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Broken Picket Fences

A Thesis Submitted

by

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# Chapter 1

## Artist Statement

### **Broken Picket Fences:**

I will be writing chapters for my women's fiction novel, *Broken Picket Fences*, for my master of fine arts in creative writing thesis. I selected this specific novel for my thesis because I want to research and explore the character transformation of the female protagonist, Raeanne. The main character is a forty-three-year-old mother who returns to her hometown after a couple of decades, where she contemplates both her past and present choices. The novel explores the bittersweet reunion of two young sweethearts who see each other again after twenty years. Love is reignited, old memories die hard, and dark secrets struggle to find the light of day in a maze of choices. She finds that what she thought she wanted may not be what she truly needs. She embarks on a journey through her past to rediscover the essence of who she really is. It has been so long since she viewed her own life through a clear lens, and she desperately searches for who she used to be before life brought her down a path, she may never have wanted to take in the first place.

This particular novel interests me most because I want to explore the internal transformation of the female protagonist. There are several different elements of human nature that I want to uncover through Raeanne, the main character. I have always found love to be quite an anomaly, as we dissect this indescribable feeling as humans. As I have matured and walked in the shoes of various life experiences myself, I am intrigued by how our feelings and choices determine our lives. It is amazing how every minute decision we make eventually becomes a culmination of who we are. We may not notice our transformation as it is happening because the

metamorphosis can be so subtle, yet defining in the end. I would like to explore the themes of forgiveness, love, faith, healing and redemption. Raeanne finds that what she thinks she wants may not be what she truly needs. I am intrigued by this concept because I have come to some of these realizations myself, in my own life. My vision for this work is for women to find belief in themselves, discover hope, find God's strength when they have none, and inspire women to be who God has created them to be—not who the world wishes they would be.

Forgiveness is a central theme throughout *Broken Picket Fences*. Raeanne not only has to forgive her mother and her ex-husband for what they did to her, but more importantly, she has to learn the beauty of forgiving herself. She originally escapes her old, abusive life to run back to the life she thought she should have had until she discovers the real reason she has been running. Raeanne needs to forgive herself for her past choices, so she can become who God wants her to be.

Raeanne is a semi-retired singer/songwriter, who used to be a famous recording artist, with her guitarist husband, Wes. At the opening of the novel, she is living with Wes and her seven-year-old adopted son, Grayson, in Nashville, Tennessee. They have lived as a family in Nashville for many years. Raeanne escaped to Nashville when she broke up with her ex-boyfriend, Michael Lazarro, in her early twenties. Raeanne and Michael had a beautiful whirlwind romance for a few months in their hometown of Meadowbrook, Florida, but then their romance was turned upside down. She was offered a production deal with a famous producer in Music City, and Michael was enlisted in the Marines and sent overseas. Life pulled them in two different directions, and Raeanne hid a critical secret from Michael that has haunted her for years.

After several years of abuse from Wes, Raeanne finally decides she has had enough one night during one of Wes' alcoholic rages. It is no longer safe for her and Grayson, and she must make a difficult choice. She barely escapes and returns to her hometown of Meadowbrook, Florida, to her parents' home on the Atlantic Ocean. She discovers that her father, Preston Bowen, has been in Meadowbrook Hospice for several months, and her mother, Linda Bowen, and sister, Sara, never told Raeanne that he was critically ill. When she visits her father at the hospice, she runs into Michael, her ex-boyfriend. Michael's father has been terminally ill with brain cancer for quite a while, and they catch up with one another for the first time in twenty years. Michael still doesn't understand why Raeanne ended things between them so abruptly, all those years ago. Raeanne's mother, Linda, was never particularly fond of Michael, but Raeanne's father, Preston Bowen, always knew how much Raeanne loved Michael.

We witness the unique and close relationship that Raeanne has with her father, while she spends time with him in his hospice room. Her father knows something is not right if she came all the way back to Meadowbrook with a broken wrist. Raeanne hasn't paid her parents a visit in a couple of years. While Preston is painfully aware of the reality that he will no longer be around soon, he hands Raeanne the keys to his downtown music shop that he has owned for thirty years. Raeanne is in awe of his gift to her, yet devastated to finally come to terms with the fact that her father will no longer be here soon. She also does not know if taking over the music shop is truly her dream at this point in her life.

The novel flashes back to the first night that younger Michael and Raeanne met at a friend's Christmas party in Meadowbrook. As the novel progresses, we gradually begin to see more and more of the beautiful love story between the two of them a little at a time. Raeanne shares her dream with Michael, which is to eventually have a gorgeous, perfect little white picket

fence around her house one day. She imagines sharing a wonderful life with the man she loves and the two children and the cute dog that they will have. Raeanne also has the dream of singing and writing for a living, and has aspirations to take her music career to the next level. Michael takes notes and believes he is meant to be Raeanne's one true love, and has the ability to make both of her dreams happen.

Unfortunately, life has other plans, because Michael only has a few more days left before he has to drive back to Texas to report for duty. He joined the Marines a couple of years ago and is currently stationed in Texas. He asks Raeanne to join him on the road trip back to the base, and they make memories together that neither one of them will ever forget. When they pull off the highway to take a break in a remote town in the panhandle of Florida, they come across a famous "love tree." A love tree consists of a palm tree that grows through the middle of the trunk of an old oak tree. They are extremely rare to find and the only other place they have ever seen one, is in their hometown of Meadowbrook. Legend has it that if they kiss one another underneath the arbors of this tree, they will share an everlasting romance. They decide to spend the night on the back of Michael's old orange Ford pickup truck. Raeanne pulls out her guitar and sings a song that she wrote for Michael, and they both wish the night would never end.

The next day they are abruptly torn apart because Raeanne has to meet with a famous producer in Nashville the next morning to possibly sign a contract. It is the opportunity of a lifetime and she would never forgive herself if she didn't take the shot. Michael must report for duty back in Texas. A few weeks later, Raeanne discovers that she is unexpectedly pregnant and choices are imminent. The stress and anxiety overwhelm her, and she struggles with her next steps.



Years later, when Raeanne and Michael are reunited once again in Meadowbrook, she discovers that Michael is now married with children and a family of his own. After Raeanne's father passes away, Michael offers to do some restoration projects on the Bowen's old dock. They begin to reminisce about their younger days and the good times they had, but Raeanne also finds herself in a difficult position. She wants to tell Michael about her secret, but is afraid of how he might react. She also wants to tell him how she is not sure that she made the right choices about a lot of things, all those years ago. She is conflicted about her own life and the life she left behind with Michael. He still carries resentment for the way Raeanne left him with no explanation and endless unanswered questions that still burden him to this day.

Raeanne was lost twenty years ago in a sea of choices and even now as an older woman and mother, she finds herself carrying regrets and in the same state of confusion. I want to take the reader on a journey from where Raeanne thinks she wants to go, to where she needs to be. In the process, she discovers how strong she truly is and molds into exactly the person God created her to be. She discovers more wisdom about life and finds true happiness by allowing herself to forgive.

### **My Life Experience:**

My background for this work certainly draws from my own life experiences. I have been fortunate in many ways to experience firsthand many of the social issues that plague our culture today. While I had the opportunity to live through many of these life experiences, I am by no means saying that these experiences were God's best for my life. Although, I do believe that if I did go through these experiences either by my own doing or someone else's, I think God has called me to minister to other women who have endured similar circumstances. My way of

helping other women is by bringing the social issues of divorce, abortion, adoption, and abuse to the forefront of our culture.

I am a Christian who believes strongly now in the antithesis of some of these issues, but I am also fully aware that women I know personally are battling these same issues in their everyday lives. I am passionate about letting women know that they are not alone, and although they may feel shame for choices they have made or situations that they find themselves in, they can still cling to Jesus and to hope. Throughout my life, I have found myself in the darkest of places and in situations I never dreamed I would find myself. Most women do not aspire to get a divorce, have an abortion, be abused by their partner, etc., but the reality is these things are going on in people's lives every day. As Christians, sometimes women feel like they are forced to suffer in the shadows and the darkness because these are issues where the Bible clearly has a cut and dry stance. After women endure many of these things, I have found that they find it difficult to share their real stories or return to the church because they feel like they no longer belong.

### **My Mission:**

My vision for this work is for women to find belief in themselves and discover hope, after reading my novel. We are all sinners, and not one of us is as perfect as Jesus. Women need to know not only are they not alone, but they can also restore a personal relationship with Jesus after enduring some of these atrocities. The greatest gift they can find is that after going through these difficult trials, they will have an even closer relationship with Jesus. I want women to understand that just because they went through these difficult moments in their lives, that does not mean that God is giving them a "left-over" life. In fact, He is specifically anointing these women to carry out a special purpose for others. Now, I can look back and say that I am beyond

grateful for the experiences I have had in this life, as a fifty-one-year-old mother myself. I am certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God has used me to write for this purpose. Although the subjects may be hard to tackle, I think it is vital to not ignore them either.

Originally, I thought this novel would be more of a beautiful love story, but as I have been writing it, I have discovered that it is more about the internal transformation of Raeanne. For this reason, I want the novel to be classified under women's Christian fiction. I have always been an avid reader of Karen Kingsbury, and she has been a profound mentor for me as a writer. She is also a large part of the reason I decided to choose Liberty University for my master of fine arts in creative writing. Kingsbury classifies her genre as women's inspirational fiction, and I feel my writing falls into this category as well. My ultimate vision for my novels is to inspire women across the world and fill them with hope, love, faith, and inspiration for life. Many women authors such as Karen Kingsbury, Francine Rivers, Joyce Meyers, Rebekah Lyons, and Lisa Bevere have inspired me over the years.

As a middle-aged woman, I have gone through my own personal transformation on many levels through the years. There were times when I did not believe I could ever escape the depths of darkness. I truly believed my life was over and that I had destroyed God's plan for my life. I am living proof that no matter what we do or what we go through, God always has an even greater plan for our lives. I want to instill that same courage and hope in women, so they can move on to bigger and greater lives that are beyond anything these women could ever imagine.

As a Christian scholar, giving hope and faith to women is my mission. When women think they are broken, I want to show them how God will put all of their broken pieces together again. Not only will He restore them, but He will build an even more beautiful masterpiece than they ever thought possible. If I had known that God was working through me, during my most

difficult moments, I would have looked at my life much differently. If I had found novels like Karen Kingsbury's books or read more devotionals during those periods, maybe I would have made different choices or looked at situations from God's point of view. Unless we have the knowledge, the people around us, and the resources to do so, the world can look bleak to women who are suffering from these circumstances. The significance of my novel is to allow women to release their shame, know they are forgiven, and ultimately give them the hope, the faith, and the courage they need to move forward in their lives and their walk with Christ. He didn't bring those women this far to abandon them. The secret is, He was with these women every step of their journey, but they didn't see Him or feel Him.

God loves to make incredible redemptive stories out of our tragedies. There is no better person to encourage others than those who have walked a mile in their shoes. I believe that God knows every choice, every decision, and every circumstance we will ever face. He would love if we chose the straight and narrow path every time, so we can live God's best life for us. He is also forgiving and loving enough to know that we are human, and He knows we will make mistakes. The question is, how will we learn and grow from those mistakes? How will our character change? Will we draw closer to Christ or run away from Him?

I have incorporated this type of writing style into my fictional characters when it comes to tackling sensitive cultural issues. For instance, when Raeanne is in her early twenties and is faced with an unexpected pregnancy in the prologue of my novel, I pictured Raeanne to be a young Joyce Meyer. It is well-known that Joyce Meyer had a difficult childhood after being sexually abused by her father. As a young adult, she also got married very young, had a baby, and got divorced. As a young twenty-something, Raeanne has the same grit and fire that I imagine Meyer may have had back in the day. Her books have influenced my writing greatly,

because of the impact they have had on my own personal transformation, and I have found myself incorporating these characteristics into my fictional characters. For instance, when Raeanne has her “come to Jesus” moment, I began writing dialogue between her and the main male character, Michael, that I can imagine Meyer saying. It is interesting how our daily influences in our real world, truly affect how we write in the fictional world. We draw from these various experiences and incorporate tidbits of life into the fictional characters that we create. Some of our writing may be pieces of ourselves while other parts may simply be what we wish we had done. A major reason I love writing women’s fiction is because we can incorporate these pieces into the puzzle that we decide to make.

We all answer these questions in different ways and make our own decisions. There is so much hate in the world, and people tend to judge others without knowing the context of their unique and personal situations. This judgement can lead women to isolate and become prisoners of their own darkness. My hope for this novel, is to shed light on these issues, so we can lead women out of the shadows and help them find peace, hope, faith, and love in the Lord. If I can do that successfully through this novel, I feel I have completed part of God’s mission for my life.

### **Examination of Craft:**

As I am writing my novel, I am exploring various styles in terms of dialogue and inner monologues. I have always been a fan of the intricate dynamics of family members and how we speak to one another. Throughout the writing of my novel, I am using dialogue to specifically convey the background of Raeanne’s sister, Sara and Raeanne’s mother, Linda.

In my writing workshops here at Liberty University, I had the excellent opportunity to work on a couple of my chapters and further develop the dialogue between the women in the

family. I am trying to convey a compelling dynamic between these three women to also demonstrate the challenges that both Sara and Linda face as women. Sara, Raeanne's sister, is a single, middle-aged woman who does not have children, and I also try to explore the stereotypes and unique challenges that those women face in our current cultural climate. Linda, Raeanne's mom, is in another stage of life where she faces her own mortality and analyzes what she would have done differently in her life. Regrets play a major role in her character, and I explore how she is able to navigate forgiving herself for her own choices in life.

### **Cultural Issues:**

Since I am tackling the highly controversial issue of abortion, I wanted to handle this matter as delicately and effectively as possible. I chose to also bring adoption into the forefront because as an adoptive mother myself, I personally think it's a great solution to the controversial topic of abortion. I also want the reader to understand on a deeper level what these young women go through when they are trying to make such a difficult choice.

I work full-time for a pro-life marketing agency which serves over ninety percent of the pregnancy centers throughout the United States and now globally. Every day I am blessed to read messages from hundreds of women who are experiencing an unexpected pregnancy. They are frightened, alone, and many of the women have nowhere to turn or the means to take care of themselves- much less their babies. If these young women do show up for their appointments at these pregnancy centers to meet with a counselor, oftentimes there is a positive outcome for the mother.

Unfortunately, we also see that many of these young women are being bombarded by the antithesis of pro-life values across their Insta feed or Snap Chat. There is a digital war that is

taking place between the pro-life movement and organizations such as Planned Parenthood, and the pro-choice movement is vying to win the younger generations' souls. Unfortunately, finances play a huge part in this digital war and we see at our own marketing agency how Planned Parenthood is tripling down on the amount of money they are spending daily on digital ads. If these abortion-minded women do not see the pregnancy centers' ads, they do not have the ability to weigh their decisions- they simply have one choice that they see. I felt abortion is an important issue to address, and specifically in my novel, I explore the internal monologue that goes on in Raeanne's head during her crisis.

I wanted to also lighten the mood of the novel during certain dialogue sections between Raeanne, Sara, and Linda. I am choosing to utilize a bit of sarcasm and authentic banter between the women. I think this shows a true picture of how women interact with each other in a family setting. Raeanne uses some humor in her dialogue to disguise her innermost feelings. I am enjoying the combination of these two elements because it allows me as an author to tackle a difficult topic while capturing the attention of the reader through humorous dialogue.

### **Methodology:**

As I am writing the chapters for my thesis, I am going to do a careful analysis of key passages throughout my novel to extract even deeper meaning and themes. I will be using symbolism throughout the story to reflect Raeanne's complete transformation. The broken white picket fence at her parents' home is symbolic of Raeanne's life in turmoil. By the end of the story, she will be reading a letter from Michael as she props herself up against the white picket fence that Michael fixed for her. I am also using Michael's old pickup truck as a literary device. In one scene where he almost goes into the high school reunion to meet Raeanne, he decides to

stay in his truck. He pulls the handle of the truck, but he changes his mind and decides to not get out. Michael has kept the truck ever since he was with Raeanne in his twenties, even though his son was confined to a wheelchair after the family suffered a horrific accident in the old pickup truck. Michael could not let it go because he could not let go of the memories it held of him and Raeanne.

I have personal knowledge of these subjects because I have been faced with many of the same decisions that Raeanne encounters. The authors that I have mentioned, including Karen Kingsbury, Joyce Meyer, Francine Rivers, Rebekah Lyons, and Lisa Bevere, will be instrumental in orchestrating how I develop my novel and dive deep inside of each character. I am also going to apply an analytical framework to the various acts of my novel. I like to use an old-school approach of putting index cards for each scene up on the large corkboard in my bedroom. Then I highlight or color code them based on the type of theme that the scene introduces. I also create another line across the board where I put post-it notes for each character and write where they are in their character arc as the story evolves. This physical storyboard layout gives me the ability to see my novel from a bird's eye view and enables me to clarify the themes and character transformations that I want to portray to the readers.

### **My Story:**

I have selected my women's fiction novel, *Broken Picket Fences*, for my thesis. Not only do I love the story line, but I specifically chose this particular novel because it touches on universal and relevant themes which are not magnified in today's mainstream media culture. My objective is to bring the themes of forgiveness, hope, redemption, and love to the forefront of our society. First and foremost, I am a Christian. I was born into a Christian home, and my parents



provided me with solid morals and values, to navigate my life in the best way possible. Before I even graduated with my bachelor's degree in marketing, I was hired at one of the most prestigious consulting firms in New York City. It was only then that I took a moment to consider the rest of my life. Up until that point, I never even questioned my career path or what it was that God truly wanted me to do with my gifts. I was about to jump onto the bottom rung of a corporate ladder conveyor belt, and I was not certain I liked where it was going. The summer after my college graduation I began to question whether I was on the right ladder. That summer, I had a brief stint as a singer in a regional country band making only forty dollars a night, and it changed my life forever. I had been on stage since the tender age of three years old, performing, dancing, singing, and acting. It wasn't only something I did for fun, but I realized it was part of who I am. The arts were what saved my childhood and made me excited to be alive, whether I was singing, reading, or writing stories in my journal—I was happy.

I was always told that the arts were something you do for fun, and eventually we all grow up and do what we're supposed to do—get a *real job*. So, I did just that, even before my college graduation, with one of the most prestigious consulting firms in New York City and one of the top hard-to-get positions that students were fighting over. To be perfectly honest, I could not understand why- it all seemed very fake and dry to me. Everyone congratulated me and told me what an honor it was to receive the prestigious consulting position, but for some reason I felt trapped and depressed. The firm gave me a healthy signing bonus prior to starting work in the fall, so the summer after I graduated I had some free time. I was making forty dollars a night and I was ecstatic- I was officially being paid to sing which was a life-long dream of mine. My take home pay was nowhere near the three-thousand dollar signing bonus I just received for merely breathing and waiting out the summer, but I was proud of my musical accomplishment more than

anything. The point was not how much money it was, but rather the fact that I proved that it was possible to make a living in the arts doing what I loved.

Those few weeks of hot summer days went by at lightning speed, and before I knew it the time came for me to start my new consulting job in Manhattan. I couldn't do it. I had experienced the taste of artistic freedom and a different kind of life, and I felt like God was calling me to follow my own path and not what society expected of me. I had the harsh and disappointing conversation with my parents, and they reluctantly said they supported my decision, although I knew deep in their hearts they felt I had made the biggest mistake of my life. I immediately found a local marketing job that I could leave at five p.m. sharp every day, so that I could still drive to my singing gigs at night. I was exhausted and working tirelessly and sleeping only four hours a night, but I had never felt so alive. I was beginning to embark on my own narrow path that was definitely the road less traveled, but the one that I thought God was calling me to follow.

My narrow path led me down roads that I never thought I would travel. Much of my life story seems so surreal that sometimes I can't even believe it was really me. The roads I have traveled may not have been the path that most would take, but I am grateful for the tragedies, the lessons, and the heartbreak because they have made me the woman I am today. I strayed far from God's best for me at times, but in those moments I discovered I had the tenacity, the strength, and the fire to get up again no matter what I had to do. Those life experiences are priceless to me because now I can relate on a much deeper level to women who have gone through similar events.

My novel touches on the issues of abortion and domestic violence, while also offering the hope of redemption, love and forgiveness. At the end of the novel, Raeanne finds the last thing

she thought she would ever find— herself. I wanted to develop a character who women can relate to and understand. The main premise of the story is how our choices can either define us or refine us, and how sometimes the things we think we want are not the things we need at all.

On this journey of life, we may all take some detours, but in the end, God is always trying to draw us back to be closer to Him. I have been on my own faith journey after taking several backroads for many years, and I am beyond grateful that somehow God and I finally had our full circle moment. As a result of my faith journey, my hope is to use what I have learned for the greater good in this world and write content that dives deep into the issues that women face throughout their lives. My hope is to offer a new perspective for women and let them know that they are not alone.

Women's fiction authors have the unique ability to incorporate many of their own life experiences into their works. I have always been inspired by Karen Kingsbury's novels and she is a large part of the reason I decided to choose Liberty University for my master of fine arts in creative writing. I wanted to learn from one of the masters in this particular genre of women's fiction or as she likes to call her genre, women's life-changing fiction. I only stumbled upon her novels about ten years ago when I was going through a deep transformation myself in my walk with God. Jesus always has the ability to meet us where we are and provide the appropriate resources at just the right time. Karen Kingsbury was one of those resources for me at a critical time in my life.

## Chapter 2

### How Christian Women Authors Inspire the World of Fiction

#### Literature Review:

There are many fiction authors who have impacted the world, but when we take a deeper dive into the world of contemporary fiction, we find the divine impact that female Christian authors have had in this world as well. The mission of these women Christian authors is not simply to write great stories, but to also impact lives with stories of faith, hope, love, redemption, forgiveness, and resilience. When these authors write their novels or Christian nonfiction books, they are giving greater insights into the human perspective and offering different spiritual lenses for readers to view the world. Readers gravitate toward their authenticity and the possibility for change in their own lives. These Christian authors have the unique ability to bridge the gap between modern storytelling and biblical truths in an extremely effective way that brings other hearts to Christ. Their stories translate into helping readers understand Christian morals and values in a meaningful way that resonates with everyday people.

This literature review takes a closer look at the contributions of five well-known Christian women authors: Karen Kingsbury, Joyce Meyer, Francine Rivers, Rebekah Lyons, and Lisa Bevere. By examining their brilliant works, thematic focuses, and stylistic approaches, this review seeks to illuminate the significant impact these authors have on their readers and the broader Christian literary community. The scope of this review encompasses an analysis of their most influential novels and non-fiction works, offering a comprehensive understanding of how their writings inspire and challenge their audiences.

These authors have made significant contributions to both Christian fiction and non-fiction and they have had a significant positive influence on modern culture. The primary works of each author have been chosen based on their critical acclaim, relevance to my own creative work, and as a clear representation of the author's unique tone and message. These female Christian authors have been chosen to represent a diverse array of contemporary Christian women's literature, and to highlight how these authors engage and inspire readers with their faith-driven narratives.

### **Karen Kingsbury:**

Karen Kingsbury is a prolific fiction author widely recognized for her contributions to life-changing women's Christian fiction. Born on June 8, 1963, she initially pursued a career in journalism where she wrote sports stories for the Los Angeles Times, before transitioning to novel writing. Her personal faith journey to Christ has significantly influenced her writing, making her one of the most beloved figures in the world of Christian literature. Some of her highly acclaimed critical works are *Like Dandelion Dust*, and *The Baxter's* series.

Throughout Karen Kingsbury's works, she often highlights similar themes of redemption, forgiveness, and hope. Kingsbury's novel, *Like Dandelion Dust*, explores adoption and what it truly means to be a parent. Sometimes the greatest gift we can give someone is to let them go. My novel explores this same concept at the end of my story when Raeanne loves Michael enough to do the right thing and let him go. The biological mother in *Like Dandelion Dust*, offers her son the same gift when she decides that pulling her son away from his adoptive parents after many years is not the right choice for her son. Although she loves her son with all her heart,

Kingsbury's protagonist makes the decision at the end of the novel to let him go because she loves him with all her heart (Kingsbury).

*The Baxter's* series follows the lives of the Baxter family, including their greatest loves and the faith journeys of each character. The series touches on a wide range of relatable, real-life issues which help readers connect the dots to their own lives. Kingsbury's writing focuses on poignant narratives and inspirational characters who transform their lives, and readers' lives are changed as a result of reading one of her novels. Kingsbury often donates her books to prisons around the United States, to inspire prisoners to receive Christ as their Savior. Kingsbury's mission goes far beyond simply the writing of her novels, but to use her writing to impact people's lives for good. She uses her writing to change lives (Kingsbury).

In Kingsbury's *The Chance*, she concentrates on the themes of enduring love between two childhood sweethearts and how their love for one another withstood time and distance. The main characters Ellie and Nolan are faced with the need to forgive one another and themselves, much like my main characters, Raeanne and Michael, in *Broken Picket Fences*. The story also highlights how faith plays an important role in the characters' lives and how it can provide strength and guidance when we are lost. The theme of faith is also something that Raeanne comes to realize throughout the novel, in her own timing.

When scholars analyze Kingsbury's work, they often point to the predictability of her stories, but her fans appreciate the consistency and reliability of her uplifting messages. These are the stories that we are living every day and her novels are highly relatable to readers. Additionally, scholars point to Kingsbury's effectiveness of addressing contemporary issues through a Christian lens. She is a cornerstone of the genre that continues to inspire other women authors like me.

**Joyce Meyer:**

Even though Joyce Meyer is not a fiction author, she has had a profound impact on my work. My bookshelf is packed with Meyer's go-to sources according to whatever I might be going through in my life at the time. She has a very candid demeanor that I personally can relate to, and she tends to tell it like it is. Joyce Meyer is a renowned Christian speaker and author of nearly one hundred books. She was born in 1943 and started her ministry later in life. She overcame a challenging childhood which was marked by abuse and she has become a leading figure in Christian ministry and a compelling author in the Christian nonfiction genre. Her down-to-earth and practical approach to biblical teachings have made her one of the most beloved Christian figures because her stories are relatable and connect with readers.

*The Battlefield of the Mind*, by Joyce Meyer, is one particular book that stands out for many readers. One might find it beneficial to revisit various points in Meyer's book because she tackles the pervasive themes of worry, depression, anxiety, and anger. Meyer offers recommendations about how to tackle what the devil tells us and explains how by changing our minds we can truly change our lives (Meyer).

*Beauty for Ashes*, is another one of her works in which she shares her own personal journey of healing from abuse, and she offers readers hope and guidance for navigating such a complex subject in their own lives. Her direct and no-nonsense style is something that appears in my writing quite often, especially when it comes to the dialogue between characters. Meyer has shaped many of my characters and I often refer to her teachings on forgiveness and redemption when I am writing my novels, to build my character arcs (Meyer).

One of the main themes that appears in *Broken Picket Fences*, is overcoming adversity. This is a topic that Joyce Meyer loves to talk about in her own books. The power of positive thinking, emotional growth, and maturing in our walk with Christ, are all key topics that she loves to explore and teach in her books. I have incorporated many of her teachings and life lessons into my characters to reach a broader audience and demonstrate the power of transformation.

Her books have freed so many people from negative thought patterns, emotional wounds and spiritual stagnation. *Do Yourself a Favor...Forgive: Learn How to Take Control of Your Life Through Forgiveness*, is another fantastic Joyce Meyer book which addresses the emotional healing we can receive when we forgive others or forgive ourselves for past regrets. This concept of setting ourselves free from the prison of unforgiveness is a theme that has been woven throughout my novel. Many of the teachings that Meyer uses throughout this book, was the foundation on which I built my main character's arc. People are always looking for tangible ways to improve their lives, and Meyer offers practical solutions for people to use every single day. When people have the pleasure of reading one of Meyer's books, one does not have to sift through complex biblical concepts. Instead, she provides actionable and tangible things we can do to become closer to Christ in our everyday lives. Her books show us ways to take small steps in our walk with Christ to ultimately give us profound changes in our own lives.

One of the main things that draws me close to Meyer's writing, is that her writing style is clear and relatable. She speaks in practical terms, and she makes her books highly accessible to a wide, diverse audience, through giveaways and offering free books to readers. Many read her books now in the modern era, as a form of self-help. Her biblical teachings have crossed genres, which means she is reaching an even bigger audience beyond the Christian realm. Some



scholarly critics argue that she spends too much of her focus on personal responsibility and positive thinking, which I think should be viewed positively by critics, because she is not alienating a certain group of people based on where they are on their walk with Jesus at the moment. She embraces everyone, regardless of whether they have invited Christ into their life yet or not. I want to embrace readers in the same way, no matter where they are in their walk with Christ. People do not have to be Christians to read my stories. I simply want to introduce them to an alternate biblical way to live their lives through my characters, who have gone through similar experiences to their own. Meyer continues to inspire and empower people to live victorious lives while enjoying their everyday lives, and I hope to do the same as an author (Meyer).

**Francine Rivers:**

Francine Rivers is another inspiring, Christian author who went through her own epiphany back in the mid-1980's. She switched from writing steamy contemporary romance novels to writing stories that reflected her deep, Christian faith. This transformation is one of the reasons I respect not only her work as an author, but I respect Rivers as a disciple of Christ. She is taking action and living out her own personal walk with Christ (Rivers).

In one of her most famous books, *Redeeming Love*, she retells the biblical story of Hosea and Gomer that is set during the California Gold Rush. Rivers explores the themes of unconditional love and redemption in this novel and displays the transformative power of God's love. She loves to draw us in to the struggles and inner turmoil of her characters. She wants the readers to feel the heart and soul of her characters, as if they are living the experience themselves (Rivers).

In *The Masterpiece*, Rivers chooses to tackle some difficult subjects such as a troubled past and the themes of grace and healing. As an author, I also feel drawn to tackle more complex subjects that culture might not necessarily want to discuss. There is a need to discuss the more controversial subjects or else people will hide in the shadows and live in shame. Rivers makes a point to skillfully weave biblical principles throughout her stories, so that others can learn the Word. She does this in a way that is accessible and relevant to readers (Rivers).

Critics often give praise to how Rivers develops rich characters who undergo significant spiritual growth. Though some people feel her overly religious messages may seem too abrasive, we simply cannot deny the fact that Rivers is a cornerstone of the Christian literary community. She has impacted the minds and hearts of people all over the world (Rivers).

### **Rebekah Lyons:**

Another Christian author is Rebekah Lyons, whose writing is marked by her own personal struggles with depression and anxiety. Her transparency and vulnerability endears readers and makes them feel like they are understood and not alone. As I have been writing my novel, I have often reflected on Lyons' book, *You Are Free: Be Who You Already Are*. In one respect this book resonates with me, because Lyons shows readers how to escape fear and anxiety and move to freedom and acceptance. My main protagonist, Raeanne, goes through this same transformation in her personal life. Her character arc involves her discovering her true identity in Christ (Lyons).

Lyons' style is conversational and heartfelt, as if she is talking to a long-lost friend about her feelings. I wanted the same conversational style to be portrayed in the dialogue between my characters to feel very realistic. Her books provide hope and encouragement to readers and

demonstrates there is a path to peace and purpose, which is what Raeanne ultimately finds in *Broken Picket Fences*.

In Lyons' book, *Rhythm of Renewal: Trading Stress & Anxiety for a Life of Peace & Purpose*, she discusses how focusing on rest, restoration, connection and creation helps us to live God's best life for us. As I was building the character arc for Raeanne, I researched these four pillars and incorporated them into the narrative of my novel. I wanted Raeanne's character arc to culminate with her ultimate connection with God and the restoration of her identity toward the end of the story (Lyons).

#### **Lisa Bevere:**

Lisa Bevere is a globally recognized speaker and best-selling author who has inspired women all over the world by addressing challenging topics such as insecurity and overcoming a difficult past. These subjects have also shaped her writing and are a large part of the reason she is so popular among female readers. *Girls with Swords: How to Carry Your Cross Like a Hero*, is a powerful and empowering book that uses the imagery of a sword to teach women how to use the Word in their everyday lives. The book's objective is to show women how to find their strength and purpose in God. It shows women how to face life's challenges with courage, cast away fear, and find the determination to live God's best for their lives (Bever).

I referred to many of Bevere's chapters during my writing process to craft Raeanne's character and develop her character arc. One of the key themes of Bevere's book is identity and purpose, which is meant to help women discover their God-given purpose. *Girls With Swords* also discusses spiritual warfare and how women need to be equipped with spiritual weapons to fight against the enemy's schemes. Raeanne fights this battle throughout my novel and

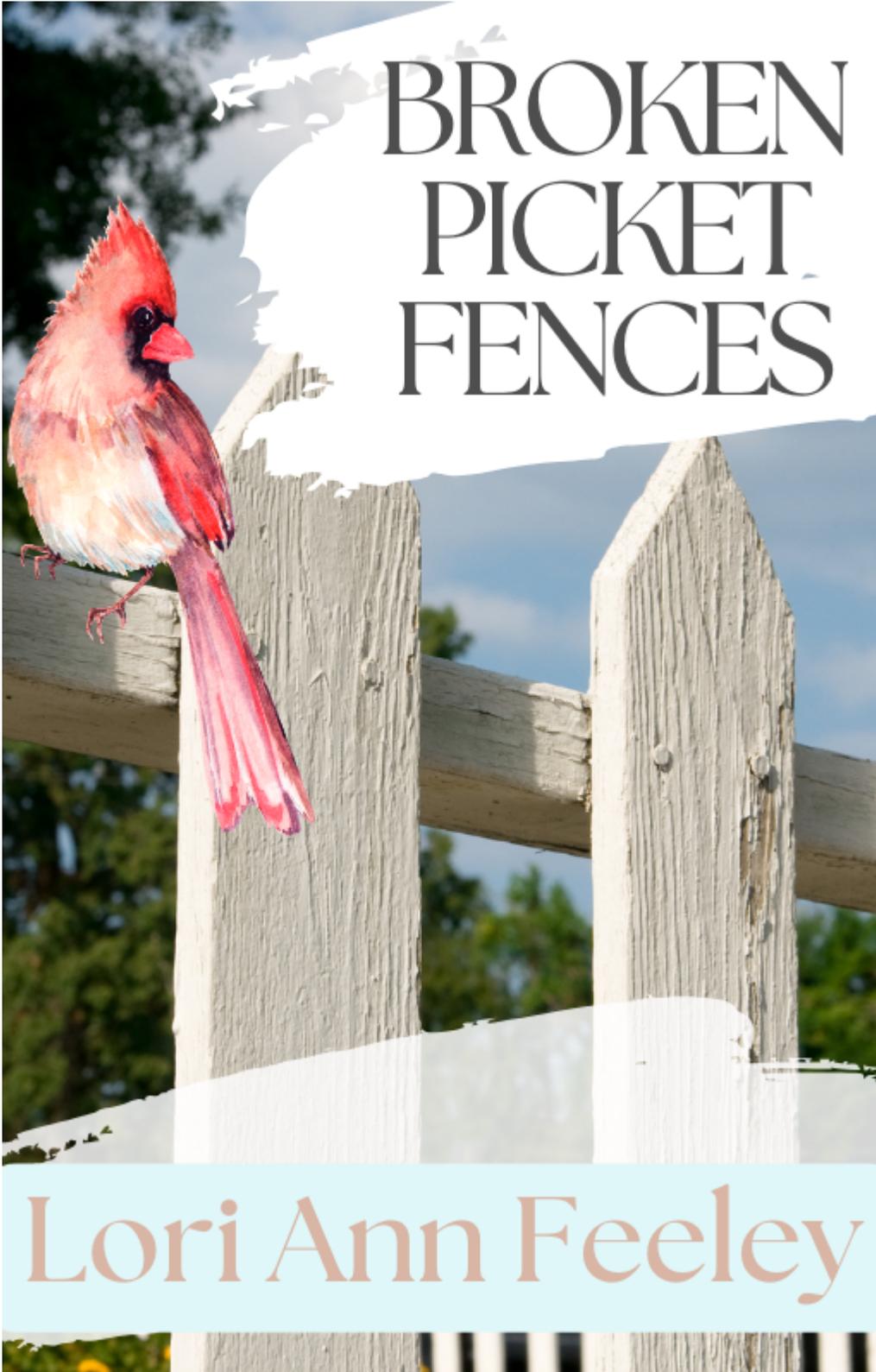
eventually finds the power to cut through the deception and defeat the darkness. Bevere talks about overcoming fear and anxiety and offers strategies to overcome them through the power of God's Word. Bevere's book encourages women to not see life through the lens of what they want for their lives, but through the lens of what God wants for their lives (Bevere).

*Without Rival: Embrace Your Identity and Purpose in an Age of Confusion and Comparison*, by Bevere, discusses the importance of understanding one's identity as a beloved child of God. Raeanne wrestles with this concept throughout my novel. She feels abandoned by God throughout much of my novel and finally comes to the realization that she is worthy in Christ and she begins to find her self-confidence and a sense of purpose for her life. Bevere's book, *Without Rival*, reminds us that each person is uniquely created and irreplaceable in God's plan (Bevere).

### **Conclusion:**

My main mission is to write a women's fiction novel that will change the lives of others. If only one reader's life is changed by *Broken Picket Fences*, I think God would consider this novel a job well done, and I would feel the same. I love writing because this art allows us to explore the deepest corners of our being- the good and the bad, and look at ourselves through a very different lens. I enjoy the introspection that I can bring to the table as an author, and hopefully readers will be willing to join me on this journey. My hope is to create characters who are relatable and to let others know that with God anything is possible—even for those women who don't know if they can even get out of bed in the morning to face their circumstances. My message is to let women know that they are not alone in their challenges and circumstances and God can completely transform their lives.

## BROKEN PICKET FENCES



# BROKEN PICKET FENCES

Lori Ann Feeley

This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or places or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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## Prologue

*The Plymouth Voyager barreled through the crashing waves of uncertainty, much like the Titanic trying to avoid the iceberg. The only problem was, much like those passengers, I had nowhere to run.*

As my father drove our brown family minivan through the sea of pro-life activists outside the main gate, I slowly cowered into the passenger seat and shoved my favorite green sweatshirt over my head. As we got closer, I finally mustered up the courage to rear my twenty-three-year-old head from beneath my favorite sweatshirt and inconspicuously peer out the window. I was terrified, ashamed, hurt, distraught, sad, and angry all mixed into a disgusting concoction of a version of myself, that I didn't even recognize. A few yards away, I could see a sea of people on bended knees, wearing white T-shirts emblazoned with pictures of something black and white. The murmurs were becoming louder and louder as we got closer to the building, although I could not make out exactly what they were saying. I quietly sank back into my seat, covered my head with my sweatshirt, and proceeded to cover my ears even though I couldn't hear what they were saying. I just wanted to be certain I didn't have the opportunity to hear *anything* that would deter me at this moment in time. I was focused on what I came there to do. Nothing and no one would distract me.

As we approached the entrance of the clinic, my father quickly hit the button to make sure all of the locks in the car were secured. One woman started to approach the window on my side of the car, but thankfully the old Grand Voyager narrowly but successfully was able to squeeze through the gate of the parking lot before the woman could get to us. My palms were sweating and my heart was racing faster by the minute. I was nervous, but I didn't expect to feel like I was on the brink of a panic attack or a nervous breakdown. Simply having the courage to come to this



awful place had me terrified enough. Somehow seeing these people leaning against the fence that guarded this building, only made me want to grab the steering wheel and turn the car around as quickly as possible and disappear into another life.

As my father pulled into the closest open parking spot near the front door of the facility, I found myself catching my first deep breath in the last several hours. I timidly and begrudgingly peeked one eye out from underneath my sweatshirt to get a closer look at where I was. I noticed a middle-aged, worn-out woman a few yards away. Her silhouette became increasingly clearer as her weathered and flushed face came into view. She was kneeling up against the black iron fence, with her hands clasped together so tightly as if she was holding onto the other hand for dear life. Her head was buried in her hands until she slowly lifted her eyes and met mine with a penetrating stare, reminiscent of the one I received from my mother not too long ago. I guess she thought it was worth a try, even if only one could be saved.

Meanwhile, saving my energy to get through the most difficult thing in my entire life was all I could focus on in that moment. I wanted to reach out and grab that woman by the arms and scream, *“Don’t you realize that this is the most excruciating decision I have ever had to make in my life? Do you think this is easy for me? Do you think this is just my choice? No, no, it’s not! This isn’t what I want either!! But what am I supposed to do? I can’t do this!”*

Instead, I just remained silent, too terrified to crawl out of the shell of the person I had become. I buried my head once again underneath my favorite green sweatshirt. It reminded me of my security blanket that I used to carry with me everywhere I went, until the ripe old age of five. The only difference is, now I was an official adult, and I probably shouldn’t be dragging around an old “binky security blanket” with me anymore. At least I graduated to a more dignified emerald green, tattered sweatshirt. There was something so familiar and comforting

about that sweatshirt that's so hard to describe- an old scent that reminded me of my mom. I missed her now more than ever at that moment, and that sweatshirt was the closest thing I had to wrapping her absent arms around me and letting me know that I was going to be okay. Yet at the same time, she was a big part of the reason I was there in the first place.

How tangled is the web we weave when it comes to families? They are the people you love the most, especially when you're a child. Yet as we get older things change, people change, and you begin to realize that your parents aren't superheroes- they're actually just real people too, with real thoughts, real feelings, and real lives. You begin to understand that they have a past as well, and secrets they pray will never see the light of day.

My father is a quiet, reserved man, yet his white knuckles on the steering wheel indicated something was percolating deep inside of him. This very moment was most likely my father's worst nightmare, yet I waited for a single complaint or curse word to come out of his mouth. I suspected the volcano's eruption at any given moment, but I savored the quiet silence while it lasted. I knew underneath all of the calm, a storm was brewing inside his soul, much like the hurricane that was about to hit our quaint hometown of Meadowbrook in a few days. It felt a lot like I was in the middle of the eye of the storm. We already lived through Part One of Storm Bowen and we were about to move into the next phase. Although it looked beautiful and sunny in our Bowen family's world right now, we were all definitely hiding behind the boards and sandbags that were covering our home...patiently waiting for the hurricane's wrath to strike any second. I wanted nothing more than to evacuate, but I was stuck on this island between my family and a sea of pro-life activists with no way out.

As I attempted to pull the car door handle and step out of the car, I felt a sudden rush of panic sink into my veins. A warm wave of nausea appeared out of nowhere as it often did as of late,

given I was in my second trimester. I quickly swung open the car door and threw my morning breakfast up all over the pavement of the parking lot, right in front of the crowd of people who were looking on with shocking expressions. The good news was the glaring stares of the proliferators instantly metamorphosized into more empathetic beams of light, and I was able to be sick to my stomach in a moment of peace. I couldn't stop. It seemed like this bout of nausea was one of the longer ones and I felt like I was going to black out. My world was dimming around me.

Then suddenly I felt a cool washcloth on my head and a gentle hand on my back. I knew it wasn't my father's hand because he has those strong hands with an undeniable presence and grip that lets you know he's got you. This was more of a hesitant gentle hand as if to say, "*I am here if you'd like me to be.*" I felt like I had finished throwing up at least for now, so I slowly lifted my head to discover whose hand it was. All I could decipher was a mirage of the flushed faced worn-out woman I had seen moments earlier. She was coming into view between the rays of sunlight streaming through the old oak next to our parking spot. Only now she didn't look so intimidating to me, and I could tell she was genuinely concerned if I was okay.

I have to admit, the cool washcloth was a lifesaver. I always loved the feel of a cool washcloth on my head when I was sick because that was one of the hallmark traits of my mother. Whenever I didn't feel well, she would always put a washcloth on my forehead and somehow it made the whole world go away. In that defining moment of my life, that cool washcloth meant more to me than that woman could've ever known. I wanted to stay right there forever, with my feet on the ground and my behind on that car seat, halfway out and halfway in, having the ability to escape in the car if needed and the ability to run on the ground in whichever direction my heart desired.

My father's feet came into clear view on the right side of me as he rushed around the outside of our car.

"Honey, are you okay? You blacked out!" he exclaimed. He looked at the worn-out woman and said, "Thank you, this is my daughter."

"Yeah Dad, I'm good. Breakfast didn't sit too well with me this morning. And I'm a little nervous, I guess."

"Yeah honey, that's understandable. We don't have to go in there you know. He breathed in a long sigh of relief and softly whispered, Maybe we should wait this one out, if you're not feeling well today."

I could tell he wanted me to think this choice through a little more, and this was the perfect opportunity to do so.

Suddenly the worn-out woman spoke up and said, "That's the best thing I've heard all year. You don't look like you're in any position to be facing any of this today. Maybe you should go home and get some rest like your dad said. I think that's some good advice."

I couldn't help but look up at both of them with confusion. Didn't they know how hard it was for me to even pull myself out of bed that morning? I had anticipated this day for the previous ninety days with anguish, eagerness, and undefinable despair all rolled into one. How could they flippantly say, "Let's go home!" It took every ounce of my being to work up the courage to even be sitting in that parking lot.

"I don't know. It's not like the morning sickness is going to change. The longer I wait, the more I'll be worried about coming back here again."

"Well, you know sometimes things happen for a reason and maybe this is God's way of sayin' today is not the day," the worn-out woman said while offering a smile.

I wanted to accept the offer of a smile with every ounce of my soul, but I couldn't muster up a full-on grin. Instead, I begrudgingly wiped more of my vomit from my mouth with her washcloth and hesitantly picked up my feet and put them on the torn floormat of our old Voyager. My father pushed the seat back to make me more comfortable, and I took a deep breath of the hot, humid salty air.

"Maybe it is best for me to go home and rest. I feel like there might be another wave coming soon."

"I think that's a good idea honey," my father said. "Let's get ya home. I'll drive as slow as I can, so the car ride doesn't make you feel more sick." My father rolled down the window and closed the car door. "Maybe if we leave the window down, some of that 'ole Florida air blowin' in your face will make you feel better, sweetie."

He shut the door and walked around to the driver's side of the car. The worn-out woman leaned in the window and touched my shoulder.

"You get some rest little one," she said in her mild and meek, Southern motherly tone.

The sound of her speaking voice was quite the opposite of what I thought she would sound like. When I was in college, I heard pro-life activists were crazy people who had nothing better to do than torture poor young women with no alternatives. I must admit I was surprised at how supernaturally comforting she was, at a time when I needed it the most.

"I will do that."

"Hey! And you might wanna just wait a few days, see how you feel, and take some time to listen."

"Listen to what?"

"To that still small voice."

“I’m not sure I have one of those.”

“Oh no sweetie, we all have it. We all don’t listen to it, but we’ve got it.”

“Well, I’m not sure I’m hearing it, if I do have one.”

“Well, that’s the point now girl, if you’re not hearin’ it that means you’ve got to do a better job listenin.’ And until you hear it, I recommend sittin’ quietly and don’t do anything before you do.”

“Okay, whatever you say. Right now my still small voice is telling me I’m going to throw up again so we better get going. Thank you.”

“Sure thing. Ya’ll take care now,” said the worn-out woman.

The tired, worn-out woman began to back away from our car and my father started slowly pulling out of our spot. The sea of pro-life activists was getting closer. I looked out the window without my green jacket over my head this time, and I could see they were beginning to focus more on the other cars in the parking lot.

“Hey!” I called out the window to the worn-out woman as we were driving off. “What is your name by the way?”

“My name is Ruth!” she yelled. “My name is Ruth!”

I heard her and I didn’t yell back. I mustered enough strength to wave out the window to her, but that was all I could do. It was all I could do at that very moment, and I was just praying that was enough. It was slightly odd that the word ‘praying’ even popped into my head at that very moment. After all, I hadn’t prayed about anything since I was probably ten years old. That was the last time I think I felt like I was enough, or else I probably wouldn’t be in a parking lot of an abortion clinic.

The words “*Am I enough? Am I enough?*” They just seemed to keep repeating in my head. Was this the still small voice that she was talking about? Could it be? I wasn’t sure. After all, I had so many things going on in my head, who in the world can silence all of this noise and listen to a still, quiet voice with all of this chaos going on? Huh? Maybe Ruth was a little crazy and didn’t know what she was talking about. I didn’t have time to worry about it. I wanted to start feeling better as soon as possible, and get myself back to that place as fast as I could.

## Chapter 1

The darkness of the attic covers me like a blanket. The wood is old and weathered, and the musty smell is like a long-lost friend that I haven't seen in quite a while. I used to spend hours in the attic of our old family home, when I was a little girl. Now, this is my favorite retreat when I want to get away from the rest of the world or someone.

Why do little girls believe their Prince Charming will come to rescue them and they will live happily ever after? I still can't answer that question, because I'm not fully convinced it isn't true. The problem is, I still tend to come up here and look for the answers in my rustic, antique hope chest. I suppose that's why we call it a "hope" chest, so we never lose hope.

Tonight, the moonlight is guiding me as I rummage through my old chest in a desperate search for pieces of my past. I can see some young photos of me at the beach, some theater awards, and lots of scrap notes of handwritten songs. The moon's bright light is unstoppable and unrelenting as it pierces through the corner of the old square window – the only window up here. I haven't had a chance to sit and gaze at a full moon like this in over twenty years. This is the hope chest that I've had since I was seven years old. The place where I've kept everything, or almost everything, that's important to me.

I can't get to the bottom without passing by the old pink, raggedy teddy bear, and I don't want to go any further until I pull it close and breathe in the familiar vintage smell. It brings me back to that unforgettable place. The time in my life, that defined who I was, and forged my path forward. Somehow, that little pink bear has always felt like home to me. I remember the day I bought her, not too far from here. I was so proud and so determined to be myself. That was when I knew who I was, what I stood for, and what I could've been. Now, I have no idea where that girl is or who she's become. I'm a complete stranger to myself.



As I place the pink teddy bear back inside the chest, the moonlight catches an old CD, and the glare is blinding. I pick it up, wipe off the dust, and attempt to read the black Sharpie writing on the cover. "To The Love of My Life,' Always, Michael." I thought I lost this mix CD years ago, and there it was. A sparkling gem in the middle of a twisted, rugged past, illuminated in the moonlight. I know I put my infamous, favorite Discman somewhere in there. I would give anything to be able to play this CD right now. That was one thing I could never live without. Twenty years ago, it was like breathing to me.

"Gotcha, Raeanne," Wes whispers forcefully from behind as he wraps his arms around my waist and then suddenly lunges back.

"Aah, what are you doing? You scared me. I didn't hear you come up." I clench the CD harder, and subtly slide it underneath the front of my flowered, bohemian shirt so he doesn't see.

"What the hell do ya think you're doin'?"

"I was just looking for something." My hand trembles, and I slowly back away from him. I can smell the Captain Morgan, and it's making me more nauseous now than ever before. His dark brown eyes are full of pure evil yet empty all at the same time. I can't help but wonder where the man is that I married. I know one thing for certain, he no longer lives here in our home.

"I bet you were." Wes lunges toward me, grabs my hips, pulls me up off of my knees, and slides his hand underneath the bottom of my shirt. My body shivers as I anticipate his next move. I never know which way things will go. He rips the CD from my hand and tries to make out what's on the cover. He smashes it to pieces on the weathered, hardwood floor before me.

"I was just looking for something," I gently whisper. I can feel the tears welling up in my eyes. I can't move. All I can do is look at the shattered pieces of my past lying in front of me.

“You were what?” he taunts.

“Nothing,” I quietly mutter. The word can barely leave my mouth. Nothing is exactly what I feel at this very moment. Nothing, absolutely nothing.

“What’d you say?” he pauses. “I know exactly what you were lookin’ for. That dang thing right there.” Wes points to the broken pieces of my past on the ground like they don’t mean a thing.

“You know that had some of my old songs on it that I wrote.”

“Well, ya sure ain’t gonna be hearing those no more, are ya? The only songs you should be listenin’ to are the ones we wrote together. Ya hear me?”

He reaches out with both arms and grabs my shoulders. I can’t speak. I can’t move, but I stare directly into the depths of his hollow eyes. He pulls me closer, so my nose is barely touching his.

“I said, do ya understand me?”

“Yes,” I softly whisper as I nervously shift my gaze onto the hardwood floor. I’m never sure what will be coming next. His six-foot-two-inch frame devours my five foot four inch petite body. His mere presence makes me feel like I disappear into nothingness whenever he’s around. He devours me.

I pray that he will let it go and eventually pass out downstairs. My whole body is trembling uncontrollably, but I’m trying to keep still so he won’t notice. I’m so tired of showing weakness, but I don’t want things to escalate. It’s never a good outcome when they do.

“Just who do ya think ya are? You think you’re too good for me?” He quickly drives his index finger into my chest and backs me up against the wall. “Ya think ya would’ve gotten that record deal all by your lonesome without me?”

He corners me against the wall, and I know I have no way to escape. He wraps his hands tightly around my collarbone, just enough to let me know who's in charge.

He stares me down and whispers, "Just remember, you can't do anything without me. Ya got that? Ya never have. Ya never will. Don't test me."

I try to turn my head to the right and break free from him, but instead his grip becomes stronger.

"Mommy! Can I have some ice cream?" Grayson calls from downstairs. I have never been so relieved to hear my sweet boy's voice. Wes clenches his fingers even tighter, but not enough to prevent me from breathing or speaking.

"Mommy! Did you hear me?" Grayson is still shouting.

I slowly move my hand from behind my back so that Wes won't see.

"Grayson is downstairs," I whisper under my breath. "Don't do this, Wes. Not now."

"Don't do what? Bring Michael up? That idiot?"

The sweat is beginning to trickle down his forehead, and I can tell he's in that state that doesn't end well. I can feel the sweat streaming down my back, and the smell of his breath in my face makes me want to cringe.

I try to catch a tiny breath and utter my words. "I just want to go downstairs and get Grayson some ice cream. Now let me go. Let me go, Wes."

I'm still easing my hand around to the front of my waist, hoping to catch him off guard and loosen his grip. My trembling fingers finally reach his rugged, weathered hand, and I thrust him off my neck with all my strength. He swiftly turns around and catches my arm behind my back and twists my wrist.

I cry out in pain. I break free and fall to the ground holding my wrist. I quickly crawl to the top of the rickety attic stairs. “I’m coming, honey! Mommy will be right there.”

I race downstairs, holding onto my battered wrist and trying to comfort myself. The pain is excruciating but I try to hide it from Grayson. He’s in the middle of our kitchen floor, playing with his Matchbox cars. I turn around and see Wes following closely behind me.

At least I feel safer now. He won’t do anything in front of Grayson. Wes doesn’t want Grayson to see his flaws and he never lets anyone witness his destructive behavior. After all, it took us five years of endless fertility treatments, three rounds of in-vitro, and three different adoption agencies to finally give us our amazing miracle that’s playing on our kitchen floor.

I should’ve known better, but I always think I can change people for the better, no matter what their circumstances. At least, that’s what I used to think when I was a bright-eyed girl with the world at my feet and God as my guide. I jumped off that lighted path long ago, with a wing and a prayer. I got my wings all right, but I never thought about where I might land.

## Chapter 2

“Hi, Daddy.”

“What’s up, my little man? You wanna watch the game?”

Grayson runs over to Wes and gives him a big high five.

“Yeah, Daddy, let’s do it!”

“It’s past his bedtime.” I bend down to Grayson while still gripping my wrist. “Let’s get you to bed, sweetie.”

I give Wes one of my stern glances because he knows it’s getting late and Grayson should be in bed soon. He’s only five years old and Wes tries to act like Grayson is his twenty-two-year-old drinking buddy.

“Oh, Mommy. Come on please.”

“I said it’s time to go to bed. I mean it. Now come on, it’s late.”

I bend down and grab Grayson, but it hurts to move my wrist.

“Hey, I’ll race ya down the hall instead, honey. Okay? Whoever gets to your room first wins!”

Wes shoots back, “Yeah, it’s never a good time for us to hang out, buddy. Mommy, always knows best, doesn’t she?”

*I hate when he starts trying to put me down in front of Grayson. It drives me absolutely crazy.*

“Goodnight, Daddy.”

Wes responds, “Goodnight, son.” Wes walks over to the wet bar in the dining room and pours himself a huge shot of his Captain Morgan. I look over at him with disgust and he stares me down as he takes a big swig of the stuff, almost as if to dare me to say anything. I don’t want

things to escalate any further, so I turn my back and try to catch up with Grayson down the hallway. My wrist is throbbing and I can see it's beginning to swell up really bad.

Grayson turns the corner into his Pokemon-inspired bedroom, with a few hints of Minecraft and Batman dispersed throughout his favorite space in the house. The "Thomas the Trains" are pushed into the corner, like a few pairs of old shoes that don't seem to fit anymore. A large stuffed *Pikachu* adorns the top of his bed pillows with the perfect Pokemon bedspread to match. Grayson is becoming more of a little young man every single day. It makes me long for the days when we would push the *Thomas the Trains* around the wooden track at night or read Dr. Seuss before saying our prayers at night.

Grayson plows headfirst into his Pokemon bed and yells, "I won, Mommy!"

"Well, yes you sure did. Mommy is getting slower by the day, and you are getting faster, honey."

"Mommy, will you read me that *Sam I Am*? We haven't done that one in so long."

"That sounds like a great idea honey." Just when I think he's passed a stage, he always surprises me and becomes my little toddler again. I must admit, it's still nice to get flashbacks of those moments from time to time.

His custom-made wooden bookcase sits right next to his bed. It's filled with every book I have ever bought him since he was a baby. Some of the books I got even before he was born, when all I had was hope and faith that one day I would become a mother. At one time, that dream seemed so far out of reach. I even had his name engraved in big red letters on the front of the bookcase. I spot the Dr. Seuss book that has always been his favorite, grab it, and crawl into his bed. We snuggle up together under the covers and I begin to read.

“Wait, Mommy. I want to read this part. ‘I will not eat them here or there. I will not eat them anywhere. I do not eat green eggs and ham. I do not like them, Sam-I-Am. Say! In the dark?’” Grayson laughs.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice the doorknob of the bedroom door slowly begins to turn and the bright light from the hallway begins to flood the floor. It’s him. Wes peeks his head in. His eyes are blood red and the scent of liquor engulfs the room. Wes stumbles toward the bed and kneels next to Grayson.

“We’re just finishing our story,” I say softly.

“Don’t let me interrupt little man. You go right ahead.”

“Actually, I think Grayson was just finishing up.” I slowly close the book and turn out the light on Grayson’s nightstand. “It’s getting late, honey.” I kiss Grayson on the forehead and jump out of bed.

“Okay, Mommy. You forgot to tell me how much you love me, though.”

Grayson looks up at me with those big, bright beautiful blue eyes and waits for the answer he expects from me every single night.

I can’t help but smile, even in the midst of all the other chaos. “To the moon and back,” I reply.

Grayson gives me that smile that makes everything in my world right again and slips his thumb into his mouth. That is always the signal that he’s ready to call it a night. We spent several months using a thumb guard to cure him of his bad habit, but nothing ever worked. We even tried putting the nasty-tasting nail polish on his thumb to make him stop, but the child has more willpower than most. He will battle for what he wants, and this was one fight I fought for many years and finally chose to surrender for the sake of my own sanity.

I motion for Wes to come with me and leave the room too, but he chooses to linger by Grayson's bedside. I thought if I left, Wes would follow me.

"Time for you to close those handsome eyes and dream sweet dreams. I will see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Mommy."

"Goodnight, Sweetie."

I reach the doorway and look back at Wes, hoping he will catch the clue and follow me.

"I'll be right there," Wes remarks. "Me and my son need a little guy time."

"Grayson needs to go to bed now."

Wes' eyes grow narrow and the brown iris disappears. I've seen this look before, *anger*. Something inside me tonight just won't let it go. I feel like a can of Pepsi that's been shaken one too many times, and if anyone pops off the lid, I will explode. My standard protocol is usually quietly getting away and praying he will pass out. Wes can hardly stand up tonight, and I can see the rage boiling in his eyes. I don't want him anywhere near Grayson by himself. At any moment, he could snap. If he's going to snap, I will always make sure it's with me, not Grayson.

"Did you see the letter on the counter from the record label?" I ask. "It came today."

"No, did you open it?" he asks.

"No, it's addressed to you, so I didn't open it."

"Well, it could be that royalty check."

"Yeah, you should come out and take a look."

Wes quickly stumbles toward me at the door and forgets to say goodnight to Grayson.



“Time for you to close those handsome big blue eyes and dream sweet dreams. I will see you in the morning,” I say, with a sigh of relief. Once again, I have narrowly escaped another disastrous moment.

Wes brushes by me and bumps my wrist, yet again. I look right at him, but he’s too intoxicated to notice. It hurts so bad, and it’s beginning to turn purple and swell more and more by the second.

“Goodnight, Mommy.”

“Goodnight, Sweetie.”

I close Grayson’s door and Wes heads over to the kitchen counter to find the letter from the label, and I make a quick left down the hallway to the music room. I’m praying Wes will be happy that he finally got his royalty check from the record label, and maybe leave me alone for the rest of the night. I hope he won’t spend it all in one week this time.

“Hey! Don’t ya walk away from me!” Wes shouts down the hallway. “Where do ya think you’re goin’?”

I instantly turn around, making sure he doesn’t open Grayson’s bedroom door. “I just have some work to finish in the music room.”

I make a quick left into the music room, hoping he’ll go to the living room, watch Sports Center for the night, and pass out. I gently close the door behind me, thankful for the silence. I quietly turn the lock and make sure it’s secure. The music room is my other refuge, besides the attic. It’s filled with numerous gold albums strewn all over the wall, my gorgeous white baby grand piano, and our collection of *Fender* and *Gibson* country guitars adorn the walls. Right in the middle of all of them is my favorite electric blue *Gibson* acoustic guitar. If I can get my hands on it and strum a few chords, my heart will stop racing. Playing music always calms me

down. I attempt to grab by blue guitar off the wall, and as I raise my arm and grip the neck, reality starts to sink in. I can't play anymore. It hurts too much. I want to go into the kitchen to grab an ice pack out of the freezer, but I know if I do, I will have to deal with Wes. I'd rather suffer than have to face him again.

I sink to the floor, pull my knees to my chest, and lean up against our wall full of guitars. I rest my arm on top of my knees and stare at the damage, counting the minutes until it might be safe for me to go to the kitchen again, praying he'll pass out soon.

## Chapter 3

I look up to the sound of the doorknob beginning to shake. It's Wes. He starts beating on the door. Now, I know now he's not going to let tonight go.

"What are you doin'?' Let me in!"

"I'm just going to finish that one song I've been working on."

"Now?"

He's still trying to get in the door, and I know if he doesn't stop, he will wake up Grayson, and I don't want Grayson to witness any of this chaos. I unlock the door and let him come in.

"Yeah, I've got to finish that one song, so I need to concentrate."

He doesn't know how much pain I'm in, and of course, he has already forgotten what he did to me earlier. He's too bleary-eyed to even notice my swelling wrist.

"Well, I don't want you to do that right now. Why don't you come on upstairs with me and call it a night? Ya know what I mean? You can get back to this later."

He reaches out and pulls me toward him. The aroma of Captain Morgan is seeping through his skin, and I'm forced to inhale the stench as he puts his huge, muscular arms around my waist. I'm trapped. He tries to kiss me.

"Wes, get off me. You're so drunk. You need to go sleep it off."

"What ya mean I'm drunk?" Wes answers. 'I'm fine, baby. I want you.'" He grabs the bottom of my shirt with his two rough hands and yanks me up against his chest. I know his next line, before he even says it. It's the way he tries to reconcile what he did to me earlier. "Why are ya playin' so hard to get? You know ya want me."

I quickly try to grab his wrists and get him off me, but I can't bend my right hand. Instead, I take my left arm and slap his wrists away. Wes is so drunk that he stumbles toward my piano and tries to regain his footing fast. I see the rage in his dark eyes. Instead of looking away and apologizing like I typically do, I stared directly into his deep, dark eyes- those same eyes I said "yes" to, on our wedding day.

Wes reaches behind himself to gain momentum, and I know his fist is coming for my face any second. Something inside me is percolating, and I can't stop the adrenaline. He's eye level with me and almost in a squat, because he is unable to regain his balance. With all of my strength, I kick my right foot into his lower chest, and he loses his balance. In a flash, that feels like slow motion, he falls back, and his head catches the corner of my white, baby grand piano bench. He collapses on the floor.

I stand frozen for a few seconds, waiting to see if he will move. He doesn't. I see blood seeping out on the floor from behind his head.

My thoughts are running like a movie reel. I'm replaying every single time he hit me or scarred me emotionally with his degrading words. I can't remember any of the good; all I can remember is all the bad times. Why is that I wonder? How do I lose all those great memories so fast, yet cling to all the horrible moments that changed my life forever?

That piano is the one thing I still own from my childhood. That instrument has been my saving grace through the years, that defines who I am, because learning to play piano from the age of three changed my life forever. I can't help but wonder in this moment, how it will also change my life forever now.

I move slowly toward the piano bench. I notice the bright red blood spattered across my gorgeous white piano bench- it's no longer pure. I bend down to get closer to his body. I'm still

frightened, thinking any second, he could reach out and strangle me if he wanted to, he could truly get rid of me – once and for all. Still shaking, I gently touch his neck to see if I can feel his pulse. He’s still alive. I breathe a deep, confusing sigh of relief. At least he’s not dead.

“What have I done? Oh my God, what have I done? Okay, calm down. Just breathe. Just breathe, Raeanne. Everything is going to be okay. Somehow. Somehow. I don’t know how. But it will. It will. Just breathe.”

*I’m in shock. I can’t believe I fought back. I finally reached my limit. I didn’t know I still had a limit after fifteen years. I could usually withstand anything. I surprised even myself tonight.*

I start looking around the room, desperately searching for something to stop the bleeding. I spot our old band T-shirt up on the wall with the name of our band, *Sugar Shack*, across the front and run to it like it’s my Savior. I rip it off the wall with my left hand and gently lift his head off the ground. I stuff the shirt between his head and the floor. The bleeding begins to subside. Thank God, he’s still unconscious. At least now the bleeding is stopping, and it looks like he will survive.

I dart out of the music room and run down the hallway to Grayson’s room. I quietly open his bedroom door and peek in to see if he’s still asleep. I pray Grayson didn’t hear all the commotion on the other side of the house. He’s still fast asleep. I close his door, immediately hit the stairs, and race up to our bedroom. I sprint to the closet and pull a few pairs of pants and shirts into my pink duffel bag. I grab my favorite pair of sandals, some undergarments and socks, and chuck them into the bag.

I race down the stairs and quickly stick my head in the music room to ensure Wes is still unconscious. Honestly, I didn’t want to check his pulse again, knowing if the news wasn’t good,

it might stop my mission.

I pause at the door of the music room. Waiting. Waiting...to see if, at any moment, Wes may move. Five seconds feels like five minutes. I can't wait any longer. If I wait too long, I'll lose my nerve. I've been so close. I was so close before, and at the last moment, I lose my nerve...every time. *Every single time, I lose my nerve. This time is different. If I don't do it now, will I ever? I have to do it. I'll be literally or spiritually dead if I don't. Either way, I'm no longer willing to take that chance. This is it. This is that chance I've been praying for, since the first time he hit me. God must still be listening to me; who would've known? It has been a long time since He has answered my prayers, and even though I still might not believe in God, I'm not going to question it right now.*

I hurry down the hallway and quietly open Grayson's bedroom door. He's still fast asleep. I go into his closet and grab a couple of his favorite T-shirts and some pants. His red sneakers are a must, and I shove everything into his little *Yoda* suitcase. Grayson never takes a trip without it. I make my way to the front door and drop our bags in the foyer.

I race back to Grayson's room and scoop him up the best I can with my other arm. He opens his eyes briefly as he nestles his sweet head on my shoulder. He still likes to sleep with his favorite stuffed rabbit, *Tabby*, so I also ensure *Tabby's* tucked securely under my arm.

"Where are we goin', Mommy?" Grayson asks.

"We're just gonna go for a little ride, honey, nothing to worry about. You can sleep in the car. We're gonna go on a little adventure, okay?"

Grayson cracks his eyes open again, and I feel him staring at my wrist as we walk to the front door.

"Mommy, your wrist looks like it's got a big boo-boo on it."

“Oh, I know, honey. It’ll get better, don’t worry. You don’t worry about a thing. You can go right back to sleep, okay?” I try to swallow and take a deep breath, but the breaths aren’t coming easily.

“What happened to you? Where’s Daddy? Is he comin’?”

“Shh. Shh. Quiet now.” My voice is shaking and I can hardly utter the words.

“Is he comin’ with us?”

“We’ve got to be quiet. We don’t want to wake Daddy up. No, he can’t come with us. Daddy’s sleepin’ right now. It’s just you and me. We get to take this adventure all by ourselves. Okay?”

Grayson is so exhausted he just drifts off to sleep on my shoulder as I grab the car keys off the kitchen counter and dart out the front door. I’m praying Wes won’t wake up until after we’re gone. If I can just get us in the car and out of the driveway, we’ll be safe.

I finally get to our minivan, and I’m able to juggle the car door and Grayson, to get him in the back car seat.

“Now you just wait right here,” I whisper. “Mommy is going to get a few more things out of the house, and I’ll be right back.”

Grayson doesn’t move. He’s holding on to *Tabby* as a headrest, and he’s sleeping like a child sleeps, with not a care in the world.

I run as fast as I can back to the front foyer to grab our bags. I hear a noise from the music room and my heart stops.

“Aaaahhh. Damn it!” Wes grumbles.

All I can think is, *it’s over. I’m done.*

I snatch Grayson's medication in the kitchen cabinet. He can't live without it, and I almost forgot it in all the madness. I grab the *Yoda* suitcase and my duffel bag and quietly close the front door, so Wes hopefully doesn't hear me. *I can't turn back now, or I'll never forgive myself.*

I sprint out to our minivan and chuck the bags in the passenger seat. Suddenly, I can't remember how to even put the keys in the ignition. It's as if I'm frozen. *What's wrong with me? You can do this, Raeanne. You're an intelligent, strong woman. You can do this on your own. You can't go back. It's over. This chapter of your life is over. You've got to close the book and stop rereading the same stupid story time and time again, expecting it's going to end any differently.*

I somehow wrestle the car keys into the ignition, slam the car in reverse, and hit the gas as hard as I can. I back out the minivan and turn around in our vast circular driveway. All the money in the world couldn't keep me here, no matter how great this house is. I decorated every square inch of it with my own two hands. This house has always been mine. Wes has never felt like it's ours and neither have I.

I can't help but peek in the rearview mirror as we make our way down the long gravel road to the main road. There's no sign of Wes.



## Chapter 4

I continue to keep an eye on my rearview mirror, praying that I won't see the distant headlights of Wes' silver Porsche. The flashing lights of Music City are racing by my minivan, as I watch the red neon signs of *Tootsie's*, *The Stage* and the *Wild Horse Saloon* blink by my driver's side window. My thoughts are racing, and I feel like I'm in some sort of a dream.

I approach a traffic light turning yellow and I slow down to come to a stop. I look to my left and I see all the hopeful singer/songwriters standing online outside the clubs on lower Broadway, clinging to their guitars with stars in their eyes. That used to be me. I am somewhat envious of their naivete and their innocence. Lower Broadway is packed with tourists, musicians, and locals looking for a fun and exhilarating night out on the town. I used to live and breathe the music life on these streets every night. I can still smell the smoky air and feel the vibrations of the music reverberating through my soul, as I watched the crowds cheer and beg for me to play another song. As I look out from my minivan window now, it all feels like a foreign country to me- almost like I was never even here.

The light turns green and I am jolted out of my daydream. I glance in the rearview mirror again to make sure Grayson is still sleeping. His head is scrunched up next to *Tabby* and his mouth is wide open. He has always been a mouth breather when he sleeps. As I turn the right-hand signal on and get ready to make the turn onto Interstate 40. As I turn on the highway, for a split second I feel a calm peace wash over me. Once again, I check in my rearview mirror as I try to merge into the lane. All I can see are the blinking lights of Music City, no sign of Wes' Porsche, and my beautiful boy fast asleep in his car seat. Something was telling me I did the right thing.

I glance down at my swelling wrist again and by now it's quite clear that I need to get to a hospital fast. I can't let this go any longer. About thirty miles outside of Nashville, I see a

hospital sign and take the exit ramp. I know if I let it go until the morning, I might be in a real fix. I can no longer bend it at all, without excruciating pain radiating up and down my arm. I need a doctor to take a look at it as soon as possible.

I pull into the hospital parking lot and put the minivan in park. “Hey, sweetie. It’s time to get up,” I whisper. “Mommy has to go visit the doctor really quick, okay?”

Grayson wrestles around in his seat and grabs Tabby. “Where are we, Mommy?”

“We’re at the hospital, sweetie. We’re just gonna run in really quickly, okay?”

I get out and grab Grayson out of his car seat, put him gently on my hip with my left hand, and make my way to the emergency room entrance.

“Mommy, is this an emergency?”

“Oh no, sweetie. Mommy just needs someone to look at my wrist so it gets better faster.”

“Why did your boo-boo get so bad? It’s purple and big.”

“It’s fine. We’ll get it all taken care of.” I walk right up to the front desk and hope there’s not a long wait.

A dark-haired woman looks up from her computer screen and adjusts her red-framed glasses. “How can I help you, ma’am?”

“I think I’ve hurt my wrist and I’d like a doctor to look at it.”

She hands me a clipboard. “Please fill this out for me. The wait shouldn’t be too long.”

I grab the clipboard with the same hand I’m holding Grayson, thinking about how in the world I’m going to manage to write with my right hand. I know I can’t. The pain is too great. The dark-haired woman sees the perplexed look on my face.

“If you’re unable to fill it out, don’t worry. The nurse can fill it out for you when you get called back. Do you have insurance?”

“Yeah, I do. I just forgot my card.”

I suddenly remember that I didn't grab my purse that has all of my credit cards and official documents in it. I left it at the house.

“What insurance do you have?” she asks.

My mind goes blank. I haven't been to a doctor in so long, I can't even remember what type of insurance we have. Wes always handles that kind of stuff.

“I can't remember. It's through my husband's production company. I'm sorry.”

Grayson is being patient, probably because he's so exhausted. The woman looks up at me with a sympathetic look.

“Well, no worries. As soon as you remember, you can just call us back tomorrow and let me know, okay?”

I sigh a deep breath of relief. “Thank you. You're a savior.”

She smiles. “I wish I was, but that wrist definitely looks like it needs some saving.”

“Yeah, it's not getting any better.”

“The nurse will call you back shortly. You can have a seat.”

I shuffle us over to a chair next to the television set, hoping the cartoons might entertain Grayson for a bit. Fortunately, they called me back pretty quickly. The nurse led us back to a room behind a curtain. She took my vital signs and then asked me a few questions.

“So, what happened here?”

“Oh, I was just trying to move a statue up on the top shelf of our attic and the darn thing fell down right on top of my wrist.”

Grayson is sitting on my lap and looks up at me with his big, bright blue eyes. I look away and direct my attention toward the nurse. I can't even look my son in the eyes as I continue my fabricated story.

"Must've been some huge statue to do that much damage. Hope you don't need to use your hand or your wrist for work," she smirks, while giving me an unwavering glance.

"Yeah, it was pretty big." I nervously put Grayson down on the floor so I can get a closer look at the damage. It does look a lot worse in the white lights of the emergency room. I didn't really have time to even focus on it until now.

The nurse stands up and whisks back the curtain. "The doctor should be in soon to take a closer look at your wrist."

"Thank you."

About fifteen minutes later, a tall man with wire-framed glasses and tossed brown hair, busts through the light blue curtain.

"Well, what happened here?" he asks, looking for my reaction.

"I think I hurt my wrist really bad."

"I can see that." He pulls up a stool next to the hospital bed. "And what is your name, little man?" He looks over at Grayson leaning on the bottom of the bed with Tabby.

"Grayson," he whispers.

"Now that is an awesome name. I had a best friend named Grayson once." Grayson smiles and the doctor turns his attention again to me. "So how'd you do this?"

"I was reaching up to grab something off of a high shelf in our attic, and a statue fell and hit my wrist pretty bad."

“Uh huh, I see.” The doctor nods with his arms crossed. Well, let’s take a look.” He pulls the stool closer and reaches for my hand to cradle my wrist. My cell phone starts ringing in my purse. “Do you need to get that?”

“Oh, no. I’m good. It’s probably my mother or something.”

“I guess she likes to call you at midnight?” he laughs. I look at the floor and pray that my phone stops ringing soon but he keeps calling, over and over again. The incessant ringing is piercing to my emotions and I’m starting to hyperventilate. I know it’s Wes. My heart starts pounding faster and faster, and I can feel the sweat start dripping down my back.

The doctor looks over at my purse on the chair.

“Your mom must really need to talk to you. Are you sure you don’t want me to give you a moment?”

“No, I’m good really. I just want to get out of here as soon as possible and get this fixed.”

“Well, usually if something falls on your wrist it wouldn’t be this swollen. This looks like something or *someone* twisted your wrist pretty bad.” The doctor attempts to slightly turn my wrist to the left.

“Oww. Yeah, that hurts a lot.”

“I think you’ve got yourself a sprained wrist for sure, but we’ll need an X-Ray to see if it’s broken or not.”

“Okay.”

“The nurse will take you back for an x-ray and if it is broken, we’ll get you fixed up in no time. You’ll just need a cast for about six to eight weeks.”

“Oh, great. That’s exactly what I need right now.”

He smiles. “Don’t worry, it’ll go by fast.”

I take another deep breath. “Thanks, let’s hope so.” I reach over and wrap my left arm around Grayson in a tight hug.

“Don’t worry, Mommy. You’re going to be okay soon.”

“Thanks, sweetie.”

“Can I be the first one to sign your cast if it’s broken?”

“You better be.” I smile and hold him even tighter. The nurse comes in and takes me back to the x-ray room, and another nurse offers to stay with Grayson while he waits. Sure enough, my wrist is broken. The doctor sets the cast and we can’t wait to hit the road. As I get into our minivan and set my purse on the front seat, the light comes on my phone again and Wes’ name is scrolling across my screen. I put it on vibrate and turn it over, so Grayson won’t see the flashing light. I knew it was Wes.

We hit the road and drive through the night. I knew exactly where we were going because there is only one place in this world I could go when things go wrong. Home. My real home, Meadowbrook, Florida, the only place I can ever go when things go wrong.

## Chapter 5

As I pull up into my parent's long gravel driveway, I put the window down and breathe in the salty, humid air as the sun makes its way across the horizon. Grayson is still asleep in his car seat and I can hear the crashing of the waves as they hit the beach behind my childhood home. Our grand white Victorian home with emerald green shutters and that large wrap-around porch still stands proud and tall against the clear, blue sky.

The weathered white picket fence hasn't lost its luster. I can tell that my mother is still diligently keeping that old fence intact each and every day. Her favorite pastime has always been painting that picket fence until there is no single chip of paint or gluing the broken pieces back together that have fallen to the ground. The Florida weather is unforgiving when it comes to wood and that fence has been no exception to the rule. As a little girl, there were moments when I thought my mother might love that fence more than me.

I put the minivan in park and quietly get out and open the back sliding door to quietly grab Grayson and try not to wake him up. I know how exhausted he has to be after such a crazy night. I take him in my arms and place him on my hip, as he begins to wrestle out of his deep sleep.

"It's ok, sweetie. We're going to give Nana and PopPop a surprise visit, okay?"

"We're at Nana's & PopPop's house?"

"Yes, sweetie. But I bet they're still sleeping, it's really early in the morning. So we're just going to go in and stay on the couch for a couple of hours, until they wake up, okay?"

"Okay," Grayson whispers.

I walk around to the side gate of the fence and the first thing I notice are my mother's beautiful Sakura trees are in full bloom. Their branches are dripping over the fence and their pink

petals are glistening in the fresh sunlight that is rising up over the ocean. To my left, I can see the sand dunes with the seagrass dancing back and forth, as the foam-cruled waves make their way to the shore. This place is beyond special to me-there's nothing like it anywhere. I've been all over the world, but there's something about this home that's unique.

We finally get to the stone walkway that my father made years ago. Each stone has one of our names on it- me, Sara, my sister, and my mother and father. Five years ago they added a stone for Grayson, too. He gets such a kick out of it when he sees it.

I reach down to the left of the back porch stoop and lift up the bright red stone cardinal that has been there since I was a baby. The key is a bit rusted, but my father always says it's the key to his heart and he'll never get a new one because it's not broken. I struggle to get it in the keyhole, as I try to juggle Grayson on my hip and my duffel bag on my shoulder. It finally turns and I quietly open the wooden green door, praying I won't wake them up or worse yet, make them think someone is breaking into their house. I would've called, but what was I supposed to say? I need to escape from my husband before something really bad happens?

I put down my bag and scan the kitchen. There is not one plate in the sink and you could eat off the countertops, they're so clean. My mother is a neat freak and her O.C.D. does not allow one single thing to be out of place. In a way, I admire her tenacity and ability to live such an organized and tidy life. Mine has been quite the opposite of that for a long time.

As I walk over to the living room, I notice how still and quiet it is and it looks like the oriental rug's fringe has been recently brushed by my mother. I lay Grayson on the pink-flowered couch and tuck the embroidered bird throw pillow underneath his little head. I collapse on the other end of the couch and I realize I don't even have the energy to go get Grayson's Yoda suitcase from the van. It can wait. He's fast asleep as well. I prop my wrist up on my



stomach and lean back. I take a deep breath and realize that I haven't done that for the last twenty-four hours. I've been running on nothing but adrenaline and maybe that's why I haven't even been able to focus on the pain in my wrist. All I know is I made it here, and that was my goal. We're safe- at least for now. I'm simply exhausted and before I know it, I'm closing my eyes and drifting off to sleep.

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I wake up to the sound of my mother's footsteps stomping down the stairs. I open my eyes and for a moment, I'm not sure where I am. Everything feels like a blur. I watch as my mom walks to the kitchen in her fluffy white robe and her blue glasses entangled in her light brown shoulder-length hair. She is muttering to herself.

"Now, where did I put those darn things?" She combs the kitchen counter and looks on the breakfast table.

I'm hoping not to wake up Grayson, because he is still fast asleep with his head cradled in my lap. I don't want to move. "Mom, we're here."

She continues to still look for whatever she is trying to find. She has always been hard of hearing and it seems like her hearing loss has become much worse since I last saw her.

"Mom," I loudly whisper across the room, hoping she'll hear me this time. I don't want to scare her.

She turns around and jumps.

"Oh, Lord have mercy." She grabs her chest. "Raeanne, what the heck are you doin' here? You just about gave me a full-on heart attack, child. You have been doin' this to me since you came out of my womb."

She walks over to the living room and hovers over us.

“Well, I’d give you a great big hug but it looks like I can’t do that.” My mother stares at my cast and gives me the look that I always dread- the one that pierces my soul every single time. “What in the world happened to you, young lady? Well, let me take that back. You’re not so young anymore.”

I shift my gaze to Grayson and he begins to stir. He is clinging to Tabby and he opens his bright blue eyes.

“Nana.” He opens his arms wide and my mother gently picks him up and wraps her arms around him as if she’ll never let him go.

“How blessed am I to see your sweet little face in my living room this mornin’.”

“Yeah, Nana. It’s a surprise for you.”

“Well, dear Lord it is. The best surprise I’ve had in a long time. It’s been a couple of years since I’ve seen you last. You are such a big boy now. Look at ya.”

My mother steps back and plants Grayson’s feet on the couch. He puts his hands on his hips and pulls his shoulders back.

“I’m Superman, Nana.”

“Well, yes you are and how is my favorite little man in the universe?”

“I’m good.”

“And who do you love the most?”

“Nana banana.” He giggles and my mother tickles his tummy and pushes him back on the couch.

You had a long drive. I wish I’d know ya’ll were comin’ down. I would’ve made ya a big chocolate cake.”

“That’s my favorite, Nana.”

“I know it. Well, what do ya say you and I make that later on?”

“Yes! Yes, Nana!”

“Okay, well you know what I do have right now? I have some matchbox cars over there in that kitchen drawer. Why don’t you go get them and play some?”

“Thank you, Nana.”

Grayson runs over to the kitchen and pulls the matchbox cars out of the drawer and starts playing. My mother sits down on the couch next to me and pats my leg.

“Now, what in the world happened to your wrist?”

I run my fingers over the cast. “Oh, it’s nothing, Mom. I was reaching up to get something off the top shelf in our attic and this statue fell on my wrist. It’s fine. I’ll live.”

My mother gives me that look. “Uh, uh. I see, Raeanne. You know I’ve been seein’ a lot more than apparently you’ve been seein’ for quite a while now. I know you didn’t just come down here to drop in and say hi after two years.”

I look over at Grayson playing on the kitchen floor.

“Yeah, well, sometimes certain things are more important than others.”

“You know what they say, you gotta put your oxygen mask on first when the plane is goin’ down, before you put it on your child. You’re not any good to anyone if you don’t do that.”

I roll my eyes. “Mom, I don’t want to talk about this right now. Is Dad still asleep?”

“Didn’t Sara tell you?”

“Tell me what? I haven’t spoken to my little sister in eons.”

“Oh, honey. I thought you were speakin’ to each other again. He’s down at Meadowbrook Hospice.”

“What?” I throw the blanket off me and jump to my feet. “I can’t believe the words that just came out of my mother’s mouth. “Hospice? Isn’t that where you go to die? What on earth happened and why didn’t you call me, Mom? What’s wrong with him?”

“He hasn’t been doing too good for a while now. You know how his lungs have been givin’ out on him and it just got really bad this past year. You know how your father hates doctors and I told him he should go, and when he finally did, the news wasn’t too good.”

“And you didn’t think to call me? And let me know my father is dying? I can’t believe you, Mom.”

“Sara said she’d let ya know and I know you’ve always got so much goin’ on up there in Nashville. I didn’t want to bother you.”

“Oh, come on, Mom. Really?”

“I didn’t want to worry you. I know how close you and your father are.”

“That’s exactly why you should’ve called me.”

My mother shrugs her shoulders and runs her fingers through her hair. She knocks her blue glasses off of her head.

“Well, that’s where the heck they are. I’ve been lookin’ for these darn things for a day now. I’m sure not getting’ any younger either. You’ll be puttin’ me in that place next.”

My mother pulls her glasses out of her hair and sets them on the tip of her nose. “Listen, Raeanne, the doctors have diagnosed him with pulmonary fibrosis. There’s no cure and there’s nothin’ they can do for him. It’s up to the Lord. All we can do is pray.”

“I’m going to see him.”

“Visiting hours don’t start until 2 p.m. You can’t get in there before then. Why don’t I make ya some breakfast and then we’ll all head over there together. Sara should be comin’ here too in about an hour. I know he’ll be so glad to see you, Raeanne.”

“Yeah, I hope so.” I try to hide the rage that’s boiling up inside of me and I sit back down on the couch. “We need to stay here for a while, okay? I don’t know how long, but just until we can get back on our feet again.”

“Are you leavin’ him?”

“I don’t know what I’m doin’ Mom. I’m taking it one day at a time. I do know I need some time to think and some space.”

I brush my fingers over my cast as I notice the aching start to become more prominent. I raise my eyes to meet my mother’s and she shakes her head.

“I don’t want to talk about this in front of Grayson. He’s been through enough already.”

My mother gets up and I follow her over to meet Grayson.

“Now why don’t you and I get started on makin’ some yummy breakfast for us. What do ya say?”

“Yay! Grayson yells. “Pancakes, Nana?”

“Well, pancakes it is for my one and only wonderful grandson.” My mom grabs Grayson in her arms and looks over her shoulder at me. “We’ll finish this discussion later.”

I nod my head and start folding the quilt on the couch, which was a genuine source of comfort to me last night. I watch Grayson start to set the ingredients out on the kitchen counter and my mom wraps one of her old aprons around his little frame. I can’t describe the look on my mom’s face, because it’s unlike any look she’s ever had through the years- a pure joy that I never saw on her face when I was a child.

## Chapter 6

The morning hours dragged on what seemed like forever and finally I heard my mom's voice from the second level. "Are you almost ready, Raeanne? You better get Grayson ready too!" I start looking around at the mess Grayson has created on the kitchen floor and I know my mom is going to be livid. "Visiting hours are gonna be over soon and you know how your father is. He'll want to be asleep in an hour and you never know when it will be the last time we get to see him on God's green earth."

Grayson is racing his Hot Wheels cars into the white shaker cabinets of my parents' newly restored kitchen. I'm trying to pick up a hundred pieces of Legos that are strewn all over the place with one hand. I cringe just thinking about the fact that I can no longer use my right hand. I don't want my mother to slip now and blame us for the excruciating pain in her feet. The pain in my wrist is excruciating and I can't even budge it. I'm still trying to get used to the cast, but I'm not adapting too well. I've been playing guitar since I was five, and this is the first time in my life that I can't use my right hand. In a strange way, I'm grateful for the pain but I'm also trying to control the deep anger that rages inside me. No one has ever been able to take away my gift of music, until now. I suppose that is why I finally had the courage to leave this time.

I know all too well how my five-year-old's favorite pastime can quickly turn a peaceful home into a horror-stricken battlefield.

"Is Sarah coming with us?" I yelled. My mother is swiftly making her way down the stairs and I'm trying to hide the collateral damage on the floor as quickly as possible.

"Yes, your sister is gonna grace us with her presence, and she's on her way here now to ride with us to the hospital. She's goin' back to the big ole' city tonight though, to go out with some of her friends."

“That’s nice. Apparently nothing’s changed. Living the single life entails she always has somewhere important to be or she has more important people to see other than her own family, even though I haven’t seen her in how many years? And Dad’s on his deathbed. Makes perfect sense.”

“Well, maybe you should try getting some.” My mother abruptly flies into the kitchen like a hurricane, looking for her favorite blue glasses. I don’t want to tell her that Grayson is using them as a launchpad at the moment. I quickly snatch them off the floor and slip them into my right pocket before she notices them on the ground. I can feel the right arm of her favorite pair of glasses is loose, thanks to my son’s creative imagination. Through the years, I have learned that the less she knows the better. I don’t want to deal with the aftermath right now, before we go to see my dad. This day has been difficult enough for me. She spots the Lego disaster on her brand-new hardwood floors, as Grayson launches a Hot Wheel that lunges directly into her shin.

“Oww!! Lord have mercy, Grayson. Can you please watch where you’re aimin’ those things? You’re gonna put me in the hospital, too.” I pick Grayson up and rest him on my hip. I remind him that we try not to hit people with the Hot Wheels.

He turns to my mother and timidly utters, “Sorry Nana. Wuv you.”

“Why don’t you grab a few of your cars and let’s put them in your backpack, so you can show them to PopPop at the hospital,” I quickly courage him to diffuse the situation. “Sound good?”

“PopPop is gonna wuv them Mama!” Grayson agreed.

I remembered my mother was trying to make some point before. It's been quite a while since I've been able to have an adult conversation without a million interruptions. "What were you saying Mom, before? Some of what?"

"I was sayin'...some friends. You should get some friends, instead of that crazy shell of a man you decided to marry. I don't know what you were drinkin' the day you said yes to that fool. Blinded by the curse of music I suppose. I still can't find my glasses. Have you seen 'em?"

"Grayson, why don't you run to the bathroom quick and see if you have to go potty before we go?" I pleaded with him.

"But I don't have to go Mama," Grayson whined.

"Please go ahead and try honey, okay?" Grayson runs down the hallway and slams the door to the bathroom.

I turned to my mom and gave her *my look*. "Mom, if you recall I wasn't the one drinking all of the time. Remember? That's why we're in this mess in the first place. And I would appreciate it if you don't talk about this in front of Grayson. This has been hard enough for him."

"That's right. The key word is "we." *I* shouldn't be in this mess. *I* didn't choose him. And the last thing in the world *I* need right now is to have my daughter and my grandson livin' back in my beautiful Victorian dream home that now looks like a tornado hit it every single day. Lord, have mercy."

I want so badly to say she's wrong and talk back to her, but I keep quiet instead. Even though I'm now a forty-something-year-old woman, my mother still makes me feel like I'm in preschool whenever I'm in her presence. A distant voice softly whispers in my ear, "Honor thy mother" and I wonder where that came from because I haven't heard that voice since I was a little girl. After all, I know she's right. Grayson doesn't deserve any of this. This is all my fault. I



made the choices and those choices brought me to this place. If only I had taken that other road twenty years ago. Who knows where I would be right now?

“Hello? I’m here!”

My mother and I turn toward the kitchen back door and realize it’s Sara.

“Oh, hey honey,” my mother replies. “You made it. Thank the Lord.”

My mother rushes over to Sara and gives her a huge hug. Sara’s long, dark hair falls around her and I notice her long necklace with a peace symbol and the flowered headband carefully placed around her forehead. Her black leather pants and her bright pink shirt are hard to miss. She has always been the more fashionable one of the two of us. Lately, I’m lucky if I have a clean, matching outfit for the day and if I do, I’m grateful.

“Hey, Sara,” I say begrudgingly.

“What the heck are you doing here?” Sara lets go of Mom and walks toward me.

“Long story. I don’t want to get into it right now, Sara. Okay?”

Sara looks down at my cast and then turns her gaze toward me again. “What happened to your wrist?”

“It was just something stupid. A statue fell on it up in our old attic.”

Sara stares a little longer at my wrist. “Well, that sucks and that’s kind of weird.” She gives me a look of confusion and opens her eyes a little wider.

“Stuff happens, Sara. It’s no big deal.”

“Sure does. In your life stuff keeps happening every single day since the day you were born. At least, that’s what Mom says all the time. Nothing but drama.”

I put my left hand on my hip and stare at Sara. “Why didn’t you call me? I can’t believe you didn’t pick up the phone to tell me. What sister does that?”

“Mom said not to bother you.”

“Bother me? When Dad is dying? Are you two crazy? You don’t know how to call me yourself? That’s nothing but a lame excuse Sara, and you know it. Same old, same old. Always leaving me out of the loop and you and Mom tag team.”

“That’s not true, Raeanne. Stop it.”

“How long have you known he was really sick?”

My mom walks over to us to break up the tension. “Now stop it you two. Enough already.”

I try desperately to keep my mouth shut and walk over to the pantry and grab the goldfish crackers, that my mom always keeps for Grayson in case of a snack emergency. I toss some goldfish crackers and a Kool-Aid Jammer in his backpack, along with the cars and Grayson comes running proudly out of the bathroom, declaring his mission is accomplished.

“Mama! I went pee pee on the potty all by myself!”

“You did? Aren’t you a big boy, now? I’m so proud of you.” I bend down, open my arms and pull him tightly into my chest. “You know I love you so much. How much do I love you?”

“To the moon and back, Mama,” he whispers in my ear.

I return the gesture and whisper into his ear. “That’s right, sweetheart. To the moon and back. Don’t you ever forget that. Did you see Auntie Sara is here?”

Grayson jumps out of my arms and runs toward Sara.

“Hi, Auntie Sara!” Grayson squeals.

“Hey, my little man. It’s so good to see you.”

Sara wraps him in a tight hug and then spins him around with his legs flying out behind him. Grayson giggles and loves every second.

“Now, why don’t you go outside and get in the car with Nana and Auntie Sara. We’re going to be late. I’ll be out in a minute.” I shuffle him toward the back door and hope that Sara will follow.

“Mom, go ahead and go out to the car with Grayson. I’ll be right behind you.”

“Okay, I still can’t find my glasses. I guess they’ll turn up somewhere. I have the red pair in the car. I guess I’ll just wear those for now. Come on Grayson, let’s go!”

All three of them scurry out the back door together, and I’m savoring the silence if only for a moment. I need a moment to exhale and breathe. I don’t think I’ve had time to take a deep breath since I landed in Meadowbrook last night.

I walk to the faucet at the kitchen sink to wet a paper towel and clean up the remnants of the mess on the floor with my left hand. I know if I don’t, I will catch hell from my mother when we get home. As I’m wiping the floor, a beam of sunlight comes streaming through the kitchen window and I can’t help but pause for a moment. I get up and stare out the kitchen window.

It’s such a gorgeous, breathtaking day and the temperature is set at a perfect seventy degrees. The wind is waltzing through the majestic Florida oak trees in its own rhythmic nature, as the Spanish moss sways gracefully back and forth. The wind seems to be enjoying the solitude.

Since I was a child, dancing and singing were my form of escape from the real world, where all of my troubles would just melt away. I wish it was that easy now. I wish I was enjoying my newfound seclusion, but my life has been far too chaotic for too long and it still hasn’t sunk in yet.

Am I really alone? Am I really free? Maybe the storm has really passed, but when anything good happens I feel that I’m merely in the eye of the hurricane. The next wave could

barrel in at any second with no warning, no mercy, and change my life forever, yet again.

Somehow, I've gotten more used to the storms than I am to the calm and the quiet.

I can see our shabby, yet enchanting white picket fence is still standing strong. Though it may be broken and weathered, having endured its share of Florida hurricanes through the years, it remains steadfast in its ability to endure. That fence is the final touch my mother has always loved about this old house, and I truly believe it's one of the things that keeps this family together. It makes this house a home, especially to my mother.

This is the magical, serene life I wanted to recapture for my own family. That was always my dream, but somehow my dream got lost and shattered and faded with time as the years drifted by. I've felt like a small wooden boat that is lost at sea for a long time now. Wherever the wind decides to take me, that's where I go.

My wrist starts to throb, and I'm jolted out of my daydream stupor. The pain reminds me that I haven't taken my pain medication this afternoon and the doctor said I should be taking it every four hours. I grab the pill bottle off the counter and throw it in my purse. I set my mother's blue glasses next to the sugar dish on the counter, and I bolt toward the door.

## Chapter 7

“Oh my God, do you have to drive like this, Raeanne? You’re scaring me to death.” My mother clenches the door handle next to the passenger seat, like it’s her saving grace.

“Calm down, Mom, what do you mean?” I ask, trying to ease her anxiety. I slam down on the horn of our Toyota Sienna minivan, hoping the other car who crossed our path will think before they make a turn next time.

“I had to hit the brakes, that car pulled out right in front of me. Would you rather me crash into him? You know I’ve been driving now for twenty-seven years. *You* taught me.”

*I never realized how anxious and terrified my mother was, until now. She’s scared of almost everything in her life, and it’s getting worse as she gets older. Maybe that’s where I get it from.*

“I swear, you are absolutely going to kill me, Raeanne, one way or another.”

My mom is clenching her teeth and still holding onto the door handle as if it will save her from the atrocities of my driving abilities, even though I’ve never had an accident in my entire life or even got a speeding ticket in all my years of driving.

“You’re gonna kill Mommy, Nana?” Grayson questions with a healthy dose of fear in his sweet, raspy voice.

I turn to my mother and give her one of my famous, penetrating stares to warn her she better stop and quick. I brush my long, wavy brown hair behind my shoulders out of pure frustration.

“You happy, now?” I ask my mom, looking at her with deep disdain. I look in the rearview mirror to catch my son’s eye. “No, honey, Nana isn’t going to kill Mommy.”

Grayson exhales and lets out a deep sigh. “Thank goodness.” He drops his bag of *Cheetos* in his car seat, and the orange, sticky remnants scatter like confetti all over the seat and floor, including on Auntie Sara’s new leather pants.

“Aah really my little man? I just got these and I’m going out tonight after we get out of the hospice.”

“Sorry, Auntie Sara.”

I can’t keep my mouth shut and I softly whisper to my mother. “Look what you’re putting in his little head. You’ve got to stop it.”

“I’ve been keeping my mouth shut for forty-three years and it’s about time someone in this family spoke up and started speakin’ the truth. I’m your mom and I’ll tell you what to do any time I want.”

My mom stared out the passenger window with her scathing, dull eyes as she seemed to drift further and further away from us in the car. She always went somewhere in her mind, when she was upset, but I was never sure exactly where but I had a good guess.

“Can’t we just try to have a nice day and go see my dying father? Or is that too much to ask?”

I hear giggling from the backseat and glance in the rearview mirror, to find Sara tickling Grayson’s tummy.

“I am the *Cheetos Monster*, and I’m here to eat up all of your *Cheetos*!” Sara proclaims.

“No, no, you can’t, Auntie Sara.” His laughter bubbles up from the backseat and begins to float around the car to offer a glimpse of hope for our family’s short road trip.

“Oh yes, I can. Who do you love most out of this whole crazy family?”

“Auntie Sara.”

“You are a smart little man. You win the prize.”

Sara pulls out a bag of *gummy bears* from behind her back and surprises him with his favorite treat.

“Look, Mommy! *Gummy bears* – my favorite!”

I know how much Grayson loves them, but of all times. “That is just what you need right now before we go see PopPop.”

“And Cheetos are any better?” Sara comments.

“That’s alright, Raeanne. You just let your sister handle Grayson for the next few hours and then we’ll see if she decides if she wants to be a parent or not. Nothin’ better than kids on a sugar high,” my mom says jokingly.

“I think all of you just need to take it down a notch,” gasps Sara in her usual exasperated tone. “Remember what it’s like to be a kid again, will you? Sit back and take a bite of the sweet taste of freedom. You should try it sometime, it’s good.”

When our family gets together, it’s like we need to send out a weather alert because we know there’s a storm coming, and any one of us could be the tornado at any given moment.

Sara leans back in her tight, black leather pants with her sixties inspired headband encircling her head. Her long, black, wavy hair is entangled in her “*Peace*” necklace that hangs with a silent declaration on her shirt. She thinks she was born in the wrong era, about twenty years too late. She has always resented being an eighties child, but personally I loved growing up in the eighties.

I can’t hold back. “Well, freedom isn’t exactly all it’s cracked up to be.” I turn my head slightly toward my mother who is sitting sternly with her elbow resting on the window over in

the passenger seat. Her eyes are firmly fixated on the road ahead. “Or is it, Mom?” My mother continues to stare out the window.

“Geez, you can cut the tension in here with a pair of manicure scissors. Chill out,” Sara begs. “I’m so glad I came home for the day.”

“By the way, Michael’s father is over here in the hospice, too,” my mom says.

My heart hits the bottom of my gut and all I can envision is Michael and I sitting on the old piano bench together.

“We haven’t heard that dreaded name in ages,” Sara says.

*I have to know.* “What’s wrong with him?”

“It’s a brain tumor. I haven’t seen Michael, but I heard all the nurses talkin’ about him, that’s for sure.”

“He got married, right?”

My mom wrestles in her seat as if she can’t wait to escape the imprisonment of my minivan. “Married? Check. Big old house? Check. White picket fence? No.”

Sara grabs the back of my seat and leans forward.

“That’s why I just say no to marriage,” Sara comments. “Remember that commercial that used to show the fried eggs in the pan and it would say, ‘*This is your brain, and this is your brain on drugs.*’ Only it’s, ‘*This is your brain, and this is your brain on love.*’ You know, kind of like you Raeanne, every time you fall in love, you get fried. But you keep jumping right back into the pan.”

“At least men ask me to marry them.”

“Let’s not go there.”



“How is that *Match man*, anyway? You went on about five dates, right? Have you lit him a new one yet? He’s almost reached the eight-week mark, so it’s almost time for a roast, right?”

Sara corrects my comment. “I’ve been seeing him for *ten weeks*.”

“We better go pick out the bridesmaid dresses, Mom.”

“Would you stop? I don’t want to talk about him with you two.”

I look over at my mother, and she turns to me nodding her head. We say in unison, “If we talk about him, we jinx the relationship and it’s all our fault.”

My mother can’t hold back her laughter, and she starts to come out of her funky mood.

“Are we there yet?” Grayson whines from his car seat.

“Almost, honey bunch.”

I look in the rearview mirror and try to finish the conversation with Sara.

“I know, it’s always our fault if he breaks up with you. I’m sure it has nothing to do with the fact that he doesn’t meet all of your specified qualifications.” *Sara always thinks it’s the man with the problems and never her. She would not know the word “compromise” if it jumped out and screamed directly in her face. She would still ignore it.* “He won’t do everything you want him to, and he might like McDonald’s instead of the latest ritzy restaurant downtown. And the nail in the coffin is if your *Sex in the City* friends don’t like him, he’s definitely out.”

Sara’s smile quickly melts into a frown. “He might break my heart, and we might break up, but at least I don’t get a broken wrist.”

I look up once again in the rearview mirror, and all I can see is a faint reflection of who I used to be, and as I look at Sara, I catch a glimpse of the girl who used to be my very best friend. She’s not there anymore.

“We’re here, everyone!” I was so glad we could finally get out of the minivan prison.

“Let’s go see PopPop.”

## Chapter 8

As we enter the sliding doors, the scent of Clorox engulfs us. It's as if the smell of bleach is trying to cover up the lingering odor of death. The cold of Meadowbrook Hospice sends a chill through my veins, and for a moment I'm staring death squarely in the face. This is why I had distanced myself from my family. I always knew the pain of losing my father would be something I couldn't bear. I never thought my father could really leave this earth, until now.

The nurse, with her short black hair, well-kept uniform, and kind demeanor, comes out from behind the counter to greet us. For a split second, I can't believe I'm actually here, in a hospice, visiting my dying father.

"Ya'll must be Preston's family, huh?"

"Yes, we are. How did you know?"

"Well, for one thing, I've seen this lady in here most every day, and I know she's Mrs. Bowen." The nurse stares directly at me and takes a moment to pause. "There ain't no way you could ever deny being Mrs. Bowen's little baby. Ya look just like her."

I hesitantly acknowledge her and smile.

The nurse approaches Grayson and gently bends down to his eye level.

"And you must be that little grandson Mr. Preston talks about all the time."

Grayson laughs and looks up at me with his sparkling blue eyes.

"Yes, Ma'am. That I am."

"So, you know where he's at Mrs. Bowen. He's right down the hall, third door on the right."

"Thanks, Miss Edie. Good to see you again today."

"You too, Mrs. Bowen. Ya'll have a nice visit."

We continue down the long corridor. Part of me is eager to see him, and the other part of me is frightened. We approach the room and there he is, lying helplessly in his hospital bed with the TV remote in one hand, and his Bible about an inch away from his other hand.

“PopPop!” Grayson darts straight for my dad and pounces on his bed.

“No, honey, be careful. You can’t jump on your PopPop like that.”

“Oh, sure he can.”

My dad’s voice is scratchier than I remember it and his eyes are dull. They had lost the bright green shine that used to radiate through my soul, when something was bothering me. His eyes used to make everything seem brighter and better. Now, that light is gone.

The number of wires protruding from his arms and chest are strikingly bothersome to me. I wasn’t expecting to see him in such a horrible state. My dad pulls Grayson close to his chest, and he climbs on top of my dad’s Bible to get into his arms. That is the best thing I have seen all day.

“Well, what a nice surprise this is. My favorite boy in the world, right here in my big ‘ole arms.” Grayson pulls back from my dad’s broad chest and gives him the biggest mischievous smile. “How did you get all the way down here to Meadowbrook to pay your PopPop a visit?”

“Mama brought me.”

My dad looks over at me with a curious stare and lowers his eyes to the cast on my wrist. “Oh, she did, did she? This is a nice surprise, and God just answered my prayers.”

“What did you pray, PopPop?”

“Well, I prayed that ya’ll would get down here and pay me a visit before I went to see the big man upstairs.”

Thankfully, my dad's comment doesn't register with Grasyon. Sara and my mom stare uncomfortably at the floor as my dad smiles.

"But the man upstairs doesn't think it's my time to go anywhere cuz I gotta spend a lot more time with this little man right here." He tickles Grayson's tummy, as my son laughs uncontrollably.

"Well, Dad, I don't think it's your time either."

"And will you just look at my little girl? Now, she's all grown up, and I don't ever get to see her anymore with her big 'ole life in Nashville."

"Aww, Dad. I didn't even know. I've been meaning to get down here again. It's just been so crazy busy."

"It sure looks like you've been crazy alright." My dad gestures with his head to my broken wrist, and the shame is overpowering my body. "Get over here and come give your daddy a big ole hug."

I walk toward him, somewhat uncomfortable with this whole situation. "Why didn't you tell me, Dad? I had no idea it had gotten this bad." I hug him with all of my might. It feels so good to be back in my dad's arms again.

"Oh, I don't want nobody fussin' about this old man, ya hear? You got enough on your plate. I'll be alright."

He takes a moment to catch his breath, but he can't. He starts coughing uncontrollably.

"Excuse me. It's not in my hands. It's in His now." He looks up toward the ceiling of the dingy hospice room. "It looks like you got somethin' else on your plate right there."

He points to my cast and stares sternly into my eyes.

"I wish everyone would stop saying that. It's no big deal, Dad. I just broke my wrist."

“I’m not gonna even ask. Well, God always knows best. Looks like He knew He had to get you here somehow, and whatever He had to do, it’s okay with me. As long as you’re here. Safe...”

My dad adjusts his pillow and turns over on his left side.

“And how are ya’ll doin’?” He looks over at Sara and my mom. “Just because I see you more often, doesn’t mean I don’t love you as much. Ya’ll come over here and give me a hug, too. We don’t know when it’s gonna be my last.”

Sara and my mom walk over to exchange hugs with my dad.

“Don’t say that, Dad.”

“I’m just bein’ truthful, honey. We don’t know. But we do know it’s comin’.”

Sara motions for Grayson to go stand by my mom and her for a minute.

Sara attempts to give me and my father some alone time together by encouraging everyone else to leave the room.

“What do you say we go find some snacks in that vending machine out there?”

“Yeah,” Grayson agrees.

My mom, Sara, and Grayson scurry out of the room, and the silence is so loud, I feel like it’s screaming in my ears. I hate the distance I feel right now between my father and me.

“Well, did ya hear about Michael’s father? He’s in here, too.”

“Yeah, Mom told me. Don’t even go there, Dad. I know what you’re thinking.”

“And how do you know what your old man is thinking? He came in the other day to say hello.”

My heart briefly pauses, and I can’t help but say, “Did he ask about me?”

“He sure did. I told him you were doin’ great up there in big ‘ole Tennessee. Clearly, I was wrong.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I know when you come down here, somethin’ ain’t right. You only come here when you need to curl up in your old bedroom again.”

“Yeah Dad, I can’t ever fool you.”

“That’s true. But you know somethin’? Your life ain’t over yet.”

His words pound through my brain, even though I don’t want to hear them. Part of me wants to think my life is over.

The constant sound of the oxygen machine seems to beep as if it’s keeping time with the clock’s ticking overhead on the wall. Every second feels like a lifetime, and every moment feels priceless. With each high-pitched beep, I feel overwhelming gratitude that it’s one more second, I get to spend with my father.

“I know you won’t tell me the truth about what happened to your wrist there, so…”

He starts coughing, and he can’t seem to stop. My dad keeps trying to spit out his next words, but it becomes increasingly difficult for him to achieve his goal. He’s not the man who I remember when I was growing up. He’s not the one who was utterly unstoppable and had the strength to do anything. He’s feeble now, and it’s painstaking to watch. I reach over to try to put my hand on his back and offer some sort of comfort.

“Are you alright, Dad?”

“I’m good. So, as I was saying, I won’t ask again about your wrist.”

“I told you what happened, Dad.”

“I might’ve never finished getting my English Literature degree when your mom and I found out about you, but I’m not a stupid man, Raeanne. It’s written all over your face.”

“I can’t hide anything from you, even if I want to. You know I always end up telling you my secrets.”

“We all need someone we can confide in, and this ‘ole man is honored that I have always been that person for you.”

He grips my hand and squeezes it tightly. It’s the firmest grip I’ve ever felt. I know he’s trying to tell me something in his own subtle way. It’s almost like he’s holding on to me, as if it may be the last time, he ever holds my hand again.

“You’ve always been my pride and joy, sweetie. Nothing, and no one, will ever change that. Don’t you forget that.”

I drop my head into my hands and stare at the cold, maroon-tiled floor.

“That means so much to me, Dad, even with all I’ve put you through over the years.”

“It could’ve always been a lot worse. At least we’re alive.”

The beeping of the oxygen machine continues to beat incessantly in the background, making it impossible for me to ignore its presence. I lift my head and can’t stop the tears streaming down my face.

“But for how much longer, Dad?”

I try to wipe my eyes and gather myself together. I don’t want to start falling apart now in front of him. I need to be strong for his sake. He has been so strong for me in the darkest moments of my life, and I want so badly to return the favor.

“How much longer do you really have? Tell me the truth.”

“The truth is, I don’t know, sweetie, only He does.”



He points toward his Bible lying on the cold, white sheets. It must be sixty degrees in here, and I need my winter jacket, hat, and gloves to be semi-comfortable. He slowly tries to lie back on his pillow and stretch his legs out.

“Can you adjust the bed so it’s a little lower?”

“Sure, Dad.” I get up and hit a button on the side of his hospital bed and pray it’s the right one. “Is that better?”

“A little bit lower.” He coughs. “Perfect, sweetie, thanks. Hey, will you do me a favor?”

He looks at me with that look. The look right before I know he’s going to tell me something important.

“Sure. What?”

“Will you stop using that stubborn head of yours?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve spent your whole dang life tryin’ to do what everybody else wants you to do, mostly what your mother wants.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Using that head of yours has gotten you into more trouble than if you had just gone ahead and used your dang heart in the first place. Your gut’s never wrong. Trust it next time.”

“I do, Dad.”

“Well, I would sure think on that a bit. If you don’t, you’re gonna wake up one day in a room like this with a whole lot of regret.”

I sit back down on the edge of the bed.

“I don’t have regrets, Raeanne. I don’t want you to have ‘em either.”

“I know, Dad.”

“Now I’m not sayin’ to do anything you would ever regret, but I am sayin’ you need to forgive. You gotta forgive yourself for the past. You owe that to yourself.”

“I know, Dad. I’ll get around to it. Give me time.”

“Time is sacred, honey. You never know when you’re just gonna run out of it.”

I pat his leg through the stark white hospital sheet to offer some reassurance and push myself off the bed. My feet hit the cold, maroon-tiled floor, and I’m reminded that this is no longer my teenage bedroom floor with lush white carpet – the place where my dad and I used to have all of our heart-to-heart conversations. I can still remember the way that carpet felt whenever I needed consolation in my life. It was like a cozy blanket that effortlessly absorbed all the cares in my world. I used to lie on it for hours at night, strumming my guitar and singing like it was the last note I would ever sing. I love that rug.

I turn and look at my dad lying in his bed. His skin now has a pale, grey overtone that I have never noticed before. His hair, once dark chocolate brown, has now faded to silver, yet his loving eyes remain the same.

“I love you, Dad.”

“I love you too, my sweet girl. I know she’s still in there. Just do me a favor and find her, okay?”

“I will.” I drop my head and stare at the cast on my wrist.

“You promise?”

“I promise, Dad.” I lean over to kiss him on the forehead, and he reaches out his trembling arms to hug me. I know that this is one embrace I will never forget. “I’ve got to go find Grayson. He’s probably eaten fifteen bags of Cheetos by now.”

My dad smiles through his pain. His strength shines amid this darkness.

“Ya’ll come back now and visit, okay? Don’t be a stranger.”

“I won’t, Dad. You can’t get rid of me.”

He laughs, and his laugh becomes a painful cough. He’s holding his chest while he tries to release the phlegm from his throat with no luck.

“I’m fine, sweetie. You go on now and find that wonderful grandson of mine.”

“Love you, Dad. We’ll see you later.”

## Chapter 9

I make my way out to the hallway and close his door gently behind me. Suddenly, all I can hear is a gut-wrenching scream coming from one of the patients' rooms not too far away. I follow the tortured voice, hoping it has nothing to do with anything my mischievous Grayson might have done.

With each step, I am closer to discovering what all the ruckus is. There is still no sign of Grayson, Sara, or my mother. I finally arrive at the doorway, where several nurses are rushing in to console the patient. I stop for a moment to observe.

"Mr. Lazarro," the calming nurse says as she tries to pin down his hands to the hospital bed. The yelling becomes even louder, and I see the elderly man's flushed face filled with anger. "Mr. Lazarro, you have to calm down, sir. Everything is okay. You're just fine."

"I'm not fine!" he yells. "I haven't been fine since I've been in this darn place! Ya'll are going to kill me in here!" He flails his arms and tries to push back the gathering group of nurses who are trying to hold him down.

I suddenly realize it's him. It's Mr. Lazarro. Michael's father. He looks so different. I don't even recognize him. I can't help but continue to stare and gaze at the spectacle. One of the nurses pulls out a syringe and is able to thrust it into his thigh. Fifteen seconds later, he is in a relaxed state, and there's no more screaming.

As the nurses step back from his bed, I notice a man sitting on a stool by Mr. Lazarro's bedside. The man has his back turned toward me, but I can see he has dropped his head onto Mr. Lazarro's lap as he's gently massaging his arms. My heart stops. Is that him? Is it really, Michael? Part of me wants to call out and ask, and the other part of me wants to run.

As soon as I have the thought, the man turns around on the stool. He looks at me with steadfast curiosity.

“Raeanne, is that you?”

“Yeah. It’s me.”

The world freezes, and the unbelievable scene is like a polaroid in my mind. I can’t believe it’s real.

“It’s been forever,” Michael suggested.

“Not quite, but close.”

“Twenty years, to be exact,” Michael agrees.

“I see you’re counting. Time flies, doesn’t it?”

“Or it stands still,” he says with a familiar smile.

I inch closer to Michael’s stool with slow trepidation but eagerness to be close to the one person who feels like home to me. Michael gets up from his stool, and his father has drifted off to sleep from the medication. One nurse remains in the room, still quietly checking his father’s vital signs.

“Here, I’m sure you’re tired.” Michael gestures for me to take his seat. “If you just got into town to see your dad, I know that’s a long drive from Nashville.”

“Did the bags under my eyes give it away?”

I take a seat.

“Your eyes look exactly like they used to,” he tells me with his big blue-gray eyes, which seem to invite me to enter his world.

I close my eyes, somewhat embarrassed by his lovely compliment, and my cheeks blush.

“Your wrist looks a little different, though. What did you do?”

I look down at my cast completely embarrassed that I even have to acknowledge my broken wrist. “Oh, it’s no big deal. Something fell on it.”

“Looks like a pretty big deal to me, if you’ve got a cast, but what do I know?”

Suddenly, my mind drifts back to that beautiful night we first met. I remember the exact dress I was wearing, a gorgeous midnight blue crushed velvet floor-length ballroom gown. The neckline was modest, but conveniently bared my ivory shoulders, which was always one of my better attributes. My rhinestone necklace sat perfectly on top of the crushed velvet to offer a shine that was undeniable.

It was the annual Christmas party that one of our old friends from Meadowbrook High School held every year at his home. In his parlor, the maroon velvet couches sat pristinely over the large oriental rugs scattered around the pine hardwood floor. The stunning floral draperies adorned the large open windows that overlooked the hillside in the backyard. The Christmas tree stood royally in the corner with a shimmering angel sitting proudly on the top. Charming red cardinals with magical snowflake ornaments were scattered around its branches. It was a magnificent tapestry of a beautiful Christmas wonderland.

As I sat at the piano bench, with the twinkling lights glistening all around the baby grand, I played *Right Here Waiting* by Richard Marx. The melodic piano intro always put me in a trance. My other old high school friends began to gather around to hear me sing.

Suddenly, the abrupt sound of crushing glass startled me from the other side of the grand living room, and I turned around to see what all the commotion was. It was a handsome young man with rich, chocolate-brown hair and gorgeous blue-gray eyes. He had dropped his beer bottle on the hardwood floor. The pieces of glass were scattered everywhere, and the handsome

young man was trying desperately to pick up all the pieces as quickly as he could. Everyone was staring at him, so I got up from the piano bench and walked over to him.

“I think it’s your turn,” I consolingly offered as I began to pick up some of the scattered pieces of glass.

“Thanks for helping,” he said. “What do you mean it’s my turn?”

“It’s your turn to sing. You haven’t heard the rules? If you break glass, you have to sing.”

He laughed. “No, I don’t sing.”

I chuckled as we made eye contact for more than a second. “Now you do.”

We finished picking up all the beer bottle pieces, and we threw them into a nearby trash can. I grabbed his hand and pulled him toward the baby grand. I took my seat back and pulled him right next to me.

“Alright, here we go.”

He placed his hands on the ivory keys and his arm brushed mine. He began to play the song exactly where I had left off before. I lifted my eyes from the piano keys and did my best not to get lost in his. His eyes were so striking. I had never seen eyes like that before, and I haven’t seen them since – until today. His dark blue blazer with his Santa Claus tie and white shirt sat perfectly on his khaki pants. I wondered where he had come from. I didn’t remember seeing him at this annual Christmas party, and now I learned he could play piano.

I began to join in and sing with him as he continued to play. He lifted his eyes off the piano keys and began to look my way. The song ended, and it was as if the two of us were the only ones in the room. Everyone else had backed away from the baby grand, probably feeling the magnetic pull drawing the two of us together that evening.

“I’m impressed. I wasn’t expecting that at all.”

“Neither was I,” he mutters as he smiles and looks up at me.

I don’t want to open my eyes because if I do, I’m terrified this beautiful moment will just be a dream.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, it’s been a long time.”

“A long time since what?” I ask him with a confused look on my face.

He shakes his head and looks down at the keys. “You have no idea do you?”

“No idea about what?”

“Who I am.”

I lean back on the piano bench and cross my arms in front of my chest. “Am I supposed to?”

He chuckles and his eyes are squinting as he smiles. “I know you, but it’s clear I didn’t make quite the same impression back in kindergarten.”

I continue to look at him with a perplexed look on my face and then it hits me. He looks completely different than the skinny, awkward little boy with glasses who I vaguely remember in our kindergarten class.

“Oh, my goodness. Michael? Is that really you? Michael Lazarro, right? This is crazy. I can’t believe it.”

“Yup, it’s me.” He shifts his eyes toward the piano keys again and shrugs his shoulders.

“You’re so different. I just can’t believe it.”

Michael is a striking well-built, young man now with thick, dark hair, olive skin, and the most intense blue-gray eyes I’ve ever seen.



He rises off the piano bench and looks a bit confused and offended. “Different? What do you mean different?”

“You’ve just changed that’s all.”

He slowly eeks out a grin. “I sure hope so. Would be kind of strange if I didn’t change since kindergarten, right? I’d probably get an F in personal development for sure.”

“Well, I don’t particularly like change. I like things to stay exactly the way they are.”

“Sounds like an exciting life.”

“Well, I guess we can’t all have exciting lives like you. If I remember correctly, I think my dad told me you joined the Army? Is that right?”

“The Marines actually. I think I’m the only kid in Meadowbrook that joined the service.”

“Yeah, come to think of it, I don’t think I know of anyone else from school that joined the service.”

“I’m on leave right now. I go back to Texas in a couple of weeks. Trust me, it’s not that exciting. But the rumor is that your life is pretty exciting. You still singin’?”

“Yeah, still chasing the dream—whatever that is.”

I start dabbling on the piano keys again and playing some random notes.

“I thought that was your dream you know, to sing and make the big time, right? There’s a reason you got class thespian in the yearbook. Remember?”

“I don’t know about that. The music business isn’t easy and not for the faint of heart.”

I look up at Michael again and I notice the tattoo on his left arm that it is a symbol for the Virgo horoscope.

I point to his arm. “Is that your sign? Virgo?”

“Yep, that’s what I am.”

I immediately stop tinkering with the piano keys and pull out the fallboard to cover the piano keyboard of the gorgeous black, baby grand. I abruptly jump up off the bench. “I gotta go.”

Michael looks at me with a baffled look on his face. “Did my tattoo scare you? Too much excitement?”

I brush right past him, but he keeps following me through the crowd of other college kids in the majestic living room.

“No, I just don’t want to waste any more time.”

“I didn’t realize we were wastin’ time. I was kind of enjoyin’ it.

“I was too, until I realized this will never go anywhere.”

Suddenly, Michael reaches out and grabs my arm from behind and turns me around to face him. “What the heck are you talkin’ about?”

“This isn’t going anywhere. Our horoscopes aren’t compatible.”

“Like you need some ghost to appear and tell you that the stars line up between us before we can hang out? That make perfect sense. You are nuts.”

Michael slowly lets go of my arm.

“Look, I’ve got my whole life planned out and I’ve written down exactly who the perfect man is for me.”

“I see. How’s that workin’ out so far? Where is he?”

I place my left hand on my hip against my crushed velvet gown and with my other hand I begin to play with my pearl necklace.

“I’m supposed to be married in about five years—not now. Of course it will be after I get my record deal. Then we will have two kids and I absolutely have to have a little dog. And not just any dog— a fluffy, white one.”

I smile and wait for Michael’s response.

“Do you have your dog’s name picked out, too?”

“Not yet, but I’m working on it.”

Michael rolls his eyes. “Well, you better get on that first thing in the morning. Time is tickin’.”

“But I do know what our house will look like. It’s going to be a medium-sized cottage that sits on the edge of the ocean. But it has to have a white picket fence. That’s the most important part.”

“And why is that?”

“It’s just kind of the perfect finishing touch, you know? Just makes everything complete.”

“Don’t you have a picket fence at your house?”

“Yes, my dad built the fence for my mom.”

“It sounds like you got it all figured out.”

I smile with confidence and notice that my hands are sweating. “I sure do.”

I quickly turn around and walk toward the glass slider that goes out to the deck. I can feel Michael still following close behind me. I open the slider and feel the crisp December air hit my face. I turn around to close the slider door, but Michael steps out onto the deck behind me. “Why are you still following me? And why are you looking at me like that?”

Michael is glaring at me with a huge smile on his face and I notice I'm feeling butterflies in my stomach. He's squinting at me with his intense blue-gray eyes as if he's examining me.

"I think I just found your soul, so I'm tryin' to get a closer look."

Michael stretches his arm out and places his hand behind my head in my long, dark brown hair. He touches the bottom of my chin with his other hand and stares into my emerald eyes.

He stares intensely for a moment. "Yup, that's it."

My face is flushed and I can feel the embarrassment slowly consuming my body.

"It's going to take a lot more than a couple of minutes on a piano bench to see my soul. But nice try."

"Like, how long?"

"Years."

"Well, I've been starin' at you since kindergarten so how many years is that?"

"A long time to be starin' at someone without saying a word. That's just plain weird."

"I know you better than you know yourself."

"You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Yeah, because I know I'm right."

"And what if you're wrong?"

"I know right now, that you're gonna fall in love with me."

"Really?"

I cross my arms in front of my chest and begin to clench them even tighter together.

"See? You didn't say no."

"But I didn't say yes."

“That’s good enough for me—at least for now.”

I look away and start to realize that we are not the only people out on the deck. My friend, Carloyn, calls over to me.

“Hey, Raeanne! We’re heading out. You coming?”

“Yeah, Carolyn, I’ll be right there.”

“I’ve gotta go. It’s past my curfew and when I’m home from college my parents go ballistic if I’m out past midnight.”

Michael steps toward me again. “Okay, can I call you?”

I step back. “Sure, if you can figure out how to get my phone number.”

Michael breathes in a deep sigh and I run down the deck stairs to join Carolyn near her car.

Michael calls out to me as he leans over the railing of the deck. “You’re not gonna give it to me?”

“Well, it looks like you have a little more homework to do than you originally thought after all these years!” I laugh. “After all of those years of staring at me, you’d think you would’ve done some better research! But I have faith in you!”

“At least someone does.”

I am perplexed by his answer and for some strange reason my heart sinks. The reflection of the full moon’s light is shining down on me and I can see Michael’s face clearly up on the deck. His face is basking in the moonlight and I’m at a loss for words. I realize it’s the first time in a long time, that I don’t know what to say and in a strange way it feels good.

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“We’re leaving, Raeanne,” my mother says, as she peeks her head into the room. I am suddenly jolted out of my daydream.

“Hi, Mrs. Bowen.”

“Hello, Michael,” my mother says to Michael with that stern look on her face. “It’s been a long time.”

“Yes, it has, Mrs. Bowen.”

My mom quietly whispers, “I don’t want to disturb Michael’s father. It looks like he’s getting some rest now.”

I stand up and put my purse on my shoulder. “Well, it was really good to see you.”

My mother heads out down the hallway.

“Yeah, you too. I guess I’ll see you around? Are you going to be stayin’ in town for a while with your dad and everything?”

“Yeah, I’ll be here for a while.”

“Okay, see ya around then.”

“See you later.”

I walk out of Mr. Lazarro’s hospice room, as if I just fell out of a time capsule. *Did I really just speak to Michael? This is completely surreal, and why do I have the same feeling in the pit of my stomach that I had twenty years ago?*

## Chapter 10

I drive our minivan through the middle of our quaint downtown cobblestone streets, past the old antique shops, the familiar coffee shops, and the gorgeous boutique shops. My mother hasn't said a word since all of us got in the vehicle. Finally, she decides to break the awkward silence.

"This town sure hasn't changed much, has it? Still the same ole' holes in the road that make you feel like you're ridin' a horse instead of driving a car."

"It's still as beautiful as ever, Mom. You never see the beauty in things. You just see the faults."

Sara chimes in from the back seat. "Beautiful? What do you mean? This is like the most boring town ever in the history of the world."

"You used to love it when you were little," my mom says, as if she's hoping someone will validate her response.

"Maybe when I was little, Mom, but I finally got some sense and got out."

I can't let Sara get away with her rude comments. "I've always loved it here. This place is so beautiful. There's nothing like it anywhere in the world. It's so quiet, so peaceful, just like a real town should be."

Grayson adds his two cents from his car seat, as he points out the window. "Church! Church!"

I look over to see where he's pointing and there it is— Meadowbrook Church. It's a beautiful, pristine little white church with a long, brick walkway and large white pillars on the front steps. My mind drifts back to the night I ran into Michael again on those very steps, on Christmas Eve, twenty years ago.

It was an unusually cold evening and the front steps of the church were packed with all the Meadowbrook churchgoers who had come to celebrate Christmas Eve. I wore my favorite bright red dress with my matching heels and I was enjoying chatting with more of my high school friends that I hadn't seen in quite a while.

“Raeanne!”

I turn around, thinking it is one of my old high school friends, but it's Michael.

“Hey.”

He is wearing the same blue blazer that he was wearing at the Christmas party a few nights before. His khaki pants are freshly pressed and his dark brown loafers are spotless. I turn around and continue chatting with my circle of high school friends, not really knowing what I should say.

Michael walks up behind me and whispers in my ear. “You can't just ignore me.”

“I most certainly can. Watch me.”

“You just did.”

“Just did what?”

“You didn't ignore me, so it's too late for that. And after all, it's Christmas.”

“Not yet.”

I look down at my gold watch.

“Uh, yeah it is. It's after midnight.”

“Whatever. So does that mean I owe you a conversation?”

“I thought you might want to talk to me again. You know, like we did at the party the other night.”

“Well, I didn't think I'd ever see *you* again.”



“Well, I guess you’re not right all the time after all.” Michael laughs and kicks his foot as he looks down at the ground. “I want to invite you to to my house for Christmas dinner tomorrow night.”

“Christmas dinner? With your family? Don’t you think that’s a little forward? What would your parents think?”

“I don’t know and I really don’t care. I want to see you again before I have to go back to the base in Texas.”

I fold my arms in front of my chest and can’t help but notice his striking eyes once again.

“I don’t see how in the world I could just come to your house on Christmas for goodness sake.”

“Come on. My family is a lot of fun. It’ll be a blast. We have the whole big Italian Christmas dinner. You’ll love ‘em. It’s casual and everybody has a lot of drinks and a lot of laughs. You look like you need to loosen up a little bit and have some fun.”

“We are going to be having our family dinner around two, so I suppose I could come over around six. Only for a little bit, though.”

Michael smiles. “I’ll see you then. By the way, you sounded great tonight up there singing with the worship team.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Don’t make me look like a loser and not show up, okay? I already told them you’re coming.

I give him a sour look. “How did you know I’d say yes?”

“Let’s just say I have good intuition. Goodnight.”

Michael brushes his dark hair out of his face and a smile slowly appears on his face as he walks away. I can't help but notice that I'm smiling for the first time in a long time, too.

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