals of the *haves* with the needs of the *have-nots*. She is creative. The characters living within her own mind are her best friends and should not be shamed or ignored. The person who finds inner peace within the pages of a good novel or at her own fingertips is truly at peace. She is as much a part of the fabric of Texas as Dostoevsky was the voice of his Russia.

As my mind continued down this path of self-discovery, I knew I would return to my home someday. Patience. I could not make sense of my sour mood nor did I know the remedy. On many occasions, before going to work, I went to church and laid my head at the altar of a small and empty chapel in the rear of the building. I doubt many people knew that this chapel

existed. I stayed prostrate before Him until He picked me up again. He alone kept me going. Every night, I prayed a simple prayer for clarity in the morning. Every morning, though, I woke up still feeling lost and hopeless.

When praying in the morning, all I could say was, "Help!" I could say no more. God pulled me out of bed and off to work. God saved me by living for me when I had no strength or desire to do anything. Because of God's unyielding love for me, I survived to see the light at the end of a dark tunnel.

God. That is what all this comes down to. I knew my trial of self-discovery was far from over, just as my faith will never cease developing. I looked out my window again and the storm had ceased. The dreary clouds remained, but the worst was past. I was transported again back to the sleepless child, the sad child who looked out the window and saw nothing but the reflection of her own cramped room. She prayed for God to let her fall asleep and never wake up. She stood up and paced the floor, never thinking to open the door and walk outside. She saw her failed life swarm before her eyes. It was as if she glimpsed the 30-year-old woman who missed the true calling for her life. She saw no hope past the reflecting window. She thought the door would remain forever closed. Rather than live like that, she wanted to die.

Instead of death, God sent his Son to console her. Jesus sat down beside her and held her. She looked up at Him, buried her head in His chest and cried. She felt safe in His arms. She felt love in His embrace. The room opened up and her anxiety ceased. She walked out the door and inhaled the peace she craved. She remembered her dreams. She saw a shooting star that night, her very first. She made a wish and wrote two poems, one about the death waiting in the

reflection of her window and the other of the life she saw in the shooting star. She believed again. Her best friend came to her and renewed her faith. He saved her.

While watching the clouds roll away that stormy Sunday morning, I realized I had forgotten my friend. He spoke to me once more, explaining the true nature of my unhappiness. God alone gave me love and compassion for the most desperate of humans. He also filled me with an urgent need to move on, communicating with me, through my unease and growing despondency, that I must stifle Him no longer. It was His talent, His ability. I was merely an instrument. If I did not use the gift He instilled in me, He could not speak. When I sat at my computer to write or go talk to the homeless, God came alive. He is alive. And, I was saved once again. I was alive. It was not about fame and fortune. It was about living—God and me living together as one voice.

I did not go to church that stormy Palm Sunday morning. I had good intentions like I did every week. But like every week, I had an excuse. That day, I did not go because the storm hit, and I enjoyed lazing on the couch on rainy days.

I planned to find a new church because of the blind eye of the one I attended. They preached the Word, but locked themselves behind the safety of self-justification, reaching out only to those with surface problems. Finding a new church was hard. I often got more quality time with God when I wrote or prayed on my own than I did sitting in a building.

I tried to go back to the Catholic Church thinking with my increased education of church doctrine, I would enjoy it more. Yet, it was still so boring, so ritualistic. I did not hate the service itself; I hated the parishioners' reactions to it. I watched the church members. They said the words and went through the motions, but they did not experience God. Even the priest seemed

like he was merely delivering his lines. Young kids were there in their soccer uniforms, ready to head to the game after church. They swayed back and forth as their feet scuffed the ground. Younger children played silent games while sitting in their pews. Moms and dads paid no attention to them as long as they kept silent. Adults checked their watches every few minutes, counting down the seconds to the end. Songs were sung and prayers were recited in one emotionless and monotonous tone. Hungry families and busy people rushed out of the building eager to go to restaurants, to games, or to many other activities which have overridden Holy Sunday. They snuck out after Communion, not even conscientious enough to wait until the service's end.

This stormy Sunday morning confirmed what I believed the day my husband and I moved into our new home. Sitting on the back of the moving truck, working up the strength to unload it, I turned to my husband. "I think we made a mistake. We should have gone back to Texas." I knew at that moment that the easy road is often not very satisfying.

At the time, my husband was growing weary of the business of the music business. We contemplated simply driving on, but instead decided to give Nashville and our lives in Nashville one more chance. Every day for the next month grew worse and worse. With each day I realized that no matter how hard I tried to stop the future, my future chugged along without me. I was an aging child, growing more hopeless with each passing day.

As my complaints increased, my husband shut me up by saying, "You always complain, but you never do anything about it."

His words echoed in my every waking moment. "He's right," I told myself. "If I'm so miserable, I need to do something about it. No one can change my circumstances for me."

“I want to go home,” I told him. “I’m miserable. I’ve been miserable since day one when we moved. It’s only gotten worse. I knew we should have just gone on to Texas.”

After assuring him that this was not like my usual flighty impulses, that I was very serious, he supported my decision. “It’s not like anything is keeping me here,” he said. We both wanted to go home. For some reason, we could never take that leap of faith. At least, not until that stormy Sunday morning.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Jessica

I had a dream. As simple and as happy as the dream made me feel in my sleep, I woke up sad and scared, feeling alone and isolated.

Walking through the airport terminal in Richmond, Virginia, I ran into an old school friend. Grinning with excitement, she ran toward me with arms extended, squeezing me once we were face to face. After catching each other up on our lives and reminiscing about the good ol' days, we walked toward our departing gates.

Standing on a pile of luggage, acting as goofy as ever, was another long-forgotten friend. We ran up to him. "Jason! Jason!" we yelled. "Remember us? What are you doing here?" The three of us embraced.

"Hey, Rachel. Hey, Jess. What's up? Long time no see."

The three of us walked away from the terminal with arms intertwined, abandoning our separate flights for the common goal of ice cream. While we enjoyed our large waffle cones, I noticed a tall thin girl with long blond hair walking past us, looking a bit lost. I turn to Jason and Rachel and asked, "Look at that girl. Isn't that Jennifer . . . oh I can't remember her last name, but look. She looks just like she did in school."

At first they could not place her, but the memory of that quiet girl quickly came back. We tossed the remainder of our cones and bombarded Jennifer with hugs. She returned our welcomed embraces.

The scene changed. We now sat in a large theater with church pews for seats. We were all dressed in medieval costumes. The play began with witches and goblins running around the

room, kidnapping unsuspecting viewers. Rachel, who sat at the end of the pew, was whisked away by a monkey-like goblin. She grabbed my arm in instinctual fright as he carried her away. He reminded me of one of the characters from the *Wizard of Oz*. We laughed, fully aware that this was all part of the act. Thinking they would refrain from taking two people from the same group, I relaxed and enjoyed watching the reactions of those finding themselves held captive in the production. But he did grab me as well. Jason and Jennifer laughed with delight as they watched them carry me to their prison.

All of us captives sat in a waiting area backstage. The monkey-goblin put me down next to Rachel. Although we were sad to be missing the show, we were thrilled to be a part of the performance.

I grabbed a chair and sat next to Rachel just as a man came up to us to explain how our parts fit into the play. He pulled out a pen and paper, took our names, and started asking us questions such as who our father was and our birth date. Rachel gave her answers without so much as a thought. I struggled with mine. I asked the man why he needed this information.

He said, "Because that's how you'll be freed. You'll all be in separate cages on stage and we'll point to you and tell the audience that we'll let you go if they can prove they know you. Then, once your group yells out something like your birth date, the gate will open. Our goblins will pretend to be confused as to why the cage opened. At this time, you take off running to your seat. The goblins will run after you, but, of course, they won't catch you. Your seat is like home base."

"What happens to someone if no one knows any of the answers?"

He laughed and said sarcastically, "Well, then, I guess you're stuck in your cage forever."

Rachel rolled her eyes. "There's nothing difficult here." She patted my knee. "Just answer the questions. Of course someone will get you freed."

I was so scared. I realized at that moment that even those I thought were such good friends never really knew me at all. How could they? I never shared anything about myself with them. How could they if I didn't even know my own father or my own date of birth? I could not exist, and it would never really matter. I am, and have always been, alone.

With this realization, I woke up.

Vicky Jacobson tapped on my door, peeking her head in. "Knock, knock. You awake yet?"

"Yeah. Come on in."

She pulled the same stool the doctor used the day before close to the edge of the bed and sat down. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Fine. By the way, my name's Jessica."

"Jessica? Pretty name. You remember your last name?"

"N-no...j-j-just Jessica."

"Okay, Jessica. That's okay." I could tell she sensed my reluctance, but she abandoned that issue for the time being. "How did you remember your name, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I had a dream."

"A dream? Was it a good dream?"

"I dunno."

"How did you feel during the dream? Were you happy? Scared?"

"Pretty happy, I guess, until the end."

“How about when you woke up? How did you feel when you woke up?”

“Sad, I guess.”

“Do you want to tell me about it? Sometimes dreams reveal something to us, give us answers to questions.”

“Do you believe that?”

“Yes, I think so. I’ve studied dream therapy some, and, although I am by no means an expert, I do believe it works. I think dreams are more than just entertainment while we sleep. Are you a religious person?”

“N-no, not particularly. Why?” What did religion have to do with dreams?

“Well, in the Bible, God used dreams to communicate with the prophets. Some people believe God still uses dreams to communicate with us.”

This sparked something within me, a curiosity of sorts. Could God possibly be talking to me? If so, that meant He had not abandoned me. I told her my dream.

“Did you really know Rachel, Jason, and Jennifer?” she asked.

“In elementary school. Rachel and I were really good friends. Jason was my first boyfriend. Jennifer I didn’t know too well, but I liked her.”

“What do they mean to you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, why were they so special to you?”

“I don’t know.” I paused to consider the question. If God was trying to speak to me, I wanted to hear Him. “I know. Rachel and I were a lot alike. We were tomboys. Played soccer together. She even looked like me some. I remember going to her house once. Her parents were

really nice. We had to do a homework assignment, and her grandma and mom helped. They made us cookies and everything. I never had so much fun with homework.”

“Do you remember what the assignment was?”

“No. But I remember building a scene with lots of trees. We constructed it out of Styrofoam and paint and toothpicks.” I smiled, losing myself in the memory. “That was a good time for me. Really good.”

“What about Jason?”

“We were more like friends than boyfriend and girlfriend, but then again, we were only in elementary school. We never even held hands. I remember watching him ride his skateboard. That was fun. He wasn’t very popular. No one liked him, and I never understood why. I thought he was so cool and so cute. Rachel liked him, though, not because of him, but because of me, you know? She liked him because I liked him.”

“And Jennifer?”

“We never hung out or anything, but she was always so nice to everybody. There was just something sweet and innocent about her. I recognized it even back then. I can’t explain it any better than that. She was just . . . good.”

“So, instead of getting on separate planes and going your separate ways, you all decided that staying together was better than whatever awaited you on the other end of your destination.”

“I guess so.”

“Was it?”

“At first, yeah. I haven’t been that happy since then. It was like being back in that make-believe world again where everything is okay.”

“Make-believe world?”

“They didn’t really know me...”

“It’s okay.” She stopped my train of thought. “We don’t have to talk about anything you don’t want to. We can stop right now if you want.”

“No, I get it now. They never really knew me. So in a way, that life, those friendships never really existed. Those were the only friends I ever truly had, but, if they didn’t know, if I couldn’t tell them, they can’t be real. I’m left alone in a cage.” As my heart sank in despair, my mouth widened with joy, and my eyes lifted with delight. “Until now.”

I noticed the surprise on Vicky’s face as the wheels in her head tried to reconcile the bitter end with my sudden exaltation. “Until now?”

“I’m pregnant. I finally have someone to love and who will love me back. I’m not alone anymore.”

After months, years, of barely uttering a word, my gift birthed new life into a dead tongue. Although I reclaimed my voice, I kept my guard up, still trusting no one with the secrets of my past. God granted me a gift of companionship. My past no longer mattered. Protecting my new love, providing the kind of life for this child that fate deprived me of, became my driving passion.

Vicky informed me of a program in Tennessee for low-income and homeless individuals. TennCare provided the mother and child with aid from the time of conception until the child turned two years old in the hope that the mother would partake in prenatal care and continue with treatment during the formative years after birth.

“Prenatal care is so important to the health of you and your child. I can’t stress that enough.” I was sold. I would do whatever I needed to do to protect my baby.

“Now,” she continued, “we need a place for you to stay while pregnant. You can’t live the way you have been living if you want a healthy baby. Have you heard of the Nashville Mission?”

“I ate there a few times.”

“They have a facility for women and children. We can enroll you in their program. They have transportation that will take you to and from your doctor’s appointments. If there’s a conflict, TennCare offers the same service. Anyway, there’s a social worker there that you will be assigned to as well. They will help you with anything you may need from treatment, education, job placement after the baby is born, to finding your own home. I think you’ll be happy there.”

“Where do I live until they help me find my own place?”

“Oh, if accepted, you’ll live at the women and children’s shelter. Depending on the program you’re accepted into, you can live there anywhere from six months to two years. Because of your present state, I’m willing to bet you’d be on the higher end. Once the baby’s born, they’ll help with parenting classes, home economics classes, daycare, schooling. It is a great program. What do you think?”

“What if they don’t accept me?”

“There are other options, other shelters—but let’s cross that bridge when we get there. Would you like me to make the referral?”

“If that’s the best thing for my baby, yeah.”

She made the referral, and they accepted me. “There’s one catch, though. For TennCare enrollment and shelter enrollment, we need to get you a social security card. Without a last

name, we can't get one. Technically, you shouldn't even be here in the hospital. Are you sure that you don't remember your last name?"

I had used so many last names in my life that I genuinely had absolutely no idea. I decided to open up just a bit more. "I don't know. My parents died when I was a baby and I've pretty much been on my own ever since. I've used a few fake names, but I have no idea what my birth name was or is."

"Do you remember any of the other names you have used?" Vicky asked.

I knew that in order to care for my child as he or she deserved, I needed to trust Vicky with the truth of my past. Then again, I knew that by revealing my true identity, Vicky would be forced to turn me in to the authorities instead of referring me to TennCare and the Nashville Mission. Then, I would lose hope.

I closed my eyes. Alan stood above me, smiling in ecstasy as if relishing in the triumph of my near defeat. So close to love only to have him strip it from me once again. I could not let him win. Never.

I thought of Malcolm and Nicholas and Victor and Jackie. How I hurt them all just to save myself. Now, though, I must save my child. Lying in that hospital bed, with eyes still closed, I took a deep breath and almost gave in to failure. Then, a gift from demons blossomed in the dark recesses of my mind. A social security number flashed into my memory. Without giving much thought to personal protection, Jackie used her social security number as her e-mail access code, the code she once entrusted to me to check e-mail for her while she was away from her computer.

She had no health insurance. "I am young and healthy," she reasoned. "I will get covered when I get a full-time job or turn thirty."

With no health insurance of her own and her social security number accessible to me, I became “Jackie Hollis. That’s my name!” I exclaimed, using every ounce of fake excitement I could muster. “I remember my name!”

“That’s great! But,” Vicky questioned, “I thought you said your first name was Jess?”

“I thought so, too, because that’s what they called me in my dream, but it’s not.”

“Are you sure?” Vicky sounded suspicious. I had to come up with a quick explanation.

“I was lying here trying just to breathe and not think. All of a sudden, this number popped into my head. It just came from out of nowhere. Then, I remembered typing that number into my computer to access my e-mail account. I know it is unwise to use my social as my access code, but I figured I would remember it that way. Since I changed my name so many times, I wanted a way to remember my real identity. Jess is the most recent alias I went by. I guess that’s why I couldn’t remember a last name. Jess didn’t have one.”

My social worker bought my lie, and so did the TennCare facilitators. My application went through, and the Nashville Mission admitted me into their program.

Vicky arranged for my transportation from the Jackson hospital to the women’s and children’s shelter in Nashville. Before arrival, I psyched my nerves to cooperate with the program so that my baby would be born healthy and happy. I wanted my baby to know love from now and forever, never going through the anguish I endured. I vowed to take whatever steps necessary to protect my baby and to offer the best life possible.

The center took over an old abandoned apartment high-rise near downtown Nashville. With no outside markings advertising the function of the facility, donors and coordinators freed residents of oppressive stereotypes. The lobby on the first floor held inconspicuous offices for

the program employees. The second level housed meeting facilities, a large play area and game room, and a small workout facility. On the third floor were a large cafeteria facility and additional office space and meeting rooms. The other seven floors housed the recipients of the program benefits.

Each resident floor contained two types of rooms, those for families and those for single women. A private restroom marked the single real difference in floor plans. Each room contained two twin beds and two dresser sets. Each bed supplied additional makeshift cabinets underneath. One small wall-mounted bookshelf hung above the head of each bed. Some rooms lodged as many as four individuals, one adult and three children. Although not the most ideal situation for larger families, the high demand for treatment in this facility required the tight accommodations. However, they allowed this maximum occupation only if one of the children was young enough to sleep in a crib that the center provided.

Each floor had large restrooms with multiple toilets and showers at the far end of the hall. A single restroom was placed near the elevator at the opposite end. At least one room on each floor was converted to a washroom with one washer and dryer. Each week, each room was assigned a certain day and time to do laundry. If a woman had a job or another obligation, it was her responsibility to work with the others to exchange wash times. We were all expected to do our own laundry.

Those who had not yet found jobs had daily chores to complete at the residence. On a rotating basis, each woman prepared meals, served the meals, cleaned the dishes, mopped the cafeteria floor, or cleaned the restrooms on their floor.

Because I technically did not have a baby yet, the program director put me in a singles room. Predicting my future needs, it was close to the elevator and restrooms.

Because of my pregnancy, the program director waived my work requirement and assigned me to resident chores and weekly doctor checkups until the birth and approval from the doctor. My past poor health made me weak and fragile, causing difficulties in performing even the simplest of tasks. Therefore, the doctor ordered me to lots of bed rest. He permitted moderate work such as sweeping and dusting.

At close to midnight a few months after my arrival, I woke up to use the restroom. While sitting on the toilet, my water broke. A member of the night staff located my doctor and rushed me to the hospital.

On the way there, I thought about my mother. How I longed to have her by my side during this most precious time in my life, to share in her wisdom and tender reflections of my own birth. I thought about my father. How proud he would be of me at this moment. His baby girl was about to have a baby. How I longed for him to hold my hand and run his fingers through my hair as he promised everything would be just fine. I thought about my brother. With a wide grin, he would declare how he planned to spoil his niece or nephew. He would wait by the gift shop ready to purchase the appropriate treasure once he learned of the baby's gender.

I thought about the dreams that would never be. I imagined Nicholas, my husband and new proud father. He would hold our precious daughter in his arms. He would hold her for me to see and say, "This is our little one, Sweetheart. Look at her. She's as beautiful as her mother."

No one would be awaiting me at the hospital except the doctor and his staff. No one would rush to congratulate me or comfort me. My baby, born out of wedlock, would never know her father. She would never know any family except for me. Doubts began to spring in my mind.

Could I give her all the love and care she needs? Could I provide for her the way she deserves?

One thing I knew for certain. I would give it my all.

I gave birth to a healthy baby girl. I never knew such love could ever exist. She came out crying as if she knew the sordid conditions of her beginnings, but as soon as the nurse handed her to me and I held her against my heart, her tears dried and she fell right to sleep.

Chapter Thirty

Andrea

Even as a less-than-confident adolescent, I still hung onto the belief that God intended something greater for me than my present obscurity. I needed to be patient. After six years of marriage and eight years of higher education, my instincts beckoned me to my roots. Without one single plan for after our return to Texas, I trusted fate for the first time in my life, certain that my future depended on going home.

We bought a house in a brand new subdivision across the street from my childhood home. A new traffic light controlled the influx of passing cars at the intersection leading into my little town, their engines singing in the night air with the birds and crickets and frogs. A new restaurant opened next to the corner gas station. Farther down the road, industry capitalized my once quiet area. My home was no longer mine.

I decided to start working out again. I took up street jogging. Every morning I jogged in the old neighborhood, noticing the houses where my friends used to live, wondering whose parents still lived in those houses, wondering whatever became of those friends. Many, I knew, had moved while we were still in school. Many more I heard nothing from since graduation. What would they think of me? The girl who declared she would be rich and famous by age twenty-one? Successful, maybe, but not quite what I boasted. What would they say if they saw me now? What could I say about myself?

The self-pity intensified when I heard that a classmate made it big in Hollywood. He was never my friend in high school, and I wished him no ill will, but I was supposed to be that celebrity everyone envied. Every time people found out where I went to high school, they asked

if I knew the star. “Yeah,” I would sigh. “I knew him, but we never hung out. I doubt he knew me.”

It’s not that I wanted to be an actor. I never even knew him well enough to form an opinion of him one way or another. I’m not sure if I even knew he acted in high school. I wanted to be proud for him, for our community, but all I could think was, “That was supposed to be me. I was supposed to be the one they all talked about.”

My husband and I decided to check out a new Italian restaurant close to the house. At a table in the far corner sat a group of high school kids, enjoying their Saturday night feast. My husband caught me staring at them.

“Think they’re cute?” he teased.

“No. It just takes me back.”

“Ah, the good ol’ days.”

“Back before you find out that life sucks. Back when you still have the whole world ahead of you. You can do anything.”

He laughed. “Someone’s in a bad mood.”

“No, I’m just feeling sorry for myself.”

“You were supposed to be famous by now, weren’t you?”

“Not necessarily famous, just successful.”

“Why don’t you think you’re successful?”

“Because I’m not playing drums for Bon Jovi.” I joked. “I don’t know. Because I don’t feel fulfilled?”

"I don't know if anything will satisfy you. The only time you seem truly happy is when you're in the middle of a book."

"Living vicariously through an imaginary being," I mused.

"Too bad you can't stay there."

"I know. When I'm not writing, I feel so ordinary."

"So you're upset because you found out that you're ordinary." That remark stung. I never wanted to believe I was ordinary, but my life proved my status: I am ordinary. "We're all ordinary. Most of the world is ordinary," my husband reasoned. "I bet even Jon Bon Jovi lives a simple life when he's away from the spotlight."

I knew he was right. While in Nashville, my husband played for several chart topping country artists. As his wife, I got a front row seat inside the belly of the beast. With a few exceptions, most celebrities I met lived very humble, ordinary lives.

I watched as those kids piled into their cars, off to their next adventure. Before getting into our own vehicle, my husband said, "I'm sorry your life isn't what you hoped. I wish I could make things better for you. I hope you don't wish you'd be better off without me."

"No, Honey. Actually, our family is the one thing I am most proud of and . . ." I paused, hiding a hint of a smile.

"It is?"

"Actually, the only thing I'm not proud of is that I haven't lived up to my own expectations."

"What? To be a rock star?" he teased.

"I was supposed to be the best female drummer ever!" I laughed. "No. All I really want is to feel like I have purpose."

“And what does that mean to you?”

“Remember the dream I told you about? About the homeless shelter? I want to pay someone to take my ideas and make them work.”

“But you don’t want to do the work?” he questioned.

“It’s not that. It’s just . . . well . . . first of all, I don’t have a clue where to even begin.”

“Remember what you said back in Nashville, small steps lead to big dreams? Well, start small. Visit some shelters and find out what works and what doesn’t. Ask questions. Treat it like research for a book. Let God lead you. If nothing else, maybe it can become another book.”

His clear voice of reason excited me. My husband had a way of bringing the conversation back to reality, shifting my focus from off the mountain top back down to the first logical step right in front of me. If I never take that first step, the children in my dream will never know Christmas joy. Homeless families will never break the cycle. I believed all this talk stemmed from visions God gave me of my future in my dreams. But without that first step, I accomplished nothing.

“You said first,” he continued, “which sounds like you may have another reason. Well?”

“When am I going to find the time?”

“You no longer have two careers. You are in between books. Why would you not have the time?” he asked.

“Because you are going to be a father.”

Chapter Thirty-One

Jessica

The past fades into a nostalgic memory as it extends a farewell greeting onto future's providential path. For me, such moments flee as quickly as they appear. Inevitably, past circumstances tickle the conscience and prohibit the mind from letting go.

The desire to change is not enough to *cause* change. I imagined that with the birth of my baby, God intended automatic transformations in my circumstances. The opportunities afforded expectant mothers in Tennessee would miraculously erase the tribulations of my plight. Why I assumed so much from an accidental birth that was far from a unique experience I may never understand. I soon learned that life's struggles never cease and the past never relents the haunting.

Nightmares, the stuff of horror films, disturbed my will to reign in childish dreams for the sake of my new baby. Nightmares of that not-so-distant past crept from the depths of the grave like rotting fingers sprouting from the soil, frosted with chilling dew, clawing through upturned earth anxious to terrorize peaceful living.

Nightmares of ghostly pasts threatened to steal my soul should I fall asleep. He awaits you, they warn. Stay awake. Do not fall asleep lest he ignite your fears into consuming death.

In my dream, I saw myself laying sound asleep in my childhood bed. My limp arms stretched wide with palms turned up, awaiting my cross to bear. The unstained crowned head of Jesus emblazoned on my shirt stared at the ceiling. A thin sheet veiled my naked legs.

My dream turned into a nightmare as I watched myself awake after he threw the door open in his giddy rage. His giant stature towered above me. His shadow loomed across the

ceiling, reaching high up the far wall. The dim moonlight reflected the black in his eyes, mimicking his exuberant joy as the corners of his mouth rose to reveal his jagged teeth.

“You whore. Did you really think you’d ever be more than my little whore?” He seemed to grow with each syllable. His voice range quickened into thundering booms. As if in slow motion, his chin rose and his chest lifted. His mouth opened wider, letting escape a monstrous laugh, personal satisfaction loomed in mocking wickedness.

In defeat, my head sagged to my bosom as his dark shadow swallowed me. He defeated my spirit.

Again, I lay sound asleep, arms stretched as wide as before. Only this time, he never entered my room. I was outside of my own body, hovering above my bed, peering at the peaceful child sleeping below me. Her face so innocent, filled with the hopes that all little children should dream, not a care visible in her sweet slumber.

Then my eyes strayed to her t-shirt. I remember that shirt. They bought it for me at a garage sale, not knowing how I would treasure it, wearing it until it hung on my shoulders like a well-used rag. I remembered that face. That same face greeted me when I lost my parents and any time I needed Him after that. But then He stopped coming to me.

This nightmare revealed to the hovering spirit the exact moment her lost friend seemed to leave her. She noticed tears filling the eyes of Jesus. She floated down for a closer inspection, filled with pity and an overwhelming desire to embrace Him. Then, to her horror, she noticed stains of the past, not innocent drops of water, fell from His soiled eyes. She looked into the face of the sleeping child, but the innocence transformed into her uncle’s menacing face. The sight frightened her spirit higher and higher until she hovered well above the bed, soaring into the

darkness of the night sky. She tried to escape the vision, but the vision never escaped her.

The church choir sang praises to the Lord, declaring His unyielding love for each and every one of us. The congregation stood with arms extended and eyes focused on heaven, singing of their adoration to the King. Moved by this show of faith and promise of needed love, I let my innocent emotion carry me to the altar. Kneeling before my God, I bowed in thanksgiving as unashamed tears shimmered down my cheeks. As I, too, lifted my arms and eyes toward heaven, I noticed that the rest of the congregation fell silent. All eyes shifted their focus onto me, kneeling helpless before the Lord.

I caught the eyes of the music leader, hoping for an answer to the silent riddle. He looked at me with bewilderment, not anticipating my silent pleading. “You didn’t actually believe we meant this about you, did you?”

Once he and the rest of the congregation understood that, indeed, I did believe the message of God’s perfect love did include me, they could no longer contain their contagious fit of harmonious laughter.

Nicholas and Malcolm stood facing me, embraced in a brotherly side-hug. With their free hands, they pointed at the unseen me, laughing uncontrollably.

Even my tongue less colleague from the old train depot haunted my sleep. The view was dark. A thick fog shaded any moon or star light. The whistle of an ancient train pricked my ears as its phantom shape raced down the tracks. He glided in front of me; his head turned to face me as he continued his course. His silent message concurred with the rest. A shiver crept down my

spine because his face was a combination of all of them combined. But his eyes. My baby glared at me out of his eyes.

Her image haunted me the most. She returns as a grown woman. The stains of life reflect on her beaten skin. Youth hides behind the veil of eager age spreading through her nimble body. Her eyes tell her life's story, forced to tread on my same path. She looks through me, grasping what remains of my pride-filled heart. With this touch, I feel every single experience of her short life. I feel the decay eating her alive.

"Mother!" She calls out to me. "*You* did this to me, Mother."

She stands. Now I see more than just her slim face. I see her body shrouded in a muddy trench coat. I can even smell the stench of decaying flesh. She opens the coat, revealing her skeletal form, skin clinging to bone. Her small-sagging breasts are leaking. But it is not nourishing milk that oozes from her tiny nipples; it is the stain of my sin, serving as a reminder of my shame.

Her belly button protrudes, growing larger and larger, forming into the shape of a fetus. The ill-formed eye sockets open, gawking at me without expression. The miniscule hand opens palm up, and with the pointer-finger, beckons me closer and closer until my ear rests on what would have become his lips.

"Because of you, you will never know me. My mommy can't feed me. So selfish. So selfish." Those last words linger in the still air as my body slithers to the floor.

I am sitting in a puddle. My hand touches the liquid which is thick and sticky. It is blood. I look back up at my daughter and witness the flow of red gushing from between her legs. As the

river pools, I hear the laughing of the truck drivers of long ago. The sound seems to be coming out from inside of her. Then the voices of all of them laugh all around me, echoing in my ears.

She looks down on me. I look up to her. She says, "Why? It didn't have to be this way."

My unborn grandson's accusations, my daughter's confirmation, and my past's condescension swirl into one continual sound echoing into my haunted slumber, waking me with the bitter truth of my inevitable damnation and determination to do one thing right, for her sake, for her future baby's sake.

But for her to have the life she deserved, I knew without a doubt that her life must begin where mine ended. I must take her home to Texas.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Andrea

How morbid dreams can be. They lash out at the intellect and refuse to be ignored. They have controlled my existence, determining every action and every path that I have ever taken. Dreams will not be disregarded.

They haunt my days and my nights until I acknowledge their truth and give life to their message. A simple dream made me a life-long fan of Bon Jovi. An ordinary dream told me what to study in college, when to move to Nashville, and when to move back to Texas. Vivid dreams created my desire to build a center for homeless families. Colorful dreams told tales of characters unimagined. All I had to do was to give voice to the dreams.

And, a lifelike scene of death awoke the sleeping child and gave her the strength to step out on faith and give life to those dreams.

I dreamt about a one-room shack standing alone in a barren field, weathered with the forgotten signs of age. Memories whispered in the swaying motion of each long weed, covering the once-fertile corn field. I alone sat beside his death bed. Why, when he worked so hard for comfort in his final years, did he insist on returning to his childhood home in the end, filled with memories of death and poverty, the life of a small-town farm boy?

With the exception of curious children and young lovers seeking the solitude and ghosts of history, no one had set foot on this ancient ground in fifty years or more. Not one person returned in over half a century to give this old home love. And it was here that he chose to die.

Once it became known that he would meet his end at any time, the entire family flew from across the country to be with him. My father, the eldest son, loaded up a bed and made the old shack as comfortable for Grandpa as he could. Grandma still insisted on overseeing everything from meeting Grandpa's needs to greeting and feeding all the family and friends gathered, while maintaining her regular activities.

We took turns keeping vigil at the old shack, one family group at a time. Grandma, once fulfilling her deeds as a wife and hostess, came to spend a sleepless night by Grandpa's side. My family gathered here the final night.

"Mom," my dad said, "You need rest. Go home and sleep in your own bed."

"I can't leave," she tiredly protested.

"Mom, you're exhausted. You run around all day, then come here and just watch him. If you keep this up, you won't be much better. Please, go rest. We'll let you know the second anything happens. Andi will take you home."

After much pleading, the tired will of my grandmother relented. After tucking her into bed, I returned to the shack and begged my dad to follow suit.

"Dad, you've done about as much worrying and fussing as Grandma. You should go get some sleep, too. Emily, you too. With the baby, you really should get your rest. I'll stay. I'm used to being up all night anyway. Grandpa and I will be just fine."

Dad and Emily left, and Grandpa died on my watch. The coffin had been laid ready in the bed of my uncle's old pickup truck. Grandpa wanted to be buried on this old farm as soon as he died; no ceremony, no black attire, no mournful service.

"My brother died, and my momma hovered over his casket, crying. The service was so depressing. When I try to remember him, I can't get that image out of my head. When my

momma died, my dad was a broken man. He held onto her hand until they closed the casket. He stayed by her gravesite for days. I can't think of my momma without remembering her lifeless body in that box or how it ruined my father. No way. No funeral for me. I want everyone to remember me how I was *alive*, not what I looked like dead."

That was the speech my grandfather gave to my grandmother throughout their married lives. That was the speech he gave to his children when they started growing older and moving away. That was the speech he gave to the entire family when they gathered for this last farewell, with failing breath but strong conviction.

In honor of his request, my uncle loaded the casket on the bed of the truck and dug the grave next to the grave of his brother, mother, father, sister, and baby brother. The headstone would be placed after his burial. My uncle, too, was in charge of this. No memorial. Not even my grandmother in attendance to watch the headstone erected into place.

The family sitting with Grandpa when he died carried the responsibility of placing him in the casket and contacting the same uncle to meet us at the gravesite. Uncle Eddie held the biggest responsibility because he was the only child still living in town and the one with the equipment to get the tasks done. The entire process would remain a family affair. He wanted as little expense and public concern as possible, the poor boy returning to his roots.

All alone when Grandpa passed, I had no idea what to do other than try to carry out his wishes exactly as instructed. Because of his aged, frail form, I managed to carry him and place him in the casket all by myself. My cell phone, unable to capture a signal so far from town, forced a slight change in procedure. Walking twelve miles into town would not do, either. I had two choices: wait until morning, still a few hours away, or drive the truck into town.

I re-covered the casket with the blue tarp my uncle left to shield the family from the obvious and drove into town. My dad, still unable to sleep, sat on the front porch, swinging in the porch swing, lifting his mind to where Grandpa lay.

He spotted me pulling up to the curb. As he stood to meet me, I could see in his eyes that he knew. "Where is he?" he asked.

"In there," I said, pointing to the back of the truck.

"By yourself?" he asked.

"Yeah."

Nothing more was said. Nothing more needed to be. We climbed into the truck and headed for my uncle's house.

We heard the noise and turned our heads to see. It sounded like snoring. My gut leapt into my throat and fear paralyzed my speech. No. I knew he was dead. No question. None.

We pulled over, and my dad with cautious curiosity, lifted the lid of the casket. Grandpa took a deep breath and smiled. "Good morning, son. Why so glum?"

I panicked. What must my dad be thinking? How could I bury a man alive? But, he wasn't alive. I knew that. I was there when he died. The phantom speaking for my grandfather panicked me. My dad, believing the scene a cruel imagining of grief, simply closed the casket, returned to the passenger side of the truck, and told me to drive. As we continued down the road, Grandpa appeared behind me, sitting on the edge of the seat of the twin cab, clinging to the back of my headrest with his head close to my left ear.

"Oh, what a great day! I feel wonderful. Where are we going?"

“I don’t know. Don’t talk to me. You’re not real.” I had lost the path to my uncle’s house and just continued down the dark, deserted country roads. My dad, concentrating on the road ahead, could not, or would not see or hear my grandpa.

“Sure I am! Don’t you like me better like this than I was an hour ago? I sure do. I feel like a kid again.”

“What do you want from me? I didn’t mean to mess up your plans. I just couldn’t do it by myself. I’m sorry I sent everyone home. How was I supposed to know you’d die on my time?”

Grandpa laughed. “Don’t get so excited. I’m not mad. And I didn’t come to haunt you. I want to thank you. I’d much rather this gets done without your grandmother. You know how she is. She needs rest, and I don’t want her last memory of me being when I actually died. And your father, I didn’t want him there either. I waited for those two to leave.”

“Why Dad?”

“He’s our oldest. We were still having babies when he was in high school, so he had to help take care of the clan. He feels responsible for his brothers and sisters as if he were their father. He shouldn’t have that burden. He feels the need to protect them and his mother when I can’t. I can’t take that burden away, but I can keep him from having the extra burden of my death. He would take it as hard as, or harder than, his mother. I don’t want his last memory of me to be my death, either. I want him to remember riding on the tractor with me, plowing the field or chasing the pigs when they got out of the pens. I want him to remember the times we shared when he was a boy, before he became a man so young. I want him to be assured that his mother will be just fine. I’ll watch over her. He doesn’t have to. He has a life back in Texas and he needs to go back and live it.”

“How is that burden going to be taken away just by not being there when you died?”

“That’s where you come in. That’s why I wanted only you there. That’s why I wanted you to come get your dad and make this trip, just the two of you.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Yes you do. That’s the point. Your grandmother and your father, they could get it, but they’re afraid of it and won’t let it in. They won’t try. The rest of the family can’t get it. They don’t have the gift. You do and you embrace it.”

While talking to Grandpa, my fear of him faded as his conversation intrigued me. “I still don’t understand. What do I get that no one else can or will?”

“Remember how you claim that as a kid, Jesus came to you in the flesh? You swear that He was real the way your dad is real to you right now and not real in the faith sense only? Remember?”

“Of course. To this day, no one can convince me otherwise.”

“He was real to you. He was real to you because you were open to see Him. He could be that real to anyone if only they would allow Him to be.”

“Then how come I can’t see Him like that anymore?”

“Because you don’t allow Him to come to you that way. The same way you were afraid of me just a bit ago, the same way you’d fear Him if He came back to you that way. You needed Him that way then. You don’t need Him that way now. If you needed Jesus to come to you in the flesh, your heart would be open to allow Him to do so.”

“Did I need you? Is that why I can see you now like you’re real? Can Dad hear me talk to you?”

“He’s oblivious. As far as he knows, you are on the path to your uncle’s house. He sees only what he needs to see. His heart shuts out what he doesn’t want to see.

“And, yes, you do need me, and I need you. We need each other. That’s why I came to you, and that’s why you can see and hear me and aren’t afraid.”

“I still don’t quite understand. Why me?”

“I know we never talked a whole lot. You and me, we were both quiet ones. But I could always see something special in you, something you could never see in yourself. I’m sorry I never told you. The mistakes we make when we’re alive . . . Anyway, your heart is so big and so pure. You look like an angel. And I can say that now. I know.” He chuckled. “Seriously, angels don’t have wings and aren’t all beautiful—not to say that you’re not beautiful, but . . . the point is, angels are pure. You look like an angel because your heart is pure, and that shines out.

“You love all people. You want to help all people. You think of this as your curse sometimes. You think that you lack direction because you care about so many different things and have so many different interests. I want to tell you that God gave this to you as a gift.

“I know what your secret dream is, the one that you haven’t told anyone about because you think it’s silly and impossible, the one about the shelter. I know all about it. And let me tell you, that, too, is a gift from God. Who do you think forms your dreams? He showed you what He wants you to do, but you’re still so afraid. You don’t think you’re good enough, you have no idea where to begin, so you don’t even try. And now you’re unhappy because you, too, know this is God’s will, His divine purpose for you. You know He’ll get you there if only you let Him, but you’re afraid. And because of that fear, you feel shame. You let the world dictate what you do and spend your days in misery.

“You think, ‘If only I got a sign. If someone besides me confirmed what I thought, then I’d know it was from God. Then I could step out on faith.’

“I’m here to tell you that it’s okay *and* it’s normal. Do you think Moses blindly took a leap of faith when God called Him? Of course not. He begged and pleaded until God sent Aaron to be his voice. Do you think Mother Teresa just blindly started her walk of faith? What about Billy Graham? Did he blindly leap into his call to ministry? No. No. And no. Each one of them started with the same doubts as you have. Each one of them needed some sort of sign that he or she was indeed hearing God’s call. Each was just as human as you are, just as weak and needy as you are. And, all humans are weak and needy. It’s just those who finally step out in faith who rise above that self-doubt and seem superior. But even now, they are not superior.”

“But they all have discipline. That’s the one thing I know I lack. I always have.”

“There is no difference. They, too, had their barriers, but, like you, they wanted it so badly that it consumed them. Like you, they were willing to do anything to become who they needed to become to walk in faith and do God’s bidding. You share the one quality that matters most, that has made average men great: you want it. You crave it so desperately. You are willing to allow God to put you in a fiery furnace so that He can mold you into what you need to do His work.

“I’m here to tell you that He has heard you. He wants you to know that it’s okay to be scared. You must remember that you’re only human. The big work, He will do. Just remember, you are His instrument. If it were a call you could do all by yourself, then there would be no glory for Him. Trust in Him.”

“Why me? Why did he choose me?”

“Because you want it. You have something to offer those He wants to reach. He chose you because He wants you. That’s all there is to it. The victory comes in choosing the humble, the ones no one expects. He chose you. That is all you need to know.”

“When will I know that it’s time to start?”

“You’ll know. He’ll find a way to tell you.”

“How will I know how to start?”

“You’ll know. He’ll find a way to tell you.”

“Grandpa, can you see heaven right now?”

“Yes.”

“What’s it like?”

“It’s indescribable.”

“Is Jesus there?”

“Right here.”

“Does He remember me?”

“Of course He does.”

“What is He like?”

“You’ll see.”

“Will you ever come back?”

“Not like this, but I’ll always be around. I will never exactly leave any of you.”

“I love you, Grandpa. I wish we could have talked like this when you were still alive.”

“I wish we would have, too. I love you, too. Now, I need something from you.”

“Anything.”

“Tell your father and your grandmother that I was ready to go. I did not want to go with them there. Tell them. Your father will hear you. And your grandmother will hear your father. She listens to him in such matters. Tell your father to go home. Tell him that his mother will be just fine. She will meet me very soon, and he is not to feel guilty. It’s as it should be. He was a

good son and is a wonderful father. Tell him that all is forgiven. I didn't understand then. There is so much I didn't understand, but I do now, and it's okay. He is a good boy. He is a good man. Tell him.

"And make sure he tells your grandmother why I did not want her here when I died. Make sure he tells her that I waited until she left before I died. Don't forget, now."

"I won't. I promise."

"And, Andi? One more thing before I go."

"Yes, Grandpa?"

"It's time."

I woke up. My neck ached from sleeping in this chair beside my grandfather. I looked at him. His breathing was slow and rhythmical. His eyes were closed and a hint of a smile reflected the peaceful expression on his face. His last breath was heavy and deep. Then, it stopped. His soul left his body. He died with me as the sole witness.

My cell phone worked. I called my dad, and, just as in my dream, he could not sleep. He sat on the porch swing in the darkness of the early morning hour thinking of the time, as a young boy, he sat on the tractor with his father, plowing the field in preparation for another season of harvesting. He remembered his father exactly the way his father wanted his eldest boy to remember him.

I did not tell him about Grandpa's passing. I told him I was just checking on him. He said he would return with Grandma at sunrise.

I called my uncle and told him the news. I asked him not to tell my father until after we had buried Grandpa. He assented. He and his three sons, my cousins, met me at the cabin.

Together, we buried Grandpa.

With the morning light, the family began to meet us at the grave.

“Don’t be angry, Dad. This is how he wanted it. He told me that he was ready. He had been ready for a long time, but he would not go with you and Grandma present. He wanted to die alone.”

“He told you this?” my dad asked.

“Yes. He did.”

“Were you there?”

“Yes.”

“But I thought he wanted to die alone.”

“He did. I was asleep.”

I told my dad the rest of what Grandpa told me as it concerned him and my grandma. I left out the fact that the conversation happened in my dream. Both Dad and Grandma took the news well. They knew what was said was what he wanted. They followed his final wish.

I woke up again, a dream within a dream.

“It’s time,” Grandpa told me, giving me the greatest gift any person living or dead could ever give. Even if only in a dream, he gave me the courage and the discipline I needed to finally step out in faith.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Jessica

“‘Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.’ Jesus, teaching the multitude, praised His Father in heaven because the truth is revealed to the little children and yet kept hidden from the wise and the learned. Why? Why would our Lord praise the Father because the truth is hidden to some? And . . . who are the little children?’” the preacher asked.

I set foot once again onto Texas soil on a Sunday. Walking through the border town of Texarkana, tattered and torn though my appearance suggested, I followed behind the late herd into a small Baptist Church.

“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,” the preacher summoned me. I sank into the back pew, clutching my daughter close to my heart. With those words, I released an unburdened sigh. Home. My baby’s new life had begun.

“You,” the preacher proclaimed, pointing directly at me, “you are His little child. You and me, that is who Jesus called His little children. ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and the learned, and revealed them to us, Your little ones.’

“Yes, let all those who have ears to hear, hear the good news today. Turn to the first chapter of Colossians, verse twenty-four through twenty-six. Paul writes to the church at Colosse, ‘Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have

become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness, the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.' Ladies and gentlemen, we, this body, this church, are the saints.

“‘To them,’ to us, ‘God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.’

“Saints, God did not keep hidden His truth to punish. He is not a vengeful God. The God of the New Testament is a loving and faithful God. His truth was kept hidden because of the hardness of the people’s hearts.

“Turn to first John, chapter one, verses five through seven. ‘This is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light; in Him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His Son, purifies us from all sin.’

“The word of God has shown us today that you and I must be like little children, trusting in our faith, in our God, as innocently as a child trusts in his earthly father. Parents, if you are here with your children, turn to them and look at them. If you have children, but they are not here with you today, I ask you to close your eyes and picture them in your mind. Can you see them? What do you feel when you look upon them? What do you think?”

As I looked at my daughter, my Hope, I noticed an elderly woman absorbed in the words the preacher uttered, lost in memories of her own children, grown and far away. I noticed our knees touching and I felt ashamed, unworthy of sharing space with the real children of God, the worthy believers sharing in worship in God’s house.

I was embarrassed knowing that my body odor must be distracting those around me from giving proper attention to worship. I assumed that the woman next to me thought not of her love for her children. Instead, she contemplated me and my smell and felt guilty for losing concentration on His word in the house of God. I was sure that I caused her and others to stumble.

I looked up from our joining knees. Anxious not to disturb the flock further by getting up to leave, I practiced the same forced concentration on the preacher's message that I imagined I caused on my neighbors.

"If you're anything like I am, you love them so much that it hurts. You want to hold them and to protect them. You give them advice from hard lessons you learned in your youth and hope they don't make the same mistakes. You want to equip them the best you can so that they have happy, productive lives. There is nothing you would not do for them. How much more does your Father in heaven love you? He sent His only Son into the world to be a light in the darkness, to guide and to protect you. What does He ask in return? How do we know if we are in Him, in His light?

"First John, chapter two, verse five says, 'If anyone obeys His word, God's love is truly made complete in Him. This is how we know we are in Him: Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did.'

"Even as I speak, I know some of you are thinking, 'Sure, but Pastor Bell, that's impossible. I'm a mere man, or woman, a simple human being. I can't walk as Jesus walked. He's God's Son, for goodness' sake. I'm not perfect like Jesus, so how can I be expected to walk as Jesus did?'

“But remember, Jesus, too, was human. We are not asked to be gods. We are inspired to be children of God. As children of God, we love as He first loved us.

“Some of you here today have never committed your heart to Christ. You feel the void in your soul, that empty space gnawing at your heart. You have searched in vain for something or someone to fill that void, but, until now, nothing has worked. You feel abandoned, lost and alone. You think no one loves you and no one cares.

“You came here today, maybe you walked through those doors this morning and you don’t know why or how you got here. Something just pulled you in.

“You come weary and in need of rest, burdened and in need of care, lost and in need of shelter. I have good news for you. No, I have *great* news. You have been set free today. Jesus Christ will fill that void. He will give you rest, care for you and shelter you. Ladies and gentlemen, He will *love* you. He loves you even now. Yes, *you*. I’m talking to *you*. Right now you are straddling the fence. You want to believe but you think, ‘Surely he’s not talking to me. Christ can’t love me. I’m a sinner. If that preacher only knew, he’d agree that God can’t possibly love and save me.’ I tell you the truth, yes He can and He will.

“He wants to wrap His arms around you, embrace you into the comfort of His light. He’s waiting for you. All you have to do is say the word. Pray this prayer with me: say, ‘Yes, Lord. I believe in you. I want to know you.’ Pray with me right now:

“‘Lord, I come to You, broken and a sinner. Lord, Your word promises that if we just confess our sins, You are faithful and righteous to purify us from all unrighteousness and to cleanse us of our sins. Forgive me, Father, and cleanse me of my sins. Lead me down the path of righteousness. Teach me Your truth, and protect me from the deception of darkness.’”

The sermon and concluding prayer restrained me to my seat. Clutching my child, my heaving body shook with the excitement of forgiveness. My young child, the source of my love and life, slept as if she, too, felt the peace of God's glory.

As the sanctuary cleared, I remained stationed at my seat of healing, afraid of returning to life beyond those church doors. Next to me, the woman remained with eyes focused straight ahead and knee still touching mine.

As if in slow motion but without a prior thought, she turned to face me. She touched my knee with one hand and patted Hope's back with the other.

"I am so glad you came," she said as if talking to an old friend. "She slept so peacefully through the whole service."

I smiled.

"My name is Beth," she said. "Wasn't that a powerful message today?"

"Yes it was," I answered.

We made our way out of the pew, standing face to face in the aisle. Like a child awaiting instructions from a parent, I stood motionless, watching as Beth talked with other congregation members. She squeezed my hand any time she felt me move away.

"Stephen," she called to a young man heading in our direction. "This is . . . I'm sorry, honey, I don't recall your name."

"Uh . . . Jessica. My name's Jessica, and this is Hope."

"Jessica and Hope, this is Stephen. He's such a good boy. He's in the choir."

"Nice to meet you," he said before politely heading out the door. Beth introduced me to many people in this fashion.

“You have to meet Pastor Bell and his wife. They’re such good kids. He just started here a few months ago. A lot of my colleagues left the church when he came because his sermons sometimes last more than an hour. I keep trying to tell them that we’re here to be with God and that you can’t put a time on that, but I gave up.

“You know old people. They just . . . well . . . I won’t get nasty. It’s just that some folks reach a certain age and give up. They’re the same folks who tell me that just because I’m 80-something I shouldn’t be driving and doing the things I do.”

“Well, I say as long as you’re capable, why stop?” I started to feel at ease with this woman.

“Exactly. I have to stay active. I can’t stand to sit around. I always pray that if the day comes when I can’t do things for myself, God will take me out of this world.”

This woman, this burst of energy in a tiny aging form exuberated such spiritual warmth. I thought she was an angel.

She took my hand and led me toward the doors where the pastor and his wife stood greeting people as they left the church. “Adam, Kathy, this is Jessica and her precious child, Hope.”

They both extended their hands to me. “Good to meet you both. We haven’t seen you here before, have we?”

“No. I just came to town, on my way to San Antonio.”

“San Antonio,” Kathy repeated. “What a beautiful city. Is that where you’re from?”

“I was born there, yes, but I haven’t been there in a long time.”

The conversation remained warm yet informal. Kathy asked me to take a walk with her. She wanted to show me something. Turning to Beth for silent advice, she wrapped her arm in mine and walked with us out of the church.

The small church housed a community gymnasium and events center adjacent to the main building. While escorting me, Kathy shared that this tiny church participates in Room in the Inn during the colder months of winter.

“A lot of churches participate in this activity. Once a week, a church takes in a certain number of homeless for the night. We can accommodate about ten or so. We’d like to do more, but we just don’t have the resources. Do you know about Room in the Inn?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve actually participated in some in Nashville. They provided us with supper and breakfast and a bed for the night. But I haven’t done that since I had my baby.”

Keeping her arm interlocked with mine, Beth said, “It’s a wonderful ministry. I help with meal preparations on Wednesday nights. We only have men, though.” Turning to Kathy, she asked, “Why is that?”

“The program keeps men and women separate. I’m not exactly sure why our church has taken in only the men. If I had to guess, I’d say that we have more men willing and able to volunteer to spend the night with them, and, well, men can’t rightly or safely stay with women and vice versa.”

“Makes sense.”

On cue, I nodded my head as a show of understanding.

“Anyway, we also try to give them things they may need, such as soap, toothpaste . . .”

Beth cut off Kathy by adding, “And sometimes even clothes. And not just men’s clothes. We get all kinds of donations.”

Kathy smiled approvingly at Beth. She turned her smile to me and motioned for me to enter the gymnasium ahead of her. “Now, I’m sure we have some clothes that will fit you. Do you want to go see?”

I nodded my head and politely smiled. “I would like that very much. Thank you.”

“Do we still have those baby things that were left from our garage sale?” asked Kathy.

“We can see.”

They escorted me to the utility closet. Boxes and boxes of clothing and other goods fought with athletic equipment for space. Kathy, knowing where to look for things, found the perfect size clothing for Hope and for me.

She handed me a small bag and towel along with the new-found clothes. “If you would like, you can try these on. We even have a shower area if you would like to wash up. I will watch your baby.”

“Okay,” I said, and followed her to the women’s locker room. The small bag she handed me contained hotel sized soap, shampoo, deodorant, toothpaste, a toothbrush, small comb, and a razor.

“Humph,” I thought to myself while massaging the coarse hair on my naked legs. “God knows how long it’s been since I’ve shaved.”

When I came out, Kathy and Beth had bathed and changed Hope and were now playing with her. I could have been offended by their generosity. I could have stoked my ego and shoved their kindness back in their face, but I felt no pride. I stood above Kathy and Beth and my Hope and smiled.

“We’ve got toys for all ages here,” Kathy recalled as she stood up to greet me. “We like all children to have something to entertain them while visiting us. It’s not just the athletes and

older kids who use our facilities. We have a mother's group that works out here. Half the group works out while the other half watches the kids. Then they switch."

Beth added, "We even have a Vietnamese Catholic Youth group that uses the gym on Saturdays. We love our young people."

"Well," I said, responding to the sudden lull in conversation. "Thank you very much for all you have done. I guess . . ."

"A group of us are going out to lunch. It's sort of the ritual after church. It's a good time of fellowship. Why don't you come with us?" Kathy asked.

"I don't . . ."

"Come on. Come with us," Beth pleaded. "The Bells are having lunch with the Senior Adult Bible Study class. That's the old folks' group. It'll be fun."

"But I . . ."

"Don't worry about money, darlin'," Beth insisted as she once again interlocked arms with mine. "I've got you covered. Ever since my Stan went on to glory, I've got nothing and no one to spend my money on."

Kathy laughed. "We call her the surrogate grandmother around here. She just loves the young people, and they love her. At Wednesday night dinner, her table is filled with people less than half her age. And every Sunday, the young ones come find her and sit by her. Like you did."

"Somehow, young people who have never been to our church before find themselves sitting right next to her." She laughed again as she hugged Beth from the side and continued talking to me. "I bet you didn't even realize who you were sitting down by, did you?"

I smiled. "No, not right away."

“I thought not. She’s simply magnetic. Well, if she wants you to go, you better go. You don’t want to hurt her feelings.”

Beth squeezed my hand, smiled, and said, “Naw, I know you don’t want to disappoint an old lady.”

“No, I sure don’t.”

Hope and I joined the pastor, his wife, and all the “old” people from the congregation of Grace Point Baptist Church for lunch.

My nerves shook in trepidation as I got in the front passenger seat of Beth’s 1985 Cadillac. It had been a long time since I last sat comfortably beside a friend, certain of the safety of my destination.

“Welcome,” Pastor Bell said after Beth re-introduced me to him. “I’m glad you could join us today. Any friend of Beth’s is a friend of mine.”

Beth, who held me by the arm as she had back at the church, gave me a loving squeeze. She motioned for me to sit beside her at the table.

Unused to being noticed at all, let alone the center of attention, it startled me to hear Beth dive into a recount of my history as she knew it. “Poor thing. She has no family. She’s been on her own since she was not much older than that little one.”

“What happened to your family?” a gentleman at the table asked.

Ashamed to tell the whole truth, yet scared to lie to a minister and his flock, I decided to speak half the truth. “Well, my parents died when I was two. I didn’t have any real family who could take good care of me. I did live with an uncle for a while until they decided they didn’t really want me. I ran away and have been homeless ever since.”

“They didn’t want you? How do you know they didn’t want you?” another luncheon guest asked.

“Well, they pretty much said so. They said I would never be a part of the family. You see, my mom was black and my dad’s side of the family, who are white, never liked my mom because of that and never liked me because of that.”

With downcast eyes and remorseful faces, they all sympathized with my situation. When the meal arrived, the conversation switched to less heart-wrenching topics, such as sports and politics. With bellies full, eyes and attention shifted away from the table and back onto me.

“Do you know about HOME?” Pastor Bell asked.

Unsure of what he meant, I said, “I had a home when I was little, but . . .”

“No, I’m sorry. I meant have you heard of it? HOME is the name of a shelter in San Antonio. It’s an amazing place. Other shelters all over the country are already starting to model HOME.”

“Mmm,” I grumbled. “I’ve been at shelters before. I don’t . . . They’re . . .”

“Unsuited for human life!” one woman protested. “I’ve worked in many shelters, and I know just what you mean. They may have good programs, but they’re in bad parts of town; they’re overcrowded, dirty, and smelly. No one deserves to have to live like that. I don’t care who you are.”

“But HOME is different,” yet another congregation member interjected.

“It sure is,” Pastor Bell said. “The shelter is relatively new, by certain standards, but it is quite impressive. You see, San Antonio is a big military city. A while back, one of their larger Air Force bases shut down. It sat empty for a long time. The organizations’s founder loved the

idea of having a self-run city within a city and was able to get the entire property relatively cheap.”

Kathy added, “And she raised the money almost entirely through private donors. Very little comes from government or large organizational grants. She didn’t want to be limited by all the restrictions and limitations of bureaucracy. She had a vision and wanted support only from people who would let her create her vision.

“Most of the donors are ordinary citizens, with a few high profile exceptions. Never hurts to have a famous name or two attached to an organization. Just goes to show what God is capable of doing through us if we let Him. Do you know that she came up with millions of dollars to start the project and never submitted a formal grant proposal?”

A business-minded gentleman turned to Kathy. “Kathy, Jessica here may not understand grants. She probably has no idea what you’re talking about.” He turned to me. “Forgive me. I didn’t mean to imply anything. Half the people here probably don’t understand all that legal mumbo jumbo either. I certainly never did until I actually had to do it. I started working for a non-profit when I retired and cut my teeth on a lot of political red tape.

“You see, if an organization, such as a homeless shelter, does not make a profit, they are non-profit or not-for-profit. They have to get funds to run the organization from somewhere else. That money usually comes from the federal, state, and local governments. United Way and other organizations also give.

“To make a long story short, before they will give you the money, they give you stipulations. Don’t get me wrong. Those stipulations are important. They’re supposed to measure the success of the organization. Any good business model should have some sort of written plan in place to measure success and forecast growth. Anyway, if the organization fails to comply

with those stipulations, they may not get the money again the next year. Simply put, this system puts restrictions on the number of people you can help or the length of time during which to help them.”

“Anyway,” Kathy continued, “The founder of HOME did not want to restrict herself by numbers. She wanted to do whatever it took for however long it took to help people. Her idea was to help people do whatever it takes to become self-sufficient and not just cover up the problem with a Band-Aid.”

“But there are a lot of good shelters around. Even before HOME ever existed,” a woman protested.

“Of course there were, and are. I’m not saying that this was something new, it was just on a scale larger than had ever been done before,” Kathy concluded.

Pastor Bell laughed as he said, “To bring us back to the main point of focus, HOME is an amazing place. The people who go there stay as long as they need. They receive education, counseling, drug treatment—absolutely anything they need to be able to get a home of their own.

“Once they ‘graduate’ from the system and are ready to venture out on their own, the shelter monitors and supports them until it is proven that they are successful. Even after that time, they can always come by or call if they need assistance. The doors are never closed to them.

“They are even taught life skills there. That old military base they converted used to have a grocery store, bank, post office, and school. I hear they are working to open them back up and make them completely self-sufficient within the organization. The people staying at the shelter will work at those places to gain employment experience and the kids will go to school there.”

“Sounds like a commune to me,” another man grumbled.

“Remember the story in the Book of Acts about sharing among believers? ‘And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them.’

If we . . .”

The old man cut him off. “Exactly! So why do they insist on building a world separate from everyone else?”

Beth, exacerbated by what she called the ignorance and hard heartedness of aged Christians, took a deep breath before giving this doubter a piece of her mind. “I think you misunderstood what the good pastor was trying to say before you so rudely cut him off! Men take the teachings of Christ and twist them for their own gain. Communism failed in this world because of the faults and sins of men! What that organization has done and continues to do is nothing less than pure Christlike love. They are not communists. They are not hippies. Besides, doesn’t this world make it hard enough on people trying to better themselves without the likes of *you* questioning a good thing? Don’t you think they would have more success long term having the opportunity to grow in a safe environment like they are trying to provide? How would you . . .”

Kathy smiled at Beth and calmed her with the touch of her hand. Pastor Bell turned to me and continued. “They take in families. Each family is given those old military apartments to live in. If someone single comes in, they have a roommate. At first, they don’t pay for anything. As they progress and find jobs, the program sets up budgets with them, and they start paying for rent, utilities, food. They pay what they can according to what they make.

“By the time they move out into society, they know how to budget and manage expenses. The program helps them locate jobs and apartments and helps them move in.”

“That sounds too good to be true,” I said. “They take in families? What do they do for children?”

“They provide educational aid. They help the kids get to the level they need to be academically and offer tutoring. The program believes that a child should be concerned with school first and foremost. They try very hard to make it so the child does not have to worry about survival issues. They want the kids to be kids.

“They have a big Christmas with Santa. All the kids mail letters to Santa, and Santa comes and brings them their gifts, within reason, of course.”

Kathy added, “Andrea, the founder, once said that she heard this child ask his mother why Santa forgot about him. He thought he was a bad boy because he had no presents under the tree Christmas morning. As a matter of fact, he had no tree. This broke her heart. She vowed that every child, from birth to eighteen, would know the same joy of Christmas morning that other children know.”

“But she doesn’t leave out God,” Beth cut in. “They have a church there, too. At different times during the week, ministers from different denominations come in to preach. They don’t require attendance, but it is encouraged, especially during holidays.”

“What about children without parents? Do they ever get any of those?” I asked.

“Certainly. And of all ages,” Pastor Bell answered. “I’m sure some have similar stories to yours. The center helps them the same way. There have also been instances where parents have left children literally on their doorstep, babies and older toddlers. The program would rather help the entire family, but they will never turn away a child. They will do whatever it takes to help that child, often taking them to reputable foster care facilities. Believe it or not, former residents like to adopt these abandoned children. It really is an amazing place. God is good.”

“How is it possible?” I pondered out loud. Even with some high profile donors and advocates, it baffled me how such a vast undertaking could survive and thrive.

A chorus of faithful voices chimed in on cue, “God is good!”

Pastor Bell and the rest of his lunch flock bowed their head in a moment of silence, reflecting on the awesome work of their own Savior, using such a place to show His mercy and love for all His children.

“Come to Me,” I heard a heavenly voice whisper in my ear. “Come to Me all you who are weary and burdened. Come to Me My little children, and I will give you rest.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Jessica

I made my way to San Antonio still certain of the path I needed to clear for the life of my child. The wonderful people from the church in Texarkana generously filled my pockets with cash for groceries and the address of HOME and sent Hope and me on a bus to freedom. Along the way, my mind replayed the scenes of my life.

When asking anyone to recall their earliest memory, most remember nothing clearly until they reach school age, categorizing an event with school holidays or vacation days. Life before formal education is reduced to fragments of erased events like scenes from a vision brought to life only by the retelling of the story by that person's parents.

The vision of the casualty of my family is much the same. I was thrown from the van before it circled like a tornado. Nor could I have seen the fearful faces of my mother, father, and brother all at the same time. But in my memory, I hear their terrified screams. I see the looks in my parent's eyes as they face their end. It is a look of horror for both their own pain and pain for their children. Even in dying, their expressions revealed their love.

I cannot see my brother's eyes. I cannot even imagine them. I only see an innocent body being tossed about like the family's material possessions. I imagine that he felt nothing and anxiously took the hand that greeted him at the gate of heaven. Maybe I can't imagine his eyes because I refuse to imagine his suffering. No child should suffer as I fear he may have suffered.

I see another's eyes. I see my uncle's eyes as he rapes me and tells me it is my fault because of who I am. I see that he believes what he tells me.

It is that look of death again. But this is different. This is directed at me not from a parental love and need to protect, but from repugnance: All because of my father's love for a dark skinned beauty, all because of my desire for the love of family, all because of love.

As I sat on that bus looking out the window watching my life pass by, it occurred to me how sad my life had become. Even with the loss of my parents, I still enjoyed living until he took away my joy. I still had hopes and dreams of my own. I still smiled. Those were the good ol' days. Although no longer a child, I should still be living in the good ol' days, not longing for them.

As these thoughts swirled in my head, I noticed a rainbow in the clear blue sky. Not one drop of rain had touched the ground all day. The sun shone for as far as the eye could see. Yet, this small rainbow glimmered off the rays of the sun, beckoning me to focus on heaven.

Believing that He sent the rainbow just for me, my heart calmed in an instant. He promised always to love me and never to leave me. Just as God used the rainbow as a promise to Noah that He would never again flood the world, He promised me that He would never again flood my life with such dark misery. In that brief moment, under a rainbow the rest of the world was too busy to see, God granted me peace.

"I will never leave you to face your perils alone," He promised. "I am here. I have always been by your side."

"But why couldn't I see You?"

"Because you were not looking for Me."

"But when I looked, I still couldn't find You."

"You were looking in the wrong places."

“Where should I have looked?”

“Inside.”

“But it’s lonely in there.”

“That is why I am there, to keep you from getting lonely.”

“But it hurts too much sometimes.”

“That is why I am there, to heal your pains.”

“But I can’t do this alone anymore.”

“That is why I am here, so you don’t have to.”

“God?”

“Yes.”

“How do I know what I felt when I saw the rainbow is real? That it’s from You?”

“Because I have written it on your heart.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that I love you.”

“But how do I really know there won’t be more crashes, uncles, or Malcolms anymore?”

“You don’t.”

“But what about the promise?”

“The promise is in Me.”

“What does that mean?”

“Trust me.”

“But how? I mean, it gets so hard.”

“Do you love me?”

“Of course.”

“Then trust in me.”

“Okay.”

“And remember that I love you.”

“Okay. Oh, God?”

“Yes?”

“Is my brother all right?”

“He’s fine. He’s here with Me.”

“Did he hurt too much? You know, in the accident?”

“He was asleep. He doesn’t remember a thing.”

“And my parents?”

“They are also with me. They, too, love you.”

“But, why, God? Why am I the only one who survived? Why didn’t you take me, too?”

“Because you have work left to do.”

“What work?”

“Follow Me, and I will lead you.”

“But what I’ve been through, it’s not fair. How is that work?”

“Trust in me.”

“Am I following you now?”

“What is in your heart?”

“I saw a rainbow. I thought You sent it just for me. It made me feel at peace.”

“It was just for you.”

“So, was all that stuff part of the plan? Did I have to go through it? I know you don’t cause evil, but . . . I just don’t get it.”

“Trust in Me. I will take care of you.”

“So how will I know if I stray from your path?”

“Be still and listen. You will know. Remember, you are never alone.”

“I will. Oh, and . . . one more thing.”

“Yes?”

“Thank you, you know, for the rainbow . . . and for loving me so much even though I don’t exactly get it.”

“You’re welcome.”

The bus pulled into the terminal, waking me from my trance. I might not understand why bad things happened to an innocent child. I might never understand how those events served my purpose in life, but one thing is certain: Whether fabricated in the depths of my imagination or lived in the silence of my waking thoughts, God’s words brought a profound sense of peace to my soul. His words breathed strength into my weakening and frail body, encouraging me to take that seemingly impossible next step forward.

Now off the bus, we were one step closer to fulfilling our destiny.

As often happens just after I have an encounter with God, sudden gloom overtook my spirit. “That wasn’t really God talking to me. It’s conversations just like that one that prove I’m crazy. Why would God go out of His way to talk to the likes of me?” These thoughts overshadowed the monumental peace, extinguishing higher motivation with a quick will to fail.

It was in this frame of mind that I stood before the entrance of HOME. Massive gates surrounded miles of populated land. The long-abandoned guard stand welcomed all visitors. The houses, once occupied by proud soldiers, now lodged worthy families eager to stand on their

own two feet. Young, carefree children played in the safety of their own front lawns. It was like entering a forgotten city, unaware of the cruel realities of life beyond its gated border.

Hope, though usually so quiet, began crying as if gripped by terror. Her wailing brought attention to the new strangers in town. A small child, no older than three or four, walked straight toward us, showing no signs of fear. Pulling at my pant leg to ensure that he got my attention, he offered me his cup of juice.

“Your baby hungry,” he said, as a statement of fact and not as a question.

I thanked him for his generosity, but told him to keep his cup. Hope, I told him, could not yet drink out of a cup like he could. He ran off. Ashamed that I had somehow hurt his feelings, I watched him run away, hoping he would turn around again. He did not, but moments later, he returned holding the hand of a woman whom I assumed to be his mother.

“Hello,” she said as she extended her hand to greet me. “Can I help you?”

“Well, I’m looking for someone named Andrea. I was told about this place, but I’m not sure where to go. This place is so big.”

“It sure is,” the stranger mused. “Andrea’s the founder, but I don’t think she’s here too often. See that large building over there?” She pointed to a multilevel building adjacent to what I assumed to be the grocery store in the center of the complex. “Just go right in the front door and go to the first door straight back. That’s the main office. They can help you find what you need there.”

“Thank you,” I said, and started on my way.

“Wait,” the woman beckoned to me. “Here,” she said, handing me a bottle of lukewarm milk. “I remember those days. They cry and cry. Just inconsolable. It used to break my heart,

make me feel so guilty.” She spoke with head down as if the glimmer of guilt still lingered close to her memory. “She’ll be all right . . . and so will you.”

“Thanks,” I said again and turned toward the building. Hope calmed with the first taste of the nipple, the milk nourishing her tiny body.

The sign on the main door read “Welcome Home.” Standing in front of the door, I hugged my child close to my heart.

“Hope, I love you more than life. I wanted you long before I ever knew you.” I lifted my head toward heaven. “Oh, God,” I whispered. “I don’t want to do this. She’s my life.”

I looked at Hope, satisfied from her meal, resting in my arms. My tears ceased for one brief moment, reenergizing my resolve. “I have to do this, for you. This is the only way. If you hate me, I want you to hate me because I spared you my life, not because I selfishly made my life your own. But, if you think of me at all, know how much I loved you. Know how much I still love you. It’s only because I love you that I’m doing this. You are my Hope.”

Wrapped in nothing more than the clothes on her back, I gently laid my baby down near the side of the door, cautious that anyone exiting the building would not hit her. Turning to leave, gazing around me to make sure my sin went unnoticed, I bit my lip, unsuccessfully trying not to lose control.

“God,” I said to myself as I walked away, “I believe this is your will, but if there’s any way, Lord, any way at all, take this burden from me like you did with Abraham. Spare me my child.”

Just as those thoughts flew from my heart, I heard a voice say, “Excuse me, may I help you?”

I turned around. There, standing in the doorway, holding my Hope, was a woman with long dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, wearing a worn-out cap, t-shirt, and jeans. I stood motionless as if staring at a ghost from my past.

The ghost spoke again, "Are you okay? May I help you?"

"I know you," I said. "I've seen you before."

"Oh, yeah? Remember where?"

"You were in Nashville. You were talking to people downtown by the river. You brought food."

"Quite possibly," she answered with a timid smile. "I used to live in Nashville. I had friends who lived by the river."

"It was Easter. You drove a gray truck. You wore the same kind of clothes. I remember because you were alone and you weren't afraid of us. You talked to James. No one talks to James. I remember you."

"My name is Andrea. Would you like to come in?"

"I . . . I expected someone older," I answered. She smiled, and, without responding to my unspoken question, she handed me my Hope.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Andrea

As we entered my office, I made my way to the comfort of my desk. She remained rigid, standing in the doorway clutching her baby close to her chest and something else I did not notice when we met outside.

As soon as I sensed her tension, I rose from my seat and walked back to where she stood, caressing the sleeping child's dirty hair. I kissed the baby's soft forehead.

"She feels warm," I said. "Has she been sick?"

"No, not until today. She's usually so quiet, but today she started crying. A nice lady here gave me this bottle for her. The milk seemed to quiet her some."

"How long has it been since she last ate?"

"Not long. I take care of her however I have to."

"We have a doctor here. I can take her to see him. Would that be okay with you?" The young mother began to cry as I asked this question. "I don't mean to upset you. You can go as well or we don't have to go at all. Whatever you want. What are your names?"

"I'm Jessica, and she's Hope."

"Welcome, Jessica and Hope. Will you please have a seat?"

Jessica sat on the sofa, still shedding tears of desperation. We sat side by side in silence for quite a while. I wanted to ensure she felt comfortable with me before moving on. I did not want to pressure her or push her. She needed time before opening up to me.

"She can't have my life," Jessica finally sighed. "She just can't. I have to protect her from that."

Always cautious of her reaction, I wrapped my arm around her, cradling her as she wept.

“I didn’t want anyone to see me. I just wanted to leave. I want to leave her, but it’s so hard. I don’t want to let her go again, but . . .” Jessica paused. She turned her face toward me, looking at me for an answer as if looking to her own mother. “I heard great things about this place and about you. I heard you will take care of homeless babies. Will you take care of her, please, make sure she gets a good life? Please? And never let her forget how much I love her?”

I smiled, in that instant loving Jessica as my own child. “Of course. But I will not be the one to remind her of your love for her.”

She looked at me with defeated eyes. I chuckled and clarified, “You will. You don’t have to leave. We can help you, too. You and Hope can remain a family. I don’t want to destroy that, and I can see you don’t want to, either.”

“But, I . . . I already have.”

“How? By loving her? By bringing her here? You have already given her your best.”

“But my best isn’t good enough!”

“Says who? You are worthy. You are loved. I don’t know your history, but I do know of at least three, four who love you.”

“Who?”

“Hope. The way she sleeps so peacefully in your arms shows how much she loves you. And me. You’re an angel. I just met you, but I love you.”

“You? Who else?”

“Jesus and God, of course. That makes three, or four, depending on how you look at it, where or who you are spiritually speaking.” I winked, hoping not to offend, but needing to be honest.

Jessica's eyes showed a sadness deeper than when pleading for me to take care of her baby. "How can you be so sure?"

"Well, if God didn't love you, then He wouldn't have sent His Son to die for you. And if Jesus didn't love you, then He wouldn't have accepted His role to die for you. He would have abandoned His cause if He didn't love each one of us.

"All I have to do is look at you and the way you love your child. I can see it, in the way you look at her. God knows you. And you know Him, don't you? You talk to Him, don't you?" We again sat in silence, both lost in our own thoughts and our own contemplations.

"When we believe, all things are possible," Jessica read this quote from an old plaque hanging on my wall.

"My mom gave that to me when I was a kid. I always imagined I was the little girl in the picture and that I was looking up to God. It was my prayer. I'd add, 'If I believe in God, I can do anything because anything is possible through Him.' That was always my motivator. That's what got me here. I used to have a lot of self-doubt and needed a reminder."

Jessica seemed to grow comfortable with me in my little office space, sinking into the sofa with a sleeping child in her arms. "This place is so big. How'd you do it?"

"It didn't start off so big. We just recently moved here. It took many years and many battles. There were times I wanted to give up, but I just couldn't. It wouldn't let me go."

"What wouldn't let you go?"

"It sounds silly, but this whole thing started with a dream I had in college, in Nashville. I dreamt about this center almost as it is today. I'd have the same dream over and over. At times,

when I tried to ignore the dream or something, I would have the dream again. This place, quite literally, exists because of a recurring dream.

“I started doing volunteer work so I could get to know about homelessness some. I guess that’s when you saw me. I guess that was my first real step in trying to discern God’s voice and obeying God’s call. Not as easy as it sounds.

“Anyway, I didn’t grow up wanting to do anything like this, but something stronger than I am pushed me in this direction. I couldn’t stop it. Well, I guess I could have, but then I’d still be haunted by those dreams and the ‘what ifs.’”

“What did you want to do?”

I laughed. “I’m not sure. Growing up, I wanted to be a pilot, astronaut, astronomer, musician. When I got older, I thought about teaching, ministry, you name it, but . . . It bothered me that I had no direction in life. I mean, I had a successful career doing what I loved doing, but something was still missing. Make sense?”

Jessica looked at me quizzically. “So, what did you do before this?” Jessica asked.

“I’m an author. Still doing that. Went to college and became a counselor as well. Still do that some, too. The wretched dream still persisted, though.”

“Do you fund all this yourself?”

“Oh, no. I could never afford that. My husband is in the music business and I am an author. We do well for ourselves, but something on this scale costs more than we could ever imagine. My education and success as a writer, as well as my husband’s success and contacts within the music industry, gave us credibility. We selfishly—or selflessly, however you want to look at it—used our names to raise funds for the center.

“It was much easier than I expected, and things seemed to take off rather suddenly and quickly. I suppose that’s what happens when God is in the driver’s seat! It’s funny, I spent so much time feeling lost and afraid. As soon as I gave in to what God seemed to be calling me to do, it all happened so fast!

“Well, there’s an untapped resource called the human spirit. Big businesses get hit up for support all the time and rightfully get burned out on giving. But people, individuals, want to give. They simply don’t know to whom to give. We did it all, talked to churches, community groups, small businesses, internet advertising, even infomercials like *Feed the Children* used to do. Hit people where it counts—the heart.

“Of course, it wasn’t always easy to sell our vision. We still run into the naysayers, but we refuse to give up. As our reputation grew, so did our funds. This place is still in its infancy, but we’re getting there!”

My brief history lesson halted as Hope awoke, sobbing as if frightened or in pain. The worry her cries caused in Jessica crushed me. Gaining her trust and friendship, I convinced her to walk with me to the shelter clinic.

At the clinic, the doctor informed us that Hope suffered from severe dehydration. Ensuring Jessica that all would be just fine and that she incurred no expense, she allowed the doctor to treat Hope. The treatment consisted of a feeding tube and supervised time in the clinic.

Since Hope would be well taken care of, I suggested Jessica and I take a tour of the grounds. Reluctant as any mother to leave the side of her sick child, she relented after the doctor’s aide, also a homeless resident, promised not to leave Hope’s side until Jessica returned and swore to find Jessica should Hope start to miss her mother.

“Hope’s in good hands,” I assured her. “Glenda has small children of her own. She’ll watch over Hope as if she were her own child.

“God put me in a unique position here. He brought you and me together for a reason. I think you’d really like it here. Everyone has a common belief. We believe we are responsible for each other. Those who have should give to those who do not have. We take no credit for what we do. We give all the credit and glory to God.

“I didn’t want to work this hard. I’m by nature flighty and lazy, but, like I told you, that dream wouldn’t let me go. God wanted this done, and God is getting it done. Just like God wants you here. He wants you and Hope both here.”

“I had a dream about her future. After that dream I just knew I had to give her up.” Jessica told me the gruesome details of her dream. “That dream wouldn’t let me go until I came here. Then, as I turned to leave, I prayed that God would take this burden away from me like he did for Abraham when he was about to sacrifice Isaac.”

“And he did!” I exclaimed. “You don’t have to sacrifice your happiness for Hope. You can both be happy. You see, that is what makes this shelter different from most. We refuse to live by other people’s standards. We know your needs are different from anyone else’s, and there should be no limit to that.

“Whatever you and Hope need to be able to survive out there, we’ll help you. Whatever it takes. All you have to do is let us.

“Glenda, the doctor’s aide, she’s been here almost four years. When she came she was a high school dropout and addicted to drugs. Now, she has an associate’s degree as a nursing assistant. She’ll soon be leaving us to go work at a local hospital.

“Glenda can come to us for anything until she feels like she’s standing on her own two feet. It’s so exciting. You can have that, too. If we see that someone is using our services and putting nothing into it to help themselves, we move them along and refer them elsewhere. We run into a lot of that, too, unfortunately. It’s all up to you. We are here for you.”

Jessica and I took a tour, starting with the clinic which served to meet the minor medical needs of the residents. Doctors and nurses from neighboring hospitals and clinics donated their time to ensure the health of all who take part in HOME’s services. Some residents served as office staff and aides.

“The administration building accommodates many programs and services. Counselors donate time to treat the emotional needs of our residents. Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous groups meet here. The center provides transportation to outpatient rehabilitation centers. For those needing more intense treatment, the center funds their stay at inpatient facilities. Parenting classes, life-skills classes, and money management classes are taught to our adult residents in this building. Literacy classes and GED classes are also offered here for our adult students. Bus transportation is provided to take others to community colleges and technical schools, all of which is funded by the center.

“The center also fully utilizes the former military housing, both homes and apartment buildings. The homes are reserved for and maintained by the residents who are further along in the program. Residents can also find employment as maintenance workers, house/apartment cleaners, and landscapers.

“At first, the individual pays for nothing and is responsible for nothing. Gradually, the individual must pay rent and pay for his or her own groceries and clothing and such. The prices are cheaper here than they are out there.”

I shared with Jessica our dreams for the future: “I envision a small staff of teachers and school officials taking pride in meeting the children’s educational needs by providing them with the same structure and opportunities afforded in traditional school programs, hosting field trips, guest speakers, sports activities, and our own newspaper and yearbook. Staff prepare the older students for college admission.

“I dream of the day when the military general store becomes the HOME general store. We will also have a small bank that is in the store, all staffed by our residents who work as cashiers, stockers, managers, and bank tellers. And, of course, we have our very own church on the property. How that will work still remains to be seen.”

I even told Jessica of our failures: “Unfortunately, not all are success stories, but that is why HOME has no time limits. We believe each person needs a different amount of time to reach the same end goal. Everyone deserves special treatment.

“God told us to love our neighbor as our self. That is the second most important commandment after having no other gods besides the One true God. That is what we believe and that is how we operate. No one can tell us different. And, I believe, as long as we remain true to these two great commands, God will find a way to keep us running.”

“You said earlier that you offer legal help. What do you mean?” Jessica asked.

“We’ve had people come in with warrants for their arrest. They’ve stolen stuff and owed money. They’ve had to file for bankruptcy, owed past child support, fled drug charges. Lawyers also offer what’s called pro bono services for us to help our clients. That means they work for free. Sometimes we’ve paid for legal service. I must say, we never guarantee a verdict. However, we do minister to those who have gone to jail. We will help out once they are released. We just do not get involved with the legal end other than providing a lawyer. I strongly recommend that

no matter how bad the past, you face it. Quit running. You can't move forward while running from the past. Deal with those demons. Confront them. Only then are you really free to move on."

As I spoke these words, I noticed for the first time that Jessica held something in her hand. I had seen this object before when she first stood in the doorway of my office, but I paid no attention to it until now. She held a folding double picture frame.

"Who's that a picture of?" I asked.

She unfolded the frame and lifted it for me to see. Two infants were in the pictures. The left side of the frame shielded one infant in a saggy diaper. The right side showed a well-dressed baby. "These are my parents," she said.

The look in her eyes told a painful story of the life hidden behind those picture frames. "I've carried them with me all my life, wherever I go."

Jessica looked through the pictures into another life. Without hesitation, she told me her story.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Jessica

Andrea enrolled me in the HOME program. The first call she made after hearing my story was to a lawyer she knew well, a family friend. The lawyer took on my case free of charge. The second call she made was to a friend of hers who worked for the San Antonio police department. He contacted the proper authorities and made arrangements for my relocation from San Antonio to Virginia, assuring a discreet and unproblematic transfer.

I should be angry that the jury found me guilty for that man's death. No one sentenced him for what he did which caused me to hurt him. My lawyer pleaded temporary insanity on the grounds that years of verbal and physical abuse corrupted the stable mentality of a fifteen-year-old girl. He used the years that followed as proof of his claim.

The lawyer for the other side tried to convince the jurors of premeditation. The prosecution sought a first-degree murder charge with life in prison. The jurors charged me with second-degree murder. During my sentencing, I received the minimum fifteen year sentence. All in all, I felt lucky.

From the time the judge read the verdict and handed me over to be taken away, Andrea oversaw the care of my baby. Arranged prior to the hearing, a mother at the center, whom I had met and approved of, promised to take care of Hope while I served my time. The center helped to make sure all her needs were met. Andrea brought Hope to see me the first weekend of every month.

Hope spoke her first words and took her first steps while I waited in prison, but I never missed a moment. She called me “Mama” during one visit. Andrea took dozens of pictures and recorded hours of video. She always smiled. And she always knew me.

Five years later, after being paroled, she ran to greet me. I held her in my arms. She kissed my cheek and whispered in my ear, “I love you, Mama. I’m glad you’re coming home.”

Andrea was right. It felt good not having to look over my shoulder anymore, not having to run away from demons. All my life I feared his ghost, even before I found out he had died at my hands. Andrea proved to me that I could not move forward as long as I lived in the past. I confronted him, face to face, and overcame.

Something happened to me in that courtroom. Instead of shrinking in self-pity with the announcement of the verdict, I felt a gigantic weight ascend from off my shoulders. A joy entered my life that I had not known since I was a young child. God released me from the burden of my sin and of my uncle’s sin. He saved me once again.

While in prison, I spent every day in prayer and Bible study. I wanted to learn more about the God who saved me. I wanted to know Him better and how to hold onto the joy He gave me in the courtroom.

As a child, I knew joy without question. It lived in my heart and I asked not where it came from. After my uncle took away my innocence, my joy vanished. I spent the rest of my days searching in vain to recapture my lost happiness, to find the friend whom my uncle disgraced.

Through grace, I found that joy again. And through grace, God led me HOME. Since my return to the center, Hope and I have both been attending school at the new on-site facilities. I work part-time in the new daycare center and lead a weekly women’s Bible study in a small

portable building next to the school used as a temporary chapel. I want to share my joy with others and to teach them how to get this joy for themselves.

Hope and I live in an apartment at HOME. It is small, but more than the two of us have ever had together. I will never admit that life is now easy and simplistic. I still have to work very hard for what I have. But now, I am not working alone.

“God, you told me everything would be okay if I trusted in You. You were right.”

“I made a covenant with you, one I shall never break.”

“I’m scared that I will lose this joy and that I’ll be back where I was.”

“Do not fear. Ask where the good road lies and walk in it. Walk in the light.”

“What is the light?”

“My Son is the way, and the truth, and the life. He is the light. Follow Him and you follow Me. Follow Him and you shall be free.”

“Ask Him not to leave me again.”

“He never left you. In fact, He carried you.”

Jesus came to me in the pain of my parents’ death, shrouded in white, looking to me just as He looks in all the pictures I had ever seen. I did not fear Him. I knew exactly who He was.

“Is that what You really look like?” I had asked Jesus as I lay wounded on the side of the road all those years ago.

“This is what I look like to you, yes,” He answered.

From that moment forward, He became my best friend. He appeared to me as real as any man. I loved Him. Then my disgrace shielded my eyes and my heart from Him. For many years, He was as a stranger to me. But then my eyes were opened, and my heart was set free. He

returned to me. I saw Jesus again, the way I did when I was a child. I forgot that He was real. I lost so much so fast. But He's here again. He's with me right now.

"You look exactly the same," I tell Him.

He holds me once more in His loving and protective embrace and gently whispers in my ear, "That is because you see me through your child eyes."