

# One Step Away

By: T. Renee Albracht

## Author's Note:

Johnny, like most of my characters, introduced himself to me in a dream. While driving down the road one day, listening to the radio and a conversation between Johnny and Sarah in my head, Matthew West's song, *Mended*, came on the radio. Johnny stopped talking and we both just listened. I claimed *Mended* as my song many years ago, and I even used it to conclude my very first sermon -My Personal Testimony – Tuesday January 24, 2017 and again on Sunday April 9, 2017.

Sarah had dozed off in the passenger seat of her aunt Diane's car. Johnny and I were both behind the wheel. "That's my song," we both wept in unison. Uncle Jimmy predicted that Sarah would be Johnny's unwitting key. *Mended* was the song which unlocked door.

~April 3, 2019~

### **Mended**

How many times can one heart break?  
It was never supposed to be this way  
Look in the mirror, but you find someone  
You never thought you'd be

Oh, but I can still recognize  
The one I love in your tear stained eyes  
I know you might not see it now  
So lift your eyes to me

When you see broken beyond repair  
I see healing beyond belief  
When you see too far gone  
I see **one step away** from home  
You see nothing but damaged goods  
I see something good in the making  
I'm not finished yet  
When you see wounded, I see mended

You see your worst mistake  
But I see the price I paid  
There's nothing you could ever do  
To lose what grace has won

So hold on, it's not the end  
This is where love's work begins  
I'm making all things new

And I will make a miracle of you

I see my child, My beloved  
The new creation you're becoming  
You see the scars from when you fell  
But I see the stories they will tell  
You see worthless, but I see priceless  
You see pain, but I see a purpose  
You see unworthy, undeserving  
But I see you through eyes of mercy

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Writer: Matthew West

Main Characters:

Johnny Preston – main character  
Maggie Radcliffe – Johnny's female companion  
Sarah Radcliffe Preston – Johnny's and Maggie's daughter  
Diane Preston Cooper – Johnny's older sister  
Pastor Jimmy Cooper – Diane's husband

Prologue  
Jimmy

I lay listening to the ticking of the clock and watching the dust particles dancing through the air. The way they seemed to gyrate higher and wider as the rays of an early Sunday morning sun crept through the bedroom window filled me with a sense of eerie premonition. My wife lay noiselessly sleeping beside me as my cell phone began to chirp.

"Hello?" I whispered as I shuffled out of bed and down the hall, anxious not to wake Diane.

"Did I wake you, Pastor?" An unfamiliar voice asked. "I'm so sorry. I know it's early."

"That's okay. You didn't wake me."

The man on the other end cleared his throat. "This is Robert. Robert Mahoney?"

"Good morning, Robert. What can I do for you?"

He cleared his throat again. "I know you don't actually know me, but we . . . well, I don't suppose that matters much right now. I know it's early, and again, I apologize, but I live a few houses down from your brother-in-law, Johnny? Yes, well, anyway. I work nights. I was just coming home and saw him passed out in that little grassy median in the middle of the road, you know, the one between his house and that vacant lot they've been clearing out? I wouldn't have seen him 'cos of all the overgrowth had I not had my high beams on, but um, well, Sir, not only is he just layin' there, but um, well, he's also naked."

"Naked?" I gasped a little too loudly.

"Um, yessir. Nothin' but his socks on. Rest of his clothes is strewn between him and his driveway. At least he was able to park his car in the right spot!" Robert cautiously laughed. "What I mean is, at least he's safe . . . for now. Just thought you ought to know, you know, before . . . you know."

"Thank you, Robert, for letting me know. I greatly appreciate it and I will take it from here."

As I turned onto his street, Johnny, Diane's baby brother, stood gathering his clothes as he attempted to stumble across the street. He paused as he heard a car engine approaching. Johnny looked like a deer caught by the headlights when he realized who sat behind the wheel. That moment of recognition is all it took for him to bolt out of the street and into his vehicle.

I followed him for a few blocks as he drove away. I could have caught up with him. We lived in the same neighborhood and I knew every hiding place he knew. After all, I raised five kids of my own – six if I counted Johnny. Some of my boys were hell-bent on distancing themselves from the stigma of being a preacher's kid. Johnny, like my other boys, is a good man – just lost. My only intent was to ensure he got inside the house before he got arrested again. He didn't need that. Not today.

I knew he drove away from me because of the shame he felt. He did not want to confront me. He did not want or need to hear what I had to say. We had had that conversation many times before.

I could have caught up with him, but I also knew he would not go far, not today. Not with his precious baby girl coming over. Not before their big road trip.

Once I was gone, he'd go home. Sarah was the one thing he loved more than anything – more than his own pride or shame. He would not let himself get into trouble today, and if he did, he would never forgive himself this time.

She was his key, I was certain, and all I wanted at that moment was the same thing he wanted – for him to get home and to get himself ready for her arrival. So, I let him outrun me and I went home. At least I could be at ease knowing he was awake and clothed and safe.

Johnny

I woke up in the overgrown, bushy median between my house and the newly cleared lot across the street, naked and hungover. As I roused, I saw Jimmy's shiny maroon Nissan Titan creeping up the street. I immediately knew it was Jimmy, my brother-in-law, my sister's husband, and I knew what he

wanted. I heard his reprimands many times before and could recite his litany by heart – *if you won't get your life straight for yourself, think about your daughter, Sarah.*

Jimmy is a good man, maybe too good, a pastor, kind and gentle. He has his life together, has it all figured out. I know Jimmy loves me if only because he loves Diane, my sister. *Yea, I've heard it all before, but dang-it, Jimmy doesn't know. He just doesn't get it, and I'm in no mood for it – not today.* I staggered naked to my beat-up GMC, my faithful Jimmy. Ironic, I suppose. *Hmph. May not look like much, but at least the ole' thing still runs, and I intend to outrun Jimmy in my Jimmy.*

Although the alcohol erased any memory from the previous night, this all-too-common routine instilled a sense of confidence that I could escape Jimmy's wrath. I always made sure I had a spare set of keys tucked away in the glove box just in case my current set were either not in my pants pocket or ignition. Picking up my clothes as I went, I half jogged, half hopped to my car, attempting to get my pants on before driving off.

Once inside my Jimmy, keys still in the ignition, I sped off, recklessly swerving into each turn until I was certain Jimmy had given up the pursuit. Back in the driveway of my dilapidated rental house, hastily clothed and wreacking of stale beer and smoke, I walked the short steps up to the front door. Taped at eye level was yet another reminder of past-due rent. This time, however, the red notice warned that if I failed to pay by the end of the coming week, I would be evicted. Sighing with bitter resignation, I tore the notice from off the door and crumbled it in my hand. I worked odd jobs, but could barely make ends meet, and I knew, by week's end, I would be living in my car.

No time to worry about that now. My daughter's mother plans to drop her off soon for our big road trip to Tennessee for her first college tour. *Man, hard to believe Sarah is old enough to move so far away all by herself. Then again, that girl . . .* I need to clean out my soon-to-be home on wheels before taking a shower.

The familiar bickering voices of Maggie and Sarah alerted me to their arrival. Even with the shower running and two doors closed between me and them, I made out just enough to gather that my daughter still pleaded to take this trip without me. *She loves me, I know that, but why, I will never understand. Despite all my screw ups, she's still my baby girl. I'm so grateful for that.* Sarah is grown now and wants more independence than her mother will give. Maggie is just trying to protect her, but what she fails to realize is that Sarah is smart, much smarter than either one of us. *She will make something of herself. I'm sure of it. Sarah reminds me of Diane. I'm thankful for that, too.*

I heard Maggie's voice grow closer. She was coming my way. We never married. We were never exactly together, yet we were never exactly not together. I seldom knew what I was going to get from her, but to be fair, she knew even less what to expect from me. I was the problem. She simply reacted to me - the problem. *Still, she's familiar. I like that. And if I'm honest with myself, which I try so hard not to be, I love her.*

She came into the bathroom, complaining about my daughter's independent streak. *Can I believe her? Where did she get that rebellious streak?* I would laugh if I allowed myself to feel anything at all. "She's too young, still only in high school," she complained, "but thinks she's miss independent – oh so grown up." I could hear her taking off her clothes as she complained. I kept silent. She came into the shower and we made love. That was our way. It was familiar. It was comfortable. It felt safe. If I ever allowed myself to feel, I would even admit that it felt good.

Later that evening, the three of us joined my sister and brother-in-law for dinner, a somewhat normal routine. As much as I wanted to cancel and avoid the wordless confrontation, an urgent need propelled me forward. As much as it hurt my pride, I needed to borrow money once again, now that I was out of work once again, if I were to take Sarah on this special road trip.

Diane, my ever-protective big sister, called earlier in the day to convince me to take her brand-new Toyota Prius instead of entrusting a 2,000-mile trip to my classic 1988 GMC Jimmy. I would have

gladly let Sarah go on her own if only to save me this humiliation, but for whatever reason, everyone thought this time together would be good for the both of us. If I had any fight left in me, I would have protested. *It's not that I don't love my daughter or want to spend time with her. I love her more than life itself. But I know what a miserable failure I am, and I can't help but wonder what good being cooped up with me in a car for fifteen hours there and fifteen hours back could possibly be for her.*

To my relief, Jimmy never brought up the morning and even acted as if nothing ever happened between us, but I knew better. I knew it was no mistake or coincidence. It was too early for Jimmy to be heading to church, and although they lived in the same neighborhood, there was no other reason for him to drive past my house on a Sunday morning. He was good like that, careful not to scold me or embarrass me in front of my daughter. I know that the conversation will eventually come again, but not now. Not here. *But make no mistake about it, that man WILL confront me sometime. I better be ready.*

After the meal, I sat back drinking a Diet Cola with my arm around Maggie's shoulder. She leaned back into my chest. We were sitting on the patio deck facing the parking lot. Maggie caught me staring at another woman across the way. The woman was talking and laughing with those she was talking with. Me and this woman met eyes, and we both smiled. Maggie glared at me as she quietly kneaded her elbow into my ribs. She mistook my stare for more than it was. I could not fully explain even if I had any inclination to do so.

She leaned further into me and asked how I knew her and if I was in love with her. I still said nothing, merely a slight nod back and forth. I had never seen that woman before. My ex was breathtakingly beautiful, sexy, everything I thought I should need or want. But that woman, plain and ordinary looking, I couldn't quite explain it, but she seemed genuinely happy, uncomplicated, simple. I wanted that. I wasn't sure what "that" was, and I assumed "that" was not meant for me, but "that" was the longing Maggie mistook for love, for desire. An uncomplicated, simple life. How nice would that be? If only it were possible for the likes of me, I thought to myself.

## On the Road – Rockport, TX to Nashville, TN

“It’s not that I didn’t want to spend time with you,” Sarah apologizes, “but I’m basically an adult now. I just felt like I needed to do this on my own. No offense.”

“None taken.”

“I don’t see why she doesn’t trust me. I mean, come on! I’ve been working for years already *and* I have a near perfect GPA. What’s she think’s going to happen?”

“I think she’s just having trouble letting you go. You’re her only daughter, her only child.”

“You’re the only one who calls me your baby girl.”

“And you always will be. No matter where you go.”

“So, what’s she so afraid of? You’re not worried!”

“Huh!!!” Johnny harrumphed. “We’re both a bit worried – just about different things.”

“Really?” Sarah replied sarcastically. “And what’s that?”

“Your mom’s afraid you’ll turn out like me.”

“And what’s wrong with you?”

Johnny glared at his daughter. She knew better than most why her mother harbored such a fear. She experienced more in her brief seventeen years than any human being should ever have to experience, especially from her father.

Sarah rolled her eyes in response. “Really,” she began, “Nature versus nurture? No offense, Dad, but I have no intention of becoming a drunk! . . . Sorry.”

Johnny remained silent, knowing she meant her words to reassure him and not to hurt him. Even if she had intended to inflict verbal injury, he knew he deserved it. Although always unintentional, his inability to control his addiction caused her a great deal of unnecessary suffering. He never set out to ruin anyone’s life, not even his own. *It’s not exactly something a person wants or chooses, but*

*somewhere along the way, I lost control.* There was no need to say anything. It had all been said before.

Sarah knew. Johnny knew. He took no offense from her words.

"Besides," Sarah continued, "I could just as easily go to school closer to home, live at home, and still make bad decisions."

They drove in silence for a while.

"So, what are you so afraid of?" Sarah asked her father.

"That you'll turn out like me."

"Huh? Thought you said you and mom were worried about different things."

"We are. She's afraid you'll ruin your life by becoming a drunk like your old man. I'm afraid you'll get sidetracked by . . . anything . . . and ruin your life."

Sarah gave Johnny her infamous sideways look of hers, common amongst many teenage girls.

Johnny once had big dreams, too. He was not as smart and driven as Sarah, but he still dreamed of building houses. He wanted to become a contractor, his own creative boss, and not simply a run-of-the-mill day laborer.

#### Johnny's Flashback Memories

Johnny thought back to his childhood, wondering where, exactly, his life got off track. There was nothing he could point to where he could say, *that's why I'm an alcoholic*. As far as he knew, it didn't run in the family. He could point to family members who drank more than average, but none who ruined their lives as a result or who got into trouble with the law. He had a great home life. His parents were both strong, hardworking, loving people. He was ten years younger than his older sister, an accident, but not unwanted or unloved. His mom doted on him. His dad never raised a hand to him or verbally berated him. His sister called him her baby from the day she met him. His parents and sister continued to love him through all his hard times. He felt miserable for consistently letting them down.

He was a popular kid, good at sports, an average student. He simply liked to drink. It started with high school parties and got out of control in college, causing him to fail out and forcing him to go to work.

Nature? Nurture? Johnny had no idea if his drinking was really a disease or simply poor choices and lack of self-control. He had no idea if his beloved baby girl could or would inherit an addiction gene. He did have confidence, however, that witnessing his downward spiral firsthand would be all the armor she would need to keep from falling into the same pattern.

#### Back on the Road – Somewhere On US-59N – Still in Texas

“So, were you going to be a big, tough, manly man like Mike Holmes or a silly, loveable guy like Chip Gaines?” Sarah asked.

“Actually, more like Nicole Curtis.”

Sarah laughed until she cried. “I thought you enjoyed watching Rehab Addict because she’s hot, not because you wanted to be her!”

Johnny loved her laughter and took the time to enjoy it before responding. “I love the idea of restoring old homes. I love that she tries to bring them back to their former glory – not make them into something they were never designed to be.”

“You still can, you know? It’s not like you’re too old or not smart enough. I mean, look what you did to your house!”

More silence. Johnny had no intention of telling her that he got fired from yet another job, that he was about to lose the house as well. He had no intention of telling her how he almost failed her this weekend by drinking away his woes or how her uncle had to “loan” him money yet again just so that he could keep his promise to her this time.

“Was it because of me?” Sarah asked, bringing him back from his self-loathing to the present conversation.

“Was what because of you?”

“Am I the reason you never pursued your dream? Are you afraid I’ll get knocked up and give up on my dreams?”

Johnny grabbed his daughter’s hand. “It was not because of you. You are the only good thing I’ve ever done in my life.” He kissed her fingers. “I may be a f\_\_\_ up, but you saved me. You may not believe that, after all I’ve put you through, but you did. You saved me.”

“Dad,” she scolded Johnny, “Don’t use such foul language!” She pulled her hand away and held out her palm. “You owe me!”

Sarah made a swear jar for one of her elementary school art projects. She brought it home and made her mom put money in it every time she said a bad word. She took it with her to her dad’s house and did the same thing with him. Her ingenuity broke her mother of her bad habits but had not yet fully broken her father.

“You are not a screw up. You simply screwed up,” she corrected.

Johnny guffawed. “Sorry, Baby Girl.”

“So, if it wasn’t me, what was it?”

“It’s a long story.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. More silence. Johnny broke the silence. “I am concerned you will meet someone and lose yourself in him, giving up your dreams for his.”

Sarah lovingly punched him in the arm. “Dad! You’re such a sexist! No man is going to have that kind of control or power over me! Even if I got pregnant, I would keep the baby *AND* still become a doctor. I know it would be harder, but I’ll do it!”

“I have no doubt that you will.”

“Dad, mom took me to see a gynecologist. She wants me to get on the pill.” Johnny took a deep breath and kept his focus straight ahead on the road, avoiding eye contact with her. He felt his palms sweating and his muscles tensing. He could feel her looking at him. “Do you think I should?”

Johnny bit his lower lip and shrugged his shoulders. “Dad?”

He remained silent. This is not a conversation he wanted to have with his daughter. “I know you don’t want to talk about this, but it’s not like I don’t know what sex is.” she paused. “Don’t think I don’t know what you and mom do when she says she’s going to go ‘talk’ to you real quick – like this morning!”

Johnny could feel his face turn red. Sarah continued. “I haven’t had sex yet, though. I may want to wait until I get married – or at least until I get done with school.”

“Really?” Johnny half croaked out, half relieved and half doubtful.

“I mean, I don’t know that I necessarily believe in the ‘no sex until marriage’ stuff churches teach – maybe – I mean . . . well . . . just imagine how many lives would be different if people could control themselves and keep it in their pants!” Johnny felt his face redden again. “No abortions, no sexually transmitted diseases – or at least a significantly lower rate of that stuff – if people waited until they were married. Maybe the church is on to something. I mean, makes perfect sense from a purely scientific point of view. Anyway, if I hadn’t come along, you may have become Nicole Curtis before Nicole Curtis!” Sarah chuckles.

“You’re probably right about a lot of that,” Johnny conceded, “but not about me . . . or you. You’re not the reason I’m a . . . You’re not the reason my life didn’t work out.”

#### Johnny’s Flashback Memories

The moment Johnny found out that Maggie was pregnant, his panic encouraged him to ask, “Is it mine?” Her fury demanded she “drop the bum” and raise the child on her own. Johnny, a flippant and promiscuous vagabond at the young age of twenty-two, craved the maturity of manhood while shying

away from its responsibilities. He assumed any woman willing to carouse with the likes of him adhered to the same shallow standards.

Still, Johnny kept by Maggie's side through the duration of the pregnancy and labor, holding her hand and coaching her through every contraction. Although she permitted his efforts, after Sarah's birth, she sought legal aid to prove paternity and legalized support.

The moment he held Sarah in his arms, Johnny no longer cared about a paternity test. He loved her and knew she belonged to him. Johnny wanted to do right by his new baby girl. He wanted to be a good father. He wanted to be a good husband for Maggie. Even so, Maggie still sought legal proof and protection.

This marked his first attempt to stop drinking. He and Maggie made up and moved in together. Being a parent proved to be even tougher than Johnny imagined, especially after he got fired – again. Overcome with worry about how to support his young family, he walked into a bar and stumbled home, crying and pleading for forgiveness. When he failed to find work, he sought solace in the bottle and then took his self-loathing out on Maggie. She gave him multiple second chances, but after a while, the routine began to wear on her. While he was out, she packed up his belongings, set them in the yard, changed the locks, and booked a room in a hotel for her and Sarah until she was certain he would stop knocking and calling. Johnny found himself living in his truck. That is, until his sister, Diane, found out. She took him in, and she and her parents sent him to a rehab facility.

After his first stint in rehab, Johnny and Maggie made up and resumed their quasi-commitment to family life. He vowed to stay on the straight and narrow, but sobriety waned soon after he left rehab. Once he returned to life as normal, temptation won the battle. His inability to find a job gave him motivation to drink and forget about life for a while. Carrying the weight of responsibility for three became too much for Maggie. They verbally took their hidden pains and frustrations out on one

another. One time, when Sarah was a toddler, he slapped Maggie and shoved her to the ground. She hit her head and Sarah started screaming. A neighbor called the police, and Johnny was arrested.

Child protective services got involved and temporarily removed Sarah from the home. Diane and Jimmy took her in and offered to adopt her, but Maggie refused to give up her daughter because of Johnny's mistakes. In order to get Sarah back, the state required that Maggie and Johnny both attend parenting classes and Johnny was required to return to rehab. Maggie took it one step further by kicking Johnny out for good and filing for an order of protection against him.

That year without his daughter broke his heart. He vowed to get and stay sober, but it proved to be too hard. When the year was up, Maggie agreed to meet with Johnny, although the option of him moving back was never discussed. Neither wanted to take this step, for Sarah's sake as well as for Maggie's sanity. He believed they were both much better off without him directly interfering in their lives.

Over the years, he and Maggie grew closer, but were never again in a committed relationship. He managed to stay sober on his weekends with Sarah, but he could not fully shield her from his antics. There were times he did not get his weekend because he was in jail. They tried to tell her he had to work, but she was smarter than any of them gave her credit. She knew the truth. She never again saw his drunken behavior, but she heard the stories. Little girls pay close attention to adult conversations and unspoken behaviors. For some reason, that little girl still loved her daddy. He felt grateful for that, but he had long since given up on himself.

#### Back on the Road – Crossing the Border into Arkansas

Sarah broke him of his reverie. "If you wanted to avoid this conversation, you could have let me fly like I wanted to – would have been cheaper *and* less uncomfortable for you!"

"And how did you plan on getting around once you got there? You're too young to rent a car and, even if you could, you don't have a license."

“Who needs a license?”

“You do, if you plan to get around once you’re on your own.”

“Dad, people don’t drive as much as they used to. I’ve got ride share options. Plus, community bicycles and scooters – all cheaper than owning and maintaining a car. Even city buses aren’t what they used to be. And one of these days, Texas will catch up to places like New York. We’ll eventually have subways. I bet there will even be trains or subways linking all the major cities – San Antonio, Austin, Houston, Dallas. They’re already working on the bullet train from Houston to Dallas.”

“I’ll stick with my old Jimmy. I don’t trust Lyft or Uber.”

“Drivers have to apply and clear insurance and background checks. Not any creepier than getting in a cab.”

“No thanks!”

Sarah rolled her eyes and laughed. “You’re old.”

After a pause, Sarah switched gears. “Dad, why didn’t you ever go to Uncle Jimmy’s church? I know he and Aunt Diane would love to see you there . . . and mom, too.” Johnny shrugged his shoulders. “You grew up in church, didn’t you?”

“Every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night!”

“Too much?”

Johnny shrugged his shoulders again. “Just not for me, I suppose.”

“When did you stop going?”

“College, I suppose. After I left home.”

“But Aunt Diane kept going?”

“She met Jimmy in college. He, uh, was involved in the church there, invited her to go, and the rest is history.”

“So, she went because of him? Did she give up her dreams for a boy?”

"Nah. I think she would have ended up back in church either way. She just does better having someone else with her. Painfully shy, but very spiritual."

Moment of silence.

"Dad, would you be mad if I went?"

"To church? Why would I be mad if you went to church?"

Sarah shrugged her shoulders. Johnny could tell that she was struggling with formulating an answer. He noticed that she seemed to struggle much more talking about church than she was about talking about sex. He wondered why. What had he and Maggie done to make her more afraid of spirituality than sexuality?

"I've never known you or mom to ever set foot in church. I don't know. People tend to have really strong opinions about Christianity." She attempted to joke. "Never talk religion or politics, right?"

"I could honestly care less about either," Johnny responded. "If *you* want to go, that's up to *you*, no one else . . .unless your aunt and uncle have been pressuring you?"

"Oh no! They never even realized I was there the first few times." She paused. "I've been going for a while now. I go on Saturday nights. I haven't even told mom . . . but I think that may be why she's worried about me . . .thinks I'm going out, getting drunk or having sex."

"Why haven't you told her the truth?"

Sarah shrugged, ignored the question. "It's a younger crowd on Saturdays. Really cool music."

She paused again. "I think you'd like it."

"How long have you been going?"

"A few months."

"Your aunt and uncle never said anything to me."

"I begged them not to. They said you wouldn't care, but . . ."

"They were right."

“Are you mad?”

“At you or at them?”

“Either? Both?”

“Neither. What made you want to go in the first place?”

“I don’t know. I’ve just been feeling like something’s missing lately. I mean, I’m about to graduate and become an actual adult! I’m excited and I do have these really big dreams, but still . . . I don’t know. Maybe I’m just scared, but I’ve just been feeling . . . well . . . like I’m missing something . . . there’s got to be more. Right? Stupid, huh?”

“No. Not at all.” Johnny knew what she was feeling, but unlike his daughter, he stopped looking for a resolution a long time ago. He had tried and failed time and again. It was too late for him, but he would never get in the way of his daughter’s search for meaning and answers. “Have you found what you’re looking for?”

Sarah shrugged her shoulders. Because she kept her gaze from him, knowing that he could not divert his attention from the road for long, Johnny failed to notice the slight rise of her lip and glimmer in her eyes.

#### Johnny’s Flashback Memories

Johnny spent countless Sundays sitting in the pew of a church, wedged between the watchful eye of his mother and constant back handed knee slaps of his father. No matter how hard he tried to mimic the “good boy” behavior expected of him, his inability to focus and sit still proved a constant aggravation for his parents and a consistent cause of Sunday afternoon reprimands to his room. By the time Johnny turned thirteen, he equated church with failure and punishment.

Logic convinced him one had nothing to do with the other, but before the age of socially acceptable psychiatric diagnoses and treatment for his behavior, he internalized his school and spiritual failures as a blemish on his natural ability and worth.

## On the Road – I-30E Near Little Rock, Arkansas

Sarah broke Johnny's brief jaunt down his religious upbringing memory lane. "Why isn't your name on my birth certificate?"

Johnny shrugged his shoulders.

"We've got a long drive, Dad. We can drive in silence or we can talk."

Johnny smiled, but still said nothing. Sarah asked again. "I'm not going to let this go. Mom may like the strong, silent type, but I'm not going to let you get away with 'it's complicated'!"

"She wouldn't let me get away with that, either."

"So?"

"So much like you're mother."

"Is that a good thing?"

"It's a great thing. That's what's going to make you a success. That's why you *are* a success."

"So?"

"Why is this so important to you?" Johnny paused briefly as a thought occurred to him. "How did you even know that my name was not on your birth certificate?"

"I looked. I know where mom keeps it."

"So, why is it so important to you?"

"If I answer your question, will you answer mine?"

"Maybe."

"Ugh!" Sarah protested. "Fine! If you must know, I've been thinking of something for a long time. Once I started applying for college, I decided I wanted to do this now instead of later, have all my documentation say the same thing."

"And what's that?"

"I want to legally change my name to Preston."

“Why?” Johnny asked, bewildered. “What brought that on?”

“Like I said, the college applications. I want my college diploma to say Preston. I thought it would be easier to make the change now so that all my school records say the same thing. Anyway, I found my birth certificate and under father, it says unknown. Is there something I should know?”

“Like what?”

“Like are you my real father?”

“Of course I am!”

“Then why isn’t your name listed?”

“It’s complicated.”

Sarah rolled her eyes, looking so much like her mother. “What’s so complicated about it? If you’re name had been on there, I would have already had your name.”

“Not necessarily.”

“Well, it should have been.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“That’s your answer for everything. Anyway, it’s what I want – it’s how it should have always been. Okay?”

“Have you asked your mom what she thinks?”

Sarah sighed. “No. I’m asking you.”

“You should ask her.”

“I will, but right now, I’m asking you.”

Johnny looked at her and gave her a sly, sideways smile. He said, “You can do and be whatever or whoever you want, and I’d be darn proud to give you my name.”

“Then, can we do it now?”

“Right now?”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m driving.”

“Ha! Ha! You know what I mean.”

“Ask your mother.”

“Oh, God!”

“And don’t use God’s name as a cuss word.”

Sara rolled her eyes again and smiled. “So?”

“So, what? I said I’m okay with you changing your name.”

“You know what I mean, Dad. I answered your question so now you have to answer mine.”

“I said ‘maybe’.”

“Dad! We’ve got a long way to go. You’re stuck with me in this car for a long, long time. I’m not letting this go.”

Sarah had always acted more grown up than her years and Johnny had always respected her as more grown up, but he had never talked quite so candidly before. Johnny took a deep breath and told her the truth about her conception and birth. “You two were always better off without me.”

“Do you love her?”

“Always have.”

“Then why did you never get married?”

“Like I said, I did enough damage. You were both better off without me.”

“Then why are you two still together?”

“We’re not together.”

“Deny it all you want, but yes you are. Neither one of you have had a serious relationship with anyone else. Ya’ll still do it.”

“We still do what, exactly?”

"IT . . . the reason I was conceived." Her irritation with her father was growing by the second.

"Have you ever asked your mother these questions?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You're stalling. I'm asking you, that's why."

Johnny finished the story – about the fight, CPS, the order of protection. He left nothing to the imagination.

"So why don't you get married now? It's not too late for that either. Dad, you're not even forty yet."

"I will be next year."

"And what a way to celebrate turning forty – a new job and a new bride!"

"Baby Girl, I know you don't like it when I cuss, but I am a f\_\_\_\_ up. Really and truly. It's too late for me."

"DAD!"

Johnny took another deep breath before telling Sarah the truth about how he spent the past forty-eight hours. "I almost messed up again. Had those high beams not woken me up, I would probably be sitting in jail right now. It's too late for me. I am so proud of you. You've learned from our mistakes – mine and your mom's. You take after your aunt Diane more than you take after your f\_\_\_\_\_ up parents. I'm so grateful for that."

"That's two," Sarah monotonously said, referring to Johnny's use of bad words and swear jar IOUs. They drove on for miles and miles in silence, each lost to their own thoughts. Johnny assumed that Sarah had finally realized the truth about her father's nature and wondered if she regretted going on this road trip with him or at the very least pushing him for answers.

Sarah allowed the silence between them to resume, fully cognizant that her own fears and questions about herself and her future seeped closer to the surface the closer she came to high school graduation. The closer life carried her toward the edge of decision - taking concrete steps toward making her boasts a reality - the more she wondered if she truly had what it took to be a success or if she was nothing more than an idle dreamer.

Back in the Prius after a stop for gas and snacks, Sarah broke the silence. "What if I stay close to home for a year or two? Go to a community college before transferring to a four-year school?"

"No!" Johnny adamantly responded, surprising them both with the quick conviction in his voice. Leary of her suggestion, unaware of her secret fears, he continued, "You are not going to back out now. You live your life. Don't feel like you have to take care of me or your mom."

"But it may be more practical for me," she insisted.

"How? You are not responsible for me or your mom. You hear? You worked too hard for this. Don't give up your dreams because I can't get my life straight. I told you, it's too late for me."

"No, it's not, Dad . . . but it's not that," she demurely whispered.

"Then what? Money? That is not you're worry, either. You earned this. You deserve this. We'll make it work. We'll find a way. I promise you that. I am not your problem, Baby Girl."

"It's not that, Dad," she repeated with more force and determination, "I know I can get scholarships, maybe a full ride. I'm not worried about you or mom. But . . . "

"But what?"

"Dad? I'm scared. I talk a good game, but what if I fail?"

"You won't."

"But what if I do? What if I get there and it's too hard or I'm too lonely, or . . . ?"

"Then you come home. But, Sarah, you will never forgive yourself if you don't try. You've always been so driven. You *are* going to do great things. There are good schools closer to home. You don't have

to go out of state. Just promise me that you will never let fear keep you from anything. If you decide to go to UT or Baylor instead of Vanderbilt, let it be for the right reasons. Okay?"

"Okay."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"And I promise to love you always, no matter what. I always have. You don't have to become a doctor for me to love you. You just have to be you."

"Okay, Dad. Will you promise me something?"

"What's that?"

"Stop drinking for good this time. Work on your own dreams. Maybe losing another crappy job is God's way of telling you that you're better than that, that you can be like Nicole Curtis – only better. You can be John Preston – Rehab Addict."

"How about just John Preston – Addict?" Johnny tries to joke.

"That's not funny, Dad. I made a promise to you. You promise me."

"No." Johnny says, deflated.

"Why not?"

"I've tried, Baby Girl, more times than you know. I just can't. I'm not strong like you. I'm a broken mess." Johnny paused. "I'll be okay, though. Don't you worry about me." He patted her knee. "I'll be just fine."

"Dad?" Johnny glanced at her. "Just try? One more time? For me? Maybe the zillionth time is the charm." She gave him her preciously charming smile.

"You are the only charm I need," he answered.

"Maybe Uncle Jimmy could help?"

Johnny sighed and smiled. He would do anything for his daughter, and he loved her innocent and naïve belief in him, but he knew he was hopeless, a lost cause. Still, he could not bear to break her heart again. "Okay. For you, I'll try."

Once again, the duo sat in silence, both lost in their own wayward thoughts. Disheartened by the bold-faced lie he told his daughter, Johnny turned on the radio in hopes of distracting his growing self-resentment. The Naked Eyes song, *Always Something There to Remind Me* grabbed his attention and pulled him back into another far-gone memory. Johnny tapped his fingers to the beat on the steering wheel. During the chorus, he sang out loud to Sarah, "How can I forget you, girl, when there is always something there to remind me? Always something there to remind me. I was born to love her, and I will never be free. You'll always be a part of me."

Johnny and Sarah sang in unison, "oh woe-woe!"

After this much-needed hearty laugh, Sarah asked, "What's with you and eighties music anyway?"

"Sure beats the music that's popular today! Sorry, Baby Girl, but Disney absolutely ruined music!"

"I thought video killed the radio star!" Once again, father and daughter enjoyed some light-hearted laughter. "Seriously, though, you would have been a teenager in the 90's, not the 80's. You should be nostalgic for Nirvana or Green Day or something – grunge, not hair bands."

Johnny rolled his eyes. "No comparison. It's about the lyric, the way a song makes you feel. Those bands have nothing on U2 or Aerosmith. They don't even come close."

#### Johnny's Flashback Memories

Johnny and his older sister, Diane, had always been close. She had posters of Bon Jovi, Journey, Europe, and other lyrically driven ballad bands plastered on her bedroom walls. Johnny spent hours sitting with Diane in her room, listening to music, and singing along with the help of the printed lyrics

hidden within cassette tape inserts. She taught him the importance of a song – the window to the soul. She wrote her own poems and said Elton John, Billy Joel, and Journey were her favorites. Their music inspired her to write. She felt something when she listened to their music. She detested the “soullessness” of the more popular boy bands. She taught Johnny to appreciate music for more than the blithering noise on the radio. She taught him to appreciate the genuine musician over those flash in the pans seeking nothing more than fame and fortune.

When Diane left home, she gave Johnny most of her cassette tape collection and made him swear on a Bible to never listen to the same “garbage” as his peers. He promised and kept that promise.

When she met Jimmy, they often took him on dates to the movies and an occasional concert. Even though a devout Christian even back then, Jimmy appreciated good secular music. Johnny respected him for that. Johnny idolized his sister, and her music became his own. Even now, her music offered a window to happier times. Eighties ballads became synonymous with pure and unconditional love.

#### On the Road – Crossing the Bridge into Memphis, Tennessee

Sarah fiddled with the radio dial, searching for a clear station. After finding nothing, she asked if Johnny minded if she played music on her phone.

“Whatever you want, Baby Girl.”

“It’s my K-love app.”

Johnny smiled at her slyly. “Love songs? Sure you want to listen to that with your old man?”

“It’s a Christian radio station. Is that okay?”

“Whatever you want.”

As she set up the in-car device, she explained to her dad how she came to listen to Christian music. “I took their 30-day challenge. That’s what gave me the idea of going to church.”

“What’s a 30-day challenge?”

“They challenge you to listen to their station for 30 days.”

“And?” Johnny laughed, “Sounds like a pretty inventive marketing gimmick. What do you get in return?”

Sarah shrugged her shoulders. Johnny could tell he was on the verge of stepping over the line and hurting her feelings. He softened his tone. “So, you like the music? That’s what you listen to now?”

“Not all, but mostly. I almost can’t stand the stuff I used to listen to. Ever pay attention to song lyrics? I had no idea how sexual so much of it is. Sing along to a good beat, oblivious to the words. Sex, cheating, getting wasted! And they make it sound okay – two people fall in love after cheating on the ones they were with or having a drunken one-night stand – it’s not okay. That’s not love. That’s not romantic. So depressing. No wonder people are the way they are. Almost makes me angry.”

“You think music is to blame for the way people act?”

“No, I . . . not really, but goodness gracious, it doesn’t help! I didn’t think there was anything wrong with it until I quit listening to it and then heard it again with fresh ears. It’s not all garbage, just a good deal of it. I do still listen to some of it, but then change the channel when something comes on that disgusts me. Songs I used to love now make me sick!”

“Such as?”

“Remember Restless Heart? I used to love them – still do, musically speaking. But that song, *Why Does It Have to Be?* That song sounds so sweet and romantic, but it’s about cheating. That’s not right!”

It tickled Johnny how agitated the topic made her. “Makes sense. So, how did you stumble upon K-love?”

“By accident. Have you ever noticed that all the radio stations have commercials at the same time? I never noticed that before I started listening to K-love. They are donor supported so they don’t have all these commercials. One day, mom was driving me to school. Started scanning the stations and

this one was actually playing a song. It was pretty cool. Not what I would have expected from a Christian station. I didn't even realize it was a Christian station at first. Could have been Katy Perry or something."

"What did you actually expect Christian music would sound like?"

"I don't know . . . like church music . . . organs and big choirs or . . . or like that Gregorian chant stuff. I never imagined it could be cool or relevant!"

"I like that Gregorian chant stuff. Relaxing!" Johnny laughed.

"Like you knew any better!"

"As a matter of fact, I do! Unlike you, I grew up in church, remember? I was even in the children's choir!"

"No way!"

"Granted, it wasn't exactly what I would call hip. But your aunt and uncle got very involved in a club in college called CMS – the Christian music society. They volunteered at Christian music festivals, mostly worked merchandise stands. That's how your Aunt Diane got into it. She tried to educate me like she did with her 80s favorites, but by then, I was no longer her impressionable baby brother. Not interested in her God music."

"So, you really don't mind, then?"

"Not at all. What did your mom say about the music? Did she like it?"

The app came on, but Sarah kept the volume down as they talked. "She didn't even notice. You know how she is in the morning. I had to be early for something. After I listened to that first song, I just left it. Someone called in talking about taking the 30-day challenge and how it changed his life. Wasn't convinced that it would change my life, but I looked them up online and decided to take the challenge. What the heck? I grew to really like it."

"Well then," Johnny said, "let's hear it."

Sarah turned up the radio and they listened in silence for a while. A Francesca Battistelli song, *Giants Fall*, began to play. Johnny paid little attention to the music until he heard a line which bewildered him.

“Budweiser giants fall? What?” Johnny questioned.

“What?” Sarah, enthralled by the song and singing along, was confused by her father’s sudden outburst.

“That line. She said, ‘and watch Budweiser giants fall’!”

Sarah burst out laughing. “No! It’s ‘but watch the giants fall’! Why in the world would it be ‘Budweiser giants fall’? That makes absolutely no sense!”

“Well, sure it does. I admit I wasn’t paying attention to the rest of the lyrics but think of it from a drunk’s point of view. A Christian song talking about the Budweiser giants falling.”

“So, who would the Budweiser giants be? The beer company or the alcoholic?”

“Both, maybe? Like dominoes. If the drunk is able to quit drinking, his alcohol ‘god’ falls. His alcohol ‘god’ falls, he stops spending money on beer, the giant beer company falls. See? Makes perfect sense!”

#### Johnny’s Flashback Memories

Johnny’s drinking days began back in high school. The freedom of a driver’s license combined with the frequent weekend-long campouts on his buddy’s hunting land provided fertile ground for teenage drunken sexual exploration. He reminisced about those carefree days often, dancing around a bonfire singing re-written songs at the top of their combined voices.

All these years later, he could never listen to any of those old songs without hearing his friend’s voices singing their inappropriate lyrics. Rarely could he even remember the original lyrics. So many great songs “ruined” by their silliness.

Johnny's memories rarely ended there. He always reminded himself of where these innocent moments ended up taking him – sneaking warm bottles of Boone's Farm and six packs of cheap beer hidden in the back of his filthy closet, sneaking a cold one from the refrigerator every now and again while his parents were out of the house.

Once he turned eighteen and moved out of the house, he no longer had to hide his addiction, keeping his own refrigerator stocked and making pitstops at a bar on his way home from work. He started out as a manageable drunk for so long, hiding what he had become from his family and from himself, convincing himself that he was no different than any other young working stiff. He even managed to explain away his early arrests. All his problems were the fault of others.

That all began to change when Diane brought Jimmy and Jimmy brought tough love into his life. At first, he blamed Jimmy and his overbearing God, but then Maggie came along and started pressuring him even more. But it wasn't until the birth of his beloved baby girl, Sarah, that he started to see himself for the louse he now knew himself to be. Now he could clearly see that they were all right about him, but they were wrong to love him and believe that he could change. He knew, even if they still held onto false hope, that he was hopeless and helpless. He knew their love was wasted on him.

#### On the Road – Back on the Road After Stopping to Tour Graceland

"Dad, I've been thinking. Why don't you invite your landlord over, let him see all the improvements you've made to the house? It's so much nicer than the dump it used to be when you first moved in. You've probably increased the value by at least half. There's still more you're working on and more you could do. Work out a deal to trade the work for past rent and maybe agree to more changes in exchange for future rent or at least reduced rent. You know, sweat equity? And if all else fails, threaten to sue him back for reimbursements for costs for all you've done!"

"I don't think it works like that, Baby Girl. It's not that easy."

"It could be. You never know until you try. Worst that could happen is that he says no."

They are silent once again.

"I've noticed a lot of these songs are about fear. You notice that?" Johnny asked. "You should make one of them your theme song, your anthem when you start to think you can't do it."

They were silent once again. Sarah started nodding off. A song came on that captured Johnny's attention. "Who sings this?" he asked his daughter.

Sarah sat up and listened. "Sounds like Matthew West."

"Are you able to replay a song on that app?"

Sarah did something with her phone, and the song started over again.

"I'm looking at a masterpiece.  
I'm staring at a work of art  
I'm listening to a symphony  
In every beat of your tiny heart  
You used to be a choice to make  
But now I think you've chosen me  
'Cause I see ten fingers, ten toes  
Two eyes and I know this is meant to be."

"What's the name of that song?" Johnny asked.

Sarah glanced down at her phone. "It's called 'Unplanned'. It was the title track for a movie that was out by the same name. Wanna guess what it was about?"

Johnny put his hand on Sarah's shoulder and gave it a gentle squeeze. "You are my unplanned masterpiece."

#### Johnny's Flashback Memories

Johnny recalled the day Maggie told him about the pregnancy. They discussed options, even abortion. Neither one of them wanted a baby. Maggie never intended on being anyone's mother and Johnny knew he was not cut out to be anyone's father. By this point in his life, he knew he was the screwup everyone believed him to be. He knew there was nothing he could offer a child. In the end, neither one of them could bring themselves to follow through with an abortion. They both knew others who had gone through with abortions and they knew the guilt that haunted those women. They both

claimed to be pro-choice, but for them, it still felt wrong. They both knew, even at the earliest stages, it would still be no better than out-right murder. They thought, instead, about adoption.

However, as the baby grew inside of her, Maggie grew more maternal. The thought of bonding with this child then letting it go and never seeing it again became more than she could bear. Believing Johnny would never agree with her plan, she vowed to raise the baby on her own. To her surprise, Johnny never left her side. Little did she know that he stayed, not so much out of love for either one or out of a sense of responsibility, but because he had no better plan, no idea what else to do. He stayed because he felt helpless and hopeless to move on.

The day came for Maggie to give birth. Johnny stayed by Maggie's side. The doctor walked Johnny through the process of cutting the umbilical cord. The nurse gently placed his baby girl into his arms for the very first time. Sarah stopped crying the moment he held her. Her tiny little hand grasped one of his fingers and he gasped. He had never known a love like that before and he knew he never would again. He also knew he could never be the father she needed, but he would give his life trying.

#### On the Road – Less than 30 Miles Outside of Nashville

Another Matthew West song began to play. Sarah slept with her head grazing his Johnny's shoulder. The song is ***Mended***. Johnny struggled to hold back the tears, thankful that Sarah was asleep and oblivious. As he fought to hold back the tears, he felt himself holding his breath as well, afraid that if he breathed, he would lose control. He pulled over at the next exit, rousing Sarah. Without looking at her, he told her that he needed to use the restroom. In the restroom, he finally breathed in and exhaled a storm of tears.

That night at the hotel, he sprang for separate rooms for him and his daughter, justifying the splurge by teasing that he was sure that she had enough of being cooped up with him and was ready for a small taste of freedom from the old man. His intuitive daughter asked if he was okay, afraid he was really planning to drink. He gave her his pinky and swore not to drink.

“If you’d rather share a room?” he asked, hoping she would accept the over-night separation.

“No, no. That’s okay,” she suspiciously relented.

They agreed that neither one of them will leave the room, not even to go to the vending machine, without letting the other know. Alone in his room, Johnny tried in vain to take his mind off these new emotions. It had been such a long time since he felt anything other than a numb self-loathing.

#### On the Road – From the Hotel on West Avenue to Vanderbilt University

The following day, Sarah appeared more withdrawn. Johnny wondered whether she doubted his promise of sobriety or if she simply got lost in her own thoughts.

“Almost there. Getting excited?” Johnny asked as they pulled out of the hotel parking lot. He wondered why the conversation between them was not as effortless today as the day before. Sarah forced a smile and nodded her head yes.

“You okay?” Johnny asked. “Nervous?”

“A bit,” she admitted.

“Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming. Just keep swimming, swimming swimming,” Johnny sang, a reminder of one of her favorite animated characters, Dori. Sarah gave him a heartfelt smile, but he could sense her growing apprehension.

“What’s that song we heard yesterday? About fear?” he asked, struggling to recreate the ease of their previous conversations.

“Which one?”

“By that guy with the deep voice. Something about fear being a lie.”

“Zach Williams. *Fear is a Liar.*”

“Yea, that one! It’ll rob you. Don’t let fear win, Baby Girl. Besides, it’s just a campus tour. No commitments.”

They sat in silence. Without Sarah instigating the conversation, Johnny felt lost. He kept thinking about his sister. What would she say? How would she make it better? She had a way, such an easy, natural way of calming his anxiety.

“Can I ask you something?” Johnny asked, thinking about his sister.

Sarah shrugged her shoulders. Sometimes he wondered how this magnificent girl could be his daughter. Then, she did something like that, answer with a shrug, and he saw himself in her. “What made you want to become a doctor? Why not a nurse like your Aunt Diane? You used to talk about becoming a nurse like her. What changed?”

“Promise you won’t laugh?”

“Cross my heart.”

“One Saturday, there was this guest preacher. He’s from Haiti, I think. Very thick accent. He’s a preacher here in America, but he was a doctor back in his country. He now leads medical mission trips. His talk didn’t make me want to become a missionary, but something about his story got to me. There’s something intriguing about going into poor countries and helping people. I don’t know where the thought actually came from, but after that talk, I thought I wanted to become a doctor, help some way like that, but here in America, maybe go on these medical mission trips. The thought wouldn’t leave me. Then I found out about these National Disaster Response Teams. I wouldn’t necessarily have to become a doctor to do it, but I don’t know how to explain it, I just knew that’s what I was meant to do.”

Johnny clutched at his heart and said, “When I think I could not be prouder of you, you go and say something like that!”

[Back Home](#)

Johnny dropped Sarah off at her mom’s house and returned to his sister’s to drop off the car. Asking to talk to her husband in private, Jimmy led him into the study. Johnny re-counted the transformation he experienced on the trip and confessed to Jimmy how he patronized Sarah when she

asked him to try to get sober one more time, rationalizing that the effort was useless and, eventually, she would give up on him like he had given up on himself. But then he heard that song and wondered if there could still be hope for him. "After all, I've tried so many times and failed. What makes me think this time could be any different?"

Jimmy sat in silence for what seemed like an eternity. Unable to take the silence a moment longer, Johnny added, "but this time feels different for some reason. Jimmy, I need you to be honest with me. Is it too late for me? Does my daughter have some pie-in-the-sky grand hope for the impossible or is it . . . could it . . . I mean . . . "

Jimmy finally spared his anguished brother-in-law more torment. "It failed before because you kept trying to do it in your own power. No one can overcome whatever their issue is on their own. That's why we need a Savior. It is only by the grace of God. Doesn't mean it will be easy. Doesn't mean you won't stumble, but it does mean God will walk beside you, strengthen you."

Jimmy grabbed his Bible from off his desk and turned to 1 Corinthians 10:13. He handed it to Johnny and asked him to read it before explaining. "In other words, Jesus is that 'thing' that will help you. If you are willing to admit your weaknesses and failures and ask God to help, if when temptation comes, because it will, you will pray and give it to God, things can be different. Johnny, are you willing to try one more time? Not for Sarah, but for yourself? It has to be for yourself. That's the only way any change will last. You must be willing to give your life fully and completely to Christ."

Johnny nodded his head yes, unable to speak. The two men got down on their knees, touching, forehead to forehead, Jimmy with his hands wrapped around Johnny's head. They both cried. Johnny wept more and more as Jimmy prayed over him. Before saying "amen," Jimmy asked Johnny to pray with him, to commit his life to Christ, to commit his healing to Christ, to ask God to walk with him, to lead him, to fill him with His strength and power. Jimmy concluded their prayer by rephrasing Joshua 1:9, "For You, Father, have called us to be strong and courageous, but You never once asked or expected

us to pull from our own limited power and courage. It is Your strength; it is Your courage that carries us. It is Your strength, it is Your courage which will continue to carry Johnny day by day, hour by hour. Father, we ask all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen."

As they stood, Johnny asked Jimmy about the story of one of the disciples teaching and baptizing an Ethiopian. "You know the one where the Spirit miraculously teleported that disciple to another place and that dude just happened to be reading from Isaiah and needed someone to explain it to him?"

Jimmy nodded, familiar with the reference. "The Book of Acts, when Philip met up with the Ethiopian Eunuch on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza."

"What's a eunuch, anyway?" Johnny asked, momentarily distracted from his intended purpose. "Well, basically," Jimmy began, obviously a little bit embarrassed. "especially in this context, a eunuch is a man who has been castrated . . . um . . . which was done when a slave was serving a woman. In this case, the Ethiopian eunuch who Philip baptize was a court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. He was in charge of her entire treasury."

"Okay, well, good to know. Anyway, what's to keep me from being baptized right now, just like that guy was?" Johnny asked his brother-in-law pastor.

"I could," Jimmy admitted, "but there is something to be said about making a public confession of faith. Besides, imagine how much it would mean to Diane, Maggie, and Sarah."

That night, Johnny invited Maggie to dinner. He told her all about the trip, the conversations he had with Sarah, the music, and the change it made in him. He asked if Maggie knew about their daughter going to church. Maggie had no idea and wondered why she would keep it a secret. Maggie confessed that she had often prayed herself, making a deal with God that she would go back to church if Johnny quit drinking. "I'll admit, I never thought it would happen, but" she paused as she stared at him. "I must admit that there does seem to be something different about you, a lightness."

“I’ll admit I’m scared. I do feel different, but what if this time isn’t any different? I am going to try – for you, for Sarah, for all of us. I want our lives to be different. I want to be better.”

“I even took Sarah’s advice,” he continued. “I did go to my landlord with the idea about sweat equity. He came over and was really impressed with my work. He agreed to waive the past due rent but said he could not afford to reduce my rent moving forward. However, he did offer to waive another month or two to give me time to get through rehab and find work after. It’s a start. At least I’ll still have a place to live.”

“Are you going to rehab?” Maggie asked, somewhat surprised. After all, she had walked with Johnny down this road before and it never turned out well.

Johnny shrugged his shoulders. “Gotta try.” He took Maggie’s hand. “I know your concerns. I have them, too, but I haven’t had a sip to drink since that night in Nashville. I won’t get loaded this time before I check myself in. And, this time, I want to take it seriously, not just use it to help me dry out for a little while. I can’t do this alone. I’m going to need all the help I can get.”

“You have my support,” Maggie sighed, eager to believe this time would be different. She knew only time would tell.

“I don’t want to think too far ahead, but when I get out of rehab and find a job – Jimmy is going to help me and I’m going to let him,” Johnny winked and smiled, “I want to save up to start my own business, but one thing at a time. Right now, I have to focus on getting and staying sober.”

“Good plan,” Maggie agreed.

“Jimmy warned me that faith is not a one and done deal. There are going to be hard days ahead. I do want to start going to church again. Will you go with me? Sarah is already going so we could all go together?”

Maggie smiled a genuine smile of hope. “I would like that very much.”

Epilogue

Johnny stands at the altar of the church, dressed in a tuxedo. As he looks across the sea of faces, it amazes him to think that a dream – his dream – could actually come true. He was sober – and happy. Sure, he still struggled from time to time. Giving his life to Christ did not translate into sunny days every day. Jimmy was right about one thing – he was right about a lot actually – but this road was tough – sobriety, starting a new business, keeping a new business thriving, being the kind of man he always wanted to be, the kind of father Sarah deserved.

He looks at his beautiful daughter walking toward him. He glances up to the ceiling and thanks God once again for the gift of her. His baby girl. His angel. His key.

At the reception, the DJ plays *Will You Still Love Me* by Chicago as he announces the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Johnny Preston. Johnny and Maggie make their way to the center of the empty dance floor and dance to their song. Jimmy, Diane, and Sarah stand arm in arm watching and smiling.

Take me as I am  
Put your hand in mine now and forever  
Darling here I stand, stand before you now  
Deep inside I always knew  
It was you, you and me  
Two hearts drawn together bound by destiny  
It was you and you for me  
Every road leads to your door  
Every step I take forever more . . .

Songwriters: David Foster / Richard Baskin / Tom Keane  
Will You Still Love Me? lyrics © Peermusic Publishing, Universal Music Publishing Group