

A promotional image for Christine Kleps. She is standing in the center, wearing a long, flowing, red, ruffled dress. Her hair is long and blonde. She is surrounded by a dark, smoky environment with several fires burning around her, creating a dramatic and intense atmosphere. The background is dark and textured, possibly a cave or a forest at night.

**CHRISTINE KLEPS**

**SNATCHED**

*from the*

**FLAMES**

# Snatched From the Flames

Christine Kleps

First edition. September 20, 2024

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*After a hard-fought victory over the alcoholism and dysfunction that has held her captive for so long, Rose Hart works to rebuild her life. As she celebrates her one-year anniversary of being alcohol free, her world is shattered by a violent break-in.*

*Fighting for her life in the wake of the crime, Rose flat-lines multiple times and finds herself in a hopeless situation as she experiences the horror of an afterlife she never imagined.*

*When she is revived, she knows her life will never be the same. As the young woman navigates through the aftermath, she finds God, love, and the ability to lay aside her anger and blame to forgive and show mercy to the man who tried to kill her.*

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*Somebody tried to murder me one night. But little did I know, the very person who tried to end my life would literally save it. Evil meant to snuff me out that night, but a Higher Power had other plans. Evil for good? I know. It doesn't make much sense, but after you hear my story, I hope it will.*

*My eyes were opened the night I work up in a fiery furnace, surrounded by creatures that hated me and wanted to rip me to shreds. That was the same night I was declared legally dead, but it was also the night I was given a second chance. I was snatched from the flames—from a very real, intense, engulfing fire that will always haunt me.*

*Please listen to my story...and learn from it. Because there is life after death. It is only a matter of where you'll spend it...*

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” – Genesis 50:20

“Morality may keep you out of jail, but it takes the blood of Jesus Christ to keep you out of hell.” -

*Spurgeon*

## Chapter 1

The day I got sober and dumped the toxic ex was one I wouldn't soon forget.

A dog barked, jolting me awake. My eyes snapped open, only to be assaulted by painfully bright sunlight. Waves crashed against the shore, and seagulls squawked. A warm breeze swayed the palm trees into whispers around me. I could smell the salty air.

*How do I make the spinning stop?* I wondered, suddenly keenly aware that I had passed out on a beach. I wasn't even sure what beach. *How did I end up here?*

I felt a sticky, warm sensation, something like damp sandpaper against my cheek. Something, or someone, was licking my face. I lifted my head from the sand and looked around. Two brown eyes looked back at me, and the friendly dog that had been bathing me snorted and wagged its tail.

Trying to figure out where I was and make sense of everything, I pulled a strand of seaweed from my hair and face. Wings flapped overhead as some gulls flew by. I felt absolutely awful, like a chorus line of hippos was dancing in my head, and I was so, so sick to my stomach. The sun told me it was morning, but I had no recollection of the night before.

*That's it. No more booze!*

Bad decisions equal bad consequences.

I couldn't help but pet the adorable Golden Retriever standing over me, even if I didn't feel much like socializing. I felt lightheaded and dizzy, and the relentless, pounding headache made me moan. My body had tried to force me to sleep it off, but I clearly had a horrible hangover.

*I'm a total disaster. Why do I do this to myself? I can't ever wake up like this again.*

I glanced down and was relieved to see that I was still at least clothed, tattered and filthy as I was. Still, spending the night out there robbed me of the little dignity I had left. "Could you please stop?" I asked the dog, who refused to cease the licking. "At least no one's around to see me in such a mess," I said, pulling a clump of soggy sand from my hair.

Then, just as I was spitting a wad of grit from my mouth, I noticed an old lady with short, red hair hovering over me. Her outfit was colorful to my red eyes, and the gleam off her white teeth as she smiled down at me made me smile back.

"This is Bella, honey. I hope you like dog kisses. She seems to really like you," the grinning lady said.

"Oh. Uh...hi, Bella," I said. Even in my inebriated state, I had to admit the dog was absolutely the sweetest creature ever. "You like waking people up with kisses, huh?"

The dog barked and licked me once again.

"Okay, okay! I get the hint. It's time to get up."

"Are you okay, dear?" Bella's mom asked.

I put a hand out to shield my squinty eyes from the sun. "Happy as a clam at high tide. How about you?"

"I'm wonderful. Bella loves her walks, and I love collecting sea glass and seashells." She held up her basket to show me all her pretty treasures.

"Nice finds!" I said, sounding much cheerier than I felt.

“Thanks. I enjoy the hunt. I never know what I might find. Anyway, we’re on our way home now. We’ll come back to do more beachcombing tomorrow morning.” She then pulled down her sunglasses and studied my skinned knees. “Oh, no! What happened?”

*No idea*, I thought as I examined them. “Guess I’m a little scratched up. I’m a real klutz sometimes. Probably just tripped on the rocks. No biggie.” I abruptly sat up. “Hey, do you know what time it is?”

She looked down at the yellow watch on her arm. “It’s only 7:30 in the morning. Honey, did you sleep out here?”

“Apparently,” I whispered, my voice raspy. “There’s nothing like, uh...getting up close and personal with nature, ya know?”

“You were snoring pretty loudly when I found you. Look, to each their own and all, so you might enjoy this hippie lifestyle, it just isn’t safe, dear. You can’t spend the night out here by yourself. It’s way too dangerous for a beautiful, young woman like you.”

She was right, of course, and because I couldn’t remember what had happened, I feared the worst. I never would have dreamt of doing anything like that if I’d been sober, but alcohol made me stupid and reckless. I wanted to explain, but every syllable I spoke felt like the equivalent of a 10,000-watt amp pumping into my head.

She reached into her backpack. “Here,” she said, handing me a bottle of water. “This will help.”

“Thank you so much,” I said before I twisted the top off and took a big swig.

“Not a problem. And, take these if you’re going to be out in the sun. I won’t take no for an answer.”

I looked at the giant white shades with the mirrored lenses. They were not my taste at all and certainly wouldn’t make a great fashion statement, but I thanked her and put them on anyway. Much to my relief, they instantly took away the blinding glare. “Um, could you... Can you please tell me where I am?” I stuttered, embarrassed that I had to ask.

“You’re on the beach.”

I nodded. “Yeah, the sand, the seagulls, and the ocean are sort of dead giveaways for that, but what, uh...city?”

She cocked a brow. “You don’t know?”

“To be honest, I seriously lost track of what happened. I honestly don’t recognize this place,” I admitted. “Can you please give me a hint?”

“Panama City Beach.”

*Wait. What!? Did I hear her right? Freaking Panama City? But...how?*

“Um, excuse me?” I said.

“You’re in Panama City, honey.”

I was beyond shocked and at a loss for words. Panama City was at least seven or eight hours from where I lived, and I had no recollection of how I got there. In a mental panic, I tried to retrace all my steps, but it was as if some kind of hacker had logged into my mind and deleted all the files from the night before, a complete blank. I wasn’t sure how to process the news, let alone cope with it.

“Are you vacationing here too?” she asked.

“On vacation? No, not me. In fact, I’m pretty sure I’m late for work and royally screwed.”

“Do you live around here?” the old lady asked.

“I’m from Jupiter. You wouldn’t believe how far away it is.”

She chuckled. “Wow. I’m not sure how much you drank last night, dear, but I can assure you we are still on good, ol’ Planet Earth.”

“No, the city of Jupiter,” I murmured, rubbing my throbbing temples. Her loud voice hurt my ears, but I didn’t have the nerve to ask her to speak a bit softer.

“Your shirt is inside out, honey, and your pants are, um...backward.”

“Yeah, I’m a hot mess,” I said.

I ran a hand through my sandy hair and struggled to figure out what to do next. I knew I’d get through the embarrassing situation somehow; it was a scenario I’d been through many times before. The regret and shame were worse than the hangover itself. Also, depression seemed to swallow me up. I knew drinking was a no-win situation. I’d lost everything because of it, from friends and jobs to self-respect and money, even precious relatives whom I’d just disappointed and frightened, time and time again. I was literally under the influence every day. I could hardly remember the woman I was before I started vanishing into bottles and cans, but I wanted to be her again. I longed to be sober; to be free from the grip alcohol had on my life. I wanted my drunken past to fade into a distant memory.

*I’m so tired of feeling this way, of making these stupid mistakes. Maybe this is it, the rock bottom that will help me change. Maybe this time I can—*

“I take it you were, um...smashed,” the grandmotherly woman said as Bella began licking my hand.

“Huh?”

“Oh, what do the kids call it these days? Loaded? Wasted? Trashed? Completely wrecked? Hammered?”

I raised a hand. “You got me. All of the above. Guilty, as charged.”

“Oh, honey.”

“I know. It’s awful,” I said. I knew I had to get clean, or I would continue being miserable. Blacking out and waking up in strange places, with huge black holes in my memory, were constant reminders that I was losing control of my life. I also hated awkward conversations with random strangers when I woke up.

*How did I let myself get to this point? This is the worst version of me. I don’t want to seek refuge in alcohol anymore. I just can’t. I know better, deserve better. I need to make smarter choices, if I’m ever going to stop all this craziness.*

“Are you the same young lady I saw stumbling around with a flashlight, laughing and dancing?” she asked, putting a hand on her hip. “I thought I saw you chasing crabs. I’m pretty sure one pinched you when you tried to pick it up.”

*Please don’t let me be that woman.* “Crabs?” I asked, feigning innocence.

“Yes, crabs!”

*No, I couldn’t be that crazy. Could I?*

“I-I don’t remember, but I don’t think I’d pick up anything with pinchers, drunk or not,” I said.

“Never underestimate what you might or might not do when you’re not in the driver seat, honey. I saw you battling crabs last night. I think the crabs won, from the looks of it,” she said, pointing at some red marks on my fingers and hands, where Bella was trying to lick my wounds.

I bit my lip hard as I tried to remember. “As much as I hate to admit it, I guess I do have a vague memory of something pinching me.”

“Someone called the police about you,” she said.

I was flabbergasted. “What!? I swear this isn’t who I am. I just—”

“Don’t worry, my dear. As far as I know, you managed to gracefully talk your way out of being hauled downtown.”

“Anything else?”

“Well, they did ask why you had an open container. You said, you were just ‘letting it breathe.’ Then, you said that since it wasn’t breathing and had no signs of life... Well, you had to give it mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.”

I was mortified. “Please tell me I didn’t really say that!”

“Your sense of humor kept you out of the clink. The officers found you very entertaining and were laughing right along with you. At least you didn’t get fined or have to spend the night in jail.”

As she spoke about it, a hazy memory flooded my mind, a vision of me stumbling around the beach with an open bottle of tequila. I remembered the officers letting me off with a warning, but I couldn’t exactly recall what else they were warning me about. I knew there was something else. For some reason, I had a very clear vision of the dark-haired one’s dimples, which were on full display as he laughed at my stupid, drunk jokes and puns.

“I might have been better off in a cell,” I whispered. “At least then I wouldn’t have sand in every crevice of my body, and I wouldn’t have risked being swept out to sea or getting sunburn, or—”

“Getting pecked by seagulls, run over by lifeguard trucks, or pinched to death by crabs,” she finished.

I rubbed my temples again. “Yeah, all of those.”

“What’s your name, darlin’?” she asked.

“Rose.”

“I’m Pattie.”

“Nice to meet you both,” I said, as I gave Bella another pat on her golden head.

Suddenly, the dog darted away and began sniffing and digging around in the sand a couple feet away.

Pattie pointed. “Oh! What did my Bella find?”

“My purse!” I said, as the dog stood there with the bag in her mouth.

“Bella, drop it!” Pattie scolded.

I staggered after the dog, who misinterpreted my ambling as some sort of Catch Me If You Can game. “Bella, please, girl! I really need that back. I will give you lots of pets if you return it to me,” I begged.

“No need to negotiate. Just command her to drop it, and it’s best if you stand still, so she won’t think you’re playing chase.”

I nodded. “Um, okay. Bella, drop it.” I stood in one spot and, with more authority, put my hand on my hip and repeated, “Bella, drop it!”

She released my purse, and I quickly retrieved it.

“Good girl,” I said. She gave me the cutest look, and there was no way I could be mad at her. She was just doing what dogs do.

“You’re so lucky you weren’t robbed...or worse!” Pattie said.

“Tell me about it.”

I unzipped the purse and glanced inside, praying my phone was still in there. When I saw that it was, a great sense of relief came over me, and I knew immediately the person I needed to call.

“Bobby!” I exclaimed. “I’m so glad you’re awake.”

“Hey, babe. Where are you?”

“You’re not gonna believe it, but I’m on the beach in Panama City! I have no clue how I got here. What the heck? I woke up face down in the sand.”

“Bad night, huh?” he teased.

“The worst! Look, I know it’s a super long drive, but do you think you could come get me?”

“I’m on my way. Gimme a couple minutes.”

“Minutes? No, Bobby, you don’t understand. I’m *not* at our beach. I’m all the way in Panama City. I’ll drop a pin in Google maps.”

“Cool. On my way.”

“Thank you.”

“Not a problem, but, uh...before I get there, you might wanna turn that shirt around and fix those pants. Maybe run a brush through that matted hair.”

“Wait. How could you possibly know that?”

“Look straight ahead at the building to the left. Recognize the guy waving from the balcony?”

I glanced up, and my jaw dropped. “You’ve gotta be kidding me. You’re *here*?”

“You better believe it. Still need me to come get you, or do you think you can find your way to Room 205?”

“I’ll be right up,” I said, now even more dazed and confused. Livid, I ended the call and threw my phone in my sandy purse.

Pattie approached. “Honey, do you need a ride?”

I pointed to the dumpy hotel. “No, but thank you. Apparently, I’m staying right there.”

“Well, at least you know what planet you’re on now.”

I could tell from the glint in her eyes and her kind smile that she was only teasing.

“I might be, but I promise my boyfriend isn’t gonna be for much longer.”

“If that young man abandoned you on a dark beach alone at night, you have every right to be mad at him. I don’t know him personally, of course, but I think you can do much better. What about that brown-haired cop you were talking to last night? He was a cutie. If I were thirty years younger...” She stopped herself and laughed. “Anyway, love, you should forget that silly, senseless boy you’re dating. I’ve been on this Earth a lot longer than you, and I’ve learned a few things. My advice is not to waste your time getting to know the wrong person.”

I let out a snuffle. “You’re right. I can’t do this anymore, can’t live like this. Maybe I should just move away from Jupiter. He’ll just try to gloss over it like he always does. He plays his empty apologies on a loop, and I fall for it every time.”

“Rose...”

“Yes?”

“Another thing I’ve learned is that now is not forever. The future can always be changed. Just remember that.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely. “I know I have to quit drinking. I’ve got a long road ahead of me, but I will do this.” I meant every word I spoke to the kind stranger, but I only hoped I’d be strong enough to finally change my ways.

“I believe in you,” she said with a soft smile. “Bella has a good sense about people, and she liked you straightaway. Besides, you seem to have a knack for fighting crabs and humoring handsome police officers. You’re stronger than you think, honey.”

I half-smiled. “Thank you.”

“You see that big sun over there?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Well, that’s another good thing about life. The sun comes up every morning, and that means God’s given us a whole new day for a fresh start. We all make mistakes or bad choices, because none of us are perfect.”

“I’m afraid I’ll never live this one down,” I said.

“If we allow ourselves to learn from our mistakes, we make better decisions next time. You’ll get past this. I promise. Don’t let one bad night ruin the rest of your days. Don’t let one big mistake own you.”

“One? Trust me, there have been a lot more.”

“You can stagnate worrying about the past or move forward to the future. Focusing on past failures is horrible for your self-esteem, ya know? Let the baggage go.”

“I will try.”

“You know why birds can fly?”

“Because they have...wings?”

“Because they’re *light*.”

“Hmm,” I said. “Come to think of it, I’ve never seen a seagull with a suitcase.”

“Precisely,” she said. “Lift that heavy luggage to the curb to make space for new joy and happiness.”

“I’m ready to do that. But how do I overcome the addiction part?”

She smiled. “Rose, you’ve already made the first step.”

“I did?”

“You acknowledged that change is needed.”

A tear slid down my face. For the first time in a long time, I felt understood and seen. Her words meant the world to me. We talked for ten more minutes while sweet Bella ran around, having a blast. I appreciated her kindness, and she even let me keep her not-so-stylish sunglasses.

“I need help,” I finally said.

*Whoa!* I'd never admitted that out loud to anyone.

I couldn't believe those words tumbled out of my mouth to a complete stranger, but she made me feel so at ease and comfortable, and I knew she would not judge me.

"There is no addiction that God's power cannot cure," she said.

"I've tried to stop, but I can't. I seriously need help."

"We all do at one time or another, honey. Life never goes exactly as planned," she said. "But you are young, and you can still turn this around. First, get sober." She handed me a card. "My daughter runs a Christian drug and alcohol wellness center in South Beach, not too far from Jupiter, I think. Please give her a call. Then, dump the other luggage."

"Other baggage?"

"I think you said his name's Bobby. Losers will only drag you down, dear."

I slipped the card in my purse and thanked her. "This is so nice of you, but I don't think I can afford it."

"There are ways."

I cocked an eyebrow. "Ways?"

"Scholarships and grants are not only for college. Many local organizations, agencies, religious organizations, public assistance programs, and so on will be glad to sponsor you into a program to help you."

"Thank you for informing me of my options," I said. "I feel like my life is falling apart right before my eyes."

"Then you need to change it. You, my dear, are capable of achieving anything you set your mind on. You can, and you will. I know you're worth it.

"How? You just met me."

"I did, but I believe you are worthy of great things, Rose."

"Thank you."

She then pulled a piece of surf-tumbled sea glass from her basket. "Amazing, isn't it?" she said, holding it up to the sunlight. "It's aquamarine, one of the prettiest colors, and nature has smoothed it all out and polished it. Just look how perfect, not one ding or chip. It even looks like a teardrop. God is quite the artist, isn't he?"

I couldn't help but stare at the remarkable treasure. "Yeah, it's gorgeous," I agreed. "The color is so soothing. I swear it has the vibrant glow of the ocean itself."

She ran her fingers over the jewel-colored stone. "Think about the journey it has taken. It couldn't have been easy. The ocean currents tossed, battered, tumbled, and ravaged this thing around for probably 100 long years."

"It's hard to imagine it took such a beating."

"Yes, but look how beautiful it turned out. We can't keep our eyes off it." She put the stone in one of my crab-pinch hands and cupped my other hand over it. "Rose, I believe hardships can create beauty," she said. "You keep this, as a reminder. Make a beautiful necklace out of it or something."

Tears started to fill my eyes as I pondered her words. "It's beautiful, but I can't just take it from you. It's your prettiest one."

“I insist. It’s a gift, a reminder of what we’ve talked about today.”

I grinned and slipped the amazing stone into a zippered pocket for safekeeping. “Thank you.”

“Rose,” she said, “it’s never too late to let God in. He’s our Good Shepherd who restores our souls.”

“Like in Psalm 23:3?”

“Exactly!” A smile curled her lips. “You know the Bible?”

I pushed a wayward hair out of my place. “I do know some. I sorta grew up in church.”

“That’s wonderful.”

“Yeah, I just got off track, went prodigal or something. I don’t really know God’s purpose for my life. Right now, I’m on a path I would’ve never chosen. I’m broken, and I’m not sure what road to follow.”

“There are only two paths, Rose, the world’s or God’s. Only one of the two leads to the finish line.”

Tears streaked down my cheek. “I know I’m on the wrong one.”

“Either way, you have a choice to make. We all do, every day. Choose wisely, Rose. Choose the path that leads to life. Choose...God.”

“Let Jesus take the wheel, huh?” I said with a smile.

She laughed. “That’s an okay song, but it’s really great advice, a decision you’ll never regret.”

“I’ve gotta run, but you’ve given me lots to think about. Thanks for the talk.”

She hugged me. “Anytime. It was nice to meet you. Goodbye, dear.”

“Goodbye. And goodbye to you, too, Bella!” I yelled to the pet who was hopping around in the sand, terrifying some poor seagulls.

She looked down the shore and shook her head. “Why is that dog so obsessed with birds?”

“Because birds don’t carry suitcases!” I said. I laughed as she ran after Bella who barked, jumped, and dug her nose in the sand.

## Chapter 2

I found Room 205 and knocked on the door. I was completely drained, mentally and physically, and all I wanted was a hot shower and a long nap. At the same time, though, I was fuming mad at my boyfriend.

Bobby opened the door, wearing nothing but boxers and a huge smile. “You’re a sight for sore eyes,” he said before taking a huge sip of whiskey straight from the bottle.

I blew out a frustrated breath. “You’re drunk.”

“That, I am,” he said with a laugh, “and you’re one to talk.”

“Still drunk from last night?”

“Nope. Just got an early start. What is it they say? Make hay while the sun is shining?”

“We can’t keep doing this, Bobby.”

He shot me a half-smirk. “Why not?”

“Because I woke up on a beach, with my clothes on backward, all alone! You left me out there! So many things could have happened.”

“But they didn’t,” he argued. “You woke up, and you’re here with me now. We’re independent, open-minded, free-spirited, Rose. We’re young, unafraid to embrace whatever life has to offer. You know me, babe. I march to the beat of my own tambourine.”

“Drum.”

“Huh? For breakfast? Whatever. I didn’t eat all the chicken. Lots of drums leftover. I think the bucket’s on the table. Help yourself.”

I heaved a heavy sigh. “You’re so drunk.”

He gently grabbed my hand and pulled me inside. “So? What’s wrong with enjoying life? I missed you, baby. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Missed me?” I asked, furious.

“Of course I missed you.”

“Sure you did.”

“Hey, you were the one that volunteered to go get our new pet.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t remember? We agreed on taking home a hermit crab. But you were out there chasing the wrong crabs. You were running after those big ghost crabs.”

“The reason I went out there doesn’t matter. Bobby, you left me out there. You weren’t concerned about me at all last night.”

“C’mon, babe. You know I was worried. I went out on the balcony to look for you, but I spotted you down there on the beach, so I called off my search and rescue. Figured you were fine, as long as you were right down there.”

“You let me sleep outside! All night! Alone!”

“Hey, at least you have a good story to tell. We’ll laugh about this later. It’ll be something to tell the grandkids about.”

“Grandkids!? What’s wrong with you! I was almost busted by the cops for public intoxication. I’m lucky they let me go.”

“Sorry about that.”

“How did my life end up like this?” I seethed.

“Hey, the bad times come with the good,” he said, leaning close to me. “I love you so much, Rose. C’mere...”

The stink of the whiskey on his breath made my nausea much worse. “Since I met you, we’ve had far more bad times than good,” I said.

“Hey, don’t say that. You make my life complete. I can’t imagine living without you. Look, you get in these moods sometimes, but you’re my sunshine, mixed with a little hurricane.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?”

“Rose, you’re the best thing that has ever happened to me. I treasure the day you walked into my life. I’ll never forget how we met at that summer concert all those years ago.”

“I’ll never forget it either. It was the exact moment that changed the trajectory of my ‘once normal’ life. I just want to go back to...normal.”

He took another swig from the bottle. “Hey, normal is boring.”

I blew out a long breath. “Then I like boring. I like sleeping on a bed with sheets and blankets, waking up without sand in my hair and everywhere else.”

“Really? You like that? Normal would be buying a hermit crab from the pet store, not trying to capture one at the beach. We prefer to be...unique.”

“You could have at least come down there with me to find Snappy.”

“Snappy?”

“Yes! Our pet crab! Why didn’t you come with me?”

“Because I was throwing up.”

I grabbed the bottle from his hands. “Yet, here you are drinking at the crack of dawn.”

“Want some? I can get you a glass, if you wanna make it classy.”

“No, thank you. And there is nothing classy about this!”

He swiped the bottle away from me. “Cool. More for me then.”

I let out a long sigh. “So, apparently, I was on a one-man mission to—”

“Correction. A one-*woman*, passionate quest to find us the perfect pet.”

“Which, by the way, is highly illegal without some sort of saltwater wildlife permit. I now remember the cops telling me that last night. I knew there was something else they almost busted me for.”

“Almost. Exactly. See, babe? You always weasel your way out of trouble, smashed or not. And I knew your memory would come back. Do you remember the trip here?”

“Not really, just taking a bottle of tequila down to the beach.”

“Pure delight. Jose Cuervo’s a good friend, huh?”

“No, he’s not. He screwed me over, stole some of my memories, knocked me out, and made me sleep in the freaking sand. He’s a tyrant!”

Bobby spun me in a circle and smiled. “He wasn’t on Valentine’s Day. Remember washing down all those tacos with Cuervo? How many bottles did we kill that night? Wow. Such a good time.”

“Sure. Puking and headaches. How very, very romantic, just like this trip. I’m never drinking tequila again.”

“You know, that liquor gets such a bad rap. You drank so much, but you were still standing on two feet for the longest time. You’re definitely not a lightweight. I applaud you. I told you last night it was a bad idea to take the bottle down to the beach, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“So, my pet-searching nighttime escapade earned me more experience for my criminal résumé, more drunk cred? Great. You should’ve never let me go out there like that!”

“But you were so excited. How could I stop you? You were going to pick out the perfect pinchy for us, you said.”

“Seriously? You know I’d never do that to an animal. I’d never take any creature from its proper home in the wild. I’m glad I passed out so that plan was scrapped.”

“Oh, hey,” he said, “I got you something from the shop across the street. You can call it Snappy if you want,” he said, handing a keychain to me in the shape of a hermit crab.

“Cute, but I think you’re missing the point here, Bobby,” I said.

“Which is?”

“You *are* my boyfriend. That means you’re supposed to care about me. You should have taken care of me, made sure I was okay. You left me out there to get arrested or worse. You should have made sure I was safe and sound.”

“I was sick, barfing. I guess that advice about not mixing beer and whiskey is true. Anyway, how was I supposed to know collecting crabs can get you thrown in the slammer?”

“Up to a year in jail and a hefty \$1,000 fine,” I said. “I looked it up. Plus, I was prancing around in a drunken state with an open bottle of liquor. More fines and more jail if they didn’t let me off with a warning. You knew I left with an open bottle.”

“I thought you’d come right back.”

“But I didn’t.”

“Well, you’re here now, right? Hey, you don’t have any crabs in your pockets, do you?”

“Not funny, Bobby.”

“C’mon, Rose. I guess this means you’re the world’s worst crab hunter. Or maybe I should blame it on the cops. You know, I spent a lot of time Googling how to take care of hermit crabs, in case you actually caught one. Do you know they communicate by chirping?”

“Really? I figured they use *shell* phones,” I said. I was in no mood to joke, but I couldn’t help it. If he was being ridiculous, then I would be too.

“Ha! Listen, I know you’re feeling *shell* shocked by this whole thing. See? I can do it too.”

I shot him a tiny smile. “Looks like I’m rubbing off on you.”

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close. “I know this was spur of the moment and super spontaneous, and you’re upset you woke up in a strange place. I get that. But try to see the positives here.”

“Positives?”

“You slept outside under the shining stars and connected with nature on a whole new level. People in plaid flannel shirts pay money to do that at campgrounds. You’ll never forget the night you were gently lulled into a deep sleep by the waves only a few feet away.”

“Wow. Pinch me. I’m such a lucky girl. I’m with the poet of my dreams.”

He shot me a grin. “Stop with the crab puns already.”

“Sorry,” I said, quickly losing my temporary sense of humor as the sloshing of whiskey in his bottle jolted me back to the cold reality. “I’m glad I didn’t catch anything. I wouldn’t want any living thing exposed to you in this condition. Might have scarred the little thing for life.”

“My condition? What about you? You weren’t any better.”

“Um, I was sober by morning. You started drinking again at the crack of dawn, obviously,” I said, nodding toward the bottle.

“Yes, you’re more sober than me. That’s only because you slept it off outside.”

“Yeah, and I’ll never forget it.”

“Good. It makes me smile knowing you have that precious memory to cherish forever. Isn’t that what vacation is all about?” His face suddenly lit up. “Hey, speaking of vacation fun, I was thinking we can get matching tattoos later today. I know you’ll love it. This is the best time and place to get your first ink.”

“That’s another problem with you. You have champagne taste on a beer budget,” I told him.

“I beg to differ. Look at this dump,” he said, waving his arms around. “Not to mention we settled on a bucket from the Colonel for dinner while our friends went to a fancy restaurant. We’re financially responsible, baby.”

“Fine. Point taken. But quality tattoos are expensive. We don’t have money for that.”

“But we’re on *vacation*, babe. We can splurge a little. Besides, it won’t cost much to get each other’s names.”

*What!? Put you on my body forever? You, of all people? Not happening!*

Not only was the idea terrifying and absurd, but I also didn’t want to pay for it. I knew rent was far more important. “Um, about vacation,” I said, changing the subject. “We both grew up in Florida, yet we’re *vacationing* on a touristy beach?” I asked, emphasizing my point with air quotes. “If we really wanted to get away, why not escape to the mountains, maybe the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone National Park?”

“You picked this place, Rose, and we all agreed.”

“I don’t remember any of that. The last thing I need to see is another beach when we live two blocks from one.”

“You don’t remember the dartboard?”

“Huh?”

“Yup. We put all the places on the board, and you got to throw the dart since you beat everybody at poker. You really don’t remember being blindfolded?”

“Nope.”

“Geez. How drunk were you? Maybe we shouldn’t have been letting you throw sharp objects under the influence. Anyway, your dart landed on Panama City.”

“Who even put that up as a choice?”

“I did, because I wanna try Paula Deen’s Family Kitchen. Last night, you told me we’d never make it before closing time, so we had to settle for a bucket of extra crispy down the street. I had to make do with eleven herbs and spices, I guess.”

I lifted a brow in shock. “We’re here because you wanted some famous fried chicken?”

“Not just *any* chicken, Rose. Paula Deen, all that Southern fried goodness. It’s not like she has restaurants on every corner.”

“Let me rephrase it. You wanted Paula Deen’s chicken, so we’re vacationing at a beach?”

“No! Like I told you, we’re here because of your dart. You hit this place on the second shot.”

“The second one? Where did my first dart land?”

“Almost in my shin, but ultimately behind the couch.”

I just shook my head.

“I know, right?” he said. “It’s not my fault you didn’t hit Hawaii.”

“Well, you shouldn’t have put this stupid place on the board.”

“I almost put up the Keys.”

“That’s only four hours from home, half the distance, but it still would have been better than this place. It’s closer to home in case...”

“In case of what?” Bobby asked, starting to take a bit of an angry tone. “Are you suggesting anyone would have driven four hours to come get us if things went sour? Look, what’s done is done. Let’s just make the most of it now.”

I shook my head in frustration. “You don’t know me as well as you think you do, even after all this time. You think I’m some kind of free spirit, but I’m not. I like *normal*, boring, as you put it. I like to *plan* my vacations, schedule time off of work, and save up money to make it nice, not just drunkenly throw a dart and then show up at some random hole-in-the-wall with a KFC nearby. I like to know where I’m going sober up. Normal people don’t spend their vacations on benders and wake up in strange places they didn’t want to visit.”

“Life is too short to be boring. I’ve always run free, like a wild stallion. Then, I found someone just as wild, adventurous, and exciting to run with me.”

“If you call me a horse, we’re done here,” I cautioned him.

Ignoring my threat, he continued, “Don’t you remember, babe? When we first met, we were just two crazy kids in love, unique, impulsive, truly free spirits. We can never be caged.”

“Maybe you just thought I was like that. Maybe I’m finally ready to play it safe. I want normal, Bobby. Is that so much to ask for?”

Even as I questioned him, I had to question myself. *I just wish I could have my old, normal life back, but can I really do it? Can I live a sober life? Am I too far gone? Is it possible to live without ever taking another drink?*

He fussed with opening another bottle. “Uh, what were you saying?” he asked, obviously using his highly honed skill of selective hearing.

“Nothing. Hey, before you slug that bottle, maybe you can help fill in the gaps for me, refresh my memory? Can you tell me any details about last night? Things are a little...sketchy.”

“Sure. Road trip in that RV Carla and Chris bought, except Mel kicked us all out when Neil puked everywhere. Traci couldn’t stop laughing. Paul kept blasting his favorite song. I swear, I’m gonna lose it if I ever have to hear Nickelback again.”

“Ick.”

“I know, right? Anyway, Beth sat on Chrissy’s glasses and broke ‘em, and Jeff kept spilling beer all over the place. Kevin accidentally broke one of the cabinets when he tripped. He must have a thick skull or something.”

“No arguments here,” I said.

“I think he might have a torn meniscus though. Micah somehow nailed the cabinet back together. Then, Joel tried to drive and backed into a tree. Left a huge dent. I guess we did hit the bottle a little too hard.”

“Ya think?” I snarkily remarked. As he told me all the tales of intoxicated terror, the lost hours began to come back to me, and I was overcome with a need to get out of there. “Listen, I have to go to work.”

“Uh, we’ve got this place booked for a few days, so good luck with that.”

“Bobby, no! My sister got me that job. If I’m a no-show, it will make her look bad. Not only that, but we desperately need the money. I can’t afford to get fired. It’s our only income.”

“Pssh. Whatever,” he dismissively said. “Office jobs are a dime a dozen. You’re calling off sick, end of story.”

“How? We have bills to pay,” I asked, my voice wavering.

“About that...”

“What? What is it, Bobby?”

He winced. “I don’t think you wanna know.”

I blew out a long breath. “Yes, I *really* want to know.”

“Listen, don’t get mad. But, uh, you might wanna sit down.”

I crossed my arms and stared at him. “I’m listening,” I said, even though I was afraid to hear the answer he was going to come up with. It was never good when he wouldn’t look me in the eyes and when he told me to sit down.

“I dipped into the rent money a little, but don’t worry. We have a whole week to get it together.”

“You mean *I* have another week to get it together.” I shook my head in disbelief. “I can’t believe you did that!”

“How else were we going to gamble at Ocean Sun Casino?”

“Gamble?”

“Don’t worry, Little Miss Judgy Pants. The gambling is shot now, since we have to pay for a room now and figure out a way back home. Maybe we can smooth things over with Chris and Carla so we can hitch a ride back in their RV. We’ll have to apologize.”

“For what? *I* didn’t do any of that stuff.”

“As far as you remember, right?” he said, smirking at me.

“We shouldn’t have come here.”

“But it’s been a blast! I’ve never seen you laugh so hard. Wait till I show you the pictures.”

“My head is throbbing.” I scooped two Tylenol out of my purse, popped them into my mouth, and washed them down with a few sips of the bottled water the woman on the beach had given me. “Where is everyone else?” I asked.

“They’re staying at the fancier hotel farther down the beach. We saved a lot staying here. I mean, I know the others were teasing me about bedbugs, but I’ve only seen a few ants in the bathroom.”

I just shook my head. “Are you sure they were ants?” I asked, looking suspiciously at the bed.

“I know what an ant looks like, Rose.”

“Fine. Bedbugs aren’t exactly the kind of souvenir I’d like to take home. I’m thinking more along the lines of a mug or a magnet.”

“Or a Snappy keychain?”

“Sure,” I said, looking down at the thing I still held in my hand.

“Don’t worry. I promise you’re not sharing your bed with any bloodsuckers.”

My gaze met his. “I wouldn’t be so sure,” I said.

The joke flew right over his head, but then again, it didn’t really feel like a joke. Bobby was literally sucking the life out of me, financially included. He contributed nothing and expected my office job to cover all our expenses, as well as all the liquor we drowned ourselves in every day. He might not have been a bedbug, but he was certainly a leech on many levels.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he finally asked. Whiskey made him the king of delayed reactions.

“It means I’m sleeping with a bloodsucking opportunist,” I said matter-of-factly.

“Wow. Rude.”

“Facts are facts.”

“Rose, quit worrying. For now, we’re stuck here. We might as well make the best of it.”

I let out a long breath, too angry to even speak.

“It’s vacation time, baby!” he squealed, without a care in the world.

I glared at him. “This is so irresponsible!”

“No, irresponsible is you gambling all your money away.”

“Gambling? I thought you said there was no gambling.”

“Not in the casino, but in the RV on the way here, before they crashed it, Jeff took you to the cleaners, totally wiped you out for at least \$300.”

I bit my lip and tried to remember. I had some slight recall of playing cards, drinking, and laughing. Regardless of whether I remembered or not, I now knew I had no way to pay the rent for the month. As more memories spilled into my mind, I realized we’d spent extra money stocking the RV cupboards and fridge with all kinds of snacks and liquor, not to mention gallons of gas. I remembered drunkenly slurring, telling stupid stories, playing games, and handing money over to my friends with cards scattered in front of me. I even remembered Marlo spilling popcorn on me and Tammy sweeping it up. As all of that came back to me, I could feel my cheeks reddening, and I shouted, at the top of my lungs, “This was a horrible idea, Bobby! We shouldn’t be here!”

“I swear, you never appreciate anything.”

“Squandering bill money is stupid!”

“Can’t you just try to enjoy yourself for once? I tried to do something nice, to help you get away for a little break. Stop being a buzzkill,” he said before he took another gulp.

“Enjoy myself? Do you expect me to just sit back and relax when you’re funding this little excursion with our rent money? I worked hard for that money while you sat on your butt all month, drinking it away and playing Xbox with the electricity I also pay for!”

“Hey, you know I’ve been trying to get a job. Get off my back, Rose!”

I blew out a long breath and, for a brief second, actually considered strangling him with the strap of my purse.

He tried to change the subject and pointed at me. “You might want to, uh...fix your clothes or take a shower or something.”

“Why are my clothes backward anyway?”

“Because you insisted on swimming with the turtles last night. I watched you from the balcony. To make sure you didn’t drown or something.”

“Wow. Boyfriend of the Year! You kept an eye on me? Congratulations.”

“I’m sorry. I guess I shoulda done better, but you weren’t looking after me either. I was just as wasted.”

“You were safe and sound in the room. I wasn’t.”

“Rose, baby,” he said, moving close to me, “we both just have to do better. You’re upset because you can’t remember some stuff. I get that.”

“No, I’m upset because my so-called boyfriend let me go skinny dipping in the ocean and pass out on the beach drunk out of my mind!”

“Skinny dipping? Babe, you’re wearing a bikini under your clothes. Besides, you mostly just dipped your feet in the water. I guess afterward, you tried to dress yourself. You just didn’t do a very good job.”

I laughed. “Obviously.”

“Hey, go take a shower and change. I packed a bag with clothes in it for you.”

“So, you packed bags for going on vacation? Gee. You’re a genius, Bobby. You never cease to amaze me.”

“Don’t be such a jerk. I just wanted to be helpful,” he had the audacity to say.

“Helpful, huh? So, let me get this straight. You stole the rent money to fund this trip, but I’m supposed to forgive you because you made sure we had clean underwear?”

“Well, I actually packed you a few of them. I knew you’d definitely need a clean pair after you heard I borrowed the rent money.”

“Bobby!”

“You’re grumpy, and you look tired. There’s nothing like a nice, cold shower to wake you up.”

“Cold?”

“The front desk said something’s wrong with the boiler. No hot water. I know this place isn’t fancy, but I was trying to stretch our money where I could. C’mon. Shower up, and we’ll get breakfast with the gang at the free buffet where they’re staying. We’re supposed to meet them in an hour.”

“How can you even think about food? I feel sick to my stomach.”

“Try some toast...and stop thinking about last night.”

I rubbed my temples once again. “How can I *not* think about last night? I could’ve drowned or been eaten by a shark.”

“Thankfully, you focused on the land mission, on getting us a pet.”

“Right, the illegal, top-secret mission that left me with these,” I said, holding up my pinched fingers and hands. “Good thing I talked those cops down, because we certainly couldn’t pay a \$1,000 fine with all the rest of our past-due bills.”

“You were singing to those crabs. It was adorable. I could hear you from the balcony, singing that ‘Under the Sea’ song from that Disney cartoon flick. You’re always such a happy drunk, always giggling! I recorded it on my phone. Anyway, the next thing I knew, you were chasing those crabs down the beach. I was gonna bring an ice bucket to you to collect them, but I was blowing chunks.”

*Oh, man. Am I too broken to be fixed?* I’d made a complete idiot out of myself again. I was just glad no one I knew was there to see it. The cops laughed it off, and the old lady I met on the beach turned out to be quite forgiving.

“And that’s the last time you saw me,” I asked, “serenading crabs with Disney songs?”

“C’mon! I was gonna get you, but unfortunately, I passed out.”

“Tequila is not your friend!”

“I think we’ve already established it’s not yours either!”

For the second time that morning, more words flew out of my mouth uncontrollably: “I can’t do this anymore. I just can’t.”

“What? Because of last night?”

“Yes.”

“You’re blaming me? Maybe it’s your own fault for not coming back to the hotel room last night. You waltz back in here with your clothes all twisted. How do I know you didn’t hook up with somebody? How, exactly, did you get the cops to back off?”

“Bobby, how dare you!?”

“Maybe you feel guilty, and now you’re pinning the blame on me. Be honest, Rose. Did you cheat on me last night?”

“What!? Do you hear yourself? Are you insane?”

“No. I think you’re just gaslighting me.”

“That’s crazy! By the same token, I could say you kidnapped and robbed me. After all, I don’t remember voluntarily consenting to this vacation, and you admitted to stealing my money.”

“It’s not kidnapping if you picked the location,” he calmly said.

“I picked it? Right, because I drunkenly threw a dart?”

He nodded. “That ultimately landed on Panama City.”

“Drunk people shouldn’t make rash decisions!”

“It’s just drinker’s remorse. Get over it.”

“Maybe I am, but this has to stop.”

“Where’s the fun girl I came here with?” he asked as he pretended to look around for someone. “I want her back!”

“She’s getting her moral compass calibrated and fine-tuned.”

### Chapter 3

Long story short, a huge fight ensued, and Bobby ultimately tossed me out of the hotel room I’d paid for. He said so many horrible things to me and hurt my feelings deeply. He accused me multiple times of cheating on him, then demanded that I leave. Even when I explained that I didn’t have any money to get back home, he just laughed at me, punched me, and threw me out with nothing but my purse, a flimsy backpack, my shoes, and a bloody lip. Wanting to avoid drama in their dump of an establishment, the hotel front desk sent security up to escort me out, as if I was some kind of criminal.

“He hit me,” I said to one of the burly men, holding a tissue to my mouth. “Look at my busted lip.”

“Ma’am, we saw you out on the beach last night, drunk and falling all over the place.”

Bobby smiled from the doorway. “And there you have it.”

“He’s drunk right now!” I protested.

“Hardly. I had one shot this morning. That’s all,” Bobby lied.

Standing there, angry, hurting, and humiliated, I thought about my future and instantly knew Bobby would not be part of it. I was done with him, for good. Time to let that jerk be somebody else's problem, I thought. "That's it, Bobby. Consider this official. I'm breaking up with you. We're over. Lose my number!" I said as I picked up my shoes and flung the backpack over my shoulder.

"Fine. You can say that if you want, but you'll never find anybody like me."

"That's the point!"

"I'm the best thing that ever happened to you."

"Really? You brought me here on a chicken quest!"

"For the record, I'm going to Paula Deen's without you to get the best chicken known to man. That's what I came here for, and I'm not leaving until I get it."

"You are what you eat," I said. "A chicken, a coward, afraid to make any changes or grow up. We're done."

He paused and just stared at me in disbelief as a tidal wave of emotion consumed him. He'd never heard me speak so firmly to him, and he'd always thought I could never give him up. After a few seconds, his confusion turned to anger, spreading across his face and wrinkling his brow.

I crossed my arms. "What? No response? Can't even come up with a string of four-letter words? C'mon, Bobby. We wanna hear it."

He glanced at the security men, then motioned to the housekeepers by their cleaning cart at the next room. "Sorry, but I won't speak that way in front of these lovely ladies."

When he smiled at the housekeepers, they smiled back. It sickened me that he was so good at turning on his charm and good looks. He had just punched me in the mouth, but women always gave Bobby the benefit of the doubt when he acted pathetic and flashed those baby blues with those long eyelashes.

"I'm glad we can be civil about this," I told him. "I think this breakup is for the best."

"It won't last," he said with a smirk. "You love me, Rose. You can't live without me. You'll come crawling back soon."

"If I have any love left for you, it will pass...just like a kidney stone."

"You better think this one out long and hard."

"Why? Because you're the hottest guy every woman wants?"

"Exactly."

"Then today is their lucky day! They can ride off with you into the sunset to go stuff your face with drumsticks."

"You know what? I've always thought I can't live without you. I'm pretty sure I can prove that wrong tonight at the club."

"Good, but why wait for the club? You can start right now. I now pronounce you dumped and single, and you may kiss my—"

"Don't you dare finish that sentence! I don't want filth in your mouth, because I still plan to marry you someday."

"Why? So I can support us? I was your girlfriend, not a stock investment or a financial plan."

"Ouch. Your words cut ever so deeply."

"Don't worry. Moochers always bounce back."

“That hurts even more!”

“Well, so does my jaw, where you punched me. If these security guys won’t believe me, maybe I should call the police.”

“Look at you! Think they’re going to believe a homeless woman?”

“Bobby, just shut up. Stop wreaking havoc on my self-esteem. And for the record, consider us both homeless. Because you spent the rent money. Or should I say you stole it!”

“I did it for *us*.”

“I’m pressing assault charges.”

“Go ahead. I’ve got hotel security on my side. The police won’t listen to your sad, little story. Look at you. You’re a mess. You spent the night drunk on the beach with God-knows-who, barely stumbled back to our room, and started making accusations. And now you want to blame this crap on me?”

“Spin it however you like. We both know the truth. Goodbye.”

Before I could walk away, he grabbed me and whispered in my ear, “We both need to cool off for a few days and meet back at the house. If you’re not there when I get home, so help me, I’ll hunt you down and kill you.”

My jaw dropped at the sound of his cruel threat. I ran away as fast as I could. I was surprised he didn’t chase after me. I never looked back, and with each running step I took away from him, I felt freer.

When I started to run out of breath and slowed down a bit, I checked the last text message I had sent on my phone. Unfortunately, it was to my mother, at 3 a.m., and it simply said, “Drunkly drunk, I am.” I slapped my forehead, fully embarrassed. I shouldn’t have sent it to anyone, but it was intended for my friend Sue and certainly not for my mother.

Wheezing from running and with my head still swimming with emotions, I thought about that night. All the tragic memories started to vividly resurface, though there were still some holes here and there. I couldn’t believe I ended up in Panama City with a lunatic bunch of friends and boyfriend when I was supposed to be at work. I couldn’t believe all the stupid things that happened on the road trip to get there, and I especially couldn’t believe I’d blacked out alone on a beach, chasing crabs. For my own good, I needed to take a step back and figure out how the night got away from me like that, how it spiraled out of control.

I wandered into the public bathroom on the beach and did my best to freshen up. Bobby had chosen the worst possible outfit for me, but at least the clothes were clean. I put them on, did my best to fix my hair, and brushed my teeth. All the while, as I stared at my sad reflection in the broken mirror, I couldn’t stop thinking about the direction my life was taking.

*I am struggling here. I feel so alone.*

I could not remember everything that had happened to me, and that came with indescribable humiliation. I had told the old woman on the beach that I’d scraped my knees on some rocks, but I was beginning to think that was just a metaphor for the path my life had taken. Truly, I had hit rock bottom. I was just a drunk, filled with self-hate, guilt, and shame. That fateful trip to Panama City was my breaking point, the thing that pushed me over the edge. There wasn’t a rock big enough for me to hide under. I wouldn’t let alcohol win. I was ready to start a life, one I wouldn’t be ashamed of. I

couldn't erase my past, but I could change my future, just like I had talked about on the beach with the kind stranger. As I slid her sunglasses over my tired eyes, I swore to myself that I would never drink again. *Whatever it takes, however hard it is, I will remain sober from this point forward.*

I called the police and asked them to meet me on the beach so I could file a report. Since they had to hear both sides of the story, one went to interview Bobby. They seemed to believe his lie that I was just a drunk who fell and injured myself.

One of the officers was at least thoughtful enough to take pity on me and give me an instant cold pack for my busted lip. Then, he had the nerve to tell me, "Just be more careful and watch your step...and maybe don't drink so much next time."

I wasn't happy that they dismissed my claim and took Bobby's side, but at least there would be a report on file in case Bobby made good on his threat. Things were over between us. I was forced to realize that my relationship with Bobby wasn't meant to be. I needed the man out of my life once and for all, so I would grieve the death of this relationship, and never go back. I let go of the hope that we'd somehow work it out. And by saying goodbye to him forever, I knew I was one step closer to a happier future.

Once I was alone on the beach again, I sat down on a bench, listened to the squawking gulls for a minute to clear my head, then called my mom. I knew I could pour my heart out to her.

"Is it too much to ask to have someone who treats me well and truly loves me, Mom?" I asked.

"Of course not. I have always thought you deserve better than that Bobby," she said.

"I don't love him anymore. But I feel shattered."

"Then it's good you've let him go. It's best for both of you that you are not together if you don't really love each other."

"I spent way too much time trying to make that unhealthy relationship work. It simply couldn't continue. The pain is too unbearable. If I don't end things, I'm afraid I'm going to lose myself. I am so done! I never want to see him again. I am moving out the second I get back."

"If you're really ready to leave him this time, I will help."

"Thanks, Mom."

"You are too full of life to waste your time on someone like him. We both knew that relationship wasn't working. Goodbye is best for your happiness and wellbeing."

"You're right. It's time to move on with my life," I said, my voice quivering.

"You can't keep living the way you've been living, honey. It's not safe. You can't even remember how you ended up in a city eight hours away and passed out by yourself on a beach overnight. That scared me to death when I heard it. I want better than that for my baby girl."

A tear dripped down my face. "I know."

"Then, Bobby punched you and threatened your life. Unacceptable, whether the police believed you or not. As for these threats, we need to get a restraining order."

"Well, it's given me quite the wake-up call." I let out a long, trembling breath. "This is so hard, but I know what I need to do."

"I know you have the strength and courage to do it. With God, all things are possible, dear."

"Yeah, sure, Mom. I can leap tall buildings in a single bound. Anyway, thanks for listening, and thank you for putting up with me."

“I love you, Rose.”

“I love you too.”

A rental car would have been the cheapest option, but I didn't have a major credit card or my driver license with me. I couldn't catch a flight to South Beach either without the proper documentation. So, Uber it was, and my mother was happy to foot the bill. The 475-mile commute was expensive and just barely fell under their limit, but Mom left a huge, generous tip for the driver. She also offered to Venmo me some money so I could get something to eat. I started walking to the meeting point feeling victorious. I had done this. My mom was beyond proud. I had finally stood up to Bobby. It was like he had put me in a box our entire relationship and I felt like I just broke out. I was strong, made out of titanium, and invincible.

Finally.

*Wow. I actually had a backbone.*

While I was waiting for the driver to pick me up, my phone rang. I assumed it was my mom, so I answered it without looking at the screen.

“Rose,” said an awful, familiar voice.

Before I could say anything, I felt a sharp pain in the bottom of my foot, like someone pinched me with a pair of pliers. Then, it felt like my throbbing foot caught on fire. I couldn't deny the unmistakable sting from a bee. I was completely startled and surprised as I watched the angry yellow and black striped perpetrator take flight.

Oh, man! I suddenly felt quite stupid for being barefoot, but I just wanted to sink my feet in the warm sand. Neither I nor the bee enjoyed the experience. Just when I thought my day couldn't possibly get any worse, it most definitely did.

A scream tore from my throat.

“Are you okay?” Bobby asked in a concerned voice.

I screamed again as I writhed and contorted in pain, clenching my fists.

“Rose? Rose!” he desperately screamed into the phone.

“I just wanna lie down and scream. It feels like I was struck by a mini-lightning bolt. The pain is absolutely unbearable, just...beyond excruciating.”

“I know how deep pain feels, like when you sent the police to my hotel room.”

“I highly doubt you're feeling what I am. Ow!”

“You're taking our breakup pretty hard. Just remember, you initiated it. And now you're miserable.”

I jumped, screamed, and shouted in agony. “I'm yelling because I... Oh, it hurts so bad! It's pure misery!”

“It's intense. I get it! I knew it would hurt, but *you* ended it, Rose. Breaking up with me is a recipe for pain, for both of us. Believe it or not, men have feelings too.”

The pain took me down to the ground. “I just want the pain to go away! It feels like a construction worker is using a power drill to excavate a splinter.”

“I hate hearing you like this,” he said.

“Uh! Why does it sting so bad?”

“Love hurts. Love bleeds. Wait. Isn’t that an old song? Anyway, you’re going through major heartbreak, but it was all brought on by you. Our hearts are breaking all because of you.”

“I need Motrin.”

“Does screaming help with the pain?” he asked, still oblivious.

“No, but ice would!”

“Ice? I think a hug would help more.”

“No, Bobby! You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Does it feel like a hand is squeezing your broken heart?”

“My heart? It’s my freaking foot, you idiot.”

“Huh?”

“Listen, Bobby, I got stung by a yellow jacket or something, right on the foot, as soon as you called.”

“Go to the emergency room, right now!”

“Isn’t that a little extreme for a bee sting?”

“You know I’m still drunk, right?”

“Of course you are. You always are.”

“Where are you?” he asked. “I’m too drunk to walk, but I’m sure I can find you. I forgive you for involving the police. I think we can work this out if we just talk about it. I think I can carry you back to the hotel room. I mean, I’m pretty loaded right now, but I want to be your knight in shining armor.”

“So you can do what? Numb the pain with alcohol?”

“It’s a start.”

“Not a chance, Bobby.”

“Okay, look, I saw some crutches by the front desk. Want me to borrow them? I swear we’ll give them back.”

“I’m fully capable of limping. It’s just a bee sting. Why are you calling anyway? Didn’t I tell you to lose my number?”

“I just wanted to—”

“Goodbye, Bobby.”

“At least stay long enough to eat breakfast. After all, our friends are waiting for us. I’m gonna call Kevin and see if everyone is up and ready to meet. He can pick us up. Also, I hope you’ll consider Paula Deen’s for dinner tonight. If you don’t want chicken, she also has awesome pulled pork or pot roast.”

“Don’t ever call me again! And you can eat by yourself. I’ll never be your dinner date again, Bobby. Leave me alone.”

“Not a chance. I’m coming to find you.”

“Love your optimism, but it isn’t gonna happen. In a few minutes, I’ll be in an Uber, flying 100 miles an hour to get back home to Jupiter, far away from you and your nonsense.”

“Wait!”

“I’m moving on to greener pastures. Enjoy your stupid chicken. Enjoy the club tonight. And enjoy my money!”

I hung up, stood, and hobbled to a new spot, closer to where the Uber would stop. I was ready to leave Bobby, ready to stand on my own, but a little bee sting quickly took the steam out of my engine. In a few seconds, my confidence melted away. “I believe I can fly,” I sang, only to end it with, “and crash land.” I wanted to be heroic, to exercise my girl-on-fire power, but only my foot felt the flames.

I elevated my leg onto a bench and looked for a stinger. I didn’t see one still lodged in there, so I used the same cold pack the cop had given me for my busted lip. I couldn’t stop the tears from dripping down my face, but I knew it had little to do with the bee sting. I felt like everything inside me was collapsing. I wasn’t sure I would survive it. I felt shattered, weak, and vulnerable. My head still hurt from the hangover. My foot stung. My heart was torn apart. It made me wonder if I’d ever feel strong again. One thing I knew was that I had no desire to ever have another drink. My friend Jose Cuervo had betrayed me, and my life had been a steady deterioration over the last few years. For so long, I had felt helpless to stop it. I’d tried to get clean before, but the road to clear-headed and sober always seemed to be under construction, fraught with plenty of hazards, its own version of speed bumps, traffic lights, and potholes. That had been my pathetic life, and I wanted it to change.

*My life sucks, but I’m the one who messed it up*, I thought. That was one thing Bobby was right about. Many of my problems were my own fault, either because of things I’d done to myself or because I’d been too drunk and blind to stop him from doing things to me.

I knew I needed help to fix the mess. I was sure rehab would do me some good. I wanted to become a stronger person, to rediscover a better version of myself. I was living the worst day of my life, in pain inside and out, but I was going to follow my stupid ex-boyfriend’s advice and make the best of it. I would turn it also into the best day of my life, the day I finally decided to get clean, to free myself from the cruel grip of addiction and a toxic relationship. I was ready to fight, to choose the right path, and to take back control, no matter what life threw at me.

When the driver finally arrived, his brows wrinkled. “I’m Roy. No offense, miss, but you don’t look so good.”

“Yeah, I had a bad day today.”

“Really? I’m so sorry.”

“Well, nothing puts a damper on a beautiful, sunny day like getting punched by my ex, probably getting fired, being stranded eight hours from home, and so on. Oh, and the cherry on top of this nightmare? I just got stung by a bee.

“Stung?”

“Yep. I guess I tried to put my best foot forward and break up with the idiot, only to have a bee sting my foot.”

“Oh, man. I have a first aid kit in the trunk.”

“Thanks, Roy.”

“So, we’re heading to Jupiter, right?”

“Yes. Thanks for taking me to home, sweet home.”

“Not a problem. It’s a long trip, so feel free to spill the tea. Sounds like you’ve got a lot to talk about.”

We both chuckled.

“I don’t know where to start,” I said.

“Usually best to start from the beginning. What brought you to our lovely city anyway?”

“Fried chicken.”

“What?”

“Actually, Southern fried chicken...or maybe a dartboard,” I clarified.

He laughed as he looked at me in the rearview mirror and arched an eyebrow. “Well, our Panama City is known for its white-sand beaches, emerald waters, and dolphins. Never heard many people talk about darts and chicken here.”

“Look for it in my Yelp review,” I teased. “I really am here because of fried chicken, a dart, and some very bad aim.”

After I told Roy the whole terrible story, he could only laugh some more. “And this loser is actually going there for dinner tonight?”

“Yes. He’s obsessed with that stupid chicken,” I said.

“Well, he’s in for an unpleasant surprise.”

“What?” I asked.

“Paula Deen’s Family Restaurant closed down permanently in Panama City.”

At that point, I had to share the laughter with him. It was so ironic, some sort of poetic justice. He would never get his hands on the stupid chicken that had dragged us into that awful night and morning. I would have given anything to see the look on his face when he realized the truth.

“Guess he’ll have to travel to Pigeon Forge, Tennessee or Branson, Missouri to taste it,” Roy said.

“And this time, he won’t have his girlfriend’s stolen rent to travel with,” I remarked.

Roy was great and gave me plenty of solid advice. I couldn’t eat for hours because I felt sick, but by the time he stopped for gas, my stomach had settled.

“Interested in a footlong, some chips, and a drink?” I asked him, pointing at the nearby Subway. “It’s on me.”

He was so grateful and polite, but I eventually talked him into letting me buy him lunch, and he ordered a feast fit for a king. As I nibbled on my chicken sandwich and sipped my soda, I called Sue, my best friend. She had a knack for making me feel better, and she could always make me laugh. That phone call was no exception.

“Remind me to order the shirt for you,” Sue said.

“Shirt?”

“Yeah, that one that says ‘Bee Sting Survivor.’ You want it in purple, right?”

“You know it!”

“Okay, then. See ya later. Call me if you get bored on your little road trip home.”

“Will do. Have fun today.”

I hung up the call, knowing full well there would be a personalized shirt waiting for me when I returned to town. Sue always knew just what I needed to cheer me up.

“How’s the bee sting?” Roy asked, after licking a glob of mayonnaise from the corner of his mouth.

“You know what? They say laughter is the best medicine, but I think Motrin, Benadryl, hydrocortisone, and Band-Aids work pretty well too.”

He laughed. “Glad I could help out.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Not a problem.”

When I got back to town, Mom advised me to actually map out an action plan to leave Bobby once and for all. The first thing I did was call a rehabilitation center in South Beach, the one on the card the lady on the beach had given me. They agreed to admit me the very next week. The next day, my parents helped me move all my belongings into their house for safekeeping.

Once all my things were out of the place Bobby and I used to share, I set the house keys gently on the dining room table. They were connected to the hermit crab keychain he’d bought me in Panama City. I didn’t want anything from him, especially from that disastrous trip. I wanted that to be a distant memory, and Snappy was a reminder of him. I wanted none of those in my life ever again, not even a harmless plastic crab.

I knew I would never return to that place. Bobby and I were over for good. I took a deep breath, and then let it out slowly. It felt like I was getting a root canal. Excruciating painful, but absolutely necessary. While I was very content with my decision, it did feel odd to walk out of that house we once shared for so long, for the last time. It was a good feeling though, an immense sense of freedom that flooded through me as I made my final farewell and dramatic exit.

I didn’t want to speak to Bobby, but I also didn’t want to chance a text that he might not read, so I called him to tell him I had officially moved out. He was still drunk and didn’t take it very well.

“First, there’s no freakin’ Paula Deen’s chicken, and now you’re gone too!” he said in a drunken rage.

Trying to explain to him that I just wanted to get sober didn’t help. I told him that I had examined my values and reevaluated all of my priorities, and that’s when everything thing escalated. He became angry and shouted and a heated argument ensued. It was like trying to put out a fire with lighter fluid. The argument just grew bigger and bigger. Before he hung up, he said they were back in the RV, but they were going to stay in Panama City for a while and wouldn’t be home for weeks.

His absence gave me a healthy amount of time to start treatment. While I was glad to be rid of him, parting with alcohol was a bit more difficult. I didn’t want to cry every night, but I carried so much guilt and pain, and I couldn’t drink to numb it anymore. I wanted the pain to go away. My heart ached. My soul bled. Emotional turmoil consumed me. I never had a drinking problem until I dated Bobby. He took me down a dark path. I could not go any farther on that road. It was time to break free. I had to travel a different direction to find myself again, to find the Rose I’d lost along the way. I missed her, and I had to become her again, no matter how hard it was.

Why was starting over so hard?

## Chapter 4

It’s been almost one year since I made the commitment to stop drinking. I’d been so lost and broken back then. But I’m sober now; an addict living in recovery. I left that toxic relationship almost

a year ago. And now I'm back on my feet and life is good. (even if I'm still trying to figure it all out) I recovered in a supportive environment and made the tough journey to sobriety and happiness. I was so happy to make that big life milestone.

I found my way through the darkness and emerged stronger than ever. I would navigate the twists and turns of life's unpredictable moments with a new found attitude, taking one step at a time and trusting in Jesus. I built the life that I desired, and was proud of all the small things that I had accomplished, like painting my living room in lively and vivid hues, creating that perfect little garden, and writing the first five chapters of a sweet romance. I really believed that life was a beautiful journey, and starting a new life had made me a new woman.

Yes, I learned it's never too late to change your life. I knew change was going to open up new doors. And boy, it sure did! (like a new job and a new home) I tried not to dwell on the past, and from now on, I would focus on my future.

I'll never forget my dad's words. "Remember, you're not your past."

*And I wasn't.*

I didn't cry anymore because my old relationship was over. I smiled because I was free, and soaring like an eagle high in the sky. So you see, happy endings and new beginnings actually do exist.

I would have to say that my biggest regret was not seeing what my relationship with alcohol was doing to my friends, family, and my life. I hoped that nobody would define me by my past mistakes because I was a different person now. Sometimes, I'm brought to tears seeing where I've been and where I'm at today. I've conquered and broken the chains of my past and I've never felt more victorious and triumphant. It's been an intense, emotional ride, and yet beautiful experience; and I love the precious people in my life who stood loyally by me.

Let me tell you a little bit about myself. My name is Rose Hart, and I'm from Jupiter. No, I don't mean the planet, silly. I'm talking about the town, on the southeastern coast of Florida. My dad is Leon, and my mother is Gabriella. I have a sister named Casey Ashford. She's married and six months pregnant with a baby boy. I must admit, it shocked me a bit at first to think my sister will be a mother, but I am excited about being an aunt for the first time.

I could start my story in a number of places, but I think it best to begin with the day I found three stray kittens. You're probably wondering what that has to do with anything, but those little furballs literally saved my life the night I almost died during a violent break-in. Remarkably, they did a better job than the average rottweiler or pit bull. Still confused? I hear ya, so let me try to clear things up for you...

It was a warm day in October, one of the many things we love about the Sunshine State. Sue Whitlock, my best friend, and I were returning from a walk in the park. Sue decided to come over and hang out, since it was her day off. Since I work from home, I make my own schedule, so it was no problem. It might not sound too exciting, but as a freelance editor, I review written content for grammar, spelling, and making their sentences make sense and look flawless. I specialize in novels and manuscripts, but I've also handled academic essays and internet articles.

My business got jumpstarted when I landed this big project for a huge publishing company. It's how I was able to get the down payment for my lovely home. They loved my work and had some major connections; slipping my name to some other big companies who needed my help. Word

spread quickly and I was finally in high demand. I've never had a shortage on work, and I usually even have a waiting list.

One of my favorite things to do is journaling and writing poems. I have boxes of them in my closet. I'm sure it would have raised my nerd score a lot if everyone knew about that, but I started writing them when I was 12 years old!

Anyway, as we walked up the sidewalk, Sue squealed, "Oh, my gosh! Look! Babies!"

I looked to where she was pointing and found three tiny bundles of joy, all cuddled up on my doormat. They were caked in dried mud, dirt, and filth. I ran inside and grabbed a box and a blanket, and we placed the kittens inside it. They peeked up at me with their pretty, blue eyes, and I'm not sure I've ever seen anything more adorable.

"I think we should leave them where we found them," Sue suggested. "Mama could be feral, and maybe she's out looking for food. I'm sure she'll come back. We shouldn't intervene. We can't just assume they're abandoned or orphaned. I say we observe before rescuing."

"Sounds like a plan. Let's keep an eye on them from the window. I know they'll fare better if they have a mom to take care of them."

"I agree."

While we waited on the mother feline to return, we decided to go on a Google quest. We learned some interesting things. For instance, if kittens appear to be over four weeks old, they can be left alone for eight to ten hours. From the size of them, I estimated my little visitors to be around 1 month old.

We waited all day but saw no sign of their mommy. I talked to my neighbor, who informed me of the sad news that a white cat had been hit by a car that morning. Another neighbor buried the animal in the woods behind his house. My heart went out to that poor creature, who was probably just out trying to find a meal for her babies.

I took the tiny trio straight to the vet, because I had no clue how to feed them, and I needed to know if they were all right.

"These kittens don't look good," the vet said. "They're so underweight. They'll need a lot of care. If you wouldn't have found them, I don't think they would make it another week. Looks like Mom wasn't producing enough milk. At least now they have a possible chance."

"Did you have a chance to call any of the shelters?" I asked. "Maybe they can help."

"I rang up several places in the city, but they're all full. You are their best bet at survival. Is there any way you could foster them?" he asked.

Just one sweet purr from one of the babies was all it took for me to blurt, "Yes, absolutely. Just tell me what to do."

"I can give you all the information you need to give them the very best chance."

I thanked the doctor and waited for them to bring the kittens back. When they did, they looked much better and smelled clean, fresh out of a much-needed bath. My jaw dropped when I saw how cute they were. "Oh my gosh! They're pure white and so fluffy! Absolutely gorgeous."

"And I do believe they are quite lucky to have ended up on your porch!" the vet said with a smile.

I took the kittens home, determined to give them the best future possible. They were fragile and vulnerable, but I would stop at nothing to save them. All I could do was try my hardest to keep them safe and happy.

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Weeks later, the cats had beaten the odds and were thriving. They got smarter by the day, and each was beginning to develop its own unique personality. In a way, they had become like a little family to me.

I met Sue at a place called Coffee Expressions. I loved that place, because it was cozy and always made me feel at home, with its unique and comfortable furniture, chill music, interesting artwork on the walls, and inviting atmosphere. The world is a tough place, and a Cinamon Toast Crunch latte is often all I need to ease the problems away or to celebrate something special.

The place is always abuzz with business and chatter. I love to go there to meet friends, work on my laptop, or read. The friendly baristas even serve my favorite comfort food, macaroni and cheese and tomato soup. The aroma of freshly roasted coffee wafts through the air, and there is something soothing about the harmony of coffee grinders, cash registers, and people talking about everyone and everything under the sun. I often find myself gazing into the case of tasty pastries from our local bakery, struggling to choose, but on this particular occasion, I opted for a cinnamon roll, the perfect accompaniment for my latte.

“No, no,” Sue softly said as she rushed over to stop me. “You have to get a piece of their date bread.” She winked, and I knew she was up to something.

Maria smiled from behind the cash register. “She’s right. Get the date cake. And today your order is on the house.”

“Okay,” I said with a laugh and a shrug. “And thank you so much. I really do appreciate it.”

Maria smiled and turned to get my order. When she came back and placed it in front of me, I saw that she’d written “365” in delicious raspberry jam.

“What’s that about?” I asked.

Sue’s eyes lit up. “Silly girl! It’s to celebrate a year of sobriety!”

I looked at Maria, then Sue. “You guys are the best. Thank you so much.”

Sue wrapped me in a quick hug. “Of course. We love you.”

“And we are so proud of you,” Maria said. “You’re doing so well for yourself. Look at how much you’ve accomplished in the last year. You’re truly an inspiration.”

I pushed a wayward strand of hair out of my face. “Thanks. This means a lot.”

“Yeah, but the best part is...calories don’t count today, so you can eat it! And it’s absolutely delicious.” Sue said with a grin. “So dig in.”

I took a quick moment to reflect on everything. I had developed a chemical romance with alcohol that led me down a dark road. Finally, with the help of Sue and others who cared about me, I’d managed to start rebuilding my life. I’ll also never forget that old woman, Pattie, and her dog, Bella, on the beach; who gave me so much hope and encouragement. I called her daughter’s rehabilitation center and they helped me get clean. Staying sober was definitely worth it. I felt healthier, happier, and more alive than I’d ever felt before. My year of healing was challenging, but it was rewarding at

the same time. I didn't like to gloat, but deep down, it was an accomplishment I was incredibly proud of.

"Hey, what's up with the sunglasses?" Sue asked.

"Oh, these?"

"They're not your usual style."

"Nope. But they're sentimental."

I proudly wore the giant white mirrored sunglasses that Pattie gave me on the beach. That woman was such an inspiration to me and I figured I'd wear them on my one-year anniversary of being alcohol free.

Sue stared at my aquamarine sea glass necklace. "Oh look! You made it into a necklace!"

"Yeah. I figured today was the perfect day to wear it. Pattie gave it to me a year ago, along with these sunglasses, back on that beach in Panama City. I knew that was the day I was never going to drink again. And Pattie gave me some great advice and inspiration."

"Are we talking about the old lady on the beach with the dog?"

"Yeah."

"I had been telling you for a long time to ditch Bobby. You never listened to me, but when a stranger on the beach tells you, you suddenly listen to reason."

"I was just at my breaking point."

"I'm glad you listened. And your necklace is simply beautiful. Just like your lovely outfit."

"Thank you. Lacy top. Black skirt. I thought it was super cute."

"It's super versatile. You could wear that to a wedding, a funeral, a night out on the town, the office, grocery shopping, the dentist office...or even a bank robbery."

I playfully slugged her. "Oh, stop."

"But I made you smile!"

I grinned. "That you did."

"Mission completed."

We walked over to a table, where I added a little creamer to my drink. "I wish I could hang out with you longer, but you know my family is coming over to celebrate with me. I still have to get shopping done for dinner." I cocked a brow. "I mean, I know it's not really the kind of thing that warrants a party, like a birthday or something, but... Well, you know my parents."

"Yeah, your mom can be over the top, but she means well. They deeply care about you, and they have a right to be proud. I think it's wonderful to celebrate this. It's a big day. Besides, it's better than a birthday because you're celebrating an actual achievement. It's a milestone!" Sue said before she shot me a huge smile.

I only smiled halfway and let out a little sigh. "Thanks, but the truth is, sobriety is an everyday battle, an everyday challenge. I'll never really be *cured*, per say."

"You amaze me every day, Rose. It's been a long, hard year for you, and you deserve a shining moment. You've worked hard."

*She's right*, I decided as I thought back on those long days of depression I thought would never end. I was so nasty to everyone during that time. I still can't believe I normalized it, even had the audacity to defend and justify my actions. I screamed for them to leave me alone, even slammed

doors in their faces, but all along, they were on my side, just wanting the best for me. Now, though, things are different.

“I’m just glad my head and conscience are clear. I even wrote about that very thing in my journal this morning. Honestly, things couldn’t be better,” I said before I took a bite of that delicious date bread and licked a glob of raspberry jam out of the corner of my mouth. “At least I don’t wake up with hangovers anymore.”

“Those were the worst.”

“Yeah, I don’t miss that. I guess... Well, to be honest, I stupidly thought I was boring without alcohol, and I couldn’t imagine my life without it. I thought drinking was fun, until I started being absent from my life. It dragged me to a dark place. I thought it made me the life of the party, but all it did was kill me inside.”

“You’re still just as fun sober, Rose. I prefer you that way, the *real* you. I’m super proud of you, and I can’t wait to help you celebrate tonight. Is your Uncle Tom coming?”

“You mean the most embarrassing uncle in the world?” I kidded.

She giggled. “Yeah, but every family has *that* uncle. I think he’s hilarious. His jokes crack me up.”

I smiled. “Hey, no party would be complete without him.”

She held up her coffee mug and clinked it against mine. “Yup.”

“This is going to be the most amazing party I’ve ever had, a whole lot better than my last birthday...and that one was the bomb.”

“Absolutely! Anybody can turn 30, but this? This is a real accomplishment. You have overcome so much. I couldn’t be happier for you.”

I smiled proudly.

Sue set her cup down and looked at me. “Hey, I saw your Instagram pics of those adorable kittens we found,” she said. “They’re as white as snow, and those eyes! So cute. I hope you’ve got cute names picked out.”

I shook my head. “No, not yet. I-I’m not keeping them. I mean, I wish I could, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Why not? Because they’re not crabs?”

I almost spit out my coffee in laughter. “You’re never going to let me live that one down, are you?”

She let out a chuckle. “I think it’s cute you wanted to hunt for a pet crab.”

“I’m not ready for any kind of pet, cuddly or crustacean.”

“C’mon. They’re sisters and need to be kept together at all costs. I was there when you found them, so I’m invested in their welfare. And I know with you, they would have the very best life.”

I sipped my latte and stared at her over the rim of my cup. “As adorable as they are, I just don’t know if I’m ready for that responsibility. I mean, I could possibly handle one cat, but three? I’m still working on getting my own life together. How can I help them with theirs, ya know?”

“You can’t break up a happy family. And don’t tell me you haven’t journaled about them. I’d take them, but you know how my landlord is. I need to buy a home like you did, so I can have the freedom to do what I want. I’m still jealous of that.”

“Yeah, it’s a lot of responsibility, and it’s not as cheap as people think, but being a homeowner is a wonderful feeling. I don’t know why you don’t just go ahead and do it. You’re always talking about it and complaining about your landlord.”

“Upkeep. I suck at maintenance. I haven’t even figured out how to change that darn filter in my air conditioner. But for real, you need to name your cats.”

“They’re not mine,” I clarified once again. “I’ll find the very best homes possible though. I think I might even have some sort of adoption papers for potential parents to fill out, just so I can check on them.”

She laughed and set her coffee down. “Fine. At least temporary names then. You’re fostering them, so that’s part of the job. I demand names for the furry critters the next time I see you.”

I chuckled. “Fine. How about...Snap, Crackle, and Pop?”

She rolled her eyes. “Surely you can do better than breakfast cereal ads. Feline friends don’t want to be named after a breakfast commercial...or little elves with giant spoons.” She sipped her coffee. “How about Autumn, Forest, and Sky...or, uh...Thunder, Lightning, and Rain?”

“Why name them after a storm?”

“But at least it’s not cereal! Next, you’ll be calling them Jake from State Farm, Mr. Clean, and Tony the Tiger.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “I’ll tell ya what. I’ll sleep on it and give them amazing names that go with their personalities.”

Suddenly, my friend grabbed my arm when her attention shifted. “Oh, my gosh! That cute guy is totally checking us out.”

I peeked over at a tall, muscular man with a ruggedly handsome face, looking in our direction. He had a friendly smile and piercing blue eyes, and he appeared to be about the same age as us.

“Wow,” I whispered. “Just...wow.”

“Wow is right,” Sue said with a grin. “Mind if I talk to him? He’s totally my type.” She narrowed her gaze. “I don’t see a wedding ring either. Looks like he’s on the market.”

I shrugged. “He’s totally out of my league anyway,” I said, before gulping down the last of my latte.

“He is not!”

“Sue, he’s all yours. I gotta go anyway. The grocery store is waiting for me.”

“You’re the best!”

The man walked over and introduced himself with boldness and confidence. “Hi. I’m Ethan,” he said.

Sue blushed and shook his hand. “I’m Sue, and this is Rose.”

“It’s nice to meet both of you.”

I also shook his hand. “Same to you,” I said, swept away by that easygoing smile and those sweet blue eyes.

“What were you reading over there?” Sue asked, trying to strike up a conversation. “A thriller or a mystery?”

He held up the black book in his hands. “Not really. More of a drama. It’s the Bible,” he said with a smile.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. I’m a street evangelist.”

“Really? Well, I’m sorry, but if there is a hell, I think I’ve got a one-way ticket already,” Sue said nonchalantly.

“You don’t have to,” Ethan remarked. “Nobody does, because God devised an escape plan. Of course, it won’t do you any good unless you grab onto it like a life preserver. Jesus is the truth, the life, and the way. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”

“Believe? It’s that simple?”

“Yes. If you don’t believe, there isn’t any hope for you.”

“Believe, huh? Sorry, but this sounds a little like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny to me,” Sue joked.

Ethan, on the other hand, maintained his serious expression. “God doesn’t offer a Plan B for those who reject Jesus and his forgiveness of sins.”

Sue’s face dropped, and I noticed a shift in her expression. I knew my friend well enough to realize she was visibly shifting from interested to jumping ship, especially when she read the screen-printing on his shirt: “How can I pray for you?”

“Hmm. Well, I can see why you’re a street preacher,” Sue said. “Nice shirt though. Goes with that whole preacher vibe.”

Ethan was seemingly unaffected by her condescending attitude or her snide comment. “Do you have any prayer requests?” he asked.

“Well, I don’t believe in God, but if your God is real, I guess I do have one little request,” she said, obviously eager to brush him off.

“Nothing is too big or too small. What is it?”

“Well, could you possibly pray that Rose, here, will decide to keep all three of the stray cats she’s fostering right now? She’ll be the very best cat mom.”

“Sure, I can do that.”

“Thanks.”

I gently shoved her, frustrated with what seemed to me like a silly and superficial prayer request. Sue just smiled at me and shook her head.

Ethan shifted his stance. “The main reason why I came over is because I want to ask you ladies what your exit strategy is.”

Sue pointed at the neon exit sign. “Uh, you mean if there’s a fire or something? Right there, buddy,” she said, pointing at the neon exit sign. When he said nothing in reply, she thought about it for a moment and realized he was asking her a spiritual question. “Oh, um...you mean, like, permanent exit, right? Like...God?”

He nodded.

“Okay, but clear something up for me. Which god? Because there really are a bunch of them. There’re all those Thor and Loki types Marvel likes to mess with, and I even read once about this voodoo god that is some kind of reanimated skeleton who wears sunglasses, a top hat, and a tuxedo.”

“I’m not talking about *a* god. I’m talking about the *only* God, the one who created *me and you*,” Ethan patiently corrected.

I shot her a look. “You know he’s talking about the one, true God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” I scolded.

“Ah, so you’re going the Jesus route.” She then looked at me and whispered in my ear, “I take it back. He’s *all* yours. Enjoy.” She then returned her gaze to him. “Rose is into all that stuff. I mean, she goes to church faithfully every Sunday, was even in charge of the bake sale. She teaches in Sunday School and Vacation Bible School in the summer. She even let them soak her on their dunking machine! I guess they earned balls to throw by saying Bible verses or something. Me, though? I’m not into religion or God or all that WWJD mumbo-jumbo. It’s just not my thing. But Rose? She’s right up your alley.”

I hoped my face wasn’t reddening, but I could feel myself blushing. Feeling the need to defend myself, I explained, “I grew up in a Christian family, went to church my whole life till I started dating a guy who made my life a living, uh... Well, let’s just say he ruined my life, and I quit going to church while I was with him. I’m back on the bandwagon now, though, and I’ve been back in church for almost a year now.”

“That’s great!” he said with enthusiasm that sounded genuine.

“We’re here celebrating Rose’s one year of sobriety,” Sue said.

If I had any latte left in my cup, I might have accidentally spilled it on her. *Do we really need to announce that to the gorgeous stranger?* I thought. “I had a rough patch with the ex. I’m getting back on my feet,” I replied.

“I’m happy you’re doing well,” Ethan said.

Sue stood. “Very well, since she dumped that loser. Look, Ethan, it was nice meeting you, but we were actually just about to leave.”

“Well, if either of you ever want to talk, just give me a call, day or night,” he said before placing a card on the table.

Sue picked up the card, read it, and then handed it to me while wearing a huge grin. “Here you go. He’s available twenty-four/seven. And the card says he’s a licensed mental health counselor. That’s at least six years of school here in Florida.”

I stuffed it in my purse and met Ethan’s gaze. “Thanks. It was nice meeting you.”

“You, too, Rose. I’m here if you ever need me.”

Our eyes met, and he smiled. My heart raced as I realized that a spark had ignited between us. His gaze lingered, and a warmth rolled through me as I was lost in it. I had never seen eyes so beautiful, a smile so white, and hair so thick and unruly. I turned to wave goodbye, but I was clumsy about it and knew I was making an idiot out of myself. I was so rusty at the game of dating, but Ethan’s smile and his laugh lit up the room. I couldn’t help but notice him. I couldn’t explain it, but I was completely drawn to a man I’d just met.

He turned to Sue. “It was nice meeting you, uh... Sorry. I forgot your name.”

“That’s okay. You can just call me Most Awesome Person Ever,” she teased.

He let out a chuckle.

I threw my sunglasses on. Sue is so bold and over the top. She’s always been like, but it’s one of the things I love and admire about her. I have always lacked confidence, especially when it comes to strangers and even more so when it comes to cute ones. Sue is pretty and always dressed fashionably.

She has long, black hair and emerald green eyes just like her dad. She's also always on the lookout for a great guy. As for me, at that time, definitely not so much. I wasn't quite ready to start dating again, so I'd sworn off men. Meeting Ethan, though, made me wonder if I'd changed my mind.

The little bell on the door tinkled as we walked out, and Sue turned toward me. "He might be perfect for you."

"I foster three cats and my love life is utterly depressing. I'm not his type. I'm not perfect enough for him."

"Ethan doesn't need you to be perfect. He just needs you to be yourself, to be you."

"So, you don't want him anymore? You staked a claim on him the second he looked at us with those big, blue eyes."

She giggled. "I guess I did pretty quickly call dibs, huh? I mean, the guy's hot, but I'm not into the Jesus thing. You know I'm an atheist. He's probably really nice, just too nice for my taste. Plus, I don't want to be preached to our entire first date. He won't preach to you, because you already believe the things he does. As far as he's concerned, you two are already joined at the hip."

I laughed. "What?"

"You are on his team. No need to preach to you about an exit strategy." She ran a hand through her hair. "Do you even have one?"

"Didn't you just say you're an atheist? I know you don't like talking about this stuff."

"Just a little curious on your take—you know, since hot preacher man brought it up."

I knew Sue was searching, even if she wouldn't admit it. More than once, I'd try to open the door on those conversations, only to have it slammed in my face. This time, she started to open it, so I had to take advantage of the opportunity. "I don't know," I said. "I mean, I go to church now, and I'm a real good person. I even quit drinking. I'm sure God will see that. I know I will go to heaven."

She chuckled and threw an arm around me. "How could you not? You *are* a good person, the greatest person I know. You always pick that soup kitchen and that church over me. But I get that. It's for a good cause, right? You truly care about people and go out of your way for anyone."

My grin widened. "Aw, thanks. I try."

"Maybe I need to work on that whole compassion thing, just in case there are big, pearly, white gates."

I shook my head as she laughed and said goodbye. I knew one day, I'd convince my friend to visit church with me.

"Oh, Rose," Sue called after me.

"Yes?"

"If you're thinking about dating again, I highly recommend you ditch the sunglasses. Sentimental or not."

I laughed. "Whatever."

She grinned and I walked off.

Outside Coffee Expressions, a homeless man saw me and asked for something to eat.

I remembered when I was hungry, but I had to shake the memory away. That was not a place I ever wanted to revisit. Without hesitating, I reached into my purse and gave him a ten-dollar bill.

"Thank you," he mumbled before he walked away.

“God bless you,” I said, and I meant it as I said a little prayer for him.

## Chapter 5

With two paper bags in hand, I made my way to the porch. I swung around and clicked the car alarm on my key fob, then smiled when I heard two beeps. *It's going to be a fantastic night*, I told myself. I was excited to cook dinner for my sister and parents, along with a few friends and other relatives. I'd been sober for a whole year, and it was worthy of a celebration.

The night I left Bobby Greenwood, the ex-now-a-why? who had threatened to kill me, I'd just had enough. I was tired of him slapping me around every time he got loaded. I also knew my love affair with alcohol could no longer continue. I said goodbye to both of those toxic relationships on the very same day. I would no longer allow alcohol to be my painkiller, my friend, or my comforter.

Eight months after our breakup, I bought a cute house on Oak Street, in a quiet neighborhood. I'll never forget the feeling I had when I finally had a home of my own. I was so overwhelmed with the sense of freedom and joy that I actually cried. The real estate agent told me it was completely normal, and she was correct about owning a home being a good investment. It was hard to contain my emotion. I was standing on my own two feet for the first time in years. I had a great job. I owned a home for the very first time. I now went to church. I had made peace with friends and family. My transformation was like night and day. I wanted to throw my arms up in victory.

*I triumphed over addiction.*

*Whoo-hoo! I did it!*

One of the many benefits of home ownership was that I could now own pets. I loved Bella, the dog I had met at the beach a year ago. So now I had my heart set on two golden retrievers, and I'd already decided to name them Daisy and Lily. Nevertheless, I knew I had to get on my feet and learn to take care of myself before I could properly take care of them. I also knew, though, that I was finally on the right track, so those pups would definitely be part of my future.

Of course, all that changed when those three, beautiful strays found their way to my porch. They'd been living with me for a few weeks now. They were all skin and bones when we first discovered them, but I was fattening them up, and I hoped to find them amazing homes. I had to chuckle to myself when I realized how serious I was about that, even to the point of considering requiring adoption applications. I just wanted to find the perfect home for them, and I didn't want them to be separated. They'd been through enough trauma, and if anyone understood trauma, I sure did.

“Hey, Rose,” my elderly neighbor called out, “what's with that huge smile on your face?”

*Hmm, I don't know. Maybe because it's my one-year anniversary of being sober...or because I'm dreaming about future pets...*

“I know why,” she said. “You've got a hot date, right?”

I had to smile even more at that. She was kinda right, after all. My good mood did have something to do with Ethan, the gorgeous guy I'd just met at the coffee shop, but he hadn't officially

asked me out. He'd given me a business card, so I figured it was a friend zone sort of thing. I could just see him with a bubbly, pretty model on his arm, and I was sure I was not his type. I always kept my long, blonde hair in a messy bun, and I never bothered with much makeup.

"All those groceries," Betsy continued. "Whipping up a homecooked meal for him on this lovely Friday evening?"

I laughed. "You're half-right."

"Which half?"

Betsy was obviously unaware that I've never had the greatest of luck with men. "Well, I am cooking, but it's for my family, not a date. They're coming over later."

"What a shame," she said. "You deserve a date. You're too pretty to stay home alone every Friday night."

"You're too kind," I said.

"I have never seen you bring a man home."

*Gee, lady, thanks for reminding me of my lonely existence...and also for spying on me,* I thought, but I just shrugged and said, "Who knows, Betsy? I might just surprise you one day."

She laughed. "Well, enjoy your time with your family."

"Thanks. I will."

"Oh! And I'm loving those cool shades you're wearing."

"Thanks!"

Before Betsy went back inside, one of her two, young grandsons walked around to the front to say hello. He'd been batting balls with his brother in the back yard, and he threw his Louisville Slugger down in the grass to give me a hug.

"They love you so much," my neighbor said. "Of course, you do buy them ice cream every time that truck comes down the street, playing its silly music."

I laughed. "Well, who doesn't love a sweet treat? It's definitely *my* therapy."

"Those kids go nuts when that truck comes 'round. Sad that I'm a bit too old for the ice cream man," Betsy said, "but I have my own adult version."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Amazon or UPS."

I laughed. "Yeah, when I hear them pulling up, I run outside for my packages," I agreed. "It's definitely the adult version of an ice cream truck. They should add that corny music!"

After we shared a laugh at that, I said goodbye to Betsy and her grandsons and told them to have a fantastic Friday night. Inside, I quickly set the groceries for my dinner on the counter, changed my clothes, and started cooking. I played my favorite music and jammed to it as I threw chicken in the oven. I danced and spun around...with, well, not so much perfect rhythm. But hey, who needs therapy when there's dancing, right? I might be awkward and clumsy but I have fun. I was in the best mood. Everything was going to be amazing, even if I didn't have a hot date to impress.

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Just as I was setting the table with the amber glasses and colorful elements I'd chosen to give the meal an at-home but classy feel, my phone rang. I answered it without even looking at the caller ID,

assuming it was Mom calling to let me know she was on her way. Unfortunately, it wasn't her at all, and when I heard the voice on the other end, I instantly regretted picking up the call.

"Rose, it's me, Bobby."

"What do *you* want? And how did you get this number?"

"I heard through the grapevine you're celebrating a year of sobriety. I just wanted to congratulate you. I know it's been...rough."

"Thank you. I appreciate you thinking of me, but I have to go now."

"It's been a year since we broke up too."

"Yes, I know."

"I'm sorry about Panama City. I was a lousy boyfriend. I should've been there for you. I'm sorry I left you passed out on the beach like that. That was so wrong and I feel so bad. I should've had your back. And then you told me you got arrested. Or wait. They let you go. Sorry, I had a few Margaritas. But only because I was sad tonight."

"That's what you're worried about? Me sleeping on the beach?"

"Well, yeah."

"You punched me. Remember?"

"C'mon! You know how much we both drank. I had a pounding headache and you were nagging me about rent money. I thought you straight up cheated on me. I had the worst hangover. And I drank more tequila and whiskey. I wasn't thinking straight. I'm so sad you're not in my life anymore. I miss you more than anything. If I could go back and change things I would."

"Let's not rehash the past."

"I'm holding the hermit crab keychain. It's the last I have to remember you by. Thanks for leaving it with the housekeys." I thanked him and he continued, "It means a lot to me. It's really sentimental, ya know? Because I just miss you so much."

"You've told me that twice now."

"My heart is bleeding."

"I have a new life now, Bobby. I worked so hard to get clean and have a normal life. I can't go back. I just can't."

"I went to Michael's Fishhouse for some fish tacos. Remember? We had those on our very first date, and I ate them but this time they didn't agree with me, and I—"

"Yeah, well, a lot of things didn't agree with me either, Bobby," I interrupted. "Look, I really have to go."

"I'm sorry about all of it," he said. "Leaving you to fend for yourself when you were wasted, our fight, spending the rent money, your bee sting."

Just then, I heard a knock on my door. I was overtaken by a knot in my stomach. *Wait. Is he actually here? Is Bobby stalking me now?* I wondered as I ended the call. I wasn't expecting any dinner guests yet, so I was terrified to see who it was. I decided it was best to play possum. I shut off all the lights and slowly crouched down where I couldn't be seen through any windows, hoping Bobby would just go away. It was dark so I knew he couldn't see me. I didn't appreciate unexpected visitors, especially him.

*CRASH!*

The sound of glass shattering filled the air, and I jumped as my heart began to race.

*What the heck? A stray bullet? Maybe one of Betsy's grandkids threw a wild pitch through the window. Or...is it Bobby?*

I went over to investigate. All kinds of possibilities rolled around my head, and my fear only grew when I rushed over and saw thousands of shards of glass all over the floor next to my back door. The entire patio sliding-glass door was shattered, but I didn't see any baseballs, nor did I see anyone nearby.

Frantic, I hurried to find my phone so I could call the police and turn the lights back on. Before I dialed, the crunching sound of footfalls echoed in the air. I turned, and, in a blur, a figure lunged at me. Caught off guard by the ambush, I was easily thrown against the wall with incredible force. I hit my head and my vision blurred. Then I saw black.

While pain exploded in my back and head, I fluttered my eyelids and saw a blurry image of a man standing in front of me. After hitting my head, I couldn't see properly and the lights were off. Everything was blurry. Dizziness overtook me. No words were exchanged as I remained still, face to face with a silent stranger. I couldn't make out his features before he clapped a hand over my mouth. When I struggled, his other hand flew to my throat. Flailing, I struggled to breathe, but he just picked me up by the neck and threw me down roughly again.

Stunned and on my back, I looked up and saw the faint line of a baseball bat. I screamed when he swung, and I desperately tried to shield my head and body with my arms.

*WHAM!*

The pain of the weapon crashing into my head was immense. Dizziness flooded me again. I tried to shout, but nothing came out. I forced myself to open my eyes.

I still could not make out his face, even as he dropped the bat and clenched his hands tightly around my neck. Then, a horrifying realization struck me: *I'm going to die...unless I fight.*

With a quick and powerful strike, I hurled a kick into his leg. He cursed under his breath and wobbled a bit. Furious, he grabbed me by the hair with one hand and punched me in the gut with the other. My throbbing head whipped around as he slapped me and repeatedly beat me all over. I tried to block the punches, to no avail. He continued to pound and pummel me, grunting from the effort.

Finally, the assault paused, but I was sore, terrified, and helpless. More than that, though, I was incapable of accepting my powerlessness.

I finally caught my breath when he took a step back. Some part of me hoped he was leaving, but I wasn't that lucky. Instead, he reached down to retrieve the bat he had dropped on the floor. I saw him lift it high into the air, and my heart lurched. When he came at me again, he delivered powerful blows, hitting me in the legs and torso.

I screamed and felt my whole body going numb. Spots danced in my vision. I squirmed, but everything hurt. He just loomed there, an ominous shadow, just waiting for my body to give out. I had no idea what I had done to deserve the savage beating, and I didn't want to die on a cold, dark floor.

Time passed, but since I kept drifting in and out of consciousness, I had no concept of how long I was lying there. When I opened my eyes again, I was shocked to discover I was still alive. My skull throbbed, and I felt weak and woozy, as if he had battered every inch of my body.

When I glanced up, I saw him standing over me again, just staring at me. I wished I could see his face or recognize his voice, but he didn't make a sound.

I'd never felt the kind of fear that swallowed me up when he lifted the bat again. At that point, I knew he was not going to leave my home till I had taken my last breath.

Then, something really strange happened: those three kittens padded across the floor to come near me. I didn't understand why they weren't hiding, but amongst the chaos, they didn't retreat. One even jumped on my chest and purred. I feared for their lives. I knew one swing could easily take one of my kittens out.

Suddenly, the intruder slowly backed away. "What's wrong with their eyes?" he whispered.

I didn't answer, for I was much too terrified to speak.

"They're...glowing," he whispered, in a calm tone I found unnerving.

He took another step back and dropped the weapon he'd been holding. I heard the sound of crunching glass beneath his feet, and then, there was only silence. Because, like a bat out of hell, he ran away, completely freaked out. I couldn't understand what had frightened him away. After all, my fosters weren't vicious guard dogs. They were only small, frail kittens, and nothing about that made sense.

And just to pause the story for a second. It doesn't make sense now. But when I learned why the kittens scared the intruder off, it'd all made perfect sense. But at this time, I was clueless. And in a fog. And glad that he was gone but terrified he'd come back and finish what he started.

Minutes passed, although it felt like hours as every inch of my body was on fire with intense pain. For the longest time, I was afraid to move, afraid he would come back to finish the job.

Once I was certain he was gone, I knew I needed to get help. The only problem was that I was too weak to get up to find my phone. Everything was spinning. The agony was unbearable.

Just as I struggled to breathe through it and will my broken, trembling body to move, a cool breeze blew by. I realized I was lying on something crunchy, something that was digging into my skin. It took a moment for my brain to recall that it was a literal bed of glass, but those small lacerations were nothing compared to the beating I had just taken.

Furious and terrified but not wanting to die there, I desperately tried to move again, to no avail. I could not even convince my pinky to twitch. All I could do was breathe and bat my eyes, and even that hurt.

I did not know what to do. I only knew I had to find my phone to call for help. I remembered that it was on the counter, but it may as well have been on the top of Mount Everest. The floor seemed so very far from where I needed to be.

My sweet kitties tried to comfort me, but I couldn't even pet them. All I could do was scrunch up my nose and whine at them when they licked my face with their little, pink tongues.

As I helplessly remained there, bleeding and throbbing with pain, I wondered, *Who would do this to me...and why? Who was he?*

I was confused and thirsty, and a deep depression began to grab hold of me. I did not know how to get up or how to get help. There was only one thing I knew for sure: *I want to live. More than anything.*

I really did have so much to live for. I had already gone through so much, and there were people who loved me and cared about me. I didn't want to disappoint them by dying. As I glanced above me and saw, with blurry vision, the corner of a grocery bag, I recalled my plans for the evening. *My family! They'll be here soon. Are they going to find me dead? Oh, I can't let them see me this way.* The thought horrified me. I thought about my parents, and everyone else I knew and loved. I could picture them grieving for me and that made it all the worse. My survival and my future, two things too many of us take for granted, were just not certain, and I didn't want to lose my life or break their hearts. I was so sorry to everyone I was leaving behind. My life had come to a screeching halt. And there wasn't a thing I could do to stop it.

My earthly death haunted me and I thought about the aftermath of my passing. I didn't want to picture all these horrible mental images, but I couldn't help it. I thought about all the 'Rest in peace' posts on social media. I couldn't picture seeing them all over Instagram that I was gone and not here anymore. I wondered how my obituary would read. My family and friends would gather at my wake trying to make sense of such a tragic death. I could picture their disbelief, shock, and sadness. My breathing hitched as I pictured them wearing black mourning attire, weeping, and hugging one another.

And man, that cut deeply.

Clenching my fists and squeezing my eyes shut, I thought about my hands folded in a casket, wearing my favorite dress. The more I thought about it, I might have to have a closed casket. I pictured that, too, with an arrangement of roses, carnations, hydrangeas, lilies, and lively green foliage resting on top. I wouldn't want people to see how I met my demise. Why add to their sadness?

I thought about the service at the church and how they would talk about the life I lived. They would share precious memories and stories. I was sure they would all say nice things, and many would come to pay their respects. I wondered if there would be poems or hymns. I assumed I would be missed, and some people would have wonderful stories to share about our time together. I would be given a beautiful goodbye and a touching tribute, then my body buried in a coffin in the expensive plot my grandparents had bought a long time ago.

I pictured the funeral procession to the cemetery and my family watching my casket get carried out of the black hearse. I could see the tears running down my mom's face as she sobbed and my dad trying to stay strong and comfort her. I felt tremendous pain and hopelessness and tried to blink the painful thoughts away, but I couldn't. My loved ones would then lay red roses on the casket, then it would be lowered into the ground. I could picture my mom collapsing like a knife had been plunged deeply into her chest. I cupped my mouth and let out a long sob. More tears flowed as I was ripped apart by grief. I would give anything to change things. But what can I say? Murder is like a thief, a thief who stole my life away from me. And I was powerless to stop it; I had zero control.

I thought about how I started my day not knowing that it would be my last. Why would any human being resort to taking an innocent person's life?

Death can be tragic, harsh, unfair, and unbearably sad. I lost my loved ones, and everything I worked so hard for, everything I had achieved, everything I was, and yet to be. It was all stripped away in a flash, in the blink of an eye. I didn't want to be trapped forever in past tense, like, we all *loved* her. But it wasn't like I had a choice in the matter.

*Why did this happen?*

I had no idea who this guy was, but his intent was clear...he wanted me dead. Was it my ex? I didn't see his face but the amount of evidence was overwhelming. He had threatened to kill me in the past. It was the one-year anniversary of our breakup. Bobby had called me right before the knock on the door.

What does it feel like to be left for dead?

Well, it's the worst pain ever.

I never knew life could be so awful.

Facing my death was shocking and inconceivable. Emotions pushed my mind in all different directions. I was scared of the unknown, I feared pain, my heart ached knowing my loved ones would grieve for me, that I wouldn't exist anymore. Thinking about sudden death is not easy. I knew I had to be brave no matter what happened, at all costs.

How does one respond to immanent death? I was overwhelmed, bewildered, upset, and stunned. Fear could be immobilizing and I couldn't let it paralyze me. My mind was at war with the fact that I was going to die a horrible death. I refused to believe it, yet I knew there was no way out of this one. Every breath was more excruciating than the last, and each one was a cruel reminder that I was moving ever closer to being on the verge of death. My head struggled to capture rational thought, everything looked fuzzy, and my insides felt twisted and misplaced. Dread knotted in my stomach. I felt woozy and was getting weaker with each passing second. I could feel myself slipping away and knew I was on the brink of death. I would have given anything for my death sentence to be lifted. I shuddered as cold, paralyzing despair washed over me.

I pondered everything as my life hung in the balance. *Wow*, I thought. It's amazing how philosophical a person becomes when faced with death. I had never valued my life as much as I did when it was about to be taken away from me.

Then, there was only blackness.

## Chapter 6

My life suddenly came screeching to a halt. I felt a force jerk my spirit upward and I knew I was getting ready to say hello to the next world. The feeling was strange, and the only way I can explain it, even now, is to say my spirit *separated* from my body and slowly floated to the ceiling, like a helium balloon wafting into the sky. In an instant, all pain and suffering vanished because I left the physical plane.

Then, I looked down at my spirit self and was stunned. I had hands, arms, legs, everything, and there was not one scratch on me.

I studied the terrifying scene below. *Wait! Is that my body down there? All broken and...dead? I gasped. No! No! No! That can't be me. Am I...floating? This could only mean...*

*No!*

To my astonishment, I stared down and confirmed it was definitely me.

Gut-punching realization hit me full force. My mind raced frantically. *Did I actually die? I had to, or I wouldn't be... Wait. Where am I?*

Once more, I looked down at what was left of my former self. My body was just an empty cocoon, bloodied and beaten, lying beneath me. It did not look good at all. I saw the cats lying beside my body, with no idea in their furry, little heads that I had passed on and was literally floating above their heads. The whole thing was surreal, and not in a good way. It was eerie and confusing, the most baffling thing I've ever encountered.

I didn't feel dead, yet I didn't feel alive either. Nevertheless, I knew it was real. It was not just a dream or any sort of hallucination. It was not a near-death experience. It was an *after-death* experience. I had died, and my body was no longer my home. My life, as I knew it, had been taken from me, in my very own kitchen, by some maniac I didn't even know.

Then, I felt a touch on my shoulder. Mesmerized, I spun around just in time to see two angelic beings materializing next to me, with dark hair and eyes and dressed in radiant, white robes. Their skin glistened and gleamed as if they were made of light.

"I-I need help," I pleaded, desperate for answers and quickly devolving into an emotional basket case. "Can you please tell me what's going on?"

One of them solemnly nodded. "As you can see, the soul continues to live."

"We're here to help," the other one chimed in. "Just come with us."

"Who are you?" I asked in confusion.

"We will take you to where you need to be," he said in the most comforting voice.

"Yes, but am I... I mean, isn't that me down there?" I knew it was, but I needed to hear it from someone else, so I knew I wasn't just losing my marbles.

One of the beings nodded. "It was you. I am sorry to say, you have passed on," he said, wearing a sad expression.

My jaw dropped as he confirmed it. I already knew, of course, but I was not prepared to face the finality of it. His words caused me to break out in a long sob, and I could not stop shuddering. "Please let me go back," I begged.

"I'm afraid that is not possible. And staring down at your mortal body isn't going to change anything. However, we were sent to help you cross over, to help to ensure a smooth transition."

My mind raced through a tumult of emotions. "Cross over to where? What is in store for me?" I asked, terrified of what he might say. I had my faith, but it was in that pivotal moment that I realized just how shaky it was.

"Come and see."

My lips pressed into grim lines. *Angels? Does that mean I'm going to heaven? I mean, I don't see any pitchforks or red horns, or—*

The glowing ones could see how lost and scared I was. The outspoken one tried to comfort me and reassure me that everything would be okay. I wanted to believe him, but I was struggling to do so.

"Please come with us," the other one gently coaxed.

I started to follow but stopped when I heard a heart-shattering, ear-splitting shriek from below.

"Oh, Leo!" my mom shouted, clinging to my father.

My mother was instantly inconsolable, and my dad was weeping. My heart lurched as I helplessly stared down at them. My greatest fear was them finding me that way. It was only worse when my uncle walked in and gasped. Chaos quickly ensued as my mom, sobbing, cradled and rocked my dead, battered body in her arms. It shook me to my core and devastated me to see them suffering like that. I wanted to hug them, hold them, to tell them, "*I'm right here,*" but I couldn't. I was invisible, no longer in their physical world.

"Call 911!" Dad yelled. Because like usual, he never carried his cell phone with him.

My sister may have been the most daunting sight. She was six months along in her pregnancy and holding her round belly as she leaned over and looked at me, engulfed by grief. I was terrified the emotional stress would harm her or the baby, and I did not want to leave my family that way.

"Dad!" I yelled. "I'm right here. Mom! Why can't you hear me?"

My piercing screams tore through the air, but they fell on deaf ears. The people below me, the people I loved with all my heart, were upset and in pain. I tried to call out to them again and again, but there was no point. They only knew I was gone. I felt so incredibly hopeless.

For a moment, time seemed to come to a sudden halt. I thought about leaving my family behind. What will they do without me? The thought of them crying over my grave sent shivers down my spine. I felt nauseated and sad, a deep, melancholy chill consuming my once-brave spirit.

"I want to say goodbye," I said, voice quivering.

"You're beyond goodbye."

Those words hit me hard. I let out another long sob. I was so numb and discombobulated.

"Please come with us," the man said, touching my back. "I know this is difficult, but we must go now...to a better place."

"I can't! Do you expect me to just...leave them!?" I yelled.

"You have already left them. You are not in their world anymore. They cannot see you, and you cannot touch them or speak to them. It is time to go." He shot me a compassionate look.

I did not want to go, but I knew he was right. The people I loved could no longer see or hear me. Somehow, some way, I was trapped in another dimension, like some twisted episode of an old science fiction show. "*You're traveling through another dimension, a dimension not only of sight and sound but of mind...a journey into a wondrous land whose boundaries are that of imagination. That's a signpost up ahead. Your next stop? The Twilight Zone!*" my mind recited, but I knew this was no television rerun. I hoped I was merely unconscious from the beating, just dreaming, but I knew it was not a dream or a nightmare either. "It's real, all too real," I muttered in defeat as I finally accepted the inevitable and turned to follow the glowing ones. I had no idea what was next, but it seemed they had some answers.

I was forced to leave my body and Planet Earth, where I'd spent my whole life, and I wondered how it all worked. So many disjointed, fearful thoughts raced through my head. So many emotions swelled inside me: anger, horror, sadness, regret, and grief, to name a few. I couldn't help but think about all the unchecked boxes on my bucket list: *I never married, never had children and watched them grow up. I'll never see my child graduate. No one will ever call me their grandma. Heck, I won't even see those little kittens grow up. And who will take care of them now, by the way? I didn't even have a chance to find them proper homes yet!*

Not only that, but I had so many future plans that were now rendered pointless, so many goals that now just seemed silly and meaningless. I wanted to volunteer more, to learn how to speak more Spanish than what I knew to order food at Casa del Sabor. I wanted to be the best aunt ever to my sister's baby, but that one act of violence took away everything from me, and it took me away from everyone else too.

But as we walked down a long corridor, I pondered more: Why can't they just tell me what's going on? Why torment me like this, leaving me in limbo? Every few feet we traveled, the pit of dread in my stomach grew larger. I felt something was wrong and sensed something wasn't right. I couldn't blindly put my faith in otherworldly beings that I knew nothing about and didn't fully trust. After a while, it just became too much to bear, so I slowed to a stop and said, "Look, I know I was transported into a different realm the second I died. But I need more answers. Please tell me what's going on, right now."

The one on the left laughed, but something about it was unnerving. Up until that moment, they had been gentle, soft spoken, even comforting in a way. Now, the illuminated thing was emitting an evil, wicked laugh that concerned me greatly.

My heart felt like a cold softball in my chest. "What's so funny?" I asked. "Did you not see that I was just murdered in cold blood? We just left my family bawling their eyes out! I'll never see my kittens or my nephew grow up! And I'll never see my family again."

*The audacity!* I thought when he seemed to think that was funny and laughed again.

"I want to hear it from you. Tell me everything right now. You owe me that, at least. I demand that you explain this process!"

This time, they did not give me the courtesy of an answer, not even a sneer, and just stared at me with their dark, creepy eyes. They motioned for me to keep moving so I took small steps forward.

I felt totally uneasy, and a growing sense of dread overwhelmed me. Something seemed off, just not right. Those fears were confirmed when we were suddenly surrounded by total darkness. The first one began cackling again, and the second one joined in. To my horror, I also heard long, muffled screams up ahead. I squinted and saw a flickering light, but it seemed so far away.

My freaky escorts continued to laugh at me. I tried to ignore them, but I was caught in a panic. There was something wrong, something so, so wrong. I felt it so deeply that I had to stop moving altogether. I didn't want to follow those heckling hyenas into the darkness toward the screams in the distance. My gut told me not to. "No! I'm not going with you!" I shouted.

They didn't seem to like it one bit when I refused to go any farther. After another round of evil chuckling, one said, "As if you have a choice."

I felt panic rising inside me, but I managed to blurt, "I'm going back."

"Really?"

"Yes, and for the record, I no longer believe you are helpful angels."

"It's a little too late to turn back," one said.

"I don't care. I don't trust you, and I am not following you for another minute."

"We can...make you."

"I dare you to try," I spat.

In an instant, the dreadful duo morphed, and I found myself standing next to two tall, troll-like creatures with menacing red eyes. I guess he took me up on my challenge.

*What the...? He flippin' shape-shifted!*

Screaming, I jumped back. An immediate feeling of complete and utter terror washed over me. I was certain now that it was a nightmare, an awful, horrible dream resulting from the trauma I'd been through. *But why does it feel so real?* I had to wonder.

The beings were now some kind of supernatural goblins, like the villains in a twisted fairytale. They were very tall and just as gruesome and hideously ugly as any creature I'd ever read about in folklore.

Without another thought, I turned to run. It was useless, though, because the fiends snatched me right back. One grabbed my left hand, and the other grabbed my right. When I glanced down, I saw their long, six-inch, sharp nails digging into my flesh with mind-blowing strength. As if the glowing eyes were not bad enough, they also had sharp, protruding teeth, and their foul breath made me gag.

Gripped by fear, I could only emit one of those long, bloody screams actresses always use in horror movies. In an instant, I became Hollywood's favorite Scream Queen.

I struggled against the crushing grip, trying to break free from their hands, but they were too strong. They were pure evil. I could feel their sinister insidiousness radiating through me like a sickness, and the thought of them touching me made my skin crawl. Then, in a gush of wind, I felt myself lift. Seconds later, I was hanging upside down, flailing. They laughed again as they carried me away to their lair. My heart started to hammer harder, and my pulse quickened as my mind thought things it should not have. I did not know what to do about it, but I knew they wanted to destroy me.

The corridor was actually a tunnel, of sorts, and rings of various neon colors vibrated around me, dancing on the walls like a psychedelic strobe light. I was going to another plane, something far worse than what I'd already endured, and that frightened me all the more. The farther I traveled, the muggier the air became, until suddenly, heat slammed into me as if I'd opened a baking-hot oven door. Then, it somehow felt worse, as if someone had thrown me into a furnace. I finally dropped into a fiery inferno, unable to catch my breath at all. A gush of hot air smacked against my face as I began some sort of freefall, like plunging into a vortex; into a massive, spinning hole. Adrenaline surged through me as my life flashed before my eyes. It was the most gut-wrenching, most terrifying feeling anyone could ever go through.

I had been tossed into some kind of portal that plunged me into the darkness. I found myself free falling thousands of feet, plummeting faster than I had ever driven my car. *Why is this happening?* I thought as I whirred and whirled deeper and deeper into an unknown, scorching abyss.

*SLAM!*

When I hit the ground, the stench of rotten eggs overpowered me, the stink of sulfur. What little wind I had was knocked out of me when I landed, and it was nearly impossible to breathe again in the sweltering heat. In the distance, I heard the crackling of flames. While all my pain had vanished when the glowing beasts first came for me, now I was in pain once again. All I saw was blackness, a darkness worse than that of any cavern I'd ever visited.

Stunned and shocked, I tried to examine my body, checking for damage. I wasn't wearing clothes. And I was glad I had long hair to help cover some of my nudity. I felt as if I'd been run over

by a semi, and my head felt like a linebacker had viciously slammed into me. The force from the fall should have broken bones, but I was surprisingly able to move my legs and arms.

“That’s...impossible. A fall like that should have killed me,” I whispered, yet there I was.

Somehow, I was alive, so I slowly sat up to try to get some sort of bearing on my surroundings. I felt around. I was laying on hot, volcanic rock. It was hard to concentrate as heat invaded my lungs and the reek of burning flesh assaulted my nostrils. One thing I did notice was that the creatures who had dragged me down there were gone. In some way, that was a relief, but in another, it was awful to be alone in such a desolate place with no explanation. I was deep underground, far, far, far, from any natural light.

Two things stood out to me.

One. I knew I was no longer in my body.

Two. I knew I wasn’t on Earth.

And I could feel this terrifying force; this pure evil surrounded me. How do you describe evil? I couldn’t explain it, but it was there. And it was unsettling. Darkness permeated through me. It’s not just all around you; it’s in you. I’d never been more terrified in my entire life.

Darkness surrounded me like a thick blanket. It looked like midnight in the choking, suffocating smoke. Cries, wails, and moans echoed from every direction, and the unpleasant noise wasn’t muffled like before. Now, I heard it as plain as day.

I knew something was terribly wrong.

Slowly, my eyes began to adjust to a dim light. I lifted my chin and surveyed the situation, only to let out a gasp when I saw what looked like a scene from the apocalypse. The rocky surroundings reminded me of lava rock and red rock. Some was reddish brown and some was burnt black. I had never experienced this kind of terrain; or this kind of heat. Had there been a thermostat there, I was sure it would have been in the triple-digits. I kept having visions of that old “This is your brain on drugs” commercial, and I could actually picture my brain frying like an egg in a hot skillet. Off in the distance, flames licked the walls of the unfamiliar place. I stared at the unsettling, orange-red glow in front of me. Amber-colored embers fluttered everywhere, like overdone snowflakes. Everything was scorched and coated with soot, as if there had been an ash blizzard.

“What is this *place*?” I whispered, horrified.

Is this what lies beyond the grave? I was left alone with my racing and terrified thoughts.

When another loud scream echoed from somewhere, I darted my eyes around the cavernous landscape, searching for the source of it. Again, I tried to convince myself that it was all just a very bad dream, that I was still at home on my sofa, taking a nap, with my kittens sleeping beside me. But I knew better because I could *feel* the intense heat. The flames burned my skin like hot coal. Had I still been fully human, I was sure it would have killed me, but something was different about me in that place. I felt the pain of it, but it did not seem to cause fatal bodily harm. Another orange, burning ember floated through the air, and I moved over just in time to prevent it from landing on my arm. I could smell and taste the smoke particles, and while that was horrible, the worst part was hearing the deafening screams. I had never heard screams like that in my life. I didn’t know what those people were going through to make them scream like that, and I had no desire to find out.

Then, something dawned on me: *I am just a zombie now, a living corpse, dead but alive at the same time.*

Desperate to prove that theory wrong, I pinched myself. I was shocked when I felt it. All of my senses were working.

I could *feel* in that awful place.

I could *see* in that awful place.

I could *hear* in that awful place.

I could *smell* in that awful place.

I could *taste* in that awful place.

I could *think* in that awful place.

I could *remember* in that awful place.

I still had the same beliefs and the same attitudes in that awful place.

I can wake up from a dream. I can wake up from a nightmare. But I couldn't wake up here. This wasn't fantasy. Or imaginary. This awful place, as nightmarish as it was, was real, and I was real within it. A lifetime doesn't last forever, this does. It was so horrible, so unthinkable, so unbelievably hot. Not only did I have my five senses, but I also had my mind. I could remember, reflect, ponder, and think. The only thing I couldn't do was get out of whatever hell that was.

Just admit the truth, I told myself. Just say it.

Tired of arguing in my own head, I caved. "Fine. I'm in hell," I confessed in frustration and embarrassment. "I'm in freaking hell! Hell. That's where I am. This has to be hell."

*Certainly, God wouldn't send me to hell. I'm religious. I believe in Him. I serve Him.*

*Why?*

*Why is this happening?*

I had so many unsettling questions about the afterlife; about this hellish universe. And I knew I wasn't in the place I envisioned myself to be once I passed. I was supposed to be in heaven. Not down here in this dark, grim, and decaying landscape.

No, not down here. I hid my face in my hands and wailed.

I now know firsthand that eternity starts immediately upon death.

Thoughts of my friends and loved ones flooded my mind. I just wanted to hug my mom and dad, to cuddle my kittens, to laugh with my sister. But in that instant, I knew I would never see them again. Even there, in that place of death and misery, I still felt love for them, and I would have given anything to see them again. That separation was the worst torture of it all.

Somehow, I had the knowledge that I had died and had been thrown into the afterlife of the damned, some kind of interdimensional chasm. Everything felt more real than it did when I was actually physically alive on Earth. The most depressing thing of all was that, somehow, I knew it was my destiny to remain there for all eternity. I knew there was no way out. I had a supernatural understanding that I belonged there and that I would spend the rest of my life in that place of eternal torment, that everlasting prison. I just knew, as if someone had uploaded that information directly into my soul. I was fully aware that I deserved to be there and that I was barred from ever escaping that supernatural, never-ending death sentence.

I had dabbled. I had been to church. I had read the Bible, even taught it. I'd tried to be a good person. I'd done all the things I thought I was supposed to do. I knew hell was no joke, not just a scare tactic meant to frighten or guilt people into being good or giving money to the church. It was simply Christ's deliberate judgment on sin, and now, I was there. *What a pathetic, miserable, lonely life it will be here*, I thought as the grief and sorrow hit me like a great tidal wave.

I felt complete banishment from all God's good gifts like laughter, happiness, peace, joy, and love; even sunlight, breathing, and eating. There was no love, no light, no one to talk to, no food, no water, no rest, no sleep, no compassion. All those wonderful things—all the things that made living worthwhile—were gone. It was nothing but unimaginable horrors and torment, and it was for eternity. That meant forever, for always.

I thought about all the things I would miss like, walking around in the morning with a big cup of coffee, touching the cold window in my living room and watching an epic rainstorm with big flashes of lightning at night, staring at a starry sky or sitting at the beach on a sunny day with a bright blue sky.

So many heinous emotions held me captive. *How can it end like this for me? How can this be my fate?* I pled from deep within my gut for the horrible ordeal to end, but it didn't. And I knew it never would. I just didn't want to face that horrible fact.

"Stop, Rose! Stop shaking. Stop it! Just stop it!" I yelled at myself when my body began to shiver with anxiety and a grief overload. How could this be my final destination?

My eyes absorbed everything, searching for something—for anything—that would help me make a speedy escape. As much as I felt it was true, I didn't want to believe I was stuck down there in that barren wasteland. I refused to accept it.

With my heart racing, I held my breath, waiting for disaster to unfold, because I felt something watching me from the shadows of the flickering, orange flames. I clenched my teeth and tried to settle down. I felt trapped and terrified, but I would never embrace that land of shadows, that hellish landscape before me. I couldn't give up, not just yet. I had to hang on to some small shred of hope that I could break free.

I spun around in a slow circle. Awful wailing, weeping, and the gnashing of teeth from the doomed souls echoed all around me, sending more shivers down my spine. Then I swore I saw a shadow in the corner of my eye like something was watching me. I felt a shudder run through me. I looked around but I didn't see anything. Just heard those awful screams.

Showering fire sparks blew everywhere, pelting me. The smoke thickened, scalding my throat every time I inhaled. I wanted nothing more than a breath of fresh air, but I was afraid I would never experience that again. I would never smile again. I would never laugh again. I would never feel joy again.

My physical body died and would stay behind on Earth, but my soul would continue to live...in this horrible place. Even if I wanted to give up and die... I couldn't. Because I was now an eternal being, my soul would live on forever. This was a place of eternal suffering.

A disabling fear crippled me as I pondered. I didn't see any exit signs. I couldn't reverse this. I couldn't change things. There weren't any second chances, no hope for a release, no parole, and no grounds for an appeal. I had to face the undeniable truth that my case was closed for all of eternity. I

had so many regrets. So, so, so many. I had no future now, and nothing but doom lay ahead. I'll never grow old, I thought. I'll never get married, never have a child.

I was separated from everyone and everything; what a final, tragic, and devastating end to my life. It was a soul-crushing moment; a soul-destroying night for me. Within moments, my little flicker of hope began to diminish, and inescapable despair consumed me.

## Chapter 7

A short time later, the treacherous place seemed even darker, the air thicker and hotter. A heavy sensation pressed down on my lungs, making it harder to breathe. I swear there was no air in hell; I had to fight for *every* precious molecule of oxygen I could get. My skin burned, bubbled, and blistered. I did not understand why I was being forced to endure it. I looked down and could literally see the skin hanging from my arms. It burned and sizzled. Pieces of flesh dropped. I gasped deeply. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. Nothing was more sickening than seeing the color of my tendons. Then... my skin regenerated. And it started all over again. Shivers rippled through my body, and I trembled.

I was panicking. I wanted to die.

But I couldn't.

I was frantic. And I was desperate for relief from the indescribable pain. I screamed. I gnashed my teeth. I shouted. The pain was a million times worse than back in the physical world.

Why did it have to be too late for me?

As if some dark entity could read my thoughts, demonic laughter rang out from somewhere in the distance. Crippling fear consumed me once again. I wondered where I could hide, but I knew it would only be a matter of time before they found me. I felt pure panic and terror. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't even form a plan in my head. My thoughts were scattered. It's hard to think when you are so terrified.

Spitting, glowing sparks floated past me. I stared at the inferno licking the rock walls and dry landscape, and I felt nothing but sadness, anger, and misery. Souls waited in torment. With both hands, I covered my ears. The moaning, screaming, and all the other noises became a cacophony of sounds so intense that I just wished I could end my entire existence. I was quickly beginning to unravel. And I found that I was talking to myself a lot.

I retreated deep into my thoughts. I was stuck in this demented reality with no human contact whatsoever. The worst of it was the loneliness. I didn't want to stay lonely forever. I didn't want to feel isolated like this; I just wanted someone to vent to, to get things off my chest. I was scared for my future, my seemingly endless sentence, and I had nobody to confide in. I had been thrown into solitary confinement against my will, stuck with nothing but pain, my troubled mind, and all those awful cries from all those lost souls. Would emptiness become my whole life?

I knew that my torment had only just begun. I didn't want to accept this new reality I was forced to endure. I knew I would be here forever, forever, forever, forever, with no end in sight. After a trillion years, it would just be the beginning. There was no rest, no breaks.

*This is absolutely unbearable.*

I had always enjoyed chatting with people. I longed to talk to someone...anyone. But there was nobody. I would be forced to carry all that pain, torment and suffering alone. My world had been turned upside down. Just two hours earlier, I was happy and getting ready to celebrate. I was cooking and singing to myself as I danced around. Then, it all went down the drain. My future would be steeped in suffering. That fiery prison, that dark pit of despair, would forever be my cemetery. Inconsolable grief devoured me at the thought: *How can you lose everything in one single moment? My heart is so broken.*

Finally, I was so angry I had to voice my frustration. "No!" I cried out. "This isn't fair. This wasn't the way it was supposed to be." My eyes filled with tears. I wished I could hold my mom and dad; grown or not, I still yearned for their tight hugs in that desperate moment. The thought of never seeing them again, of never even having the chance to say goodbye, was like a cold knife in my heart. The vision of my family and friends weeping at my funeral tormented me. I wasn't ready to die. My life was snuffed out, and I had no warning whatsoever. It all ended, just like that. The feeling of being helpless and powerless overtook me. I would now live on in the memories of all those who loved me.

I treated every honorable person I met with respect, and I'm leaving this world with no hate in my heart. I've treasured every friendship and relationship I've ever had.

The fire crackled, and the piercing screams from others continued. I pointlessly lumbered around in circles, just staring at the rough walls of the caves, struggling to breathe the toxic air. The stink of death hung thickly in the air, even though no one was granted the relief of death down there. I stepped over the fiery embers burning on the ground. Steam rose from everywhere, and the dizzying smoke made my head spin. My legs wobbled with every step, and nothing made sense.

Now, if I had ever harbored any doubts before, I knew. I knew there were realms beyond death. I knew the afterlife was real. I knew hell was not just some altar-drawing routine those fire-and-brimstone preachers used to force people to behave. It was not just some manipulation tool, like Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. It was a very real place. I was in a *very real* spiritual place, a place not known to the natural world.

That, in and of itself, was a sobering truth.

Great sobs shook me. "How do I get out of here?" I whispered to only myself, collapsing to my knees, greedily gasping for every breath.

The eerie, haunting landscape made me shiver. It was like Mars in all those space movies, unforgiving and lethal, only it was so much more sinister and foreboding. It was home to the purest, darkest evil. A feeling of dread and inescapable doom lingered in my mind. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to go. I broke out into loud, uncontrollable cries. That was the darkest moment of my existence, because I was sure my world was forever shattered.

It was so dark, except for the flickering of fire, and I was alone and isolated to contend with that fiery pit on my own. As I thought about that, a memory made its way into my mind unexpectedly. A scene flashed in my mind, a vision of Ethan in the coffee shop, asking, “What’s your exit strategy?”

“I don’t know!” I yelled, wiping sweat off my brow. My voice came thin and raspy, as though I couldn’t quite control it. I rubbed my pounding head as the question throbbed in my mind.

I knew it was too late. My soul would be alive forever in that place of doom. Unbearable pain gripped my soul, even more than it had hold of my body.

Next, my thoughts were kidnapped by a brutal round of woulda-coulda-shouldas, as my mom loved to call them. Why couldn’t I listen to what he had to say? Was that my last chance to hear the truth? I shoulda heard him out. Why did I brush him off the way I did?” Then, I felt a defensiveness taking over. “Wait. What did I do wrong? I went to church faithfully. I even went in that blizzard, when only four people showed up. Why am I down here? Sue is the atheist, not me!”

I thought about how sad my mom and dad would be.

My parents shouldn’t be burying me before they passed. That’s not the way it was supposed to happen. They were supposed to be celebrating my year of sobriety with me, but now, they would have to plan a funeral.

I was also sure my mother would say, “*At least she’s in a better place,*” or “*Our loss is heaven’s gain.*”

*If only she knew the truth.*

No tribute, no obituary, no reminiscing, no heavenly hopes could change the reality of where I was now imprisoned, even if it was against my will.

I knew then, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that death is just a transition into another form of life, an eternal one. Knowing I would be there forever sent me into a panic. I had only horrendous screams and crackling fire to keep me company in the darkness. I would’ve given anything for someone to talk to. Even more than that, I would’ve given anything for a second chance.

*I just want out, out, out!* my broken soul screamed.

My heart was as shattered as the glass I’d left behind on my kitchen floor, broken beyond repair.

There is no purgatory, no nirvana, no reincarnation. I thought about all the people living their life without a care in the world, just going on and living their life not realizing that hell is waiting for them. If only I could warn them.

If only...

I peeked through the gaps in the towering rock. I almost let loose with an audible gasp when I saw several demons pounding across the barren landscape, barking and nipping at each other, their hairless skin scarred with red welts. Other creatures, four-legged beasts paced the cave floor while black smoke billowed up from the magma below. So many demons patrolled the deep pit, and as I peered around, I noticed all sizes and shapes of monsters. They ranged from ugly, mangled, and deformed to ugly, grotesque, and twisted. My breath caught in my throat, and I crouched down even more between the towering rocks, trembling so violently but unable to calm myself down. I would have to be more careful if things like this lurked everywhere.

Monsters were real.

Pure malevolence.

Satan's little secret. Surprising truth to us.

And I wanted nothing more than to run to God.

But.

I knew that I would never see God again. And that hurt deeply.

*If heaven is where God is, hell is where God isn't, I surmised.*

I knew there was no repentance for the fallen angels, the demons, but there was also none for any human who took his or her last breath and died in sin, without Jesus. That information was downloaded to me in this spirit body. I bet this place was full of surprised people like me. Being a good person didn't matter. Going to church, even in a blizzard, didn't matter. At the moment of truth, when it was too late to make the right decision, only Jesus mattered.

Bright orange flames and treacherous shadows caused by scattered fires flickered around me. I had descended to the bottom of the hellish world, and I was now doomed to suffer for eternity.

I wouldn't just be here for...

A week.

A month.

A year.

A thousand years.

A million years.

A billion years.

But eternally.

I knew the darkness would *never* lift; I would never see another sunrise, never be cooled by a summer breeze or a spring rain. I would never breathe fresh air again. Instead, I could only laboriously inhale smoke. It felt like nuclear waste, like radioactive particles settling deep in my lungs.

Suddenly, a crawling sensation on my arm made me jump. I flicked off a squirming, black worm and sent it flying. "Gross!" I accidentally said aloud.

When I looked more closely at the jagged rocks strewn about, I saw more worms and other creepy-crawlies moving in swarms. I jumped back, gagging. They were not normal earthworms or night crawlers. No, these moved faster than any worm or caterpillar I'd ever seen, and the ground was peppered with wriggling bunches of larvae and what looked like writhing, burnt maggots.

Yells and howls radiated in the background. Fear and trembling seized me. I really couldn't stand this anymore. The tragedy of my dark eternity weighed down on me and left me screaming in the back of my mind that I had to find a way out, even though I knew there was no rescue or safety to be had. More terror-filled shrieks drew my attention away from the bugs and made me glance around. It was as deafening as a crowd at some Taylor Swift concert, millions crying out, only these screamed in torment. I covered my mouth as a sickening stench blew past me. The suffocating filth made me gag. I saw no living beings except the beasts and the insects, but the screams were so horribly real. When the sounds drifted off into oblivion, the near silence that ensued was almost worse. A shiver shot down my spine. I didn't like being down there one bit, especially as alone as I was. I would have given anything to see anyone, but I didn't want my parents, Sue, or anyone I cared about to be stuck down there with me. I just wanted out, before those creatures spotted me.

The air remained thick and heavy. I choked on the scent of suffocating filth and death, and tried to rub the stinging smoke out of my watering eyes. I waited, every muscle in my body tense. The acrid smell assaulted my nose, and I gagged again. It was a struggle to keep from puking. The inferno of impenetrable heat was torturous and unending, like someone pointing a blowtorch in my face. The dense smoke, sizzling crackles, and blinding heat made my heart race something fierce. My eyes stung from the black smoke and the tears I'd been silently shedding. I was overcome by thirst, and my tongue felt like sandpaper, swollen and dry. I had never felt more parched, and I never realized a person could miss Blistex quite that much.

More than that, though, I needed water. I desperately, desperately needed something to drink. I thought of those TV shows and movies I'd seen where people drank their own pee, but frankly, I was so dehydrated from the punishing heat that I couldn't even go to the bathroom.

There were no comforts to be had in that place, no meeting of anyone's needs. I clenched my teeth as a sick feeling nestled in the pit of my stomach, and I sucked in a deep breath as the fire crackled.

The next thing to make me jump was a round of tiny growls and squeaks. I glanced down, and my face twisted up in disgust when I saw two deformed rats staggering toward me. Their faces were emaciated, their snouts contorted in an unnatural way, their eyes red and beady. I stomped on one with my shoe, but it survived the blow and darted off into the darkness, dragging its burnt, pink tail behind it.

Even after the rodents went away, something continued moving near my feet. I focused on the ground and noticed long, thin, black snakes slithering by. More and more of them came, one after the other, and I knew I could not remain where I was. To get away from the snakes, who were likely chasing the rats for their next meal, I clenched my fists and scurried away, ready to take down anything in my path.

My feet crunched over smoldering piles of ash and debris as I shuffled through the bleak land of shadows and burning caverns. I never felt so weak; literally had no energy. It took everything I had to just walk one step. And I couldn't escape the feeling that I felt weighed down somehow, my legs heavy like cement.

A black creature with a grotesque face, red eyes, and humongous wings bared its teeth at me like a ferocious animal as it flew past me into the smoke. I drew a shuddering breath. Would it turn back around? I blinked and looked again, but I didn't see anything but darkness. My hands shook and I took a deep breath to calm myself. But I couldn't calm down. A horrible thought raced across my head: What if that creature comes back? I literally shuddered at the thought.

My stomach felt so sick. The scent of death invaded my senses; the smell of decaying flesh was overpowering. I tried to find a pocket of breathable air, to no avail.

Couldn't breathe.

Needed air.

Lungs burned.

Needed water desperately.

No air. No light. No water. No life. A dark, eerie panorama stretched before me, with high-pitched screams, cries, and wails echoing from every direction and shadowy figures flying and darting

above me. Before I could make out what the hovering things were, they disappeared in the soot and smoke.

My mind raced. Each and every shadow made me nervous. I took cautious steps, alert to every sound, smell, and sight. Guttural chanting began, and I swore I was trapped in some sort of lucid nightmare. Not to mention, my feet were on *fire*. Walking on hot rocks was taking its toll. Not to mention, it was difficult to walk, and every step felt like I was operating in slow motion. And also, with every step I took, I expected one of those creatures that I'd seen... to rip its claws deep into my back. I never felt safe, not for one moment.

*It's like being stuck in a horror film.*

I was a nervous wreck and I couldn't deny how rattled I was. I tried to take a deep breath which was nearly impossible. My condemned soul longed to escape this underworld of fire, smoke, and brimstone. The agony of missing everyone and everything I loved and cherished was too much to bear.

*Control the stress. Control the fear. Control the emotions.*

Yeah, none of that worked whatsoever. The temperature grew so hot, and the red-hot lava all around gave the place the feel of a burning lake. I knew it wasn't any ordinary fire. There was something supernatural about it, as if it could never be quenched, and it had to be at least 2,000 degrees. I was sure the place was pumping out deadly carbon dioxide, because I felt toxic inside with every breath I struggled to take. Heat waves rippled in the air and I felt my dry tongue. It felt rough like sandpaper. I found it hard to swallow. And I never had been more parched in my entire life. I was suffering terribly and I was suffering all alone. It felt impossible to keep my mind calm.

This place was beyond description, beyond words. What an evil and wicked place.

I knew my body was dead. I'd seen it on the kitchen floor. Still, I was somehow still very much alive and experiencing pain, fatigue, and dehydration. Everything was more intense, my senses more heightened. I could not make sense of it. My senses were sharper, and my thoughts were not hazy anymore, but nothing seemed to gel with reality. I was slowly being seared by the heat like a marshmallow over a campfire. *The place is no joke. I'm being roasted alive!* I thought, and I so desperately wanted to be freed from the punishment, agony, and bondage. I was tired, weary, and emotionally distraught.

For some reason, I remembered something my friend Sue once told me, on one of the rare occasions when we were discussing my beliefs. "Dying is nothing more than an end, just... where your existence stops," she believed.

*How very wrong she was!* I now realized. *Your wealth couldn't save you. Your worldly accomplishments couldn't save you. Good works couldn't save you. Your connections couldn't save you.* My heart broke for Sue, because she didn't know any better, and I was sure she would end up in that awful place. But my heart broke for myself, too, because I was no better off than she was. I had put my faith in works, not in the One who could save me.

I closed my eyes shut and tried to decide what to do. I had to stop myself from screaming because that wasn't going to get me anywhere. Even though I felt weak, I forced my body to work. Slowly, I stepped around another section of jagged stone towers. I stared down at dizzying vertical descents and gasped. If I fell, it would be a deadly drop into one of the flowing rivers of molten lava,

gurgling and bubbling beneath me. I had no idea what to look for, where to go, or what to do. It was not as if I had a tour guide. The two beings who took me there just left me, abandoned me in that land of fire with no instructions or explanations whatsoever.

I'd do anything to have my old life back. Right now, I was stuck in limbo not knowing how my new future would fare. Would I spend the rest of my existence wandering around? What was going to happen to me down here? If only I could have one more chance. I would make things right. I swear I would! I wouldn't have wasted my life had I known that this would be the outcome. I would have made it count. I would do anything to go back. I felt stuck. Ignored. Forgotten. Rejected. Abandoned. Overlooked. I hated that I couldn't change this situation that was happening to me. I couldn't escape. I simply had no control and it was out of my hands. I couldn't even stop the pain that was inflicting me. Because even though I was dead, my spirit could still feel pain.

Extreme pain. Extreme thirst. Extreme despair.

And...

The extreme, disturbing knowledge that something was waiting for me.

*I've never been so sad or lonely. My heart's never ached this much. I'm living in profound terror; in suffocating fear. I'm so stressed out. So freaked out. So flipping thirsty. How can I endure this cruel fate for all eternity?*

Shadows roamed and shifted ahead of me. I sucked in a sharp breath. I dreaded those lurking shadows. But the smell was even worse. Swallowing hard to force the bile back down my throat, I suppressed the urge to puke. I felt cold and numb, disconnected and confused in all this mess. I felt incomplete but had so much more to give, to make a real difference in the world I had left forever. I knew I was capable of so much more. I had so much potential lying dormant inside of me. But now, it was too late.

After walking through the eerie and unsettling landscape, I made my way to a canyon not too far away. I dared to peek over the edge and saw the smoldering lake of swirling fire and flames, a sea of rippling orange. I could also see what appeared to be rows and rows of dungeons with black, iron bars high in the towering, dark red rock. It went up as far as the eye could see. I heard piercing cries and moans coming from up there and I could feel their suffering and pain. Sorrow overwhelmed me at the unseen torment I knew that they were facing. There was no escape, no relief, and no rescue.

## Chapter 8

My eyes drifted back down to the fiery lake, and my breath came in ragged gasps. *Those poor souls burning in a sea of fire.* I watched as they bobbed up and down through the flames. There were different cultures and different nationalities. I felt completely helpless every time I heard one of those screams, because there was nothing I could do to save anyone. I couldn't even save myself.

It was a heart-wrenching sight. I let out a long sob, then another. I also felt a profound sense of debilitating loneliness and isolation, like none I'd ever felt before. I was drowning in a sea of screams in that underground lair. Merciless heat blasted my face as more glowing bits of ash rose high in the

air. My lungs screamed in protest as I sucked in toxic fumes, and more blisters bubbled on my skin. I felt like that green witch on *The Wizard of Oz*. I was melting. I wouldn't have been surprised if I saw a Tin Man or a bunch of flying monkeys at that point, but I had no ruby slippers, and a hot air balloon would have burst down there.

Sue had said, "...where your existence stops," but I knew better. I had been given a crash course in the truth. Death is where existence really begins, and it is eternal. Everyone will live forever, in heaven or hell. Somehow, I had ended up in the wrong place. Why didn't anyone shake me awake from my lethal slumber during my lifetime? I was clueless. Completely clueless. I had no idea. I was oblivious to where I was heading.

As I continued staring at the catastrophic fire, I noticed silhouettes. I looked more closely and saw people. I clapped a hand over my mouth. So many suffering souls were being burned alive in those orange-gold flames that shot up hundreds of feet.

I could see some of them rather clearly. I spied a beautiful woman with long, black hair and bright, blue eyes, bobbing up and down in the lava. Emotions overwhelmed me, and my throat constricted. She noticed me and began to beg me for help. She looked so terrified, so scared. I had no idea what century she was from, who she was, or how long she had been in that place. I didn't know what she had done or not done to earn her one-way ticket there, but I felt pity for her anyway.

"Please! Please help me!" she squealed, reaching out for me with both hands. Her arms were red and wrinkled and covered with welts and burns, like hotdogs left in the microwave way too long. "Please! I need..." she cried before she sank deep into the searing flames, her skin melting away.

When others took notice of me and looked at me, their expressions said it all. They were in absolute misery, excruciating agony.

I was helpless to intervene and I was saddened by that. "I-I can't help you," I said, my voice wavering. "I have no idea how to get you out. I can't even save myself."

Another hellish chorus of moans and grunts echoed in the air, their suffering unending.

I was a trembling ball of nerves by then, and my thoughts haunted me: *So, this is where the dead are gathered? Except...they're still alive.* There wasn't anything I could do to help the *living* dead. I tried to cover my ears, but that brought me no peace. There was no comfort, no fellowship, and no rest. I knew that place was reserved for the devil and his demons and for everyone who died without being saved from their sins by the blood of Jesus Christ. What I didn't know was that I would end up there. I had never been more scared. *Will I be thrown into the lake too? Am I really doomed to spend eternity being scorched, tormented, and burned?*

I cried. I screamed. I wept. I prayed. But nothing changed. I was in a place of darkness where I was hated and despised; forced to be stuck in this constant state of intense terror. I felt like I was losing my mind. This is not a place you want to be in, or live in, or you want to be in for ALL OF ETERNITY.

I'm hurting.

I'm stuck here.

And I just want out.

The thought was too much to bear. I was slapped with a rollercoaster of emotions: horror, fear, heartbreak, sadness, grief, regret, anguish, and misery. I was absolutely devastated. I felt like I was

going to throw up. All I knew to do was to run. I didn't even know where I was running to, but I had to get away. The only problem is...it's impossible to run in this fiery furnace. So I forced my body to move, forced every muscle to at least try. I don't know, but at this point, life felt empty and meaningless. My life was literally over.

When I ran out of breath and had to rest, I hid behind a towering rock. No matter how long I hid, though, I could not calm down. More screams tore through the air, followed by growls and hisses, as if mocking my attempts to relax. My body shook uncontrollably. This entire experience was my darkest moment. I pondered and let everything sink in. I had labeled some of the worst things that ever happened to me back on earth as 'my darkest moments.' But nothing on earth, no matter how bad or how painful, could ever compare to what I was facing now. This was my lowest. I had hit rock bottom. How did everything spiral out of control like this?

I knew I was beyond the point of help, but I would not accept that I was past the point of no return. I needed a way out of that strange land of misery, burning flesh, and gloomy darkness. *I know! God!* I thought, and I even managed a half-smile, as if a lightbulb had flicked on in my head. If my fingers were not so sore from the burns, I would have snapped them in that a-ha moment.

I prayed, begging God for help, but I felt like my pleas were going no higher than the smoky ceiling. Nothing but dread and terror consumed me as the separation from Him took hold of me. *God's not here. He won't come here, not to this evil, wicked, unbearable place,* I knew, to my horror.

More souls wailed in torment, and the ground I sat upon felt like highway asphalt on a 110-degree day. Everything hurt, physically and emotionally, and it seemed it would never end. My soul felt tormented and lonely. Hell was the absence of anything good, and I was utterly and completely alone. The emotional, physical, and spiritual pain is indescribable and no person should ever have to experience this horror.

As I pondered the life I had lived, another question came to mind: *What, exactly are the rules, if the rules I lived by don't work?*

Before I could reason that out, another bone-chilling, bloodcurdling wail, followed by animalistic screams, pierced the air. Wings flapped like wind on sails, my nervous gaze darting upward between the towering rocks and the fire. I couldn't spot anything through the smoke, but I knew something lurked in the haze. A long shriek echoed. Then something caught my eye, something glowed in the shadows. A pair of red eyes.

I gasped.

My vision was obscured as a plume of smoke blew my way. I didn't see anything but my senses were on high alert. I ignored the flames licking at my feet and glanced around when I saw something stirring, something emerging from the smoke and flames. My stomach dropped. I had finally been spotted. All I wanted was to get out of this inescapable nightmare. A dark shadow flew at me from the cavernous wall. My heartbeat quickened, and dread suddenly overwhelmed me as a menacing form loomed over me.

Staring in horror, I couldn't believe what I saw! Uncontrollable fear took over. Face to face with some otherworldly force, I was paralyzed and could only stare at those red eyes and listen to its raspy breathing. It was covered with razor-sharp, spiny, irregularly shaped scales and donning tall, black,

spiny wings. Its glowing eyes were soulless, and when it snarled, it revealed rows and rows of rotten, black teeth.

I screamed in sheer terror. I scrambled back. Then...I was paralyzed. Like it was controlling me somehow. I could not move, could not breathe. It was like watching the scariest horror film of all time, only a thousand times worse. Pure horror enveloped me. I feared my heart might literally jump out of my chest.

I couldn't move. I felt weak. I couldn't run, even if I had dared to try. Like some kind of huge cinematic build up, I was finally meeting one of the creatures who were causing these souls to cry out in torment.

The giant monster landed in front of me hitting the ground with an earth-shaking thud, spreading its mighty wings. A large dust cloud spread all around us. As the debris and dust settled, I peered closer. It was a cross between a dragon and a humanoid; like a hybrid, a dragon man with wings. I mean, I didn't know how to explain this bizarre thing.

I locked eyes with the ghastly creature and noticed that I could make out every little detail. Something about my new body gave me supernatural vision. The green reptile had a seamless skin pattern with textured scales. It was so tall, at least thirteen feet, and I felt like David looking up at Goliath. I was pretty sure, though, that a slingshot wouldn't have done me any good. The huge, protruding jaw was home to so many decayed, pointed teeth. Its eyes flamed with hatred against mankind and its features were deformed and twisted, completely out of proportion. At the end of its hands were claws, each about a foot long. It could have made quick work of shredding me to pieces.

This thing hated me. For absolutely no reason.

As soon as that thought occurred to me, I felt something. Somehow, I just knew its intention. It did, in fact, want to shred me like a cabbage. Somehow, I just knew, like another one of those supernatural uploads. I sensed its bitter hatred, felt how intensely it wanted to destroy me, and that scared me more than anything.

The thing stared at me for a moment, as if sizing me up. My trembling hand covered my mouth. Then, without warning and with lightning speed, it punched me, knocking me down flat on my back. My head ached. Searing heat and pain spread across my body. I quickly sat up, but I could feel its dark, icy gaze upon me. I tried to scoot away on the hard, stone floor, but the creature mockingly grinned at me. It was the wickedest, most sinister smile I'd ever seen. It knew I had no strength, knew *it* held all the cards.

It let out a wailing shriek.

Beyond startled, I jumped.

It seemed pleased that I was so scared. The torment and terror were bad enough, but it made me angry that my pain and torture would be its amusement. I'd never felt such an evil presence. It was not a creature from the natural world I knew so well, but I still knew what it was. "Demon," I muttered. "Evil incarnate." I knew this thing was ancient and had been alive for thousands of years, if not more. It was extremely intelligent, diabolically clever, and had supernatural strength. I knew I was no match for it and that terrified me.

My heart pounded as adrenaline surged when it took a step toward me and reached for me with a gnarly hand, threatening me with its long, awful nails. My heart beat like a drum in my chest. It

seemed to enjoy toying with me. I didn't know what it was thinking but I knew there was no pity. How could I ever endure these unimaginable horrors?

Fear engulfed me, and it wasn't just run-of-the-mill, average fear. No, this fear was far worse even than the fear I'd felt when walking down a dark street or when seeing the bugs and slithering snakes earlier. This fear was crippling, gripping me tightly. That fear coiled around me like a huge serpent and swallowed me whole.

The monster's horrendous face contorted with rage. I screamed, then shouted as the creature raked my outstretched arm with a claw. A huge gash appeared, pain exploded, and a burning sensation crawled over my skin. I pressed my wounded arm against my chest and was surprised to see that, as deep as the cut felt, there was not one drop of blood. It stepped closer and I could feel its heated breath. When the demonic dragon creature picked me up, I screamed again.

For a moment, I felt my body flying through the feverish air, before I hit the cavern wall with a thud. In excruciating pain, I slid down the wall. A shudder ran through me, and I could only sit there, dazed, and let it happen. Before I had any chance to recuperate, with supernatural speed, it picked me up and threw me again. This time, I hit the ground with a loud smack. With every breath, my entire body screamed in agony, and I bit my lip against the pain.

Now, I felt every ounce of pain ten times worse, as if every nerve ending was on high alert. I fell back onto the ground, trying to catch my breath. I pulled myself up and sniffled, determined not to give up, and weakly pleaded, "Please don't hurt me anymore."

Not sure why I begged for mercy because this coldhearted behemoth didn't care. I could sense it had no emotion, sympathy, or feelings. My cries only egged it on, fed its hate for God and all of His creations, including me.

I darted my eyes from left to right, looking for an escape path I knew I would not find. I felt jittery as I rose to my feet and took a tentative step forward, my aching body forgotten. With trembling hands, I pushed my sweat-soaked hair out of my eyes.

Again, the thing emerged from the darkness. It was extremely vicious, and I could feel pure evil flowing from it. "You will never leave," it taunted in a deep, menacing voice.

My lips pressed into grim lines. I was taken aback that it could speak, but I knew it was telling the truth, simply to torment me. "Why?" I bravely asked. "Why should I be stuck in eternal damnation, down here with the ugly likes of you? Why am I here?" I demanded, with flames crackling all around me.

It shook its head, and that unnerving grin curled its black lips again. "You *all* ask the same thing. None of you believe you deserve it."

I had always known from my Bible studies and from church that demons are cruel, sadistic, merciless, perverted creatures, but standing in front of one was so much more terrifying than just reading about them or imagining them. I knew then that the Bible can be taken in a very literal sense, because that thing was real, standing before me, staring at me with the vilest eyes, glaring at me in a way that let me know it wanted me dead. It hated me with a penetrating, paralyzing hatred, simply because God made me. I sensed the evil things it wanted to do to me—horrific, grotesque, unbelievably cruel things! I couldn't understand why I was down there, why I was facing the demon. "But I... I really don't deserve it. Why me? I never hurt anyone, not ever," I mumbled, my anger now

uncontrollable. I had never felt so betrayed before, but my faith had somehow let me down. “I went to church!” I screamed. “I was a good person!”

In response, a choir of demonic laughter echoed around me. When I heard that many voices, I was stunned. In unison, they all started cursing my name and the very day I was born. I knew these demons were to be my tormentors.

I clenched my teeth, heat rising in my cheeks. I couldn’t reason with the beast, couldn’t defend myself in any way.

“Good?” the nightmare asked. “Are you sure? Because hell is a place that is *entirely avoidable*, yet here you are.”

I thought about his question as more shrieks rang out in the silence. “Fine. I-I drank,” I stuttered. “I even dated a toxic man, but I got rid of him. I got sober. I went to church. I changed my life for the better.”

The thing laughed harder. “Oh, you piteous fool. I’m going to enjoy torturing you for all of eternity.”

“But I just told you, I’m a good person. Is this my payment for that?”

“Silly girl. Your belief in being a good person is the very deception that led you down here. There is no such thing as a good person. You are all sinful, every last one of you. I’ve always appreciated your weakmindedness though. It seems to work really well to delude you humans. All that love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control you tout. How pathetic! None of those can save you from this place. You only wasted your time and saved us the trouble of having to deceive you. You deceived yourself.” It inched closer to me like a cheetah stalking its prey. “And, now, you’ll pay for your unforgiven sins.”

Frustration and desperation washed over me in a tidal wave, and I threw my hands in the air. “God, where are you?”

It continued to stare at me, its gaze intense. “He’s not listening,” it hissed. “Because it’s too late.”

My heart sank. Through the fog enveloping my brain, I tried to move, but the revelation that God would not even be present in that wicked place had frozen me in place. “But, I... I even taught Sunday School, and—”

“What of it? Going to church doesn’t grant you a golden ticket to heaven,” it said in a deep, baleful voice. “You may not believe me, but many of us have been in some of your so-called churches ourselves. We find them quite...entertaining.”

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. “B-but I *believe* in God.”

“As do we,” it said with a raspy cackle. “Yet, we are down here, are we not?”

I trembled.

“Belonging to a group saves no one,” it said. “Your heart is hard toward our Creator. You did not fully repent. You had no real relationship with our Maker, because that unresolved sin came between you. You never asked for forgiveness, not even once. You died in your sins.”

My jaw dropped as I pondered its words. His words were deeply disturbing. The truth was supposed to set me free, but this time, it just hurt.

“You also harbor unforgiveness,” it said. “And it ate you up inside. You never forgave the man that took you down that long, dark road of drugs and alcoholism, the very road that we personally

designed to deceive you even further. We had a plan to destroy your life and keep you in bondage. Unforgiveness worked well on you. If you couldn't forgive your worst enemy, then you'll never taste heaven. So you blamed *him* for getting you addicted to alcohol. But really. You should've blamed *us*. Because we were behind it the entire time. Just know that we loved watching your demise and how easily you fell into our trap."

That statement blew my mind.

"Your plan is being drawn up now," it said.

"What does that even mean?" I asked, extremely frightened.

"We know your deepest fears and how to torment you specifically."

I gasped. "You're planning tortures custom designed and tailored specifically for me?"

Suddenly, the creature stopped talking and instead roared in my face. My feet were like cement, as if he had some sort of control over me. I was powerless to stop its fierce attack on me. It sliced my skin with its long claws, all the way down to the bone, and it laughed again and again as I screamed in agony.

Soon, one of its demonic companions joined us. It was exceedingly ugly. The second one had glowing, yellow eyes and sharp teeth. Bull-like horns protruded from its scaly head. Its massive frame made me gasp. For it, the slicing of my flesh was just a tease. It wanted more. It desired my demise. I knew I was going to be tormented at the hands of those hideous demons for all of eternity, and I couldn't fathom the thought.

When that creature reached for my neck, as if to snap it, I looked into its eyes. I could have sworn I was staring at the devil himself. My stomach lurched, and I feared I might pass out. I was utterly helpless. There was no fighting them, and their only mission was to unleash all of their wrath on me. The demonic onslaught was coming my way, and there was not one thing I could do about it. I couldn't even pray, because my prayers—for the first time in my life—would only fall on deaf ears.

"Your time has finally come," the monstrosity said with a sneer.

I opened my mouth to protest, but it choked the words right out of me. I could not fight the first one, let alone two of them. When it finally let go, I scrambled back, my lungs devoid of air and my heart pounding like a jackhammer.

The hideous demon bit and clawed at me with as much ferocity as a roaring lion attacking a zebra. The pain was blinding. I sucked in a painful breath and collapsed, pain shooting through my intestines like a spreading bush fire. I knew I had to fight, yet I couldn't. It was much more powerful than us lost souls.

As if jealous of its partner, the other demon joined in the fray and bit deeply into my neck. I swear the pain was amped up tenfold. Then, one of them threw me down, offering me to a third. The terrible trio laughed at me and mocked my pain. Now, all kinds of demon spirits in different sizes and shapes approached and surrounded me. It was like they were waiting for their turn. I had never felt crippling fear like this on Earth. I was filled with terror; this punishment was far too much to bear.

My vision blurred, and my head spun as a heavy creature, the size of a bear, with a row of spines on its head, made me gasp. The evil, furry, spiked colossus reached for me with its long, black nails, and I let out a caterwaul that echoed off the cave walls and made them laugh again.

## Chapter 9

My body jerked and convulsed like I'd been electrocuted. Just like that, I was jolted back into the land of the living.

I screamed wildly like a madwoman.

"We got her back!" a woman squealed victoriously.

"Rapid, weak pulse," another said. "But she's conscious and breathing."

"Pulse 50, BP 190/110!" a voice shouted. "We need to get those vitals stable."

It was so noisy and chaotic as strangers swarmed around me. They yelled every word to one another, as if in a panic.

For my part, I was stunned and confused. It was so bright, and when I drew in a deep gasp, I felt pain. Everything hurt. Beads of sweat rolled down my forehead. As my vision cleared, I realized I was lying on a gurney, looking up at the bright lights of the ceiling. Sirens pierced the air, joined by a choir of beeps and bleeps from all sorts of machines that seemed to be hooked up to me with all sorts of wires. Every bump in the road felt like a punch in the gut. The medics tirelessly worked to restore my life, and there seemed to be blood everywhere. Even though I was sweating, I felt a chill, and I noticed my shirt had been cut off. I was too dizzy to be embarrassed. Everything around me spun, and I kept seeing spots, like psychedelic amoebas dancing. I felt blood drip down my face. I hope they had a super high tolerance for blood and guts and gore, because I felt like I was pretty bad off.

I had been liberated from my tormentors and was literally snatched from the clutches of evil. I had simply vanished in their midst. What a dramatic escape. What a miracle!

I was ecstatic when I saw no fire and no monsters, smelled no sulfur. I was thrilled to know I was out of there. Somehow, with divine help, they had managed to pull me back. I never hurt so bad. Still, I was glad to be there. Bleeding and topless in an ambulance was still far better than *down there*.

All I could think was: I escaped.

I was so glad I somehow left that fiery pit of pain, torture, fire, and punishment. It was so real, and there was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. I couldn't fight those creatures, had no chance against them. They were embodied evil, ten times bigger than me, and a hundred times stronger. Trust me, you are no match against these demonic beings.

I felt like I had been kidnapped, held as a captive, and tortured. I questioned how anyone could endure and survive such cruelty from wicked beings. The agony, unending pain, hopelessness, torturous suffering, and unspeakable torment was indescribable. Nobody in their wildest imagination could ever picture a place so horribly terrible as Hell. No horror writer could even come close to describing it. No police crime scene could even compare. The most evil, demonic Hollywood film didn't dare come close. I couldn't believe how cold, merciless, and heartless these beings were.

I met the medic's gaze. "Thank you," I whispered, voice wavering, my eyes filled with tears.

It was all I could muster up. I was just so thankful for everyone there who worked so hard to bring me back. I looked up at all their kind faces, silently thanking them for helping me in my most vulnerable moment.

"I'm here to help," the man said with a smile, trying to reassure me. "We all are, and we made some split-second, on-the-spot decisions that worked in your favor."

I was so grateful and nodded, feeling drained of energy. I closed my eyes and started thinking about everything. I felt so out of it, so loopy.

Now, people were taking care of me, trying to help me, but down there, in that dark, horrifying abyss, my screams were neither heard nor acknowledged by anyone, except by those who took some sick joy in it. Simply put, no one cared, and the pain created by my sadistic abusers was the worst any soul could ever feel. Hell offers no relief. There is no medication for gut-wrenching pain that deep.

Once I was pulled away from the clutches of that awful, dreadful place, relief swept over me. I couldn't stop thinking about it though. The memories were crushing and horrifying. I knew then that I would be traumatized by that forever, and I will never, ever forget how real it was.

"Is she conscious?" a woman asked.

"Rose," a man called out.

I slowly opened my eyes. I wiped the sweat off my face, then took a deep breath to calm my racing heart down.

"Rose Hart, do you know where you are?" a man asked.

"Um...ambulance," I muttered.

"Yes."

"You know my name?" I asked.

"Yes. Your family filled us in. They're meeting us at the hospital."

I closed my eyes as everything began to spin again. I couldn't stop thinking about that giant, red lake of fire and brimstone covered with smoke and flames. Was I seriously getting a do over? I knew what I experienced wasn't a dream, hallucination, or vision. I was there.

"She's lost a lot of blood," a voice echoed through the chaos. "And I'm not liking how her vitals are looking. If we don't do something..."

"She's going to arrest again," a woman said, finishing the sentence.

*Please! Please keep me alive.*

I opened my eyes and blinked again.

"Just don't let me go back there! I can't! I don't want to..." My voice trailed off, into a scream. "They're ripping me apart!"

The medic's face was suddenly etched with deep lines of shock and confusion. "I think she's recalling the attack," a female voice said.

"You are safe, Rose. Your attacker is gone," someone said to me. "We're trying to save your life."

Tears streamed down my cheeks. I felt like couldn't hang on. Spots dotted my vision. "I'm gonna pass out! I feel like I'm going to die."

The man looked into my eyes—my terrified, desperate eyes—and touched my shoulder. "It's okay. We're not going to let you die."

"I-I can't go back."

"You aren't," he reassured me. "We're taking you to the hospital. Just hang in there! You're in the ambulance, in good hands. You aren't going back to your house right now, sweetie."

"My house?! No, you don't understand," I wailed, clutching his scrubs shirt even more tightly. "The flames, the heat, the...demons!"

“You’re okay,” a woman consoled. “There is no fire here, no demons. You are safe with us.”

So badly, I wanted to convey my horror to them, but they didn’t understand. For me, nothing would ever erase the vivid memories of hell. I held her hand and begged her not to let go, and she again assured me everything would be okay, but it wasn’t.

I was seeing stars and everything was starting to fade.

“Her pulse is dropping!” a paramedic yelled.

“We need to get her to the ICU STAT!” another yelled. “She’s lost too much blood.”

“Get the defibrillator ready!” another shouted.

“We’re losing her! Start compressions.”

My eyes fluttered closed, and everything went black, and the last thing I heard, seemingly from far off in the distance, was the solid, steady beep of a flat-line.

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Once my heart stopped again, my soul broke free from my body. I blinked a few times and awoke to find myself back in that eternally burning fire pit. It was like being in the middle of an eternal forest fire. And I knew menacing, threatening, supernatural threats loomed all over the place. This was a violent world down here where monsters roamed freely and inflicted torture on their captured prey. Everything is marked by torment and suffering.

I thought it was over, but I had spiraled back down into the depths of hell once again. It was one of the most terrifying experiences imaginable. I could hear the cries and screams of millions, maybe even billions, and feel the burn. That familiar rotten egg stench thickened the air. Ash softly fell over me like sooty snow.

*Not again!*

I darted my eyes around the frighteningly desolate landscape, and that same eerie feeling of despair swallowed me whole. Relentless heat pressed on me from all sides as I took another faltering step in the darkness. This time, at least I wasn’t naïve and knew what to expect. I knew what was waiting for me, lurking in the darkness. I was not looking forward to a repeat encounter, but at least I knew. All of my emotions came running out of me. I could only feel the cruelest darkness and sadness inside my soul.

Choking sobs, shrill screams, and frightened cries rippled from all around. I gagged at the stink of rotten eggs and death, a ragged stench that assaulted my nostrils. I instantly knew I was back in that place of doom.

*Hell.*

Right on cue, an inhuman shriek pierced the air, but this time, it was a whole different layer of creepy. I literally felt like I had been thrown into a fiery furnace. Sweat gushed down my back and pooled on my brow. The heat and dry air were almost unbearable, and more screams and groans of misery rang out from every direction.

Desperate for some place to hide, if only for a little while, I spun around. I felt something biting my legs and was horrified when I glanced down to see what it was. I brushed the insatiable worms off and scurried away, stumbling in the burning apocalypse with no clue as to where I was going. I noticed a few more worms crawling on my skin like an inchworm. They stopped and started bobbing their heads around. I smacked them but they clung tightly to my skin. Then, I felt a new sensation as

they began to burrow deep into my skin; eating their way through me. I could feel every single tortuous bite.

These things were crawling inside of me, squirming and turning, twisting and biting. The creepy-crawly feeling beneath my skin was beyond unnerving. Instantly, I knew it was the worms. The thought of it was nauseating, and it made me want to vomit, just to expel them from my body. The crawling, biting, and stinging was all over me, inside and out. I could have sworn I was infested with hundreds of them, maybe thousands. Like maggots, they moved and writhed and crawled under my skin, in my muscles, up and down my spine, and even in my head. It felt like lit matchsticks crawling through my veins. The infiltration burned and stung, and I could literally feel these aggressive nasties biting my flesh, devouring me, like something out of a terrible science fiction movie.

I knew I was on the verge of insanity.

As if that was not bad enough, the sound of clawed feet click-clacked on the rock, reverberating through the air, a clear indication that more malevolent beings were coming. Their guttural moans were even louder than the pained shrieks all around me.

*They are coming. They are coming for...me.*

I had no idea where I could possibly run to get away from them. Panic gripped me, and terror charged through my body as their footfalls pounded ever forward, powered by bloodlust. I froze at the sound of their voices and shuffling gait, and their hissing growls and muffled voices made my hands shake. I couldn't believe I was in that predicament again, but I knew I had to calm down to keep my heart from jumping out of my chest and to prevent my heavy breathing from giving me away.

Without any warning whatsoever, a six-foot demon, clearly humanoid and walking on two legs, appeared before me. It shot me a cold, unblinking stare oozing with hatred toward humans. It had a muscular build and powerful frame. I knew it could kill me in a heartbeat. It peered at me intently, its eyes blazing with fury. I was face to face with unspeakable evil. The creature let out a monstrous growl. I shuddered. I had come so close to escaping the nightmare, but now it looked as if it would never end—at least not the way I'd hoped.

"Hello, human soul," it taunted through clenched black teeth.

I took another big step back.

"So glad your heart gave out again," it said. "We all want a turn with you."

I glared at it, speechless and terrified. They enjoyed pure pleasure from my pain.

Clearly irritated by my presence, it swooped its hand toward me. With long, black fingers, it gripped my throat. It had a flat nose and evil, yellow eyes like those of a snake. Two bony, thick tusks protruded from its lips, giving it a boar-like appearance. It exuded a putrid, rotting stench, and it was far more terrifying than anything I'd ever seen in any horror movie.

I felt my throat constricting, as if I might suffocate. Spots danced in my vision, and everything began to blur. I could feel everything slipping away, but I refused to give up so easily.

Its dead, bony fingers moved from my throat to my head. It started squeezing, the pressure excruciating. Then, just as it gave me the worst migraine I'd ever felt, it lunged its horrid face forward and bit into my neck. I could only scream in agony as it feasted on my worm-crawling flesh.

Out of nowhere, hairless creatures arrived. They had oval-shaped heads and long, thin arms with slender fingers. One hopped on my chest, and I saw then that it did not have normal features like a

nose, ears, or mouth. There was only an agape opening, full of razor-sharp, jagged teeth. The thing let out a bloodcurdling scream that reminded me of a hawk's screech combined with a snake's hiss. I kicked and flailed with all my might, but they would not give up. All my fighting only made them come at me more viciously, time and time again, hissing and screeching more loudly each time. It was a sound I knew I wouldn't soon forget.

Fear gripped me as the horned demon pulled a red-hot poker from the flames. A shot of adrenaline surged through my veins, but I couldn't run, for I was surrounded. Shadowy figures whispered my doom in eerie voices all around me, desperate to rip me to shreds. It was as if one of them had rang the dinner bell. They came from everywhere for a taste of fresh meat.

"Nooo!" I shouted.

"This is just the beginning," it said, in a mocking tone and with a rude sneer.

I punched and kicked, hitting it hard, but I could not find any vulnerable area on its body. It laughed at my feeble efforts and threw me back about five feet, as if I weighed nothing. In the next second, I felt the fiery rod plunge into my stomach, with such force that it rammed through my back and out the other side. Heat sizzled, and a cloud of steam lifted up. Pain flooded through me, and I let out another horrified wail.

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"Epinephrine, now!" a man yelled.

Light flashed, and I felt my soul crash back into my body as I reentered the earthly realm. I was shrieking incoherently.

"We've got her again," someone said, hovering over me.

I was sucking in deep breaths as droplets of sweat dripped down my face. "H-Help me!" I shouted, in a full-fledged panic but relieved to be in the ambulance once more. "Please don't let me die again!"

"We aren't going to," the man insisted.

"I'm on fire," I shouted, cruel memories flooding through me. "I'm going to burn!" I screamed, hanging precariously somewhere between life and death. I grabbed the closest paramedic's shirt as tightly as I could. "My skin is on fire! Please help me!" I cried out.

I was a screaming lunatic at this point.

"You are *not* on fire," the man said. "You're in pain," he said in a comforting voice, gently picking up my right hand. "We're going to administer more morphine. It will help you relax and feel better."

I frantically brushed my arms. "The worms! Get them off me! Get them off me!"

"I don't see any worms."

"But they're eating me!"

"You are in an ambulance, and we're taking you to the hospital. Try to relax."

"Relax? But I was... Oh, how can I even describe it?"

"Describe what?"

"The... It's torture! Torture, I tell you!"

"Someone tortured you?"

"Yes," I murmured.

“Hang on,” the man said.

“There’s a l-lake...”

“You don’t live by a lake,” the man said.

“It must just be some childhood memory from a vacation or delirium from trauma,” another said.

“No, no, no! It’s a lake of burning sulfur.”

“Yes, she’s hallucinating.”

I wasn’t. It was a constant battle to stay alive. Beads of perspiration ran in rivers down my face.

“I-I can’t die again. They’re lurking there, just...waiting for me,” I said between gasps.

“Who?”

“Not who. What! The monsters.”

“There are no monsters here, Rose.”

“Not here. There. When I’m dead. I can’t... They have *no* mercy!” I grabbed his arm hard. “They bite and cut my skin.”

The man’s eyes widened in horror, and he looked at me with a furrowed brow of confusion.

I cried, begged, and pleaded, “Please keep me here. I can’t go back. They’re waiting for me,” I whispered, the anguish in my voice undeniable. “Please help me.”

“The monsters?”

“Yes! Cruel, attacking demons. All those worms, biting me and hurting me, inside and all over. I-I felt it all...everything.”

“She *was* attacked pretty brutally by the intruder,” a woman softly said.

“No!” I said, adamantly shaking my head. “It’s not that. It’s...what happens to me every time you lose me.”

The other woman gazed over at the medic. “Any chance of intoxication here?” she asked, but it did not sound rude or condescending. She had kind eyes, and I could tell she felt bad for me. Despair edged in every soft line on her face.

Still, I wanted to scream, “*I don’t do drugs. I’m clean and sober! I haven’t had a drink in a year!*” but at this point, I was so weak and felt myself drifting off. I had to fight it, because I did not want to endure further torment in that fiery place, but I couldn’t hold on, no matter how hard I tried. “They’re coming for me!” I hollered as I felt myself slipping away again.

I shuddered at the grim fate that awaited me on the *other side*. A feeling of impending doom overtook me. It was deeply unsettling.

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not! It’s not okay at all!” I said, trembling and in a perpetual state of panic, crying uncontrollably. “You can’t lose me again! That pain, that fear... You can’t even comprehend it!” I said between labored breaths. “You’ll never know...unless you die.”

Her terrified expression mirrored my own.

“You’re exhausted and beat, but you’re alive. Hang onto that and keep fighting,” another said.

“We are not going to let you die,” a man said.

My heart was racing so fast I couldn’t breathe. I began mentally preparing for yet another battle. Because I knew what was waiting for me. My heart sank, and my stomach churned.

Everything was getting hazy and fuzzy, then it turned to complete darkness.

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All the noise stopped.

All the chaos stopped.

All the pain stopped.

My soul untethered from my body. I could only watch helplessly as the paramedics tirelessly worked on me while I floated away. They were powerless to stop imminent death from claiming me and dragging me down to that fiery pit a third time, no matter how much they assured me I was in good hands. There was one more long beep from the flat-lining, and then, I felt myself being pulled downward.

Nothing made sense, and I never felt so alone. I'd never felt so angry, so sad, so empty, and the grief ripped through me mercilessly. Waves of despair washed over me, and my heart grew numb as currents of raw anger held me underwater—or at least it felt that way. Why couldn't the paramedics keep me alive? I didn't want to face what was down here. I *couldn't* come back to this wretched place. I just couldn't. But that was wishful thinking...

Because I was back... and surrounded by a maniacal choir of demonic snarls and groans. Then there were the lost souls. The disturbing sounds of screaming echoed in my ears once again; people screamed in pure agony, screeched, and moaned. My entire body trembled. I wanted to cover my ears. I just couldn't take it.

I was surrounded by evil. I had never felt such fear before this horrendous place. The sounds and moans of the undead gave me chills, and the stench of death and rotting flesh made me gag. It was something I'd never get used to.

I could feel the dark energy all around me as ten or a dozen little trolls came to greet me screaming maniacally. I stepped back, then felt the hot breath of demons on my neck. When I heard the sounds of heavy, raspy breathing behind me, I turned. My eyes widened. It was the demons I'd dealt with before; they were also still there, snickering and blocking my escape. The grotesque trolls in front of me snapped their jaws in the air, releasing loud, unforgiving snarls.

I prepared to fight. I knew this was a losing battle because there were far too many and they came from every imaginable direction. I had absolutely no chance. The closet one snapped its jaws like a wild animal, and I could feel the intensity of its white-eyed stare. Raw fear gripped me, making my stomach churn; I knew they'd never stop coming for me. And I couldn't stop thinking about my impending doom.

One nodded to the other, wearing a sadistic smile. "I knew she'd be back."

I felt sheer panic as one of the stark-raving lunatics clamped down on one of my legs with its powerful jaws. I'd tapped into a primal rage I didn't know I even possessed, and I planned to use that energy to knock it off.

"Did I give the go-ahead to attack?" the creature behind me asked the one biting me.

It immediately let go and scurried away. I gritted my teeth from the pain.

The one with the horns pointed at me. "You're Satan's property now."

I jumped when rotting hands with black fingernails began to claw at me. I stared straight into milky, white eyes and a face that looked like something straight out of a nightmare.

More dangerous predators loomed over me, emitting deep, guttural huffing sounds. Their eyes were white and clouded over too, and a river of sticky drool dripped from their mouths. I couldn't stop staring at their fangs and huge claws, all equally sharp and menacing. I felt their cold, dead fingers grasping my ankles. The hell-spawned demons reached for me. And I started to kick at their drooping faces and crooked noses. These were monsters, killing machines with flaring nostrils, ready to rip me to shreds in milliseconds. I almost blacked out in terror as I imagined them ripping off my lips and scalp, then tearing apart my face. I didn't even have a fighting chance against these things. I was literally living the stuff of nightmares, right there in living color, the very real stench of very real death seeping up my nostrils.

"She's all yours," the creature said with a gurgling breath.

Right on cue, the little, three-foot trolls jumped on me, ripping and biting my flesh. It was the most unimaginable, excruciating pain I'd ever felt.

Unable to free myself from my tormenters, I yelled at the top of my lungs, "Lord, please help me!"

Then, a blinding light entered the darkness, bathing me in glorious brilliance, light like the light of a hundred suns.

I squinted in the glare and saw a shape, the shape of a man, but I knew instantly who it was. I knew the light was the light of God, and Jesus was with me. I couldn't explain it, but there was just this calmness and I could feel his overwhelming presence. An invisible blanket of soothing warmth enveloped me, encompassing me with beautiful, comforting, loving light. I felt the most at peace I have ever felt in my entire life. I felt safe and protected, basking in that unconditional love. All the pain from all the bites, rips, and tears of my flesh instantly left me. Just like that, all fear was gone. I've never felt safer in all my life.

Jesus was magnificent beyond all glory, and yet, here he was taking notice of me; somebody completely unworthy. I didn't deserve His mercy. He was loving, merciful, and gracious.

"Stop! It's not her time," a thunderous voice boomed with divine authority.

Now, it was the demons' turn to shudder in terror, and they immediately fled, like cockroaches under a flashlight. Jesus was so powerful, holy, and mighty. He had complete authority over everything, even in that fiery spirit realm. Not even the strongest malevolent, supernatural entity was any match against the power of Jesus Christ.

I stared at Him in complete awe, just adoring his beauty. I have never felt such love and compassion.

He was my lifesaver.

Jesus was the Lord of Lords, the King of Kings, but as powerful as He was, I could make out a gentle face through the light. He wore a gleaming, white robe, and his skin was a darker hue, an olive complexion. He had brown hair and piercing, greenish-blue eyes.

"Rose," he said so ever sweetly. "Don't you know you mean everything to me?"

I wept at his words and could feel his intense love. It washed over me and I couldn't explain it in human terms; but it was beautiful, breathtaking, passionate, beyond powerful, and the purest of love any person could feel like a million times over.

"Jesus," I whispered.

“Yes, daughter, I am here.”

A great flurry of emotions ran through me, much different and not dark like the ones I’d felt just moments before. This time, there was happiness, excitement, and pure joy washing through me, illuminating every corner of my jaded mind with a new sense of hope.

I hugged him. He squeezed me back just as tightly and I melted into his embrace. Nobody could have asked for a better miracle. More emotion overwhelmed me. I had never felt so touched, thankful, or happy in my life. Jesus was the LORD and there was no other.

“Thank you,” I said, with heartfelt emotion.

“You’re welcome, my child.”

“Why did I go to this place?”

“You know *all* about me, yet, you don’t *know* me. And you must forgive others as I have forgiven you. Tell my people all about this place. Tell them it’s real. Now, go and make the most of this second chance...and know that I love you so much.”

“A second chance?” I asked.

He looked lovingly into my eyes. “Yes. It is not your time. But seek me, for I have a plan for your life. You will lead many to me. And you will speak to millions.”

“Speak to millions?” I asked. “But I failed speech class. I’m not a public speaker.”

“Trust me.”

And I would.

“I trust you, Lord. Whatever plan you have, I accept it.”

His voice was so beautiful, so kind, so sweet, and when He reached out his hand, I couldn’t help but grab it. As soon as I touched him, I felt myself lift, in both body and spirit. The heat receded and the smoke cleared as we moved upward into the light.

The devil thought he had me. Well...

He miscalculated.

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I felt like I’d just been electrocuted, then I was pulled back into my body. I was emotionally exhausted and physically drained...but I was *alive*.

“I’ve got a pulse again!” a woman’s frantic voice burst through the air.

*Beep...beep...beep...*

“We got her back!” a man said victorious.

I looked cautiously to my left and saw a blinking monitor, emitting low-pitched sounds. I wasn’t in the ambulance anymore. It was a hospital emergency room, and I was in great pain, but I couldn’t have asked for a better place to be. I knew there was a war raging over my soul, and I knew the devil wanted me something fierce. But he lost. Because Christ saved me.

I was *alive* and back on Earth. I was jabbed and medicated, examined and poked at while they worked heroically to save me, but I didn’t mind. I did not want to go back to that place of fiery torment, where the disempowered bullies were waiting for me, waiting for my heart to stop, waiting to drag me away deeper into that dreadful pit.

I grabbed the nurse’s shirt with a death grip as droplets of sweat beaded my face. “I’m back!” I shouted. “Thank you, Jesus!” I wanted to shout it from the mountain tops!

She looked at me and blinked her eyes, as if not sure what to say, but I couldn't help reacting that way. I had been sentenced to everlasting death in hell, without the possibility of parole, but Jesus broke me out.

"Praise the Lord!" I squealed. "I got a second chance!"

I couldn't have possibly gripped her shirt any more tightly. Since I'd experienced the greatest fear I'd ever felt, now I was overcome by the greatest sense of relief. I was relieved to see light and not darkness, people and not beasts or lost souls screaming. I knew there was another world; an invisible, spiritual realm that actually existed. *It* was an actual place with actual demons. I knew it wasn't a dream. I knew what I saw was more real than *real*. I had all my senses and could think and feel.

I literally knew I was supposed to spend the rest of my eternal life in the worst nightmare anyone could ever imagine. I knew I wasn't supposed to get out. I knew I was there forever. And I knew I never wanted to go there again. And after what I saw, I was sure to be traumatized for a long, long time. I learned that the spiritual realm consists of unseen realities that I didn't encounter until I was dead. You had to be dead to see what I did.

But I wasn't dead. Not anymore. I felt a tear slip down my cheek.

There would be no mourning from friends and family. Because a funeral *wasn't* happening! No RIP posts on social media because I was *alive*. God had bigger plans for my life. I felt like I still had a lot of work to do here on planet Earth. I wasn't sure what my purpose was, but I knew God would show me.

"You can let go of me dear," the nurse said, but I simply couldn't.

"If I do, I might... What if I slip? What if I fall back down there?" I questioned, certain she was my anchor to the present. Then, in a fit of morphine haze and emotional trauma, I closed my eyes and drifted off.

## Chapter 10

I was treated at Grace Mercy Hospital for head injuries, in critical condition and fading in and out of consciousness. My eyes widened and filled with fear every now and then as images of those grotesque creatures flickered in and out, like a beam from an old projector on the fritz. I was on the edge of death, fighting for my life. The darkness seemed foreboding as the demons awaited my arrival. Truly, it was the stuff of nightmares and horror movies.

I drew in choked breaths and peered around, a sense of dread settling in the pit of my stomach.

"You're safe," a woman said in my ear in a soothing voice.

Nevertheless, I didn't feel soothed at all. Goosebumps prickled up on my forearms. Memories of my hellish trip flashed before my eyes, every detail whirring by like a movie on fast-forward: horrific creatures clawing at me, guttural moans filling the air, and the indescribable stench still stinging my nostrils. I recalled, in vivid detail, being thrown into the wall and the pain crashing through my entire

body. A shiver slid down my spine as the memories assaulted me, fast and furious, like a second nightmare themselves.

I couldn't calm down, couldn't catch my breath. I had crossed over. My world seemed to spin out of control as I struggled to make sense of what was happening. I needed refuge in that land of confusion, but none of the doctors or nurses seemed to understand the ordeal I had just faced. I even tried to explain it to the phlebotomist, who just shrugged and took more blood samples. There were two things I now knew for sure: One, my life was forever altered, and, two, there really *is* a supernatural realm and an afterlife.

The experience of hell was more horrible than I can even describe. Those who haven't gone through it haven't an inkling of a clue. Still in fight mode, I couldn't stop thinking about those demons ripping into my skin. That was why, when the hospital staff touched me, and I jumped and squirmed, they didn't understand. Not one person could even comprehend my night of terror. I had technically been murdered, died, and gone to hell, and that does not bode well for one's psyche. *How do I even begin to untangle the emotions that come with all this madness?* I wondered, fearing I might lose my sanity for good. But I knew without a shadow of a doubt what I *saw, felt, and heard.*

"Death isn't the end!" I yelled. "I promise you... *we go on.*"

"What?" a nurse asked. "To where?"

"To everlasting life or everlasting condemnation."

"Should we restrain her?" a nurse asked.

"Let's try Ativan," another suggested. "It'll relax her."

Their voices sounded far away, as if they were in a tunnel or like I was listening to a movie with the volume turned down. I was too shaken by the events to focus on where I really was at the moment. Desperate for something to hold on to, for something real to stabilize me, I then remembered seeing Jesus reaching for me. I focused on His glory, and I prayed. Again, I thanked Him for rescuing me, and I begged Him to help me calm down.

Just like so many times before in my life, my prayers were answered. Little by little, the fear and confusion began to dissipate. I still felt physically and mentally weak, like a kitten who had been hit by a speeding Mack truck. I tried to remain awake, but I slipped into a deep slumber. I thought I heard voices. In the back of my mind, and I yelled at myself to open my eyes, but my lids wouldn't budge.

Suddenly, I felt a hand slip into mine to hold it tightly, and I heard the sound of soft crying nearby. "Don't you dare leave me," a voice said, gruff and hoarse with emotion. "You can't leave us."

"Rose, come back to us," another familiar voice pleaded.

*Mom? Dad?*

I tried to open my eyes again and to speak, but I was somehow trapped in a drowsy darkness. The voices faded, and, for just a moment, I felt alone again, until the pressure of my dad's reassuring grip reminded me that they were with me.

I was so thankful to be free from that tortuous place, but sadness overwhelmed me as I lay in the darkness, thinking about my family, my friends, and my poor, little kittens. I needed to wake up, but I just couldn't.

Eventually, the darkness melted away, and a quiet, rhythmic beep met my ears. I cringed at the agony in my chest, gasped when the full force of it hit me. My eyes fluttered open, and I looked

around at the dimly lit room. “Mom? Dad?” I whispered, my voice high pitched and insecure. They held my hands and didn’t let go.

“We’re here, baby,” my mom said. “We’re both here. It’s gonna be okay.”

It was so overwhelming to see them and hear their beautiful voices. “Is this real? Am I really back?”

“You’re in the hospital,” my dad said.

*I wasn’t down there anymore.*

“I’ve never been so happy,” I whispered softly.

My parents looked at each other in confusion. Why would I be happy after being attacked? They didn’t get it. The attack was bad, but what happened after death is what scared me the most. I had been rescued from spending eternity alone in a hellish nightmare. I shuddered with horror at the memories of being imprisoned and feeling like prey, the same way an antelope is chased and killed by the lion.

No words were needed as we clung to each other for the longest moment.

I literally begged for this moment to see them again, to be back here on Earth, to get out of that blazing pit and live once again.

I sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Value every breath you take.

It felt good to breathe again, to *normally* breathe.

It felt good not to have my skin burn.

It felt good to talk to people.

It felt good to see light in the room.

It felt good to smell and not take in the putrid sulfur smell.

It felt good not to hear all the screams, and all the wailing that was all around me.

It felt good to know that there weren’t hideous creatures lurking around.

It felt good not to have worms crawling inside me.

It felt good to not be terrified.

It felt good to be alive.

I knew life was the biggest gift of all...such a precious, precious gift.

I’d never been happier to see them. Joy flooded my eyes as my mom gently caressed my cheek. I just let the tears flow freely and started to sob uncontrollably. I didn’t care about the tubes, wires, or IV’s and I reached out for a hug. And they were careful of the equipment as they embraced me. Hugging them was the best feeling in the entire world. Just hours earlier, I thought I would never see them again. I didn’t want to be separated from them or any of my loved ones ever again. Happiness flooded my soul when I realized I was going to live after all.

*I’m really back!*

It was a huge relief. I wanted to scream, sing, shout, and dance. If I had the strength, I’d climb a mountain and shout, Halleluiah. I couldn’t even explain how it felt to survive after thinking I was going to die. It was the most wonderful feeling in the world, and a million emotions flooded my mind. I realized how precious each moment was and how easily life could be snatched away. I’d thought my life was over the second I died, but I’d survived again and again as the paramedics kept bringing me back to life, and I vowed, then and there, to make every day count.

My feelings were overwhelming and intense, rushing over me like a tidal wave. It was like looking at a calm blue sky after being caught in a seemingly endless hurricane. In that very moment, I could have sworn I heard my dead heart beating again. My parents, the people I'd missed so much were standing right there in front of me, alive and breathing, smiling at me. I blinked, and my stomach dropped. My heart beat so hard that it felt as if it would rip through my chest at any moment. I wanted to touch them to make sure they weren't an illusion.

"Mom. Dad." I said, my voice wavering. "I love you."

"Oh, honey!" my mom said. "We love you, too."

She had the most beautiful voice, like that of an angel.

"I thought I would never see you again," I said softly between my sobs. The thought of never seeing my beautiful family again nearly ripped my heart in two. They were my world, so special, so important, and they meant everything to me.

Tears flowed down Mom's cheeks as she held me close. "I'm so sorry this happened to you."

"You're such a fighter," my dad said. "I can't imagine what you're going through, honey, but we're here."

"Thanks," I said, the back of my throat constricted with emotion.

"Of course! We both love you so much."

"I love you too."

"Casey and James are also here," my mom announced.

"I am so happy to see you, sis," Casey said, trying to smile through her tears.

A tear slipped down my cheek. My words turned into tears. I squeezed her hand.

Casey blinked away the tears. "We've been so worried. I thought I'd never see you again and that was the worst feeling in the entire world."

My sister had the purest heart and I couldn't love her anymore. She was my best friend. I began to weep at her words. I swear there wasn't a dry eye in the room because we all started crying, and weeping, and showing our raw emotions. It's never been like me to lose my cool, but I couldn't help it. I just couldn't stop. It had been one of the most unsettling experiences of my life, unnerving and scary, and now I was back on Planet Earth, among the living, embracing my loving, wonderful family.

I was really blessed to have such a loving support system. I loved and cherished my family, and they meant everything to me. I couldn't imagine my life without them, and treasured each and every memory. I loved them to the moon and back, and the thought of not having them in my life terrified me.

In that dark pit, my family had been ripped away from my life forever. I knew I would never see them again, yet, here I was...being given another chance to see them again, love them, and hold them in my arms. I stared at the beeping machines. It horrified me that if I died in the middle of the night or something, then I'd lose them forever all over again. I couldn't live through that kind of heartache again. They loved me in good times and bad, made life worth living, and were important. I couldn't lose the people who meant so much in my life; they were my treasure and strength. And I surely couldn't go back down to that fiery furnace. The horrible thoughts literally tore me apart.

“I am so sorry about everything that happened,” my brother-in-law said. “We love you so much, and we are here for you day or night.”

My vision started to blur from all the tears and I wiped them away. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

My gaze met his and my body trembled. “I’m so scared.”

“We’re staying all night,” he said, trying to assure me that I was safe and sound. “Just try to get some sleep.”

“Can’t.” I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and slowly let it out. “I-I can’t go back there,” I said, my voice trembling. “I don’t ever want to go back again, not ever.” A flood of uneasiness gathered in the pit of my stomach as I thought about it.

“Where? The house?” my mom asked. “You can stay with us until you’re better.”

“Not my house. I’m talking about...hell.” My voice trembled as it trailed off.

Their jaws dropped, and their faces scrunched up in terror. I could have kept it to myself, but at that point, I would have told anyone who would listen. I didn’t know whether they would believe me or not, but I wanted my loved ones to know what had happened to me.

“You’re here with us now,” Dad assured me, as both he and Mom squeezed my hands again.

“I have to tell you what happened.” I sucked a deep breath thinking about the horrible place I’d just escaped from.

As much of a dream-come-true as it was to be with them again, the nightmare still haunted me every couple of minutes, like some sort of post-traumatic stress. My hands felt clammy, and a dull, painful panic tugged at my insides. “I can’t die again. They’re waiting for me.”

“You won’t,” my mom promised. “Everything is going to be okay.”

“The medics said the exact same thing, but then I died again...and again.”

“The doctor said your vitals are stable now,” Dad explained. “You’re going to be all right, Rose.”

“Did you know I died? Three times?” I softly asked, voice wavering.

“Yes, they mentioned that,” Dad said, as another tear ran down his cheek. “We are so thankful for this second chance.”

“Why didn’t God let me go to heaven?”

“Shh. Get some rest now.”

“What did I do wrong?” I asked, voice quivering. “Jesus said I knew all about Him, yet, didn’t know him.”

“There’s no way you didn’t go to heaven.”

“I agree,” my sister chimed in.

My mom softly stroked my face. “We’ll figure it out together later, okay? Right now, you need rest.”

“Things might not have gone right but...I met Jesus. He rescued me...from hell, and He was so beautiful, Mom! He has greenish-blue eyes and brown hair, and He was surrounded by this bright light.”

I could tell my mother was just as confused as I was, but she didn’t call me crazy or deny my story. She just held me and offered to help me figure it out. I love that about her. She has always been the best mom in the world, always there for me, always supporting me. Dad is just as supportive, and

of course he said he couldn't wait to hear more of the story. Casey and James seemed intrigued the second I mentioned Jesus.

"Leonard and Gariella Hart?" asked a nurse who walked into the room.

"Yes, that's us," Mom answered.

"We need to talk to you. Your daughter may have to have emergency surgery."

Finding it difficult to concentrate, I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the beeping monitors and blaring intercoms. In a short while, I slipped into a fitful slumber.

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I didn't know how much time had passed when I woke up and heard two hospital employees talking near me.

"Careful changing that IV bag," a man said. "She might take you down."

"With all that Ativan? I don't think so."

"I'm telling you, don't let Sleeping Beauty fool you. This one could eat you for lunch," he argued with a laugh.

My eyes fluttered open. "Eat a nurse for lunch? Why, I only do that on Wednesdays."

They both burst out in laughter, and one looked down at his watch. "It's past midnight, so it's technically Thursday."

"See? You're completely safe."

I heard a chuckle as my eyes closed. I vaguely remembered giving the staff a hard time, but that was only because I'd been so scared and disoriented. When the heart rate monitor beeped again, I let the electronic sound lullaby me to sleep once more.

## Chapter 11

Black and blue all over, I remained in intensive care following treatment for traumatic injuries consisting of a brain hemorrhage, a collapsed lung, and blunt thoracic trauma. I felt like a broken plate superglued back together. I was certain Bobby, my ex, was guilty, and I figured he'd be caught and charged with a trifecta of felonies: assault, criminal mischief, and criminal possession of a weapon, to name a few. I assumed he'd be locked up for a long, long time. I still couldn't believe he'd gone that far, that he had done something as vile as try to kill me.

*How could I have ever loved someone like him?* I wondered. I felt like the lyrics of every bad country breakup song were now about me. I was sad, angry, and afraid. A hurricane of feelings smacked me all at once. I tried to remember the good times, like when we went camping and on cruises, but those pleasant memories were always sucked up in the dark shadow of the truth that he had tried to murder me.

I daydreamt of the two of us playing in the creek, with the sun shining brightly down on us. He carried me on his back, and when I splashed him, he squealed with delight. I remembered how he kissed me, how he held me in his strong arms while we watched the spectacular sunset streaked with orange, red, and yellow. Then, my world crumbled. Those same strong arms that held me once had

pummeled me viciously with a baseball bat, trying to end my life. How could someone who once claimed to love me do something so awful? My mind couldn't make sense of it. People told me months later that he had moved on and he was okay with us breaking up. But little did I know that deep trouble was brewing.

When I opened my eyes, I heard a tiff between my mother and someone else.

"Just leave her alone," Mom demanded. "You can talk to her when she's better."

"Ma'am, I need to talk to your daughter now. She is really the only witness to this crime, and we must establish the motive behind this assault."

"She's in no condition to make a statement, Detective Gannon. And I answered all your questions before Rose woke up."

"A statement about what?" I whispered.

"About the assault, of course," the detective answered.

"Don't you mean the attempted murder?" Mom corrected. "He nearly killed her."

Detective Gannon met my mom's gaze. "Exactly. We know we have an unhinged killer on the loose. Whoever he is, he is extremely dangerous, and we need to catch this person immediately! Rose can take us a step closer to stopping this monster, if she'll cooperate and answer our questions."

"But I..." Before I could say anything more, all the memories rushed back, and I found myself struggling to breathe again. Between the horrible Earth memories and the hell pit recollections, everything was a blur.

"Can't you see? She's having a panic attack," my mom said. "This is too much for her."

"We need information if we are going to solve this crime," the detective stated matter-of-factly. "I suppose we can wait till her condition improves. But I don't advise that. She's barely hanging on."

*Gee, what a nice way of saying they need to pick my brain before I kick the bucket,* I thought.

My sister touched my mom's arm. "Mom, we gotta catch this guy. I know it's hard, but the police can't do their job without all the pertinent information."

"But Rose is so tired right now."

"Don't you want to know who did this to her?"

"You know I do!"

"He's just asking for a couple minutes."

She pondered, then shook her head. "Okay."

The detective softly touched me. "Rose, can you talk to us? This is very important."

I had no energy but fought through the pain and nausea to answer, "Someone attacked me." I let out a long breath. "I saw a bat. He kicked me, punched me, and I...died. I went somewhere horrible. Hell. It was so hot, so much fire, so many screams and creatures and worms and..." I was unable to go on, and my skin prickled as the thoughts flashed back.

"If you feel you went somewhere, I suppose that's between you and your Maker," he said dismissively. "We need to stick to the facts of the case, ma'am."

I nodded. I was too weak to really explain it anyway, and I knew he didn't really care to hear it, even if it did weigh heavily on my mind.

"Now, your mother tells me it's been exactly one year since you broke up with your ex-boyfriend, Bobby Greenwood. Does that sound right?"

“Yes.”

“And he was upset about the breakup?”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“And your mother also told me you filed a police report on him in Panema City because he hit you and threatened your life.”

“Yes.”

“It was a great decision to file that report. It leaves a paper trail. We now have proof that he threatened your life a year ago. Did you have any contact with him on the night of the attack?”

“He called me on my cell. I had a brief conversation with him. Then, I heard a knock on the door. I thought it was him, so I turned off the lights and tried to stay quiet, hoping he’d think I wasn’t home. I hung up on him.”

“Did you see your attacker’s face?”

“No. It was...too dark.”

“Did he speak?”

“Just a whisper, only twice.”

“Did you recognize the voice or what he said?”

“No. I couldn’t make it out.”

“Can you think of anyone else who might want to harm you or have ill feelings toward you, Rose?”

“No!” my mom chimed in. “Everyone loves my daughter. She is the sweetest person. Did you know she spends her weekends feeding the homeless with her church?”

“Mom, I’m sure he doesn’t care about that.”

“Actually, I do, Rose. It helps establish your character. Did anything out-of-the-ordinary happen yesterday? Did you meet anyone new? Piss someone off, even accidentally?”

“Well, I did meet a guy a few hours before it happened.”

He cocked a brow. “Who?”

“Um, I can’t remember his name right now. My best friend, Sue, was with me. She might remember. Met him at Coffee Expressions. But he was...nice.”

“Could he have stalked her and followed her home?” my mother frantically asked.

“We will surely find out,” Detective Gannon said.

“Oh,” Mom interjected, as if she’d suddenly remembered something, “the attacker is afraid of cats. Rose told me he ran away when he saw her kittens.”

“Hmm,” the detective pondered. “Does your ex suffer from ailurophobia?”

“What?” I asked, confused.

“English, Detective?” Mom asked.

“A fear of cats,” he clarified.

“Oh. Not that I know of,” I whispered.

Mom sighed. “Bobby probably ran because he thought he killed Rose. That man is a horrible person, a terrible human being. The best thing my daughter has ever done was leave that brute.”

“This act occurred on the one-year anniversary of your breakup, did it not?” the detective asked, crossing his arms.

“Yes.”

“Why, on that particular day of all days? Doesn’t that seem odd to you?”

“You think Bobby did it?” I asked.

“Yeah, I’m leaning toward your ex. It’s too much of a coincidence.”

“Bobby needs to be put in jail,” my mom said. “He tried to murder my baby.”

“You have to catch him, Detective. He’s a slime ball,” my sister said, her voice wavering.

“Oh, I plan to. There’s no doubt about that.”

The detective stuck around for a while and asked more questions. I answered the best I could, but at some point, the medication knocked me out cold right in the middle of the interview.

## Chapter 12

Days passed, and I was in and out of consciousness as my body took time to recuperate and heal. I didn’t remember much, and my mother said that was because they kept me under sedation.

My eyes fluttered open.

“Baby?” my mom said, stroking my face. “You are a fighter. You survived.”

I nodded.

“You’re a miracle,” she whispered as she kissed my hand.

“Yes, baby girl, and you are the heart of our lives,” my dad said.

I smiled.

Tears welled up in my dad’s eyes. “You got a second chance.”

“And I’m going to make the most of it,” I promised. “I swear I’ll make it count.”

He softly patted my hand. “I know you will.”

“I feel like the luckiest woman in the world.”

“You truly are. The doctors don’t know how you survived. They said it was a miracle.”

“It was Jesus.”

“Most definitely.”

“Can I get you anything?” my mom asked.

“I could use a hot shower...would love a cheeseburger.”

My mom chuckled. “I meant like a sip of water or your pillow adjusted.”

For one brief moment, I felt a glimmer of hope as my heart danced. I was stable, and I knew I would not have to revisit that place, at least not anytime soon. I watched as the medical staff fussed with machines and took care of me. Having my parents there meant everything. I felt loved, safe, and cherished, and I would never take that for granted again.

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When my parents left for the night, I knew I was still safe and sound in my hospital bed, with plenty of medical personnel to look after me, but the stress of everything I was going through took its toll. When I fell into a deep sleep, the awful dreams began.

First, I was lying on my floor, taking my last breath. My attacker's face was blurred, but he held up a match and set me ablaze. Then, I felt myself falling for what seemed like forever.

When I finally landed with a thud, I saw a barren landscape stretched out before me, burning with fire and red flames that snapped, crackled, and popped. Smoldering embers suffocated me, as if I'd plummeted into a warzone.

I spun in a slow circle as hair-raising cries from flickering, shadowy figures flew overhead. "No! How did I end up here again?" I shouted, furious that I was drifting between Earth and hell again, just like I had in the ambulance.

A sinister voice came from the smoke and flames. "You belong to us."

I awoke to a loud scream and realized it was my own. My body was covered with a sticky sheen of sweat, and my heart was racing, sending the beeping into a steady staccato.

Frightened and helpless, I screamed, "I'll never let you touch me again!"

A nurse ran in, clutching her heart. "Wow! I've never jumped so high! Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Nurse by day, stuntwoman by night?" I asked with a crooked smile, gasping between breaths.

"You're a funny one. What happened?"

"Nightmare. I'm just shaken up. I'm fine," I said.

I tried to play it down for her sake and didn't tell her I was infected with soul-crushing despair and hopelessness, absolutely broken. In my mind, I could hear the agonizing wails, smell the smoke and burning sulfur, and see those spiraling flames. How could I talk to a stranger about this very uncomfortable topic? Hell is a place that's more frightening than anyone could ever imagine; the suffering in hell is beyond comparison to all the suffering ever experienced here on Earth. It's utter agony, a horrific place of intolerable physical pain. Then there's the mental agony of being forsaken and abandoned by God, and knowing you'll never see your friends, family, or old life ever again.

She sat on my bed and held my hand. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm sorry. I just keep having these flashbacks, and..." I gasped again. "Nightmares, bad ones. The images in my head won't stop. They constantly play on a loop, frightening, disturbing things."

"Rose, traumatic events like the one you suffered often trigger a fear response in the brain, which can lead to lucid dreaming and vivid memories. You're reliving the attack in vivid detail. Sometimes, the emotion tied to it can cause your brain to exaggerate a bit, which only makes it worse."

*Which attack? The Louisville Slugger or the demon claws, lady?*

"I feel scared," I confessed, gripping the sheets for dear life and regretting that I did not feel nearly as strong and independent as my mother has always thought me to be. The flames of hell had dissolved my titanium armor.

"I completely understand your fear, but we have extra security on this floor. Between us girls, we're protected by a lot of big, burly fellas up here! I promise, that creep who did this to you will not step one foot on this floor, Rose."

"I'm not scared of him. I'm scared of *them*."

"Wait a minute. Was there more than one attacker?"

I shook my head. "You wouldn't understand."

“You can talk to me,” she encouraged. “I promise, this is a judgment-free zone. I know you’re struggling to find answers, like, why did this happen to me? The world is becoming a cruel, dark, and dangerous place. I don’t get the senseless violence against innocent people. And I know you’re traumatized. The emotional fallout can be intense. But trust me, recovery is a process and there isn’t a single-lane road or easy path to healing. Everyone is traveling a different journey to get to the end.”

“I am struggling...”

“So please talk to me.”

“It’s hell,” I said, finding it difficult once again to calm my racing heart.

“Okay, honey, I know you might feel like that right now,” she said in a soft, soothing voice, “but just take it one minute at a time, one hour at a time, one day at a time.”

*I meant hell, the actual place. Yeah, she’d never understand.*

“I’m in shock and disbelief,” I said. “I feel numb all over.”

“Becoming a victim of crime is a life-changing event, and it can be a very frightening experience. You survived severe trauma. I know you’re struggling with the emotional impact. Dr. Jonas will be in to see you tomorrow. She’s one of our very best therapists.”

*A shrink? What a nice way to put it.*

“I just wanna sleep.”

“I already gave you a sleeping pill earlier. You should also eat something though. You’ve barely touched your meals over the last two days. Your body needs nourishment to heal.”

“I’m not hungry. “

“Okay. For now, just try to relax. Focus on happy thoughts.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Maybe...imagine yourself in a colorful garden with beautiful flowers and singing birds.”

I know she was only doing her best to comfort me but nobody could understand my life-altering experience. I was grateful to be alive. But how was I supposed to deal with the aftermath by myself? Picturing flowers and birds wasn’t exactly going to take away the hellish images out of my head. How would I ever escape these flashbacks and nightmares?

“It’ll help you not worry so much, and the calming images will bring down your anxiety level,” she said.

“Hmm. Maybe I should think about rainbows and unicorns too, huh?” I said, somewhat snarkily.

She smiled. “How about soaring mountains, lush green grass, and soothing, trickling streams?”

No beautiful place I imagined on Planet Earth could overcome this intense memory of heat searing my blistering skin, air that smelled like putrid sewage, and those deafening screams all around me. I knew she was just trying to be helpful, but she had no idea what it was like to have real, live monsters slicing and ripping flesh. I shuddered at the thought.

I knew surviving was only the *beginning* of this ordeal.

“You know, it really sucks to be in this club,” I said.

“What club?”

“Sleep Deprivation 101.”

She pushed up her glasses on her nose. “Would you like some chamomile or lavender tea? Or maybe I can put on a funny movie or some soothing music for you.”

If *only* it were that easy to forget, I thought, but I was certain Bach or some Adam Sandler flick weren’t going to do me any good. Not only that, but I wanted to be alone. I politely asked if she could leave the room for a while, so I could gather my thoughts, and she kindly agreed. As she was reaching to turn off the lights on her way out, though, I had to stop her. “Can you please leave them on?” I asked, terrified to be by myself in the darkness. I’d met several awful versions of the bogeyman in person, and I was going to be afraid of the dark for a long, long time.

“I understand. Just know you are safe here, Rose. I promise that no one will hurt you. The guy who did may be on the loose, but the police will catch him. You can count on that.”

I gave her a nod and wished her goodnight. I felt the agonizing pressure to spill my guts. Because I wanted to talk. Badly. I wasn’t one of those people who kept everything inside and talked about it years later. I wanted to know why this happened to me.

My eternal destiny weighed heavy on my mind, as well as my attempted murder. But nobody on the planet had faced the kind of scenario I was going through. How would a stranger ever understand? The feelings of helplessness and hopelessness flooded through me like a tidal wave. I had a hole in my soul that I swear rivaled the Grand Canyon. I was just traveling along life’s road and everything was finally starting to go smoothly. Then, *boom*, something unpredictable and unexplainable happened to me.

The memories were so haunting. I was in a dark place mentally and spiritually. I could not stop envisioning that bat striking me over and over again while alive, then being poked with that red-hot rod while dead. I shuddered. Attacked and beaten in this physical world, then in the spirit realm as well. Man, I couldn’t catch a break.

*How will I ever forget the worst night of my life? I wondered. Where can I find the strength when everything around me is crumbling?*

The terror that my soul endured was far worse than any supernatural film or horror movie. I knew I would never be the same again.

Just as I was starting to doze off again, the nurse popped her head in the door. “Sorry, Rose, but I forgot to tell you earlier. Some lady named Madaline from Trinity Church called and asked me to give you a scripture.”

“Okay...” I mumbled.

She bit her lip. “I have to run to the nurses’ station to get it. Hold on.” She hurried away, then returned in a few minutes and stood beside my bed and began reading from a yellow Post-it note. “Okay, it’s Isaiah 41:10. It says, uh...’Don’t be afraid, for I am with you. Don’t be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you. I will hold you up with my victorious right hand.’”

My eyes filled with tears. “Thank you. That came at just the right time.”

She handed me the piece of paper with the scripture written in her beautiful cursive, and I clutched it tightly in my hand under my pillow. “Thank you,” I said. “This means so much to me. I will meditate on it, and I’ll call Madaline in the morning. Goodnight.”

“Night, Rose. Sweet dreams,” she said before she walked out and left me to my thoughts and dreams for the night.

Would being by myself always be a trigger? It was hard being all alone and feeling safe. The last time I was alone...the break-in. I hoped the hospital staff came in constantly all night long. I blew out a long breath. Yep. I hated being alone with all my thoughts and my deep-seated trauma. Both terrified me and I didn't want to find myself in a full-blown panic attack. Every horrible recollection would flood back derailing every little bit of peace I felt from my mom's talk. It was like I was hanging from the edge of a very high cliff. I didn't want to be doomed to a life of misery and anxiety.

I couldn't wrestle my giant tonight. I refused to let my mind wander toward bad thoughts. Leaving my mind to its own devices wasn't a good idea and I wouldn't whip myself into a frenzy. I was still traumatized from everything that had happened to me, but even so, I wouldn't let negative thoughts win. I put on some calming music from my phone. And I focused on that perfect vacation Sue had mentioned. And just maybe I would adopt that parrot and name her Polly. I let out a little laugh. It was silly but I calmed down and was able to fall asleep thinking about cheerful sunshine, chirping birds, and roaring waterfalls.

### Chapter 13

The next day, I closed my eyes and tried to enjoy the comforting presence of my loving parents. After a few minutes, dismal memories of hell fire flashed into my mind. It was nothing short of terrifying. I tried to ignore them, but they were persistent invaders, as well as far too real and vivid. I felt an anxiety attack coming on as my heart began to race and beads of sweat rolled down my face. What does one do when the unthinkable occurs? Life can change in an instant.

"What's wrong, honey?" my mom asked.

"Whatever you do," I said, squeezing her hand for dear life, "please don't let me go back to that awful place."

"You're not. You're coming home with us," she softly said. "I don't want you in that house again, especially not with that maniac still on the loose."

"I'm not talking about the house, Mom."

"What do you mean then?"

My eyes widened. "Hell."

The creases in Mom's face deepened. She seemed troubled by my declaration, and that hurt me. She didn't want to believe that I wouldn't end up in heaven. I wanted to be the perfect daughter who would make her proud and taste paradise for all eternity. I believed in God. I had always believed. So, I had no idea why He would send me to a place of eternal torment. Question after question burdened me.

When the doctor walked in with some nurses in tow, I looked directly at him. "Did I officially die?" I blurted, desperate for an answer. I was certain I had died, multiple times, but I wanted to hear it from an expert.

"Yes, Rose. I'm afraid so."

"Are you sure?"

“You had no pulse, your breathing ceased, and we did not see a skin resistance response. There was also no detectable EEG activity. We lost you a few times in the ambulance and once in the hospital. It was a close one, but we worked endlessly to bring you back.”

“Wow. I really did die,” I whispered, feeling broken and blindsided. *How could a person like me end up in a place like that?* I just didn’t understand it, but I knew the experience would forever change me. The doctor’s confirmation only meant I didn’t imagine or dream it, that everything I’d seen and felt was very, very real. “I really died,” I repeated. I couldn’t believe I was uttering those words, but I knew, with every fiber of my being, it was true.

A nurse slowly met my gaze. “You did, but like Dr. Thompson said, a lot of people worked diligently to bring you back. You were hovering between life and death.”

“And thank you for that,” I said. “I’m so sorry I was so stubborn and fighting. I was just scared and confused.” I clutched my blanket with both hands in a death grip. “I s-saw things.”

“You *saw* things?” she asked.

“You wouldn’t believe me,” I slowly said. “I can hardly believe it myself.”

She held out her hand, and I took it. As the images flooded my mind again, I felt the blood draining from my face. I closed my eyes, but when I opened them, I noticed I had everyone’s attention. I knew it was highly unlikely that any of them would really believe me. I just hoped they wouldn’t put me in a rubber room and a straitjacket.

I didn’t even think I was the same person anymore. I’d survived so much and I would never forget that harsh and violent world called hell. I’d hoped to one day conquer the nightmares at night that plagued me now. I’d survived, but I think it changes a person. My view of the world had changed. I now saw life in high definition. Through all the tragedy life had stuck me with, I had become stronger than I ever thought I could be. But at the same time, I now had a colder, harder edge to me, and my emotions were all over the place. Maybe I was damaged goods.

How do I survive and not completely lose my mind?

I’d always see that attack from the home break in and the afterlife when I dreamed or when I am thinking or when I close my eyes. Sometimes, I think I’m back fighting them, those ghost white eyes and horrible faces etched into my mind forever. I knew this had been a scarring experience for me and I hoped I’d be able to get past it one day.

“You mentioned before that you thought you went to hell,” the doctor asked. “Did you see...fire?”

“More than fire. I wish I could paint you a vivid picture of what happened.”

“Please do.”

I paused, because it hurt just to think about it. Tears welled in my eyes with the onslaught of that bitter nostalgia. It was too grim of a thought to bear, and I wished I could prevent anyone from ever going through such a horrible trauma. How do you even start to explain falling into the depths of the Earth? Conversations about the afterlife are never easy.

The doctor stepped closer, blinking while my lips quivered. “Rose?” he coaxed.

Slowly, the words came out. “I saw some really bad stuff....darkness, fire, and...creatures.” I’ve never really enjoyed fantasy books or movies, as I’m the kind of person who prefers to focus on reality. For that reason, when I heard those words coming out of my mouth, I was aghast. Still, I

couldn't hide such a happening, and I couldn't deny it. I just let the terrifying tale tumble out of my mouth, with no regard for what anyone would think of me.

"Hmm. Well, it's normal for your mind and body to be in shock after such a violent attack," said one of the nurses, staring down at a clipboard.

Droplets of perspiration peppered my back and face as I relived the experience. "And these things..."

"What things?"

My eyes widened as the events rendered vivid in my mind. "I-I'm not sure what they were. Monsters? Demons? I just don't know. There were different kinds of creatures, some like evil, little trolls out of some horror flick, biting me and—"

"Now, now, Rose. No creatures were biting you."

"They were!" I insisted. "I still remember their stench, still feel their grip, those sharp nails piercing my skin. I could *feel* their hatred. I was there! Then, dozens of things with red eyes crept toward me, hissing like snakes. One of them shrieked so loudly that it thundered in my ears. It pounced on me and sank its long, sharp teeth right into my stomach. The pain was so horrible! I—"

"We found no bite marks or evidence of such injuries on your body, Rose," the doctor said. "Why don't we just dim the lights and let you get some rest. This stress is not good for you."

I began to gulp, pulling at the air like a fish out of water. I still couldn't grasp what had happened to me, couldn't forget how the creatures snarled and smiled, with foam dripping from their jaws. I had no way out down there, no "exit strategy," as that Ethan from the coffee shop had put it.

Clearly, they did not wish to talk about things they could not explain. For all I knew, they thought I was insane. *Maybe it's the drugs they're giving me*, I reasoned, *but why does the experience seem so real then?* It was really all I could think about, the complete and utter hopelessness. It wasn't like a video game I could just reset. There were no cheat codes. I knew it was the end for me, with no chance of escape. It was just some innate, dreadful knowledge I had. Then, though, I was saved, snagged back to life by those doctors. If they hadn't brought me back, I would have been tormented by those creatures forever.

As the nurse turned the lights down, I screamed, "Please don't! I need light. In fact, please turn on every light in the room. I don't ever want to be in a dark room again." My eyes filled with tears. "Listen, I need to talk about this. I just can't let it go. I just can't. I won't be able to sleep until I know what happened to me."

"Why don't we talk about how wonderful a fighter you are?" the nurse suggested. "You have a second chance at life, my dear."

*Second chance?* I pondered. Well, if that's what's waiting for me when I die for good... I gasped at the thought. I was so confused, obsessed with finding answers. I could not process all that had happened to me. I felt alone, caught in a void, and no one around me understood because none of them had ever set foot in that place. Frustrated, I blew out a long breath and closed my eyes tightly.

The nurse held my hand and tried to reassure me. "There were no trolls, honey."

"Okay, maybe not trolls, but I saw... Oh, I don't know. It's too hard to explain."

"What? What did you see?" the nurse asked.

"These...heinous creatures."

She looked at me like as if I'd lost my mind.

Ignoring the disbelief on her face, I continued, "And it felt real. So real."

The nurse squirmed as she tried to discern what I was telling her. She obviously didn't like hearing it, and I was sure I had totally freaked her out. She seemed lost in thought for a moment, but in the end, no words came out. She was as lost for words as I was, just as dumbfounded and speechless as my parents.

"Something happened to me," I whispered, "and it was worse than any nightmare you can ever fathom."

"But you're the sweetest person I know." My mom kissed my hand. "Just know you're a good person, honey. Nobody can take that away from you."

"A good person like you will go to heaven," my dad chimed in.

"That wasn't heaven," I said, my voice quivering. "It was hell, Dad, pure hell. I had no control of what was happening to me, and it felt...permanent, like it was too little, too late. My destiny was handed to me, just eternal torment in endless flames. There was no exit, no door, no hope. I was helpless. I didn't even have a chance to say goodbye to you or my friends. It was just over, lights out...literally. There is no joy, peace, or bliss down there. It is nothing but endless fear and torture."

The doctor straightened, and I could tell by his expression that he didn't believe me. "A lack of oxygen triggered a temporal lobe seizure," he said, reviewing my chart. "That can cause hallucinations. It's a random jolt of activity in a person's brain just before it shuts down."

"Why would I hallucinate something so horrible? I don't even watch horror movies. How could I invent something so hideous and evil?"

"There is also the dying brain hypothesis."

"The what?" my mother asked.

"The theory states that near-death experiences are just hallucinations caused by activity that occurs in the brain as cells begin to die."

I bit my lip hard. "So, while I was dying, my mind made up the story of ugly, grotesque creatures hurting me? Creatures I've never even seen in my worst nightmares?"

He tapped on his clipboard as if my concerns were no big deal. "The mind can play funny tricks."

"Do you believe in God, Doctor?" I asked.

"I believe in science."

"Fine, but science can't explain the hellish realm I was taken to. I assure you, it wasn't a hallucination. I could think, feel, everything. I now know an absolute fact."

"What's that?"

"Our souls really do live on after our bodies die."

"Of course we live on," my mom chimed in. "Grandpa and Grandma are in heaven. We'll see them one day."

"Why couldn't I see them?" I asked. "Why didn't I appear in a green meadow with them embracing me?" I knew I had experienced something real, but not one person in that room really, truly believed me. My mind and body were exhausted, and I needed rest, but I swore I was going to get to the bottom of it, one way or another. "I-I'm even more scared to die now than I ever was before," I confessed. "If that is what's waiting for me, I just... I can't bear it."

“You’re not going to die anytime soon,” the nurse said as she hung up another IV bag. “I think human consciousness is nonphysical and continues after physical death. As long as you’re not out there robbing and hurting people, you will go to the pearly gates.”

“Then why didn’t I? I’ve never robbed or hurt anyone.”

“I don’t think you really went where you think you did,” she said.

“But you all said I died.”

“You just had a dream, that’s all. At the very end of life, your brain was lacking oxygen. You’re a sweetheart. Your mom told me all about you. In the afterlife, you will be bathed in bright light and feel a deep connection to the cosmos.”

“Nurse, I don’t believe any of this New Age talk is helping,” the doctor said. “It is best to accept the fact that when you die, you die. That’s all there is to it, folks.”

The nurse gripped her stethoscope. “New Age? Forgive me, Doctor, but this stuff goes all the way back to the Middle Ages.”

He rolled his eyes, then looked at me. “Listen, it was nothing more than a dream, Rose. Like I said, death is final, the end of the road. It’s game over, unless we manage to bring you back from the brink, which we did. You were suffering from severe oxygen deprivation, and that triggered vivid hallucinations.”

“It was not dream-like in any way, shape, or form,” I argued. “The only way I can explain it to you is to say it was *realer than real*. I floated up and saw you frantically working on my body.”

“It was a dream and nothing more,” he retorted, unwilling to let me win the argument.

“It *wasn’t* a dream, Doctor, and it *wasn’t* a hallucination. I watched you accidentally step on my watch that fell on the floor.”

His jaw dropped as he looked at his staff. “Did you tell her that?”

“No, Dr. Thompson.”

“Did that happen?” my mom questioned, stumped.

A nurse nodded. “We are so sorry about that. The glass cracked. The only thing on our minds was saving your daughter’s life.”

“How could I know it?” I asked. “I also saw a brown loafer on the roof, a man’s shoe, lying on its side. It doesn’t have any shoelaces. Can somebody check and see if there really is a shoe on the roof, at the south end of the building?”

“There is!” a brunette nurse said. “I saw it when I was assisting on the medevac team last week. You can really only see it from the helicopter.”

One nurse covered her mouth, and another’s eyes widened. Even the doctor seemed rattled.

“Your science can’t explain that, can it?” I spat. “Look, I don’t know what happened or how. I really have no idea. I only know it *did* happen.”

“If death isn’t final,” said a young nurse, “then what happens next?”

“I don’t know, but I’m gonna find out. There has to be a better future than what I experienced. There just has to be. I couldn’t even take it for a few minutes. How can I spend eternity in a place like that?” I shuddered at the thought. “What if things had gone differently? What if you couldn’t revive me?” I asked, then swallowed hard to eliminate the lump in my throat.

Dr. Thompson shook his head in complete disbelief, tucked my chart under his arm, and abruptly exited the room. It was quite evident that I had struck a nerve with an atheist. If he had experienced what I had, he would have been singing a different tune.

The nurses gave me one last smile and left too.

“They don’t believe me, Mom,” I said as my gaze met hers.

She softly stroked my arm. “You’ve been through so much. Just rest. I think that’s best.”

“You weren’t there.” My voice wavered. “If you had been, you wouldn’t be as calm. There is something waiting on the other side, and it isn’t good. I don’t want to go back there, not ever.”

“I can tell you’re traumatized, dear, and—”

“I’m far beyond that,” I interrupted, “but I guess that’s what happens when demonic beings throw you into rock walls.”

An experience like this shifts your focus in life. It was absolutely brutal. And I knew firsthand what it felt like to be roasted alive. The experience would haunt me forever.

“What about post-traumatic stress disorder?” my mom asked one of the nurses who had remained in the room.

“She’s been through a lot. We brought her back to life so many times.”

“I hate seeing you like this,” my mother sadly said. “I wish there were something I could do for you.”

A tear rolled down my cheek. “If you would’ve seen what I saw, you would be this crazy too.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Do *you* believe me?” I asked.

“I’m sorry, honey, but I just don’t believe our loving God would send my baby to a place like that,” she said, rather adamant with her declaration. “You’ve done nothing wrong, absolutely nothing. You never even broke curfew, for goodness sake. You’ve been doing charity work for years, and you donate more than I do. You love people. If ever there were a perfect candidate for heaven, it’s you. There is no way they would reject you, not in a million years.”

I wanted to agree with her, but for some reason, I had still ended up down below. My mind spun in circles. I’d never felt so alone and heart-stricken. “When I thought I was never going to see you again, my heart sank. I thought it was over. I couldn’t escape, Mom. There was nowhere to run, no one to help me. It was the worst moment of my life. I should’ve demanded a life review. Surely, they would have seen I was sent to the wrong place. Those creatures told me I was in hell. Hell, Mom!”

“Not you.”

“Yes, *me*.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, but I have to find out. Maybe I can prevent it when I really do die.”

“You can tell me your story in more detail later. Just get some rest now. That’s the most important thing. We don’t need you getting upset again. I promise, we’ll figure this out in time.”

“Mom, Dad, I saw Jesus. I called out for Him, and He rescued me.”

My dad’s face lit up at my words. “What did you say He looks like?”

“He was clothed in bright light. I’ve never felt such love and peace. He was the most beautiful thing in the whole, entire world, with the kindest smile and prettiest eyes I’ve ever seen.”

“What a wonderful experience that must have been,” my dad said in awe.

“It truly was.”

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Sometime later, after I’d dozed off, a nurse came in, collected my chart, and turned off the lights. That was more than enough to send all the terror rushing back in. The flashbacks were more vivid than ever. I had been beaten in a dark house and sent to a dark pit. I was battling PTSD and I knew right now that light was my friend.

I felt completely discombobulated and loopy, like I was lost in a thick fog. Paralyzed with fear and still loopy from drugs, I couldn’t tell if I was experiencing reality or some sort of hallucination or nightmare. I took a deep breath and tried to fight through the confusion that was flooding my head. My arm instinctively jerked to the IV that was pinching me.

“Honey,” my mom said. “You have to leave that alone.”

“Mom!” I cried. “Please turn on the light. I know I haven’t been afraid of the dark since I was a kid, but something’s changed.”

“Okay, honey, calm down.”

“Please hurry, Mom!” I shouted, as everything seemed to close in around me. “Please make it as bright as you can.”

“How are you ever going to sleep with that blaring in your face?” she asked as she pulled the string to put the lights on the highest setting.

“I don’t know, but this is how it’s going to have to be from now on,” I said. “I’m sorry I got caught up in...a real-life horror movie. I wouldn’t recommend it. I’ll probably have nightmares for years.”

My mom nodded in agreement and didn’t argue. She just wanted me to be comfortable and at ease, and she understood that the lights helped me to feel more in control. She pulled the blanket up over my shoulders and kissed me on the cheek. If only she could understand what I was truly going through. I found myself to be jumpy and anxious, vulnerable and helpless, disconnected and numb. I was never like this before and I felt like my life was unraveling right before my eyes; I felt so overwhelmed and so weighed down by life. Why couldn’t I have control over my feelings and fear? I felt stuck. And stressed out.

I tried to put on a braver face, but I began to hyperventilate, gasping for air.

My mom took my hands in hers. “Rose, I want you to close your eyes and visualize yourself in a happy place, sitting on a pristine beach, beside the ocean. Concentrate on the warm sand between your toes, the salty sea air, the seagulls cawing overhead, and the waves lapping up against the shore.”

“I smell tropical flowers.”

“Good! Can you feel the white sand running through your fingers and the cool breeze across your face.”

“Mm-hmm. It feels nice,” I said, my voice trembling.

“Feel the hot sun beaming on your face?”

I nodded and smiled.

“Now I’m splashing cool, refreshing water on your face.”

I felt water sprinkle on my face. “Mom!”

“It’s water from my cup. I’m trying to make it real. Now you laugh and splash me back. Picture it. Really feel it. Put yourself in that place, away from here. Smell the salt in the air. Taste the sweetness and the lemon in your iced tea? Hear the waves crashing along the shore?”

For several moments, we went back and forth, imaging that beautiful scenario that put my mind at ease.

“That’s so much better,” I told my mom. “Thank you so much.”

She smiled. “You’re going to get through this, I promise. And I’ll be here every step of the way.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

I didn’t want these flashbacks and unwanted memories. I tried to bury and hide my horrible memories and these challenging emotions. But no matter how much I tried; they would seep out through my invisible wounds. My life story was incomparable to anyone else because of the supernatural element that nobody understood unless they experienced it firsthand for themselves. So much was eating at me, I even blamed myself for surviving when other souls didn’t. I was processing so much and trying to figure everything out. I also wanted to know who wanted to kill me. Somebody was out there running around. Had somebody gotten away with trying to take my life? I was overwhelmed by all these conflicting emotions and unsettling thoughts. How do I get past this deeply, distressing, and disturbing experience?

I rubbed my temples and closed my eyes. This was all taking such an emotional tow on me and I wasn’t sure how to handle it. For now, I would just take one small step at a time. I thought about being on the beach and feeling the sun on my skin and digging my toes in the sand and feeling the coolness beneath the surface; listening to the rhythmic crashing of the waves. That’s what I focused on for now. To keep sane, so I didn’t lose touch with reality. I took some deep breaths and let them out slowly. My mom prayed with me and that helped so much.

“Do you need anything else before I go?” she asked.

“A reset button to press would be absolutely lovely.”

“I’m right on that. Well, if they existed in life.”

We both let out a chuckle.

“I’m sorry, Mom, that all of this is taking such a heavy toll on my mood. You’re up here constantly putting up with me. And I love you so much. And I thank you. You’re the best mom in the world. And I mean that with all my heart.”

“I love you too. And you’re going to get through this. I know you can tackle any challenges that come your way.”

“Then what?”

“Then my darling daughter, you keep going.”

“Thanks for everything, Mom. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

I loved my mom and I knew from this moment on, I would love every single person unconditionally. I would treasure my family and friends. I would never take them for granted. Not ever.

## Chapter 14

The next day I felt a little better. I had gotten a few hours of that ‘elusive’ sleep. I went for a couple of tests and talked to the therapist in my hospital room. I opened up about the crime and it felt good to talk to her. I told her how my world had fallen apart, yet, life continued. How does happiness vanish in one single moment? I hated how sad I was.

She explained there was no way to bypass grief when tragedy strikes your life, and that it was going to be a tough journey to heal. I sat up in my bed, and we started talking about all kinds of different things.

“I survived...attempted murder,” I whispered. I survived that fateful night, but I knew the horrifying incident would always stay with me. “I came face to face with pure evil.”

“You’re struggling to navigate through all of this, but you lived to tell the tale,” she said. “You’re a survivor.”

“I’m a burn survivor too.” Yeah, had to throw that one in also, even if she hadn’t a clue what I was talking about. Although nobody could see the burns, I knew they would have a lasting impact for the rest of my life. God had rescued me from the dark grasp of those demonic beings and that frightening journey. I would always be forever grateful for my second chance at life. But it does make me think over and over again, *why am I here?*

“Burn survivor?” She flipped through her notes. “Um, was there a house fire?”

“I would say it was definitely trial by fire.”

She looked at me confused, then continued, “I see a beautiful, strong woman, a strong survivor with a story to tell that will inspire many. So what’s your story?”

“My story? It reads like a Lifetime movie script or book. Where do I even start? Well, I can tell you it’s filled with crazy plot twists.”

“Crazy plot twists, huh? What would you say about your life if it was a book?”

“I would say the beginning is absolutely boring.”

“Boring?”

“Would totally put you to sleep. Total snooze fest. But then the story unravels, and would take the reader on some kind of horrifying ride with a crazy, jaw-dropping plot twist...that even I wouldn’t believe if I hadn’t lived it myself.”

She cocked a brow. “The attack?”

*Which one?*

I nodded.

“What’s the plot twist?” she asked.

“It’s so unbelievable that I fear nobody will believe me. And more than anything, I just want to be believed and taken seriously.”

“Well, I’m here to listen. I’m here to give you support, love, and empathy.”

“Thank you. Now those are the best gifts you can give any survivor. You’re a wonderful listener.”

“Thank you. I just have a passion to help people and find it very rewarding if I can make a positive impact on their life. Others have walked the same road as you. I promise you that you are not alone.”

*I promise you I am.*

I was overwhelmed with emotions. She handed me a tissue and assured me it was okay to cry. So I did. And she let me. I cried way longer than I should have in front of any stranger, therapist or not. I guess I needed that really bad. But... I'm not the type of gal that shares tears with other people.

Insurmountable evil had crossed my path and took away my perfect, beautiful, happy life. It was so hard to keep my head above water. I felt like I was gasping for air and drowning. But I knew I had to keep swimming no matter what curveball life threw. I'd been knocked down before but I jumped back up on my feet. Because I always bounced back when bad things happened to me, and I knew this was an opportunity to grow and find personal strength. I refused to let fear and anxiety carry me away. I had been pushed to the edge of life and death and it left me struggling, but I refused to let it ruin me. I would heal and come back stronger than ever. I didn't know what the future held, but I would face it head-on, bravely and strongly, and—above all else—I would trust in Jesus and never, ever give up hope.

Even though my entire life had been turned upside down, I was still joyful that I had been given a second chance and I wasn't going to blow it.

*I'll make every day count.*

I pondered some more. “Will people only remember me as the woman whose life was almost cut short by a baseball bat?”

“Let's talk about that.”

“You know what? Yes, life is hard, but I will heal and move forward. I am a survivor and not a victim. My story will not be my identity. Oh, look at that! I answered my own question.”

“But you still look troubled. I can see something heavily weighing on your mind.”

I bit my lip hard. “I hated that I had absolutely no control on whether I lived or died. Because it was entirely in someone else's hands. Why was a stranger allowed to determine my fate? Why did he deem me unworthy of life for no particular reason?”

“Let's focus on that,” she said.

We talked for over an hour. Talking to her was very much worthwhile. She validated all of my concerns and didn't judge me.

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Later, after my bandages were changed, I felt sleepy. Sleep was hard to get these days, so I thought I would jump on the opportunity.

I took a nap and pictured myself back in hell. And I saw that beautiful woman, with the pretty eyes and long hair. She was pleading and begging me for help. I reached out, but I couldn't save her.

“Please help me!” she shouted.

I woke up drenched in sweat.

My mom and dad were visiting me. I forced my mom to open up the shades to let the sunshine in and turn on all the lights in the room.

I LOVED all that sunshine. I would never take every beam for granted, not ever again. I had a new outlook on sunshine and fresh air. Because I literally thought I would *never* see it again. Or inhale wonderful, beautiful, fresh air. I would enjoy the simple act of breathing, and enjoy the sun on my skin. It's truly a gift from God.

"It's the most beautiful sight," I said. "I'll never get enough of it."

"Honey, it's just the parking lot, not the best view, I promise you."

"I can't wait to get outside and enjoy the feeling of fresh air flowing through my lungs."

I guess I felt numb and I was still in shock and disbelief about everything. My entire world had changed in a flash. I thought everything was going perfect, but then life can take unexpected turns. Turns I never expected in a million years. I felt like I was trapped and couldn't escape the horrible memories of everything I went through. I mean this whole, entire thing changed my perception about life. I felt restless, agitated, and burdened. I had one foot on the gas and the other on the brake and I was spinning out of control. And it might even burn out the engine.

Life is filled with all kinds of obstacles and the roads can get rough and bumpy, and I knew I would have to travel them to get to the beautiful destination that God had waiting for me. I was given a second chance. And second chances are *always* appreciated.

She handed me a glass of water and I accidentally spilled it.

"Drinking responsibly means not spilling it," I said. Referring back to my drunk days. But I wasn't sure if my mom and dad caught on.

"I wanted to bring you one of your favorite coffee drinks, but you insisted on water. So I stopped and got you a bottle of Fiji water and asked the nurse for some ice."

"Oh, Mom, it's just the most wonderful thing in the world. Even tap water without ice would've tasted heavenly." I took a drink and it was so satisfying and refreshing. I'd never forget how parched my throat was in hell, how thirsty I was. I literally dreamed for a drink of water. I knew a simple drink of water was a gift from God. I would always treasure it every single time I took a sip.

"We're loving your little kittens," my mom said. "Even if they're crazy at night."

"I didn't get any sleep last night," my dad said with a laugh. "They're so playful and energetic."

"What did they do?" I asked.

"Went after my toes, knocked stuff over, and pounced on my head. All. Night. Long."

I couldn't help but laugh.

A knock on the door made me jump. I was still on edge and very jumpy.

It was Detective Gannon and he wanted to talk to us a little more.

"I want you to catch this guy," my dad said. "I want him put away for the rest of his life. Maybe even give him the death penalty."

"He deserves to pay," my mom added. "And we won't stop until we get justice for our daughter."

I nodded. "If my ex did this, I want him persecuted to the full extent of the law. My life has been forever changed. And this isn't something I'll ever forget or ever get over. I was at home celebrating. In my own home. If I'm not safe at my home, where am I safe?"

My mom grabbed my hand. "Bobby shouldn't be able to get away with attempted murder. And my girl is traumatized. He needs the book thrown at him. I've been researching this. I want him

charged with attempted first-degree intentional homicide, use of dangerous weapon.” Her voice wavered. “What if my baby would’ve died?”

“Your ex-boyfriend has a solid alibi,” the detective said.

“C’mon,” my dad shouted. “We all know it was him!”

“You can’t let him get away with this!” my mom chimed in.

Detective Gannon crossed his arms. “He was at work. Clocked in. It wasn’t him.”

“Then somebody is lying for him!” my dad said.

I let out a long breath.

“Multiple witnesses saw him at work,” the detective said. “But they could be covering for him. Maybe even clocked him in.”

My dad crossed his arms. “Could he have hired someone?”

“That is a strong possibility I plan to pursue. Because what are the chances someone would attack Rose like this one year on the date of the breakup?”

“Slim to none,” my mom answered. “And the attack was violent, like it was personal.”

The detective looked at me. “The murder weapon, the bat that he used. It came from your next-door neighbor.”

My mind flashed back to the day when I was carrying in groceries and talking to my neighbor. I remembered that the kids were playing baseball outside. Little did I know that was to be my murder weapon.

“The kids were playing baseball that day,” I said.

“Their grandmother said the kids didn’t pick up. They left the ball and baseball bat outside. The perpetrator found it, then broke into your home.”

I let out a shaky sigh.

“What would have happened if the kids would have taken the bat inside?”

“Your ex was determined on revenge. So I think it wouldn’t have mattered. He could’ve planned on looking for a weapon once inside your home. Like a kitchen knife.”

I shuddered at the thought.

We all talked about any enemies in my life and what a motive could be. But I had no enemies. The detective and my parents ended up leaving for the night and I contemplated hard every little thing in my mind to try to come up with a clue.

All I knew was that I was changed. I had been changed forever. It was unbelievable. And I couldn’t stop thinking about everything that had happened. Those recurring thoughts about the attack kept running through my mind. This was the most frightening experience I ever had.

*Is he going to come back once I’m home?*

*What else could happen?*

*Would he try this again?*

I was bruised and traumatized. I knew it was going to be a long, long road to justice and healing. Right now, I wanted to walk on my own two feet, but I couldn’t do anything but hang onto the life raft.

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The next night I was watching television when someone knocked on my hospital door. Bobby walked in and my voice wavered.

“Bobby?” I asked frantically.

“It’s me.”

It was paralyzingly frightening.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, voice trembling. When I went to scream, he covered my mouth.

“Rose,” he said softly. “I just came to see how you’re doing. Trust me, I didn’t try to kill you. You have to believe me!”

We stared at each other and he slowly uncovered my mouth and dropped the call light for help on the floor. He wouldn’t dare try to kill me right here in the hospital, would he?

“Just leave!” I said.

“Okay, okay. I will. But I want you to know that I didn’t hurt you.”

I could feel the heartfelt emotion in his voice. But I was scared, frozen. I thought about the bat and all the terror he had caused me, almost taking my life away from me.

“I would never ever hurt you,” he continued. “I love you and I always will. And I wanted you to know that it wasn’t me. I can’t live with you thinking it was me.”

“Get out!” I shouted at him.

“It wasn’t me!”

“Just go!”

He held his hands up in surrender. “Hey! Okay! I’m going. I just wanted to see you in person. To tell you that I would never do this to you. I wanted to clear my name.”

“You threatened to kill me in the past.”

“Rose, I was mad, hurt, upset, and said some of the most ridiculous things. And I believe I was drunk when I made that statement. C’mon! You know how trashed I was that day.”

“Leave!”

He looked at me with sad, hurt eyes. “How could you ever believe that I could ever hurt you?”

A tear dripped down his face. He looked so sad, so pitiful.

“It happened on the same day we broke up, the exact same day a year later,” I said.

I remembered that day clearly. He spent the rent money. I broke up with him and swore off alcohol that very day. Joined a support group the next day. Joined rehab a week later. Bobby was livid when he realized I was serious. He thought for sure I was coming back. But I knew I wanted to get clean and get off booze. I hate how it controlled me. I hate how Bobby controlled me. I hate how my life was in the gutter at that time. I had lost everything because of him.

“The same day a year later, huh?” he said. “Coincidence. I swear.”

“The man came at me with a bat. He broke in and tried to beat me to death.”

His brows furrowed. “I’m going to kill the man that did this to you. I swear. I am so sorry, but I swear I wasn’t there, and it wasn’t me. And that psychopath is gonna pay!”

“Just go.”

“I need you to believe me,” he said. “It hurts to know you would think I would do something like this.”

Tears slipped down my face.

He walked over and softly kissed my hands. "I swear to God it wasn't me."

Looking deeply into his eyes, I wanted to believe him. I mean he was a scoundrel. But a killer? He just didn't have it in him.

He blew out a long breath. "Your mom and dad have been harassing me like crazy. They even hired a private detective. And the guy is always on my tail. And then there's that police detective. Why am I getting hounded for something I didn't even do?"

"I didn't know that. I'm sorry, but we just want the truth."

"I know that's what we all want. But they want to pin this on me. And I'm the perfect patsy. I was horrible. I was a drunk. We fought all the time. And I know I would be an easy target. And I deserve it. I do. The things I put you through. I don't know how you ever could forgive me. And I understand why you broke up with me. I get it. I really do. But I've been doing good. I don't drink or do drugs anymore."

"That's fantastic," I softly said. "But please go. I can't deal with this right now. I'm shaking like a leaf."

"Maybe someday I could earn your love again. I heard you've been clean too. So we both started over again. And I'm hoping you'll give me a chance once I show you I'm a changed man."

"I can't talk about this right now."

"Take all the time you need. When you're better, maybe you can stop by. I moved into my dad's house, the one I just inherited."

"I'm so sorry about your dad."

"Thank you. I miss him terribly." Heartbroken, he looked away, and then changed the subject. "Anyway, I got a steady job and pay the bills now."

"Like a big boy, huh?"

"Yeah. And I had to pay big boy money to get out of jail and pay off that fancy lawyer. They threw me in the slammer for a few weeks...for attempted murder on you."

"You made good on your promise."

"Are you talking about that dumb threat I made in Panama City? I was wasted!"

"You don't even have an alibi the night of the attack."

"I was at home sick from bad fish tacos. My lawyer said they found blood on the glass from when he broke the window. The guy cut himself. When it comes back it's not mine, this whole town will owe me a big, giant, humongous apology. Including you."

I let out a long breath.

"Remember the last game we ever played together?" he asked.

"Yup, Monopoly."

"And I kept landing on..."

"Go straight to jail."

"It was a sign, wasn't it?"

"Could've been."

He gently picked up my hand. "Listen, I'm going to find the person that did this to you and I am going to make him pay."

“They don’t have any other suspects. Just you.”

“I am well aware. I saw myself on the news last night. I didn’t look too shabby.”

“You still have a lot of growing up to do. You can’t keep getting by with your good looks. You need to take this more seriously.”

“Oh goodness. My pocketbook tells me I’m taking this plenty serious. That bail bond wasn’t cheap.”

“Are you seriously playing the victim? You’re thinking about money when I was beaten within an inch of my life.”

Then we heard an elderly lady yelling, “I saw that killer from the news go into Rose’s room to finish her off.”

“Time to go!” he said.

He left and was gone. A group of nurses raced into the room.

“Are you okay?” a nurse exclaimed, rushing over. “Did he hurt you?”

“I’m okay.”

Once they saw that I was alive and breathing, they left. The meds they gave me were kicking in and I just wanted to go to sleep. But sleep eluded me.

The horrors of hell were worse than coming face to face with my possible killer, Bobby.

A particular conversation kept playing in my head. That conversation with a demonic being in another dimension.

*“Your belief in being a good person is the deception that got you down here. There is no such thing as a good person. I always liked that strategy. It seems to work really well. And now you’ll pay.”*

This demon told me that being a good person to get into heaven is a deception. Why would it tell me that? But I had believed the deception and I was down in hell. It definitely had knowledge. And it called it a strategy. As in a trick to get me down there. It said it worked well and it even liked that strategy.

I grabbed my phone and googled the topic. I found this scripture: For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

Then another conversation played out in my head.

*“Going to church doesn’t give you a golden ticket to heaven,” it said in a deep sinister voice.*

*“B-but I believe in God.”*

*It cackled. “Even we, the demons, believe in God. And you see where we are.”*

It literally told me believing in God and going to church doesn’t give you a golden ticket to heaven. I pondered on those words. So what got me a golden ticket in? That was the million-dollar question. So as I thought about both of these conversations I realized that only being a good person and believing in God would not get me into heaven. I bit my lip hard trying to think about everything. Jesus knew every sin in my life. He knew the shame, guilt, and pain associated with my sins of drinking. After I got sober, I came to church. I thought going to church would get me to heaven. It obviously didn’t work.

## Chapter 15

I woke up and ate the breakfast hospital staff brought me. I blew out a long breath as I contemplated everything. When would the pain stop? Not only the physical pain, but the flashbacks. I was tormented by the memories, and I swear I carried this trauma every minute of every single day. I was tired of feeling like a total mess. I didn't know how I was going to get through the day, let alone the week.

In the morning, my pastor and some dear church friends stopped by to see me, and I was very thankful for that. We chatted about everything, they prayed for me, and we even sang some beloved old hymns together.

"Listen, there's no easy way to put this, so I'm just going to blurt it out," I said after a rejuvenating but somewhat off-key rendition of "Amazing Grace." "I died during the ambulance ride to the hospital."

Their jaws dropped, and one asked, "You mean...actually? Like, you actually stopped breathing?"

"Yes," I said. "Then..."

They were obviously taken aback to learn that I'd gone to hell, especially because many of them were just like me. They were bothered by it, and it weighed heavily on their minds. They didn't understand why I didn't go to heaven. After all, I sat next to them in church every week, even taught some of their children in Sunday School. I listened to all their excuses, when they tried to explain it away with logic or theology or even a little psychology, but none of it made any sense. We talked at length, until they all left except for the pastor.

"I saw hell. I really was there," I said to him. "And it wasn't pretty! It was absolutely horrible."

"I don't believe God would send you to a place like that."

"But I was there, and now I feel like my faith is unraveling."

"There's no proof it was real, Rose. You were traumatized. The body and mind do strange things."

"Hospital documents prove I died four times. When I did, I saw demons. They revived me, and I was back in the ambulance again, but as soon as my heart stopped, I found myself facing the creature. Every time my soul left Earth, I immediately went to hell. It was like some awful game of tug-of-war."

"I'm sure it was nothing more than a horrible dream," he said.

"I'm not sure of anything, Preacher," I said. "I need to *know*, so it never happens again."

"You're doing the best you can."

"Obviously, that isn't good enough."

"If it's blessed assurance you're searching for, you'll find it in the pages of your Bible."

"I read my Bible all the time, so why did I end up in hell?"

The question left him, quite uncharacteristically, at a loss for words. I felt sorry for him. After all, even pastors are only human, and they don't have every answer for everything. It was frustrating, though, that he didn't believe me, even with documented proof of my deaths. I knew what was waiting for me on the other side if I didn't get my salvation sorted out, and that made me shudder.

When the nurse came in a while after the pastor left, she administered some pain medication. My bruises were badly bruised, tender, and sore, and every breath I took made me feel like my chest was

wrapped in barbed wire. I tried not to complain much, because I knew I was lucky I hadn't been left with brain damage. I was lucky I was still alive at all.

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Another visitor knocked lightly and came in when I told her to. "Sue?" I said, as I began to drift off.

"Oh, Rose, I am here for you. I tried to come sooner, but they wouldn't let me in," she said as she took my hand and smiled.

I fluttered my eyes open and smiled. "I'm so happy to see you."

A rush of emotions overwhelmed me, choking me. In that moment, no words were needed, because I could feel how relieved she was. The other's presence was enough to convey even more than we could possibly say.

"When I come back, I'm going to decorate this room," she said.

"I do get tired of staring at the same surroundings, the same four walls, the same room."

"Think of me as your personal hospital interior designer...at your service. You need photos, twinkle lights...and that IV pole needs Christmas lights."

I laughed.

"See? Laughter is the best medicine." Sue held my hand and smiled. "I picked up your journal and a pen. Something to kill the boredom."

"Perfect for being stuck in hospital limbo."

"And I brought your favorite Yeti cup."

"My turquoise one?"

"Yup, the one with your name on it."

She pulled the eighteen-ounce Rambler out of her oversized purse, dumped my glass of water inside, and set it on the bedside table. "Ask for some ice. And you'll be good to go. 'Cause I swear that water will stay super cold for over a day."

I smiled. "Thank you so much."

This cup brightened my day and meant everything to me. This kind gesture meant the world to me. I think she knew it because I got teary-eyed. It's the simple things that made me feel good. It was like having a little piece of home in my hospital room.

"You're welcome," she said. "Need you to stay hydrated so you can get better fast. You got some kitties waiting for their mama at your mom's house."

"Absolutely." I took a long sip of water.

"Your cup reminds me of tropical water."

"That's why it's my favorite."

"Once you're better, we're going to visit all those white sand beaches and turquoise water in the Caribbean. Or better, how about feeling the rush of adrenaline as we drive dune buggies across the sand dunes in the Middle East? Or how about we climb the Rocky Mountains or hike through lush rainforests in South America?"

"Maybe even adopt a parrot?"

“Girl, you’ve got cats now. So let’s switch that thought to, um, standing underneath a glorious waterfall.”

“That sounds amazing.”

“Okay, let’s do it. We’ll go on a cruise together.”

She smiled and gave me a fist bump.

I smiled back. “You know what? I’m never going to take life for granted.”

“Definitely add that to the journal. I know you got all those thoughts swirling around and need to get everything down on paper.”

I let out a chuckle. “You know me so well. I know the first thing I want to jot down.”

“What? Give me the first sentence.”

“I died and there’s an afterlife,” I said.

“I didn’t picture you writing that. But um, okay.”

“I’m never going to take life for granted.”

“You fought so hard for your life.”

“It’s so terrible in the afterlife,” I said.

“The afterlife?”

“I died, Sue, and I went to hell.”

“I just don’t know,” she whispered. “Can we just talk about life on Earth for now?”

Even though her words were thin and sparse, I could hear the sincerity in her voice. I know she truly cared but this story was about the afterlife and that scared her. Her gaze became stubborn, and her hands clenched to her sides, as though she already sensed something had happened to me and I had a story to tell, but didn’t want to acknowledge it just yet. So far, everyone I talked to brushed me off. But this was something I couldn’t keep to myself. I couldn’t pretend like this didn’t happen to me, because it did! A single worry wrinkle creased her otherwise smooth skin. I peered into her eyes, begging her to understand; I couldn’t dare speak the words that burned a hole in my heart. I knew the truth was a painful thing for all of us. But you couldn’t just hide me under a rock.

I nodded. “Sure. I know it scares you. But hell is real. I went there! And I swear I’m not lying.”

She let out a long trembling breath. I gave her a quick recap but she quickly changed the subject. She didn’t want to rain on my parade and upset me, but I knew she didn’t believe me. Or maybe the topic terrified her, but whatever the reason, she switched the topic to being a survivor and enjoying life.

With shaky fingers, she brushed a stray strand of hair out of her eyes and continued. “This is why you need to stop and smell the roses. From now on, go out and live life to the fullest and enjoy every single moment.”

“Okay, I promise to watch every sunrise and sunset, feel the wind on my skin, walk in the rain, gaze at the stars, and walk in the wet sand along the ocean whenever I feel like it. I will treasure life forever.”

“Good, because nothing is more important.”

“I beg to differ.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“All those things are nice, but they’re not the most important.”

“And what’s more important?”

“Salvation,” I said boldly.

She let out a long sigh. “Another conversation for another day.”

“Gotcha.”

“Okay, let me finish,” she said. “Life is tough, but, girl, you’re tougher. Things are gonna work out. After darkness, light always come. We might not end up exactly where we planned to go, because it can take us in all sorts of crazy directions, but we eventually arrive precisely where we need to be.”

“I hope. It’s just...”

“Just what?” my friend coaxed.

“Just when things are going great, something bad happens,” I said. “Sometimes, I think it’ll never end. Why can’t I just be normal, like everyone else?”

“That’s not your destiny,” Sue said.

My voice trembled, and I felt a tear roll down my face. “Is it my destiny to be buried under a constant avalanche?”

“Bad things happen to everyone. It’s life. No, you don’t deserve it. Heck, none of us do. It’ll get better though. Maybe not overnight, but things will settle down. I’ve been there, done that. Trust me. Life is full of ups and downs. You’re gonna pull through this, and you’ll come out stronger in the long run. It’s a long-term journey, Rose, and it’s prepping you for future storms.”

“It’s so hard.”

“I know, but you’re going to be okay.”

“I’m trying to believe it’s going to get better.”

“Look, just because you don’t see blossoms during the winter of life, that doesn’t mean spring won’t come.”

“That’s lovely,” I said.

“It oughtta be. I read it on a fortune cookie once,” she said with her silly grin.

Suddenly I heard footsteps and glanced at the door. There stood a hideous, hairless, four-foot creature with pointy ears and beady, red eyes and pointed teeth. I let out a blood-curdling scream that I’m sure the entire floor heard. I was gasping for breath; completely terrified and paralyzed by fear. I refused to let this thing drag me to hell again.

“I’m not going back!” I yelled frantically.

My heart was beating out of my chest and I thought I might pass out from fear. I was just waiting for it to pounce and attack me. Horrified, I looked at Sue and pointed at the evil monster. I was sure it crawled straight out of the pit and hell, and I was also convinced it was coming back to finish the job.

“Do you see it?” I asked with a shaky voice.

She chuckled. “Yeah! What a cool costume.”

*Costume?*

I peered closer and tried to make sense of her comment.

“Scared you!” the thing yelled.

I jumped, startled.

He then took off his monstrous mask and smiled.

“Rose,” Sue said. “It’s a just little kid.”

Clutching my chest, I let out a long breath of relief. It was just an adorable little boy wearing a costume. Not a demon coming for me. I felt so foolish. And I knew I was so traumatized. I would have to completely avoid Halloween in any shape or form. It would only trigger me and bring on a panic attack.

A woman rushed in and gently gripped the boy's hand. "It's not nice to scare other people."

"But Mom!"

"Tell the lady you're sorry."

"I'm a goblin!" the little boy yelled.

Trembling, I just stared at him.

"Sorry," the boy said.

"That's Landon," his mom said. "His dad is in the next room and he dressed up in his Halloween costume to show him what he's going to be for Halloween. I'm so sorry he scared you."

They turned and left the room and a nurse rushed in. "So sorry about that. Are you okay?"

"I'm okay," I said.

"I see why you screamed. That costume is so realistic and scary. Just imagine anyone who comes across that little goblin's path. So creepy. I screamed myself." She then turned and left.

"You're spooked," Sue said to me.

I swallowed hard and stared out the window as I tried to process everything. "Yup, you nailed it."

"Just take a deep breath and let it out slowly."

I brushed the hair behind my ear and sighed. "Yeah, I have come across the path of goblins and it wasn't pretty. It was absolutely terrifying."

Sue held my hand and tried to comfort me. But it was hard to calm down. It triggered every memory of hell I was trying to put behind me.

"Do you want me to ask the nurse for something to help you calm down?" Sue said. "Because you were genuinely freaked out."

My hands were still trembling. "No, I'm okay." All the thoughts came back. I was still pretty shaken up by it. I knew these creatures actually existed and had experienced them firsthand. It wasn't fun and games when I was being tortured by creatures just like these.

She cocked a brow. "You don't look okay."

I swallowed hard and looked away. "It just scared me, that's all."

"You never used to be scared like that."

"Who would dress up like a real, living creature in hell?!"

"C'mon! I thought that was a cute costume."

I rolled my eyes. "Nothing cute about it."

"Don't be a party pooper. It's almost Halloween."

"And I want nothing to do with it."

Sue told some jokes to get my mind off of things and had me laughing. A few minutes later, I calmed down. How could I not? The girl was hilarious.

Her phone dinged and she checked her text message. "Oh, it's just this guy I'm talking to from Minnesota. His name is Ron. I told him I'm from Florida and he wants to know if it's hot here and if alligators are really dangerous."

I chuckled. "Give me that phone." She handed it over to me and I texted him back, *Is it hot here? No, not ever! And 1,000 pound alligators are cuddly and harmless.*

We both burst out in laughter.

"We both know that Florida is hot," I said. "That's exactly why we Floridians don't own hot tubs."

"I hear ya. If we want hot steam, we just step outside. And who doesn't know if alligators are dangerous?"

"Obviously him."

She let out a long chuckle. "Yup. I don't think he's the one for me. But I am talking to this other cute guy named Joe." I cocked a brow and she showed me a pic of him on her phone. "He owns a pizza shop, has never been married, and is looking for his soulmate."

"He's really cute," I said.

"He seems the better choice. And he lives in West Palm Beach."

"Much closer than Minnistota. And you don't have to shovel sunshine."

"Yeah. Lots of snow in Minneapolis, Minnistota that's for sure. But it's so beautiful and the state has like 10,000 lakes."

"You so Googled his state."

"Of course."

We both chuckled.

"I'm going to call Joe when I get home," she said. "I'll give you an update later."

"Sounds good."

She picked up her purse and put it over her shoulder. "It was great seeing you, but I gotta bounce. I've got to be up at five am tomorrow. Got a super early meeting."

"Thanks for stopping by."

"Anytime."

"Bye."

"Oh, and Rose..." she said.

"Yeah?"

"Not everyone has the same heart as you. So don't ever stop doing good. And never stop spreading smiles. Okay?"

I grinned.

"See? Your smile just spread to me."

I laughed.

Sue hugged me, then waved goodbye, the last thing I saw before I drifted off to a chemical-induced sleep again.

## Chapter 16

A couple more weeks had passed, and I was getting better. I went to rehab. Things did get better. I would finish the healing process at home. I had some complications that kept me at the hospital longer

than I thought but at least I was functioning. Well, kind of. But I struggled on. There was no permanent damage from my attack. I would heal and be okay, but I knew the emotional scars would always be there.

But also, the spiritual scars...deep in my soul.

It seemed like forever and I couldn't believe tomorrow was the day that I was finally heading home. My parents had cleaned up my house and restored the glass patio door with Polycarbonate Unbreakable Glass. It's over 200 times more resistant to impact my dad said. Everything looked perfect now. I thanked my parents over and over again. They just loved me so much and I was so thankful for them. I don't know how they would have survived had I not lived.

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Morning came faster than I anticipated.

Gasping and sweating profusely, I sat straight up in the hospital bed. My gown was stuck to my clammy skin. My heart was racing faster than a horse hooves at the Kentucky Derby. I wiped my face with my hand and took deep breaths, trying to calm down. I felt like all of my energy had just been zapped out of me. Today felt like a real struggle and so did the roller coaster of emotions flooding through me.

"Get out of bed," I told myself. "Forget the dreams. Just move."

*Why does this seem like such a major hurdle?*

But sometimes, it's not always as easy as just simply waking up and moving. Not after being plagued with horrific dreams all night. I mean, I had just woken up from another nightmare; complete with monsters and fire.

AGAIN.

Am I allowed to crumble and fall apart? I desperately needed the strength to move through these painful times. I couldn't suffer like this in silence. I needed to talk and process everything. I needed someone to tell me everything was going to be okay when nothing made sense. Because sometimes, the darkness is so heavy and suffocating. I was lost in a fog of nothingness; stuck in a rough spot and struggled to cope. I felt like I had nothing left to cling to. And maybe I needed a life preserver desperately.

I tried to slow down my breathing. It was just a dream, just another nightmare, I told myself. I wasn't really back in that terrifying place. I was in the hospital fighting through the pain. My body ached. I hurt all over. My injuries reminded me that someone had once wanted to kill me. Bad things can certainly happen in life, that's for sure, but was I powerless to do anything in the face of all this evil? I felt like the trauma didn't just happen to me, it was becoming who I was, and I couldn't let it become my identity. I hated these images, these flashbacks, these awful memories. Why was I feeling sorry for myself? Why did I feel helpless? Why were these intrusive thoughts floating into my brain? How do I stop my endless, racing mind? Why was getting up so challenging, so hard, so overwhelming? Was this more than just sadness?

I hated the endless worry of anxiety. Or those persistent dark thoughts whispering in my ear about my inevitably bleak future. Do anxiety and fear live in my future? How do I cope with this? Would I ever experience peaceful sleep again? Because right now, my nights were either restless sleep, nightmares, or insomnia. All three options literally sucked. I couldn't succumb to this. I couldn't let

this take me down. But at the same time, I'm desperately trying to keep my head above the rushing water.

I had always prided myself in being a strong, independent, confident woman. I was doing so well the last year, and now, I was taking steps backwards in my journey. I assured myself that I could cope. I bit my lip hard and pondered. The most important thing right now is establishing a sense of safety. Was going home the right decision? Would I feel safe? I told my family that I would be fine, that I wasn't scared. But truth be told, the fear still lingered no matter how much I told them I didn't need them staying with me. Why did I have to be so stubborn? I should just stay with my parents. Because seriously... Could I handle this all by myself? Especially when I'm this broken? Did I have it all figured out? Sure didn't. And I had to admit, staying with my family was probably the better decision.

I think every single one of us sees life through their own unique lens, their own personal window of perception on how you view the world. Maybe I needed to clean that lens and bring it into sharp focus. Staying with family would definitely make me feel safer, calmer, and at ease, yes, that was a given. But I didn't want to lose my independence I had fought so hard for. I refused to let my attacker take that away from me. I wouldn't let him take me away from the house I had worked so hard to make a home, the house that secured my new life, to finally own property after working so hard, one of my greatest blessings in life.

It also represented stability in my life, and it was my physical and emotional haven from the outside world. It gave me a sense of identity, pride, and it was a symbol of personal achievement. Yes, a crime happened. But I survived. And thinking about all of this was such a stressful experience but I was reclaiming my power and refused to let this define me. I wouldn't let this home invasion turn my dream home into a nightmare. I was so tired and I wanted to go back to sleep. But I knew I had to face this day head-on. I had made the decision to move on with my life and I knew this was a positive step. Besides, I had adorable pets waiting for me.

Groggily, I rubbed my eyes. My bare feet hit the cold floor, my knuckles tightened, and I took a deep breath. My feet shuffled across the floor as I headed to the bathroom sink. I splashed a ton of cold water on my face. My reflection startled me. As water dripped from my face, I looked closer at myself in the mirror and pondered.

*Who is this person?*

I blinked. Then I let out a choked sob. I wanted to remember who I used to once be. But I just came up with blank thoughts. It's like I didn't recognize myself, the person staring back at me. I felt like a shell of my former self. I didn't even feel like myself and I wondered how I got to this point. How do I look happy and composed when I'm dying inside?

I kept staring. The fading bruises and dark circles didn't do me any justice.

*Where do I even start with this mess of a face?*

Why was I judging myself so harshly? Maybe I couldn't process these painful emotions. My hands shook. No, I couldn't let these waves of anxiety crash over me. I stared at myself in the mirror as I patted my wet face with a towel. The cuts and deep bruises had faded some. Even still, I didn't even look like the same person. My bright, cheery disposition, and smile had been taken away from me, stolen I might add. Would I be able to navigate life after something like this? I still had a long way to climb, and my footing felt unsteady.

But I didn't have to run this race. I would just walk it as slow as I wanted to. I would do this at my own speed. It was going to be a long, slow, painful process of putting myself back together. I had changed. My psyche had changed. I still needed to physically heal. My ribs still hurt. But I couldn't look back. I needed to focus on what's ahead, to get better, strong, and well. But how do I do that when I'm so broken? How could I ever repair the damage? It just seemed like the path before me was filled with so many questions and clouded with so much uncertainty. Nothing was clear and I felt helpless to move things forward. I felt overwhelmed; nothing felt easy. How could I survive in the aftermath of all of this? Can a broken vase be put back together again? I pondered. Maybe with a whole lot of super glue.

My mind was wandering all over the place. I walked to the window and opened it. The cold air felt good on my face, cooling my skin as well as my nerves. It was cloudy outside; a storm was fast approaching. But the sun would come out later. I really hoped it did. I desperately wanted to see sunshine.

I got cleaned up, then dressed. My sister had brought my purse so I even put some makeup on. I covered my fading bruises the best I could. How could one hide a run-in with a bat? I had survived and had triumphed, but in spite of my victory and my survival, I was haunted by those dreadful memories. The room began to spin, then grew smaller and smaller, and I felt a hot flash. Am I losing my mind, or is this just some kind of panic attack? I wondered, horrified. I slapped more cold water on my face. I felt like I've lost control of my car, have crossed into the opposite lane, and I'm looking at an eighteen-wheeler barreling toward me at some ridiculous speed.

I let out a long breath. Today, I was going home. And I refused to let any nightmares ruin my homecoming. I told myself that I never lost my balance, even when the tide turned against me. I knew I could get passed this emotional torment. I would climb out of this emotional dark hole somehow. After all, I had been given a second chance. And I was thrilled. I truly was. I knew what a treasured gift this life was. I appreciated it more than anything. But dealing with the aftermath of the attack and everything else had really taken its toll on me.

I sat in silence and pondered. And a thought came to me. I needed God to fill the void in my life.

*He changes everything!*

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My sister was taking me home and my parents said they would meet us back at my house around 11am. I was thrilled when James and Casey came to pick me up. They smiled and looked so happy and I completely lit up.

"We stopped at your favorite diner," Casey said.

"You didn't?"

"We did!"

I squealed. I had the very best family in the whole wide world. They brought me hot coffee, eggs, bacon, toast, and fluffy pancakes. I couldn't stop thanking them. They truly made me feel like I wasn't a burden or any kind of trouble whatsoever. Everything tasted delicious. We talked while waiting for the paperwork. I shared my thoughts and they encouraged me every step of the way. They truly believed things would get better and that I was going home with a sense of purpose. I had survived and it was a miracle from God.

James told a bunch of corny jokes and I laughed.

“Stop,” my sister told him as she playfully slapped his arm.

“I love them,” I said. “A little humor and a lot of heart goes a long way.”

We all smiled. I had woken up to a bad start, but things were turning around. I think we all need hope, don’t we? And that’s exactly what Sue and James gave me that morning. I knew I could face anything that came my way. An hour later, I was discharged from the hospital and couldn’t be more thrilled.

“I can’t wait to get home,” I said.

“How about a quick, little pit stop first?” my sister asked. “I’m thinking about thirty minutes or so, to give you a glimpse of something I know you’ve been missing.”

“What do you have in mind?”

She smiled. “How about some light therapy? Some Vitamin D? James and I are taking you to the beach for some much-needed sunshine.”

My entire face lit up with joy. “Really?”

“Really. The storm passed and the sun just came out. So, let’s do it! All you talked about when you came to was seeing the sun, the sky, and the ocean.”

“I thought I would never see it again,” I said, tears welling up.

Her eyes widened in delight. “You are right now.”

Joy surged through me and I could hardly contain my excitement. “Thank you! I can’t wait! Thank you for breakfast, guys. And now this!”

“Of course,” James said. “This day is all about you.”

We went to the beach and parked. Casey said she didn’t want me to overdo it, so we wouldn’t stay long. We all walked to the beach and I threw off my shoes. I let my feet sink and squish into the wet sand. I let it sift between my toes. The gentle ocean breeze felt delightful and I couldn’t stop smiling at the soothing ambiance. It was so beautiful and a rush of tears filled my eyes.

*This is exactly what I needed.*

I didn’t know what the next step on the road ahead was, but I knew God was with me. And I would have to put my trust in Him. I could feel the fog beginning to lift. He’d get me out of this maze and back on the right path. I knew the light would shine clearly on the road He had chosen for me.

I turned to James and Casey. “Thanks for bringing me here.”

“Anytime,” James smiled.

The sky was an endless portrait, stretching for miles and miles, and that image would be forever imprinted deep in my soul. Standing beneath that azure expanse, I felt pure peace, bliss, and tranquility.

The expanse of blue water stretched as far as I could see, and it was spectacular—my jaw dropped at the stunning backdrop before me. My heart continued to pound in excitement as I stared up at the blue, billowy heavens. The hue was so stunning that it was as if I’d never seen blue before, and fluffy, white clouds dotted the sky. All my attempts to capture it with words failed. I knew from now on, I would find the joy and beauty in every single day that I had breath.

Next, I closed my eyes to give my ears and nose a chance to take it all in. As squawking seagulls circled overhead, I inhaled deeply. I could instantly taste salt from the fresh air coming off the ocean. At first, it shocked my senses. So much sea salt. It was actually quite overwhelming, but only at first.

I opened my eyes again. It's the deepest blue I've ever seen, the most soothing color in the universe.

I welcomed the warm rays as they bathed my face, arms, and legs. I loved the warm breeze brushing across my face. The seascape sparkled across the ripples in the gentle sea. The waves flowed toward me, and I studied each and every one.

I didn't think I expected it to be so emotional, but it was the most breathtaking thing I'd ever seen.

I smiled at Casey and she smiled back.

"Thanks, sis," I said. "I needed this."

"Anytime."

We walked back to the car and James told me to take the passenger's seat. James was driving and Casey sat in the back seat.

My sister touched my shoulder. "Oh no, look who's coming over."

"Is that Jenny Barton?" I asked.

"Yup. From high school. James, just pull out, just pretend like we don't see her."

But it was too late and she came over to my window.

"Oh, Rose and Casey!" she exclaimed, pushing back her short, blonde hair. "I've missed you guys."

"Hello," I replied cordially.

My sister waved. "Hey."

She then looked at my sister and flashed her shining, three-carat ring. "I am so sorry about taking your knight in shining armor."

"He turned out to be a jerk in aluminum foil so he's all yours."

"You shouldn't have let that one go. But your loss, my gain."

"Congrats," Casey said. "Wishing you all the best because you will need it. He was as useless as a screen door on a submarine."

Jenny rolled her eyes and Casey shrugged.

"Congratulations," I said.

"Yeah, congrats," James said.

"Meet my husband, James," Casey said. "He's a keeper. And we're having a baby."

"Nice. I wish you all the best. Get sleep while you still can."

Jenny then looked at me, clutching the handles on her designer bag. "It's so nice to see you. Because I heard you were dead. Like someone murdered you."

"Nope. I'm still here among the living."

"So good to hear. But you look awful. Why are you so pale? Maybe that's why people thought you were dead."

"The zombie look is trending. It's going viral on Tic-Toc so I decided to try it!"

"Well maybe try some more powder for those dark circles."

"Then I won't be trending, silly," I said.

"Please try not to worry about Rose's dark circles," Casey said. "Worry more about drawing your eyebrows too high." She cocked a brow and my sister continued. "See? You looked surprised, like all the time. Listen, we have to get going. Our parents are waiting for us."

“You both still live with them? I should’ve figured as much.”

“No,” Casey said. “We’re meeting for lunch.”

“Oh, but wait, I didn’t get a chance to tell you what I’ve been up to.”

“What have you been up to?” I asked.

“But try to sum it up in three sentences,” James said. “We really gotta go.”

“Sure. So, you know I’m engaged to Fred, and we just bought a brand-new superyacht with the perfect superyacht crew...including a world renowned chef, and we’re traveling to Europe in a few weeks.” She grinned, one of those fake smiles. “How are things with you, Rose?”

“Rose can totally outdo that,” Casey said casually.

“Really?” Jenny asked. “Sum it up in three sentences.”

I smiled. “I’m doing fantastic and I bought a house in Jupiter. I’m fostering three adorable, white, fluffy kittens. And I died and went to hell.”

She cocked a brow, and James revved up the car.

“Told ya!” Casey said giving me a high five. “You totally creamed her.”

Jenny took a step back and we sped off. Casey and I burst out in laughter.

“Fred is all hers,” Casey said. “I am totally in love with the upgrade I have now.”

“Thanks, babe,” James said.

I laughed. “True to that.”

“Did you see her face when you told her you went to hell?” Casey asked. “She looked completely surprised. Or maybe that was the drawn-on, way-too-high eyebrows.”

James chuckled.

She turned to face me. “Hey, I thought you were going to tell her about your waterfront home on the beautiful shoreline in Jupiter. Like, how you’re greeted every morning by the most adorable pod of dolphins and the most magnificent sunrises every single morning.”

“You said I had to *outdo* her. How could I possibly beat a superyacht and Europe? Do you personally know anyone who has died and went to hell?”

“No, I actually don’t.”

“Well, now you do.”

They both chuckled.

“Why can’t you two just be normal?” James asked with a laugh.

“Well, we have tried in the past, honey,” Casey said.

I turned to look at my sister. “Longest five minutes of our lives, right?”

“Totally,” she agreed.

“What am I going to do with you two?” James asked. “But of all the goofballs in the world, you two are my favorite ones.”

We laughed.

James was speeding, and hitting all those bumps was really playing havoc with my bruised ribs.

“Hey, James,” I said. “Is it possible to slow down a little?”

“We’re late now. I have to make up for lost time.”

“I know how punctual you are, but we’re not in a race.”

“Hey, at least I’m on the right side of the road.”

I glanced back at Casey with a smile. “I heard that psychologists say it’s not healthy to obsess about the past. And I only did that one time after a few too many.”

“Okay you two,” Casey said. “No speeding and no bringing up the past.”

“Okay, boss,” James said.

“Well, I’m glad you know it.”

We all chuckled.

This was the first time we laughed together in two years. It was why I took special note of it. Tears welled up in my eyes and I tried to hide them from my sister. I was so happy that things were going back to the way they used to be.

I missed my sister so much. We were distant from each other for the last two years. And just hanging out with her made me smile. When she lost me due to addiction, she was heartbroken. I was awful to her during that time of my life and did a lot of horrendous things. And even when I got clean, she hardly talked to me over the last year. She was just so hurt and mad at me. And I understood.

A few months ago, I wrote her a well thought out, emotional apology letter. And that’s when we started talking on the phone. It was progress. When she said she would come to my one-year sobriety dinner, I was surprised. She missed me and wanted me to be around for her new baby. She said her little boy needed to know his auntie. And I couldn’t agree more. My entire family had forgiven me. And I’ve apologized to them. I am so sorry that I made their lives so horrible. If I could take it all back again. I would. Recovery is a long, long, long road.

## Chapter 17

By the time James and Casey drove me back to my house, it was 11 am. My mom had left to bring home the three kittens I was fostering. I stepped out of the car and noticed all the homes decorated with Halloween decorations. But the house across the street really took me by surprise. It was beyond creepy. It wasn’t just simple skeletons, spider webs, and ghosts. It was straight horror décor, a nightmare chasm. I could feel myself trembling. I felt it in every part of my body.

“Rose,” my sister said. “Are you okay?”

“The whole yard is loaded with monsters,” I whispered. “So many of them.”

It’s quite the horrorscape, huh? I know they went a little over the top this year. Especially with those 12-foot skeletons from Home Depot that they dressed up like giant Barbie dolls.”

“The doctor one is cool,” James said. “But the other ones are beyond creepy.”

“I like the cheerleader,” Casey said. “But not the dragon man.”

The dragon skeleton. They put an elaborate dragon mask over its head. Its height and face reminded me of the tall creature I had come face to face with. And all the other demonic creatures displayed looked like beings I had met in that awful pit. And of course, they had to have goblins. I bit my lip hard. Staring at the yard just brought back those awful memories of the terrors of hell. My stomach turned.

“They told me they just want to bring joy to the kids,” James said.

“Any kid is going to run,” Casey replied.

“I want to run,” I said. I couldn’t take anymore and headed toward the house.

My sister ran after me. “Listen, we can keep the curtains closed until this is all over. They take down the display the day after Halloween.”

“I can’t wait.”

My dad greeted us on the porch with a welcoming smile and big hugs and I felt such a sense of calm.

*Finally, I’m home. And nothing feels better.*

I’d been gone for way too long. I walked inside. That familiar, comforting scent of coffee wafted through the air. I knew Dad had made a fresh pot. While he and James and my sister talked in the living room, I walked from room to room. Being home felt like a warm, familiar embrace. Well, except for when I took a step into the kitchen. Memories flashed, vivid and detailed, but I drowned them out. I wouldn’t let them ruin my homecoming. Everything was so clean and serene. You couldn’t tell a crime had ever happened. It looked absolutely spotless, completely immaculate. Nothing was out of place, not one shard of glass in sight. Still, I felt emotional.

“It’s hard to walk in here,” my sister confessed in a tremulous voice.

“Mom told me you wanted me to sell the house. But I’m not.”

“It’s just...”

“I know. It’s anxiety provoking,” I said in a soft voice.

She slowly nodded, tears welling up in her eyes. “Yes, it is.”

“And I get it. But I’m *reclaiming* this space. And I won’t give in to fear. I’m not letting that guy keep me from my home. He’s already taken enough from me.”

“I don’t understand it.”

I sighed. “What can I say? I’m emotionally attached to this place. Besides, change is unsettling. I’ve been through enough in the last few years. I went from sleeping on the streets to owning this beautiful place. I have worked so hard to get this far and buy this home.”

“I know you did.”

“It means everything to me. And losing this house would be like losing someone I loved.”

She pondered. “Well, the sunsets are pretty spectacular from your backyard. And you do have the very best cookouts.” She let out a long breath. “Okay, I promise to respect your decision. I know how much you love living here.”

I tried hard not to let a tear fall down my cheek. “Thank you.”

“I’m so sorry all this happened to you.”

She turned and I embraced her in a long hug.

“Hey,” I said. “Do you want some coffee?”

“Sure. And I hope this coffee is as strong as your determination to stay here!”

I chuckled as I walked to the counter in my kitchen. I felt as though I had reclaimed this spot as I poured coffee into our mugs. This was my kitchen, my house, and nobody was going to ever take that away. For a brief moment, I felt optimistic about my future.

A few minutes later, my mom came back from her house with a cat carrier and pulled out all three kittens. “Look who we have here. Three beauties your father and I have fallen in love with.”

“I’ve missed them so much,” I gushed, reaching for them and hugging every single one of them.

“I’m going to miss them,” my dad said. “Three balls of boundless energy. They love to jump, pounce, and do all kinds of funny hunting behaviors.”

My mom patted one lightly on the head. “They are absolute darlings, tiny, fearless explorers.”

“Do you want to adopt a few cute feline friends?” I asked. “I want them to have the very best home possible.”

“Not with the birds. But I think you should.”

“But Mom, they don’t come with instructions,” I kidded.

She laughed. “I got you plenty of cat food and cat litter, cat toys and treats. And I will pay for their spaying and vet visits. I really want to keep the family together. Like one big, happy family. And I can’t imagine splitting them up. They’re bonded siblings. Honey, I know you’ll love them like crazy.”

“Thanks, Mom. I will think about it.”

“Adopting three kittens is a game changer, but what better person than you? And I think you should have some company.”

Casey smiled. “A triple adoption miracle. Now that melts my heart.”

I grinned.

“I love the sound of that. Their personalities are starting to come out,” my mom said.

“Snowball one loves to get into trouble in the most adorable way, and she’s a big diva,” my dad chimed in. “Snowball 2 loves to have her belly rubbed and is the most playful, I’m talking hours of playtime. And Snowball 3 is a cuddler and a purr machine. She’s just a sweet ray of sunshine that lights up the entire house.”

“I love it,” I said. “But what kind of names are those?” I asked with a laugh.

“Oh, that’s on you,” my mom said. “You didn’t give them names so we temporarily came up with those.”

We all laughed.

My dad shook his head. “You know what? I set up three cat beds the first night we brought them home. But they all slept on our bed.”

“They sure did,” my mom said.

“And they love the fuzzy jingle mouse. Definitely, give that one a try.”

“Oh, I will for sure.”

We talked for a while and then ordered a pizza and watched a comedy. The three kittens all snuggled into a big ball on the couch. It was so nice to spend time with my parents and my sister and her husband.

My mom had begged to stay the night with me. And so did Casey. And Sue. But I was a grown adult and didn’t need my mom or anyone else looking after me.

“Just know I’m only a phone call away and you can always change your mind.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

She kissed me on the cheek. “I’m your biggest cheerleader.”

“And I’m your biggest fan,” my dad chimed in.

“Love you, sis,” Casey said.

“I’ve always believed in you,” James said.

“Thank you, guys, so much.” I hugged all of them. “Do you wanna stay for a movie?”

“Sure,” my mom said. “Just don’t let your father pick. He’ll pick a western.”

“What? I pick the best ones.”

“Taste is subjective,” Casey laughed.

“How does pizza sound for dinner?” my mom asked.

“Pizza is always a beautiful thing,” I said with a chuckle. “With a salad. With lots of ranch dressing. Because we all know that lettuce is impossible without ranch.”

“No rabbit food,” my dad joked. “Some Coke or Pepsi would be nice. Some wings. Some garlic sticks.”

“How about those mini chocolate lava cakes?” James asked.

“With the liquid chocolate center? Mmmmm. It’s a happy day to have our Rose back. So I will look for a combination deal.”

I sat on the couch and all three kittens curled up into a big ball on my lap. I petted them and they purred. They were so adorable!

“You have some great lap cats,” my dad said.

I grinned. “Yeah, cats are the best, especially this trio.”

I actually loved dogs too. I loved all animals. I even wanted to get a cockatiel like my mom. And maybe even a fish tank. When I was little, I wanted to be a veterinarian. Because that’s how much I loved all animals, big and small.

It was a happy day. I was home. I had my kittens back. I was alive. And I was laughing. And did I mention I cranked up the air conditioning so it felt like Antarctica? The flashbacks of choking in that heat was far too real. I needed it ice cold in the house. Yeah, life was good. Until the thermostat wars started. The battle intensified between all of us. But in the end, I won. And the others didn’t challenge me, just covered up in blankets.

“It’s officially winter, and the temperatures are freezing,” Casey said.

My mom sighed. “Honey, we’re in Florida. It doesn’t freeze.”

“It does now!”

“And not one of us owns a coat here in sunny Florida,” James teased.

I looked at my family. “I promise next time you come over, we’ll find middle ground, a happy medium, a good old-fashioned compromise.”

“It’s your first day back,” Casey said. “Or else I would’ve never given up so easily.”

James smiled. “Yeah, you know we don’t suffer frostbite for just anybody.”

“Awww,” I said. “You guys really love me.”

James gave me a fist bump. “You know it!”

“Me and your mom have been talking about going on an Alaskan cruise,” my dad said. “So this will start getting us prepared.”

My mom shot my dad a look. “I don’t mean to give you the *cold* shoulder but I’m having second thoughts about that now. I’m thinking more Bahamas.”

“Definitely. Good thing we did a trial run here.” My dad turned toward me. “I’ll bring the ice pick tomorrow morning to break you out of the ice cube you’re going to turn into.”

“Funny, Dad,” I said. “Are you guys telling me you don’t want ice cream for dessert?”

“No!” Casey laughed. “And you are as cold as ice for asking us that as we sit here shivering in blankets. Good thing Mom bought those little lava cakes from the pizza place.”

“Listen guys, all is not *frost*, I mean *lost*.” They laughed and I continued, “You got me settled in. We enjoyed some pizza. And I loved spending some time with you guys.”

“It was *cool* spending time with you,” Liz said.

I enjoyed the wonderful time with my family. I was determined not to let the attack ruin my life.

*I'm gonna keep moving, forging forward, and conquer life with every bit of strength I have. We can't decide what life does to us, but we can live it in the moment, right here, right now. Life is waiting for me, and I intend on living it every single minute I have breath in my body.*

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But then they left. I was all alone.

I decided to make a pot of tea. I grabbed a pot of water, then turned on the stove. The flames sparked to life and I just stared at the fire. My heart rate spiked.

Memories of those fiery flames and that heat in hell roared back to life. I was petrified. I quickly turned off the stove. I shouldn't be drinking tea this late at night anyway. But then I thought, will I ever be able to cook again, or go to a campfire, or see a tiki torch and not have PTSD?

I tried to quell the trembling in my shaky hands. Every time I think I'm doing good with my recovery; something happens to take it back a step. My mom and dad offered to sleep in the guest room or on the couch. But I told them I was fine. I felt like I didn't need to be taken care of. And honestly, I just needed to be alone and think. I needed to sort through my thoughts and figure this all out. I just wanted a quiet house.

I was going through so much emotional stress trying to deal with the attack and my NDE. My attack didn't make sense. We didn't know who did it. We suspected but we were still in limbo. And I still didn't understand my trip to hell. The police were working on my first problem, but they couldn't help me with my second supernatural, spiritual one. So, I pondered on that one.

I felt survivor's guilt. I survived while all those others down there didn't get their second chance. I knew they felt the exact same things I did. I knew they were terrified as I was. Tears slid down my cheeks. My heart went out to them. It was heart-wrenching and chest-crushing to think about it. This had been the worst year of my life. Worse than my other problems over a year ago. A year ago, I had to get sober, leave my ex, and rebuild my life. I thought nothing was worse than that. How wrong I was.

Family has asked me if I remember everything from when I flatlined. Unfortunately, yes, I remembered it all. And I wish I could forget it. And I felt like I had post-traumatic stress.

How can one forget tumbling into an inferno?

I let out gut-wrenching sobs till I fell asleep. I started dreaming. I was trapped in a sea of black smoke and couldn't breathe. Hot flames danced all around me. With a loud scream, I woke up covered in sweat. It was only a nightmare. I couldn't escape this emotional drama even when I slept.

I found myself pacing the floor. I couldn't sleep. Sleep completely eluded me. I was too shaken up. The memories kept flashing in my head. I had gone through some major, unexpected life changes. I had no one to share my emotional burdens with. Because who could really understand? There wasn't a support group for people who survived hell and lived to tell about it. And it wasn't like I had a list of

friends who had experienced this kind of thing. I needed a new path mapped out for me by someone who knew the terrain.

*But nobody knew the terrain.*

So yes, I was on emotional overload. My life was a whirlwind. And I wasn't sure if I could handle all of this. How do I heal from wounds so deep? There just weren't enough stitches. I just felt so helpless. And I longed for the return of my once normal life.

I spent an hour journaling in my notebook. I navigated through my own healing journey. I wrote down everything I was going through and detailed the intense feelings that I felt. I also looked for some online support groups. Not for hell survivors, (cause, yeah, that didn't exist) but for crime victims. I found the perfect one. It was created so fellow survivors could come together and share their stories and move forward in their lives.

It was late. I made a snack and watched some television. I couldn't stop thinking about life after death.

*Maybe I could find some things online, since I'm wide awake anyway.*

I started blazing through the internet like a madwoman.

I clicked on, Do We Survive Bodily Death? The article went on to say we don't.

"Lies!" I found myself shouting out. "The human soul is eternal. Chemical-based theories lacked concrete proof. If there was one thing I learned, it's that there is something on the other side. I remembered the sensation of leaving my body. And the complete nightmare remained vivid in my mind. I didn't know how to put this behind me. There was no way I could get this out of my head.

The screams... I would never forget the screams of agony and torment. A chill shot down my spine as I was filled with the sense of horror.

I called God at the very beginning when I was down there. I did. And He wasn't there. I was alone. By myself. And that scared me more than anything. What did I do to deserve that? The question haunted me. Yes, Jesus rescued me in the end. But why was I down there? I went over my life. What had I done that was so horrible? Besides what I was told by the demons. How could I believe them? I couldn't think of anything. I was a model citizen. People loved me. I loved them. I went out of my way for people. I wasn't sure if what that demon told me in hell was even right. It said it was because of sin and unforgiveness. I would need to investigate further.

What are the rules to get into heaven? Had I broken one that made God cast me away? Was it the past drinking?

*Maybe that was it.*

I sipped on ice water as I scrolled through near-death experiences. I needed someone to talk to. Somebody that understood.

*A pastor?*

I didn't know. Maybe I needed a clearer understanding of my life and purpose.

*Maybe Ethan could help.* His blue eyes flashed across my mind. He was religious, that was for sure. Maybe, just maybe he could give me some clarity. He said I could call him day or night. But I would wait until tomorrow. I put on some soft music in the living room and curled up on the couch with the light on. I fell asleep quicker than I thought I would.

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When I woke up, Ethan was on my mind.

I pulled out his card and stared at it. Maybe I should just leave him alone. But he did say to call if I ever wanted to talk.

I needed to talk. Badly.

I dialed his number and he answered.

“Hey, it’s me, Rose. From the coffee shop.”

“I’m so sorry about what happened to you. It’s so horrible and I’ve been praying for you.”

“Thanks for the prayers. I can use all the prayers I can get. But how do you know?”

“The police found my card in your purse. I had to come to the station for questioning.”

I felt so bad for him. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s understandable. They had to check out every lead.”

“You didn’t deserve that,” I said. “I don’t know how to apologize for that. That had to be awful. I never meant for that to happen.”

“It’s okay. I was cleared quickly. I was a guest speaker at my church with hundreds of witnesses. I was talking about the Prodigal’s Son. It’s a powerful story about repentance, forgiveness, and redemption.”

“Oh, I remember that story. God’s love for us is unconditional. Even when we’re not faithful and go astray, he’s still our loving Father.”

Talking to Ethan came naturally. I felt like I had known him for years.

We prayed and I felt God’s presence. I could feel the love of God. I felt this divine, eternal love permeate my entire being. I felt loved. And I expressed this to Ethan.

“That’s the Holy Spirit,” he said. “The Holy Spirit understands what you and I are going through, and is here to help us in our weaknesses and our times of need. He also wants to show us the love of Jesus, and makes the love of Christ real to us. He gives us revelation, understanding, and wisdom.”

“That’s amazing.”

We talked for a good thirty minutes. He said we could meet on his day off, which was in a couple of days at the coffee shop. I couldn’t wait to meet him. I had so many questions.

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I took my kayak to the nearby Loxahatchee River-Lake Worth Creek Aquatic Preserve. My dad always loved to canoe alone, and he’d told me it was like having a backstage pass to every inconspicuous, hidden lake cove. “You can go as fast or as slow as you want, and you don’t have to coordinate strokes with anyone else,” he’d told me.

I climbed in easily and sat down, then picked up the paddle, which I used to gently push the kayak away. I dipped the paddle into the water until the blade was submerged, using a J-stroke to correct the bow and drift away from the paddle side without killing momentum. As the paddle passed my body, I twisted my hands down and out. The paddle blade rotated a quarter-turn, and then I pried the blade away from the boat. It worked great for a one-man kayak trip, and I was quite impressed with myself. Most of what I knew about canoeing and kayaking came from my days as a Girl Scout. My mom was a

troop leader, so we went together on many wilderness adventures. My family and I loved being in the woods, setting up tents, and canoeing down the river.

Using my leg muscles and upper body strength, I made smooth, powerful, well-balanced strokes and headed west, propelling in a straight line. I had no idea where I was heading and didn't really care; I just wanted to burn off steam. So many emotions were flooding through me at the same time. I was consumed with guilt, anger, frustration, and fear.

I was so mad somebody had broken into my home and tried to kill me. I was angry, completely enraged. My feelings were overwhelming and intense, rushing over me like a tidal wave. Looking upward at the sky, I screamed, "Why!?" I felt numb, withdrawn, and disconnected. I couldn't understand why somebody would want to murder me in my own home. I wanted that person put in prison for the rest of their life. Justice needed to be served.

I rowed harder as the sun beat down on my face. Sweat poured down my back as I gasped for breath. I took out all my frustration out on the paddles in the water.

I sucked in a trembling breath as the boat bobbed up and down in the water. As hard as it was, I tried to leave my cares behind as I enjoyed the serene landscape. Out there, I couldn't tell that my world was a mess, a living nightmare. Birds flew overhead, and the sun peeked in and out of white, fluffy clouds. There was something special about the healing solitude of the outdoors.

Whenever I had problems as a child, I'd build secret forts or go to private corners of the woods. It was my way of dealing with problems. I watched ants carry their leaves, picked up insects, and stared at spiders spinning their intricate webs. I'd make play boats out of leaves and follow them down the stream in the woods. Life was so simple and carefree back then as a kid, and I missed that feeling. Still, even though I was going through a rough time and trying to heal from my ordeal, I had to survive. Every day I grew stronger and somehow found strength to make it to the next day. My determination to fight and win was far greater than anything else.

After paddling around for what felt like hours, I decided to stop and rest directly at the center. Glancing around, I set down my paddle. I'd found what I'd paddled out there for: peace and quiet. I could be alone in my thoughts, without constant interruptions. I could spend hours getting lost in my own thoughts out there under the big, blue sky.

I just wanted to lighten my heavy heart. I just needed to drop that heavy mental weight. Dump it all out! I just wanted to retreat to a quiet mental space. Because my thoughts were draining.

I watched for alligators but wasn't afraid of them. I knew I just needed to stay thirty feet away if I saw one. Or just go in the opposite direction.

I took a few deep breaths, inhaling the fresh air and enjoying the lake view. The rhythmic lapping of gentle waves relaxed me. I felt safe out there, as if nothing could touch me. The sun beat down on my face as I pulled out my chocolate bar. I hadn't had a bite of chocolate in a long time, and it was so delicious that I even licked my fingers clean when I was done.

It was peaceful, serene, beautiful, quiet, and I felt normal out there. But I knew it was time to pull the kayak back and get home.

## Chapter 18

My phone rang and it was Detective Gannon. We talked a little bit before he dropped the bomb. “Bobby made bail,” he said.

My jaw dropped. Those three words were terrifying.

“Rose?” he said.

“Thanks for letting me know,” I said in a daze.

I hope and prayed my tormentor wouldn’t come to my house to finish the job he started. I hung up the phone. I phoned my family and friends and let them know. I refused any help from any of them.

As the night wore on, I was increasingly engulfed by fear. I felt violated and like it wasn’t my home anymore. I kept my music and lights on. But it didn’t seem to help much because I was convinced that I heard noises and that my intruder was coming back again. I would check the entire house, lock all windows and doors, and then check it all again. Hear more noises, and go back for round three.

I was always on edge and emotionally exhausted. I was confused and powerless.

I had no control in my very own home. My mind was running with worries. I knew I couldn’t let stress and worry consume my thoughts. He had raided my safe place, my sanctuary. I wanted to feel safe again in my own home. I wanted to take control back and I wanted peace of mind. I wondered if trauma had a timestamp. At this point, I didn’t even care. I just wanted to *sleep*.

I had anxiety in the past. I tried drugs, therapy, and booze. Nothing worked. And that was before the attack. So now add that into the recipe.

I knew recovery was a process. I tried to embrace my inner strength and take it an hour at a time; maybe even a minute at a time.

It’s okay to start over, I told myself.

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Morning finally came and my mom came over and bought me bags of groceries, and she also did the breakfast dishes and cleaned up the kitchen. My mom and I had a long talk about Bobby being released on bail. I was scared and anxious but I didn’t confide my feelings to my mom because I knew she would just insist that I stay with her. Maybe I should. I would keep it on the back burner.

“Mom, you don’t have to do all of that,” I said.

“I want to. You need to recover. And get lots of rest.”

“Thank you.”

“Besides, I had to move to stay warm,” she joked. “You really need to turn down the air conditioning.”

“I did, some. Hot temperatures trigger my anxiety and I get panic attacks. I start having flashbacks of fire...” I blew out a long breath. “Don’t worry. I’m going to get through this.”

She hugged me tightly and I embraced her.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Keep the house as cold as you want. I honestly don’t mind. If it makes you feel better, then I’m all for it, okay?”

“Okay. Thanks so much for understanding.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Oh, hey, I saw you brought some stuff in,” I said.

“I sure did. You said you weren’t sleeping well.”

“Are you kidding me?” I retorted. “I just got eight fantastic hours.”

“That’s fabulous.”

“It only took three days to get the eight hours.”

“Ha. Ha. So you’ll need what I bought you.”

She handed me two bags. I opened the first one and pulled out some noise canceling earplugs, a Gravity Blanket sleep mask, Jambys Pajama Shorts, and a rain sound noise machine.

“Oh, this is so amazing! I’m *always up* for a good night’s sleep. Thank you, Mom.”

“You’re welcome, sweetie.”

“I’ve been wondering why I can’t sleep at night and now it *dawns* on me, I needed this sleep package.”

“You can listen to the ocean, or you can listen to the forest, or you can listen to the rain, and there’s all kinds of other choices. I just want you to get that ever-elusive restful night of sleep.”

“I love it! I always loved, listening to the sound of the woods on all those camping trips we used to go on. It was so calming and relaxing.”

“Me too.” She glanced at the second bag. “Open that one too.”

I then pulled out a can of pepper spray, a taser, and a Ring camera. I knew that security camera was easy to use and would get the job done. Plus, I could easily install it myself.

“Whoa, Mama! Weapons of mass destruction. This doesn’t seem to go with the theme of sleeping. What’s up with that?” I smiled.

“I’m worried about you. And I only bought it because I love you. I’d have more peace of mind and so would you.”

I examined all the new products. “Oh, mama, you’re not playing! If any uninvited guest takes one step in here, they will be getting sprayed or tased for sure. Thank you for caring about my safety.”

“I know you won’t let me or your father put up camp in the living room or the spare bedroom but just remember you have an ex-lover who went over the edge and is determined to harm you.” She gave me a stern look. “You need to always take extreme precautions. Like getting a restraining order.”

“You’re absolutely right. We need to file one against him.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page. If he makes any future attempts to reach you, please let me know.”

“I will.”

“I know you’re hurting, baby girl.”

I was. The physical and emotional pain that I endured from my ex will always leave a lasting impact on my life, and I was struggling with the trauma that was inflicted upon me by the real world and by the supernatural one. I felt like my entire world was crashing down around me.

“I hurt emotionally and physically,” I admitted. “I try not to shake when I go into the kitchen area or look at the sliding glass door. I wake up every morning and have to remind myself that Bobby won’t hurt me today. I have to, because if I don’t keep telling myself that statement, then I can’t function, or get out of bed, or start my day.”

“I’m so sorry this happened to you.”

“I know you just want your life back.”

“The life he took away from me before he pushed me into the rabbit hole and made me question everything. I mean, I thought I did get my life back from him. But he stepped back into it after all this time. It’s like I can’t get rid of him. Why can’t he move on?”

“He’s obsessed and needs help.”

“I never thought he would actually try to kill me, Mom.” My voice was shaking. “Why would somebody you love and trust do something like this? I just can’t understand it.”

“I know. I thought everything was over and done with. We haven’t heard from him for over a year.”

“He just flipped out. Tried to take me out. But... it still wasn’t over. After that horrible beating he gave me, I died and it felt like a second death. I went to hell.” I told my mom every single detail and she listened to me intently and never questioned or judged me. I gave her the long version and all my thoughts. This was the first time we actually dived this deep into my story. I cried, and she cried, and she held me tight in her comforting arms. Neither one of us could stop all the tears from flowing.

“It exists,” I said. “It’s not a fairytale.”

“I believe every word you’re saying.”

“You believe me?”

“Yes. Why wouldn’t I?”

“You’re the only person that would ever believe me.”

“Others will believe. You just have to tell your story. You got a glimpse into a world that nobody gets to see. People need to be warned.”

I bit my lip hard. “Who would believe me?”

“Well, you are indeed walking down a road untraveled, an unknown territory, but you died. Death happened the second your heart stopped beating. We have proof, medic and hospital staff testimonies, and hospital records. You went somewhere, crossing over. When your heart stopped, you weren’t here with us any longer. And only you can tell us what happened when you were in cardiac arrest.”

“It was just as real as you and me sitting here. I could think. I could remember every single thought I had. I had all my senses.”

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am for everything you had to go through.”

She hugged me and I embraced her. So many emotions flooded through me. More tears ran down my face and my mom handed me another tissue.

“The path of life can be messy, challenging, and downright confusing,” she said. “But we will get through this together.”

“I couldn’t do this without you,” I said.

“I’m always here for you. Always.”

“I thought I would never see you again when I was *down there*. And that tore me apart more than anything. Because I honestly did *not* think I was coming back.”

“We prayed and prayed for you. I got down on my knees and I begged God not to take you. We all did.”

“I think it was all those prayers that brought me back.”

My mom softly touched my hand. “I know God heard them, and it’s why you’re here with me right now.”

“I thank God for this second chance, I really do.”

“I do too. I stood on one particular scripture. And I declared it over and over again. Psalms 118:17. I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD.”

I wiped another tear. “I’ll never forget that verse. It’s beautiful.”

One of the nurses held my hand and we declared it together.”

“I do thank all my prayer warriors.”

“They were amazing.”

“I can’t remember everything in the hospital in the beginning. Can you fill in the missing gaps? I remember screaming in pain like I have never screamed before.”

“Well, um... It’s so hard to think about. You had bruises all over your body. You had all these bandages, and tubes, and all this machinery hooked up and beeping. You had a breathing tube because your fractured ribs had punctured your lung, and a chest tube to keep your lung inflated and drain the fluid. You were heavily sedated and the breathing tube kept you alive. They told us you had a lacerated spleen and liver. And I just wished I could trade places with you.” Her voice was quivering. “And they told us that you had flatlined multiple times. And that things weren’t looking good. It was such an emotional roller coaster. But I sat at your bedside for the next two weeks in the trauma ICU.”

I felt so bad my family had to see me like that and my heart ached for them.

“But you never gave up on me,” I said.

“I told them that with God all things are possible.”

“I truly believe that.”

You’re going to get through this and me, Dad, and everyone in our family will be there to help you get through this ordeal. Just know you are loved and cherished.”

My gaze narrowed. “Why did this happen to me?”

She inclined her head as though in thought. “I don’t know because there’s no clear answer. I just know life can lead us on unexpected journeys. Just remember I am always here. You are never alone. I’m one text or phone call away, day or night.”

“Thanks, Mom. It’s just... Well, I had a plan for my life. And Plan A, Plan B, and Plan C have all failed, ya know?”

“You still have twenty-three more letters of the alphabet, honey.”

“I finally got back on track and everything was going according to plan. Then life took a complete 180, forcing me to go a different route.”

“I get it. You feel like the rug has been pulled from underneath your feet.”

“Yeah, recently, it has. But I’ve been navigating life with a broken compass for a few years now. I’m so off course and the new route is terrifying. Especially when I didn’t choose this path. I mean I’m happy for my second chance, but I feel broken. I’m carrying this enormous weight and it’s spiraling out of control. Why is life so hard? It’s like walking backwards on a tightrope.”

“It does get better, honey, I promise. But with God and his unconditional love, you’re going to be very well equipped.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“We’ve been doing a lot of heavy talking. How about we go shopping?”

“Oh, how about we get some titanium nunchucks and a Katana sword? I’m sure they’re legal here in Florida.”

She let out a chuckle. “Nope, we’re switching things up. No shopping for self-defense equipment; only an adorable pair of shoes or a cute blouse.”

“Why, I think I would look cute with a pair of nunchucks.”

“Now that’s straight up out of a Jackie Chan movie,” she said.

“Hey, you wanna watch some of his old movies?”

“Sure. That man brought comedy to Kung Fu. I love all his movies.”

“I hope that’s okay because I’m still sore. I don’t wanna walk around.”

“Oh, silly. I was talking about online shopping. How about we do both?”

“Deal!”

My phone rang and it was Casey. I put it on speaker.

“Hey, Mom is over. We’re gonna watch some Jackie Chan movies. Do some online shopping. Wanna swing by for lunch and a movie too?”

“I’d love that. But you’re not going to make me watch cat videos, are you?”

“That last one I showed you was absolutely hilarious!”

“If you say so. Listen, I’m driving home from my doctor’s appointment now. The baby is doing just fine. Loves his somersaults every hour.”

“Maybe a future gymnast!”

“Maybe. Hey, what’s for lunch?” she asked. “I’m starving.”

“Burgers, or sandwiches, or burritos?”

“I’m craving burgers.”

“Me too. Stop by Burger King on the way over.”

We all laughed.

“Nonsense,” my mom said with a chuckle. “I’ll make my famous bacon cheddar burgers.”

“Sounds good, Mom,” Casey said.

“See ya soon.”

It was nice that my sister was stopping by. I felt we were getting back on track, and getting a little bit closer every day. I had wanted that sisterly bond back so bad.

## Chapter 19

The day passed quickly and I went upstairs to my room and put on my blue flannel pajamas, brushed my teeth, and took off my jewelry, then checked my phone to see if Ethan had texted me. No texts from him. I had to admit, I was a little disappointed. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

I woke with a jump. A thudding sound echoed in my ears.

*What was that sound?*

Everything was fuzzy and distorted. I was caught between dream and reality. I listened intently but it was now quiet.

*It's nothing.*

I yawned. *It's just a dream.* I snuggled back into my sheets.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

My eyes snapped back open as a gasp hitched in my chest. My eyes fluttered open. I tried to adjust to the darkness.

Was I awake or asleep?

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

I'm definitely awake!!! I checked the Ring camera footage. Nobody was there. At least at the front door.

I tried to not breathe heavily or scream. Somebody breaking into my home while I was inside AGAIN horrified me.

Reached into my purse.

Car keys in my hand.

I could escape. Front door. Jump inside my car. Take off.

No.

I wasn't going to run from this. At least not until I identified the sound. *If I see someone, I'm running!* Facing whatever was making this noise was terrifying. But I knew I had to do it. I needed to investigate. I threw my phone and car keys in my pajama pocket.

*Thud. Thud. Thud, thud, thud.*

I let out a trembling breath. I felt uneasy from all the thumping that I couldn't explain. I was on edge, my senses on high alert.

*Lord, please be with me.*

Scratching and skittering noises echoed. *I need a weapon! Fast!* My hands shook. I had to go check out the sketchy noise. I opened my bedside drawer and pulled out a can of pepper spray. I took cautious steps. *Was someone in the house?* The noise was too loud to ignore. The cats were sleeping by me, so it wasn't them. I swallowed hard. Thoughts of that bat from that horrible night darted around my mind. Was he coming back to finish me off? I'm getting a better security system pronto.

*Thud. Tap. Thud. Tap.*

*What is that?* Should I call the police? Could this be something supernatural? I had no idea! But the things your mind will come up with! I couldn't move. Too scared. My thoughts raced out of control. I didn't want to hitch a ride on the anxiety bus. But here I was in the front row. Home invasion? Attempted burglary? A thief? My attacker?

*Thud.*

My breath froze in my throat, and my stomach clenched. I felt helpless, unsafe, and terrified. I was tired of all of this. I was tired of the feeling of being watched and followed all the time, always looking over my shoulder. I hated that overwhelming wave of fear that flooded through me every time I was alone in my home. I found myself always looking over my shoulder, double-checking the locks, making sure the curtains were closed. And now I couldn't even get a good night's sleep.

Was my own home even a safe haven? I wondered. It's crazy that I can't feel safe in my own home.

I went to turn on the bedroom light switch, but nothing. I flicked it back and forth. I thought about all those horror movies where the intruder cuts the power. That thought terrified me.

*Thud. Thud. Thud, thud, thud.*

I let out a trembling breath. I felt uneasy from all the thumping that I couldn't explain. I was on edge, my senses on high alert.

*Lord, please be with me.*

I held up the light on my cell phone with one hand and gripped the pepper spray with the other. Shadows danced on the walls from my light beam. I checked the hall light and it didn't work either. Same with the bathroom.

I shined my light into the bathroom. Clear. But when I looked over to the left, a figure materialized. Terrified, I let out a loud cry. I went to pull the trigger on the can when I realized it was only my reflection of myself in the mirror. Seriously?

I let out a long breath. *Rose, you almost sprayed your own reflection, you dummy. Everything is fine. Quit being a wimp! You're nothing but a big baby and-*

Something grabbed my foot. I screamed. It wouldn't let go. It clung to me something fierce. Teeth bit down into my foot. I aimed. Ready to spray. Amidst the chaos, I flashed my light down. It's a flash of white. It's my playful kitten biting my toes.

*Are you kidding me right now?*

I tried to catch my breath. I forced myself to take step after step. I stopped at the top of the staircase. Lights to downstairs didn't work. I shone my cell phone flashlight and looked down into the living room. I didn't see anything unusual. I continued to follow the sound of the tapping. It was definitely coming from up here. I followed it to the spare bedroom. I listened. I froze. Okay, I've identified where it's coming from. I didn't want to be the naive girl who walked blindly into a bad situation. But I needed to know.

*Open the door, Rose.*

I let out a long breath. My hands gripped the doorknob. I slowly opened the door. My heart pounded. The rustling sound was louder. I felt a sudden wave of fear. The pepper spray was ready. I pointed. And this time I wouldn't spray kittens or reflections. My fingers clenched tightly around the trigger. I would blast anybody in my path. Every part of me wanted to run. But I walked into the darkness. Held my phone up and the light swept across the room. My gaze darted around.

Nothing.

With a burst of courage, I opened the closet.

Nothing.

But the ominous tapping continued with its rhythmic beat. My nerves were on edge. It came from the window. I took a few steps forward. Took a deep breath. Snapped open both curtains.

And then...

I was greeted by nothing more than a tree.

My hand clutched my chest as I let out a long sigh. It was merely branches blowing in the wind, hitting the window. I was literally having a panic attack over tree branches.

Swaying branches in the wind.

Nothing more.

I tried to quell the trembling in my hands as I watched the branches relentlessly tap on the window. I felt like an idiot. I let out another long breath. I couldn't let this hopeless fear dominate my life.

I blew out a long breath and fell on the soft bed.

I was happy and relieved that it wasn't anything. That was awesome news!

Still.

*I can't live like this. I can't live always wondering if someone was coming back to finish me off once and for all.*

When was the last time I got a good night's sleep? I couldn't sleep. I was exhausted all the time. I didn't want to be trapped and terrorized by this torment. I wanted off this emotional roller coaster. I felt consumed, swallowed up by horror, fear, sadness, and disbelief. Why was every day a struggle? My stress and anxiety had sucked me into a deep black hole, and I wasn't sure I could ever get out. I was shaking and I took a deep breath trying to calm my nerves.

I walked out and started walking back to my room. It was eerily quiet. The branches took a break from tapping. The kittens disappeared from the hallway.

All of the sudden...

**BOOM!**

The can of pepper spray flew out of my hand, struck the wall, and bounced into the darkness. I shuddered in fear. Gasping for air, I peered around and tried to make sense of the sound. It was loud...like the patio glass door being smashed in. I picked up the mace. My feet left the ground as I took flight. I ran down the stairs and stopped at the patio door. Rain pounded against the glass. Thunder crashed. Lightning flashed.

It was thunder.

I sighed in relief, then checked the downstairs.

Clear.

I headed back upstairs. A whooshing sound startled me. And the lights flashed on. My stomach dropped.

*Relax. The air turned on. The power is back.* I jumped into my bed where my trio of kittens waited for me.

But sleep eluded me.

I thought about the conversation Sue and I had. When would spring come? I laid back down and the branch rattled against the window. I was shaking and breathing heavily. I tossed and turned. Living in this constant state of paranoia and anxiety was doing a number on me. I wish they would just catch the person who tried to kill me. If it was Bobby and they could prove it, then he needed to be behind bars. I had a lot of weight on my shoulders. There was a murderer on the loose and I needed to learn how to stay out of hell. I mean, these two things weighed heavily on me. This unresolved conflict was eating me up inside.

So much so that I texted my dad in the middle of the night. I told him about the tree branches. He offered to come over but I told him not to.

*DAD - We need to take immediate precautions to make your life safe.*

*I'm not moving in with you and Mom. Too old for that.*

*You made that very clear in the hospital. I'm talking about installing a high-tech security system with cameras. Would that be okay? That ring camera isn't enough. I have a guy I know that can do it ASAP.*

*Sure, Dad. And thanks!*

*You're welcome, honey. Love you. Goodnight.*

*Love you too. Goodnight, Dad.*

But the stress of the night had really gotten to me. And I wanted a drink. I was struggling to hold onto my sobriety. I reminded myself why I got sober in the first place. I didn't want to admit this to my parents so I definitely wasn't calling them. Mom would be over in five minutes with a suitcase in tow.

How did I become an alcoholic? I dated one. We drank heavily to drown out our sorrows. Everyone in our friend's circle were alcoholics. There was constant drinking. I wanted to drink the pain away and I was self-medicating my depression. And then I was dependent on the alcohol. I tried to quit, but I couldn't.

I wanted one tiny drink.

So, I called my sponsor, Melody Simmons.

"Hey, Rose! How is life treating you?" she asked.

"Like I skipped its birthday party and it's furious with me!"

"Yeah, I have those days too."

"Are you slurring?" I asked.

"That would be a big, fat yes. I fell off the wagon. I'm sorry, but I think it's best not to call me again."

*Click.*

I tried to call her back but it went straight to voicemail. I felt bad and thought maybe I could comfort her. I needed to talk to someone. I paced for thirty minutes before I finally plucked up the courage to call Sue.

I leaned back against the cushions and closed my eyes with a tired sigh. "After the day I had, I deserve one drink, just one. And I tried to talk to my sponsor and she's drunk as a skunk."

"I'm so sorry. And I heard about Bobby being released on bail. Do you want me to come over?"

"No, I want a drink. And a guard dog. And a whole lot of chocolate. And please take all weapons like taser guns and mace away from me. Especially the pepper spray!"

"Don't relapse, honey."

I swallowed past the lump in my throat. "You have no idea what I'm going through. I don't feel safe and I don't feel like I'm in control anymore. I feel helpless and vulnerable. I have nightmares. And I cry a lot."

"Talk to me in person," she insisted. "Let me come over."

"No, please just let me rant."

"Okay, hon."

"These strange and terrifying sounds woke me up out of a deep sleep, and they were freaking me out. I almost maced my own reflection, not to mention the kitten. Please don't laugh."

"Girl, I'm not. Is that why you want me to take away the pepper spray?"

“I’m not a pepper spray kind of girl. I was sure somebody was breaking in. But spoiler alert! It was nothing more than tree branches tapping on the window. When I hear the ice cubes falling in the fridge, I think someone is coming in through the window. When the kittens are playing at night, I think someone got in the house. And just now, the branches were clicking against the window and I was sure somebody was coming to get me. I have this crippling fear nobody understands. I think I deserve just one little drink.”

“One drink leads to another, then another. And then once you start, you won’t be able to stop. You’ve made it this far, and I know you can do it. Your old life is dead and you’ve done so well to rebuild a new sober one. I’m so proud of you.”

“I’m so sad that I want to break my sobriety. All because of this jerk attacking me. It takes commitment and determination and I don’t have either.”

“Yes, you do. You are so strong.

“But my world is falling apart. What should I do?”

“Be patient and take it one day at a time. This is a healing process. You have to heal at your own pace.”

I blew out a long breath. “You’re right. And I’m so sorry I’m so moody and irritable.”

“It’s okay. This won’t be easy, but it’s so worth it. Get through tonight. And I’ll be over tomorrow to take you to the beach.”

“Sue took me for a quick glimpse. But that wasn’t enough.”

“Then we’re going. We can even snorkel.”

“I’ve worked too hard to give up now. Thanks for talking to me. I can do this. I’m gonna journal, then go to bed.”

“Get some sleep. You’re running on fumes. Chronic fatigue won’t do you any favors. I’ll see ya tomorrow. But not too early.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I knew recovery never ends, but I feel like I got through that little rough patch, a bump in the road. I was just so stressed out. But once I calmed down and talked to Sue, everything seemed okay. Journaling really helped me and I came back to my senses. I had done so well with my sobriety and I wasn’t about to ruin it now. I refused to abandon sobriety. And I wrote that in my journal.

The next day we went to the beach and Sue was so patient as I let out all my feelings and problems. I asked her about hers but she said the focus here was me. We talked for hours and I felt so much better. She made it seem like I could do anything I set my mind on.

Sue started reading a book while I strolled up and down the shoreline. I never felt sand so soft between my toes. Seagulls flew overhead. A heart-shaped kite soared high above me. The sun glittered on the water, and the sky was the prettiest shade of blue. A cool breeze blew through my hair. I sat in the water along the beach. Waves crashed to the shore, splashing over me, crests of white foam rolling over me, taking all my problems away.

It was a great day for reflection.

## Chapter 20

I refused to let anxiety interfere with my work. I went for a jog on the treadmill, then took a shower. I opened the curtains to my upstairs office and opened the windows wide. The chirping birds and the outside view of my backyard calmed me. I filled my insulated cup with ice water.

I worked all morning in my office with three adorable fur babies. I finished the last of the articles I had to edit for a company. I turned everything in and they were already lining me up with more work. I knew I would have no problem covering the mortgage this month, so I was very thankful for that.

Ethan was at the coffee shop so I decided to meet him there for a chat, for the lingering questions in my head that not even my pastor could answer. I started to walk to the coffee shop when it started to rain.

*Great! Just great.*

I peeked in through the window but didn't see Ethan. I blew out a long breath and decided to just go home. This was a dumb idea anyway. I went to start my car. It would not turn. Ug! This was the last thing I needed. I got out of my car in the rain and opened up the hood and tinkered around with it. It wouldn't start.

"Rose," a voice yelled.

"Ethan," I said.

"I'm sorry I'm late."

I squinted as the rain fell. "So sorry. But I have to go."

"I was hoping we could talk."

"I'm not in a good place right now. I just don't want to talk about it."

"I'm here to listen."

"I'm sorry you came all the way here, and got soaked in this storm. Maybe we can do this again later."

He ran his hand through his hair, slicking it back, and droplets beaded on his eyelashes like tiny diamonds. "Are you having car trouble?"

"My car does this all the time. It'll start. Eventually."

I went back in the car and turned the ignition a few times. It finally worked. Thank goodness. I jumped back out to close the hood and say goodbye.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here," he said. "I had to give my neighbor a ride to work. Then I was coming right back to meet you."

"It's okay. I'm heading home. And I promise you that this is not your fault. I'm just going through some stuff right now. We can talk another time. I'm sorry you came out here and got soaked like this. But I can't do this right now. I'm so sorry."

"I'm a great listener. Even here in the rain."

I stood there frozen. Tears streamed down my face. I felt like I was crying right along with the rain. Ethan could tell something weighed heavily on my mind. I was so tired of these long-term feelings of emptiness and loneliness.

"Tell me what's wrong," he said.

"I wish I could. But I can't. I just need to be alone right now."

“What’s wrong? Please tell me.”

My stomach dropped. And I felt sick. Should I tell him? Should I unburden him with it right here in the pouring rain? What was I supposed to say? That I wasn’t eating. I had this constant headache from lack of sleep, and I was always looking over my shoulder. I was scared to live my life. But at the same time, I was scared to die because of my hell experience. That I was literally a big, hot mess. I stood there feeling completely helpless.

Droplets of water pounded on my face. And I didn’t even care. I was searching. And I needed answers.

“I’m lost and alone,” I said over the roaring wind. “I’ve lost sight of the truth and I don’t know what to do next. It’s like being lost in the woods, like taking a wrong trail.”

“Tell me more.”

“My soul is aching.” I threw my arms up in the air. “My faith is running on fumes. I’m living with no hope. And I know I sound ridiculous.”

“God says he will never leave you or forsake you.”

“But I feel like he did leave me!” I shouted.

“No, I don’t believe that. You don’t have to wander aimlessly. Just give your life to Him.”

“I did. I quit drinking. I went to church. I died. And guess what? It sent me to hell.”

He cocked a brow. “What?”

“Long story.”

“Listen, Rose. I have all day. I can stand here in the rain as long as you want.”

“It’s like I’m lost at sea. And I don’t know what direction to go.”

“What’s the best chance at hitting land?”

“I don’t know. I’m looking through the darkness and searching for a lighthouse.”

“Don’t fall into darkness, depression, and despair. Look through the storm and rain, just over the horizon. There’s a beacon sweeping so wide and so bright. You’re almost home.”

“I can’t do this. I can’t process what happened to me.”

“Please talk to me. I can’t stand to see you hurt this way.”

“I can’t.”

I started to walk away and he yelled, “If you don’t want to talk to me, please talk to somebody you trust.”

“I’ve tried. It got me nowhere.”

He frowned, sighed, and hung his head.

I jumped in the car, turned on the windshield wipers, and screeched off. I felt that familiar ache and nausea filled my chest. I was broken, lost, unraveled, and undone.

My mind was restless. I was searching for answers. For the truth. For peace.

I went home. Never forgetting to check the rearview mirror. I had to take extreme precautions because I didn’t want to end up injured or dead. The stress from this terrifying ordeal was wearing me down. I scanned my surroundings as I got out of my car. And as I fumbled to insert the key into the lock, I thought, What if Bobby’s waiting for me?

Fear washed through me like a tsunami. My heart thundered. I was gasping for air. I couldn't relax, and I knew I was in a full-blown panic attack. I was constantly looking over my shoulder and fearing for my safety. How did I get thrown into some kind of real-life psychological thriller?

My gosh. I was afraid to walk into the beautiful home I had built for myself. Nervously, I picked up the stunner that my mom got me and went systematically room to room looking inside every closet and under every bed and piece of furniture. Was I being ridiculous? I physically felt sick to my stomach. Rain water dripped off my soaked clothes. My three kittens followed me. The whole search was exhausting and daunting. But I didn't feel safe unless I checked out everything. The man with the bat had made me petrified of being by myself. I considered moving back in with my parents. Because at this point, I was just so emotionally drained.

But I just couldn't. I had worked too hard to establish my new life, my new home.

I changed into dry clothes and put my hair up in a towel. I sat on the couch with my three cats. They purred like they didn't have a care in the world, unlike me. I went over my escape plan in my head. I had one from every single room in my house. I even had a backpack in the closet for a quick getaway. I knew how to get out of there if I needed too. *It feels like my life is on hold right now.* I wondered about all the people who took for granted the beauty of a normal life. I actively aspire to have this kind of life.

When my Ring camera sent me a notification about movement at the front door, I grabbed my taser. I didn't want to look. But I knew I had to. Was he an animal watching his prey's every move? Why couldn't Bobby handle rejection? He could replace me in five minutes flat. The guy was gorgeous and could find another party girl to hang on his arm in no time. All he had to do was bat those baby blues and flash that movie star smile. There's no way he could be this fixated on me. But I was attacked. I just wish I knew who my attacker was.

The recording showed the neighbor's cat passing by and stopping on my porch swatting at a leaf blowing around. It was a false alarm.

I let out a long sigh of relief.

I went around the house and shut all the curtains. When I got to the last room, the living room, I shut the lace brown curtains. Would I always live in fear like this? Would I ever live the normal life I'd always dreamed of?

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The next day, my cell phone blew up with dozens of horrible messages from Bobby. He must've been furious with the restraining order I put against him with my parents. I knew if he was the one that tried to murder me, then he'd be triggered. He'd come after me for sure. I was tired of thinking about him. I was ready to take back my life. I slammed my door shut and hurried into the grocery store.

I found myself leafing through my grocery list at the grocery store. But my mind wasn't on groceries. I was always looking over my shoulder. It was like my ex invaded every space of my life. I replayed that nightmarish night a million times over in my head.

I was scared. Nausea clawed at my throat. Was there a safe place to go? Ever? He wanted to take my life and destroy any shred of happiness that I could find. I wouldn't let him have this power over me, this emotional terror sweeping over my soul.

Bobby was an abusive partner but I never knew he could be homicidal. He pushed me out of a moving car, luckily it wasn't going fast, but I sprained my ankle. He hit me on the head with a beer bottle and claimed it was an accident, that it slipped out of his hand. Ten stitches later, he bought me roses. He would become jealous without reason and then slap me; would punch me too. He would turn minor incidents into major arguments. He would throw me against the wall. And list goes on.

It was difficult to accept that someone who once loved me had tried to kill me. He didn't finish the job and I wondered if he would come back. Was he a jealous lover who would not stop until he got his revenge on me? Would I spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder?

I knew I was lucky to be alive, and I knew God didn't let me die that night because He had other plans for me.

Then I saw a man from the back that looked like Bobby. I froze. I swear my heart stopped. I was shaking. I couldn't speak. Had he seen me? I could run. I could run forever. I could leave Florida and never look back.

He turned to get something off the shelf. I looked closer.

It wasn't him.

I sighed in relief.

But I ran.

I was so paranoid. I was on a roller coaster that I couldn't get off. My emotions were all over the place. I just wanted the killer caught so I could get my life back on track.

I cried for a very long time in the car. I could barely breathe through the sobs. I called Sue. I told her about my paranoia. She assured me that I wasn't paranoid, that I was in a high-emotion situation. That I had every right to be scared. She made me feel better. And I was so thankful for her in my life.

I fell asleep and missed dinner, but the nightmares wouldn't stop. I was on the floor with Bobby standing over me with that bat in his hand in the dim light. He shot me this evil smile. Then the pictures of hell flooded through me.

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The doorbell rang. I woke up.

I didn't want to talk to anyone. I hoped it wasn't my parents. I was home but I still felt like I was still on edge. I checked the Ring camera and saw it was Sue, then rushed to the door. And there Sue was with a huge suitcase; probably the size of Texas.

"I know it's late. But you need a friend."

"I can always use one of those...minus the suitcase."

"You told all your loved ones 'no' to moving in; but I think you'll make a notable exception for me."

"I don't want to be inhospitable, but..."

Ignoring me, she rolled the suitcase in with a huge smile. "I'm moving in. Temporarily. Until this creep is put behind bars. It's for your own safety, ya know? And we can watch Robinhood on Netflix."

"I require thee to remove thyself and thy suitcase from my home."

"But I've come to slay the dragon. I'm at your services, milady."

"You suddenly think I need a bodyguard?" I kidded. "Bobby's been out on bail for a while now."

“Yes, I think you need a female body guard. And I possess a range of skills and qualifications.”

“Like what?”

“I’m of sound health and physically fit, I take self-defense classes, and I have advanced driving skills if we need to make a quick getaway.”

“Those are your skills?”

“I know CPR!”

“Movie CPR, like in Jurassic Park when Dr. Grant gives that kid CPR?”

“It’s just... you shouldn’t be here alone.”

“Listen, I’m a big girl. And I’ve been doing just fine. And nothing has happened. Besides, how are you going to fare against a bat-wielding maniac?”

“Don’t underestimate me. I will protect my life and the lives of those I love.”

She sounded so loyal, so protective. “You always have my back,” I said, sincerely.

“And I always will.”

“Thank you for caring about me so much.”

“I will always care about you. Don’t ever forget that I am your best friend.”

“You call me your best friend?” I asked.

“Absolutely.”

“Where were you when my favorite selfie only got three likes?”

She laughed.

“I’m kidding,” I said. “I do love you, and you are my best friend.”

She reached for my pinky finger. “BFF’s”.

“BFF’s.”

Her face grew solemn and I could sense something was wrong.

“What?” I asked. “There’s a reason behind that giant suitcase, isn’t there?”

She nodded. “Got some news.”

“And by the look on your face, I can tell it’s not good.”

“No. They found out Bobby didn’t have an alibi. And that’s what scares me. He’s their lead suspect. It was on the news. They need to revoke his bail.”

She handed me her phone with the news article on it. It said he left work early and that co-workers covered for him.”

I shook my head. “He called me right before he started knocking on the door. On the night of the attack. It had to be him. Who else could it be?”

“I think he was stalking you. And was right outside the door when he called you.”

My stomach dropped. “That’s scary.”

“Definitely.”

“Is that why you’re moving in?”

“I can’t leave you here by yourself. Not with Bobby on the loose with no alibi. Do you remember how angry he used to get?”

“Yeah, I lived it. Remember?”

“I remember those eyes. And I think he could do something very bad if he went off his rocker. Knowing he doesn’t have an alibi freaks me out. I know it was him. We both know it *was* him. And

I'm afraid he's going to come back, so I came up with a gameplan and talked to my boss. I'm going to work from home for a little while. He's okay with it. I can professionally design websites for companies at home."

"You don't have to do this."

"I do. I know you wouldn't let your parents or your sister move in. But you can't say no to me. You simply don't have a choice in the matter."

I pondered. Truth be told. I was tired of jumping at every little sound. If Bobby didn't have an alibi, that worried me. I'd be up all-night worrying. I'd feel much safer with Sue here.

"Can I stay?" she asked, giving me that undeniable heart tug. "Please.

I grinned. "Yes. I would love for you to be my guest and stay for a while. I'll get you some fresh towels."

She smiled in victory. "I knew you'd see it my way."

"Well, I knew you would never take no for an answer."

"Got that right."

I smirked, then continued, "I have to admit, and please don't tell my parents this, but I would feel so much safer with someone else in the house. I know I can be stubborn sometimes."

"Sometimes?"

I chuckled. "Okay, a lot. Thank you for coming. I really appreciate it."

"Not a problem. And at least I get to break in your guest room. You worked so hard to set it up when you bought this place and not one person has stayed yet."

"Well, now I have a houseguest."

"It's about time! How long did it take to finally get some use out of that beautiful room? See? You so need me in your life."

We both laughed.

"And I'm sorry to have to tell you about Bobby," she said. "But he's out there. And I'm convinced he'll be back when we least expect it. We have to be on high alert at all times."

I blew out a long breath as I pondered the news. "I can't believe Bobby's alibi didn't pan out. It's hard to believe he did this to me."

"That ex of yours was such a loose cannon."

"He now claims he got his life cleaned up like me."

"I heard. I don't believe him. Not one tiny bit."

I sighed. "Bobby is such a distant memory. I am so over him now. I can never go back there...not ever again."

"Why do you think he left work early on the night of the attack?" she asked.

"No idea. But it's not good. It can't be a coincidence."

"Did you even eat dinner?"

"No."

"Me neither."

She wrapped an arm around me. "Hey. What do us girls do when we're feeling terrible?"

"What we've been doing since high school. Eat ice cream?"

"Ice cream is the *coolest*. Wanna skip dinner and go straight to the pint?"

I laughed. "Yeah."

Sue took her suitcase upstairs and I got her some wash clothes and bath towels. I was thankful she was there. I might not feel so anxious knowing she was there. We each had a bowl and sat outside on the back patio, and I tried to forget about all my fears.

"Your mom told me what's bothering you," Sue said as one of my kittens jumped on her shoulder.

I put a bite of ice cream into my mouth. "Did she now?"

"Yeah, she told me about your trip to hell from start to finish."

I let out a long breath. "Why would I confide in you?"

"Because you're my best friend."

The smallest kitten tried to take a lick of my ice cream. I held out my spoon and let her have a tiny lick. "You don't even believe in God or heaven or hell. So how could you possibly help me? And I mean that in the nicest way possible. And I know this stuff freaks you out."

"Nobody knows what happens to us when we die. Because nobody comes back. But you did. You crossed the line to the other side. And you saw something. And I'm intrigued. I want to hear your story. Even if I'm freaked out by it."

And so I told her the entire story, not leaving out a single detail. And she listened, and she never judged me.

"I was so scared, Sue," I said.

Her voice cracked slightly like it always did when she felt uncomfortable. "It sounds horrifying. And I believe you. Even if it makes absolutely no sense."

"You believe me? But you don't believe in the afterlife."

"Your story is pretty convincing. You poured out your heart. And I know you're not lying. And I don't understand it. But I do believe you. I need some time to process everything you told me. But what happens if I die, and that happens to me? You have given me a lot to think about. And I think you should talk to someone who knows more about this stuff."

"And that's why I called Ethan."

"Ethan?"

"The guy from the café who gave me his card. You know, the guy you wouldn't touch with a ten-foot pole."

"Oh! That guy. Mr. Hottie. But not my type, Mr. Hottie."

"Yeah, that's the one. I met him at the café. But he was late and I was upset about everything and I got stuck in the rain when the car wouldn't start. I just left when he got there."

"And what made you reach out to him?"

"I've talked to my family, my pastor, church friends, and none of them can give me any answers. I was thinking maybe Ethan could."

"You should've given him a chance."

"How do you blurt out to a stranger? 'Hey, I was almost murdered. I died and went to hell. And now I'm as confused as ever.'"

"I think you should give him a call tomorrow. Just see what he has to say. I mean, since you wouldn't confide in me."

"Because you don't believe in hell."

“After the story you just told me,” she said with a shudder. “I believe something exists. I know you wouldn’t make this up. And I know your heart stopped. You crossed the line. And I believe what you said. You have given me things to think about, that’s for sure.”

“When you die, I know you go somewhere. I was there. I saw it. I felt it. I smelled it. I touched it. It’s real. More real than anything.”

“And that’s why I’m scared. Because I believe you, Rose. Every word.”

“Thanks for believing me. I wouldn’t make this crap up. After all the things I’ve seen, there is no way life could just go on as it always has before.”

“You need to tell somebody.”

“I just did.”

“Not just me, but your entire church.”

“Okay, I’m not ready for that.”

She nodded. “I totally get it.”

“Please don’t tell anyone about this. I can’t explain it. And I don’t know how to explain it. And I need to make sense of this.”

“Your secret is safe with me. But you were given a second chance and you need to find out why.”

“Are you saying there is a God?” I asked as I walked back inside and set our empty bowls in the sink.

She walked inside and locked the back door. “Maybe the universe gave you a second chance.”

“Not a chance. I know it was God.”

She walked into the living room and plopped down on the sofa. “Well, on that note, I’m going to find us a good movie to watch.”

Smiling, I sat down on the couch. “It’s okay. That’s how we stay friends. We agree to disagree.”

Grabbing the remote control, she laughed and started surfing Netflix.

## Chapter 21

I got a phone call that morning from Detective Gannon who informed me Bobby didn’t have an alibi. He apologized that it was on the news before he told me. He took a few days of vacation time and just found out this morning.

My dad bought me a fancy, high-tech security system and they had come out and set up cameras. That made me feel better. He also hired someone to come over and cut the branches that were tapping on my window. My dad loved me so much and was doing everything he could to make me feel safe in my own home. I couldn’t thank him enough for that.

He even had his buddy from the police department do drive-by’s. He made sure my doors were metal-clad with wide-angle peep holes and a sturdy deadbolt. He trimmed the shrubs and bushes. He put up bright flood lights to illuminate visitors all around the outside of the house. And he did so many other things. My dad was the best.

I noticed one of the kittens missing. I called my dad outside who was checking one of the cameras.

“Dad, have you seen uh... my kitten?” I called.

“Yeah. She’s out here. She followed me outside.”

I hurried out. And there she was playing with the ladder, jumping up and down the lower ladder step. So adorable. I scooped her up and she let me hold her in my arms.

“I think she wants to help you,” I said.

“I think so. So what’s her name? Because you need a better name than just, *my kitten*.”

“I haven’t officially named the trio.”

“Well get to work.”

“I will.”

“And are you keeping them?”

“I’m putting all major life decisions on hold for now.”

“Really? Because you chose to live out here by yourself.”

“That’s not a major decision. That’s my home. Of course, I would come back home when I’m better.”

“With a killer on the loose?”

“If he wanted me dead, don’t you think he would’ve already come and finished me off?”

“That’s not funny, honey.”

“Those cameras have been acting up,” I said softly petting my kitty. “Did you find out what the problem was?”

“Changing the subject.” He smiled and assured me everything was great.

“Thank you, Dad,” I said. “I can’t begin to thank you enough.”

He smiled. “Not a problem.” He pondered for a moment and then let out a long breath. “I try not to let my emotions get the best of me. But I worry about you.”

“You’ve done all that you can do in the security department. I’ll be fine.”

“I still fear for your safety.”

“You sound like Mom. I carry my phone with me at all times and I make sure my phone is always charged. I’m observant and never let my guard down. I changed up my routine, take different routes, and hang out in different places. I changed where I go shopping or get coffee. I haven’t been online much. And I don’t post where I am at. All the neighbors know what is going on and they’re always looking out for me and watching the house closely. I carry pepper spray. I’ve even changed the locks. I’ve gone to some self-defense classes. And then look at all the security stuff you did.”

“You still go out alone,” he said.

“I have to live my life, Dad. I can’t let him take my life away from me. Recovery is a winding road, and each path is different. So please let me go down my own road.”

“I think about that night that I found you. It was the worst moment of my entire life. I thought I lost you. I can’t lose you, I just can’t. The thought of you dying was too much to bear. Please consider moving back home.”

“Please don’t worry. I’ll be okay here. We just have to put our trust in God. Try to remember I’m the survivor, not the victim.”

“True. And there’s nothing you’re not afraid of.”

“Like living out here by myself after the attack?”

“You always were my brave girl. I do admire your courage and independence.”

“Awe, thanks.”

“You’re not afraid of anything,” he said.

“Yes, I am.”

“Nope.” I playfully rolled my eyes and he continued. “You’re not afraid of any dog, big or small. You were never scared to do laundry in the basement. And you were never scared to go diving in the ocean like your sister.”

“Sharks are not going to target you. You’ve watched Jaws far too much. No more shark week for you!”

“Fifteen rows of razor-sharp teeth. I mean sharks will never run out of teeth.”

“I just loved the ocean. There was nothing better than feeling weightless in the water. The bubbles, and watching the tropical fish swim by, or the green plants swaying back and forth. I felt like I was home.”

“You felt at home with sharks?”

“I meant it was peaceful and serene.”

“Again, with sharks?”

I playfully punched him.

“You were never afraid to climb the highest tree,” he said. “Not to mention, you climb them faster than anyone I know.”

“I was twelve.”

“You’re not afraid of lizards,” he said.

“Again, twelve years old on a Florida trip.”

“You and that lizard really bonded.”

We both laughed at the memory. The kitten now moved up to my shoulder and I snuggled her. “And you wouldn’t let me take Henry, that adorable lizard, home. Imagine that.”

“You knew him for less than a few minutes and you named him, yet, you can’t name your kittens. What am I missing?”

“If I name them, I will bond with them. Three lives will be dependent on me for twenty years or more. What if I’m not a good mom?”

“Is that what you’re worried about? C’mon! You’ll make the best mom in the world. And like I said, you are not afraid of anything.”

“Thanks. You established that as a kid, I wasn’t afraid of dogs, sharks, or lizards.”

“Oh! You’re not afraid of spiders, either,” he said.

“Yet again. 12. And it was a Daddy Long Legs. Can we stay out of childhood please?”

He laughed. “You used to pick those things up like they were nothing. Yet, you were so gentle to insects and animals. You would not let Mom kill a single insect in the house. You’d catch them and put them back outside.”

I grinned.

“You were never afraid,” he said. “So tell me what you’re not afraid of as an adult. Since you said stay out of childhood.”

I chuckled. “I’ll think on that one and get back to you.”

“Okay. I’ll be anxiously awaiting your answer.”

“And honey, you have gotten back on track after that bad breakup. You got yourself clean, bought this beautiful home, and I think you are far more than capable of keeping those kittens. I am so proud of you.”

I hugged him. “Thanks, Dad. Those words mean a lot to me.”

“Me and Mom got you a small present. It’s out in the car.”

He ran to the car and came back smiling and handed me a pink box with a pink bow.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Open it.”

I opened the pretty pink box and there in pink tissue paper lay three kitten collars glittering with small diamond rhinestones. My eyes welled up with tears. It was just touching.

“They’re beautiful,” I said, hugging my dad. “Thank you.”

“Now start thinking about names. When they outgrow these, me and your mom are going to get ones where we can engrave their names.”

I grinned. “I’m surprised you didn’t want me to have three Rottweilers for protection.”

“Those kittens did the job of three dogs, they scared your attacker off, so they have a special place in my heart now.”

“They have a special place in my heart too.”

“I want you to know that you don’t have to walk this journey alone. Just reach out. Me and Mom are here for you day or night.”

“It’s hard. I’m working through a lot. So please don’t think I’m shutting you out. I’m broken. I’m trying to find my footing again. There isn’t a formula and I don’t have a roadmap.”

“I understand. Just know I’m here for you.”

“And I’m here for you too. If you ever need me.”

“Thanks. You are so confident in yourself, and you have such a pure heart. And I love how you live with so much love, enthusiasm, and passion. From the moment you were conceived, I knew you were going to be someone special and that God had a special plan for your life.”

“I love you so much.”

“I love you too.”

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My sister came over to check up on me.

“I don’t say it enough but I love you so much,” she said voice wavering.

I hugged her tightly. “I love you too, more than anything. You are always there for me. Always. You always pick me up when I fall down and lead me in the right direction. What would I do without a big sister like you?”

“Well, I’m very blessed to have someone as loving and selfless as you.”

“You’re going to make me cry.”

She looked into my eyes. “I thought we lost you. And it was my worst nightmare. When the medics rushed in, I was screaming my head off. I was crazy with grief. I swear I thought they were going to sedate me or something.”

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

“I really wanted to talk more about it when you were better and the time was right. Mom and Sue told me the story but I want to hear it from you.”

“Do you believe the story they told you?” I asked.

“I heard you left your body and floated right above us and that’s wild.”

“I really did.”

“Really?”

“I can prove it.”

“How? Because we can’t see souls. I didn’t see you.”

“But I saw you. The night of the attack. You tripped over the bat and fell down. Smacked your head on the wall. But you didn’t say anything or tell anyone. You just rubbed your head and I knew you were in pain.”

She gasped. “What? How could you have known that? Nobody noticed that. And I didn’t tell anyone.”

“And then you cut yourself on the shards of glass on the ground. You pulled out a triangle piece of glass from your hand. And then you just flung it. The others were tending to me. And after seeing me lying there lifeless, the glass was the least of your worries. I wanted to help you desperately. But all I could do was float right above you.”

“You really were with us,” she whispered in shock and disbelief. “Oh. My. Gosh.”

“I was there but in a different realm. I watched the whole thing before I was escorted away.”

“I still have nightmares of that night,” she told me.

“I’m sorry you found me that way.”

“Stop apologizing. I’m just glad you’re here.”

“Well, I had to be here, so I can be the very best auntie in the whole wide world.”

Another tear slid down her face. “I can’t ever lose you.”

“You won’t.”

“That ex of yours is still out on the loose.”

“I have cameras. Dad has done everything possible to make this place like Fort Knocks.”

“I know you won’t stay with Mom, but would you consider living with me?”

“You have a baby coming. And a wonderful husband. Enjoy your life without a houseguest. Besides, your hubby is allergic to cats and I’m fostering three of them.”

“Rose, please.”

“I’m staying right here where I belong. Besides, Sue moved in temporarily. She’s taking the spare bedroom. I’m not letting anyone chase me out of my dream home. This is my first house, it’s like my baby. I love this house. And I’m not leaving, okay, sis?”

She nodded. “Okay. It’s just...well, I want to be there for you.”

“You are.”

“No. I should’ve been there for you when you were drinking. But I shut you out when we had that big fight.”

“I stole your car and I was drunk as a skunk. You had every right to be mad at me.”

“I shouldn’t have kicked you out of my life like that. That was so wrong of me. I couldn’t stop thinking about that on the drive over here.”

“It’s okay. I was a hot mess, I stole money from you, got in fights, said hurtful things, and I even quit that office job you recommended me for. I was just awful.”

“You needed help, that’s all.”

“But I refused all help. I was so horrible to you, Mom, and Dad and I feel so bad about that.”

“It was that toxic ex of yours. I should’ve broken you two up.”

“How? I loved him. A herd of wild horses wouldn’t have been able to drag him away.”

“I don’t know the right answer. But I should’ve been there and tried harder instead of just walking away the way I did.”

I wiped a tear from my cheek. “I pushed you away. I created a rift between us. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for all the heartache, hard feelings I caused, and pain.”

“I accept your apology, but always know our relationship wasn’t beyond repair. When you got sober, you paid me back all the money you owed me and I knew that was a start.”

“But you’ve been distant.”

“You know, when the ambulance left with you, Mom and Dad let me ride with them. I couldn’t stop sobbing. And I thought about how I treated you over the last year, how distant I had been. And I thought I would never be able to tell you how sorry I was. And that you would never know how much I truly loved you. And I thought I would never get a second chance. You were more important than any dumb fight we had. And I wish I would’ve come to you sooner, to tell you that you have been such an inspiration to me and that you’re so incredibly amazing. I’m sorry about everything.”

“It’s okay, and I’m sorry too.”

“That was so wrong on my part,” she continued, “and if I could do things differently, I would. But I want you to know that I was very happy about your recovery and being sober for a year. I was coming to dinner to tell you how proud of you I was.”

“That means the world to me. This has been the biggest hurdle I’ve ever jumped over.”

“You’re the strongest person I know.”

“Thank you. I thought my past was behind me,” I said. “And I thought we could all celebrate. I was rebuilding my life and things were going well. But my past still came back to bite me in the rear.”

“What a cruel man Bobby is to come back after a year and try to take your life. I want them to throw the book at him. He deserves the death penalty. What if he does this to another woman in the future?”

“Trust me, he is going to pay for what he did to me. I will have no problem testifying against him in court.”

“The prosecutor told me he’s going for life in prison. But I don’t think that’s enough. The death penalty will provide the justice and closure we need. I’m a non-violent person and don’t believe in capital punishment. But after experiencing firsthand what that man did to you.” Her voice trembled. “I was there and I saw you, my baby sister fighting for her life. Well, I’m all for execution now. How could someone be so cruel and heartless and do such a horrible thing? He is the worst of the worst.”

“Evil can lurk anywhere.”

## Chapter 22

The next day Sue ran to the bank, and I assured her I would be okay. When my phone rang, I thought it was her checking up on me and I answered.

It was Ethan.

“I’m so sorry about that day in the rain and running off,” I said. “I’m going through a lot of things right now.”

“It’s okay, and I understand. If you need to talk, I’m here.”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“Not on the phone,” I said.

“I’ll come over.”

“No, I’ll come over to you.”

We made arrangements to meet. I texted Sue and told her so she wouldn’t freak out when she returned and I wasn’t home. I jumped in the shower and threw on a pair of jeans with a cute blue top. I put light makeup on and brushed my hair, then was ready to head over.

I left the curtains shut. Not one sliver of light was getting through. And for a second, I wondered if I would ever open them again. I guess I felt safe with the curtains shut. Taking a deep breath, I opened them just enough to peek out. All looked good on this dreary day. I grabbed my purse and left.

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I stood frozen at his door. I went to knock but stopped. He was going to think I was nuts. Maybe this was a horrible idea. But... I needed answers. Okay, I might look a little crazy but at this point, I didn’t care. I just wanted to hear his religious take on all of this. If he never talked to me again, well, it was the risk I was willing to take.

I knocked.

He answered quickly.

I bit my lip. “Um, why hello.”

He flashed me that gorgeous movie star smile. I froze smitten at how handsome he was; that smile and those blue eyes definitely did me in.

He brushed a hand through his hair. “Come on in.”

The chemistry and spark between us was undeniable. But I tried to ignore that because I didn’t come over for romance but for answers.

I glanced around. “Very nice place. Very clean too.”

He chuckled. “I *am* a bachelor and I bet you expected much worse.”

I laughed. “I was expecting the typical bachelor pad.”

“I do have a dog who would be jumping all over you right now, but my parents took him on a camping trip for a few weeks. Because he loves the outdoors. I miss him terribly. But they’re spoiling him rotten and he’s loving every single moment of it.”

“When he gets back, you’ll have to introduce me sometime.”

“That I will. What can I help you with? If you need to borrow sugar or an egg, I’ve got both.”

“I actually came to get your opinion about a religious matter.”

“Okay. Shoot.”

The words wouldn't leave my mouth. I wanted to bolt just like I did in the parking lot at the coffee shop. “You know what? I think I made a mistake. I'm sorry I bothered you. I hope you have a wonderful Saturday.”

I turned to leave when he called my name. “Hey, please give me a shot. That's why I gave you my business card.”

I spun around. “It's going to take more than a few minutes. I have something really heavy weighing on my mind.”

“I have a Master's of Science Degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling. I work for my church and I spend hours talking and listening to people's problems. You can trust me. I promise.”

“It's hard to talk about. You see, my life took a dump. And I feel like I haven't *truly* laughed in ages. And I miss that, you know?”

“When was the last time you laughed?” he asked.

“Probably when I was young and jumped in this bouncy castle at the fair. I was so young and naïve about the world. And I just laughed and laughed and laughed. And I had so much fun. But that was so long ago. I'm thirty-one now.”

“And you haven't laughed since then?”

“Maybe I'm filled with too much sadness to remember. I don't know.”

“Well, I take this as a challenge. I'm going to make you laugh.”

“I'll give you thirty days.”

“Challenge accepted.”

I shot him a tiny smile.

“I think I might've seen a smile,” he said.

“I know what you're doing. Breaking the ice. And it's working.”

“Tell me what's wrong. I'm here to listen. And I promise not to judge.”

He asked me to sit down in the living room, so I did.

“Okay. Here it is. I spent weeks in the hospital.” I then went on to tell him all the details. Maybe too many details because I couldn't seem to just tell him about the dying part. He hugged me when tears filled my eyes and he seemed to genuinely care. And he knew about my case because it was on the news.

And then I did it... I just blurted it out.

“I died,” I said, voice wavering.

“Oh, Rose!”

Okay, now, I was rambling. “My EKG went flat and there was no heartbeat. And then something strange happened.”

“What?”

“I went to a place... I went to *hell*.”

He looked at me with serious eyes and I waited for him to give the crazy girl the boot. But he didn't. He just kept intently listening.

“Listen,” I said. “I know it's a lot to swallow. And I can barely comprehend it myself.”

I explained everything and told him my story.

“Straight ahead of me, I-I saw this huge lake of fire. And the smoke, it was so hard to breathe. And it was dark. And there were monsters. I did some googling last night about demons. And they enjoyed tormenting me and the more scared, I became, the more they got off on it. People were screaming in agony and the smell was horrendous. And like I told you; I cried out for God. But He didn’t seem to hear me. I was alone and isolated.”

I then told him the entire story from start to finish.

A tear dripped down my face and he handed me a Kleenex. “It’s crazy, I know. But I know I experienced it. It was real. I know it was.”

“You were given another shot at life,” he said.

“You believe me?” I asked in shock. “Because the doctor and everyone in that hospital told me it was from lack of oxygen. But it felt more real than talking to you right now.”

“I believe you,” he said.

The fact that he believed me completely shocked me. “Thank you,” I said. “I even have the papers to prove I died.”

I pulled the medical records in a folder out of my tote bag purse. He leafed through them.

He handed the papers back to me. “You didn’t need to bring proof. I meant it when I said I believed you.”

“But it seems like nobody believes a story like this without solid proof.”

“I 100% believe you.”

“Thanks, that means so much to me.” I let out a long sigh. “I know I unloaded so much. So where do we start?”

“I think we need to start with the Gospel. That is God’s plan to save sinful mankind whom he loves from eternal judgment through his son, Jesus Christ. Jesus died for our sins on the cross, so you and me can be reconciled with God, the Father.”

I let out a long breath. “So what happened? Why would a loving God send me down there? I didn’t do anything to deserve that. And I know you’re a Christian that loves God. And I need you to tell me why. Because if that’s where I am heading, then...” I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Why do I deserve a fate like that?”

“Do you think you’re a good person?”

“Yes. I’m a very good person. I know that I am.”

“Have you ever lied?”

“I’ve told a few lies like how I like someone’s haircut, but I didn’t. But I didn’t want to hurt their feelings.”

“I understand. Have you ever stolen anything?”

“I stole candy when I was a child. Stole some money from my sister for booze. I stole a lot when I became an alcoholic. But I went to rehab. I’m clean now. I don’t steal anymore. I swear.”

“But you have in the past. What does that make you?”

“A thief.”

“Correction. A lying thief.”

I laughed. “You’re going over the Ten Commandments.”

“Yes. So, listen, I’m not judging, but let me continue. Have you ever lusted?”

“Yes.”

“Have you ever used the Lord’s name in vain?”

“Yes.”

“How do you think God reacts to your lying, stealing, lust, and blasphemy?”

I bit my lip hard. “I’m sure He hates it.”

“Sin is so serious to God that he gives it the death sentence.”

“Whoa.”

“You have to face a holy God, so if God judges you by the Ten Commandments on Judgment Day, do you think you’d be innocent or guilty?”

My jaw dropped as I pondered the question. “If I’m judged like that, then I’m guilty.”

“So, do you think you’d go to Heaven or Hell?”

“Hell.” I pondered for a moment at those words. “And I did. But how can anyone keep all those commandments? None of us are perfect by any means.”

“The moral Law, the Ten Commandments show us God’s standard, so that we can see our need of His forgiveness.”

“I see what you did. You used the ten commandments to show me the knowledge of sin.”

“Yes.”

I thought long and hard. “Oh my gosh. It’s starting to make sense. I get it. I never judged my life by God’s standard, his moral law. All my good works and going to church and being a good person can’t get me into heaven. Why isn’t it enough to be good?”

“If we all got in by good works, then Christ didn’t need to die.”

A tear ran down my cheek as I pondered. He was so right. “I never thought about that.”

“There are two destinations, heaven or hell.”

“I want heaven, more than anything. I never want to go back to that horrible place. So how do I get to heaven?”

“You must understand your need for a personal Savior because the Bible is clear that we all have a huge problem called sin.”

“I get that. I really do.”

“Romans 3:23 says, ‘For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.’ This verse means that none of us are perfect. ‘For the wages of sin is death.’”

“We deserve death for our sins,” I said.

“The price for sin is eternal death in hell! We’re not good enough to get into heaven because of our sin, none of us can make it into Heaven by merit alone.”

“Please tell me there’s good news.”

“There is. We have Jesus. Just know that Jesus Christ came to earth as God in the flesh, lived a perfect life, and then died on a cross because He loved you. When He died on that cross, He literally paid for all of your sins. He took your blame! He was punished for your sins.”

I really thought about those words. “He gave me a way out.”

“Yes. John 3:16 says, ‘For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ God, in His awesome love, came to earth to make a way for you to be forgiven of your sins and receive eternal life! Finally, you

must place your full trust in Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. Romans 10:13 says, “For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” It also says, “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. It’s as simple as asking! Salvation occurs when we accept Jesus as Lord and believe He rose again from the dead.”

“It’s as simple as believing and receiving!”

“Absolutely.”

“I’m starting to understand why I went to hell. I was doing it all wrong. It’s not about religion, and being good, and going to church, it’s about a relationship with Jesus Christ. Does it talk about being born again in the bible?”

“Yes. John 1:12,13. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.”

“I need to be born again spiritually.”

“Yes, and here’s another good one. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!”

“I didn’t have a real relationship with Him. I was never born again. I never even ever asked him to forgive me of my sins. I don’t think He was in my life much. I went to church, but I only went because I thought I needed to be good to go to heaven.”

“You were trying to get there by good works.”

“I was so blind. And I’m so thankful for a second chance.”

“There are plenty of people who believe Jesus was “good” and who are themselves are “nice” people. And they will spend eternity in Hell if they don’t believe in Christ for salvation. We are saved by grace, through faith, not by works.” (Ephesians 2:8) The price for sin had to be paid, and only sinless, untainted blood was good enough. According to Jesus, no one is good. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.” (Ephesians 1:7).

“I thought all good people went to heaven. It’s what my parents always told me. They’re always doing stuff for the church. And so I followed their example and tried to do good things in this life.”

“God’s big question will be, “Did you believe in my Son, Jesus Christ for salvation?” The answer to that question determines where a person spends eternity.”

“I believed in God and Jesus.”

“Even the demons and devil believe in Jesus.”

“But I never put my salvation in Jesus Christ. If I were to die today, the biggest question is where would I spend eternity? I now understand that my relationship with Jesus Christ determines the answer to that question. And I didn’t have a relationship with Jesus. I knew about Him. But we didn’t have a relationship.”

“Think of it like this. Imagine owning the biggest mansion ever. And this guy comes to the door with his suitcases and says he’s moving in. What would you do?”

“I would tell him to leave.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know him. How can I let a stranger live in my home?”

“Exactly. When you died, you couldn’t just show up at God’s house. Because he didn’t know you.”

“I went to church. And I did good things. And I believed in God. But... I didn’t have a relationship with Him. I never asked Jesus to forgive my sins. He had every reason to throw me out. I was a stranger to Him. How could I just expect to move in? *I need to have a relationship with God and ask Him to forgive me of my sins.* I now know I’m a sinner. Which I never realized before. I break the ten commandants every day, but when I ask Jesus to forgive me and wash me with his blood, I become white as snow.”

“Yes. A born-again Christian is someone who has repented of their sins and turned to Christ for their salvation. Being born again is a spiritual rebirth. You live a new life as a new person in relationship with Him.”

“So good works, going to church, and being a good person are wonderful as long as I’m not using them *to earn salvation.*”

“Exactly.”

“So how do I become a real Christian?”

“There is no special prayer you must pray to do so. Remember, salvation is not based on your works, but on God’s grace. Ask Jesus to forgive you for your sins. We as believers are washed spotlessly clean and sanctified by His blood.”

“So, my sins are forgiven just like that?”

“Yep. Psalm 103:1. The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.”

“Let me sum this up. God loves me more than I can imagine. He came up with a rescue plan because my own sin condemns me to hell. I’m in need of forgiveness. Jesus died to atone for my sins by dying on the cross, and his blood washes my sins away. So I am forgiven and cleansed. I need to believe in Jesus Christ and that God raised him from the dead. I need to confess that Jesus is Lord. And I need to depart from sin and make him the Lord of my life.”

“You said it perfectly,” he said.

“I want to do this. I know I’m a sinner. I know I can’t save myself. And I accept the plan God has provided; the gift of salvation.”

“Just give all your broken pieces to Jesus. He can give you a new life in Him.”

“If you don’t mind, I want to bow my head and pray. I want to make a commitment to Jesus. Dear God, I realize I am a sinner and I ask for your forgiveness. I believe you died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead. I want to live for you. I turn from all my sins and invite you to come into my heart and life. I will trust and follow you as my Savior. Thank you for accepting me and letting me be a part of your family.”

“You’re saved by faith, Acts 16:31,” he said. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

My heart leapt with joy. I felt the deepest, sweetest, greatest joy. I felt the presence of God right there with me. And tears slipped down my face. I knew this was real and that I was in it for the long

haul. I believed in Jesus more than anything. He had saved me from the pit of hell. I planned to learn more about God and have a deep, profound, personal relationship with him.

A weight had been lifted. I was delivered out of bondage to sin and death. I felt transformed and a peace inside my heart. I wasn't my old self and felt as though I had been given a new lease on life. I knew I didn't have to do this alone anymore.

I felt joy, peace, and freedom. An overwhelming sense of love. It was such an amazing experience and explaining it couldn't even do it justice. I felt like a baby being cradled in a loving parent's arms. I was redeemed and forgiven and no longer separated from God. I had no fear of where I was ending up when I died.

It was the best night of my life.

It was the night I accepted Christ to be my personal Lord and Savior. My heart was changed and I could feel the love of God pouring into me. I felt completely different, like a new person. Life had new meaning because it was no longer about me and doing good works solely to get into heaven.

And it was the best decision ever.

## Chapter 23

Ethan told me 'Sweet sleep' instead of goodnight. I thought it was the coolest thing ever. It was from this scripture, When you lie down, you will not be afraid, when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Proverbs 3:24. I wrote this down in my journal. I went to bed and had the sweetest sleep ever.

Morning came and I felt wonderful. My day had started out wonderful. I sat outside on the back porch and listened to Christian music and read some chapters in my Bible. I had started out with the book of John. Ethan said to start there or with the Psalms. I spent some time in prayer.

God loved me. Before the foundations of the earth, God loved me. I remembered that scripture from John 4:19. *We love him because he first loved us.*

He loved me *first*. God's love is proved by his actions. Christ died for the ungodly. I was blown away that God loved me so much that he gave his only begotten son to redeem me from all wickedness and to die for my sins, and to cleanse me from all unrighteousness. And not only that, but God, creator of the universe, wants a relationship with me. I pondered and let out a long breath. Wow. Just wow. In Timothy 2:4, it says: You are His delight, and He paid everything in order to be close to you again. God desires to be close to you.

He wants to be close with me. He wants a close, intimate relationship. I was more in love with God than ever.

Life is filled with all kinds of obstacles and the roads can get rough and bumpy, and I knew I would have to travel them to get to the beautiful destination that God had waiting for me. Yesterday was the past and I wouldn't dwell on the pain anymore. Tomorrow is the future and God is the designer of my future, and I couldn't wait to see what He had in store.

I loved the book of John. Another scripture that took my breath away was: I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. John 17:23.

The creator of the universe loves us as much as he loves his son. WOW! I had to reflect on that one.

I thought about my future with Jesus. The second I took that leap of faith, my desires, priorities, my path, and my direction had changed. It was the start of a new life with Christ.

God has a plan for my life. For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Jeremiah 29:11.

And then everything changed my mood.

My parents and Detective Gannon were at my house talking to me about the case. They didn’t have enough evidence to prosecute Bobby and my dad was livid. They tracked his cell phone’s location by cell towers and he wasn’t near my house when he had called me. I started to wonder if Bobby was the one who attacked me. And maybe we got it all wrong. He stated his innocence from the very beginning. We were still awaiting DNA from the blood collected at the scene that wasn’t mine. The detective went over crime details that I didn’t want to hear. I was just so over this.

When Ethan called, I was stressed out about everything and I told him everything that was going on. I just wanted to spend the day reading my Bible and praying. And then this happened. My mind was racing and I couldn’t concentrate.

“I just want to forget about all the bad stuff,” I said. “Just for a day.”

“I can do that,” Ethan reassured me. “I’ve got the perfect idea.”

“But time machines don’t exist.”

He laughed, then told me to meet him outside at 1 pm and to wear something comfortable. When he arrived, I rushed out and hopped into the car.

“What’s up?” I asked with a smile.

“I’m taking you somewhere to get your mind off of things,” Ethan said.

I was intrigued. “Where?”

“To the place that makes you laugh when you were young.”

I pondered. “Wait. I told you about the bouncy castle. Is that what you’re talking about that? How did you even remember that?”

He grinned.

My gaze narrowed. “Please tell me you’re not taking me to a bouncy castle.”

“Maybe,” he said with a little grin.

“Ethan, no. I’m too big for that. I’ll step on a five year’s old foot!”

“You’re going to love it!”

“No, I’m not. I’m thirty-one years old. Not five.”

“How about five minutes?”

My arguments didn’t faze him and I decided to give in. “Five minutes I can do. But please, no more.”

He nodded happily, knowing that he had won his argument. “Sounds like a plan.”

“You think you’re going to make me laugh?” I questioned.

He met my gaze. “You did give me that challenge. And I love a good challenge.”

I smiled.

“You’re smiling,” he said.

“Smiles don’t count.”

“You’ll be laughing soon enough.”

“I hope.”

He pulled in the parking lot and I was sure I didn’t want to get out. He opened the door and pointed to the building.

“Sky Zone Trampoline Park?” I asked.

“It’s for all ages,” he said. “They even have dodgeball tournaments and SkyFit classes. Just because we’re adults doesn’t mean the fun has to stop. Like I said, you’re going to love it.”

He grabbed my hand and led me inside. Current tunes from the radio played. I gazed around and saw bright and cheery colors. It wasn’t crowded. The entire humongous room was lined with trampolines from wall-to-wall, including trampoline walls. We signed a waiver and put on special socks with grip.

We headed to the jump zone. I hesitantly stepped onto the trampoline, testing it with a little hop. I smiled, and then we started jumping high into the air, my hair flying. I could jump way higher than I normally could. I loved experiencing that moment of freedom, that moment of zero gravity with every big leap. At least that’s the way it felt. Like I was soaring.

*Exhilarating!*

I never had so much fun and let myself go. We bounced right along with some laughing teenagers and their moms. I spun, flipped, and jumped. I felt like a kid. I couldn’t stop laughing when I fell. I don’t think we ever laughed so hard in each other’s company.

We said goodbye to gravity and jumped high into the air. Again, and again, and again.

“It’s time to go,” he said, pointing at his watch.

“Why? We paid for two hours.”

“I promised you five minutes.”

I playfully punched his arm. “You’re not dragging me out of here that easy. I am having way too much fun.”

“That’s what I love to hear.”

“I haven’t laughed like that in a super long time. So thank you.”

He flashed me his signature grin. “You’re welcome.”

I shot him a grin. “I guess that also means you won the challenge.”

He winked. “Never had a doubt.”

We played Dodgeball, catapulted into large foam pits, and Ethan taught me how to bounce off the walls, like literally. We then went back to my favorite spot with those gravity-defying trampolines. I swear it was like trampolines on steroids. I ran across the entire room jumping from one trampoline to another. We had a great time jumping around and having a blast. I felt like a kid again. The thrill of jumping higher and higher and higher was a memory I would never soon forget.

“Hey, Ethan. I have a confession to make.”

“Yeah?”

“I love this!”

“I told you so.”

A woman accidentally jumped on our trampoline. I lost my balance and fell into Ethan’s strong arms. A shiver shot down my spine. I found myself staring into those pretty eyes. And his smile. I could never get tired of that gorgeous smile.

“I’m having the best time,” I said.

“I love seeing you laugh.”

“How can I not? It is *way* better than the bouncy castle.”

“I don’t think I could’ve taken you there. You might’ve stepped on a five year’s old foot.”

I laughed. “You made me forget about everything I’m going through. I thought there was no way I was going to have any fun, that you were taking on an impossible mission. But you went above my expectations. Thank you, Ethan.”

“You’re welcome. I’m just glad you had some fun.”

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I spent that evening in worship, praying and reading my bible. I wanted to enjoy an intimate fellowship and relationship with God. I turned to Him and talked to him. I prayed. I cried. I worshipped.

And I felt everything lift as I kept praying. All of the anxiety and worry just lifted from me. And I knew the Lord was with me every step of the way. I felt peace wash over me and I knew the Holy Spirit was with me.

“Thank you, Jesus,” I said.

“My Lord, I refuse to live in a state of fear. I end the struggle with fear today. I place all my anxiety, worry, and stress into Your hands and trust you. Please give me the strength and clarity of mind to find my purpose and walk the path you’ve laid out for me.”

Ethan called and we talked for a bit and he ended the conversation like this:

“Sweet sleep, Rose.”

“Sweet sleep,” I said.

We hung up and I couldn’t stop thinking about him. I finally slipped into slumber and I had a beautiful, glorious, restful night’s sleep.

I woke up and completely put my faith in God. I walked around my impenetrable fortress and pulled every curtain open. Light burst into every room. I let the sunshine shine on my face. The kittens rolled around in the beams of light on the carpet.

My mom texted me: Good morning, darling. I hope you slept well.

I answered back: As soon as my head hit the pillow, I was out like a light.

She said: So glad you got a good night’s rest.

And then, I kept sleeping night after night and trusted in God to keep me safe. He knows my needs and will take care of me. I held onto that dearly. I thought finding freedom was impossible. But I could sleep in peace because the Lord was watching over me. I didn’t have to carry mace with me around the house or keep looking under my bed or in my closets thinking somebody was hiding.

My trust was in the one true God, the maker of heaven and earth.

I hung on to these scriptures: In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety. Psalm 4:8 and When you lie down, you will not be afraid; when you lie down, your sleep will be sweet. Proverbs 3:24 and “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” 1 Peter 5:7 and Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid. John 14:27

I gave everything to God and just went to sleep.

For the first time, I felt safe in my home.

And I had the best night of sleep.

## Chapter 24

A week passed.

I got a call to go to Detective Gannon’s office. He wouldn’t talk to me over the phone so I knew something was up, and that he needed to tell me in person. I was worried and called Mom. She insisted that she come with me, so I picked her up.

She fastened her seatbelt and we drove off.

“Mom, I have been meaning to tell you something.”

“What’s that, honey.”

“I figured out why I went to hell.”

She cocked a brow. “Why?”

“I went to church. Taught Sunday school. Read the bible a little. I believed in Jesus. I did so many good works and deeds. But I didn’t have a real, intimate relationship with Jesus. I only spent time with him on Sunday and did whatever I wanted the rest of the week. He wasn’t the center of my life. He was more on the back burner. And I *never* asked him to forgive me of my sins. I thought going to church and being a good person got me to heaven. I thought it was enough. And I found out that’s not the case. Not to mention, I had unforgiveness.” She took it all in and I continued. “Because we are sinners, we can’t get to heaven by being good, sweet, and nice.”

“God doesn’t send good people to hell.”

“Remember, it’s not about being good. The bible teaches that no one can go to heaven by being good. Being a good person is awesome, but good deeds aren’t enough for salvation. We can’t do good works to earn salvation. It’s all about sin. 1 John 3:4 tells us that sin is transgression of the law. Remember the Ten Commandments are God’s moral law. And we break them every day. Let me read them to you.

You shall have no other gods before Me

You shall not make yourself a graven image

You shall not take God’s name in vain

Remember the Sabbath, to keep it holy

Honor your father and mother

You shall not murder

You shall not commit adultery

You shall not steal  
You shall not lie  
You shall not covet

Like I said, we *are* sinners. Every single one of us. And that's a death sentence that will send us straight to hell. But God had a plan to rescue us from our sin. He sent Jesus to die on the cross and forgive our sins, so we could once again be close to Him."

"What's wrong with doing good things?"

"Well, it's amazing. It shows good fruit. And as Christians, we should do good deeds and help people. But it's just not enough to get you into heaven. I've been talking to my friend, Ethan. And I understand now that salvation can't be earned, it's offered as a gift from God which must be received by faith."

"What's salvation in your words?" she asked.

"We are sinners who are destined to go to hell. We deserve to be eternally separated from God and His holiness. But Christ paid the penalty for our sins with His own blood on the cross...for our salvation. And through Jesus Christ, we are saved from sin and forgiven and cleared of all charges. His blood cleanses us of all our sins. Jesus is the only way to Heaven."

"I would love to be cleared of all charges."

"*Admit* your sin and ask for forgiveness. *Believe* that Jesus died on the cross and rose again as a payment for your sins. *Confess* that Jesus is Lord and choose to follow him daily. *Depart* from sin."

My mom pondered everything for a few minutes. She started weeping and praying right there in the car and asked Jesus to forgive her of all her sins. It was so beautiful. And I knew it was sincere. We pulled in the parking lot and my mom wiped her eyes with a tissue. I held her hand and we prayed some more. I'd never been so happy.

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We walked into the police station and met up with Detective Gannon in a private office. He set down his folder and looked at me. "We found out what happened that night. And we also have the suspect in custody.

My heart dropped. "Was it Bobby Greenwood?"

"No, it wasn't," he said. "We totally went the wrong direction."

I shot him a confused look. "But nobody else would want me dead."

"It wasn't him."

We both stared at the detective dumbfounded, trying to make sense of his words.

My mother stood. "What do you mean it wasn't him? His alibi didn't even pan out."

He looked at me. "Bobby went home sick near the end of his shift. Lots of reliable witnesses saw him violently throwing up. His cell phone records don't match up. So, he couldn't have been at your house when he talked to you that night. He was actually home at his house. He even made social media posts about how sick he was. And his blood doesn't match the blood we found at the scene. And we have a confession from another man." He let out a long breath. "I can definitely tell you it wasn't Bobby Greenwood one hundred percent."

I felt relieved that it wasn't Tommy. I then wondered who would do this to me. I didn't deserve what they did to me. And who would confess to this?

My mother was in complete shock and tried to process everything. “It wasn’t Bobby?”

“No.” He let out a long sigh. “It was a random act of violence.”

“Random?” I asked baffled.

“Completely random.”

“You’re telling me that some random man broke into Rose’s house and clubbed her for no particular reason?” my mom asked, voice wavering. “What kind of crazy person does that?”

“I’m so sorry to tell you this news, but yes. And I’m so sorry that we zoned in on Bobby.”

I let out a long trembling breath. “Are you telling me that Bobby was innocent *all* this time?”

“Yes. That’s what the evidence proves.”

My heart sunk. “But we blamed him.”

“I made a mistake and I deeply apologize. I just follow the facts, and the facts were all leading to Bobby. But ultimately, yes, we blamed the wrong man.”

“The media has been awful to him,” I said, voice wavering.

“I am so sorry. He didn’t deserve any of that. But we have strong evidence it wasn’t him.”

“Who would randomly attack me?” I asked.

“A guy named Edward Williams was at a house party on the next street,” he said. “He took hallucinogenic drugs. And he hallucinated. He somehow staggered to your house and broke in. In his delirium, he then attacked you.”

I was stunned by this news. I tried to process it. It didn’t make sense. Detective Gannon tried to explain everything once again but everything was a blur.

“Out of all the houses to pick,” I said, voice wavering. “He picked mine?”

“Yes.”

“So, nobody is trying to actively kill me?”

“Not at all.”

“I can’t believe it.” I couldn’t comprehend that Bobby was innocent. I had blamed him. My family had blamed him. My friends had blamed him. The media had blamed him. The newspaper blamed him. And he was innocent all along.

I felt so much guilt and remorse.

“You were so sure it was Bobby,” I said. “You insisted it was him.”

“We all did, but DNA doesn’t lie. The suspect admitted everything and gave a full confession and we tied him to the crime scene with his DNA from the blood at the scene.”

“Why would he try to kill me?”

“He was tripping. It was a bad drug drip. We call this a psychedelic crisis. Completely out of his mind. And he’s never done drugs a day in his life. His friends talked him into it...and it turned out badly.”

I tried to process it all.

He tried to explain it some more. “Hallucinations can be terrifying. Edward felt very paranoid and became aggressive and even violent. He felt terror, anxiety, and panic. He took psilocybin mushrooms. Things suddenly started to feel wrong and he felt himself losing control. His thoughts were whirling and drew him into a deep dark place. The visuals around him were overwhelming and too much to handle. He started to feel paranoid to the extreme and thought you were robbing his house.”

“His house?”

“Yes, he thought he was home. He just knew he had to protect himself from the person robbing his home.”

“My home. Not his.”

“In his delusion, he thought it was his home.”

“And you said he’s admitted to it?”

“Yes.”

My whole life had been turned upside down by a random act of violence.

“I deserve justice, Detective. If my parents weren’t coming over for dinner, and if they didn’t find me, I’d be dead. You could have been arriving at a homicide scene.”

“I know that. And we are pressing attempted murder charges.”

“I don’t care if it was his first time. He almost bashed me to death with a bat. How can I ever forgive him for that?”

“What you are feeling is understandable.”

My mom shook her head in anger. “We want the book thrown at him. He needs to go to jail for a very long time. Possibly life.”

“We are going for life, but... there’s something you need to know.” I cocked a brow and he continued. “The suspect was a minor.”

“A minor?” I asked, taken back.

“Seventeen years old.”

I gasped. “What?”

“And not just any minor. He’s an honor student and soared at the top of his SAT’s and ACT’s. He was accepted into Harvard College next Fall. He has a squeaky-clean record. He even partners with the Furry Friends Adoption Ranch and helped them with a paid advertising campaign on Facebook and Instagram reeking in thousands of dollars for the animals. He has a resume that will blow your mind. And guess what? I talked to the lady in charge of the shelter. He’s deathly afraid of cats. Runs from them. But he loves dogs.”

“My kittens scared him off?”

“Yes. He said it was their eyes that scared him off. Thought they were demon possessed. So glowing eyes would totally throw him off balance even in a drug-induced state. I do believe if those cats hadn’t shown up. He would’ve kept hitting and you wouldn’t be here today.”

I took a moment to reflect. “But you said he has a clean record. Do you think he’ll shmooze over the jury?”

“I won’t let that happen. The facts speak volumes.”

He opened up a file and set a picture in front of me. I covered my mouth as I stared at a teenager with blonde hair and blue eyes. He had one of those movie star smiles and his whole life in front of him. It was such a shame that he ruined his life like this.

I shook my head. “No! This can’t be who attacked me.”

My mom touched my back and tried to comfort me.

“DNA and his confession prove it,” Detective Gannon said.

I picked up the picture. “But he’s just a kid.”

My mom agreed. "He's so young."

Detective Gannon nodded. "A kid on a bad trip who exhibited violent behavior. He needs to pay the price for his actions."

"His whole life will be over," I said.

"He brought this on himself. And I want to push for the death penalty."

"I agree he needs to face charges, but not the death penalty."

"He tried to kill you."

I picked up my purse. My head spun. "I have to go," I said.

"Rose."

"Please. This is all just too much for me right now."

I just wanted everything to go back to normal.

On the way out, a woman called my name. When I peered closer, it was a friend from my party, drinking days. She was handcuffed to a chair, her brown hair disarrayed, her clothes wrinkled, her makeup smeared, and mascara running down her face. I asked my mom to meet me in the car. I would only be a few minutes.

"Can I bum a cigarette?" my friend asked.

"I don't smoke. And I don't think you can smoke in here."

"Bummer."

"Hey, Mel, what's going on?" I asked.

"I'm still getting in trouble," she said with a chuckle. "I see you are too. Man, are we troublemakers! Doomed to live in cardboard boxes. I guess things never change. But that's what makes life so unpredictable and so much fun."

"No, I'm not in trouble. I'm here for something else."

"Oh, that's right. I saw you on the news. What happened? Did a drug deal go bad? Because that's what I heard. All the guys are saying you got whooped for stealing a bag of drugs."

My jaw dropped at what she was insinuating. So glad I left that group of friends. And I was so glad my mom wasn't here to hear this. So glad she went out to the car to wait for me.

"I miss you, girl," she said. "I don't see you anymore since Bobby broke up with you."

"Is that what he told you?" I asked in a shocked tone.

"You should've tried to get that boy back. If you would've stayed, maybe you wouldn't have gone down the road you went down."

"No thank you. Since I left him, my life has never been better."

"I beg to differ. You have a drug dealer or a loan shark smashing into your house. I don't know what you're into or what you did, but girl, you gotta get out. Is it really worth your life? You might not be so lucky next time, ya know? And please don't tell me you got a pimp. Because that rumor is going around too. Oh, and so is the one about the drug cartel breaking in."

Confusion washed over me. "You got things horribly wrong."

"You working as a bagboy now? Because I heard that too."

I cocked a brow. "At the grocery store?"

"No, silly. It's drug slang. It means you're selling illicit drugs for someone else."

“Listen, I don’t do drugs. I don’t sell drugs. I don’t drink anymore. And an intruder broke into my home. He was the one on drugs.”

She shook her head. “Oh man, Rose. You can’t hang out with those kinds of people. I tried to tell you that before. That crowd will take you down the gutter.”

“Like our crowd didn’t?”

“Excuse me?”

I needed to get my point across. “The attack was random.”

“Okay, okay. Hey, girl I miss hanging out with you. I miss our road trips.”

A memory flashed across my mind of our last road trip where I ended up in Panamá City and passed out on the beach. I shook off the awful memory.

“So any more road trips in your future?” she asked. “My sister, Carla, still owns that RV.”

“You guys kicked us out.”

“Only the drunks.”

“Well, I had to take an Uber home.”

“I remember. That had to cost a lot.”

“It was a small fortune.” I sighed. “I’m sorry, but I don’t see any party trips in my future.”

“Too bad. Hey, I saw your mom with you. She isn’t mad at you after what happened? I remember when you stole all that money from your parents to pay back that loan shark that was gonna beat up Bobby,” she said.

“I was drunk and not thinking straight. And I don’t behave like that anymore. If you want to throw my past in my face, then you should know that Jesus has dropped all the charges.”

“Meaning?”

“He’s forgiven me.”

Her gaze narrowed. “You found God? I don’t believe it.”

“Believe it. He’s changed my life.”

“I’m glad.”

“He can be the answer to your problems too.”

“I’m good.”

Listen, I have to run. My mom is waiting for me. It was nice seeing you again.”

“Likewise. And don’t be a stranger. Call me.”

“I would love to tell you about my testimony sometime over lunch.”

“Lovely. I can do a testimony. Just not preaching.”

I said goodbye and rushed out of the police station.

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On the way home, I tried to forget about the awful rumors my old group of friends were spreading. Why did they think the worst of me? I never wanted to hang out with any of them for as long as I lived. If I ran into them, I would be cordial and nice, but that’s it. I knew my old set of friends would be a negative influence in my addiction recovery and my new path.

I dropped off my mom at her house, and stayed for a few hours as we processed everything, then drove home. I pulled into my driveway when my neighbor, Betsy, walked over waving. So, I didn’t pull into the garage.

I got out of the car, “What’s up?”

“I just heard.”

“What?”

“That the intruder used my son’s bat, the same bat the kids forgot to pick up. If only I had known. Things could’ve been different. If only I had been more careful.”

“Don’t worry about it. It wasn’t your fault.”

“If I had made sure they picked up those bats, you wouldn’t have been beaten. He couldn’t have smashed the sliding glass door. He wouldn’t have been able to get in. It’s my fault and I feel awful. This whole thing could’ve been prevented, the outcome could’ve been a different one.”

“You couldn’t have known...”

“That it was a future murder weapon?”

“I didn’t die. I’m right here talking to you.”

“You know what I mean. It was an attempted murder weapon.”

“The toys weren’t picked up. So what? You had no control over the situation and you’ve done nothing wrong. You didn’t make that bat get up and walk into my house, okay?”

“I had to get that off my chest. Want to come over and hang out for a while? The kids would love to see you.”

“Listen, Betsy, I just found out some news I’m trying to process. I can’t talk right now. Can we talk later?”

“I understand. Just know I’m truly sorry.”

“Thank you.”

“You can talk to me, always.”

“That’s great, but I think I need to be alone right now.”

“Okay, Rose. Take all the time you need.” She nodded and walked off. I just wasn’t in the right mind frame to talk to her. I was too upset. Too shocked.

## Chapter 25

The stalker theory was laid down and put to rest. I finally knew what had happened and I tried to process it. Bobby had been officially cleared. And I felt so bad that I blamed him. I thought about the teenager. I thought about that night. I thought about everything. My mind was racing. I put on some soft worship music.

I felt lighter. Nobody was plotting my death like in some Lifetime movie. The person who tried to murder me was in custody. I was completely safe now.

I wasn’t in limbo anymore and I finally had the answer to who attacked me. I didn’t have to look over my shoulder. I didn’t have to hide anymore. I let out a long breath as I opened the window to let fresh air in. My home was my sanctuary. I didn’t feel vulnerable or unsafe or anxious.

I had peace of mind.

I even took a few minutes to journal.

And even though I felt more relaxed and at ease. I wasn't. Anger was eating me up. Unforgiveness taunted me. The anger, bitterness, and resentment were slowly killing me. I knew I had to forgive him to set myself free. I knew what was right for me at this moment and I had to find the courage to forgive the person who tried to kill me.

But I have to admit, it was hard. And it would take time. Because I was so angry. So mad. So full of rage.

My family came over to support me. They all hated the man who did this to me and wanted him to spend the rest of his life in prison. After much thought. I agreed. He tried to take my life and I was definitely pressing charges. He needed to pay for what he did.

My uncle hugged me. "We are going to fight for you. His lawyer wants to make a deal and wants the DA to drop the attempted murder charges and change them to physical assault."

"No," my dad shouted. "He's not getting off that easy. He tried to kill my baby."

I went over and hugged my dad. "It's okay. He won't win. We won't let him."

"He doesn't have a chance," my mom chimed in. "I was told he is going to be tried as an adult."

"It was obvious intent with an obvious outcome in the level of harm," my aunt said.

"I want the book thrown at him, kid or not!" my sister shouted in a fit of rage.

My phone rang and I picked it up. It was Bobby. And he wasn't very happy. He was calling from a number I'd never seen before.

"You know what, Rose?" he said. "Had you not hung up on me the night of the attack, I would've heard that drug-crazed teenager bust in. You see, I was your lifeline that night. And had you hung on, I would've rescued you. I would've called 911 and sped over like a speeding bullet. The police would've hauled that monster into jail and threw away the key."

"If I could change things, I would."

"You were only a few minutes away from a lunatic killer breaking into your house. All you had to do was stay on the line and ask me how I was doing. Is that so much to ask? I was doing horrible by the way. But no! You blew your chance by hanging up on me. Do you know that? All you had to do was have one little conversation with me. I was the only person that could've actually helped you. But you hung up! You blew your chance, your one and only opportunity to get help. Do you realize what a HUGE mistake that was? I hope you know it led to your demise."

"Are you seriously blaming me for my attack? Stop gaslighting me!"

"Then... you had the audacity to label me as the baseball bat killer. I'm a lot of things! But I'm not a killer! What's wrong with you? You have destroyed my life! How can someone I love accuse me of such a heinous and violent crime? You loved me at one time. You knew me inside and out. You knew I wasn't a murderer. Yet, you screamed it to the world. I never want to see you again. Got that?"

"Loud and clear."

I hung up and blocked the number.

I left my family and locked myself in my room. His words stung and I felt so guilty. He was so mean to me but I deserved it. Maybe I was the monster. I had accused an innocent man of the worst crime possible. Tears ran down my cheeks. I was devastated.

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Sue thought we needed more media coverage so we could tell our side of the story. She got us on a local morning talk show. And I wasn't so happy that she did that.

She told me the news while she fixed us grilled cheese sandwiches, something we really enjoyed as kids.

"I don't like attention and I don't want to be the center of media attention," I said.

"But you already are. And there's nothing you can do to stop it."

"And you're trying to gain emotional public reactions. You're looking for responses like fear and anger. Why?"

"Because we need to tell the people before they do, trying to gain sympathy for a teenager who didn't know what he was doing. Their lawyer has already flooded the media with their agenda and propaganda. You should see the picture they're painting of him. He's a saint who made one little mistake. And they'll be on the side of the poor kid who was headed to Harvard, the poor football quarterback who was voted most popular in his class. All because of peer pressure. The kids never took drugs a day in his life."

"But he did that day."

"Well, his friends conned him into taking magic mushrooms, and that he didn't know how powerful they were. He was naïve they said. Clueless. We need to tell people what happened to you is unacceptable and demands justice. And it doesn't matter if he's rich and popular, and seventeen years old. A crime is a crime. You almost died. The people need to know how close to death you came."

"Why is the news obsessed with disturbing crime stories?" I asked.

"Because crime makes for an engaging narrative arc. You know the saying, if it bleeds, it leads."

I sighed. "So glad my life can be their engaging narrative arc."

"We've got to fight back. Or he's going to ride off into the sunset with not more than a slap on the wrist."

I shook my head. "He's not getting away with this."

"He already is. Have you watched the news? Nobody knows what horrors and anguish you went through. They are just hearing about a quarterback hero who made a tragic mistake. And your dad agrees with me. He says they're distorting the story. Making him out to be America's Sweetheart, but in guy fashion."

"That's no sweetheart that broke into my home that night. I get shivers thinking about it. I still wake up with nightmares. I don't want to relive this any longer. I just want to move forward with my life."

"We've got to put him away, then you can get justice, and move on."

"If they knew how terrified I was that night. To feel every bat swing. The pain exploding throughout my body. To feel myself die and slip away. Losing everything...because of a kid."

"Tell the people your story, your side. Let them know your pain so we can get the book thrown at him, kid or not."

"I'll talk to my family."

"Sounds like a plan."

"I can't face Bobby right now," I said. "I just can't."

"He won't be there."

“I can’t have him going off on me in a public place like that. I won’t be able to handle his fury toward me.”

“And he will go off. Like a ticking time bomb.”

“I’ll do it, if he’s not coming.”

“I’ll tell them. No Bobby allowed.”

“Thanks.”

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We decided to have a family meeting that night and we talked about everything. We would do the show and tell everyone what our family had experienced. We drove to the news station to be interviewed. And the next thing I knew, I was on set and the show started. I knew Tina was taking my side and Shawn was taking Ed’s side. That is the way this show worked. Each host took a side.

“Welcome to the Coffee & Talk Show. I’m Tina. She motioned to the other host and he smiled, “And I’m Shawn. Thanks for joining us, everyone.”

“Shawn looked directly into the camera. “A teen with no history of violence experienced a magic mushroom-induced psychosis and delusions when he broke into the home of Rose Hart. Unaware of his surroundings or what he was doing, he brutally attacked her with a bat. This is a case that has taken this town by storm because it’s our very own beloved quarterback of North Coast High School, Edward Williams. Today we’re going to discuss the case along with Edward’s mom, Dr. Jackson, and Rose Hart herself, her mom, dad, sister, and best friend, Sue Whitlock.”

Tina turned to face us. “We would like to welcome Rose, Brian, Sandra, Casey, and Sue. We also have Ed’s mother Gina Williams.

I nodded when they said my name and tried to keep my composure when Ed’s mom was introduced. I wasn’t told she would be on with us and it came as quite a shock. She wore classic makeup that showed off her pretty blue eyes, a designer suit, and her hair was braided up into an elegant bun. Her husband wore a designer suit with an expensive haircut and a Rolex on his wrist. They looked like quite the power couple. I knew his mom hung around the society circles and his dad was CEO of a business firm called Key Investments, an investing firm. They lived in the most expensive part of the city and owned a beautiful mansion.

This kid had it all, looks, money, talent, yet he chose to throw it away on some lousy fix that ruined his entire life.

They played a video clip that summed everything up. It was fairly portrayed. They thanked us for coming and expressed sympathy for what I went through.

“How are you doing, Rose?” Tina asked.

“Well, my wounds have healed, but the scars are forever. It hurts...it hurts so bad. I am traumatized by what happened. Imagine your glass door shattering into a million pieces. I thought a car had run into the house. I go to investigate, then call 911, and suddenly I am attacked by an intruder with a bat. After the attack, I lay there dying, wondering how a person could be that evil. And I didn’t want to die. I had everything to live for. And I remember feeling hopelessness as I laid there bleeding to death.”

“I’ve read the police reports and this was a very violent act,” said Tina. “We are so glad that you made it through and recovered.”

“Thank you. It’s been quite the journey.”

“The police had originally thought your ex-boyfriend, Bobby Greenwood, was the attacker. But after much policework, they realized it wasn’t him. How did you feel about that?”

“I am devastated by what Bobby went through. And I’m so sorry. I apologize to him and his entire family. I was happy to hear that he was cleared of all charges. No innocent person deserves to go through what he did.”

“We wanted to have him on, but our producer said he wasn’t available.”

“I wish him nothing but the best.”

“Hopefully, he can get on with his life now.”

“That’s all I’m hoping for.”

“How did you feel learning that your attacker was a popular, high school football player?”

“I was flabbergasted. I couldn’t believe it. How could someone so young commit a violent crime like this?”

“So, the question on everyone’s mind is, should a teen be charged for attempted murder?”

Shawn jumped in. “I know what happened was absolutely horrible, but we have to look at all the facts. This teenager has a clean record and is on the honor roll. He ended up at a party and did some drugs, and then lost touch with reality. He was out of his mind. He broke into Rose’s home, but he didn’t know what he was doing. He’s a good kid who got into a bad situation and we have to remember he’s a teenager whose mind isn’t fully developed yet.”

“Bad situation?” Tina asked. “Rose fought for her life and she died at least four times when her heart stopped beating. It’s a miracle she’s even here with us today. This young man deserves to spend some time behind bars for this barbaric treatment.”

“I think we would all agree with that statement,” my dad said.

Sue nodded in agreement. “I don’t care if he went to a party and accidentally took mushrooms. He needs to pay the price for what he did and justice needs to be served.”

“Listen, you can’t sentence a child to die in prison,” Shawn said. “Just think about it. Children can’t survive in an adult prison.”

My sister jumped in. “Why don’t you show your audience photos of Rose after she was beaten to a bloody pulp? Care to see those? Because I guarantee you’ll throw up. Her face was black and blue and swollen, and I could hardly recognize her. You should see what a ‘child’ did to her!”

“A child not in his right mind,” Ed’s dad said in defense. “This young man came from a well-to-do family and was on his way to attending Harvard next year. He was loved by everyone and very popular, with very good grades. He even volunteered his time with different charities. My son loves people and he loves life. And he would never intentionally hurt anyone. He will carry the weight of what he did every single day for the rest of his life. There is no way he can undo it, and if he could go back, he would. And Shawn is right. Children do not belong in prison.”

My sister looked at him. “I’m sorry his perfect life was ruined and shattered when he attacked my sister and nearly killed her. Does anyone care that I almost lost my sister?”

“He deserves an adult-sized punishment,” Sue piped out.

Ed’s dad shook his head. “He did 5 mg of shrooms. My son shouldn’t never have been given such a high dosage for the first time. That’s enough to put someone in a mental institution.”

“Do you know what that stuff does to you?” Ed’s mom said. “The walls and floors start warping and you see faces in the trees, in the sky, on the table, and on the couch. Vivid colors dance like spinning disco balls, objects start talking to you, and time transforms into an elastic rubber band that stretches too far and then snaps back into place. I’ve researched it!”

Sue shook her head. “Does it cause someone to want to murder somebody? Because your son did a real good job.”

“My son is not violent,” Ed’s dad said.

“I beg to differ,” Sue said. “The facts speak for themselves. Why don’t we show the audience some of the horrifying pictures?”

“He was on a bad trip! That wasn’t my son. It was those drugs!” Ed’s mom wiped her eyes with a tissue. “Edward takes spiders outside when we find them in the house. I go to swat them, and he tells me all life deserves a chance. He’s such a loving boy, always has been. I’m telling you; it was those drugs.”

Anger shot across my dad’s face. “I don’t care if your son was under the influence. Rose survived a violent crime that your son committed after he wandered into someone’s home uninvited. The justice system shouldn’t let her down no matter what the excuse.”

Ed’s mom let out a trembling breath as his dad tried to comfort her by placing his arm around her.

“The act of participating in a crime by a minor is considered juvenile delinquency,” Shawn said. “I really think life-without-parole sentences for juvenile offenders are completely unconstitutional. I think Ed needs teen boot camp. Not prison.”

“What?” my dad asked. “Are you telling me the law is not going to hold anyone responsible?”

Shawn cocked a brow. “You see, a juvenile brain is underdeveloped and extremely different than your typical adult brain for controlling impulsive behavior, thinking, and resisting peer pressure,” said Shawn. “Their brain is still developing. Think of it like this: A teen’s brain is like a sports car with a fast accelerator but weak brakes. All of those powerful impulses are under poor control.”

“And that results in a big car crash,” Ed’s mom said.

“Exactly my point. And it can cause lasting damage to his mental health. He did some stupid things, like taking mushrooms, but youths don’t think about the consequences of their actions. He’s at a party, trying to fit in and look cool. He gives in to peer pressure. He wants the cute girl to think he’s hip. He takes a pill. He’s dancing and having a good time. Not in a million years did he think he would leave the party, break into a house, and start hurting someone. Teens are incapable of making a decision like an adult can.”

“He did *more* than hurt,” my mom said. “He nearly killed her. She literally died on the way to the hospital multiple times.”

My dad joined in. “Her heart stopped. STOPPED. And that was because of him.”

I blew out a long breath. I didn’t know what the answer was. Shawn seemed to defend him. How can you try to defend somebody who tried to take an innocent human life?

“My research showed me that teens are committing violent felony crimes are on the rise,” said Tina. “They need to suffer the consequences for their own actions. This is how our legal system works.”

“What do you think, Dr. Jackson?” Shawn asked.

“He was experiencing an altered level of consciousness we like to call delirium. No matter how much he tried, he wouldn’t have control over his actions. He wouldn’t be able to follow simple commands, know his name or address, tell you the day of the week it is, or comprehend where he was. Mushrooms contain psilocybin and that makes him lose the ability to make judgments on what is right or wrong and whether to do something or not. He was intoxicated to the point of automatism and this means he was too high to understand his actions at the time of the attack.”

“I have to agree,” Ed’s mom said. “My son is a kind, non-violent man of integrity and character. Those drugs turned him into some kind of monster none of the school, football team, even our friends or family have ever seen.”

“But he did commit the crime,” Tina said. “And we want accountability. It’s not okay to get high, lose control, and hurt people. Ed does feel sorry and we all know he’s this town’s beloved football hero, but that doesn’t change what he did. We can’t forget the crime because he’s a nice guy and that he’s sorry.”

“If he gets away with it, it’s because he’s popular, privileged, has a fancy lawyer, and is a pretty boy,” Sue retorted. “Who wants to charge the town’s favorite quarterback? Who wants to believe that the sweet guy with blonde hair and blue eyes turned into a monster for one night?”

“No!” his mom said. “It was caused by a drug-fueled attack. His mental state was compromised. He wasn’t in control of his actions! Our son has no prior history of criminal behavior.”

“An attack is an attack no matter what the cause!” Sue shot back. “You can’t get high and then go hurt people. He must face the consequences of his actions.”

“This is a witch hunt,” Ed’s dad said.

“Are we supposed to just let him go and not hold him accountable or responsible just because he’s sorry and remorseful for his actions?” Casey said. “That’s not how our legal system works!”

Ed’s dad shook his head. “If this goes to court, there’s not a jury that wouldn’t sympathize. He consumed hallucinogenic mushrooms which caused him to be in a state of extreme intoxication akin to non-insane automatism.”

My dad cocked a brow. “What kind of mumble jumble is that? A person can’t go out there and do this kind of stuff and then slap a fancy defense label on it like you’re doing. Mr. Williams is trying to play the blame game so he can get his son off the hook.”

“His actions were involuntary,” Ed’s mom said. “And therefore, not criminal. You want to lock him up and throw away the key, taking away his future for conduct he wasn’t aware of or couldn’t control? He was completely out of character.”

“Do you hear yourself?” my mom said. “What about public safety?”

“This could open the door to all kinds of violent acts by people consuming intoxicants and walking free from criminal liability.” Tina then turned to me. “Rose, do you think Edward Williams should go to jail for the crimes he committed?”

“Absolutely. He needs to pay for what he did to me. I am a victim of a violent crime. I think me and my family have a right to justice.”

“But he’s only a baby,” the mom said. “Look up at the screen. Look at his picture. That’s not the face of a killer. He’s just a baby.”

“I don’t think a baby can swing a bat like that,” Sue said. “The way he wielded that bat like a pro, I’m not so sure why he took up football when he should’ve taken up baseball. And yes, we see the pictures of your adorable boy. Very cute. Now how about we put up Rose’s injury pictures and we’ll compare. And I’m telling you right now, her pics aren’t so cute!”

Ed’s mom rolled her eyes, then turned her attention to my mom. “What if it were the other way around and your daughter was out of her mind on a drug trip and accidentally hurt somebody? There was no intent to kill. It was an accident.”

“He should’ve never taken those drugs,” my mom replied. “If he didn’t take them, my daughter would’ve never been attacked. And we wouldn’t be sitting here now and your son would be free.”

“We are so sorry. But we can’t change what happened. I wish we could. Our son is guilt-ridden about the mistake he made. He just started his life and now he is facing prison time. He never tried to hide anything and came clean when the police found him. He didn’t know he had even committed a crime. But then he started putting memories together. And told the police everything. He never once tried to hide the crime or cover it up. He takes full responsibility.”

“As he should,” my dad said.

“Rose,” Tina said. “What made you come here today?”

“I needed to get my feelings off my chest. This young man forever changed my life. I was just getting my life back together. I bought a house, had a good job, and bought a new car. Things were looking up. I was celebrating my one year sober with my family that awful night. But it wasn’t supposed to be awful. It was supposed to be happy because I had worked so hard not to drink. It was the longest year of my life. And my family was coming over to celebrate. It couldn’t have been a happier night. I cooked dinner and set the table. I worked hard to set that table and it was beautiful. My family would be coming soon. And then it happened. He arrived. And he didn’t ring the doorbell. And he wasn’t invited.”

“What was the first thing he did to alert you to his presence?”

“He smashed the sliding glass door down with his bat. A bat one of the neighbor kids had left in their front yard. I saw those kids playing baseball only a couple of hours earlier. I had no idea that would be the attempted murder weapon an intruder would use very soon.”

“That must’ve been very terrifying.”

“It was. I heard something crunching on the glass shards. And I turned and it was him. And he swung the bat and knocked me down. And then the beating started and...” My voice wavered and I took a few seconds to regain my composure. “It was the worst night of my life. I’ve never forgotten how much it hurt, because the pain was excruciating. He had no mercy. He just kept hitting no matter how loud I screamed. It was like a monster in the dark, no mercy, no compassion. Hitting. Hitting. Hitting. I tried not to pass out. But the room was spinning. And I fought to hang on. And I knew my family would be here any minute. And I didn’t want them to find me this way. He took my proud celebration and turned it into a nightmare. I was in my safe haven, my home. I didn’t go anywhere. I didn’t walk in a bad neighborhood. I wasn’t taking crazy risks. I wasn’t doing anything wrong. I was just home cooking. Just getting ready to celebrate an amazing milestone with my amazing family. And he just came in...and took everything away from me in the blink of an eye. The doctors didn’t think I was going to make it. But I’m a fighter. And God brought me through it.”

“It’s been such a journey,” my mom said. “Rose is so strong and has so much courage.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“You’re a courageous woman,” Ed’s mom said. “And I’m so sorry for all the suffering you’ve been through. But please don’t take my son’s future away. He has so much to live for.”

“Edward is so sorry, and so are we,” Ed’s dad said. “We are deeply sorry.”

“He needs to face swift justice,” my sister said.

Shawn nodded no. “He entered the whimsical realm of shroomville and that’s where things are different and reality takes a vacation for 6 - 8 hours. Sometimes people have bad trips. And it’s not like he signed up for the bad trip. He was manipulated by his peers and didn’t know what it really did. He was told it was like weed. We can’t blame this kid for a trip he never expected or wanted. He never took one sip of alcohol or did drugs a day in his life.”

“What about my pain and suffering?” I had enough of hearing his defense. “Obviously, you don’t see me as a victim. So, I guess I won’t either. Because I’m a survivor. I always have been. I keep getting back up every time life knocks me down. I’m not going to let this attack define me or hold me down. I just thank God for the second chance he gave me. And I’m going to move forward with my life *once again*. This whole ordeal has been tough. But guess what? I’m tougher.”

“You sure are,” Tina exclaimed. “We are so proud of you.”

“We interviewed Ed in jail and taped it,” Shawn said. “You’re going to get a chance to meet this young man and now hear his side of the story.”

My jaw dropped. Why didn’t they warn me about this? My mom squeezed my hand and whispered we could leave but I shook my head no. I wanted to hear him for the very first time and see what he had to say.

They played the video on a big screen for us all to see. He wore an orange jumper suit and immediately apologized. “It’s hard to find the words to tell you how deeply remorseful I am, and that I take complete responsibility for my actions. I feel awful. And I’m sorry. So sorry.” He paused and a tear slipped down his face. “I sincerely want to apologize to Rose Hart and her entire family, and all of her friends. I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am for all the pain I caused. I never meant to hurt you and I am appalled by my actions. I know that ‘sorry’ can’t fix everything and I wish I could take that night back. I do hope one day you will learn to forgive me.”

His voice wavered and he tried to maintain his composure, but it was starting to crumble and the interview had just started. I could tell by his emotion that it was genuine. My heart sank. And I wiped a tear sliding down my cheek. He looked just like an innocent kid. He was clean-cut, handsome, and a part of me felt sorry for him.

“Can you tell us what happened at that party?” Shawn asked.

“Um, yes. I’m always teased by my friends for being a prude.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t drink or do drugs. I have to stay clean because I’m on the football team and I have to keep my grades up.”

“So why did you take the drugs?” Shawn asked.

“My parents put so much pressure on me. They want me to be perfect and go to Harvard like they both did.”

“They expect perfection?”

“Absolutely.”

“And is that why you went to this party?”

“Yes. I got in a fight with them. They were trying to demand what major I pick and I was tired of them controlling every inch of my life. So, when my friends asked me to come, I jumped at the chance to have a little fun, something I never get to do.”

“You went to the party?”

“Yes. And they made fun of me because I wouldn’t drink. They talked me into taking some mushrooms. They told me it was just mushrooms and not as bad as weed. And I’ve never done weed. I thought if it’s just a lighter drug, then I might as well.”

“You had no idea what mushrooms were?”

“No, not really. I knew it was a drug. And I thought how bad can a mushroom be? There was also a pretty girl I wanted to talk to but didn’t have the guts. They told me these would give me confidence and I would have no problem talking to her.”

“So, you took it?”

“I ate the shrooms they gave me, and they tasted awful. I wanted to spit them out so bad, but I felt like my friends were judging me and I would disappoint them. I gave into peer pressure.”

“And then what happened?”

“It took about forty-five minutes. Then all of a sudden, my mind was racing. Everything around me was so colorful and I tried to touch the colors. The floor started to warp and it was hard to keep my balance. And then the walls started to come alive and breathe, then they melted like candle wax. And a face appeared on the wall and told me to go talk to Mia. And I saw the girl I had a crush on, and I went to talk to her. And her face started to distort into this demonic being with horns and I told her how scary she looked. And she slapped me. And I got mad and left the house running off into the night. All the colors around me were constantly changing. I looked up at the dark clouds in the night sky and they are animated and flickering like I’m in some kind of old film. And I’m so hurt that the girl of my dreams slapped me so I just wanted to go home.”

“And you thought you found your house?”

“Yes. But I couldn’t find my keys. I guess I left them at the party. I walked around the house so I could hop through a window, and then I spotted a bat. I thought I would break into the house through the sliding glass doors. I smashed the bat as hard as I could and broke the glass door. And then I walked in and I saw a woman. And it was my crush from the party. That’s honestly what I thought in my drug-induced state. I thought she took my house keys from the party and beat me here. I was mad she locked me out and didn’t leave the door open. And why was she in my house?”

“You now think she’s the intruder?”

“Yes. And now I clearly know it was the other way around.”

“In your mind, the crush from your party stole your keys and came to your house, locking you out?”

“Yes. I was so removed from reality at this point. I had absolutely no motives to break into anyone’s home let alone hurt them.”

“You were suffering from substance intoxication delirium. And it’s unlikely you would ever do this again.”

“I would never take drugs ever again.”

“What were you thinking as you walked into the house?”

“Maybe I would just go with it and kiss her. She started walking towards me. But then something changed.”

“What’s that?”

“She was morphing into something demonic with horns and fangs. And it freaked me out. Then she started laughing at me. And said my parents were the first to die, and then me. I was terrified at this point. I had to get this horrid thing out of my house. I had to save us, no matter what the cost. I started hitting this monster with the bat. And I didn’t stop. She pleaded and begged for me to stop. But I couldn’t let her hurt and murder the people I loved. My sense of reality was warped.”

“As you were hitting her, did she still have the horns?”

“No. As she lost strength, they disappeared. But I knew I had to deliver the final blow to finish her off once and for all, and I was prepared too. But then something strange happened. Three white kittens jumped on her chest. And their eyes were glowing, and changing colors. And I have a fear of cats anyway so this totally freaked me out. The kittens started to morph into white demonic lions and their eyes continued to change colors. I knew I had to get out of there.”

“What about your parents you had to save?”

“I wasn’t thinking right. And at that very moment, I had forgotten about them. I just knew I had to run for my life. And I did. I ran for blocks when my friends beeped. They were out looking for me when they found out I had left the house. I crashed at my buddy, Jeff’s house. He asked why I had blood on me and I told him I got tangled up in a fence. That really did happen on the way to the house. I think I took a shortcut and ended up in someone’s backyard. The next morning, I thought all of the stuff I saw was just from my trip. And the blood was from the fence. I didn’t know I actually had hurt someone. I told my friends I had a bad trip and I was never ever doing that again.”

“When did you realize everything in your bad trip had actually happened? Like breaking in and beating a woman?”

“When the police came and arrested me. They took my blood. I was absolutely mortified. I couldn’t believe that it was all real. That I broke into somebody’s house like that. That I had hurt somebody. I knew my wild trip wasn’t make-believe but real.”

“You almost killed her. And I assure you that she did not have horns and fangs.”

“I am so sorry. This is something I would’ve never done if I wasn’t crazy out of my mind. And to think I almost delivered that last fatal blow. I would’ve. If it weren’t for those three kittens. They literally saved her life. Because they scared me right out of the house. I am so thankful they came out of hiding and jumped on her chest. I could never live with myself if I had killed Rose Hart.”

“Do you understand her anger?”

“Yes, and all I can say is how sorry I am,” he said, tears running down his face. “I am so ashamed of myself and my heart is breaking because of what I did that fateful night. I wouldn’t wish what I did on anyone.”

The show continued but my mind drifted. I felt bad. This young man had such a bright future ahead of him and it was shattered by one act of taking some drugs. And I felt bad for his mother. She was so caring and she was deeply sorry. I didn't want to hurt anyone or take away her precious son. I didn't want to break up families or ruin his life. I just wanted justice.

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I went home in a daze. After a nap, I went to the park to see the ducks and be alone.

I pondered everything as I watched the ducks swim around the big pond. And I prayed. I played worship music and I worshipped. And prayed some more.

I came home and played with my three kittens using a variety of fun cat toys. I was their bridge to a forever home. These three would soften the hearts of anyone who met them.

At least that was the plan.

I knew it would be hard to say goodbye when they had been such a valuable part of my life. I lay on the couch and watched TV as all three cuddled on my chest. I softly stroked them. They purred and I knew I was their special human.

I thought it would be wonderful to place these cats into their forever family but I had now realized that *I was their forever family*.

They had beat all the odds, and so had I. We had both been given second chances at life. I just couldn't say goodbye because the bond was now too strong. And they had literally saved my life. How could I give my fur baby heroes away?

These cats were forever loved and officially had a home with me.

These babies were *mine*.

## Chapter 26

Sue, Ethan, and Casey came over that night, and I couldn't wait to give them the big announcement, that I was adopting all three kittens. Yes, their adoption was official. I couldn't be more thrilled.

"I have something really special to tell you," I said, my smile widening.

"What is it?" Casey asked.

"Oh! I'm on pins and needles," Sue said.

"Please, don't leave us in suspense," Ethan laughed.

I smiled and brought them my trio of kittens with their adorable rhinestone collars. "I am a strong woman. I've conquered so many things over the last two years. After everything I've been through, raising kittens should be a breeze."

"You can do this," Ethan said with a huge smile.

"You're keeping them?" Sue asked.

"Yes! It's official!" I squealed in excitement.

They both clapped and cheered and we all were so happy.

“That means you have to name them,” Sue said. “I have so been waiting for this moment!”

Ethan nodded. “Yup. I’m excited to hear their names.”

My sister lit up. “Yes! What are the names? Because I know each one of these cats has their own unique joyful and happy personality.”

“They definitely have their own personalities, that’s for sure,” I said.

“Chance, Hope, and Faith. Chance is because she got a second chance in life. When I found her, she was on death’s door and the vet didn’t think she would make it. She had lost too much weight and looked like a skeleton, but I nursed her back. And Hope, well, the name 'Hope' represents her journey from a difficult past to a brighter future. And Faith, symbolizes trust and faith.”

“I love them!” Casey said. “This calls for a celebration.”

“Next round of ice cream is on me!” Sue said.

I laughed. “Let me guess? From my fridge?”

“You know it!”

Casey smiled. “Well, Mom bought like four kinds of ice cream, so I think we’re all set for the ice cream social.”

Sue collected the kitties and said, “Group hug!”

We all hugged with the kittens and I knew they would have a fantastic home. I knew that I could be a good cat owner. Now everything was complete. I was sober. I had a solid relationship with God, my family, my friends, loved my job, had a home, a car, a church, and my kittens. I guess I was scared to take that last final leap into being a responsible adult. I was scared I would screw it all up. That I couldn’t handle it.

I snuggled and petted my fur babies. I talked to each one and welcomed them officially to the family. I think I was scared of commitment. This living being is completely dependent on me and I was going to be a committed, responsible pet owner. I viewed these kittens as valued family members and I loved them more than anything.

“I also have news,” Sue said. “Now that things are settling, and Football Boy is locked up, I’m gonna go back home. I packed up my suitcase and I’m heading out in a few hours. Unless you really need me here for moral support. Because I won’t leave my bestie if she doesn’t want me to go.”

I met her gaze. “Really? You’re leaving?”

“Only if you don’t need me.”

“I’m totally okay with it. And I can’t thank you enough for being here for me. I loved having a temporary roommate.”

“It was fun while it lasted. But I need to get back to the office. Working from home is too distracting. And I miss my bed. But... How about we play some games or pick out a movie?”

“That sounds like fun,” Casey said. “How about Monopoly?”

Ethan cocked a brow. “What? We’ll be here all night.”

“True to dat,” I said with a giggle.

“How about Jenga?” I asked.

“Or that drawing game?” my sister asked.

Sue smiled. “Let’s do both!”

We played for a few hours, dished out ice cream, then Casey left, and Sue too. It was just me and Ethan. We decided to just talk for a little bit. I accidentally brought up the ex and he asked me questions. I told him how awful he was and everything he did to me. Ethan told me he hadn't dated seriously in three years. He was thirty-two years old. His girlfriend of five years had left to go to school to become a fashion designer in Paris and had no interest in God. He hadn't heard from her since the breakup.

"I don't date," I said. "I'm trying to get my life back together."

"You've done a great job rebuilding your life."

"Thanks. I don't have a lot of trust, faith, or confidence when it comes to dating."

"You're so beautiful. Any man who gets the chance to date you is a lucky guy."

"Thank you. And you're a handsome guy I get to call my friend."

"So, am I in the friend zone? Sorry, I have to ask and know where I stand. And if I am in the friend zone, it's totally okay."

"I feel like there's more between us," I admitted.

He shot me that white movie star smile. "I am thinking the exact same thing."

I grinned.

He pushed a stray strand of hair from my eyes. "Don't be afraid to love again, to try again," he said softly. "Don't let your past harden your heart."

A tear dripped down my face as I thought about those words.

He softly touched my cheek. "I'm not him, Rose. I promise I will never be like him."

"I know that," I whispered. "That's why I would love to give this a chance."

"Being with you feels so right. Since that day I met you in the coffee shop, I can't stop thinking about you."

"I felt the connection the second I met you," I said.

"I love spending time with you. And I love your smile, and your laugh, and the way you look at me. And I just want you to know that you don't have to do this on your own. I am here. Just lean on me."

I hugged him and just held on as he softly stroked my back. And we just had this long moment. We held each other and no words were needed.

My mom called and I didn't want to answer.

"You better talk to her," he said.

I laughed and picked up the phone. I had a short conversation with my mom who had just heard Sue was moving out. I assured her everything would be fine. After I hung up, Ethan stood.

"I have to work early in the morning," Ethan said. "But Pictionary was a blast."

"It was. You had me laughing so hard with some of those pictures you drew."

"Like the stallion picture?"

I couldn't help but giggle. "I so thought it was a dog."

"And so did the others. I definitely need drawing lessons ASAP."

I laughed.

"Thanks for stopping by," I said. "I'll walk you out."

His phone dinged and he checked the message and laughed.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s my grandma. She forwards every joke, funny TikTok, current news, chain letters, and anything else you can think of. Look at this dancing cat she sent me.”

I glanced down and laughed at the performing kitty. “Your grandma sounds amazing.”

“She is. And she calls me every week. Even when she’s traveling.”

“Where does she travel to?”

“Any place with a beach.”

“A woman after my own heart. I adore and love the beach.”

“Me too.”

We stepped outside and Ethan pulled me close, putting his arms around my waist.

He stared into my eyes. “Just in case you didn’t know, I had a really great time.”

I grinned. “Me too.”

“Goodnight,” he said, kissing me softly on the cheek.

“Goodnight,” I replied, completely smitten.

He smiled as I walked him to his car. I loved lacing my fingers through his, loved leaning my head on his arm. I felt like I was walking on clouds and I felt giddy like a schoolgirl. I watched his car drive off and couldn’t stop smiling.

How could I get a guy like that? I came with so much luggage. I knew we were friends and I wasn’t expecting more, although the sparks between us were flying. I thought I had everything already. And now I got a bonus: romance. It was like the cherry on top of the Sunday. God had truly blessed me.

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When I woke up, I felt like a cup of coffee at my favorite coffee shop. It didn’t take too long for me to get noticed and the long stares made me uncomfortable.

I couldn’t go anywhere. My case was all over the news. I’m sure everyone had their own opinion. But I didn’t want to live like a prisoner in my own home.

I hurried out of the coffee shop and noticed I was being tailed by a reporter.

*Not again!*

People enjoyed hearing all the details of my pain and misery. The girl beaten with a bat by an irresponsible party goer.

The second I spotted him; he fired off a question.

“How are you?”

“You go first, then, we can compare,” I said.

He inched closer. “Do you feel like it isn’t just your life that’s been affected by violent crime?”

“Please, leave me alone,” I begged.

“Okay, I will.”

“Hmm. Just like that?”

“I’m a reputable journalist. I behave responsibly. If you tell me to leave, then I’ll go. I’m not like those aggressive guys following you last week.”

“Thank you.”

“It seems like you don’t like our kind much. How about I talk to you nicely with respect? I have a daughter your age. After what happened to you, I installed a security system. Because I’m a dad. And my heart goes out to you and your family for this tragedy.”

I sipped my coffee. “Thank you. It’s nice to see the human side instead of the frenzied sharks.”

“You’re in our thoughts and prayers.”

“Thanks.”

“Would you mind answering my first question?” he asked.

“Fair to partly cloudy.”

He cocked a brow. “Huh?”

“You said, “How are you? I am answering your question. I’m fair to partly cloudy.”

He laughed. “I meant my second question then. Do you feel like it isn’t just your life that’s been affected by violent crime?”

“No. It’s the ripple effect. My sister still has nightmares about finding me half-dead. My parents are traumatized by it. Everyone close to me has been affected.”

“The second Edward Williams ate that shroom, he was about to shatter the lives of three families. He and his family. You and your family. And Bobby Greenwood and his family. And divide the entire country with his actions.”

“Is that your angle?” I questioned.

“Yes. And I already interviewed Edward Williams and your ex.”

“Edward Williams never gave one thought to the consequences,” I said. “It’s sad. And people think just because he was a good kid, it’s okay. But it’s not. Why does he get a free pass just because he’s an honor roll student? Does anyone care about what I went through?”

“I do. I’m a human first and a journalist second. My name is Albert Parson. I work for the New York Times. My job is to connect with people, telling their brave stories with respect and dignity. My job is to get the information and tell the truth.”

“Thank you,” I said sitting down on a nearby bench under a tall palm tree. “I’ll answer some questions.”

“That’s wonderful. Where would like to start?”

“The wonderful morning before the attack.”

“Okay, let’s start there.”

I told him about my special date cake that read 365 for that many days clean and sober. And he was genuinely happy for me. I told him about the glass smashing, and then I paused as the memories flooded in.

“What was going on in your mind when you realized you were in danger?”

“It happened too fast. There was no time to think. But I do remember thinking why would someone do this to me?”

A tear fell down my cheek as emotion consumed me.

“Are you able to tell me more about what happened? If not, we can skip that part.”

I told him. And I talked about how I was recovering from all the injuries and all the fear afterward. I told him about the pain my family went through. We talked about difficult things, but he listened and

was different from the others. He asked me what my thoughts and feelings were. And I told him everything.

He thanked me for the interview and I headed home. I was confident that my side of the story would come out and that people would understand what I went through. And understand why justice needs to prevail.

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Later that night, Ethan stopped by and brought some Chinese food over with my favorite chicken egg rolls. We decided that we were going to do a bible study over the book of Luke. I really wanted to learn more about Jesus. I felt a hunger to study the Word.

When we got to Luke 37, I read it. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; 38 give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

I looked up at Ethan. “Does that mean I have to forgive the person who tried to murder me?”

“You do,” he slowly whispered.

“But I still want justice.”

“Then you haven’t fully forgiven him.”

I crossed my arms. “C’mon! How do you expect me to forgive that guy?”

“The same way Jesus forgave you.”

I sighed and my eyes teared up. “I just can’t.”

“Pray about it,” he said. “Put it in God’s hands.”

“I announced on national television that I wanted justice.”

“Well...things change. There’s nothing wrong with a change of heart. And there’s nothing wrong with forgiveness either.”

## Chapter 27

I went to a doctor’s appointment for a follow-up from the attack. I walked into a giant waiting room and it was crowded. Maybe I could catch up on some funny pet videos my mom sent to me. I let out a soft chuckle. No, I would save that for home. Having a good laugh here wasn’t the way to go.

I sat down and thumbed through a magazine. A flash of light exploded in my face. I squinted and looked. A man with a camera was snapping pictures.

“Please stop,” I said, placing my hands over my eyes.

“As you know, your story is making headlines everywhere. I’m with the National Enquirer and I was wondering if I could get an exclusive with you.”

“And you hope to get my attention by blinding me with your camera?”

“Just a few questions please.”

I used the magazine to cover up my face. “I’m literally sitting in the doctor’s office. And I already gave an interview to the New York Times.”

“That boring, rag newspaper? More people read mine. We’re a popular form of journalism. We report in a sensational way that really gets people’s attention.”

“Aren’t you more into the art of the garbage search?”

“I don’t publish tabloid trash.”

“You publish lies.”

“If I published lies, then why fly down here? I could simply make this stuff up in my office. But I search for truth so let me do my job and please answer. Tell me, were you scared when a high school jock broke into your home?”

That question really annoyed me. I put the magazine down and stared at him hard. “Don’t mind me, I’m just looking for your mute button.”

“I get it. You don’t want to talk about the attack, so let’s focus on a different angle. Before we learned the truth, the police said Bobby Greenwood was stalking you and that’s why you got a restraining order. What do you think was going on in his mind?”

“Well, you should know. Aren’t you a glorified stalker yourself?”

“Funny, but I get paid for my stalking. So how does it feel to blame an innocent man? The press and media really put him through the wringer. You must’ve really hated the guy.”

“The police told me it was him.”

A man next to me waved to me. “Hey, you don’t have to answer his questions.”

“This man is right,” I said. “I’m not talking.”

“I interviewed Bobby Greenwood,” the reporter said.

I gasped.

“Thought that might get you talking,” he said.

Bobby sold me out for the almighty dollar. AGAIN. This reporter was taking a different angle and focusing on Bobby. The people were probably tired of the same old story. This guy freshened it up with a new spin: being falsely accused.

The reporter continued, “Bobby said, and I quote, ‘The trauma of being falsely accused can be worse than a bereavement. My life has been ruined and this has been an emotionally, crippling ordeal. I did everything I could do to prove my innocence but my reputation was shattered and I lost my job, friends, and my sense of self-worth. I’m trying to heal and move forward with my life, but it’s hard when your character is constantly in question.’”

I felt just awful and was temporarily speechless.

“What do you think of that statement?” he asked.

“Absolutely devastated. I’m so sorry.”

“Can ‘sorry’ really fix it? He spent time in jail! I think it’s incomprehensible to be accused of a crime that you did not commit. I’m glad truth and justice prevailed for this brave man.”

“You have my picture so please just make up whatever story you want. Isn’t that what the tabloids do anyway? Besides, it looks like I’m the bad guy in your story. And I assure you that I am not!”

“I think this is all about revenge. Bobby threw you out because you were a raging alcoholic who could no longer function and lost her job and went to jail. Is that why you work from home? Can’t get a real job? Are you drunk now, Rose Hart?”

“No! I’ve been sober now for a year! And for the record, I was the one who broke up with him because he was a drunk and stole the rent money!”

I was so tired of the reporters following me and showing up at my home or when I grocery shopped, ran errands, or went to the doctor. It was getting out of control. My attack never made headline news until they found out it was a high school quarterback whacked out of his mind and high as a kite on hallucinogenic magic mushrooms. That’s when the story got juicy. Went viral. That’s when they really started hunting me down. I didn’t want to be the latest news, that shocking crime story that drew everyone’s attention.

I could hear the people around me talking.

“She’s a drunk and forgot to lock the door.”

“They’re definitely gonna give her a Lifetime movie,” one lady said. “She’s just so brave.”

“Her gorgeous ex gets blamed, but it’s the high school football player,” said the person next to me. “That’s definitely a Lifetime movie!”

“That reporter does have a point, though,” another said. “They dragged that poor, innocent guy through the mud.”

“I heard he even lost his job!” somebody said.

“Smut and lies, that’s all a stupid tabloid is good for,” a man said.

“They shouldn’t be using her crime story for “material”, a blonde said.

“I bet Law & Order, CSI, or Criminal Minds rips her story off, they’re always taking real cases from the news headlines,” another said.

I was nervous with a room full of people, all focusing on me, all talking about me.

“I see you’re jittery,” said the reporter. “It’s understandable to be nervous before a doctor’s appointment. Or maybe you’re feeling guilty about what you did to a wonderful, hardworking, responsible, honorable, and caring man.”

“I’m sorry...but are we talking about the same person? Or are you a friend of his?”

“Hey!” A woman said. “Just leave her alone. She almost had her life taken away.”

“You think Bobby Greenwood didn’t almost have his life taken away also?” His attention then shifted to me. “Tell me why you accused him of beating you, almost taking your life, and stalking you afterward. Tell me why you ruined his life.”

“The attack happened exactly one year after we broke up. He had threatened to kill me in the past.”

“And on that night, you couldn’t tell the difference between a teenager and your ex-boyfriend, the love of your life?”

“It was dark and...” I trailed off. “Why are you making me the villain in this story. I’m the victim. I didn’t ask for any of this!”

“You shouldn’t have hung up on him that fateful night,” he said. “That’s what he told me during our interview. Bobby said had you stayed on the phone, he would’ve heard someone breaking in and would’ve called the police.”

“I’m well aware. He’s expressed this to me. And I am sorry I hung up.”

“Dumb move.”

“Bobby was right. I should’ve stayed on the phone. But I thought Bobby was the one outside and I was trying to play like I wasn’t home. I had no clue a maniac was on the other side of the door casing my house.”

“Maybe Bobby’s life would be different right now had you chatted with him,” the reporter said. “The correct person would’ve been taken to jail in the first place. And Bobby wouldn’t have lost his job and his respect. People wouldn’t hate him. He wouldn’t have to hide his face in this town.”

At this point, my hands shook. “I’m sorry.”

“Tell me. Why couldn’t you manage to have a conversation with him? Weren’t you curious what he was up to after a year? He was very cordial on the phone. Just wanted to see how you were doing.”

“You have no idea what I went through with him,” I said. “So, the answer to your question is no, I didn’t want to see him or talk to him. I heard from friends that he was doing well. And that was good enough for me.”

A tall, muscular man in scrubs walked over. “If you don’t have an appointment, I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave. Or I’m calling the police.”

“I have an appointment,” he said. “Made one earlier.”

“This is a dumb place to interview me,” I said.

“I figured you wouldn’t cause a scene or run from me.”

“Why do you take Bobby’s side?”

“Bro code.”

I rolled my eyes.

My doctor came out and winked at me, like don’t worry, I’ve got this all handled.

He then proceeded to look at the reporter. “Sir, I’ve got that rash cream you were looking for. And whenever you’re ready, one of the nursing students is ready to get some practice and give you that shot of penicillin to really help get rid of that nasty rash.”

He blushed. We smiled. He then made a run for it out of the office.

The doctor called out to him, “Please don’t make any *rash* decisions. We gotta get this cleared up.”

“Cancel the appointment,” the reporter yelled back.

“Guess he didn’t want that rash cream after all,” I said.

The entire office of people applauded and laughed.

My doctor smiled. “Come on back, Rose.”

“Thanks for coming to my rescue.”

“Not a problem.”

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I had invited Ethan to teach Sunday school with me this Sunday. It was my first class since before everything that had happened. I pulled up the next teaching and it was all about forgiveness. Nobody planned it. It just happened to be the next lesson. We presented it to the class that we forgive others not just once or even seventy times, but countless times.

I looked over at Ethan and gently tapped his arm. “What are the chances this lesson came up?”

He smiled. “One in a million. God is speaking to you.”

I grinned, then faced the class. We had two backpacks sitting on the table. The blue backpack was heavy with books. And the red backpack had nothing in it and was light.

I pointed to the bags. “We want each person to wear the blue backpack and walk from one side of the room to the other. Then slip it off, and do the exact same thing with the red one. Okay?”

They formed a line and started the experiment. Ethan and I joined in and tried on both backpacks too.

“Now which one is easier to carry?” I asked when they finished. “The red one or the blue one?”

“The red one, because it’s lighter!” a girl said.

“The blue one was too heavy,” a little boy said.

“We all want to carry the light one,” I said.

Ethan nodded in agreement. “Because who wants to carry a heavy backpack?”

“Not me!” a girl answered.

“Me either,” Ethan said. “Because grudges and unforgiveness can weigh us down just like that heavy backpack.”

“I don’t want that,” a little boy said.

“Have you ever forgiven someone?” Ethan asked.

A girl in a pink dress jumped up and down. “Yes. I forgave my brother when he threw his shoe at me.”

“It can be hard to forgive someone for doing something so mean. But Jesus wants us to forgive.”

“Yes. And I felt better afterward.”

“God forgives us no matter what, so we should show grace, love, and forgiveness to others.”

Ethan looked at me and I met his gaze. He could see the tears forming in my eyes. Here I am teaching about forgiveness when I can’t even do it myself. I felt like a hypocrite. I should be stripped from my Sunday School teacher title.

And then a little boy asked me a question that really hit me hard.

“Should we forgive everyone?” he asked.

I cleared my throat. “Yes.”

“Even if they do something really, really bad?”

I bit my lip and Ethan jumped in.

“Yes, we must forgive everyone because that’s what Jesus wants us to do. Forgiveness isn’t easy but God wants to help us. It’s okay to feel mad, sad, or embarrassed. Just don’t stay that way. Jesus says we should forgive someone 70 x 7.”

“How much is that?” a girl asked.

“I’m glad you asked that question.” Ethan dumped a huge bag of candy onto the table. “Let’s count 70 pieces and make 7 piles.”

I watched as the kids all started counting and making the piles. My stomach was in knots. This was really hitting home with me.

“That’s a lot!” a boy yelled. “So much!”

“We need to thank God for His abundant mercy and forgiveness and ask for His help in being merciful to those around us, even when forgiveness can be very challenging.”

The illustration really hit home. I felt sick to my stomach. When the kids left, I collapsed into Ethan’s arms and he just held me as I cried.

I wiped the tears from my face. “Ethan, what are the chances that particular lesson came up? It’s like God is speaking to me.”

He softly stroked my back, comforting me. “Just keep praying about it.”

“My family forgave me for all the awful things I did to them when I was a drunk.”

“Holding onto anger and resentment isn’t good. Embrace forgiveness and move forward.”

“I want to. But that man tried to murder me in cold blood. I can still feel the bat hitting my body. How do you forgive a person like that? How do you forgive an...almost killer?”

“It’s a process. And it’s something you can’t do overnight. But you can do it through the strength of Jesus Christ who lives in you.”

“Why is it so hard? I want to keep on hating him. Nobody knows what I went through. The pain. The fear. The terror. Who grabs a baseball bat and attacks an innocent woman for no reason? He tried to take away my life. Do you know how much I’ve been changed by this senseless act of violence?” My voice wavered. “I will never be the same again. He left a wake of destruction behind him. It wasn’t only me he affected, but my parents, my sister, my friends, my family.”

He held me close as I processed everything. “You can’t let hate and bitterness take over your life. It’s a complex and complicated process, but forgiveness is not about absolving the person of their horrible crime. It doesn’t mean you are okay with what happened. But you have decided to let God be the mighty avenger. God is the judge, not you, Rose.”

“I don’t want unforgiveness to steal my joy. And I want to set myself free from this heavy burden on my shoulders. Because I’m literally suffocating from the pain. But I’m too angry. Matter of fact, I *am* past angry. I feel rage. Pure rage.”

“Remember, we have to love our enemy,” he said softly.

“I just don’t know how to do that. The path is just way too difficult. And I’m just not strong enough.”

“Why don’t you start with Bobby?”

“Why?”

“Well, for starters, you never told him sorry. And the guy is rotten to the core from what you told me, but he didn’t deserve to get blamed for a heinous crime he didn’t commit. It’s a painful, humiliating, and emotional experience. The police and media put him through the ringer. Think about the weight of those accusations. Think of it from his perspective.”

“You’re right. Bobby’s a victim of Ed just like me. He didn’t deserve any of it. He got pulled into the drama whether he liked it or not. I understand how betrayed and angry he feels. I can’t believe I dragged him into this big mess. I guess it’s only natural for him to lash out, fight back, and defend himself. I’m sorry he went through that.”

“Think about forgiving him. Forgiveness can help you heal from your past.”

“I do forgive him for all the mean stuff he said to me and how’s he acted lately. But I can’t forgive him for the past.”

“Carrying around all that anger and resentment isn’t going to give you any peace. I’m sensing all that hatred and anger is masked pain.”

*And that’s what I get for dating a counselor.*

“You’re spot on,” I said. “And I know that forgiveness is healthy, needed, and recommended. All I can tell you is that I’m working on it. Forgiveness can’t be rushed. Because that guy did a number on me.”

We stood there and I held onto him tightly. He just stroked my back and told me everything was going to be okay. God had forgiven me, so why couldn’t I forgive Ed? Or Bobby?

“Hey, it’s a beautiful day,” Ethan said. “What do you want to do today?”

“I’m easy to please. Just give me some sunshine, chirping birds, and blue skies. I want to see life and greenery all around me. Because nature makes me appreciate life...it’s so beautiful and so precious. How does that sound?”

“Completely doable.”

“I just want to be outside. Because when I was in hell, I thought I would never see it again. I thought I was doomed to just fire, torture, and a bleak, scorched landscape. I thought there was no getting out.” I let out a long trembling breath. “But I did. So, I need sunshine. I need fresh air. And I need a cold, bottled water.”

He cocked a brow. “Just one?”

“How about a huge cooler full?”

He chuckled. “And are we taking this huge cooler to the beach or park?”

“The park today, the beach tomorrow.”

He laughed. “Okay. I’m going to pack so much water that I have no idea how I’m going to carry it all.”

A smile spread across my lips. “That sounds like the perfect date!”

“I thought it would be expensive roses, fine jewelry, and pricey candy, but no. It’s water.”

“And don’t forget cheap candy,” I said, picking up a smartie and popping it into my mouth. “You have totally won me over with this bag.”

“That’s all it took?”

“See? Now you’re getting me. I’m low maintenance. Ditch the diamonds and take me to see a sky full of stars. With some Smarties.”

He couldn’t help but grin. “You’re the most caring, sweetest, genuine girl I’ve ever met.”

“Complement accepted. Thank you. And I think you’re pretty awesome yourself.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I mean every word. I love your honesty and sincerity,” he said.

“I hope you know, I’m only sweet because I’ve nibbled on so much of this candy you brought.”

He chuckled. “Guess you’ll even get sweeter by the time this bag is finished.”

I smiled. “You’re more than welcome to join me.”

He picked up a few packages and stuck them in his pocket and I grinned.

“Listen, I have to stop at my mom’s house and help her with a few things,” he said. “I promise I won’t be long. How about we meet later this afternoon, like dinnertime?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

## Chapter 28

I went home and Ethan was supposed to come over and pick me up a few hours later. I texted Sue that I was going to the park with Ethan. The next thing I know, she showed up at my door.

“You’re still in need of a serious fashion intervention,” she said.

“Oh, stop it, you!”

“You’re about as far from hip as someone can get. Look, I’m only telling you this as a loving friend. I won’t even go on about the dark circles, your brows, or out-of-date hairstyle.”

“I let myself go.”

“And that’s why I’m here. Just let me cut ten inches off and give you some layers,” she said. “It’s time to get your glam on, girlfriend.”

I laughed.

Sue spent hours on me. She dyed my hair with deep blonde highlights, cut my hair, waxed my brows, did my makeup, and painted my toenails.

“Good thing his mom needed help putting that dishwasher in,” Sue said. “Gives us a little bit more time.”

“I didn’t tell you to dye my hair. You just kind of threw that on me.”

“But girl, you needed it. And you’ll thank me when I’m done.”

“I’m excited to see the final product.”

“You’re going to love it. So, tell me, what’s it like to date a therapist?”

“We’re not officially dating,” I said.

“Yeah, you are.”

“Not officially.”

“Just answer the question. What’s it like to date a therapist?”

“You can’t hide.”

She chuckled. “Not to mention, you’ll always have a shoulder to cry on.”

I smiled. “Yeah, and he’s so patient with me. He never judges my past. I can just be myself and talk freely with him. He makes me feel safe and comfortable, and he knows how to make me laugh. I just love everything about him.”

“And don’t leave out what a hottie he is!”

We both laughed.

After fifteen minutes of primping, I was finally ready. I wore a cute white sundress with white heels. When I looked in the mirror, I didn’t even recognize the woman staring back at me. My long, blonde hair spiraled down my back in glorious curls, and the highlights really popped.

“Thanks, Sue! You did an amazing job.”

“Now go have fun today.”

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Ethan and I went to the park and took a row boat in this huge pond. We planned to have dinner afterward at this cute little restaurant that was within walking distance. I waved and he smiled at the sight of me, and then started walking over. He carried a small, vertical, crossbody cooler on his shoulder. I was sure it was filled with ice and lots of bottled waters. He had remembered my

comment about wanting all that water. But if anyone had ever been to hell and experienced that kind of intense thirst, I'm telling you, water would be your constant companion twenty-four seven. Man, Ethan was the sweetest for thinking of me.

"Hi Ethan."

"Hi Rose. Seeing your beautiful face is the highlight of my day."

A huge grin spread across my face. "Right back 'atcha."

He stared at me for a moment, then smiled. "You are simply breathtaking!"

"Thank you so much. Sue came over and told me I needed to get more hip."

"All I can say is wow. You look incredible."

I blushed. "Thank you. And so are you, but uh...in the boy version."

He laughed.

We walked over to the lake, picked out a boat and got started. It wasn't crowded and we practically had the entire pond to ourselves.

Ethan started to row the boat and I took in all the scenery around me. Every little thing fascinated me. I soaked up every tiny detail from a leaf floating around in the water to a stream of air bubbles from some random fish.

"Did you ever stop and slow down and marvel at God's creation?" I asked.

"All the time."

"Me, not so much. Not until now."

"What do you think?"

"God has definitely grabbed my attention, that's for sure. And look at all of this beauty. It's just stunning. Just like our Creator."

"We're literally surrounded by the work of His hands."

"Okay, it's my turn now," I said. "I'm not going to make you do all the rowing."

He kept paddling. "I just want you to stare at the sky and all your surroundings. Don't worry. I've got this, Rose."

I looked up at the pretty blue sky as the white clouds drifted by. It was the perfect day, and the weather was delightful.

"I needed this," I said with heartfelt emotion.

"Soak in all the sun you need. And drink all the water you want."

"Nobody has any idea what I endured that horrible night. Not just the earthly pain, but the supernatural pain in hell."

His face was painted with concern. "I know how hard this all is."

"Just staring at the most beautiful blue sky, the fluffy clouds, listening to the chirping birds, feeling the sun on my skin, being able to breathe clean, fresh air, and being here with you, it's nothing short of amazing. I wasn't supposed to see any of this ever again. So..." A tear dripped down my cheek. "It's mind-blowing. And I feel bad for the other souls still down in that awful place."

"God gave you a second chance."

"And I want to make the most of it. I never want to screw it up again."

"You won't."

“I feel like I want to warn everyone. But I have no idea how. People go through this life so unconcerned and don’t give one thought to hell. If they only knew what was waiting for them if they reject Jesus and the Gospel.”

“There’s a way to escape hell, and I spend all my extra time trying to warn people,” he said.

“I think it’s admirable.” I took a swig of water and pondered. “All the people that die without Jesus, well, my heart just aches. Because I know what will happen to them. I experienced it myself. And it’s like something out of a horror movie. I’m telling you; nobody wants to fall into that pit and see what I saw. I can’t even begin to tell you about the fear and anxiety I experienced when I realized where I was. It’s just awful. I see why Jesus warned us about it so much.”

“People accuse me of using scare tactics.”

“It’s more real than anything. People need to be warned about its existence and reality. It’s the most terrifying place ever. People need to avoid that dreadful place at all costs. I want to write down all my thoughts I had when I was down there. I want to tell everyone everything, every little detail, every smell, how the fear overwhelmed me.”

“I think writing it down is a great idea. Your story needs to be told.”

“I’m scared they won’t believe me.”

“You have proof you died. That’s huge.”

“I am so thankful that Jesus died on the cross to forgive me of my sins; to keep me from going to that horrible place for all of eternity. He gave me an exit strategy just like you told me the day I met you in the coffee shop.” I pondered. “Do you know when I was in hell, I thought about your words.”

“I didn’t think you paid attention.”

“I did. And when I was in hell, they haunted me.” I let out a long breath. “Do you think we could just spend some time in prayer? In the middle of this amazing lake.”

I would love that.

We spent time praying. And I felt so much peace and love. Ethan pulled out his bible and we read a few psalms that were just so calming. Psalms 104 was so cool to read while enjoying this lake, this warm breeze, and this awesome day. It was a hymn of praise about the sovereignty and majesty of God as creator. I loved how it praised God and the wonders of creation.

After meditating on everything, we had a blast soaring around the lake and soaking in all the natural beauty around us. Ethan made me laugh and I loved that about him.

I didn’t want Ethan to do all the work so I insisted he let me help. “Can I please take a turn now?”

“I got this,” he answered.

“But you need a break. And I promise I won’t run over any ducks.”

We both laughed.

We changed positions, and I started to row. “See? I already got the hang of it.”

Laughing he gazed at me. “We’re going in circles.”

“Um... Just need a minute to study the lay of the land.”

He smirked.

I gazed into his blue eyes and couldn’t help but notice how the sunlight made them glitter. Everything was always more beautiful and vibrant when he was around me. I watched his dark hair get

tousled in the wind and couldn't help notice how handsome he looked. Ethan was movie star kind of handsome. He had high angular cheekbones. He was clean-shaven. And he was so fine to look at.

"I think I'm obsessed with water now," I said, taking a swig of my bottled water. "I just want sun and water on my skin."

"That's completely doable." He splashed a little water on me. There was a kind of playfulness about him and I laughed.

I splashed some water back. We went back and forth, and then we just stared into each other's eyes.

For a moment, I could hardly breathe.

And those stupid butterflies fluttering in my stomach!

He shot me that perfect, white smile.

*Why can't I stop staring at him like an idiot?*

He pushed a wet strand of hair from my face and my heart skipped a beat. I couldn't stop staring into the depths of those piercing blue eyes. I had been completely captivated by him. I knew there was no way to hide my emotions.

I cleared my throat. "Um, next time, let's do dinner first. Then splash around in the water."

"Rose..."

"Um, yes..."

"What's going on between us?" he asked.

"We're trying to navigate this lake," I joked. "And then you splashed me. So, there was a little payback. I think we got a little too carried away."

He sucked in a deep breath, eyes taking in every inch of my face. "I feel like there's more."

"Well, if it's any consolation, you make me feel weak in the knees every time you touch me," I confessed.

"Really?"

"I think so," I teased. "But I'll need more dates to find out."

His face lit up with a charismatic grin. "Yes, many more dates are needed."

We held each other's gaze for what seemed like forever.

"Do you think I'll succumb to your irresistible charm?" I asked, breathless.

He winked. "Darling, I know you will."

I playfully slapped his arm. "Well, we will definitely see."

"Challenge accepted," he said with a huge smirk.

My face beamed.

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After the boat ride, we sat in the sun and dried off some, dropped off his cooler in his truck, then headed to lunch. We had a cute little table outside and I loved listening to the birds chirping their happy tunes. We started talking and Ethan kept making me laugh. I loved laughing. I can't believe I had forgotten what it was like to smile and laugh and hear someone laughing at my jokes. It was just the best feeling in the world. I hadn't been this happy in a long time.

Ethan handed me a small box. "I got you a little something."

I was completely surprised. "Oh, you didn't have to."

“I wanted to.”

I opened the box and it was a gold rose and diamond heart pendant.

My eyes welled up with tears. “It’s beautiful, and it’s the most thoughtful present anyone has ever gotten me.”

He touched my hand. “The rose is for your name, and the heart is for your last name.”

“Rose Hart,” I said, softly. “I love it.”

I was so excited. Ethan really took the time to think about me, and it made me feel absolutely amazing. This wonderful man made my life even more beautiful. And I couldn’t thank God enough for bringing him into my life.

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I went to church on Sunday morning and the most epic song came on. It was Glorious Day by Passion and we were all worshipping and singing. But the lyrics that touched my heart were:

*I was breathing, but not alive  
All my failures I tried to hide  
It was my tomb  
‘Till I met you.*

*You called my name  
Then I ran out of that grave  
Out of the darkness  
Into Your glorious day*

*Now Your mercy has saved my soul  
Now Your freedom is all that I know  
The old made new  
Jesus, when I met You, whoa, what a day*

My thoughts raced. I thought about the lyrics. I was breathing but not alive. I tried to hide all my failures and rebuild my life on my own. It was definitely my tomb. I was in hell...then Jesus called my name. And I ran out of that grave! Literally! My old life was made new. I ran out of the darkness and into His glorious day. Whoa, what a day! Praise the Lord! Those lyrics summed up my life, that was for sure. I downloaded the song on iTunes and put it on my playlist.

I reflected about everything. My once normal life was interrupted which caused a sort of ‘ripple effect’ on all corners of my life. I was desperately trying to clear the rubble and repair all the damage; and the emotional aftermath sure took its toll, but I worked through difficult things and God definitely helped me through this brutal time. Sometimes, I felt like this path was nothing but a maze. Even still, I was hopeful things would return to normal at some time. Things had settled some and I was thinking more clearly, working things out at my own speed. I was open with my emotions and fully trusted God. I learned that no matter what trauma anyone suffers, healing comes through Jesus Christ.

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Later that day, Sue was on her way over and I told her the door was open, just to come yell for me when she came. We were just going to hang out outside and have a little barbecue. I wanted to start working on my thoughts. Because Sue was always late.

As I typed away, my three feline companions played around my desk and swatted at the computer screen as my cursor arrow moved around. I laughed. It was funny how they thought they could virtually catch it as it slid around on the screen. Their fluffy faces darted back and forth, studying everything intently. They were beyond adorable. I spent an hour on the project. Time just flew right by.

“Hey,” Sue said coming into my office. She looked at my screen. “Editing another fantasy?”

“I’m writing down my story, from the break-in to the hell experience.”

“Writing a book?”

“Maybe an article or something.”

She picked up my kitten, Chance, and kissed her on the nose. “I think writing a book can be a healing journey for you.”

“I wouldn’t even know what to name a book like that.”

“How about, ‘I survived.’ Or ‘Surviving Horror’. Choosing a title has to capture the essence of your story. What sums up everything?”

I thought about when I called on Jesus when I was in hell. He literally came down and saved me from that fiery pit. Then a title jumped into my head.

“I know,” I said. “Snatched from the Flames.”

“Oh, that’s good! And you’ll make a ton of money from this.”

My gaze narrowed. “No, I don’t care about the money. You’re missing the point. I’m giving it away for free.”

She looked dumbfounded. “Why?”

“To warn people about hell, to tell them how God saved me, to tell my story. I have a duty to tell people what’s down there. And the Lord told me to tell people. I experienced it firsthand and I don’t want a single person to ever go there.”

“But you can’t give paperbacks out for free. No way will a publisher do that. It costs money for ink and paper.”

“You’re right. But I can give it away digitally.”

“Like an e-book?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“Seriously, you don’t even need to include the hell part. The tragic, true-life story about a rich, Harvard-bound, popular, high school quarterback taking mushrooms and almost killing you would make a great Lifetime movie all by itself. Not to mention, an awesome book. It could be a story about drugs, attempted murder, and the wrong guy getting blamed. Nobody suspected the high school quarterback! And you could sell it for cheap online. Like those \$2.99 eBooks. You could make a killing!”

“Leave out hell?” I cocked a brow. “You don’t believe me?”

She petted my kitten, Faith. “I’m iffy on the hell part. But you know me, I’m a skeptic.”

“It’s okay, I know there’s nothing I can say to convince you to believe me. All I can do is tell you the truth.”

“I know you’re being honest, and I just need more time to try and figure out things.”

“That’s okay, I still love you.”

“Awww. I love you too. I know you’re a Christian. And I understand what you’re trying to do.” I smiled and she continued. “But I noticed something.”

“What?”

“Well, Christianity is a religion of love and forgiveness which is considered central in the Christian faith. But you have unforgiveness in your heart. You haven’t forgiven Bobby. And you haven’t forgiven Edward Williams. I know those are two horrible people that did awful things to you. But if you’re a so-called Christian, why haven’t you forgiven them?”

Her question threw me off guard. Her words hit me hard when she said I refused to forgive.

I didn’t know how to answer. My mind raced.

She was so right.

I sighed. “I’m working on that. But it’s a process.”

“I know you’re going through so much and I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re right. I know toxic resentment, hate, and anger can be poisonous. And I’m really trying.”

“I’m sorry if I upset you. You don’t have to forgive them. I mean, I don’t forgive them. But then again, I’m not a Christian.”

Hope jumped up on my shoulder and started snuggling into my hair. I petted her and pondered Sue’s thoughts. “You brought up a valid point.”

“Well, they’re both creeps. You don’t have to forgive either of them.”

“But I do,” I whispered.

“Girl, you do that, and the book will be even better. A true-life story of drugs gone wrong, a break in, attempted murder, a whodunit, the vengeful ex who didn’t have an alibi because he ate too many fish tacos that gave him food poisoning on the exact day of your one-year breakup at your favorite restaurant, blaming the wrong person for the crime, and forgiveness of the perpetrator. Look at all those layers you could dive into. You will sell books like no tomorrow.”

“This isn’t about making profits.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not trying to profit off my crime!”

“You do you then. Give it all away for free if that’s what you want.”

“You missed the point. I’m trying to tell my testimony, to bring people to Christ. That’s the most important thing ever. I’m trying to warn people about what I experienced. If you knew what I went through...I mean, I thought my life was over forever. It was real! I went there. And it was terrifying. I thought I was stuck there forever. I want to make sure nobody I know ever goes there. I want to warn the entire world.”

“I do see where you’re coming from. We’ll talk about this later. But right now, it’s hamburger time! And you promised me extra tomatoes and onions.”

The subject got too heavy for her. I wasn't trying to push, but she needed to know the horrors I faced. It was unimaginable. There were creatures that literally tried to tear me apart from limb to limb. I was given a second chance and I was going to make the most of it. Jesus saved me so I could warn people that a literal hell exists. And I was going to go full throttle on this. I was never going to sweep this under the rug. I was going to scream it from the rooftops. I took a deep breath to calm down and let it out slowly.

“Okay, let's fry up some patties,” I said. “And I'll cut up a tomato and an onion.”

She smiled. “Good because I'm starving.”

## Chapter 29

“We'd better get going if you want to catch that ziplining tour,” said Ethan. “We have a long drive.”

I lit up from excitement. “Can't wait!”

I wore a pair of lightweight black pants, a royal blue shirt with a sweetheart neckline, and comfortable tennis shoes. I pulled my hair into a tight ponytail. At the site, we were given a crash-course orientation, and then we signed our lives away on far too many disclaimers and waivers.

We climbed to the platform high in the trees.

“Oh,” I said, a little spooked.

“We don't have to go,” Ethan said. “It's no biggie.”

“No. I trust in God completely. Besides, there's no way I'd miss this. I need to prove to myself that I can do this,” I said. “I know it sounds weird, but it will help me move forward with my life. The old me would never do something this crazy, but I'm not her anymore.”

He touched my face. “At least you don't have to do this alone.” His eyes told me he was referring to far more than our ziplining escapade.

The guy in charge told us to wait over to the left, behind some teenagers, a man in his late forties, and a brave, sweet granny. When I saw the old woman push off, hooting and shouting about how fun it was, it gave me all the courage I needed.

I put on my helmet and smiled. A tall man helped me into my harness with a carabineer that was attached to a wheel on a cable strung between trees.

“Ready?” Ethan asked.

My toes hung off the platform, and I looked at the steep drop below. It was humid, and a droplet of sweat rolled down my face. I took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. “More ready than I've ever been.”

Hanging on to the cable, I pushed off from the platform. There was suddenly nothing under me except air and the rocky ground way below. I started to pick up speed, cruising downward.

*Swoosh!*

In that single moment, flying over the treetops, so many thoughts washed over me. With God as my refuge, I was safe in His loving arms. I praised God because He was with me. I trusted him with my

whole, entire life and being. I'd been broken, rejected, heartbroken. I was letting go, breaking the chains of the past. There was no room for resentment or regret. I let loose of my previous dreams in order to accept the new life in front of me. I knew I was going to soar.

I let go and leaned backward, spreading my arms out. I did not want to live in pain and loneliness any longer, and I knew I would never achieve what I was capable of as long as I was attached to my old life. I knew at that very moment that I had forgiven Bobby and Edward and everything they put me through. I just let all the pain go and this peace flooded through me.

I gave it to Christ, my Creator and Redeemer and let it go.

High above those trees, I let go of the fear plaguing my life, the anger, hurt, and vengeance, and all of the deep-rooted pain. I let go of Bobby, and my past, so I could move on to the present. I admitted to God all my doubts, fears, and insecurities.

There is a light at the end of the tunnel, I realized. There is always...hope. There is always Jesus.

There was something amazing about letting go, and it felt as if a huge burden had been lifted from my shoulders. I hopped off my emotional rollercoaster, and I accepted my life for what it was. I let go of heartache, I forgave Edward Williams and Bobby, and I was consumed by an amazing sense of peace.

I had never felt better in my life. It was a complete victory, the day I finally let go of my old life. I vowed to rebuild, to find amazing love once again, to get closer to God, to write that book, and do whatever God had planned for my life. I knew, whizzing through the air, that there were endless possibilities for me.

This is just the beginning, a brand new, fresh start.

"Thank you, Jesus!" I shouted through the wind. "For giving me this second chance."

*I plan to make the most of it.*

I felt alive. I was soaring like a bird, from tree to tree, with the wind blowing against my face. A rush of adrenaline shot through me. The whirring of the cable screeched the faster I accelerated. I had a bird's-eye view of the trees and scenery I couldn't see from the ground. It was as close as I'd ever get to flying, skimming across the top of the trees like a rock on a pond. I was so high off the ground, flying between the trees at a height where the birds and other wildlife hung out on the thick branches. What a stunning and unforgettable view it was, and letting go and giving it to Jesus set me free.

The crew pulled me back in and helped me out of my gear, and I waited for Ethan.

Once he was released from the contraption, he shot me a huge smile. "That was amazing, so exhilarating!" he said. "All that speed, height, and the wind whipping in your face. Flying through those trees was such a thrill."

"I know! A total adrenaline rush! I'm so glad we did it."

He flung an arm over my shoulder as we both burst out in excited laughter.

"Me too," he said.

We spent a wonderful Saturday together and got home really late, but I learned something. I felt free and at peace and I was finally ready to forgive.

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It was Monday morning and I was heading back into the kitchen to get my second full cup of coffee when something stuck me: I needed to apologize to Bobby in person.

I knew he was furious with me and going alone to see him might not be the best idea. I pondered as I sat outside on the porch. I read my Bible and prayed about it.

I had made my peace with all those who had hurt me in my past. I even journaled about it.

“I forgive you, Bobby,” I softly said. “And I need to tell you this face to face.”

I needed to forgive Bobby in person and get this off my chest. And I needed to apologize to him for everything he’d been through by being blamed for my attack. I think we both needed closure.

As I drove, I thought about Bobby’s persona. He could fool everyone. Nobody thought he could do any wrong. He was loved by all; the life of the party. He could be charming and funny, but he had a dark side. And I got to meet that manipulative, dark side up-close and personal. But I wouldn’t dwell on that, I was here to make peace.

I drove out to his house and he was sitting on the porch drinking a clear glass of lemonade. I parked and walked up to him.

He stood, frowned, then started to head inside.

“Just go home,” he shouted. “I have nothing to say to you.”

I wouldn’t let his anger deter me. I needed to make peace with him. I knew this would be good for both of us.

I took a few steps to follow him. “Please don’t go. Please hear me out.”

He turned around and gazed at me. “Are you really here by yourself? Shouldn’t you have bodyguards or something? To keep someone like me from trying to kill you a second time. After all, didn’t you tell the world that I’m a dangerous predator that loves to beat women with bats?”

“Well, not bats,” I whispered. *More like fists.*

“What? Cats?”

“Um, yeah, how are your cats?” I asked with a smile.

“They’re doing good. But just cut to the chase. Why are you here? I told you I never wanted to see you ever again. You screwed me over royally.”

I sucked in a deep breath. That really hit hard. I could tell how hurt he was. “About that. Bobby, I am so sorry for everything I put you through. It was a huge mistake, a huge misunderstanding. I know you didn’t try to kill me. We got the DNA results and you’ve been cleared.”

“Tell me something I don’t know. I know that already, and thank goodness. But I’m mad it took science to clear me. You should’ve believed me from the get go. I’ll never forget the way you looked at me when I visited you in the hospital. You were beyond scared. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you that frightened.”

He shifted uneasily against the door and touched his jaw in thought. My heart was aching, bleeding all over the ground.

“I was totally in the wrong,” I admitted.

“You know why I left work early the night of your attack? My stomach hurt. I ate some bad fish tacos at the place where we had our first date. I threw up. So half-way through my shift, I left. Had I known I was going to be accused of a crime. I would’ve stayed at work and thrown up all night with plenty of witnesses!”

“I’m sorry you got sick.”

“I knew that particular day was exactly one year after we broke up. I couldn’t stop thinking about us. I went to eat at ‘our restaurant’ because that’s where we had our first date. I was missing you so much and I wanted to reminisce. I even sat at our old table. I had to drown out the pain so I drank three strong Margaritas. Ate some salsa and chips. Then the dreaded fish tacos. Then I got sick. I then went home and called to tell you that I got violently sick there eating our favorite meal, at our favorite place one year after we broke up. It was like you were giving me payback for all the bad stuff I did to you.”

“Why would you call me?”

“Because of Rita!”

“Who is that?”

“It’s a nickname for a margarita. So, blame it on those darn margaritas! They gave me liquid courage to dial your numbers. But, yes, that’s why I called you. And then you assumed it was me outside your door, stalking you. Truth is, I was on the toilet puking, so no way could I be stalking you.” He paused, then continued, “Do you know how horrible it’s been having everyone blame me for that horrible attack?” he said with a raised brow. “Everyone and I mean *everyone* thinks I’m a psycho stalker. But I’m just a man who lived through a food poisoning nightmare and left work early. I should’ve never gotten the two-for-one special! I lost my job. I was embarrassed. My family has been harassed. I’ve been harassed. Strangers curse me. Everyone hates me. All because of fish tacos!!!!”

“You’re blaming this on fish tacos?”

“You bet I am! I’m definitely blaming fish tacos. Is it a crime to eat fish tacos, and then call you and tell you? The detective wanted to know why I was on your phone records that night. Well, that’s why! Our favorite place to eat, and also our first date is now tainted by that runny situation. Also, had I stayed at work, I would have had a solid alibi. But you know what? I should’ve taken some Imodium sooner and stopped by in person. Because I would’ve caught that punk. But I was out of commission because of those tacos. And I’ll never eat fish tacos as long as I live.”

“Sounds like a solid plan.”

“And I’ll never leave work early ever again.”

“I told you to stop being a party pooper.”

He chuckled. “Rose. Don’t make me laugh when I’m trying to be mad at you. I’m pouring out my heart here.”

“I’m sorry. They just come into my head and I have to say them. And quit blaming the fish tacos.”

“You’re right. It’s all because of a little privileged, rich teenager prick. Yes, a teenager ruined my life! And I’m not even in high school anymore.”

“I am so sorry. But my life was ruined too, the stress, anxiety, and the medical bills,” I shot back, but the moment his face fell, I instantly regretted it. This shouldn’t be about me. I had to think about what he was put through.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know you would trade my attack for yours.”

“No, I wouldn’t. Did I really date you?” He was complaining about a food poisoning nightmare when my nightmare almost killed me. And I wouldn’t wish it on anyone. I wish this guy all the best but I needed to go my own way. My family was definitely right about him from day one.

He pondered for a moment. "I told you that night in the hospital that everyone would owe me a big, huge apology. Including you."

"You were right," I said. "And I'm here to give you that big, huge apology."

"I also want an apology from the press and all social media. Your parents. Your sister. Sue. That private detective your parents hired that followed me all over the place. I also want one from that Detective Gannon who had me locked up in that interrogation room for countless hours for something I had nothing to do with. I thought I was on one of those stupid crime shows. You would not even begin to understand how much this has affected my life. I even passed the lie detector test but they still didn't believe me. Do you think I would lie about pooping my pants? But they made me come clean. I had to admit all those embarrassing facts. Treated me like a crazy psycho who broke into a woman's home and tried to beat her to death. And then you...you believed every word of their lies."

Tears filled my eyes as he poured out his pain. "I never meant to hurt anyone or ruin anyone's life. I'm sorry. I can't apologize enough."

"I'm so mad at you right now."

I swallowed hard. "I know you are. Is that why you talked to the tabloid and the New York Times?"

He sighed. "Rose, my hours suck. I can barely keep the lights on. I just needed the money. It was nothing personal. I was just telling them how I felt and getting a big, fat paycheck at the same time."

"You told them you broke up with me," I pointed out, then crossed my arms over my chest.

"I've told everyone that after you dropped the bomb on me! I wanted to come out smelling like roses. Do you think I want to admit that I was dumped? Sorry, but I had to protect my image here. Oh, and where are my manners? Do you want something to drink?"

"No thanks."

"Afraid I might poison it?"

"Not at all. I just swung by to apologize. And not just for blaming you, but for everything I did in the past. And I want you to know that I forgive you too."

His gaze darkened for a split second before he nodded enthusiastically. "Apology accepted. I could never stay mad at you. And I'm sorry too. But I still have to ask how could you ever think I would hurt you like that?"

I met his gaze. "I'm so sorry."

"You know, that's what hurt me the most. That you would believe it."

"You made threats like that in the past," I reminded him.

"I was drunk out of my mind when I said those things. I would never hurt you. When you left, I gave you your space. I never called you. I never bugged you. I left you alone. Because I loved you and that's what you wanted." He set his drink down. "I even straightened up my life, the same way you did. Because I thought that maybe when we both got straightened out, we could try again."

"You've done so good for yourself."

"Thanks. And so have you. I'm proud of you, Rose. I truly am."

"I'm proud of you too."

"I still think about you," he admitted.

I can't believe he went there. "There were more bad times than good."

His eyes widened. “Oh, come on. We had some fantastic times.”

I sighed, and the look on my face grew serious. “I really hated you for a long time, but I’m here to tell you that I forgive you for all the awful things you did to me.”

“I wasn’t that bad.”

“You stole my car, got me fired, arrested, threw me out in the middle of a blizzard, cheated on me, beat me up. The list goes on!”

“I was a mean drunk and a scoundrel. But I’ve changed. I swear I have. I would never hit another woman, not ever again.”

“I’m happy to hear that.”

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“And I’m sorry too. And I forgive you. We just weren’t good together. Too toxic for our own good.”

I stared at him and could see the emotion on his face.

“But I still love you,” he admitted. “I got food poisoning because of you.”

“I didn’t tell you to go there!”

“I just wanted to think about the good times in a familiar place we both loved.”

My brow wrinkled in confusion. I just stared at him. I didn’t know what to say. After everything he put me through, I knew I could never be with him again.

He reached out for my hands, but I stepped back.

“Things are different now,” I said. “My feelings have changed. I’m not interested in you that way anymore.”

“I wish it hadn’t come to this. You don’t feel a connection between us?”

“I’m sorry. But I don’t.”

He put his arms around me and pulled me close. “How about one last kiss? To see if we still got that spark.”

I gently pushed him away. “Not a chance.”

“I know why,” he said softly. “It’s Ethan. Heard it through the friends’ circle.”

My jaw dropped. “Gotta love gossip. Anyway, we’re just friends. We don’t even know where things are going.”

“I hope everything works out the way you want it to.”

“Thanks.”

“I also heard about your little trip to hell. You know how the gossip goes around here. Is it true?”

I nodded. “Yes. I would love to tell you all about my testimony.”

His eyes darted away from mine. “Maybe another time. I don’t need your Jesus. I just wish things could be like before.”

“Things were horrible before.”

“I don’t drink anymore. You don’t. We never tried to date sober. I will never raise my hand against you. You have my solemn promise. You hardly know Ethan. Me and you had something so special for years. I mean it’s worth a shot. And if you found religion, that’s great. I won’t stop you from praying or going to church.”

“I didn’t find religion. I already had that. And it got me nowhere. I found a true relationship with Jesus Christ. It’s about a relationship with Him, not a religion.”

“You can have your relationship with Him. I’m okay with that. But I’m not sharing you with anybody else.”

“You’re not taking this seriously at all.”

“I’m not ready for a relationship with God at this time. And when I’m ready, I’ll come to you, to personally hear about how you went to hell.”

“I have hospital records that prove I died four times.”

He sipped his lemonade. “If there’s no hope for you, then surely there’s no hope for me.”

“Not true. It’s not about religion or works. It’s not about being a good person. It’s all about believing that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and having an intimate relationship with Him. And I’m telling you that you do not want to visit the place that I did. It was dark. There was fire. And demons tormented me. You need to find Christ while you still have breath. Because once it’s gone, there’s no escape from that hellish nightmare.”

“It wasn’t real.”

“Did you ever die? No. I did. And I know where I went. When I was down there, I had all my senses and all my memories. Hell is real and I don’t want to see that happen to you. And when I came back, I searched for Jesus. Because I never wanted to go there again.”

“Why don’t you tell more people?” he asked.

“Because, like you, they don’t believe me. But I’m telling you because I care about you. I don’t want you to wake up to what I woke up to. Hell is an eternal (Matthew 25:41), physical (Matthew 10:28), and horrifying (Mark 9:43) place. And you need to know!”

Just then, a red car pulled up and a woman about my age with super long curly hair got out. She walked up to the porch with a smile.

“Hi,” she said. “I’m Gwen. I’m Bobby’s girlfriend.”

He has a girlfriend. And then had the nerve to hit on me. Tell me he still loved me. I blew out a breath. I was so happy we were over. I knew that I would pray for him and that he would find salvation in Jesus Christ. I knew I moving forward with my new life. And it felt wonderful to forgive Bobby. I was glad he was moving forward with his life as well.

“I’m Rose. Nice to meet you.”

She grinned. “Likewise.”

Bobby stood. “Listen, Rose, it was good seeing you. And I appreciate the apology.” He then looked at Gwen. “This is my ex. She came over to apologize.”

“Oh, baby, that’s wonderful.”

“I’m so sorry about everything,” I said. “I’m sure he’s filled you in.”

She nodded. “I recognized you from pictures and on, um TV.”

“Maybe we could all have dinner together,” Bobby said.

I tried to smile. “I would love to do some fish tacos sometime. How about at Michael’s Fish House?”

“That’s never happening.” He then turned to Gwen. “That’s her cue that she never wants to have dinner with us.”

I let out a chuckle. “You catch on quick. It’s probably best that way. Bye, guys!”

As I started walking back to my car, I could hear him explaining to her his ‘own’ version. “We had our first date there, and that restaurant is special to her. I think she wants to reconnect. And I don’t want to lead her on, and that’s why I said that’s never happening. I was thinking somewhere neutral. But she picked a place that was so special to us in the past.”

Keyword: *in the past*. I shook my head, having to laugh on his spin on things.

“You still forgive me?” he called out.

“I do. And I was just kidding about the fish place.”

“I knew that. I forgive you too. And you put through a lot, man.”

“I do apologize, sincerely.”

“And I felt that it was genuine,” he said. “Goodbye, Rose.”

“Goodbye.”

I stepped into my car and pulled out.

They both waved to me and I waved back.

## Chapter 30

The next day, my doorbell rang. I answered the door and it was Bobby looking at me with sad eyes.

“Didn’t we just see each other yesterday?” I asked. “I forgave you. But we need to set clear boundaries.”

“I need to figure some things out. I won’t overstay my welcome.”

“What are doing here?” I asked.

“Can I come in?”

“We can talk here on the porch.”

“Scared of me?”

“Nope. I just want to hear what you want to say, and then leave.”

“Fine.”

“What’s up?”

“I need closure. I can’t move any further with Gwen until I have it.”

“What?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, you are coming in between us.”

“How?”

“Because I can’t stop thinking about us. On our one-year breakup, I cancelled plans to take Gwen to an art gallery on her birthday. I spent it by myself at that Mexican restaurant where we had our first date.”

“You should’ve taken Gwen out, and you would’ve never been blamed for my attempted murder.”

“I couldn’t get off work. And I was going to originally call off. But I ended up sulking about us and going to a familiar place we loved, drank some, then went to work, on time I might add.”

“That’s a bad combination.”

“The bad combination was those chicken, beef, and seafood tacos.”

I let out a chuckle. “Yeah, I know all about those. You told me the story.”

He started to pace on the porch. “We had the best time, and then we went to Panama City where everything went haywire. We drank too much. We had a bad night. And then you ended it forever over my drunken behavior. I am so sorry I hit you. I was plastered.”

“It wasn’t the first time. When you get drunk, you tend to beat on me. And my life was going down the drain. Being drunk was destroying my life.”

“But you never gave me a chance to try and stop drinking. You just ended it. And that’s what hurt so much.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You wouldn’t even talk to me when I got back from Panama City.”

“Bobby, I was in rehab. You know that!”

“You wouldn’t talk to me after rehab. You just cut me completely out of your life.”

“I was starting a new life alcohol free.”

“Maybe I would’ve joined you, you know, if given the chance.”

“I thought it was time we went our separate ways.”

He stared into my eyes and gripped my hands. “I loved you so much. You’re the only woman I’ve ever loved in my entire life. And I’ve been with lots of women.”

“I know. You have no shortage of them. Even when I was breaking up with you at the hotel, those cute girls were checking you out.”

“I actually took the brunette out to Paula Deen’s and the restaurant was closed!”

“Go figure.”

“Had I known that, I would’ve picked a different place to write on the dartboard. And maybe we would still be together.”

“Things happen for a reason.”

“I’m so mad that you threw away everything we had. I told my dad you were the one and that I was going to marry you. If I had asked you before the Panama City fiasco, would’ve you have said yes?”

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Then you shouldn’t have given up on us.”

“It would’ve been a dysfunctional marriage.”

He shook his head in denial. “How could you say that?”

“You were always drunk.”

“Not anymore. I’m sober right now. I was sober when you came to my house. I don’t drink like that anymore. How do you think I keep a job now? Well, before I lost it. And that was because of the police investigation against me. But I got a better job making more money doing construction.”

“I’m glad you’re doing good now. I’m glad you’ve changed. And Gwen is a great girl. She’s really pretty. Don’t lose her chasing after your past. We will never get back together. Move onto the future with Gwen.”

“I need to know if I can move on.”

“Yes, you can.”

“Kiss me, Rose. Just one kiss so I can know what to do.”

I took a step back. “No, that’s not happening. I have no feelings for you.”

“Kiss me. And if you don’t have any feelings, then I’ll never come back again.”

“No. This isn’t a Hallmark movie. I’m not going to kiss you and realize I have all these feelings when fireworks explode over our heads and we live happily ever after.”

He suddenly held me close and kissed me.

I forcefully pushed him back. “That was uncalled for. Get off my porch and leave!”

“Houston, we have a problem.”

“Yeah, we do! I should call the police.”

“A bigger problem.”

“There’s no bigger problem than what you just attempted!”

“Turn around! Is that your boyfriend?”

My stomach dropped. I turned and saw Ethan with the most hurt look on his face.

“Ethan,” I said. “It’s not what you think.”

He looked at Bobby. “Nice to meet you, Bobby. I’ve only seen you from the news.”

“I’m so sorry, man,” Bobby said. “That kiss just kind of happened.”

“Kind of happened?” I shouted. “You planted that kiss on me against my will.”

Ethan turned and started to walk away. I chased after him. I had to tell him my side of the story. I would never kiss this idiot in a hundred years. We were so over!

“I saw the truck in your driveway and parked on the street,” he said. “I’m sorry I interrupted things.”

“We were talking. I wouldn’t let him in the house! So we talked on the porch. He wanted closure.”

“Did he get what he came for?”

“He forced that kiss on me!”

“Really?”

“Yes! Didn’t you see me fighting him?”

“I just saw you kissing him,” he said, slamming his car door shut. “I can’t unsee that.”

“Ethan!”

“If you have feelings for your ex, then you should explore them.”

“I don’t have feelings for him!”

“I don’t wanna be the rebound guy. I think you should take some time, and really think about what you want.”

“Ethan, I don’t want him, I want you. I didn’t date anybody for an entire year after I broke up. I had plenty of time to get back together with him, and I never did because he’s not the person I want in my life. My future is not with him. It’ll never be with him. I don’t and never will have feelings for him. Bobby and I are over. We have been for over a year.”

“Goodbye, Rose.”

He sped off.

Tears flowed down my face, my heart broken. I was so saddened by the fact that he didn’t believe me. I walked back to the porch where Bobby stood.

“Why are you still here?” I asked, wiping my eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

“Do you see what you just did? You just ruined the best thing that has ever happened to me.”

“You can do better than Pretty Boy.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“You can’t date somebody better looking than me!”

“Why are you so shallow? And how did I ever date someone like you? I’ve got an idea. How about you leave and go somewhere far, far away. Like to Paula Deen’s Kitchen and get yourself a bucket of chicken? They’re still open in Tennessee or Missouri. And don’t even count me in. A road trip with you would be drinking ourselves into oblivion, and me waking up in Hawaii on a black, sand beach or inside a volcano, and not remembering how I got there.”

“That’s not very nice. I’m not like that anymore. I’m a new man now. Just ask Gwen.”

“Can you please leave? I need to be alone right now. I can’t deal with you anymore.”

“Okay, I get the hint. You’re upset.”

“I felt nothing from that kiss. That kiss just destroyed my entire life. I wonder if that was payback. I destroyed your life. So you wanted to destroy mine. I guess we’re even!”

“I didn’t even know Loverboy was coming over. And maybe if you would have let me inside, he wouldn’t have seen anything.”

“You always do this! You blame everything on me. Like if I would’ve stayed on the phone with you, you would’ve heard the attack and called the police. And now this, if I would’ve just let you inside the house, he wouldn’t have seen. I’m so mad at you right now.”

“I’m sorry but when I looked into your eyes, I couldn’t help it. I just had to give you one last kiss, so I can move on. I bought Gwen an engagement ring. But I couldn’t give it to her until I knew where we stood.”

“I told you.”

“I needed to kiss you, so I could know for sure.”

“I hope you have your closure. And kissing me, when you have Gwen, that’s despicable. You can’t rekindle a dead relationship.”

“Aren’t you listening? I needed to know for sure, and now I know.”

“Like the year apart wasn’t a clue that I didn’t want to be with you anymore.” I let out a long breath. “You have to let me go. I’m your past, not your future. And you have a great woman now. I’ve heard how wonderful she is. Give Gwen the ring if you love her. But you better treat her good. Never hit her or threaten her.”

“I swear I’ll treat her good. I don’t drink anymore. I was becoming my alcoholic dad. And I didn’t want to be like him. So I sobered up. That is all behind me now. Just like you, I am a changed person also. From today forward, Gwen will be the only woman in my life. I’m going to try my best to make her happy.”

“Do you love her?”

“Yes, I do. And after our kiss, I realized we’re over. There wasn’t any fire or chemistry.”

“Ya think?”

“I’m going to ask Gwen to marry me. I now know I want to spend the rest of my life with her.”

“At least one of us will be happy.”

“I’ll fix this for you.”

“Please don’t make it worse. Just leave.”

“I’m sorry.”

He paused and I saw his eyes well up with tears.

“Rose, you were my best friend,” he said. “I miss you. You have no idea what it’s like to lose your best friend in one night. One day I had you, and the next day you were gone forever.”

“I am so sorry.”

“We should’ve never gone to Panama City,” he said. “I wish that dart would’ve hit anywhere else. Because it doomed our relationship.”

“We can’t change things. And our relationship was already on the fritz.”

“I was madly in love with you. And you left. I lost my lover and my best friend. I was miserable without you. And I couldn’t live without you. I missed our long talks. I missed everything about you. So I was trying to hang on to you by a thread. But I realize, we’re over and I need to move on.”

“I think it’s for the best.”

“I love Gwen and we’re going to have a good future together. I just needed to say goodbye to you and make sure there was nothing left between us. I couldn’t give Gwen my one hundred percent until I had closure. And now I got it.”

“I am so sorry things between us didn’t work out,” I said. “And I’m not going to dwell on the bad times. I’ll just remember the good.”

“We did have some good times that I will always cherish.”

“We sure did. Camping was my favorite.”

He let out a long sigh. “The epic camping trips. Yeah, I’ll never forget those.”

“They were so much fun.”

“You know I saved you from that bear, right?”

I shook my head in agreement. “Absolutely. You brought the bear spray. Totally saved us. Thank you.”

“I’m sorry for all the bad times. I was a horrible drunk. Just like my dad.”

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s just both move forward.”

“I thought I was still in love with you. But I know now...that I’m not.” He hugged me tightly.

“Goodbye, Rose. I hope you find whatever it is that you’re looking for.”

“It’s all in God’s timing. Take care, Bobby.”

“I will never forget you. You’re a hard act to follow.” A tear dripped from his face. “But I finally understand it’s over.”

He jumped into his truck and left.

I thought about Ethan. I tried to call him but he didn’t answer. I stood there numb on the porch as tears fell from my eyes.

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Two weeks passed.

My parents came over and surprised me with flickering tiki torches in my backyard. When night came, we sat on the back swing and watched them.

“They’re gorgeous, Mom and Dad. Thanks. They really transform my backyard.”

“You’re welcome. I’m glad you love them. I really wanted to enhance your landscape back here.”

Dad paused and looked at me. “What’s wrong, honey? You’re just not yourself?”

“Me and Ethan are over. And I’m devastated.”

“The nice church guy?”

“Yeah.”

I went on to explain the entire story to them.

“I’m incredibly confused,” I said. “I was getting to know the perfect man who understood me and made me laugh. And Bobby ruined everything with one stupid kiss I didn’t even want. Now I’m dealing with the ramifications. Ethan can’t undo the image in his head of me kissing another man.”

“I’m sorry,” my mom said.

“I even kept Bobby on the porch,” I said. “And he still managed to ruin everything. Meanwhile, he’s deliriously happy with that Gwen girl. They got engaged yesterday and she’s flashing some big, glamorous rock.”

“I saw that on Instagram and Facebook.”

“So why couldn’t Bobby just be happy and run into the sunset with her? Why did he have to ruin my life in the process? I don’t think he wants to see me happy. He came in like a tornado and destroyed everything I had, and then left to go get engaged and be happy.”

“That boy is such a loose canyon,” my dad said. “He’s too carefree and doesn’t think. And he has no problems boasting and bragging about himself.”

“Yeah, he’s gorgeous, but way too narcissistic for my taste.”

“Ethan sounded like a fantastic person,” my mom said.

“He is.” I sighed. “I thought I had a chance with a nice guy. I haven’t dated anybody for a year. And then Ethan unexpectedly came along. And he was so wonderful, loved God, and he was so sweet.” A tear fell down my face. “I thought he was special and I wanted to see where the relationship was heading. Our time together was absolutely fantastic. I’ll always cherish the small amount of time we spent together.”

“Just try to explain what happened,” my dad said.

“He’s not taking my calls, emails, or texts, and won’t answer the door if I stop by.”

“Leave him a note on his door. Or a letter in his mailbox.”

“I did, Mom. The trust has been damaged. Everything was going great and I didn’t expect to get blindsided like this.”

“Give him some ‘cooling off’ time. And try again.”

“I think it’s over,” I said sadly. “He’s not the kind of guy that enjoys drama. I’ve given him plenty.”

“Oh, honey.”

“I’m as loyal as they come. I feel so embarrassed because I don’t do stuff like that. That’s just not me. I swear I don’t have wandering lips.”

“We know that,” my dad said. “But he doesn’t. I think he just needs to hear your side.”

“He hardly knows me,” I said. “I don’t think it matters.”

“But you weren’t cheating. You’re not even officially dating yet.”

“I know, but he’s hurt right now.”

“I constantly find myself wondering how things would be if I hadn’t answered the door or been home.”

“Bobby would’ve eventually found you. He wasn’t giving up until he got closure.”

“He sure got his closure. And it cost me the greatest guy I’ve ever met.”

“He destroyed your life, and you broke up with him. But even after a year, he’s still managing to destroy your life. How can he continue to keep causing havoc like this?”

“Don’t forget, Dad,” I said softly. “I accidentally destroyed his life as well.”

“What the press did to him wasn’t your fault!”

“You never said anything publicly to slander him,” my mom said. “The media got all the info from the police. And jumped to assumptions. It’s not your fault they labeled him a crazy maniac.”

“He didn’t deserve that.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Mom, he’s a jerk, but he didn’t deserve the bad rap he got.”

“Oh, I know. I’m sorry. He was just so horrible to you.”

“His whole life was turned upside down. You have no idea.”

“Honey,” my dad said. “I think we do. Our lives were turned upside down too. Reporters followed us everywhere. We felt powerless and vulnerable. It was a life-changing event for the entire family. And now, we all just want justice and closure.”

“I’m sorry this whole thing turned into a circus. I apologize and again, I’m sorry. I wish I could take it all back so that nobody got hurt. This whole thing has affected everyone in my life, as well as the entire community. I’m so sorry all of our lives got torn apart.”

“You do not need to apologize, sweetheart. We love you and we’ll stick together through thick and thin.”

I grabbed my mom’s hand next to me, and then my dad’s. “I love you both so much.”

“We love you too,” Dad said.

“We’re all in uncharted territory,” my mom said. “But we’ll get through this. And we’ll never stop loving you.”

I touched the necklace I was wearing. “Ethan got this for me,” I said.

My mom smiled. “It’s beautiful.”

I pondered for a moment at the memory. I remembered every moment from that date from paddling around on the lake to splashing each other. Afterward, he gave me the special gift. My mind drifted back to the moment.

*Ethan handed me a small box. “I got you a little something.”*

*I was completely surprised. “Oh, you didn’t have to.”*

*“I wanted to.”*

*I opened the box and it was a gold rose and diamond heart pendant.*

*My eyes welled up with tears. “It’s beautiful, and it’s the most thoughtful present anyone has ever gotten me.”*

*He touched my hand. “The rose is for your name, and the heart is for your last name.”*

*“Rose Hart,” I said, softly. “I love it.”*

I returned to the present.

“Meeting Ethan changed my life. I’ll never forget him,” I said.

My parents tried to give me lots of advice about what to do, but I knew the special connection between Ethan and me had been ripped. Nothing they said really cheered me up. I was inconsolable. They hugged me and I tried to hold in the flood of tears that wanted to explode. The guilt of hurting him really hit me hard. When they left, I stayed outside and pondered. I couldn’t stop thinking about Ethan. And I wish things would’ve gone differently. I’ll never forget the horrified look on his face. My stomach just hurt thinking about it.

Now that I was alone, I let the flood of tears out.

I even thought about calling Gwen and letting her know about what happened on my front porch. How would she feel knowing her man tried to kiss another woman? No, I wouldn’t do that. I was not going to ruin Bobby’s happiness. Even though he destroyed mine.

After a lot of tears, and ice cream, I scraped myself off the floor and went to bed.

## Chapter 31

More days passed.

I still couldn’t get a hold of Ethan.

And that made me sad.

I took a long walk in the park and prayed. I came home and took a long bubble bath and read some chapters in this amazing book about healing and forgiveness. I journaled. I read my Bible. (read about Joseph’s loving forgiveness of his brothers, totally touched my heart) I cooked a meatloaf. I called old friends. Cleaned. Even dusted. I hate dusting.

I was going through a rollercoaster of emotions. I was working on trying to forgive everyone in my life that had hurt me. I was upset Ethan wasn’t responding to me. I was trying to get my life back on track. I tried to draw close to the living God in prayer, and it’s one of the most healing things you can do. I ran to Him and poured out all my feelings. I knew he would never abandon me. I asked the Holy Spirit to help me heal and I planned to get to know God even better. He listened to all my fears, hurts, and anxieties and He comforted me. I could feel His loving presence near me.

Yes, God was my strength.

I wanted to walk in love and forgiveness.

I ran up to the grocery store to make something for lunch. I was heading to the check out counter when my eyes locked with Gwen, the ex’s new girlfriend. And she didn’t look very happy. She definitely knew about that kiss.

*Awkward!*

I just needed to keep the encounter short and polite, get away as quick as I possibly could. I had no way of knowing how Bobby has spun everything. For all I knew, he could’ve told her I laid the kiss on him!

“Hi Rose,” she said holding her cart.

“Hello,” I said.

“Did you enjoy locking lips with my man?”

Yup she knew! I could feel the heat in my cheeks. Those words angered me. “Are you kidding me?” I asked. “He ruined everything with a great guy I was seeing.”

“Ethan. I heard all about it. Bobby admitted everything to me. We don’t have secrets.”

“Then you know Bobby came to my house uninvited and forced that kiss on me. I’m not the bad guy here.”

“I’m well aware. That was so wrong of him.”

“Completely!” I cocked my head. “Wait. Did you just agree with me?”

“I did.”

“Was not expecting that. I thought you were going to blame me.”

“Nope. Sorry about the lip locking comment. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t enjoy it.”

“Nope. It was embarrassingly bad.”

“Great. That’s what I like to hear. So... I need you to answer a question for me. I’m leaving a great job that specializes in me wearing wedding apparel and all kinds of accessories for promotional purposes in California.”

“You’re a bridal model?” I asked.

The girl was stunning and I could totally see it. She had a unique look with long, curly red hair, flawless skin, and green eyes.

“I don’t like the word model,” she said. “It makes me sound conceited. And I’m very humble. I need to know that I’m not leaving this job for nothing. They said they’d hold my job for a year if I wanted to come back. So please answer truthfully. Would you ever get back with Bobby?”

“Absolutely not. Did the embarrassingly bad kiss I mentioned not clue you in?”

“People say things when their mad at someone. You just lost Ethan. So I don’t know. In a few weeks, you might want to rekindle things with your old flame.”

“Never! Even if things are over with Ethan, I’d never ever get back together with Bobby. There were reasons why our relationship didn’t work. Besides, I could never be with someone who doesn’t love Jesus as much as I do.”

“I heard you’ve found religion.”

“No, I haven’t. I found Jesus and I have a personal relationship with Him.”

She let out a long breath. “I’m happy you found God. But my real concern is your interest in Bobby. I can’t marry Bobby and have kids with him, and then he leaves me to go back to his one true love.”

“I’m interested in Ethan. Not Bobby. Why would I ever go back? Bobby treated me awful. And I hope he never treats you the way he treated me. And I hope he carries his own weight and doesn’t leave you with all the bills like he did me. And I hope he never hits you or hurts you.”

“I’ve talked to friends in your old friends’ circle. I know how he treated you, and I apologize for his behavior. He did some horrible things. And I’ve talked to him about it. Just always blames it on being drunk.”

“Why are you with him? You are beautiful. You make a great living. I dated him for years. He just took me down the gutter with him. I don’t want him to do that to you too.”

“He’s changed. He’s not the same man you dated. I met him at a volleyball championship at the beach. We just hit it off. He had already stopped drinking cold turkey. I was so proud of him. I did everything I could do to help him recover. We started dating and I’ve never looked back. He did have a slip up and drank on the one-year anniversary of your break up when he went to that Mexican restaurant and drank all those Margaritas. Because he was so sad. And yes, that hurts me deeply that he wasn’t over you. I thought I could never replace you. He chose drinking his sorrows over celebrating my birthday. And man, did that sting. We could’ve celebrated my birthday before he had to go to work on the 3pm-11 pm shift. We didn’t have to do the art gallery at night like I originally wanted. I would’ve been happy with lunch. All he had to do was invite me. But no, he wanted to go to your special spot and sulk all by himself.”

I bit my lip hard. “I’m so sorry.”

“Will he always think about you on my birthday? Because that’s your break up date.”

“I hope not.”

“But he told me he’s officially over you now. So only time will tell.”

“You shouldn’t have to go through this. Maybe it’s best to let him go. We both deserve better.”

“But I love him.”

“So did I. But enough is enough. When I came over to apologize to Bobby, I assumed he was single because he was begging me for a second chance, then you arrived. I was shocked.”

“Bobby told me everything. He’s always so honest with me. He was just confused about his feelings. You guys had been together for so long.”

“But now he knows what he wants, he wants me with all his heart. He’s doing wonderful now. He goes to work. He takes care of his business. He’s not that loose canyon you once dated. I think him losing you made him realize what a jerk he had become. I can’t believe how he turned his life around. But it’s been amazing. And I think we can have a fantastic life together. I just have to know you’ll never come between us in the future.”

“Never ever,” I said. “I promise.”

“Thank you for forgiving him for all those horrible things he did to you. I know that meant a lot to him, even if he didn’t tell you.”

“Now I need to learn to forgive Bobby all over again. Because Ethan is not talking to me because of that kiss. I’m sure we’re over. And losing Ethan hurts more than anything.”

“I’m sorry Bobby did that, and that he came between you and Ethan.”

“All me and Bobby do is hurt each other, even if it’s not intentional. I didn’t mean to hurt him in the media, and I know he didn’t know Ethan was walking up to the porch when he kissed me. We will never ever get back together again; even if he did change. I promise you that with every fiber of my being. I don’t love him anymore. I have no feelings for him whatsoever. And if you love him, and he truly loves you, and he’s truly changed and treats you like a queen, then you have my blessing. Go and be happy. I will never stand in your way.”

“Thank you, Rose,” she said, voice wavering.

“I have to run, but I hope this talk helped.”

Wiping a tear, she nodded. “It did. Thanks.”

I went to the cashier and paid for my groceries.

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I knew that I had forgiven Bobby Greenwood. (even for the new kissing fiasco on my porch) But I needed to forgive Edward Williams also. I had been struggling with this for so long but I knew this was what I wanted to do.

If God could forgive me, then I could forgive others. It was that simple. Forgiveness enabled Joseph in Genesis 50 to forgive his brothers and not become angry or bitter or to seek revenge. I wanted to forgive like that. I didn't want to be bitter and angry, plotting revenge. Despite the pain inflicted on Joseph, he taught us to forgive. I wanted Joseph's loving heart. I wasn't going to let unforgiveness steal my joy anymore.

I wanted to forgive.

Forgiveness instead of vengeance.

We need to be kind and loving to each other.

I grabbed my bible and car keys but when I got to the door and swung it open. The news media was camped outside. A news anchor noticed me immediately.

"Rose," she yelled. "How do you feel after your attempted murder by the high school's Honor Roll quarterback?"

"Your front-page news tomorrow morning," another said.

"What else is new?" I retorted. "They're always talking about my story since I made national headlines."

"But they're doing a big series called, True Crime & Justice and your story is being featured. Please give us a statement."

"Who reads the newspaper these days anymore?" I asked.

"You're already plastered on social media news," another chimed in.

"How did my problems become such a huge media circus?" I covered my face as flashes of light blinded me. "You never cared too much until you found out my attacker was somebody in high school!"

"What would make a high school, honor roll, quarterback take drugs like that?"

"What would make reporters hang out on my door step?" I shot back.

"Please talk to us," a lady in a dress said holding up a microphone.

"Listen, I've been advised by the police not to talk to you."

"Okay," a man said. "Maybe you can't talk about that. But can you tell us how you felt on that night?"

"I was being murdered. How do you think it felt? Do you think each swing from a bat felt like a bee sting?"

"How did you get through it?"

My memory of that night flooded in as I remember laying on the floor not wanting to die. "I fought not to die because I didn't want my parents, my family to find me that way. They were on their way to my house for dinner. I couldn't bear the thought of them seeing..." My voice trailed off.

"What would have happened if dinner hadn't been planned?"

"Nobody would've found me until the next day," I said sadly. "I would've been dead."

"Would you say having dinner with your parents saved your life?"

“I-I can’t talk about this.”

“I heard on the night he broke in and tried to kill you that you coded four times.”

I nodded.

“And that you are telling people you went to hell.”

My jaw dropped. How would anyone know that? Memories of my hellish trip flashed before me, the flames, the demons, the darkness.

I froze and he rephrased the question. Flashes of light blinded me from the cameras. But I couldn’t answer. I just needed to get out of there.

“Have you been able to maintain your sobriety with all these triggers?” one asked. “You’ve been under a lot of stress and anxiety. Nobody would blame you if you slipped.”

“How do you know that?”

She pushed her bangs out of her face. “Your sponsor says you haven’t reached out to her in months.”

*She fell off the wagon so why would I contact her? But I can’t throw her under the bus like that.*

“Do you have anything to say to Bobby Greenfield?”

“Yes. I’m so sorry he got blamed. And I personally went to his house and apologized. He didn’t deserve to be falsely accused, and this town should forgive him.”

“How can he live with that heart-piercing blame?” a woman asked.

“I think the media needs to acknowledge the role they played in this tragedy,” my neighbor yelled over. “You didn’t have all the facts, yet you played judge and jury. It was unprofessional!”

She waved and I waved back.

“Why are you carrying a Bible?” another asked.

“This is a gift for someone,” I said softly.

“Who is it for?”

“Edward Williams. I’m taking it to him.”

They gasped and chaos erupted.

“Why would you want to give it to him?”

“I want him to find Jesus. The way I found Him recently.”

“Why would you do this?”

“Because...because I forgive him.”

*There! I said it!*

And that’s when the flashes really went off and I stirred up a media frenzy.

“I’m lost,” a reporter said. “Why would you even consider forgiving him? He had it all. Good family. Wealth. Good looks. Top of his class. Going to Harvard. He’s the one that threw it all away.”

“You ask me why I would do it? And the reason is because, well, it’s simple. It’s what Jesus would do. Jesus forgave me...and I need to forgive him. We need to forgive others as God has forgiven us. It’s better to do good rather than evil. Read Romans 12:17-21.”

She googled the scripture and started reading it: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. 20 On the contrary:

“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

I was surprised that they had actually stopped and let the reporter read that. I looked at her and smiled, “Thanks for reading that.”

“I was curious,” she replied with a smirk.

Everyone seemed to ponder and tried to understand how I could forgive him. I then rushed to my car and shut the door. I carefully swerved through the crowd. I couldn’t believe that my life captivated so many others. I then called my parents. A few reporters might swarm their place for a story. This was unbelievable. This story was going viral all over the United States. I was tired of all of this. I just wanted my life back. I just wanted the reporters to leave me alone. I wanted the tabloids to leave me alone. I wanted social media to leave me alone. I wanted people to stop pointing at me out in public.

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I went to the jail where Ed was being kept. A friend worked there and pulled some strings. And I met Edward Williams in person. He was so young and so sad. It was hard to believe that I was staring at my actual attacker. He definitely didn’t look like a murderer. But he *was* the stranger in the dark who showed me no mercy on that dark and fateful night.

He picked up the phone on the other side of the glass.

“I’m Rose.”

He gasped. “I know who you are. Why are you here?”

I held my phone tight. “I needed to meet you. In your interview, you said you wanted forgiveness. Well, that’s why I’m here.”

“I’m so sorry for everything,” he said, a tear running down his cheek. “I can’t believe you are here. And I am so sorry for the crime, and for the harm I caused. I accept full responsibility for my actions. I’ve had so much time to reflect on everything I did, all my harmful actions. I swear to you that I’m committed to continuing my journey of rehabilitation and ensuring such an incident never recurs. I will never take drugs ever again. That is a promise.”

“I accept your apology,” I said sincerely.

He let out a long sob. “I’ve been staying awake at night wondering what to say to you and how to apologize. Not a day goes by that I don’t think about what I did, and how I hurt you, and how I messed up your life.”

“God has a purpose for your life. You are so full of hope, life, and dreams. You can’t let this ruin your life.”

“I should be saying that to you,” he said, voice wavering.

I was crying. He was crying.

I could feel the outpouring of love from him. He was genuinely sorry.

“I’m a monster,” he said.

“Only that night, and because of drugs. That is not who you are.”

He wiped a tear. “I was crazy out of my mind. I wasn’t myself. I would never hurt anyone. I don’t even know what happened. I feel awful. I’m truly sorry.”

“The police filled me in. I understand what happened. No need to rehash it.”

“I can’t apologize enough. I am so glad you are here and alive. If you had died...”

“I forgive you,” I said.

He was completely taken aback. “Just like that? Why?”

“Forgiveness is complicated, complex, and difficult. I’ve processed this and I’ve prayed and prayed. I renounce revenge or vengeance. Today, I come from a place of love, kindness, and forgiveness. What happened, happened. And it’s time for me to let it go. I don’t have time in my life to think about the hurt. I’m moving forward. You did what you did because of where you were in your life at the moment and the drugs you took. You have a bright future in front of you and I know you’re going to do something wonderful with your life.”

“Thank you so much.”

“I brought my bible. And I’m going to give it to you. And I want you to read it. That’s all I ask. Start with the Psalms or the first book of John.”

“I promise I will read this book. You have my word. And thank you for your forgiveness. It means the world to me. Because I don’t even think I can forgive myself.”

“If I forgave you, then you must forgive yourself.”

“I’ll work on it, it’s a process.”

“I told myself the exact same thing.” I stood. “I’ll stand up for you in court. I’ll be on your side.”

His brows lifted in shock. “Why?”

“Because in a way, you rescued me.”

“What?”

I went on to explain the entire hell story blow by blow. And by the end he was crying even more and the prison guard brought over a box of Kleenex.

“So, you see?” I said. “By dying and seeing hell up close and personal, it saved my life. The devil tried to destroy me, but God turned it around and showed me the light. What Satan used for evil; God used for good.”

“I think I got this. The devil tried to take you out, to destroy you. But God turned it around. He brought you back to life so you could tell people that hell is real, so you could tell people about Jesus.”

“Yes. And if I had really died and took my final breath that night. I would’ve spent eternity in hell. So, you see, dying was the best thing that could’ve ever happened to me. It saved me from spending eternity in hell. So in the long run, you helped to save me, because now, I found God.”

“It reminds me of that coach that got hit in the head with a ball and knocked him out. They took him to the hospital and found out he had a brain tumor that would’ve killed him without immediate surgery. They operated and he was better. His life was saved by getting hit in the head by a ball. Had you not died, you would’ve never have known.”

“I wouldn’t have. I thought I would be first in line for heaven. But just like Charles H. Spurgeon said, ‘Morality may keep you out of jail, but it takes the blood of Jesus Christ to keep you out of hell.’”

“That’s just powerful.”

“I know God can use me, and this entire experience to testify to the world. If I just save one life from burning in that pit, then it was all worth it.”

“Your story is amazing.”

Emotion overcame me. “I’ll never forget waking up in that pit. And knowing I could never leave. I don’t want a single other person to go through what I did. It was absolutely horrifying. I just want to warn everyone. No religion will get you to heaven. Only Jesus. He is the truth, the life, and the way.”

“Jesus,” he said softly.

“Yes.”

“I bet that devil is upset you came back.”

“Like I said, Satan tried to take me out. But what the devil used for evil, God meant it for good. There’s a scripture. “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.” – Genesis 50:20.”

“Can you expand on that a little bit more?” he asked. “How did God mean it for good? Because you’re alive?”

“The devil wanted me to die. He was sure he won. But God stepped in. And saved my life. And now...I’m going to tell the world about my testimony. I’m going to warn people about hell with every breath I take. So the devil meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. By bringing me back to life to testify, to warn the entire world anyway I possibly can. I’m going to wage war against the kingdom of darkness. I’m going to preach the gospel with every fiber of my being. I will spend the rest of my days warning people about hell. I hope to plant seeds and help bring people to Christ.”

“I get it. What happened was evil, but God used it for good.”

“Yes,” I said with enthusiasm.

Grappling with difficult emotions, he wiped a tear from his eyes. “Can God forgive someone like me? After what I did?”

“If you still have breath in your lungs, you can be forgiven of anything. Repent and put your faith in Christ. There is no sin too big that God can’t forgive. There isn’t anything you could say, do, or think that can keep you from the love of God.”

“What a great answer.”

We talked for a long time. He kept asking me questions about my testimony to hell. I patiently answered all his questions, and then he asked me to repeat the story all over again from start to finish. He told me he believed every word I said. And he promised to get in touch with a minister. I felt like my testimony had a big impact on him. Most people, with a few exceptions, brushed me off when I talked about my experience, but he hung on every word, and wanted every single detail.

He held the bible tightly in his hands. “Thank you for this precious gift and your forgiveness.”

I nodded as I wiped a tear from my eye. “You’re welcome.”

As I drove home, I wanted to tell Ethan all about it. But sadly, he wasn’t talking to me and that hurt more than anything. I had forgiven Bobby for all the things he did to me, and then he struck again, taking away the only man I had cared about.

## Chapter 32

My phone rang and it was Ethan.

I felt euphoric.

I couldn't believe it was actually him, and I missed him terribly. Hearing his voice made me smile. I had been waiting for this phone call for so long.

So long.

"Hello, Ethan," I said, excitedly.

"Hi, Rose."

"How are you?"

"Good. How about you?"

"I've been fine. Listen, I've been trying to call you and wouldn't pick up."

"I'm so sorry about that."

"It's just so great to hear your voice," I said.

"I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you, too. And I just wanted to explain everything. I really want you to hear me out. And if you don't want to see each other anymore, I will understand. But please give me the chance to talk to you."

"There's no need for that. I read the letter you dropped off."

"Ethan, please. Let me apologize."

"Rose, it's okay. I'm not upset anymore. And I should be the one apologizing."

"What?"

"I jumped to conclusions. And I'm so sorry."

"It's understandable."

"Please accept my sincerest apology."

"I do. And I'm sorry too."

"Listen, Bobby tracked me down on social media. We met for coffee at Coffee Expressions. He brought Gwen along with him. And admitted to both of us that he wanted to propose to Gwen but he needed closure with you."

I was flabbergasted. "You met with Bobby? And Gwen?"

"I did. And Gwen wore her engagement ring proudly. They're officially engaged."

"Yeah, I'm happy for him. So, he admitted he forced the kiss?"

"Yes, he did, right in front of Gwen too. Looks like they don't hide anything from each other. Me and her were kind of in the same boat. She didn't want to go any further with Bobby if he had any feelings for you. And I didn't want to go any further with us, if you had any feelings for Bobby."

"I completely understand."

"Gwen told Bobby to go figure it out, think about it, and so he did. He went to talk to you. He said you were cold toward him and wouldn't let him in the house. He expressed what he was feeling and you shot him down. He tried a kiss as a last-ditch effort. Just to see if there was anything there. You pushed him away, and he didn't feel the spark. He then realized his feelings were dead for you."

“That about sums it up.”

“He wants us to go on a double date sometime.”

“Um, no. Absolutely not.”

He chuckled. “I agree.”

We both laughed.

“My stomach was in knots thinking that I was going to lose you because of that idiot coming over and forcing that stupid kiss on me.”

“He said he could see how hurt you were, and he wanted to make it right.”

“Nicest thing he’s ever done for me,” I said.

“And we’re both invited to the wedding in July.”

“I’m going to pass on the wedding. But I will send them a nice gift.”

“I’m so sorry, Rose. I ignored you for so long. I feel so bad.”

“It was a horrible misunderstanding. And I’m not mad.”

“I’m not either. And I’m going to make this up to you.”

I was incredibly excited, beside myself with joy, and ecstatically happy. Does that even make sense? But that’s how I felt. I couldn’t believe Ethan had called me. I truly thought we were over. I thought I wasn’t good enough for him, had way too much baggage. I prayed about this and asked God to bring him back into my life again if it was His will.

*Thank you, Lord.*

My doorbell rang and I peeked out.

“I hear the doorbell. You’ve got company. Reporters bugging you again?” he asked.

“My parents are here,” I said. “Can I call you back?”

“Sure. I’ll call you later. And I’m glad everything is okay between us.”

“Absolutely. I’m so happy we’re on good terms again.”

“Me too.”

“Goodbye.”

“Bye.”

I opened the door and my parents walked in with an attitude. They didn’t look very happy and I bit my lip hard. Yeah, Mom looked livid.

“You’re on TV again,” my mom said.

“What else is new? They love to pick on me. I’m the perfect victim in their eyes. Young, innocent blonde bashed with a bat by a high school quarterback. I mean, that stuff sells.”

“Don’t say things like that,” my mom said. “I hate that word, bashed.”

“But it’s what happened. So, why are you mad?”

“Why would you ever forgive that teenager?”

“Is that what this is about?”

“Yes!”

“Mom, I think I gave the answer on TV plain, simple, and clear.”

“He tried to kill you,” my dad said. “As you said so yourself on TV, if we didn’t come over, you’d be dead. The doctors said you would’ve been dead within minutes.”

“He made a mistake, Dad.”

“A mistake! A mistake is missing an appointment, not taking drugs and breaking into someone’s home.”

My mom shook her head. “The judge needs to sentence him to life without the possibility of parole, condemning him to die behind bars.”

“Yes,” my dad said. “He needs to pay. We need justice.”

“Is it you and Mom who need justice? Is this for you...or me?”

My dad’s voice quivered with emotion. “I was there! I am the one that found you. We saw the aftermath. That awful memory is seared deep into my conscience. I’ll never forget that. You were a bloody mess. I thought you were dead!”

My mom started weeping at the thought. I knew it was one of the worst moments of her life.

“You should never face that guy again,” my mom said. “Yet, you’re meeting with him behind our backs. And it upsets me that we have to beg you to keep this possible killer behind bars.”

“The news said you want to free him!” my dad said.

“I never said that. I only told them that I forgave him. But I did tell Ed that.”

“You survived. You need to go live your life. Lock this guy up and throw away the key, and move on.”

“Oh, Mom. When I saw him, I just wanted to hug him. He’s so devastated.”

“Give him a hug? Are you kidding me? He destroyed your life, and ours! You cannot let him get away with this. Justice needs to be served. Juvenile killers need to spend time behind bars.”

“The thought of him being freed scares me,” my mom said. “I think he’s a dangerous young man.”

“What he did was horrible,” I said. “But he was on a drug trip. And the guy doesn’t do drugs. He’s clean. He’s a good person. He made a mistake. He was tripping. He didn’t know what he was doing!”

My mom just shook her head. “You’re being brainwashed by his defense strategy.”

“I’m sorry you are upset, Mom and Dad. I really am. You both should be open to this. You both love God and go to church. But as a Christian, I have to forgive him. Jesus told Peter in Matthew 18 to forgive someone “seventy times seven” times and he makes the sobering statement that if we do not forgive others, our Father in Heaven will not forgive us (Matthew 6:15). I don’t take this lightly. And I’ve been thinking about it for days. Forgiveness, well, it’s the heart of our relationship with God as well as our relationship with others.”

“Yes,” my mom said. “I’m a Christian. But I’m also a human. Maybe I don’t have the capacity for forgiveness like Jesus does.”

“I realize forgiveness isn’t always easy. But holding onto this will only lead to further heartache. Unforgiveness is bitterness and torment. It’s time to let it go. God saved me and has a plan for my life. I truly believe that.”

“We almost lost you,” my dad whispered as a tear slipped down his cheek. “How can I forgive the young man?”

“I think about how God forgives me and the grace He offers when I mess up. Which is a lot. If He can do that for me, I can certainly do the same for others. Forgiveness isn’t optional. It’s mandatory.”

My dad pondered and then said, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” Ephesians 4:32. I love that scripture. And I should live by it. But how do I forgive him?”

I looked at my dad, blinking away the tears. “Forgiving Ed does not mean we no longer feel the pain of what he did. We can’t ignore the wrong that was done or deny the fact that he tried to snuff out my life. I’m not asking you to diminish the gravity of what he did. Because he literally tried to murder me. And it’s horrific. But forgiving him says that you’ve determined to let God be the avenger. He is the ultimate judge. Not us.”

My dad put his arm around my mom as she cried. I came over and we all hugged tightly. And the three of us just wept.

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I did send Bobby a quick text message. *Thank you! All is well.*

*I’m glad.*

*Congrats on the engagement.*

*Thanks! See you at the wedding.*

*Can’t attend. But will send a nice gift. Congrats!*

*That Ethan. He’s a keeper.*

*For sure! And so is your Gwen. Treat her good!*

*I will.*

*Good.*

*You deserve to finally be happy.*

*Thanks! You too.*

That night I was on the news, I was in the newspaper, all over social media news.

I changed the television channel. But they were all saying the same thing. “Victim speaks after she is beaten with bat after a break in. Rose Hart, 31, says she forgives the man who tried to murder her in cold blood.”

“A woman is on the road to recovery after a high school quarterback goes on an acid trip...”

“A young woman was assaulted in her own home by the high school football star while cooking dinner for a family celebration. Her door was smashed in with a bat and he tried to bludgeon her to death with a bat.”

“Two things saved Rose Hart’s life. The assailant was deathly afraid of cats who ultimately came to her rescue. When he set eyes on them, he freaked out and ran off. Now, that definitely proves a cat can be a guard dog. And two, her family was on their way over for a special dinner celebration. Had dinner not been planned, she would’ve perished from her wounds within minutes. Rose Hart credits God for this second chance at life.”

“A woman claims that almost getting murdered saved her life. Her heart stopped four times and she claims she went to hell. After a long treatment, she found religion and even took a bible to the man that tried to kill her that fateful night.”

“A Christian convert, who was hospitalized last month after being severely beaten by a teen. Rose Hart says she will forgive the suspect.”

“Teen faces attempted murder charges after the beloved, sports hero broke into the home of Rose Hart.”

“Squeaky-clean teen goes on bat smashing murder spree.”

“Teen goes from popular, high school quarterback to violent attempted murderer in one single night after a bad trip on mushrooms.”

“From high school to the slammer...”

The phone rang and it was Ethan.

“I’m all over the news,” I said. “I don’t like all this attention.”

“You know the press. They’ll move along as soon as the next big story comes along.”

“They’re parked outside my house again. They’re asking for an exclusive.”

“Why don’t I take you somewhere special to me? We can order a pizza and put on a movie.”

“I would love that. Getting past them is the hard part.”

“Go out the back door, hop the back fence, and cross over to the next block? I’ll pick you up.”

“That sounds so James Bond.”

He laughed. “Okay, give me an hour. I’ll pick us up a pizza. Oh, and I want you to meet someone very special in my life. So he’s tagging along.”

“Who?”

“I’ll give you a hint. His name is Tiny.”

“Okay, I can’t wait to meet Tiny.”

“See ya soon.”

“Can’t wait.”

When I hung up, I pondered. Was Tiny an adorable hamster or a cute Chihuahua? Or was Tiny a four-year-old niece or nephew or a four pound Pomeranian? I hadn’t a clue.

### Chapter 33

When I spotted Ethan’s car, he greeted me with that brilliant white smile, and then I noticed he had a huge Great Dane with black spots all over its white coat. The dog was stunning with one crystal blue eye. The beautiful dog stuck its head out the backseat window, its tongue hanging. The monstrous dog let a deep, booming bark and I jumped in surprise.

“So this is Tiny?” I said.

“The massive pup, the myth, the legend himself.”

I let out a long laugh, then couldn’t stop laughing. I expected something tiny and got the complete opposite. It was hilarious. “You gave my funny bone a little kick. I was expecting extra petite...but got XXL.”

“That you did. He’s a boy.”

“He’s gorgeous! Like a miniature horse.”

Ethan opened my door and I thought he was quite the gentlemen. I hopped in and put my seatbelt on.

“I remember you telling me you had a dog the first time I came over,” I said. “The dog was on a camping trip with your parents for a few weeks.”

“Yes. They went to Grand Teton National Park in the RV.”

“I have to admit. I forgot you had a dog. So did he enjoy his camping trip?”

“He loved it. He splashed through streams, hiked the mountains, and ran like the wind.”

“I’m so glad he had a great time.” I gave him a pat on the head and he barked.

“Don’t let the bark fool you. He might have the body of a giant but he has the temperament of a *tiny* lap dog. Thus his name. He loves everyone!”

“An overgrown lap dog, eh?”

“Most definitely. He’s three years old.”

“Looks like his dad was Scooby-Doo and his mom is from 101 Dalmatians.”

“He’s very unique, that’s for sure. Hop in!”

I jumped in and Tiny gave me big, slobbery kisses. I gave him a few pets, and we were on our way.

“Man, did we outsmart those reporters,” I said.

“And I know the perfect spot. I have a pizza in the trunk with some drinks and breadsticks. I was thinking we could just get away from everyone and everything.”

“I could use a break. I don’t want to talk about the press or any of it. I just want one night of normalcy.”

“How does a nice, normal picnic under the stars sound?”

“Sounds lovely.”

“And I brought my guitar.”

“Even better! It’s so cool you play.”

“Since I was a kid.”

“And this is an awesome surprise. And I love meeting Tiny. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I just want to apologize in person about the Bobby thing. He just stopped by out of the blue and suddenly kissed me on the porch.”

“No need. It was a huge misunderstanding. No biggy. It’s in the past. Let’s just focus on us tonight.”

“Deal.”

“And I got you something.”

He handed me a bag of Smarties and I smiled.

“You remembered what I said?”

“You said to ditch the diamonds and take you to see a sky full of stars with a bag of Smarties.”

“You are amazing.”

“Thank you. And so are you.”

And there we were stargazing at the Milky Way, cracking jokes, laughing, drinking soda, and eating pizza. The gentle giant among us was calm and laid beside us on the blanket. We made a fire in the fire ring. The fire crackled and I stared into Ethan’s eyes as he told me a story about his last camping trip. Somehow, somehow, Ethan made me feel alive again. And I could swear it was like we knew each other for a million years. I felt so comfortable with him. And we were becoming fast friends. Maybe more.

Tiny, this huge 200-pound dog, suddenly tried to climb into my lap. No way was he fitting. He flopped his big body with his legs still touching the ground. He was clueless to how big he was and it was hilarious. Ethan tried to call him off but I told him not to. I thought it was cute and couldn't stop laughing. Tiny couldn't care less about where he fits when he wants a pet.

I stroked his beautiful coat. "He's a big snuggle baby!"

"Yes, he is."

I laughed. "I should've brought my cats. It'd be like one big, happy family."

"You have a beautiful laugh," Ethan said.

I turned to face him and smiled. "It feels great. I haven't laughed like this in ages until I met you."

"I'm glad you're having a great time."

"Thanks for getting me out. I really needed this. And it's so beautiful and so serene. Just you, Tiny, the stars, and the crickets."

"There's nothing like nature's orchestra, God's creation."

"How about some music? I would love you to play a song on your guitar."

I smiled. "Some campfire tunes? Sure, I can do that."

"I can play Indescribable by Chris Tomlin," he said, holding the guitar as he started to strum.

He started singing and I couldn't contain my excitement. He was the best guitarist. I could spend hours listening to him.

"You have a fabulous voice and you picked the perfect song," I said.

"Thank you," he said. "I inherited a little bit of singing talent from my parents."

"That's wonderful."

"My mom sang on Broadway in New York City for years. And that's where she met my dad. He used to sing with a live orchestra. He's won three Tony awards."

"That's amazing. No wonder you sing so well."

"I lead worship at my church. I would love to have you come sometime."

"Absolutely. You are just full of surprises."

"I have to keep you on your feet."

I chuckled.

We talked for hours, stargazed, ate Smarties, and laughed like never before. I even left my phone in my purse. I swear we connected on such a wonderful level and I wasn't a ball of nerves like how I usually am with a cute guy. Maybe it was because I wasn't rushing things.

I had spent the last year healing from an explosive, toxic, and abusive relationship so it was so nice to take things slow with no expectations. I was on edge about dating again. I was weary about being hurt again. But at the same time, I didn't want to be jaded, bitter, or cynical about love.

Tiny wagged his tail and stood over us before he plopped down across both of us. We laughed.

"Maybe I can bring Tiny over sometime to meet the kittens," Ethan said.

"But the kittens are so little."

"Trust me, he loves other animals. Big or small. He bonded with my neighbor's cats across the street since they were tiny kittens. He was always so good with them. He's never dominant or pushy. He's a laid-back kind of guy. And I've brought him everywhere, so he's very socialized, well trained,

and everyone loves him. I couldn't have asked for a Great Dane with a better personality. He's just perfect."

"I think Scooby-Doo when I think of a Great Dane. Not black and white and spotted."

"Tiny is a Harlequin Great Dane."

"He's just beautiful," I said petting him.

"Thanks."

"What made you decide to get him?"

"I didn't intentionally go out and say I want the biggest dog known to man." I chuckled and he continued, "The next-door neighbor was moving to California because he got a new job. He asked if I could take Tiny for a couple of months while he got settled in his new home. He was the perfect dog and so well behaved. I knew Tim had him in obedience classes since he had him. Tiny was ten months old, a perfect gentleman, and potty trained. I instantly fell in love with him. We would go for runs every day to the beach, and then he'd love to explore. Then, that neighbor called me one day and said he sadly couldn't take him. He had moved into an apartment and asked if I could take him to a no kill shelter. I said no way. I'll take him. And I did."

"How could he just give him up like that?"

"He got a promotion and was working seventy hours a week. So, he had a new life, new commitments, and a new apartment that would never allow a Great Dane. I was very surprised by it. But Tiny knew me as a pup. He lived right next door."

"Did you name him Tiny?"

"No, that was his original name. I kept it because he was this gigantic dog who thought he was a *tiny* lap dog."

I laughed.

"So that's how I ended up with a Great Dane. Tiny just fell unexpectedly into my hands. And I couldn't imagine my life without that giant pup."

We gazed up at the vast expanse of the cosmos. The night sky was so beautiful as it glittered with shining stars. I snuggled into the crook of Ethan's neck and he put his arm around me. Nothing felt more wonderful than that. And it was incredibly romantic. I hadn't been this close to a man in a long time and I treasured every moment.

I learned he loved backyard barbecues and that he had a book fetish. He loved taco truck burritos and a good steak, cold pizza, and he loved sleeping in on weekends. He loved that first gulp of cold water after a workout and camping in cool, quiet forests. He loved those garlic-stuffed cocktail olives and hotdogs with extra onions. He loved the smell of coffee and bacon. He loved his mother's lasagna and chili.

I told him how I love to stand inside a towering cathedral, or watch a desert sunset on vacation, and how much I enjoyed a good seven-layer dip. And how I loved the smell of popcorn in the movie theater and always ordered a large, my absolute weakness. I loved checking off items of my to-do list. I loved lightning and the sound of rain. I loved when my three kittens cuddled on my chest when I was watching a movie. I loved walking in fresh snow. And I absolutely loved fireworks flashing in the night sky. I also told him how much I enjoyed seeing pink, blue, and purple cotton candy clouds during a sunset. And I told him how much I enjoyed writing. It was one of my favorite things to do.

We couldn't decide which was more mesmerizing, watching the sun reflect on the ocean or staring at the flames of a roaring fire. So, we decided that we would do both sometime, and then pick. We had a fantastic night. We packed up everything, including the empty pizza box, and went back to the car. We started talking about church when he suddenly remembered something.

"Our guest speaker at church canceled for next month," he said. "Would you be interested in filling in?"

My hand flew to my mouth. "Oh! I don't do public speaking. And I don't know how to preach."

"No, nothing like that. I was thinking you could simply share your amazing testimony."

I bit my lip as I contemplated. "Talk to a church full of people?"

"Yes."

I swallowed hard. "I'm just not that brave."

"But it's a great place to start."

"To start?"

"You need to tell people your story. People need to know that hell is real."

"But why me?"

"Because God chose you. And He told you to tell people that hell existed."

"This is a private story. And I will tell lots of people. But I don't want to go public. You saw how those reporters laughed at me."

"They don't believe in God. My church does. Get your feet wet at my church. Get up there and tell your story. They will listen and they will believe you."

I pondered for a minute. "Maybe... Maybe this is why I was given a second chance, so I can tell my story to the world. But I just don't know yet. Yeah. I can't do it."

"And not just about hell. But about forgiveness. It's about the power of God. How He saved you and how your life changed, so much so, that you forgave the person that tried to hurt you."

"Give me some time to think about it," I said.

He smiled. "Take all the time you need. If not this month, maybe another later."

I nodded.

He drove me home late at night. The reporters had given up and went home. I was thankful and told Ethan goodnight.

"I had a great time," I said.

"Me too."

"I loved Tiny!"

"He loved you too. I'll call you tomorrow."

I smiled, said goodbye to Tiny, and Ethan walked me to my door. He softly pressed his warm, soft lips against mine and kissed me. And it was like the world around me stopped and I was frozen in time. I swear I saw fireworks.

Ethan and I spent the next few weeks together, practically inseparable. We texted and called each other all the time. We hung out, went to church together, went to the pool, swam in the ocean, went on hikes with Tiny, played mini-golf, and got to know each other even better. We connected, laughed, and shared this special bond. He even introduced me to his parents and his family at a cookout. They were all fantastic, and even attended Ethan's church. I started attending Ethan's church and loved it. I was

falling for Ethan hard and I couldn't stop thinking about him. I was beginning to forget about my troubled past and imagined getting serious with someone like Ethan.

\*\*\*

It was nighttime and I was coming home after a movie with Ethan. We drove separately. Up ahead, at a warehouse, heavy flames and smoke swirled through the roof. Firefighters battled the towering fire.

It was a horrifying sight. I watched from a distance safely from inside my car. I was going to turn around and go back a different way, but I couldn't stop staring at the huge fire.

It made me think about eternal life and going to hell. Jesus suffered and died so we wouldn't have to go to a place like this. Because that's how much he loved us. God adopted me to be his very own beloved child and wants me to be a part of his family.

*Knowing what it's like down there up close and personal, I think it's awesome that he gave us a way out. Why wouldn't everyone jump at this chance to avoid this fiery place? God gave us an escape route, an exit.*

I knew there would come a judgment for every human being. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." (2 Corinthians 5:10)

I gripped the steering wheel tightly as I continued to watch the massive flames shoot high into the sky. My mind couldn't stop thinking about hell. I'll never forget how the flames scorched my skin and how inhaling the smoke burned my throat, and the intense pain.

I'll never forget the feeling of knowing I'd be there forever.

I'll never forget those demonic faces. It was like being in a real-life, horror movie that you can't get out of no matter what you do.

I thought about all the people who would end up there like I did, and I imagined how they would feel the second they were dropped into hell. My heart ached for them. I knew I needed a way to tell my story. And that's when it hit me, I knew I needed to tell my story at Ethan's church. Maybe even my own. I'd start with Ethan's because they held their arms wide open to me. Whatever light I could offer, I must shine as brightly as I could.

But I knew my job was to be ready to be used by God. This is something I can't and must not be silent about. Even if it did take me out of my comfort zone, speaking in front of crowds wasn't my thing. Especially talking about something like this. But God didn't bring me back just to hide my experience under a rock because I was afraid of how people would respond to my story.

They might not believe me, but I felt like it wasn't my job to make them believe me. My job was just to tell the story, present the message, and plant the seed; and trust the Holy Spirit to work and turn people's hearts back to God. Jesus wanted me to tell people that hell was real. I knew I needed to obey what he told me. If I could save one person from waking up in that nightmarish place...like I did, then it was all worth it.

I stared ahead. Flames devoured the entire structure and firefighters continued to battle the warehouse blaze. I prayed that nobody was in there.

I pondered some more.

I didn't make my decision to follow God just because I was afraid of hell. I found that truly loving God is not difficult because he's just that awesome. The more I think about him, go to church, praise

him during worship, and read my bible, the more I fell in love with Him. I enjoyed spending time in His presence and prayer. No relationship can grow unless you spend time together. And that's what I started doing. I was in a covenant relationship with the most amazing God ever.

I was created by a loving creator who gave me life. I think of myself as a rare and precious jewel. I was not worthless or unimportant in God's plan. And he's causing everything to work together for his good, Romans 8:28. Getting almost killed and going to hell were horrible. But I survived and everything was coming together for his good. My story could make people think about their eternal future. And I knew this was God's plan for me, that He would be with me every step of the way.

*You have encircled me behind and in front, And placed Your hand upon me. Psalms 139:5*

The Bible says that God is love. People have written about the love of God in Psalms, hymns, poems, and songs for centuries. And I never really got it until now. Now, I understood it completely. God doesn't just love us immensely, but he is the very definition of love. His affection is unconditional. God's love will change you forever if you accept it.

When you realize that there's supernatural strength available to you from above, then your perspective on life will change. You can move from worry to worship by realizing that God is in control of every circumstance in your life. I would let Him be the Master of everything in my life. Once you stop trying to do things in your own strength, God will take over and lift you to new heights.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.

-Proverbs 3:5-6

I immediately dialed Ethan and he answered.

"Hey! I'll do it!" I said, my voice filled with enthusiasm.

"Do what?"

"Speak at your church. I want to do it. I want to tell my story. And I don't care if they believe me or not."

"What convinced you on the car ride home?"

"There's a huge fire. And I pulled over and reflected." I then proceeded to tell him everything.

"You have such a powerful testimony," he said.

"And I want to tell the whole world."

## Chapter 34

The next morning, when I checked the mail, I got a card with a pretty butterfly on it. And there was also a check included. It was from Edward Williams. It read:

*Hi Rose,*

*I'll keep this short and simple. Because I'm not good at words. I can't take back all the pain I've caused you. I am truly sorry from the bottom of my heart. I don't care what happens to me, but I want to give you something. If I go to prison, I won't have access to my account, so I cashed it out. I contacted our lawyer and he did an estimate of how much your medical bills were. So I'm sending you*

*a check to cover them. If there's money left over, please use it however you see fit. I wish I could do more, but I'm only seventeen. I've been reading the first book of John. It's been inspirational. Thank you for such a wonderful gift. And I think you should tell the world about your experience. Be sure to write that book!*

*Edward Williams*

Tears fell from my face. And I couldn't believe he did that for me.

After dinner, I called my dad.

"Hey, Dad."

"Hi, honey, what's up?"

"You're not going to believe it. But Ed sent me a check for all of my medical bills. And he said if there was leftover money to keep it to use, however, I see fit."

"He did what?"

"He paid for my bills! How awesome is that? I thought I'd be drowning in debt for a long, long time."

"Praise the Lord."

One of the kittens jumped up on me and I held her in my arms. "I'm so happy. That's a huge relief. I owed so much, even with insurance."

"That was very honorable."

"I can pay you for all the extras you've done, like buying the security system and putting in the new glass sliding glass doors."

"Nope. Don't even worry about it."

"Thanks, Dad. I love you so much."

"I love you too."

"And another thing, different topic."

"What's up?" Dad asked.

"Hey. I've been thinking. Remember that conversation we had a little while ago about what I'm not afraid of as an adult?"

"Oh yeah."

"Well, I finally have the answer."

"Let's hear it. What are they?"

"One. I'm not afraid of hell because I know I will never go there again. I've been born again and Jesus Christ is my Savior. And I have a personal relationship with him. I've committed my life to him. And two. I'm not scared of demons. I don't want to see one but if I do, I will just tell it to leave in the name of Jesus Christ and it has to flee. And three. I'm not scared of death. Because I know when I pass away, I will be in heaven with our Lord and Savior. So those are three adult things I am not scared of them anymore. His hand is on my life every second, every minute, every hour, every heartbeat."

"That's powerful," my dad said.

"I thought about it long and hard."

"You've been such an inspiration to us. We've already met religion, but now, you introduced us to Jesus, who has changed our lives around. We need to be in a relationship with God through Jesus and not church religion."

“Yes, I have learned our focus should be on Jesus, not religion. Jesus is the key, not church attendance.”

“Agree 100%. And I rededicated my life to Jesus. So did your mom. After hearing your testimony, it made us really think. And when you told us you got born again. We gave our lives to God fully and asked Him to forgive us of our sins. We believe in Jesus as our hope for Salvation and everlasting life. We’ve been praying and reading our bible and putting God first in our life.”

“I’m so happy to hear that.”

“We also forgave Ed,” he said. “We’ve put it in God’s hands.”

“That means so much to me.”

“You were right. It’s what Jesus would want us to do.”

“I know it was hard. It was hard for me too.”

“It was. But it’s done.”

“Feel better and lighter?”

“We do.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“You should call your mom. She really wants to discuss it with you on a deeper level.”

“Sure thing.”

“Oh, hey, are you still meeting me at the golf course tomorrow?”

“See ya there.”

\*\*\*

I met my sister, mom, and dad at the golf course on Saturday. We planned on playing eighteen holes, roughly about three hours, and rented a golf cart. Playing golf was really my dad’s thing. I did like it better than tennis though because I was the one who decided when to hit that white ball. I thought it would be great to get out and have some fun outside, and to get some sunshine and fresh air. I wasn’t a PGA champion like my sister, but we always had a blast. I decided to be sporty and wore a white shorts outfit with cute little blue stripes and tennis shoes.

My dad hit the ball like a champ and his love for the game was obvious. I was amazed at how far he hit the ball.

My mom hit a low hook driver off the tee and it nearly missed a little dog running loose.

“Mom!” I said. “You almost took out the pup!”

Her mouth dropped. “Thank goodness I missed him. But I don’t get it. I had everything right.”

“Except distance and direction,” my dad chuckled.

My mom playfully slapped his arm, then motioned for me to go next.

I took a mighty swing. My tee ball went into some trees ricocheting off several tree limbs and my dad had to run over to rescue it.

Chuckling, he came back with the ball. “Ladies, we really need to stop aiming at dogs and trees.”

We all laughed.

My sister scored a hole-in-one. “See? Not all of us ladies aim at puppies and trees.”

I smiled at her. She was such a great player. Unlike me and Mom. We all cheered for her incredible shot.

When it was my turn, it took many strokes. When I was finally a few feet away, the ball rolled past the hole. But my family cheered me on. It was a short, easy putt and I aced it.

“What was my score?” I asked Casey after I was done teeing off. I was sure it was a four or five for that shot.

“I lost count after the fifth stroke,” Casey said.

“Casey!”

“What? The truth needs to be told.”

I sighed. “Why is this the only sport where I can get a high score?”

“You know high scores aren’t good, right?”

“Yes, Captain Obvious. It’s a joke.”

She adjusted her ball cap, then threw me a smile. “You know you love me, sis. I’m the best friend you can’t get rid of.”

“That means you’re stuck with me too,” I chuckled.

“I’m next,” my mom squealed with excitement.

“No aiming for birds,” I kidded.

My mom laughed.

“Okay, Gabby, what’s the foundation of every golf swing?” my dad asked her.

“Stance. If my stance is off, then my swing will be off.” She adjusted her position with her feet shoulder-length apart and knees slightly bent. “Hey, hon, I think this is going to be my hole-in-one.”

“We’re rooting for you.”

My mom swung and sent the ball high into the air. It landed on the green a few feet from the hole. That was one of her best shots ever. She was so excited and I was thrilled for her.

“Awesome job!” my dad cheered.

Somebody called out to us and I turned. A golf cart raced over to us. An older lady with dark hair in a bun seemed to be in a panic as she stopped next to us.

“My dog got loose. Have you seen him? He’s a terrier mix.”

“Yes,” my mom answered. “He ran over toward par three.”

“Thanks,” she said and drove off.

We continued to tee off and Casey and my dad were putting and hitting balls like a dream for fourteen holes. Me and Mom, not so much so. But I did get a great shot on par 10 in only two strokes. And my mom did get that awesome shot on par 3.

Loud yelps caught my attention. When I looked off, a dog was fighting for his life. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. A seven-foot alligator suddenly engulfed its head in its jaws. It began to drag the poor dog off toward the pond. I knew it was the exact same dog that had been running around the green. I was horrified. I couldn’t just stand there and watch. I just couldn’t.

Adrenaline surged. Without giving it any thought, I ran toward the dangerous situation. I knew dogs weren’t its usual meal but I knew these things would eat about anything if given the opportunity. I knew gators weren’t to be messed with, but I literally had no choice.

*Lord, please help me. Please save us.*

The dog was crying, struggling for life. I started swinging my golf club like a wild woman. I knew I had to win this tug-of-war. The alligator didn't back down. I knew alligators knew no fear, so I wouldn't either.

"This dog is NOT dying today. It's not happening!"

I used my putter to fight off the massive reptile. I smacked the tip of its snout and also aimed for the eyes. But this beast wasn't having any of it and wouldn't let go of its strong grip. I was not going to give up and let this apex predator have this pup for a snack. I delivered blow after blow. I did everything I could to try and force the gator to let go.

I swung again with all my force. It opened its huge jaws and released its prey.

*Thank God!*

Yelping, the dog ran off. I was now staring at this thing straight in the eyes. I was the person who took its dinner away. He looked pissed. But I was ready for a fight. It wasn't any uglier than other things I had to try and fight in hell. Of course, I lost those battles.

Locking eyes with the beast, I held my putter up in the air. I could shove it down its throat if it came close enough. I noticed a life jacket on the ground next to me. I could jam that down the gator's throat too. Stimulate that gag reflex.

It hissed at me.

Here I was, face-to-face with this huge alligator. I stared at its fearsome set of teeth and its heavily armored skin. I knew every second counted in determining the fate of this horrifying encounter. I was going to fight back as hard as I could.

It lunged. I jumped back.

"Let's raise our hands and try to look as big as possible," my dad said, suddenly standing next to me. "Then he won't want to mess with us. Hopefully."

"Okay."

"Now let's slowly back up. On the count of three, we're going to run away in a straight line as FAST as we can. One. Two. Three."

And we bolted.

When we were a safe distance, we turned and watched it retreat and strut off, sliding back into the big pond. I let out a huge sigh of relief. I then waved goodbye. "See ya later, alligator."

I then wiped the sweat off my forehead and tried to regain my composure.

Hysterical, my mom and sister ran over to us.

"Is the dog okay?" I said trying to catch my breath.

"Yes," my mom said. "He ran to his owner, that lady."

"Good," I said, breathless. "That's wonderful news."

"Rose, that was crazy!" Casey said. "Not the best decision a Florida-born girl can make."

"Well, you know me. I love animals."

My mom looked at me with a terrified look on her face. "Why did you do that? I can't take this a second time! What if it would've grabbed you and pulled you into the water?"

"What was that about?" my dad said angrily. "This could've ended very badly."

I leaned over still trying to catch my breath. "What do you mean? I had to save that dog!"

"You could've gotten yourself killed! And me included. Don't ever take a risk like that again!"

“I couldn’t stand by and idly watch.”

“It could’ve easily killed you in the blink of an eye.”

“If I die, I die. At least I know I won’t be greeted with the red glare of fire and flames. Didn’t we have this conversation last night on the phone when I told you what I wasn’t afraid of?”

“Is that what this is about?”

“Dad, I trusted in God. I knew he would protect me.”

My dad hugged me as emotion consumed him. “I can’t lose you again. Not again.”

“Do you think we want to see you taken out like that? That’s as horrible and violent as last time!”

Casey said. “Do you have a death wish?”

“I’m sorry I scared you.”

My mom and Casey came over and joined in on the hug.

“How did you think you could ever take that gator on?” my mom asked.

“Well, honestly, this was a piece of cake compared to the other ten-foot, gnarly beasts I’ve had to face.”

“Not funny,” my sister retorted.

“It was a split-second decision,” I said. “I didn’t think. I just acted.”

“Obviously.”

“There wasn’t time to weigh the pros and cons.”

My sister wiped a tear from her eye. “Quit tempting fate.”

“Everyone, in the golf cart now!” said my dad. “We’re getting out of here. We’ll report this immediately.”

A couple of guys ran over to us.

“Whoa! Did you see that thing?” one asked. “You took that big guy on!”

“That thing was straight out of Jurassic Park,” the other said.

I ran a hand through my hair. “Welcome to National Geographic on the golf course.”

“Are you all okay?” one asked.

“We’re good,” I said. “Thanks for asking.”

A golf cart approached. It was the same lady who had asked about her missing dog earlier. Her dog barked in her arms. I was so happy to know the dog was safe and back with its owner.

“I saw everything!” she said. “Teddy got loose. I was looking for him everywhere. And then I saw that alligator taking him. And I about freaked. Which one of you girls saved my boy?”

“That would be my sister,” Casey said pointing to me.

“Thank you,” the woman said with heartfelt emotion, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I don’t know how I’ll ever repay you. I just want to tell you thank you a million times over. You’re so brave.”

“Or insane,” my sister said.

“Thanks,” I said to the lady, my eyes welling up with tears because I was so happy that this turned out to be a great outcome. “I’m just glad he’s safe.”

“You’re truly our hero,” she said between sobs. “I know not all heroes wear capes, but maybe we should get you one.”

“I did what anyone would do.”

“Speak for yourself,” my sister said.

“Oh, Casey,” I said, touching her arm.

She wiped a tear rolling down her face. “You could’ve been killed! Stop taking life-threatening risks!”

“Risks, as in plural. Hey! The last life-threatening one doesn’t count. I was locked inside my home safely. Please don’t be so dramatic.”

“Dramatic? What’s next, huh? Shark diving, scaling massive cliff faces, and parachuting?”

“Listen, I’m not an adrenaline junky. And I’m sorry that *my* risks are shaking up your life.”

“I’m pregnant. I want you here and alive to meet my son. And you scared me with this stunt.”

“Not a stunt. A rescue. There’s a big difference.”

“I am happy Teddy is okay. I am. It’s just that... I just want my sister alive. Is that so much to ask for?”

Casey tends to be sarcastic when she was upset. I didn’t hold it against her. She just loved me and the thought about losing me a second time was too much for her to handle. She had been so emotional the last few weeks. Probably the pregnancy.

“Teddy is bleeding,” the woman said, voice quivering. “It’s nothing major. Just superficial bites. I’m rushing him to my vet.”

“We’ll say a prayer,” my mom said. “And I’m sure he’ll need some antibiotics.”

She wiped the tears from her eyes. “Thank you for praying. I really appreciate it.” Her attention turned to me. “And thanks for risking everything for him. Your quick actions saved his life. I’ll never forget what you did. This is my baby and I can’t live without him. May I ask what your name is?”

“Rose Hart.”

“Nice to meet you, Rose. I’m Jenna Robertson.”

“Nice to meet you too.” I then introduced the others.

She nodded, then sped off.

As Dad drove us back, I asked about lunch.

“I’m too shook up,” my mom said.

“But Casey needs to feed the baby.”

“How can you eat? We’re all a big bundle of nerves.”

“It’s no biggy. We played golf and I rescued a dog out of the jaws of a giant alligator. All in a day’s work.” I smiled. “Why let a little dramatic rescue ruin our fun-filled day? Today is a day for celebration. Somebody’s family member lives to bark another day. Nobody was hurt. And what did Dad say about today?”

“That it would be unforgettable fun for the whole family,” Liz said.

“And was it not *unforgettable* as Dad stated?” I simply asked.

My sister laughed, followed by my mom and dad. I was trying to make light of the situation. I guess it worked.

My mom glanced over at me. “Honey, I didn’t know you and Dad could run that fast.”

“Me neither.”

Dad chuckled. “All she knew was that she had to be faster than her old man.”

We all chuckled.

“I’m the writer, editor, and director of my own life,” I said. “How about we edit out what just happened, and continue our lovely family bonding day? Because we can’t live in the past. At least that’s what Dad always tells me.”

“But it just happened,” my dad said with a chuckle.

“I just handed you the invisible pencil with the eraser.”

“Fine. I guess this is what happens when your daughter is an editor.” He pondered for a minute. “Okay, it’s done. I just edited out the horror scene. We played golf. No flesh-eating monsters involved.”

“And I won first place,” my mom squealed with joy. “Even got a huge trophy.”

“Oh, that’s a lot of editing.”

“Leo! Just write it in.”

“Okay, we had a fantastic day and Mom surprised us all by winning.”

She laughed. “Don’t forget the hole-in-one. I made so many.”

“Me too,” I added.

“Did I come in second place after Mom?” Casey asked.

“I’m sorry but you didn’t. You came in last.”

“Rewrite it!”

We all laughed.

“Hey, can we rewrite that Rose wore durable combat boots,” Casey asked.

My mom couldn’t help but grin. “With her white outfit?”

“Well, in the rewrite, Rose went to the golf course in fashionable combat clothes with durable boots.”

She chuckled. “How about a floral pair of Doc Martens, it’s a complete twist on the classic combat boot.”

“Floral boots it is!”

“No,” I said. “Write in trendy and gorgeous combat stilettos. I fought in high heels and won.”

“C’mon, ladies! Ditch the heels entirely! Just battle barefoot,” my dad said.

We left and reported the incident, then went out for lunch. Casey invited me over but I wanted to get home and rest. Tomorrow, I was speaking at Ethan’s church. I was so happy that my family would meet me there to support me.

On the drive home, I thought long and hard about the events of the day. I simply trusted the Lord. I knew he would protect me. I had spent a lot of time in prayer and worship that morning. I had read Psalms 91 and it was still fresh in my head.

Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.[1] 2 I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’ 3 Surely he will save you from the fowler’s snare and from the deadly pestilence. 4 He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart. 5 You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day, 6 nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness, nor the plague that destroys at midday. 7 A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. 8 You will only observe with your eyes and see the punishment of the wicked. 9 If you say, ‘The Lord is my refuge,’ and you make the Most High your dwelling, 10 no

harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent. 11 For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; 12 they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. 13 You will tread on the lion and the cobra; you will trample the great lion and the serpent. 14 ‘Because he loves me,’ says the Lord, ‘I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. 15 He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him. 16 With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.’

I knew I was safe. I felt protected. And that’s why I didn’t hesitate. I knew my Lord and Savior would rescue me and deliver me.

“Thank you, Jesus for protecting me and that dog today,” I said out loud. “I love you so much.”

A ring echoed through the air as I pulled in my driveway. Somebody on social media was trying to call me. I didn’t recognize the person and debated on whether to answer it or not.

I accepted the call. A face flashed on the screen of a man in his thirties with light brown hair and brown eyes.

“Getting creative? You guys haven’t tried to reach me this way before. But I’m not making a statement,” I said. “Please don’t call here again. And I’m asking nicely. Goodbye.”

“Wait. Wait! Don’t disconnect me. I’m not with the press.”

“Have we met?”

“We’ve met briefly. I doubt you’d remember me. But I never stopped thinking about everything you said.”

“Oh, really?”

“My name is Tim Masterson. I was one of the medics that tried to save your life that night.”

My jaw dropped. “Thank you for everything you did...” I paused to gain my composure. “I can’t thank you enough for saving my life, for all of you who helped me that night.”

“Your story had a happy ending.”

“I give all the glory and praise to God for that one.”

“Speaking of God and all of that, that’s the reason why I reached out to you. And I hope it’s okay.”

“Not a problem.”

“Okay, that’s good. So here’s the thing. I know you saw something when you flatlined. You were scared out of your mind talking about fire and torture. I’m not a Christian but I know you went somewhere when you died in that ambulance. And I’d love to talk to you more about it.”

“Are you free tomorrow morning?”

“I am.”

“I’m speaking at a local church called, Trinity Church of God at the corner of Oak and Elm downtown about my experience. You can hear my testimony from start to finish.”

“Really? I would love to hear your story.”

“I’m meeting people afterward for a Q&A. And I can answer any questions you might have.”

“That sounds wonderful. I’ll be there. And I can give my recollection of the ambulance ride. I saw what you were going through. And I knew you were fighting to stay out of...well, wherever you ended up when your heart stopped beating.”

“I remember very well,” I said.

He bit his lip pondering, then spoke, “So where do you think you actually went?”

“I was dragged into the depths of Hell.”

I shot him a serious look as he gasped, and he knew I wasn’t playing.

“By what?” he asked, terrified. “Who dragged you down there?”

“Demons. Big, ugly, scary ones.”

## Chapter 35

I wore a royal blue dress with matching heels. I wore my hair in curls and they hung down my back. We had arrived at church and I was now on stage to give my testimony. God brought me back for a reason and I think it was to tell my story and how God rescued me.

“I think the devil doesn’t want Rose Hart here today,” Pastor Bill said. “She battled a huge alligator yesterday that wanted to take her out. But nothing could stop her from being here today and telling her extraordinary testimony.”

Everyone clapped and I smiled.

I briefly told them the unbelievable alligator story, then I started my testimony.

“Hello. Thank you so much for inviting me to your church to give my testimony. This is my first time speaking in front of a crowd so I’m a little nervous. But here I go. I am Rose Hart, and I died and went to hell, but Jesus brought me back. Praise the Lord! You’ve seen the papers of my clinical death. These are my personal medical records and they are confidential but I want to share them with you so you can see I am telling you the truth.

I survived cardiac arrest. I had no heartbeat or pulse. There was no activity on the electric monitors.

I didn’t plan to wake up in a fiery place, a dimension of pure evil filled with brimstone, flames, demonic beings, and the cries of the damned. I thought when I died, I would wake up in a beautiful paradise with harps playing and choirs of angels singing, and my loved ones greeting me. Unfortunately, I had no say in what was happening. I died and justice was set. I thought my good works could get me to heaven. That I could be a good person. But nobody can be a good person.

When I died, the medics frantically tried to bring me back. They knew I was clinically dead but they had no idea what happened to me in that time frame. But I can fill in the missing gap and I can tell you what awaits on the other side. I was sucked into another world where the stuff of nightmares and horror movies are created. To the medics, I looked dead, but in fact, I was very much alive in another realm where I was burning and being tormented by hideous creatures. And it makes me mad when people say, well she’s at peace now. All her worries and problems are gone now. But let me tell you, I was NOT at peace and my worries and problems WERE only beginning.

Hell is HORRIBLE!

I now appreciate *more* what the blood of Jesus Christ has delivered us from. Never take salvation or the grace of God for granted.

It took a minute for me to gather my thoughts.

“But soon things were supernaturally downloaded to me like... that this was it and that I would be in this fiery inferno forever, locked up down here, with no escape. There was no rescue team to save me. And what hit me the hardest was that horrible revelation, that terrible truth that I was never getting out. There was no parole, no pardon, and no release date or time served.

I beg you to avoid this place at all costs.

We have a good life here on earth. We have a house and we listen to music, and we watch movies and we eat pizza, and we go on vacations. Just think about all the modern comforts we have. And so we don't think much about the afterlife. We underestimate the fact that our souls are so unqualified to spend eternity with Jesus.

According to Google, there are 8 billion people living on this planet. Also, according to Google, 31% of the world's population is Christian. That means over five billion people today are going to hell.

These five billion people today are going to the exact place where I was dropped off. And my heart cries out for them. Because I found myself in this otherworldly place. If I close my eyes and concentrate, I can still smell and hear hell, I can hear the tortured screams and smell the blood, the burning, and the rot.

A tear dripped down my face and my voice began to tremble, “I have personally seen this place up close and personal and I can't imagine 5 billion people having to go through what I went through. The pain is indescribable and you feel it 100 times more in your spiritual body. I knew this was something I couldn't keep to myself and I needed to warn everyone! What kind of person would I be in I saw the bridge was out and I didn't warn you and let you drive right on by, knowing that your car is going to plunge into the water.

And that's why I'm up here today. To scream out loud, hell is a REAL place and you don't want to go there. Because let me tell you, I am not a public speaker and I'm terrified of telling my story or being ridiculed or having somebody think I'm crazy. But if I could save one person from experiencing what I went through, then it's all worth it.

If I could save somebody from having to come face-to-face with those horrific demons in that nightmarish realm, then it's worth it. If I can save one person from the terror and fear that I felt then it's all worth it. Tomorrow is not promised. You have to make your decision while you are standing on this planet because once you cross over, it is too late. Unless you happen to get resuscitated like myself. But that's very far in a few between. So, trust me when I tell you, there is no get-out-of-jail card once you officially die. Trust me on this one. If you don't accept, Jesus Christ as your savior, and Lord, then hell is waiting for you.

And just because you don't believe in a real, literal hell, it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. I could tell you that I don't believe in the moon. Yet, there it hangs in the sky at night. You can choose not to believe, but your disbelief doesn't change reality.

What happens when I die? You see, death is just a transition into a new life after death. You go to heaven or hell. Everyone loves to talk about heaven. Not so much about hell.

I know hell is an uncomfortable subject to talk about. It's why some preachers don't preach it. And I wish I could tell you I had a warm, fuzzy experience and everything was beautiful. Because I hate horror, and I won't even watch a horror movie. So telling you about this horrible experience makes it that much worse. I would rather tell you about beautiful waterfalls, breathtaking flowers, scenery, and

how Jesus showed me heaven, but that's just not what happened. This is hard to speak about this publicly, but I know that's what I'm called to do. Hell is so horrible that Jesus preached about it in the New Testament 70 times. Why did he warn us so many times? Because he knew how horrible this place was and didn't want to see one person go there. Jesus talked about hell more than any other person in the Bible.

Hell is real. I've been there! And you can't comprehend it until you've seen it for yourself. I'm telling you if you spent one minute there and you came back, you would be on your hands and knees, begging God for forgiveness for weeks. There is no mercy, no kindness, no compassion, no light, and no hope. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy because no one deserves that.

One lady told me hell was a fabrication by Christian theologians of later centuries after Jesus' death and that it's completely made up. I asked her if she had ever died and of course, she told me no. I told her I had the honor of dying at least four different times one night, that I had clinical proof. And I've literally seen the truth.

I won't go into the horrible details, but I will just sum it up by telling you that a young man broke into my house and attacked me. My heart stopped beating. I felt my spirit come out of my body. And there I was floating on top of the ceiling, looking down at my former self. It was like being in a movie.

I can remember thinking that this couldn't be happening and that I was just at the grocery store shopping for this celebration dinner. That I was in the middle of cooking it. I was young and healthy. But everything changed in the blink of an eye.

I felt myself slip away. And I stood there floating. Just floating. And all I could think was that I wasn't ready to die. I had so much to live for. And these two men in white robes greeted me. I thought they were angels coming to take me to heaven. They assured me everything was okay and to follow them. And I did. But as we continued to walk, it got darker and I knew something wasn't right. I told them I was going back. And these heavenly beings suddenly changed into these demons right before my eyes. They were so strong. And threw me over their shoulder and dragged me to what I would call the edge of a cliff and they just threw me down.

And I fell. And it felt like it was a long time, but then I landed with a thud on this hard rock. My body ached. I couldn't breathe because it was so smokey and I was surrounded by flames.

The smoke burned my *eyes*.

I could *smell* the smoke.

I could *taste* the smoke.

The smell of sulfur assaulted me, followed by the smell of burning tires, burnt hair, and putrid flesh. My sense of smell, my hearing, my touch, my eyesight was intensified supernaturally by like a million times.

I was alive. I knew who I was. I remembered my life. I still loved my family and friends. I was still the same me. It was like I had been transported to another dimension or somebody had thrown me in an active volcano. But it was one hundred percent me. My mind was sharp. I knew everything that was happening to me. And I remembered my old life vividly.

And even though I couldn't breathe, and it was dimly lit by the fire, and the smell made me want to vomit, I felt around and stood. I remembered dying and floating above my body. I knew I was dead.

And I knew I should've never survived that fall onto the hard rock without breaking every bone in my body. And I knew this was a supernatural place. And I would've done anything for a second chance.

*Anything.*

God, please, I don't deserve this. What did I do to deserve this?

I felt like I didn't belong there. And I didn't understand why someone like me would be there in the first place.

Because I went to church. I taught Sunday school. I fed the homeless on weekends. I was nice. I was sweet. I did countless works! I volunteered. I ran the bake sale. I ran the rummage sale. I helped with the church dinners. I had no enemies. I was a people pleaser. If anyone needed anything, I was there.

I thought I was good enough. But truth be told, I was not good enough for a holy God.

I guess I thought that I could make up for being a drunk over a year ago. Because I was sober now. I went to church. My family went to church. I had always gone to church my *whole entire* life. I had gone off the path for a few years but I was now back on track. I had to make a mend to God for my bad deeds. I was trying to make up for my sins, my awful sins, by works. I believed in God. And I believed if I was good enough, I would definitely go to heaven. Because I didn't understand the salvation plan. I didn't even have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I just went to church and did good things. I honestly thought being good got me to heaven. That was my way of getting through the big white pearly gates.

And folks, that's why I was down there in the first place.

I went on to tell everyone every detail of my experience from the demons to being resuscitated. I swear I didn't leave one detail out.

And I'm telling you nothing compares to the horrors of hell. In hell, you feel literal pain and continue to exist. Sadness fills me when I know someone is on their way to hell, to an eternity of torture, pain, and hopelessness. It's why I have to speak up.

Hell is scary, isn't it friend? That's why I have to say something. It's why I'm here today. And I have three words: Unimaginable suffering forever. Nobody wants this heart-crushing reality. Do NOT walk your life *without* Jesus! Repent of your sins and trust in Him. Jesus loves you and wants to have a relationship with you. It's why He shed his blood on the cross. Nobody has to go to hell. The Lord can save you, but you must choose Him. You must have a relationship with Him. And it's your choice. God lets you choose. And that's the cool thing about God. He lets us have a choice.

Because I'm telling you good people go to hell every day. It doesn't matter if you're rich or poor or what nationality or social class you are. It doesn't matter if you're beautiful or talented. It doesn't matter what your connections are. It doesn't matter if you're the president or a sports star or a movie star or a famous singer. You are there to be tormented and punished.

There was only one thing I wanted. And that was a second chance. To get out of this nightmarish realm. And by God's grace, I was given that opportunity. Because it wasn't my time to die just yet. I often think about what might had happened if God hadn't intervened and those paramedics couldn't save my life. I would've been officially stuck down there. Hell is violent, scary, and unimaginable. You will burn. You will see hideous demons that have no regard for you, and have no mercy whatsoever. They will enjoy ripping you apart from limb to limb. They delight in your torment and pain; they have

an unquenchable appetite for it. They feel nothing but this intense, pure hatred toward you. When you face the brutal realization that there is no rescue, you are beyond heartbroken. I can remember writhing in pain, grinding my teeth, demons unleashing all their fury on me, claws tearing at me, fangs biting into me, the stench of burning souls assaulting my nostrils, the desperate cries and screams echoing all around you.

I let out a long sob as emotions swept over me.

Do. Not. Come. Here.

A woman handed me a tissue and I wiped my eyes, then continued. “Friends, you have to make that decision while you are still breathing, while your heart is still beating, while you are still on this planet. Always remember that death does not announce the date, time, or location when it will come for you. Life can change in the blink of an eye, in an instant. So please don’t stumble in the darkness of deception. Choose God while you still have breath in this lifetime. Because once you pass on, your fate is sealed and your choice is irreversible.

And just know. I literally roasted in indescribable torment and eternal punishment.

But something good came out of it. The Lord allowed me to go to hell...so *you* didn’t have to. So that I could warn anyone who is willing to listen.

I’m begging every single person who is listening to me.

Choose life.

Choose Christ.

Here are four scriptures that really helped lead me to Christ: Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under Heaven given to men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

For the wages of sin *is* death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 3:23)

If you seek me with all your heart, you will find me. (Deuteronomy 4:29)

So those four scriptures showed me that few find the road to life. And I wanted to be on the right road. Sin is death but there’s eternal life in Jesus, and that salvation is found in nobody else or in any other religion, and if I looked hard enough, I would find Him. And I searched...and I found Him.

God is a God of love, compassion, mercy, and second chances. But we have to remember that God is a righteous God of judgment. Nobody knows their death date or when they are going to cross over. So, we must be ready. And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment. (Hebrews 9:27)

One day everyone on Earth will stand before a holy God and the Book of Life will be opened. Will your name be written there? Because you can’t get into heaven without it. Revelation 20:12 - And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works.

Reading the Bible had a profound and life-changing impact on me, leading to a deep and intimate relationship with Christ, who gave me peace and strength during my times of trial. I knew things would

never be the same ever. My outlook on life completely changed. My heart was transformed. I even forgave the young man who tried to kill me, who beat me senseless with a baseball bat. Yes, I forgave him. Forgiveness is a beautiful thing.

I had expected the man who tried to hurt me to be a snarling beast. I remembered him as heinous, atrocious, and cruel.

But he wasn't.

He was gentle, loving, and kind. He was an honor roll high school student and hero athlete on a bad trip. He was headed to Harvard and came from a good solid family. But a friend talked him into going to a party and he drank and then was talked into drugs. That one bad mistake led him down a long dark road that changed his life forever. I hate what he did to me. But I forgave him and I hope he gets his second chance at life. I hope they drop all charges or that he's acquitted.

I know now that the young man had just altered the course of *both* of our lives. We both need those second chances desperately.

I went to hell. Got a second chance. And forgave my attacker. Accept Jesus Christ while you still can. Love everyone. Forgive.

Do you know where you're going when you die? Let's pause for a moment, and everything think about that.

Hell is real, and it's forever, and people are going there. We need to spread the gospel and tell everyone we know about the Good News and the gospel. Christ died to save us from this place. So don't let your soul be in DANGER. Hell is not a scare tactic to get you to choose God. Jesus died so you didn't have to come here. Please take up on his free offer. He loves you. So much so that he gave his life so he could spend eternity with you.

Really think about where you'll spend your eternal citizenship. I have, and I know that my name is written in The Book of Life. My home is heaven. Even with all my countless sins. Because Jesus washed my sins away when I asked for forgiveness and decided to follow Him. I was a raging alcoholic and did so many horrible things that hurt people deeply. But no sin is too great for God to forgive. I know God has forgiven me and I am a new creation in Christ. He's my absolute joy. He called me back...and He's calling you back to Himself with arms wide open. Fall to your knees. Cling to the mercy of the cross. Ask for forgiveness and follow Jesus. You are never beyond the reach of God's love; He will love, care, and cherish you forever. I mean, look at me. I am so imperfect. But it doesn't matter. God still loves me perfectly. He loves you perfectly.

His love for you is unwavering.

His love for you is unconditional.

His love for you is unimaginable.

His love for you is unfathomable.

His love for you is unfailing.

You *matter* to Him.

He thinks about you all the time. In Psalms 139:17-18, it says, How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered! I can't even count them; they outnumber the grains of sand!

Take a moment to reflect that. God's thoughts toward you outnumber the grains of sand on the seashore. How amazing is that?

God is such a loving Father. He loves you and cares for you more than you'll ever imagine. In 1 John 4:8, we see that God is the very definition of love. Enjoy his love, and love him in return with all your heart, mind, and soul. I have surrendered my life to Jesus and I know I will spend eternity with him. Yes, I can safely say that I know my eternal destination. And not because of my good works, but because of what Jesus did for me. Praise the Lord. Do you have that same assurance? If not, just turn to your Father in heaven and join His family.

In Luke 15:7, God says to come home and He'll throw the biggest party heaven has ever seen. In Ephesians 3:14-15, God says He has always been Father, and will always be Father. In John 1:12-13, God wants *you* to be his child. In Luke 15:11-32, He says He is waiting for *you*.

So, my final question is, will *you* be His child?

Thank you so much for listening to my testimony."

The entire congregation started clapping. And I couldn't believe I survived my first public speaking event. I knew God was with me and felt his presence. The pastor came up and said a few words, then I walked off the church stage and sat down. Pastor Bill asked for people to come up for prayer and many came, some weeping. There was more worship and the service ended.

My parents and Casey congratulated me for a job well done. We stayed after and talked to people who were interested and had questions. Like a Q&A. I even got a chance to talk to the medic who saved my life. He was so touched and went to talk to the pastor afterward. After an hour, we said our goodbyes.

I jumped into the car with Ethan.

"I'm so proud of you," he said. "You did a fantastic job."

"I just poured out my heart."

"You did good."

"The pastor asked me if he could post it on their church website. I told him yes."

"That's amazing," Ethan said.

"The press is going to have a field day with this story."

"Who cares what they think? Maybe one of them will get saved."

I smiled.

## Chapter 36

I was picking up a prescription when I heard a 10-year-old boy pointing me out.

"Mom, that's the lady! From church. She wrestled with a demon and won!"

"Let's not bug her, okay?"

"But Mom!"

Not listening to his mother, he ran around to the front of me and smiled.

"Hey! Didn't you wrestle that thirteen-foot demon and win?"

I laughed. "I would love to take all the credit and tell you that I kicked its sorry butt from hell all the way to outer space. But the truth is, and I really hate to admit it, is that it kicked my butt."

"Really?"

"It beat me up big time. But Jesus came down and rescued me."

"Wow!"

"The demon won because I was in hell. But...here right now, on planet Earth, we can kick any demon's butt with the mighty name of Jesus."

"Even me?"

"Even you. Because Jesus is the most powerful name in the universe. So, if you ever see a demon, say, 'Leave in the name of Jesus', and it *will* have to leave."

"Even if it's thirteen feet tall?"

"Totally."

The pharmacist called my name and I picked up my prescription. I waved goodbye as I walked away. I headed home, then sat on the back porch with the kittens. It was such a nice day and I couldn't resist hanging out in the fresh air.

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After dinner, my entire family unexpectedly showed up with a Texas-sized sheet cake filled with more colorful candles than I could count. My niece held a huge bundle of helium balloons. I invited them inside and my aunt and cousins went into the kitchen to start lighting the candles. Sue couldn't stop smiling. I knew she was in on it and never told me. I was so surprised.

"Um," I said. "Guys, it's not my birthday."

My dad nodded. "Nope, it's not."

I let out a long laugh. "Then why the cake, the balloons, and enough candles to send the fire department to my house?"

"Oh, and I brought party hats and blowers," my uncle chimed in.

"No party is complete without those," I said. "And you know I can never say no to cake. But...what's going on?"

"Life is tough," Casey said. "And so are you. You see, my dear sister, you have the strength to overcome any obstacle in your life."

I lifted a brow in confusion.

My mom smiled. "Honey, it's to celebrate *you*. We all wanted to get together and just celebrate you and all your victories. You've overcome so much and we wanted to celebrate it and show how much we love and care about you. It was Uncle Tom's idea."

My uncle smiled and put a pink party hat on my head. "You know I'm always doing crazy stuff like this. You should've expected nothing less." He then started passing out his party accessories.

"It's the most beautiful thing ever," I said, tears filling my voice. I was so overcome with emotion and so touched.

"You're such a fighter," my mom said.

"And I even have the scars to prove it."

My parents and family surrounded me in love and hugged me. My cousins threw confetti high up into the air. It landed in my hair and on my face and I couldn't stop smiling. I just wanted to hang on to

my beautiful family forever. At one point, I thought I had lost them forever when I died. And now, here they were holding me as we smiled and laughed through the tears. I couldn't thank Jesus enough for this wonderful moment, for giving me this second chance that I was going to make the most of.

Ethan arrived and kissed me softly on the cheek. I think I surprised everyone in the house because no one knew I was romantically linked to anyone. (Or maybe they were shocked at the Great Dane sitting in my living room.) Everyone was thrilled to see me happy and thriving. I smiled and introduced Ethan and his dog, Tiny. Tiny was a sight to behold. Yep, my guy was an owner of a giant breed; who napped in a giant-sized dog bed and was strikingly beautiful and, oh, so gentle. They absolutely adored Tiny and he enjoyed all the attention he could get. My parents were thrilled I was back with Ethan again and so was I.

Ethan had asked if he could invite his grandma over. She was in town visiting from Cleveland, Ohio and wanted to meet me. She was staying with Ethan in his guest room. I was ecstatic that he wanted to introduce me because I knew how much she meant to him, and that his grandma wanted to meet her grandson's new girlfriend. I wanted to make a good impression. I'd met Ethan's parents and other family members at his church. Ethan said they had said nothing but great things to his grandmother. My family was still going on and on about Tiny. I smirked.

Sue's eye's brightened at the sight of the massive dog. "My gosh! You've brought a small horse. You should buy a saddle and ride him."

Ethan laughed. "I've heard that before."

"Does he bite?" my aunt asked.

"You might drown from all the slobber when he licks your face," Ethan responded.

She laughed.

Tiny barked, wagged his tail, and hopped up and down like a kangaroo. He was so excited by so many people at this celebration. I knew Danes were notorious for their 'happy tail' but he took it up another notch. My aunt who was intimidated by his size went over to pet him. He was extremely lovable and who couldn't help but fall in love with the gentle giant? My friends and family adored him.

"The candles are finally lit!" Sue said.

"How many candles?" I asked.

"100," my sister answered with a giggle. "And Dad used his blowtorch. I guess he had to bring it because apparently you don't have one handy."

"Dad," I said. "Please don't tell me you used a blowtorch."

"I did not!" he insisted. "Although, I was very tempted."

I laughed. "You guys definitely win the world's record for most lit candles on a cake."

"We wanted this to be a memorable celebration," my uncle said.

"Well, that it is!" Sue said.

My aunt adjusted her party hat and just sighed. "You're going to need a fire extinguisher! I'm going to definitely say this will be memorable."

I smiled. "I might not have the blow torch, but I do have a small fire extinguisher in the kitchen. Never thought I would need it for a cake."

"Well, get it handy," my cousin joked.

Uncle Tom blew his noise blower and others followed. My dad turned out the lights in the living room and my uncle came out holding that giant cake that lit up the entire room with all those flickering flames, all burning brightly.

I flinched for a second. Fire has always been a trigger for me since the accident, since that wild trip to hell. It always brought back those horrid memories. It was like living the trauma all over again.

My mom touched my back. “Are you okay? Maybe we should’ve skipped the candles.” She knew about my fire triggers.

I smiled. Because I felt like I had conquered and broke past the bonds of my past, conquered the flames, and I had nothing to fear. “I’ve never been better. And I’ll never let fire trigger me, not ever. I’ve been snatched from the flames and they’ll never scare me again. I promise you that.”

“Blow them out!” Casey said. “Before the whole thing catches fire.”

It wasn’t an easy task, but I did. All 100 of them. My mom started slicing up the cake and handing out plates with ice cream. Casey put some upbeat music on. My uncle danced around.

Casey handed me a present and I felt more tears welling up inside. I opened it and it was a blue butterfly necklace.

“Oh, Casey,” I said.

“It’s a symbol of transformation, hope, and new beginnings.”

I hugged her. “It’s beautiful. I’ll always treasure it.”

She helped me put it on and I thanked her.

We had a great little party and I knew I had the best family in the entire world, always there to support me.

Ethan pulled me aside and was so excited.

“What’s up?” I asked, curious.

“Your video, the one Pastor Bill recorded, your testimony. It went viral!”

My eyes widened in surprise. “Viral? Are you kidding me?”

“It got over 3 million views! And still counting!”

“I’m speechless,” I said, clutching my chest.

“You’ve caught people’s attention.”

Then a thought popped into my head. “Ethan. Remember what I told you about what Jesus said to me when he rescued me?”

“Yes, that you would speak to millions,” he said, excitement flooding his voice. “And it’s literally happening!”

I shook my head in disbelief. “I thought how in the world would I speak to millions? I wasn’t a public speaker. I was a nobody living in Jupiter. How on Earth would I ever speak to millions? But God knew what He was talking about.”

“He sure did. God had a plan for your life from the start.”

“I’m glad the video went viral, but I want to reach more people and plant more seeds. My testimony is something I know I can’t sit on any longer. I need to tell everyone. If God can use me to help save one person from hell, then it’s all worth it.”

“How about a speaking tour at different churches across the country?”

“Yes, but I was thinking about writing a book too. And giving away the digital copy for free.”

“A free e-book. I love the sound of it. I think the two of us should get in ministry together. Just think of what we could accomplish together.”

I grinned. “Absolutely. I feel like I have a real-life purpose now. That this is what the Lord wants me to do. I feel like this is my calling. Why didn’t I turn my life around sooner?”

“It was just all God’s timing.”

“But I don’t know if people will take me seriously. Some of the commenters on that video are laughing at me. Saying they shouldn’t believe someone from Jupiter. Saying I’m from outer space.”

“Ignore them. There are also amazing comments.”

I then heard my uncle’s voice cutting through the room and telling everyone to turn on the TV.

“It’s about your case,” he said. “They’re dropping all charges against Edward Williams.”

“What?” I said out loud.

I turned on the TV, and put on the news, and we all gathered around, listening to the police chief talking about the case. Ethan wrapped an arm around me for comfort and support.

The chief then said, “We will not file criminal charges at this time.”

They then showed a tearful Ed offering a genuine apology to me and expressing how happy and grateful he was for this second chance. He promised that he would never touch drugs again, and that he wanted to travel and talk to schools to educate and warn about the dangers of something like this happening. I gave a little smile. I was glad something good could come out of all of this. He didn’t deserve life in prison. He made a mistake and was remorseful. I wanted to see him do something amazing with his life. The camera flashed to his tearful parents who thanked everyone, even me

“Thank you, Rose Hart, for forgiving our son,” she said with emotion. “It means the world to us.”

I wiped a tear from my eye as Ethan held me close in a tight hug. I was so happy that Ed wasn’t going to prison. I knew how happy he was, and how happy his family was. He was so young and had such a bright future. I’m glad that wasn’t taken away from him.

“Okay people! Press is here, coming in full force!” Sue said, shutting the curtains.

“Why do they insist on camping out here?” my cousin asked, moving the curtains and peering out the window. “And why are there so many of them?”

“They want my reaction to the news that Edward Williams has been set free,” I said.

“Why is your sister out there talking to them?” my aunt asked.

Social media blew up with the news. And the press was back on my doorstep. Everyone was calling me and my phone rang off the hook. Text messages and emails poured in.

“They’re not leaving anytime soon,” Casey said as she came back inside. “They’re asking for a statement.”

I let out a long breath. “I’ll go out and talk to them.”

“You don’t owe them anything, sis.”

“It’ll be quick,” I promised. “I just want them to know that I harbor no ill feelings toward Edward Williams.”

I then went outside and all the cameras flashed all around me. But I smiled and was confident. I was a new woman. I had gotten my life together. And I wouldn’t let what happened destroy me.

I said, “The night Edward Williams attacked me was a nightmare. And I’ve recently done a lot of soul searching. And I knew the right thing to do was to forgive him. I forgive him and hope he can

have a bright future and that he can find his identity in Jesus the way I have; and that God can use him mightily. I'm glad he has a second chance at life. I know he'll make the most of it."

Cameras flashed around me. Reporters yelled questions. Chaos erupted.

"But what about all the trauma Edward Willimas inflicted?" one shouted

"Jesus has triumphed over trauma, over the wounds of my past. Trauma will *NOT* get the final word here."

"But aren't you angry at him?"

"No, not at all. I'm going to quote you a scripture, As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. – Genesis 50:20."

"Good scripture. But can you explain what good can come out of this?"

"A story of love and redemption, and how Jesus healed my wounded soul. God turned my pain into a beautiful testimony to share with others. He transformed my grief into a journey of healing, forgiveness, and hope."

"But how can you forgive him?" another reporter shouted.

"God's love broke through my feelings for revenge, justice, anger, and bitterness. He forgave *me*, even though I've done some horrible things. I know that through God's amazing love and incredible strength, I must forgive others who have deeply wounded and hurt me. It's a decision I made through the power of Christ's shed blood. I've forgiven this man, and I urge you to forgive him, and others as well. I know the God of mercy can heal anyone's wounded heart. He heals *all* wounds. Just call out to Him, lay it all at His feet. Forgive yourself, and forgive others."

I then turned and went back inside. My parents embraced me and I was so thankful for everyone who stuck by me. I then turned to face Ethan. I was so thankful God brought him into my life. Romance was just starting with Ethan but I couldn't wait to see where it would take us. I looked deeply into his eyes and he softly cupped my face.

"I'm so proud of you," Ethan said.

"I couldn't have done this without you. I'm so glad God sent you my way. You're a blessing and I can't thank you enough."

He held me close, his face full of emotion. "I'm so glad you're in my life."

I shot him a grateful smile. "I can get through anything with you...and God at my side."

He hugged me, then my family and friends joined in, and we just all had one of those big, giant group hugs. I knew everything was going to be just fine, and that I would flourish, and be used for whatever plan God had for my life.

"My grandma is here," Ethan said checking his text message. "I'll go get her."

My heart sunk. "Oh no! She'll have to wade through the large crowd out there. I'm making a horrible first impression."

"You had no idea they were coming to camp out on your front lawn. None of us did. She'll understand."

"We should've had her come over a little later when all the new crews left."

"Couldn't. She has plans with my cousins. And I would've have brought her here, but she had plans with my mom and said she would meet me. I'm telling you; the woman has more energy than me! Don't worry, hon. It's okay. She's very understanding."

He kissed me on the cheek. “She’s going to love you.” He turned and headed out the door into all the chaos surrounding the house. I waited a few minutes and then Ethan came back inside with his grandma.

“Paparazzi everywhere!” his grandma said. “I didn’t know my grandson was dating a movie star.” Chuckles and laughs erupted from around the room.

*Oh, I know that voice!* A smile grew across my face as recognition struck me. The woman was dressed in colorful clothes and had that trademark red hair. I’d never forget her, not in a million years. A golden retriever stood right next to her. It was Pattie from Panema City beach with her dog, Bella. I hurried over and her eyes lit up. Bella was so excited and wagged her tail as she jumped up and licked me.

“Rose!” his grandma said.

“Pattie! And Bella.”

She threw her arms around me and I hugged her tightly.

“What are the chances?” she asked. “How are you?”

“I’m great,” I said, petting Bella. “How are you guys?”

“Me and Bella are as happy as a clam at high tide getting through that crowd.”

“I’m so sorry about that.” Then I chuckled at her reference. Those were the words I said to her laying on the beach when she asked me if I was okay.

Bella recognized Tiny and gleefully they ran off to play.

“Grandma, this is my lovely girlfriend, Rose,” Ethan said. “But it seems as if you already know each other.”

I glanced over at Pattie. “Yes, we do. I can’t believe you’re Ethan’s grandma.”

“I had no clue you were Ethan’s girlfriend,” she said in shock.

Ethan was completely surprised. “I don’t think God works by coincidence. Where did you two meet?”

Pattie grinned. “At the beach on vacation in Panema City.”

She had met me at one of the very worst moments of my life when I had hit rock bottom. Here, I was worried about making a great first impression, but she’d already met me at my worst.

“There’s so much I have to tell you,” I told her.

“No need. I know you found my daughter, set things straight, dropped the baggage, um, the ex, became an editor, bought a beautiful house, and went on to have a fantastic life.”

“Until…”

“I know, darling,” she said in a concerned voice. “I followed the story on the news. I was so sad about what had happened. And I’m so sorry. I kept praying. But you overcame it and found Christ, and what you said to those reporters back there was heartfelt. You forgave that young man.”

“I did. It took some work, but Jesus was there every step of the way.”

“He’s been right beside you in all the trials of life.”

“Amen.”

“I’m so glad you chose the right path.”

“Me too. And your daughter, Rebecca, was amazing. She got me through some tough times.”

“Oh,” Ethan said. “Aunt Becky.”

He made the connection. I had told Ethan everything about my past. I didn't want any secrets between us. He knew I went to rehab, but didn't realize it was his aunt's clinic. And he wasn't going to discuss it here with all these people which I was thankful for.

I turned to Ethan. "Your aunt is just wonderful, so patient and so kind. And your grandma is the one that convinced me to change my life around. I couldn't have changed my life without Jesus, and without them. I know God brought them into my life for a reason and I can't thank Him enough. He divinely orchestrates things perfectly; sovereignly orchestrates everything for our good."

"He has a perfect plan for your life," Pattie said. "Even when plans falter and things get off track, God is designing your journey toward his ultimate purpose for your life. And I believe God put me in your path at just the right time."

"That's so beautiful," I said. "Like a divine appointment."

"So, my grandma is the one that gave you that blue sea glass rock," Ethan asked, "the one you turned into a necklace? She's the awesome lady that inspired you on the beach?"

Another grin spread across my lips. "Yes, that was her."

"What a small world! I can't believe it."

Pattie smiled. "It was such a special piece. I'm so glad you made a necklace with it."

"It's gorgeous," I said, "one of my most treasured pieces. Thank you so much. And thank you for everything you did for me."

"You're welcome."

"How long are you in town?" I asked.

"A few weeks. So enjoy your friends and family. We can catch up later." She then squeezed my hands gently and smiled. "I am so happy for you. I couldn't ask for a better girlfriend to date my grandson. You have my stamp of approval."

I was so touched. "That means the world to me."

"Hey, I heard you're going to write a book," my uncle said, patting me on the back.

"You heard right. I want to help win souls for Christ."

"Oh, that brings music to my ears," Pattie said. "I love hearing that!"

My mom was recording on her phone. "Absolutely, I love all this talk about soulwinning," she said with a bright smile. "So, you've been on quite the journey. Rose, what do you have to say?"

I grinned and looked directly into the camera. "Hey, world, I'm just getting started!"

They all cheered as I grinned even wider.

My mom put on worship music and we all sang and prayed and soaked in God's presence.

"We praise you, Father," I said. "You are a faithful God, the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob. The world does its best to try and get me to forget about you. But I know who I am now, and who I belong to. I am Your beloved. I am Yours forever. I am truly loved. I choose to trust you, and love you with all my heart."

I am not scared of death.

I knew the next time I left this Earth, I would definitely be going to *heaven*, because I now had a personal relationship with Jesus, my life-saving decision, the Lord of my life.

Lord Jesus, thank You for sacrificing Your life on the cross for our sins.

Thank you for the free gift of forgiveness and salvation.

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of your family.  
 Thank you for healing my wounded soul.  
 Thank you for having a plan for my life.  
 Thank You for redeeming and saving me; and forgiving me and loving me.  
 Thank you for the precious blood of Jesus Christ.  
 Thank you, Jesus, for snatching me from the flames.  
 I will be forever and eternally grateful.

The End

Just remember tomorrow is not promised. You can die at any given moment, and you can only place faith in Christ while you are still alive and breathing. Jesus loves you so much that He died on the cross for our sins, and He desires for all people to come to know Him. Salvation is only found through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

When we accept Jesus, the cost of our sin is covered by the blood of Jesus Christ. He bridges the gap caused by sin. Jesus serves as the mediator between humanity and God. Through Him, we can find reconciliation with our one true Creator and receive salvation.

Seek the Lord while He may be found. (Isaiah 55:6)

I encourage you to listen to Father's Love Letter Narration video at [FathersLoveLetter.com](http://FathersLoveLetter.com)

I love the 2001 version! Below is the letter, but the video with narration is AMAZING! It was like God personally reading a love letter to me Himself, so heartfelt and touching.



**More powerful, salvation scriptures:**

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (Acts 4:12)

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. (Jeremiah 29:13)

If you seek me with all your heart, you will find me. (Deuteronomy 4:29)

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. (Revelation 3:20)

No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. (Luke 13:3)

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

But everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Acts 2:21)

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (John 3:16-18)

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23)

Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart, one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. (Romans 10:9-10)

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:12)

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

Jesus told him, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.' (John 14:6)

For there is only one God and one Mediator who can reconcile God and humanity—the man Christ Jesus. (1 Timothy 2:5)

They replied, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household.'" Acts (16:31)

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by his great mercy that we have been born again because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation. (1 Peter 1:3)

But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. (Romans 5:8)

Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. (John 10:9)

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. (Romans 10:10)

13 "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. 14 But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:13-14)

4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. 5 Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God. (John 4-5)

I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved, and shall go in and out, and find pasture. (John 10:9)

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18)

I love you, Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Psalms 18 1-2)

13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Colossians 1:13-14)

and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.' (Mark 1:15)

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

"And the Lord, He is the One who goes before you, He will be with you, He will not leave you nor forsake you; do not fear nor be dismayed." (Deuteronomy 31:8).