

THIS ROOM

Tabitha, Open Your Eyes

Tom Donnan

*Although inspired by a true story, the names of the characters have been changed.
Names in this book that correlate to any living or dead person is purely coincidental
and part of the author's imagination.*

This Room by Tom Donnan

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Prologue

Grace was exhausted. Being the primary caregiver for her husband, she had forged a routine that helped them both survive the hardest days. He had a horrible disease. Moments of frustration could make him erupt in anger at any time just because he could not remember. She had come to ignore his agitation.

She heard the alarm going off, a needed reminder to keep track of all of his meds. It was amazing how a small woman with a soft voice could direct such a huge hulk of a man. On their wedding day, they had vowed, “For better or for worse, in sickness and in health, till death do us part.” She was now living the hardest part of those vows but not begrudgingly. Interrupting her thoughts, the notification alarm again jarred her back into day in and day out regimens. Whatever it took, she was going to see him through the final day of his Alzheimer’s disease.

Once he had taken the meds, he was calmer. Because of his disease, physically he was the same, but mentally he was different. His lifeless eyes haunt her. Grace is thankful for how he can sit in front of the television hour by hour, giving her time to take care of herself. But now the timer demands her attention. Filling a glass of cold water for his six o’clock meds, pills in hand, she brings them to him, wondering how it is going to go. Easy? Most likely not.

“Jim, honey, it’s time for your pills,” she said. Breaking his gaze from the TV, he looked at his wife. Instantly she knew it was going to be one of those times to coddle him. His expression was disturbing to her. The blank look immediately turned to anger. Instantly fire flared in his eyes, and his hands grabbed the chair armrests. With startling speed, he was up and in her face. The words he was shouting did not make any sense. In his mind, however, he was in another time, another place.

“I’m going to kill you with my bare hands,” he yelled at her. Traumatized, Grace was relieved when his mind went blank, and he sat down and took his meds. However, later that night, when he started a work project in the bathroom, a project he could not finish, he entered another rage. Quickly she grabbed and hid the hammer, an obvious weapon he could use. Suddenly she felt his large hands wrap around her throat and powerfully squeeze as he pushed her backward and up against the wall. Adrenalin pulsed through her veins. Instinctively she tried to stop him in a futile attempt to break free. Giving up, she flailed her hand at his face, scratching him, fighting for her life. Her chest struggled to get a breath. Her eyes were bulging. In her last conscious thought, she asked, *Oh God, how is this happening to me again?*

Chapter One

She heard his voice, “Tabitha, open your eyes; we need to talk.”

It’s so bright she thought. Normally when she has heard that phrase in the past, waves of gut-wrenching fear washed over her. Not so now. A hand, soft and gentle, took ahold of hers. Effortlessly she rose off the bed and into his presence. As her eyes adjusted to the light, they were face to face. Blue eyes—deep royal blue and vast like the ocean. And yet as his eyes widened, they seemed to reflect the freedom of the light blue sky. The softness of his expression subdued all her fears. She was in complete peace. Swept behind his ears and shoulder length, his dark brown hair accentuated his face. Looking up into his face, she guessed him to be about six feet tall.

Adjusting to her surroundings, she thought, *No one calls me by my middle name*. He led her down a dark hallway, and they entered a well-lit room. This man was in his prime, and he talked to her as if they know each other. It was a casual conversation, setting her at ease.

Then he said, “It was Agatha’s prayer for a future granddaughter to have the name Tabitha. She had read that miraculous story many times in the Word.”

She understood that he was talking about the Bible and how Peter raised Tabitha from the dead in the book of Acts. He went on, “In the end of days, Agatha read that the world would be inhabited by a godless generation. She prayed for you to be raised from the dead physically and raised spiritually from a dead and sinful society.”

In an instant, the walls, the ceiling, and the floor all showed images. This startled her. A linear flow of images ran back in time to a Quaker village where a kneeling woman was praying. Tabitha thought to herself: *How is this happening?*

“Shhhh,” he said. “All questions you have will be answered.”

Absorbing this information, she watched the images on the wall. To her it was like a video recording. She watched this woman, whom she did not know, and observed it was a simpler time but one filled with hard work. Maybe it was the lines on Agatha’s face that were the tell or this moment of earnest prayer to God. Regardless, this woman, Agatha, was praying hard. Tabitha listened to her voice and her words. She could hear faith, strength, conviction, and determination in them.

Tabitha recalled the Bible story of the woman begging Jesus for crumbs off his table. Agatha was earnestly begging God for His hand to be on her future granddaughter. But how did she know about her? Searching her memory, Tabitha drew a blank. There were no family portraits of this woman, nor had she heard stories about her, yet she was weeping for Tabitha.

Tabitha’s soul had caught up to the transition from being lifted off the bed and out of sleep, but not in understanding where she was at this moment. It was all happening so fast and outside of life’s norms. Then an awareness came, and she had never felt this good. Her soul was immersed in an atmosphere of love. A knowing came over her. She was made to exist in a thick atmosphere

of love almost as if she were being immersed in water. All her life, she had longed to be loved, but it seemed that love from her parents and family always eluded her. Never verbalized but simply understood, keeping the family secrets held love as the controlling leverage to remain silent. But here, now, love was freely given! She was giddy.

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All images on the walls stopped, and the room returned to white. A shelf appeared waist high, and on it were several items. Walking over to the shelf, her companion picked up a coiled clothesline and placed one end of it in her hand. Unraveling and stretching it out, he approached the far wall. Taking his end of the clothesline, he slipped it through an eyebolt, anchoring it to the wall.

“Pull it so it’s taut,” he said. Walking over to the shelf, he picked up a white ribbon with black lettering on it. Moving in her direction, stopping short by six feet, he stretched the ribbon out for her to see. It read “Grace Tabitha Winslow born 1960.” He then tied it onto the clothesline.

“Let me explain this to you, Tabitha,” he said, walking back over to the eyebolt attached to the wall. “Over here represents 1620. It was when Agatha Winslow stepped off the ship called the Mayflower.”

In her mind she screamed, *What?*

Turning to her he said, “There is more! This line represents the timeline of your family history—both the heritage of your father and mother. Right now, we’re looking at your father’s family. Where I tied your name to the line is your birthdate. From 1620 to 1960, marking when you were born.”

She understood that from the name tag to her hand was her life span. Absorbing his words and imagery, she smiled. She was fascinated.

Back near the eyebolt, reaching out he snapped the line, and a small ripple began. It increased to a large wave as it traveled in her direction. She watched as her name tag rose to the height of the wave and then into the valley, racing to her fingertips.

“Tabitha,” he said, “that ripple represents sin in a family.”

“I have a question,” she said. “Am I allowed to ask questions now?”

“Yes.”

“Why was the ripple small in the beginning and then became a large wave by the time it reached my hand?”

“Sin by degree. The more devastating the sin, the higher the wave,” he told her. Tabitha was not yet relaxed enough to continue asking for more information, so she let it rest.

Going on to explain, he said, “When good people follow God’s ways, the consequences of sin are small. However, Tabitha, moving the theatrical timeline back to 1841 on your mother’s bloodline and heritage where your lineage reaches back to Ireland and Bohemia, it was different.”

Tabitha felt the line pull forward, but she held on. A ripple representing her father’s family flowed forward. They looked almost the same. But her father’s wave was bigger.

“Your forefathers had ravenous habits leading into serious sins. This opened the doorway to evil, and the thief came into the bloodline seeking to steal and destroy. It has been traveling your family line for generations. Although your Quaker grandparents stood in the gap for future generations, much of the wave carried on. The dysfunction and spiritual debris flowed forward. In 1960, at the height of the wave, you were born. You lived in chaos and drama from there on. Tabitha! The choices you made were not the result of you being bad or morally bad in character. They were the results of sin’s sequence you absorbed from the family you were born into.” He let that sink in.

At the end of his words a wave of truth pasted through Tabitha. A layer of self-imposed responsibility swept back and off her spirit. This revelation brought freedom from the weight she had been carrying from childhood. As a child, like all children, she felt the world revolved around her and that things happened as a result of her actions. The truth was that many things were not her fault as she had believed. It hit her. Something was different about this room. Here her emotional heart was wide open. In this atmosphere, her hands were quivering. She dropped the rope and covered her face. She once believed she was guilty and worthy to carry shame, but now she understood it was never her fault.

The tears rolled down her cheeks. Collapsing onto her knees, she sobbed so deeply. In a flash, she wondered if she might pass out. Her companion let her cry because he knew about the bank account of un-cried tears she had been carrying. It was her time of release. Shame left her replaced by a sudden awareness of feeling spiritually lighter and cleaner. Moving closer he handed her a cloth to wipe her eyes and blow her nose. She wondered, *Who is this man?* A question she thought that he did not respond to or answer.

Chapter Two

The right-side wall suddenly came alive in continuous motion. Tabitha gasped. Stepping closer to the wall, she yearned for more than just the image. She longed to feel the presence of those on the screen. Turning to her companion she said, “They look so young.” It was her parents.

Henri and Nessa Winslow were seated on the edge of their bed. In a spontaneous gesture of affection, Henri comforted his grieving wife. It had been four years of trying, and she was still not pregnant. Being a nurse, Nessa was very concerned that something might be wrong. She had not conceived. But who was at fault? Henri or Nessa?

As soon as Tabitha wondered, *Can these VCR type images be paused*, the images stopped. When she looked at him, her eyes asked the question how he knew. She said to herself, *It is as if he can read my thoughts*. A bit unnerved, she was hoping that understanding would come later; but for now, she moved in and touched the wall, placing her hand over her father’s heart. She never knew or felt his longing for her. Then moving to her mother, she gently brushed her hand over her cheek in a loving touch.

How can this be? What I am seeing is in the past. But, all of this feels so real. Am I living this? She desperately tried to comprehend what was happening to her.

He said, “Tabitha, this is a gift to you. Absorb it and process it later. We need to move on.”

“Wait,” she said. “Let me have a good look at them.” She wanted to commit this to memory. “I never knew them like this. Really, I did not give any thought to this time in their lives. But to see them this way stirs up all kinds of feelings.”

It was too brief as far as she was concerned, but the story went on. Listening and watching, Tabitha saw that Henri and Nessa mutually agreed they might need help in conceiving a child.

The appointment was made. It was easiest for the doctors to begin with Henri. All they needed was a sperm sample from him. When the doctor received the results, he called. Nessa picked it up.

“This is Dr. Conners’ office. Is Henri or Nessa home?”

“This is Nessa. Do you have news for me?”

“Your husband has a healthy sperm count. Now, Nessa, we need to get you in the office for a blood test and an X-ray of your pelvic region. It may show us any malformation.”

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The wall faded, but instantly it began again. The sign on the door read: Dr. Conners. Below in smaller print: Reproductive Endocrinology Specialist.

Tabitha knew her parents went to a doctor for help. Now she was witnessing their consultation with him as if she were there in the room.

“Nessa, we see abscesses on both of your ovaries. We recommend surgery to remove them,” he said.

The wall image faded. She took a deep breath. The wall came alive again, and she saw the surgery suite with machines, tubes, and the surgical staff as Dr. Connors preceded to open Nessa’s pelvic area. Tabitha’s view was shielded so she could not see Nessa’s internal organs.

She heard the doctor talking to the nurses.

“There are pronounced abscesses on both ovaries. That is the problem. Look how the fallopian tubes are flat? See there. They’re blocking the eggs from being released.”

Tabitha watched as he motioned toward the nurse for the surgical knife. He called out, “We’re going to remove the abscess on each ovary.”

The room went quiet as the work was being performed.

“Okay, let’s close her up.”

With that, the images shift to Nessa’s recovery and her overnight stay in the hospital. Ann Finley, Nessa’s mother, came into her room at St. Catherine’s Hospital. She and Henri had been in the waiting room, waiting to hear how the surgery went. Nuns and nurses stopped in to say hello and check on them. Some of them were her classmates from nurse’s training. Everyone knew how much Nessa and Henri wanted a baby.

“Wow” is all Tabitha could say. Her focus was centered on her grandmother. Seeing her at this young age was startling.

“Pause, please. May I ask a question?”

“Yes” even though he knew it already.

“Why are their pieces missing in the story?”

“You are seeing highlights of your family’s history leading up to your birth. It will become clear to you.”

They were quiet again. Tabitha was looking inward, trying to understand what was happening and where this was leading. Then she had an epiphany. A rush of loving feelings overwhelmed her. Now she knew. She was wanted! Tabitha allowed her thoughts to express, *I never knew*.

Turning to her companion she said, “I had a sudden rush. I felt esteemed and a sense of self-worth. Most of my life this has escaped me. Knowing my parents wanted me has changed the way I feel.” More than anything, she felt loved.

An image of Ann Finley is on the front wall.

“Grandma,” she said softly. Now she was ready to focus on the joy of her Grandma Finley. The image on the wall was from some fifty years earlier in her life. It flooded her with pleasant memories and warmed her heart. Grandma Finley gave her the best gift of her life—her time.

“Tabitha,” her companion said. “Now you understand your beginning foundation in life—how your parents worked and sacrificed for you to be born and that your Grandmother Finley played a significant role.”

The left side wall burst forth in images, and at the same time, an impartation of knowledge was being released into Tabitha. There stood an angel next to the doctor in the operating room. He placed his hands over Nessa during surgery, releasing power through a glowing beam. It was a one-time event.

God heard Agatha’s prayers and now He was answering them. Nessa’s womb was opened. Her prayers had moved God’s heart to a sovereign act of love. His hand was upon her first-born child. The image on the wall faded and went white. Tabitha did not know what to say. She had no idea. However, her companion was very pleased for now she knew. Her parents, with God’s help, brought her into the world.

Chapter Three

Reveling in the knowledge that her parents worked and sacrificed to bring her into the world brought about a level of self-esteem she had never known. It felt good, great even. Excitedly she looked into the eyes of her companion with an unspoken, thoughtful question, “What’s next?”

Shifting her position toward the front wall, she placed her hands upon her hips and did not have to wait long.

At first, she wondered what she was watching. Then Tabitha smiled. A couple walked through the front door of a local favorite restaurant, the Bohemian Café, which was part of their beloved Little Italy area in the heart of Omaha, Nebraska. It was her parents. She thought, *They look good; they look happy. Mom is beautiful with her hourglass figure, and dad is tall and handsome. Look at them. They are full of life!*

The Café has the sights, sounds, and aromas they love. *How many times has the family been in the Café over the years? Wonderful times*, she recollected. Tabitha could see the familiarities her parents enjoyed in this place. They were seated at a long table. Everyone ate like family here, bunched together, passing bread and sharing the water pitcher. She watched as the scenes changed quickly.

Henri told the waiter he would have a beer and added, “Keep them coming” while Nessa ordered coffee; when they were brought, they ordered their food. The Café was loud that night, making it hard to engage in small talk with those around them. Stories of old times, of good times filled the air. Little Italy of Omaha was unique at that time. Because it was centered around the church community, there was a closeness among them all. The major topic of conversation was what was going on at the Stockyards. When their food arrived, the conversation shrunk as Tabitha’s parents focused on each other. They enjoyed a world within a world as they chatted over dinner. It was an intimate time amid the setting of many around them.

When dessert arrived—an assortment of kolaches—Nessa’s expression changed. She was coy. Tabitha watched with mixed feelings. How good it felt seeing her parents this way. They were obviously a happy couple. Tabitha looked at her companion with a big grin and thought, *Wow! Those are my parents*. She also took notice of the dessert. *Those look just like Mom makes*, and her taste buds felt as if they could almost taste them. It occurred to Tabitha she was hearing the audio and seeing the video as if she were right there sitting with them—an invisible third person in a fly-on-the-wall scenario. Her college degrees and higher learning did not aid her in comprehending what was going on in this room.

It was time. Nessa could no longer keep it in. She was all about making a memory. Leaning forward, Nessa said, “Henri, it worked.” Deliberately she strung him along.

He responded, “Have you gotten that new ward to work in at the hospital?”

“No silly; it worked!”

Henri was not one for games, but right then the world was right as rain. He played along. “Give me another clue!” he said.

Nessa was loving this interplay. “We have been at it for a long time, Henri.” A light was dawning, but he was just not there yet.

“How long have we been working at this?” he asked.

“Right around four years,” she said.

Henri straightened up, “No” he said in a questioning way.

Tabitha watched as her mother slowly moved her head up and down. He knew—they were pregnant! Tabitha sees the joy on his face and that her mother is ecstatic. Strength wells up in her, knowing she was wanted by her parents.

Henri stood, pushing his chair up against the person behind him, and in a loud voice he shouted, “Everyone! I am going to be a father!” as cheers and congratulations filled the air.

Snapshots flashed on the wall. Nessa was dressed in her white nurse’s uniform and wide-winged cap, bulging at the waistline. It was her second trimester, and Henri was doing dishes. Then he had Nessa sit down and rubbed her feet after her long shift at the hospital.

Suddenly Nessa screamed. “Henri! My water broke.” They hurried to the car and then Tabitha watched them enter the emergency room where Nessa was seated in a wheelchair and whisked away.

In the next scene, her parents are cooing over a perfect baby girl. Grace Tabitha Winslow was born. Again, the nuns and nurses stopped in to congratulate Nessa and Henri. Their prayers had been answered for the couple, and one nurse, Lucy, stayed with Nessa after the birth of the baby. The walls fade to white.

“I didn’t know,” Tabitha said. It made all the difference. Tears of joy rolled down her face like raindrops.

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The picture of a family is on the front wall now—a father, mother, and toddler in the middle. They seemed to be under a glass dome. Tabitha turned to look at her companion and asked, “What is over them? Can you please explain it to me?”

He responded, “The dome is a way of seeing what has happened in the spirit. At first, it was just your parents. They became one in marriage. Now their spiritual oneness included you in their covering.”

She pondered this while staring at the image. Then words appeared. Next to her father was a list that read, Love, Protection, Provisions, and Investing. On the other side, next to her mother

a list read, Love, Nurturing, Empathy, and Investing. Looking deeply within, not understanding, she asked, “What do these words mean?”

“For parents, they are the natural instincts given to them for raising children. These instincts work best when they are under the covering of Father God when God is guiding a marriage and family.”

“WAIT! It was not that way.” Her companion gave Tabitha a warm smile.

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The ambience of their surroundings changed. All the walls, ceiling, and floor emanated with the same level of illumination. She was not sure if she noticed it before, or it just happened.

“Tabitha, you have wondered all your life. Now you know.”

She was not used to hearing statements that bridge silent gaps. She has never allowed herself to contemplate this heartfelt longing. It was too scary to consider. Too scary to risk knowing. Right now, coming forward from the hidden places of her mind, hidden in her heart, she was safe to express it.

“Yes, I have always wondered if my parents wanted me,” she said. “I always felt my parents were disappointed and wanted a boy. They had the name Michael picked out but had no name for a girl. Way back on my father’s side, back in England, there was a Grace. Whenever she was brought up in conversations, they said she was the black sheep of the family—something I can identify with.”

While she was feeling weak in her legs, a chair appeared behind her. She was neither expressing happiness nor sadness. A rush of panic rose from within her, choking her. What had been stuffed down came out like an artisan well. She began sobbing and an emotional release took place. Throughout her life, she had been in control. But in this place, restraints had been removed.

He gave her a moment and then said, “We will address your question later.”

“What will be addressed later?” she asked.

“Your confusion. Right now, you need to know your parents labored, strived, and sacrificed to bring you into the world.”

How is he doing this? He knows the questions my mind has not yet formulated. I might feel them, but they have not yet become thoughts she said to herself.

Chapter Four

The front wall burst into colors. The micro image zoomed out for Tabitha to see. Her dad was driving the car.

“He always told me to sit down, but I would be too excited. I wanted to see where we were going, especially when it was my father-daughter day and all. I would stand up on the bench seat next to him.” A memory came back. “Once in an emergency, his arm shot out in front of me to hold me back as he slammed on the brakes. He more than mumbled a few choice words towards the driver who nearly caused an accident. I felt safe with my dad’s safety belt on.

“I had a slip up one day at home and said one of dad’s choice words. Mom was not happy, and the soap tasted bad. Oh, my dad loved their Peacock Blue, Ford Galaxie 500. It must have been one of their favorite colors. The kitchen and bathroom in our home had that same color.” She thought to herself *I am not sure my companion will understand what that means*. “That car, with the swept back lines looked chic. It was his baby, and having a fender bender would break his heart.”

The moving picture surrounding her on the walls told the story of her favorite times when they went fishing together. On the bench seat she saw the familiar exit. “My dad always drove the same route. He took the ramp off the highway, winded around the road next to it where he made a right-hand turn, and always said something about being a cornhusker—the name of the road and fond memories of college days,” she told him.

Henri had a good gait. Her little legs had to run double time to keep up. Seeing this, Tabitha placed her hands to her face while she was watching her life. In one hand she clutched her fishing pole and in the other, a tackle box. Being a fisher girl, her setup was the best. If she dropped it in the water, or shockingly, a fish pulled it out of her hands, it was of no financial loss to her father. Her pole was just above toy grade but functional. Together, they walked out onto the pier at Grover Lake Recreation area.

She knew the routine, the beginning routine anyway. Tabitha saw herself sit down on the end of the pier, her legs dangling over the edge, waiting for Daddy to put the worm on. She was not old enough to cast, although she asked to.

He said, “Gracie, honey, maybe next year” as he made a short cast. The bobber righted itself, and it was game on. Tabitha had a sudden awareness, smelling the aroma of the lake waters and the surrounding trees and hearing the lapping sounds of the waves on the lake. The smell heightened her memory.

“Dad was not a worm fisherman,” she said out loud. “No bluegills or sunfish for him. He just wanted a ‘keeper’ as he called them. Oh, I watched him. He angled for the big fish. After five casts with no bites, he would try another lure from his tackle box where there was an assortment of them. He worked the water. Beginning with the deeper water, he made his way towards the shoreline, never far from me in an emergency. He would say, ‘Gracie girl, it would be a shame to

get your plaid shirt and blue jeans wet. And let us avoid the scolding when we get home.’ He has heard it before—‘Henri Winslow! What were you thinking!’ It never ended with just a few words.”

Tabitha’s voice told the story in a fond reminiscing tone. “And, I would come home covered in dirt and sunburnt. I loved Aunt Dorothy. She made me blue jeans to cover me up, but I still got burnt. I always came home with a coffee can full of tadpoles. Dad wanted me to see them change into frogs. A science lesson, he would tell me.”

Tabitha walked close to the wall. *How can this be?* she wondered. *It is as if I am living this on two levels—being that five-year-old girl and the woman I am now. My daddy was the world to me. Cherish is the word.* In this room, it is like a time machine. She felt her unwavering love for her dad. Oh, how she loved this time in her life. *If only, she thought, life could have stopped here for a while longer. Before.*

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Appearing on the left-side wall was a new image. It was the clothesline superimposed on the lake and pier picture. On it, further back from where her birthday was tagged, there was another cloth tag that was enlarged for her to read. It gave the birthday of Henri Bartholomew Winslow. A look of disbelief was on her face. She never knew. *Bartholomew was my father’s middle name?* On the right-side wall was the picture of them on the pier fishing. A new image of a man and his son came up on the left side wall. The style of clothing was different, older somehow. They were enjoying fishing.

“Yes, it is them,” he said. But she had not asked him the question of who they were. *Why does it seem like he knows the intimate details of my life* she wondered.

“Oh,” she said, “It is Grandpa Winslow and my dad. They look so different with my dad being young and my grandpa being in his prime.” Pleasant nostalgia had not been a part of Tabitha’s life. But she was enjoying this. There had been too many secrets and too many gaps in her history. Grandpa Winslow was mostly all work and no play. She was surprised at seeing him fishing.

In her peripheral vision, movement caught her eye. Looking back to the front wall, it was the bobber being pulled underwater. She heard a little girl’s squeal. Henri ran towards her as he saw her little hand reeling as fast as she could.

“Hurry, Daddy!” she screamed.

“Stand up, honey,” he said to her. He was prepared to catch her if she moved nearer the edge of the pier. “Remember, Gracie, raise the tip of the pole and reel as you dip it towards the water.” Higher and higher the tip of the pole went. She forgot to reel. Henri came up from behind her and grasped her hands in his as they reeled in the fish together. “It’s a whopper!” he said. Her little heart was beating a thousand beats a minute. On the hook was a two-inch sunfish. “Nice catch,” he said. How she loved his positive reinforcements. Now she had a fishy story for Mom.

The image on the right-side flipped. First, it went to the micro, as before, then it zoomed out. Seated at the kitchen table were Nessa and Grace. She had begged and begged until Nessa stopped what she was doing and set things up with a deck of cards, a piece of paper, and a pencil to keep score. Nessa walked over to the cabinet and retrieved a glass. She filled it with milk from the fridge and assembled a plate of cookies. Now they were ready.

Gracie knelt on the chair. Nessa asked her, “Gracie, do you want the phone book to sit on?” With a tinge of fire in her eye she answered, “No, Mom.” The cards were shuffled, and it was time to play crazy eights. Mom dealt. Holding her five cards, arranging them as she was taught, Nessa looked at the discarded card, an ace of spades. Thinking it over, she has a spade and put it down. Now she had only four cards and was pleased. Tabitha turned to her companion and said, “I love that game.”

Unexpectedly, Tabitha became emotional. *Oh Mom, I loved being with you. I miss you*, she thought. It was the best of times for her. It was just another day for Nessa as she went through the motions. Sneaking a peek at her daughter, she took notice of her lazy eye. Soon the surgery would have to be done to correct it. Gracie’s little finger pushed her glasses up and back and put down another card. Looking at the wall, Tabitha saw an opportunity and investigated her mother’s hand. Right off she saw two eights and a spade. *Aw*, she thought, *mom let me win*. It was worth it for Nessa to see her daughter’s excitement and smile each time she won the game. It was a race. Lowest score, finish the cookies, and Gracie wins.

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The picture on the wall shifted to the right. A generational mirror image showed mother and daughter, except this time it was Grandma Finley and her mother. Right there in the kitchen they played checkers. Chocolate cookies, milk, and stacks of checkers were on the table. Grandma always wore an apron over her dress. The apron always hung on a peg by the door, and whenever she stepped into the kitchen, she put it on. She was envied in the neighborhood because she was the only woman to have a pantry, and it was well stocked.

Stepping into the center of the room, looking right, then left, Tabitha saw the way her parents invested in her life with their time and the good things they enjoyed. With Henri, it was sharing a passion in his life. With Nessa, it was taking time to do the things she enjoyed. It had happened to them when they were young; now they were passing it on to her.

Tabitha stopped for a second. “This all feels very good,” she said. It had been lost in the span of life. She marveled at the detail of the picture. It was the spitting image, a phrase her dad used, down to the smallest detail. The dock, the kitchen, and how everything looked, including the items in the kitchen and the scenery around the dock. *But how can this be?* she thought again.

“Luke 12:7, you know it,” he said, “Now say it.”

Tabitha recited the verse by heart. “Indeed, the very hairs on your head are numbered.”

“Yes. Each day the total changes, and yet your heavenly Father knows everything that has happened down to the smallest detail. Not one sparrow falls to the ground without his knowledge,” he said.

The walls return to translucent white.

Chapter Five

Tabitha was deep in thought. How wonderful it felt to be reliving this time in her life. *What is next?* she wondered. When she looked into the blue eyes of her companion for an answer, he stepped into a corner of the room and out of the way.

A picture appeared on the front wall. She saw herself holding her parents' hands as they approached St. Catherine's Hospital/Bergan Mercy Hospital. It was surgery day. She thought, *sweet innocence*. Outside the hospital was a little girl with complete trust in her parents. The still image began to play.

Tabitha was nervous. She began to pace in front of the wall as she watched. She saw her mother take her into the changing room. At this point, it was still a game to the little girl. Then she was on a gurney as she took a ride toward surgery. Loving all the attention, in her sweet disposition, she smiled at everyone. It was not until Nessa was stopped from going with her that her little heart began to fear. The nurses and doctor were using comforting voices, assuring her everything was okay. Then a hand with a face mask appeared. Tabitha took a deep breath for she knew what was coming. Gracie's nose and mouth were covered with the mask.

"It's okay, honey, just breathe," the doctor said.

Tabitha turned away, and the image stopped.

"Sometimes in life, a painful event, like this surgery, needs to take place. Your parents made the choice, knowing it would improve life for you moving forward," he said.

Reluctantly she turned back. As the image moved forward, it was hard to watch. The anesthesia she inhaled put her into a deep sleep. Clamps were put on the top and bottom eyelid to expose her eyeball. The doctors asked for operating scissors and began to clip muscles attached to the eyeball. In a matter of minutes, it was all over. They wheeled her into the recovery area where Henri and Nessa were seated next to her.

When she woke up, however, all was not well. She felt sick to her stomach, and her eye hurt. There was a patch over it so she could not see out of that eye. She had no idea what was wrong, and you could see it on her face. She felt anger that they let this happen. Mad, she was sick and in pain. The belief they would protect her was tarnished even though this was for her own good. Her trust has been fractured. The image ended.

Tabitha was processing this on two levels—the child and the adult. The adult understands and accepts it. She felt gratitude towards her parents for what they did for her. The kids at school had been at times cruel, calling her cross-eyed, and reading was hard for her. On the child's side was confusion and a touch of mistrust. Right now, she did not need a movie screen to remember what happened because she lived the pain. Grasping this life's event came back too easily. Although they doted on her for days, regardless, it was a bad memory. Now replaying it in her mind, she remembered painful days and the patch coming off. The light hurt her eye.

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Turning to her companion she asked, *Can the wall start up again on the fourth day after surgery?*

He turned towards the wall. Tabitha looked at herself. She was standing on a chair in front of the bathroom sink, looking into the mirror. Both eyes were looking forward. The mean kids could not make fun of her now, so she was pleased. The image jumped forward to a new eye exam, then jumped again when she went to get her new glasses. In a bit of pride, she thought to herself, *Now I am ready to go back to school.*

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The left side wall flashed. Henri just walked in the back door with a six-pack of bottled beer. Opening the refrigerator door, he moved things around until he finally fit it in. A cold expression was on Nessa's face, but she remained silent and continued with dinner.

A voice yells, "Daddy" as Gracie runs into the kitchen. Henri picked her up in his arms and kissed her on the cheek. "How's my princess?" he asked. A glare was coming from Nessa. The wall was on pause.

"Go ahead and ask the question," he said. Stumped. From her perspective, everything was good. Then she looked again. The atmosphere between her parents was different.

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The right-side flashed to a new picture. Henri was on the left, Nessa was on the right, and Gracie was in the middle. The difference this time was that there was not one dome over them but two. Each parent had a dome over them, and they intersected or overlapped with their little girl in the middle. She thought, *Are my parents drifting apart?*

"Yes," he said.

Tabitha's attention was drawn to the left wall where she saw they were having dinner. She was bubbling over, talking a mile a minute, while her parents remained quiet. Something on the table began to glow. It was a bottle of Falstaff beer. Then from behind her father and above was a dark mist. As he drank the beer, the mist covered him. Ever so slightly the expression on his face changed. Finishing the beer, he began to talk. The words were not important; it was his tone. The loving expressions he shared with her just moments ago were now tainted with negativity.

Abruptly Nessa got up and left the room. Quietly she closed the bedroom door. They both knew she went in there to pray.

Pause, please? Can you please tell me what just happened here?

"Your parents had an understanding that Henri would not drink his beer until after seven thirty in the evening. Most nights it would mean you were already in bed," he responded to her. He went on, "Feel how it felt that night" and instantly Tabitha relived that moment.

She said, “I thought it was because I was talking too much that Daddy was upset with me. It was disturbing. Tell me about the black mist.”

“It is the spirit of alcohol. Metaphorically, the darker the mist, the more he lost control of his demons.”

“Demons?”

“Yes, in spiritual warfare, it’s where demons tempt and provoke people where there is unresolved woundedness.”

“I don’t understand.”

On the left wall was a picture of her father sitting at the dining room table holding a hospital bill from her recent surgery.

“And why does this matter?” she queries.

A moving image next to the picture began in a modest home. Everything was very worn and old with thirty-year-old wallpaper in the room. Tabitha recognized her grandfather and father. But her father was maybe six years old. In her grandfather’s hand was a piece of paper. He was standing over Henri. In one hand was a bottle of beer and in the other was the hospital bill for his broken arm.

Yelling down at Henri he said, “What the hell were you thinking, boy! We do not have a pot to piss in, and you do a stupid thing like get your arm broke,” he ranted and berated him.

Tabitha was taken aback. She noticed the tears in her father’s eyes rolling down his cheeks and felt compassion for her him.

“But what about Mom?” she asked. “She knew where the night was headed when he opened the beer for dinner. She did what she had seen before. When things got bad, she went to prayer.” Tabitha looked confused and said, “My mother prayed the rosary. What good did it do?” A statement reflected on in hindsight having learned since that being born again was idolatry.

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All the images disappeared. Blue sky and white puffy clouds filled the room, strikingly beautiful and overwhelming her senses. If she looked up, it was blue sky, and the clouds surrounded her. The floor below seemed so real she looked to see if she could still see her feet.

“I need a minute,” she said. “What did I just witness?” she asked.

Knowing the question was rhetorical, her companion was quiet. *Is this some kind of lesson? What are the implications? How did this happen?*

“Triggered” is all he said. It was becoming a common question, so she asked him to explain.

“With dysfunctional lives, traumatic events are stuffed down inside the spirit/soul. Most learn how to manage it. However, often, there is underlining anger. Then something happens that is like a repeat in their lives, and those painful memories rise up again. They rise in most cases not to invite God into them for healing but to lash out at those who triggered their deep wounds.”

“Is there an event like this in my great-grandfather’s life?”

“Yes.”

Pacing in the clouds, thinking inwardly, trying to learn and solve this puzzle, suddenly she saw it. It was a revelation, new knowledge given to her. Never in her wildest dreams could she have understood this string dynamic that what came before, decades before, had sculpted her own life. An invisible weight lifts off Tabitha.

She asked, “What is this?”

“A burden you were not meant to carry,” he answered.

Stirring in Tabitha, not yet in her conscious mind, was the first illustration of riding the wave from the pleasant highs to the bottom of the lows. She made the visual connection that the wave in the clothesline were the highs and lows in her life.

Chapter Six

It has been an endless stream of self-discovery since I was awakened, she thought.

Tabitha's companion seemed to be on a schedule. After a brief rest in the clouds, a breeze blew them away to reveal a new picture. On the floor she could see a bird's-eye view of the land below. Then the image transferred to all the walls. For a moment a banner flashed, and she read the town's name—Van Wert, Ohio.

She was looking at the edge of town, literally the last block. On the other side of the street, or the opposite wall, were farmers' fields yet to be plowed. The houses here, if you could call them that, were more like shacks, very weathered, and most roofs leaked. It appeared that a strong breeze could blow them down. At the fourth house on the right, a man stormed out the front door and onto the dirt road. He was in a fit of rage. Right behind him, flooding out the door were two women and numerous children. From the look of things, they were poor. Very poor. Harry Winslow walked down an empty road, headed to nowhere.

"Is that him? My grandfather?" Tabitha asked.

"Yes."

"What was happening?"

"He was a broken man and out of options."

"Please explain."

"The house he walked out of it was not his. He and your grandmother Ruby, whom you saw running after him, were living with her sister and family. Harry could not find a job. For several years it has been difficult." He added, "When a man sees his wife and children going hungry and being poor, it is demoralizing."

This was new information for Tabitha. *Where were these stories when I was growing up?* she wondered. Searching her memories and trying to figure out what it meant to her, she came up empty.

Her companion spoke up again, "It was not always this way for Harry." Tabitha watched as Harry walked off, turned and saw Ruby in hysteria. All the children were crying.

"What do you mean when you said it was not always that way for him?"

"Your great-grandfather Winslow owned a hardware store in the center of town. It was a family-owned business. Harry grew up living in a fine home. There was good food to eat, nice clothes to wear, and family vacations they enjoyed. They owned a car free and clear. All of that ended when the hardware store closed. He and Ruby had a nice life. He always believed he would own the store one day. Then in a span of one year, it was all over. Life for them went from enjoying

a good life to taking handouts from family and strangers. Life for the Winslows had been very good. Failure never crossed his mind, Tabitha,” he said. “The Great Depression hung over America like a black cloud. One third of the country was out of work.”

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On the wall, the sun was fading, and Harry had walked miles already. His head was down. He was in total frustration and pain. His feet and head both hurt. The weight of meeting the needs of his family was crushing him. A war was being waged in his mind. At wit’s end, he turned his heart towards God. Harry was not a religious man; he was a desperate one. A heartfelt cry was released. In the recesses of his mind, he remembered Psalm 107 which says that God brought people out of their troubles. His cry? “Help me God” is all he prayed.

Within the room, a man appeared. Now there were three of them. He acted as if he had been summoned. The wall that bore Harry’s image became like a liquid. The man stepped up to the wall in front of Harry. He stepped through the liquid and became part of the scene she had been watching. He was wearing dirty tan pants, an overcoat, worn shoes, and a hat with holes in it. On this deserted road, two souls were passing. Harry finally saw the man when he was only feet away. He knew who he was—a hobo. Three years ago, Harry would have looked down on him for being homeless and out of work, thinking of him as a bum. He now realized it was nearly the picture of his current life.

“Hey, buddy,” the man said, “Can you spare a dime?” Harry understood his question and more. It was a line spoken in Americana during the great depression. A dime—enough money to buy food to eat.

Harry’s life was spinning out of control; however, it was not as bad as the man in front of him. So, he offered him some advice. “In town, go to the VW Café. Go around back and knock on the screen door. When someone barks at you to go away, ask them if they have work you can do. They are a sucker for those who are willing to work.”

“Thanks, pal,” the man said and then told Harry, “I am on my way to Omaha. I hear that I can get a job there. I’m jumping on a westbound train tonight. The worst and best part of riding the rails is the Jungle.”

“The Jungle, what are you talking about?”

“It is the human jungle alongside the tracks. Some will help you, and others will kill you for no good reason.”

The hobo walked past Harry as if he were on his way into town. But when Harry turned around to tell him one more thing, he was gone.

“Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it,” Tabitha said.

Chapter Seven

Harry and Ruby were sitting on the steps in front of the house. Tabitha could see they were having a heated discussion, and she was listening in. In a moment of honesty, she heard Harry saying, “I do not like the man I have become. I am angry all the time. I take it out on you, honey, and the kids. I hurt you. I say terrible things to the kids. Ruby, this is the first time in years I feel hope. I need to go; I need to try.”

Next is an image of the adults sitting around the kitchen table. All the reasons Harry should go to Omaha were shared, and all the reasons he should not go were also said. Ruby’s sister and husband would have to be willing to accept responsibility for Harry’s family while he was gone. Harry has had a belly full of misery. For him it was true that misery likes company. His tongue lashings had hurt everyone. Could he ever undo what he had said in the depth of his pain and spewed out hurtful words and emotions upon his offspring’s tender hearts?

Tabitha asked, “How am I hearing their conversations and feeling their feelings?”

“In due time,” he said, and she relinquished her need to know.

The sum of two families was outside. Harry had a cloth sack with all the food they could spare. Tenderness welled up in his heart with the realization he might not see them again. He kissed his son on the forehead, a first for Henri, then made his way down the line to each of the girls. Ruby grabbed him in a dire hug. She knew it might, could, be her last hug from him. Tears were blinding her as she released him.

Due to the harsh realities of life, Harry was feeling his love for her. His hopes had been high with all the talk about the New Deal. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt wrote into law a program called the Work Process Administration, intended to be a jump start of employment for Americans. It had been that way for many men and women. However, it had not reached Van Wert community and Harry’s life. He had considered going to Cincinnati or Chicago to find work, but it just did not seem to come to pass. Now, he felt led to go to Omaha.

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“Pause,” Tabitha said, “I need to think about this for a second.” Going on she said, “I have never known poverty like I am seeing. It is almost too hard to watch. *To believe people rode on the freight trains in 1941 is difficult to fathom. It was an end to an era and now I see how it touched my family*, she thought.

As she looked back at the wall, her life’s story continued. She heard the long pull on the steam train whistle. Next to the tracks, running alongside the train all pumped with adrenaline, Harry jumped in an open box car. He was alone, for now. While he slept, other men jump in his boxcar. Startled awake, Harry learned his first harsh lesson riding the rails. Might is right. His food was taken from him by force. A few slugs to the head convinced him it was better for these thugs to have it before they threw him off.

The train stopped in Gary, Indiana, and he barely escaped from the train security guards. Odors filled his senses. The Coker's, located in the US Steel Plant, were burning coal to make pig iron. For the first time in his life, he has seen smog—orangish color hanging in the sky as a result of the basic oxygen furnaces making steel. Just outside the yard, there were way too many people for his liking. Harry was concerned. Walking to the east and out of town, his belly burned for food. He avoided the temptation to go into the jungles for help while in the countryside. He mused while looking for a job that it was not the plan he and Ruby had agreed upon.

“Hey, buddy, I need to get to Omaha. What train goes there?” he asked another hobo. He eyed him hard, and Harry thought maybe he had made a mistake by talking to him.

“You be right here at midnight. I'll get you on the right tracks,” he said.

“Buddy, I don't have a watch. I won't know the time.”

“Did you hear that screeching sound in the mill?”

“Yes.”

“It goes off every hour so the workers in the plant will know the time.”

Harry was humbled to beg for food. Just another mouth to feed was how he was looked at. Most do not help him.

Tabitha was having a hard time watching this. Then she saw a woman call out from her house, “Hey you.”

Harry turned and looked at her standing on the other side of a screen door. “Are you hungry?” she asked. “Go wash your hands with the hose on the side of the house. Then come to the back door.”

He made short work of this deal and did what he had been told. She handed him two bread rolls and an apple. “Drink from the hose and then be on your way,” she told him. It was compassion to a point.

Midnight came, and there he was standing in the shadows for safety.

“Hey, over here,” the man whispered. “I'm going west. I'll get you on the right train, but then you're on your own. You got it?”

A day later, there were two slowdowns and no railroad security check. Men and boys were hopping on, hopping off. Drifters talked; Harry listened.

Ever been past the Mississippi River?” he was asked.

“No.”

“Widest darn river I've seen. I was a dang fool once thinkin' I could swim it. Walk the bridges, the cops get ya. In jail, at least you get a meal. Train bridges are just dang dangerous. Got caught in the middle once. Had to climb down the side or be run over. Listen here, once ya see the

river ya are just about's there. When you smell it, get ready to jump and pray to your God they be goin' slow. Them stockyards is the perfume of money. If the winds right, ya know that ya coming into town." Harry thought, *that old timer had a screw loose*. He didn't smell the yards until after he crossed the Missouri River.

He could smell Omaha before he saw it. The pens had their own smell that drifted on the air. He had hope, but the train was moving faster than he felt it safe to jump. But he finally did and had a bad jolt on the stones alongside the tracks. He rolled to a stop, bruised but not broken. He decided it was the most foolish thing, the most desperate thing he had ever done.

Walking on 24th street in south Omaha, Harry caught his image in a store front window. He stopped, looked at himself in the reflection, thinking he had become the stranger he met in Van Wert. As he walked on, the atmosphere was changing. You could feel it. Dynamite.

Any moment, violence could erupt. He noticed men with black Stetson hats and handlebar mustaches. Hardened men lingered around the bars. Harry walked on the edge of the street, keeping his distance. Up ahead there was a small crowd composed of a line of men waiting to get into a store. Once he got there, the painted sign on the window read, Rescue Mission.

"What's the story?" Harry asked a man at the end of the line.

"Can you stomach preachin', boy?" the old man asked him. "If you can sit through the preachin', they feed you a meal."

He was so hungry he would have sat through any sermon to have food in his belly. Tabitha watched as Harry found a temporary home base with hot food and some nights a bed to sleep in. Harry had his immediate needs met, although his soul was not saved. With food in his belly, exhaustion settled in, and his thoughts drifted off to Ruby. He had never missed a person so deeply as he missed her right now. So, he talked to her out loud as if she could hear him.

Honey, I am in over my head. At times I wonder if I'm going to make it. I fight my way every step. When the mission is full, the alleys are not safe. I learned that the hard way. I was roughed up a couple of times until they saw I did not have anything they wanted. Another poor soul told me about the Riverview Zoo. There I found places to hide where I could sleep safely. It meant I had to walk farther to the plants to find a job. I fall asleep listening to the animals making their noises.

Tabitha saw he had lost a lot of weight; his clothes did not fit him.

It was heartbreaking for her to see her grandfather stand in long lines looking for employment. All day he stood in line at the Swift plant. No job. Then he went to the the Armour plant, no job. At the third plant, the Cudahy plant, they saw something in him—he had an education. His practical business skills from the hardware store helped. He was hired as a laborer, his title—cattle driver. Harry's new life would be lived on or near Q street in the heart of the stockyards.

In the image in front of Tabitha, she saw the hogs, sheep, and cattle pens. She turned her head as she smelled them too, and in a moment of brevity, she asked if they could skip that part. On the right, she noticed the meat processing plants. On the left side were the pens. Harry was full

of life, full of hope, and in desperate need of meat on his bones. For the first time in three years, he had a job.

On the first day of work at the Cudahy pens, the boss gave Harry the low down. He said, “John here is going to show you what to do. Just try and make it through the day without getting yourself trampled.” He was not joking.

John, six foot, two inches tall, lean, and strong was not looking to be his friend. Turning to Harry he said, “I’ll show you the ropes. Then you are on your own. You live or die by how you work. If you are a slacker, you’re gone. If you do not give your all, you’re gone. You get hurt and cannot work, you’re gone. You got it?”

John went on to show him his one tool. Extending past his hand, John was holding a pole with a spike on the end of it. He said, “This here is a cattle prod. Now looky here. You see my prod; you get yourself a pole to tie onto the prod we give you each day. You want a good four or five feet between you and the cattle. Now pay attention.”

They walked out to the pens, passing through several of them. “Now you’ll climb the fence to the far side,” he said.

The pictures began jumping. The gate was opened. The cattle started moving out. “Pokem Harry,” he heard. They worked the cattle from the pens to the tunnel.

It was the innovation other stockyards did not have—underground tunnels for livestock to go to the processing plants. No one was ever prepared for their first time in the tunnel.

Tabitha was right there, living the scene with her grandfather. The smell would make you lose your stomach. Dark and narrow, it was the tunnel of death. Livestock were led to slaughter. Careless workers were injured, and some died.

Harry’s body felt like it had dried up and died. He slept at the Zoo, working hard all day. Then, it was payday. The boss came up to Harry and said, “Today, at five o’clock, head over to the plant. There you will see a line at the payroll office door. When you get to the window, state your name, sign the receipt or make your mark, and move on. Now I am going to tell you. Fridays are the most dangerous night of week around here. Be on guard. A man can get his throat cut if he is not careful.”

He was dealing with John all week with cattle that did not want to be driven, and now there were more hazards he had never had to imagine. How does he keep his money without someone taking it from him? On the way out the door, the boss yelled, “Harry, get yourself some boots!” Since the pens and the tunnels were layered with dung, it was a very good suggestion.

Through the pay window, a voice said, “State your name.” No sweeter words had he heard in three years. That day was the reason for his coming to Omaha. Harry received a small brown envelope with \$23.50 in it. Pure joy. He was earning money again! He was relieved beyond belief. He had been three exceedingly long years in this journey.

Tabitha watched as Harry moved into a flophouse hotel for a dollar a day. He bought boots for work and a strong pole for prodding.

It had been a long three weeks away from Ruby and the children. His chest puffed up a bit. He was a provider again. Harry had been forced to grow in ways he never thought he would. “Do or die” was his new mantra. He toughened up, getting a hardened exterior in order to survive.

He was excited—it was time to call home.

Chapter Eight

Harry made a serious mistake, and Tabitha did not see it coming. Neither did he. Money was burning a hole in his pocket. Temptations ran high. She watched where he had hidden most of his money until he could open a bank account.

Walking out of his room, his head held high and chest puffed up just a bit, Harry was feeling his oats. He had pocket money. He drifted, not aimlessly, towards 24th street, Saloon Row. He had decided to give himself a well-deserved beer. He had eyed a place half a block from the mission. Heathens and saints were both striving for the souls of men.

He thought about the mission. Those good people were there for him in his time of need, but the fire and brimstone they preached were hard to palate. A God bubble is how he saw it. Once inside the door, he discovered no one cursed. They seemed to care about him. Today he walked past the mission, did not heed his own conviction, and went through a dark portal into a crowded, dank bar. It was a loud, smoke-filled room that reeked of alcohol and was filled with language that could curl a woman's hair.

Naïvely, he made his way to the bar, pushed up, and waited to be served.

"Whatever you want; you pay first. Do you have a problem with that?" the bartender barked at him. He looked as rough as the crowd surrounding him. He wore a white shirt, bow tie, and dark vest. His hair was slicked back from his narrow face, and deep lines were etched on his cheeks when he smiled. His handlebar mustache curled up at the ends. He was friendly to regulars and had a no-nonsense approach to drifters.

"Give me a draft of Falstaff," Harry said as he handed the bartender a dollar bill. The two men on his left took notice. A dollar went a long way when a dime would buy two hamburgers. That first pull on the Falstaff awakened the sleeping beast within, unleashing the controlled demons. Wiping the foam off his mouth, he took a breath and became reunited with his old friend. By his third beer, it was obvious to everyone around that he was more than tipsy.

That was when he heard someone say, "Hey, country boy" in a rough tone.

The bartender overheard it and said, "Not in here" as he placed his hand on the gun under the counter. Harry was dragged out onto the street. A well-planted punch or two, and Harry was lighter by one dollar and seventy cents—a half day's labor. Tabitha shuddered as she watched this scene play out, in part for his foolishness and a betrayal of his family by losing the money.

In the morning, the look on Harry's face read of indignation towards those men and not his own stupidity. The mirror told another story. Touching his cheek, he grimaced. He heaped more insults towards the thugs as he looked at his shiner. He was mad; he felt bad and missed his family. If they had not interrupted his night, Harry would be having a horrible hangover.

On Sunday Harry walked over to the mission but not to attend the service. He saw there was a phone booth in the back where they served meals. Closing the door, he lifted the receiver. Dropping a dime in the payphone, he dialed zero for operator.

“Long distance, please,” he said.

“Your call is going to be twenty-five cents per minute. At the tone drop another quarter in the phone, or you will be disconnected.” Bong. The phone was ringing.

Each Sunday, Ruby waited in the church office. For four weeks in a row, there was no call. The stillness in the room broke when the phone rang. Ruby gasped. In a split image on the wall, Tabitha watched this simulcast. On the left was Harry; on the right, Ruby.

“Honey, I got a job. I will wire you money next Saturday,” he said. Ruby burst into tears; Harry’s hand was trembling. He talked fast, giving her the low down on the job and where he was living. She told him about the children. When they heard the fourth bong, he had to end the call. For now, distance had made their hearts grow fonder.

Ruby was still crying. She was a wreck, instantly feeling foolish for allowing her mind to think the worst. All she needed was to know he was alive and okay. The children surrounded her, trying to comfort her while not knowing the story. Henri placed his hand on her shoulder.

Ruby composed herself, then announced, “Your father’s got a job!” She had tears of joy. Things were going to be okay. Tabitha, totally immersed in the scene, sobbed. The strain, the pain, the hardships her grandparents endured were now understood. She needed a minute; then they moved on.

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The scene shifted to Harry sitting in the flop house lobby. He was writing a letter to Ruby. Now that he had an address, they could correspond by mail. He wrote,

Dear Ruby,

The work is hard, but I am not complaining. The first day of work, the man named John who trained me, taught me a trick he learned the hard way using a long cattle prod. He had been kicked several times by cattle until he used a longer prod. The first week here, I spent most of my time standing in lines to get a job. I will tell you all about it later. When I was not in line, I was at the mission. If I sat through the sermon, they would feed me. And some nights I got a cot. The other nights, sleeping in the shadows and alleys were difficult. There is a lot of talk about war. Everyone wants to know how long we can stay out of it. Others say it will be a boom for the processing plants if we go to war.

I figure it will take me a month of working to earn the money to bring you and the children to live here in Omaha. It is nothing like Van Wert. It is city living, hard and sure. I am glad I did not go to Chicago. Omaha is all I can handle. Ruby, I will never say this to the children again, “Sleep tight and don’t let the bedbugs bite.” I miss you.

Love, Harry

Tabitha thought about how much she had taken for granted, even though her father's harshness and abuse were tragic. Her own mother's neglect fostered her feelings of abandonment and being alone. Her father's abuse was traumatic. But the poverty she just witnessed was not part of her life.

Chapter Nine

It started out with the best of intentions. Tabitha saw the timeline jump by three months and then Harry was able to bring the family to live in Omaha. Those three months were the first time he had lived alone, but he built a life of his own that would soon include his family. It was a learning curve to determine where it was safe for his family to live. He also discovered where the boundaries were at work.

They had no problem with functional alcoholics if it did not interfere with work. He found a kinder watering hole north of L street on 24th. It catered to the between crowd—no roughneck cattlemen, nor the white shirt bosses. The Midwest immigrants gathered there. Here he came into a stable relationship with his old friend. He promised himself not to spend more than half an hour's pay each day on his drinking. Most of the time he kept this promise

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The walls began fast forwarding Harry's life until Tabitha asked for it to be slowed down. "Please, slow it down when he is in the bar. Then jump from bar scene to bar scene," she asked.

As she watched, there was a tell that took place during his second beer—he changed and became more negative. After the third beer, he got mean. Tabitha honed in on his voice and saw how his words were harsh and often cruel. At first Harry was likable, and people befriended him until they learned of his dark side. He was a mean drunk. He had two beer friends for a while, but they drifted elsewhere in the bar away from his rants on life. Tabitha decided to table this observation until later when she could revisit it.

In mid-June the family plan came together. Tabitha watched as the family loaded a small truck with all their worldly belongings. It had wooden slate sides holding everything on the bed of the truck. They prayed there would be no rain for the tires were nearly bald. It puffed smoke when you started the engine. They packed the car with children, the trunk with suitcases and bags, with odds and ends stuffed into every available spot. Cousins cried and sisters said their goodbyes as they set out for Lincoln Highway to travel out of Ohio. They drove through Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. It would be another long day's drive to Nebraska, their new home state, where Harry had rented a house. It looked much like his sister-in-law's home. It would be a beginning. Instead of a family of seven, it would now be a family of eight. Ruby's younger sister, Dotty, would be helping them make the transition into a new life. Everyone was excited, including Ruby's sister and brother-in-law.

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Tabitha's companion slowed the pace down. Move-in day needed to be witnessed. The caravan pulled up to the house where Harry had been waiting. It was a wonderful reunion. The expressions on Ruby's face were priceless. Technically she had been a single parent, carrying the parenting load alone, and it had been hard. Ruby rushed to embrace her husband. They kissed,

hugged, laughed, and as Ruby felt the load lift off her, she cried. The children gathered around Harry. It was a pinnacle moment, a wonderful memory for them all. Attention then turned towards the house. In a flash, Harry could see Ruby's expectation—she had hoped for better. It hurt him with a sharp stab. What they had in Van Wert before the Depression was gone. Over. She would adapt. Chaos erupted as everyone moved in, and the girls were not much help. It fell upon the adults and Henri to get them settled.

"Pause, please," Tabitha said as she thought about what she had just witnessed—the hardship Ruby endured without Harry, the dangerous journey he took for a chance at a new life for his family, and how he rose to meet the challenges.

Steady food, good sleep, and being a provider energized and strengthened him. A word flashed in her mind. JOBS! The pivotal point of everything was a job. Responsibilities came into her thinking. Up to now, Harry was only carrying half of his responsibilities while his in-laws had been carrying the other half. The lighter load helped to regenerate him both in body and soul.

"I need to ask," Tabitha said. "Did God plan this all along? Bringing them to Omaha?"

"Exodus" is what he replied.

"Please explain," Tabitha responded.

"When one door closes, God opens a new one. The Israelites left Egypt for the promised land. The Winslow's left Europe for America. Your parents left Ohio for Nebraska. They left a dry, lifeless place to send roots down in a stable one," he said.

"Is that why God sent a messenger to give my grandfather a new direction?"

"Destiny," he said.

Oh boy. Here I go again. I am not doing well at comprehending these thought jumps, she said to herself.

"Tabitha, let us move forward. You will see the answer," he told her.

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A jump to August was made when the children were enrolled in school. The family's needs pushed Harry and Ruby to examine their finances. There was no way around it—Ruby needed to get a job. Bitterness on life's fickle fate was running deep within Harry. He could not give it up. Their good life before the world fell apart seemed cruel to him now. Running endless cycles of thoughts through his mind made it go nowhere.

They needed a second income, and Henri was still young. Ruby was hired at the same plant where Harry worked. She would be working on the cutting room floor, cutting chickens into pieces. Harsh reality sunk in.

Only a few inches separated her from the women next to her. At times she felt claustrophobic. The pace was fast as cleaned chickens quickly came down the line. She had no

choice; she had to learn to keep up. At home she could work at her own pace and meet the needs as they arrived. All that changed as her sister became a surrogate mother. Twinges of bitterness entered Ruby's heart.

Images on all walls showed Tabitha the inside of the plant. Women, wearing their cutting floor uniforms, sat in front of a conveyor belt. They had a knife in one hand and a chicken in the other. Women in the workplace was not the norm. Up to this day and time, they would have stayed home, raised the children, worked to keep the inside of the house clean, cooked meals, and did endless laundry. Ruby was missing out on seeing her children grow up since Dotty was filling in. When she thought about it, tears welled up in her eyes. But what was important? She knew in her heart it was a stable life for the children, a roof over their head, food on the table, clothes on their backs, shoes on their feet, a warm bed to sleep in without bugs, and health care when needed.

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The image jumped to December 7th. Everyone's worst fears took place—America declared war on Japan. Images flashed on all the walls of events happening in Omaha, then all over America. She saw the interruption to life. Fear grasped a nation. The concerns of her grandparents were paramount. The underlying question was how this would affect the Winslow family. Harry was too old to be drafted. All able-bodied men either enlisted or were drafted into the military, but there was a man shortage at the plant.

Harry was moved to a new position, in part due to his education and management skills. He was now an inspector in the ham processing department. He got a well-received raise, which was a short-lived relief. During the war, workers were asked to work double shifts. There was never enough money since prices for goods were so high. Buying war bonds was encouraged. The demands on the body and mind were zapping the households' breadwinners. The downward grind was hitting them hard.

If life were not bad enough. Harry escaped into the bottle. Life's fickle fate struck again, ripping a good life from him. His bitterness ran deeper. He was forced to work harder than his body could perform, and it was crushing him. His demons ran rampant the nights he drank, but Ruby could not stop him. No pleading or coddling worked. Her deep embarrassment was working with a blackeye.

Tabitha began to pace again. She knew what was coming.

Harry set the third bottle down on the kitchen table. Henri was walking through the room and was backhanded by his father and knocked to the floor.

She heard him say, "You sorry excuse for a boy." For several minutes Tabitha listened to Harry berate his only son. She yelled "STOP!" and dropped to the floor on her knees, sobbing.

She said, “Oh my God. He did it to his son; his son did it to me.” The pain in Tabitha’s heart rushed out like a flood stage river.

“Why” is all she asked.

“Hurt people hurt people” he responded.

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From here on out, the images made one jump after another. Henri, in part, had a lost childhood while taking care of his sisters with Aunt Dotty. He did household chores and mopped the floor with a worn-out mop and galvanized bucket. While other boys were out playing, he was stuck helping care for his sisters. The war dragged on, they all got older, and Aunt Dotty was able to handle the home but not the bickering, the endless bickering.

To get more time to himself, Henri stayed away from home as much as possible. A day came when everyone was hungry. If they just had a loaf of bread for a sandwich, but it cost twelve cents. All the money in the house totaled eleven cents. Every cushion was checked, and every place searched for a penny, but they come up short. Another mindset was made. Henri said to himself, *I never want to be hungry again.*

The first mindset, silently made, while he laid on the kitchen floor, was to never trust his father and mother again. Henri got odd jobs whenever it came to him for pocket money but always returned to daydreaming, looking to the future when he would be on his own.

Chapter Ten

All the screens were filled with the war efforts in Omaha or other places in Nebraska. Factories were building Flying Fortress bombers for the Air Force. One screen held the image of North Platte, Nebraska. Their railroad station changed the lives of many young men on their way to war. Every train stopped there. Women supplied sandwiches and cookies to all servicemen. That ten-minute act of kindness made memories carried into battle and upheld soldiers in bleak gruesome times.

The images narrowed closer to Omaha as farmers contributed to the war effort. War Bond campaign signs were posted on buildings and fences. Henri rallied with other twelve-year-old boys to find scrap metal to be melted down and turned into jeeps and trucks. Dotty found time to aid the local USO Club. She lived for the dance nights and all the good-looking soldiers in uniforms.

“Can I see more about Aunt Dotty?” Tabitha asked.

On the front wall, there stood a thin woman with a warm smile, trying to hide her crow’s feet with makeup. She was just beyond her prime and another fickle fate story. In her late teenage years, living in the height of the depression, she found the male pool of potential husbands too small. Oh, there were plenty of men and scores of drifters, but none of them caught her fancy because they did not have a job.

Tabitha watched as Dotty, now older and living in Omaha, smoothed her hair while standing out on the back porch. She was deep in thought. She may not have had her own children, but she had been mothering for years. Now, Omaha was filled with marrying-aged men, but the war brought about another man shortage for spinsters, as they are called, unmarried women with no job of their own. Dotty worked hard taking care of the Winslow children. There on the back porch stood Dotty. Her inward thoughts made Tabitha wonder if she was daydreaming of finding true love. Was time running out for her?

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Sweeping pictures told the story of the population demographic changing in Omaha. To fill the need for workers, African Americans fill the void. A new wave of immigration had begun from the southern states.

The Nation endured four more years of fear, change, and chaos until August 15th 1945, VJ Day. All Americans celebrated the victory over Japan; the war was over. Pictures of her grandparents, her father, and many other happy citizens flashed on all the walls; the war was over. The nation celebrated.

After the second great war, prosperity came to America, and the Winslow family was swept into the increase. “Happy days are here again” was a popular song played on the radio. A new home was purchased, and they were a step closer to their comfortable life back in Ohio. However, keeping their heads above water was a continuous struggle.

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The front wall was the only image now and captured Tabitha's total attention. Henri was standing there, no longer a boy. He was transitioning into being a man, a bit gangly, which is to be expected for his first year in high school. It is like a time-lapse picture. The next frame was Henri as a sophomore, then a junior. In the senior picture, Henri was a tall, strong, lean image of a man. And then, his graduation picture showed a truly handsome man. Tabitha remembered seeing that picture.

It was the beginning of the end. He had been waiting for the day he would get out. For him, the family was a bunch of disconnected people living together. The extreme lows and too few highs were part of his motivation for getting out. On June 25, 1950, he saw the door open. The Korean War began, and Henri joined the Navy. Good old Uncle Sam took him in. For many years Henri had dreamed of this day. At eighteen he finally gained his freedom from the family, not before getting barraged by his father's anger, hearing he will never amount to anything. These words would ring in his ears for decades to come.

Henri had never ridden on a Greyhound bus. His destination? Camp Moffett at the Great Lakes Naval Training Center. He watched the countryside stream by. This was only the second time he had traveled. Hopscotching from one Greyhound station to another, he was impressed with all the open spaces and small rural towns. He was pleasantly surprised and thrilled. Only the occasional hog farm brought back the reminder of the smell of living in a Stock Yards community. Elated to be on his own, he was still nervous to be fully responsible for himself.

Watching her father feeling his freedom, Tabitha was wearing a smile. This was a part of her father she had never known. She continued to watch as the bus moved into the Chicago metro area. Henri's face was glued to the window.

The tall buildings blocked the sunlight. The bus pulled into the station at Roosevelt Rd. and Wabash Ave, the heart of the south loop. He had a ten-minute stop there. As he stepped onto the big city street, all his senses came alive. From the screeching, clamoring El trains above, the smell of Lake Michigan, and a myriad of cars and trucks heading many different directions, he was alive to it all. He was the typical small-town boy who sees the big city. There were more people around than he had ever seen before. There were also young women galore, looking their best. He took note, enjoying his final hour of freedom.

After arriving in Waukegan, Illinois, Henri grabbed his suitcase. Just outside of the bus was a man in Navy whites. He was yelling, "Recruits line up here." Within minutes Henri was on the camp bus. Tabitha took notice of his response to the harsh tones.

The images continued. It was the last step off the bus when his life changed forever. A Navy training officer got right into his face, yelling orders. Henri and a hundred others had stepped into basic training. First thing? All suitcases were thrown to the side in a pile. They were headed to the dumpster. His indoctrination into Navy life began. He was told to undress down to his skivvies. The hair on his head was cut off, and he was given new clothes. A regiment unfolded as

one officer after another yelled at them. He felt the pressure immediately, and yet, it was a familiar life to him.

The bodies and minds of the new recruits would then be evaluated. Every part of his body would be examined. He would be given vaccinations, have his teeth x-rayed, and have a full medical workup. From stem to stern Henri was becoming ship-shape. Tabitha watched and blushed as a room full of men and her father sailed through the physical requirements. She saw him qualify in firearms training and excel in his studies. Technical school opened a new pathway for Henri. He scored high in electronics, a slot in Radio Communication School was given to him. The goal in this class was to learn how to repair all types of airplane radios. The secondary training, he would have would be flight line firefighting. As the Korean War was escalating, Henri's training would bring him to be stationed on a land-based airfield.

"Wait," Tabitha said loudly. "How is this happening? My father was never exposed to electronics. No one in our family gravitated in this direction. An airplane" she questioned. "No one in our family has ever ridden on an airplane."

"War films. Henri went into the movie theaters in Omaha with his friends. There he saw many new things. All sorts of new possibilities," her companion told her.

Graduation day arrived—his first milestone. In celebration, he and ten of his buddies headed into Chicago on liberty. Dressed in Navy whites, they piled off the Greyhound bus and onto Roosevelt Avenue, headed for the infamous Billy Goat Tavern. It was a culture shock for Henri. The place was a bit of a dive, with cheeseburgers, beer, and entertainment. Emma Fiedler was singing on stage, and she reveled in all their attention. As she sang, in the background you could hear, "Cheeseburger Cheeseburger," chips, and "Pepsi no coke," as food was ordered. Historic Billy Goat times. Above on Michigan Avenue, Henri saw more beautiful women, a target-rich environment that he had little time to explore. He liked the looks he was getting from the ladies with their smiling faces and batting eyelashes.

At Great Lakes Naval Academy, he received his first assignment. He would travel to the Naval Base at El Toro on Whidbey Island in Washington. It was the beginning of some of the best years of his life. Oddly, the harshness he lived within his father's household had prepared him for the military. Some cannot handle this type of pressure, but Henri absorbed it and lived on. Quickly he discovered the base was located near a fishing paradise. He used all his liberty to explore Puget Sound. Tabitha watched as her father saw Orca whales for the first time. She saw his fishing poles bend under the weight of a huge fish. She saw him running towards fires on the flightline and drinking with his buddies. She questioned what she did not see. He did not have any serious lady friends. They cost money, money he could not send home.

Navy life suited Henri. His next assignment was in the Aleutian Islands, where he would spend relentless hours fishing. Boxing was a big thing on base. He entered the boxing ring and found out he liked it. He became rather good and won a base title or two. Poker—the bluff and fold game—he read the guys and already knew when they were bluffing. Beer. Always more beer.

Throughout his Naval Career, he sent money home to help the family. Why not? He had three square meals a day, a place to sleep, clothes, and medical care. Despite America being at war, Henri stayed stateside. At the end of four years, he left the Navy. He had saved enough money to buy a new car and lost no time getting one once he was home. He enlisted in college using the GI Bill.

“Pause please,” Tabitha said. She was puzzled. Thinking to herself, *there is something missing. But what?* Her companion waits as she processes what she has just seen. Pacing from one side of the room to another. *It just does not make sense.* She watched as he lived his life as a child, then how he grew to be a man, an adult. It was an oxymoron. She knew him as Daddy—the parent part of his personality. Her life had been no different than the life he lived as a child. The only exception? She did not live in poverty. She did observe how her father broke away from the family cycle.

Chapter Eleven

Confusion swept across Tabitha's face. She focused on the center of the front wall. On the left was a three-masted sailing ship moored off the tip of Cape Cod. A name flashed above it stating its name, *The Mayflower*. The images were running forward until they showed Agatha Winslow kneeling, praying for her. She was taken with revisiting Agatha, not knowing she was on the Mayflower. On the right side were images of Ireland, which had been thrust into poverty in the 1840s to 1850, when the potato blight hit them severally. There were not enough jobs nor food to feed the masses. Scores of young Irishmen and women lined the boat docks. They were being loaded into a large, three-masted merchant ship, trying to escape poverty for a new life in America. They boarded a cargo ship of Irish immigrants. Most had sold themselves into indentured servanthood in America. Women were called Biddy's and would become maid servants. The men were often called Paddys. Regardless of their skills and education, most only find jobs of hard labor.

An image flashed revealing life below deck. The Irish were stowed away in very tight spaces in horrible conditions. Agatha's experience was that she saw many lifeless bodies at their journey's end, and it sickened her. They were desperate and wanted a new life. Tabitha wondered if any would have changed their mind if they knew twenty percent died on their way to the new land.

For Agatha, making the crossing forged her need for Jesus Christ in her life. In the miracle of her saved soul, she looked into the future. She prayed, "My dearest, loving Father. I ask for a girl child to be born at the end of the age. I ask that she would be the apple of your eye and that your hand would be upon her to pull souls out of the enemy's grasp. May she stand in the gap for the Winslow's and many others. In Jesus' name, amen."

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A sign was displayed on the front wall. It read: Finley Family Lineage. Tabitha's companion swept his hand from right to left changing her family lines. All the walls now had pictures relating to the Finley clan. Tabitha watched Seamus Finley walk down the plank and onto the streets of New York. He was alone. The way he was dressed and his brogue told he was Irish. He would be hated in many places. Businesses hung signs proclaiming, "No Irish Wanted."

Seamus heard a familiar-sounding voice. A fellow countryman told him of the hardships he was enduring in America. He had no help for him other than friendship. Every place he looked Seamus saw skin and bones people. They were wearing clothes so threadbare that they were not much good. His new friend pointed him in the direction of Shantytown on the outskirts of town. It would be safer for him there. The living spaces were made of cardboard walls and dirt floors. As he walked past them, he saw the lifeless eyes and dirty clothes of hungry men, women, and children. Gaelic was the spoken language in Shantytown. He could hear anger and desperation in their voices. Sick and hungry children drove men to bitterness. They came for a better life and had found worse.

Tabitha heard someone say to Seamus, *Ar chuala mé an t-ainm Finley? An bhfuil tú ó Chontae Lú?* Revelation came to her as she understood it immediately. *Did I hear the name Finley? Are you from County Louth?* Both men could not believe their good fortune. They had never met before. Nonetheless, they were family. Seamus was brought into his home. He met the man's wife and children and was a bit horrified for their condition was dire.

Tabitha's interest heightened when the conversation came to Seamus' family's work back in Ireland. She heard him say he was a farmer. His new friend, Liam, told stories of sharecroppers in the Midwest. He had hoped one day to take his family there. His kinsman's hope now burned in Seamus' heart as well. Seamus was invited to stay the night. For hours they talked about their beloved Ireland—of places they had been, the pubs they drank in, and the hardships that caused them to travel to the new land. Seamus found sleeping on the dirt floor was not what he expected, but he was grateful.

The journey of Seamus Finley was played out before her eyes. She was witness to the goodness of people when a meal would find its way to him, and he found work for food amongst the Quakers in Pennsylvania. The Amish in Ohio and Indiana brought him a meal and a night's rest in their barns. He heard them speak of God and often shared scripture with him. He thought it odd that they spoke German to each other. In town after town, Tabitha watched as he asked for work and was rejected. Now he too looked gaunt, but he pushed on. To what end he was not sure. Was it Providence? The hand of God? In the state of Iowa, he was hired on as a farmhand. He had traveled far enough that the Irish were not looked down upon there with hatred and disdain as he had experienced in New York. Instead, they were known for their hard work. It was the hard work of the Irish that helped build the railroads. His wage? A room in the loft of the barn, meals, and a share of the crop profits.

Weeks turned into months. Months turned into years. The image focused upon a Catholic Church social. Many Irish came from the surrounding farms. Seamus had taken a fancy to a colleen whose name was Mary. The image fast forwarded to their marriage. By God's good fortune, together they entered a contract to become sharecroppers, hoping one day to own the land. They had one child, Conor. Fickle fate hit them. After ten years of hard labor, there was a crop failure because there had been no rain. Quickly the submerged anger and bitterness surfaced, and Seamus lashed out. Although he had promised himself that he would never do what he experienced in the grass-roofed cottage in County Louth, he hit his wife and cursed at his son. In times of rage he even beat him. He raised his fist to God, all the while wanting to know why. It did no good. The family erected protection boundaries. They were once a unit, now they lived together but detached.

The walls showed a pathway to Omaha, Nebraska, where Seamus found a job cleaning Stockyard pens. It was work but was a mixed blessing. The family had a place to live, food most of the time, and used clothes. It was home. Mary was away from her family and had nowhere to go. Seamus frequented 24th street saloons. His rage never subsided. Leaving Ireland with the hope of a good life turned into endless years of using his life to benefit others. Tabitha watched Mary attend church, kneeling, asking God for grace to hold on, for Conor, for herself.

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“Pause, please,” Tabitha said.

“Why are you showing me all of this? At times it is too hard to bear. It pains my heart to see the continuing despair.”

“It has to do with the gift.”

“Gift, what gift?”

“You will understand at the end.”

Tabitha looked around the room at the frozen images. She enjoyed the loving times, but she hated the ugliness that bared its head generation after generation. Love and marriage can be a foundation in life, but she was watching crumbling families. The pieces were falling in her mind. A question immersed. She asked, “Does it ever end? The ugliness?” He did not answer.

Tabitha’s picture comes back on the front wall. “Ya know. I never knew about my great-grandfather Seamus,” she said.

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An 1895 newspaper headline was visible on the left wall. It read, “Rental farmland on the increase!” It was the beginning of the end of tenant farming once called sharecroppers. The transition from agriculture to manufacturing was felt all over America. The industrial revolution was changing the labor force. As farming was winding down, the industrial age was gearing up. Regardless, the Duff family that hailed from County Mayo had signed a lease on farmland southwest of Des Moines, Iowa. It was a roof over their heads—not much to speak of but a beginning.

It was a hard life for Patrick and Margaret Duff. Once they paid the land owner, what was left was theirs. In the good years, there was laughter in the air. In 1897 Ann Duff was born—a beautiful baby girl with all her fingers and toes. The farm provided more than enough. Patrick bought a used tractor for the farm, although clearly it had seen its best years. His natural-born mechanical abilities kept a once broken-down tractor going. Tabitha watched as one child after another was born until there were nine in all.

Tabitha took in a deep breath. In front of her was the picture of her grandmother Ann Duff/Finley. Placing her right hand across her mouth, she said, “She’s so young, so pretty, and in peak health.”

The image faded and was replaced with a farmhouse filled with nine children. It took a minute, then she recognized Ann again, the oldest girl. She was on the back porch washing clothes. With a large family, everyone needed to do chores. Ann was using a wash tub that was loaded with clothes, water, and soap. The up-and-down hand motion was the agitation cycle. Tabitha watched her in amazement. Then Ann grabbed a shirt out of the tub, fed it into rollers atop the tub and cranked in a manner that fed the shirt in the front, squeezed the excess water out of it, then came out the back, sliding into a basket below.

Ann suddenly grabbed her left hand, shaking up and down in pain. Her finger was pinched again, which was a common hazard to doing laundry. Once the basket was full of clothes, she went out into the yard and over to the clothesline.

Ann Duff. A bright girl, filled with the joy of living life. She had her father's blue Irish eyes and her mother's thin figure and brown hair. Despite being poor, she made the best of it, sometimes for the younger children's sake. Patrick, her father, swore himself an oath that his children would have an education. He knew it would be a hardship.

Tabitha took notice. This was a directional change from prior generations. Patrick wanted a better life for his children that demanded a sacrificial price he was willing to pay. You can hear laughter echoing off the side of the barn. The children always figured out how to play while they did their chores. One day, no different than any other day, Dixie, the family pet, ran up on the porch. Patrick and the dog were inseparable. This set off a panic since Dixie never left his side. From sun up to sun down, she was with him. Ann screamed for her mother. Tabitha saw the concern on her face. The oldest boys were told to go check on their father. Dixie led them right to him, and they find their father face down in the dirt.

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New images came of Patrick's funeral. He had a heart attack and died at the young age of forty-six. Tabitha had heard the stories from her grandmother. Seeing them like this was an entirely different thing. Flashing images upon the walls showed how the family was forced to change. Family members moved in to help run the farm. It was now a blended, multifamily, multigeneration household. Ann quit high school to get a job, a common practice in 1914 when people fell on hard times. In America, things got so bad that children were sent to live with family while the parents hunted for work. At times years might go by before they came back for them. Despite Patrick's passing, they managed. There are now more mouths to feed, more beds in a room, more clothes to wash, and more bodies to share the work.

By the grace of God, the Duff family held on in the midst of their loss and made it through the flu pandemic when nearly two hundred thousand Americans lost their lives in three waves of illness. The world was at war in 1918. Many men went overseas to fight. It was a very difficult time for everyone. Ann, being the oldest child, carried the load, working a job and giving her pay envelope to her mother and got up early for chores and getting the youngun's ready for school. Tabitha watched. For years this was her grandmother's life. Then!

A letter arrived addressed to Ann Duff. She could hardly believe her eyes. By word of mouth, she was recommended for a job in Denison, Iowa. A wealthy family needed a nanny's assistant. After Ann's tearful goodbye, Tabitha watched as she saw her grandmother moving into the servants' quarters. For the first time in her life, she would have her own bedroom. Then the images swept across the estate.

"Pause, please," she asked. Then she said, "It looks like a farmgirl's paradise. From the farm to this new home cannot be compared. Not one building needed repair. It was obvious the house was perfect. There was money to spare."

The story moved on. Ann was introduced to Miss Carrie, the housekeeper, her new boss. A new and wonderful door opened for her, a twenty-two-year-old spinster.

Chapter Twelve

Guilt and joy. Ann displayed her joy when she was with others but guilt in her private times. Having a room to herself, a very nice room, aggravated her guilt. At home, on the farm, her eight siblings could not imagine the life she had stepped into, thus the feelings of guilt. Ann was a giver, thinking of others before herself. She was patient, having learned that the daily emotional highs and nightly lows moved into another day. But, in the darkened room of her mind, she always ran back to them. With a heart full of love, she had invested herself into her siblings. Being in a family of many and now alone living outside the family unit was a hard transition.

Tabitha could see the drain on her face during her alone times. But! In her new life, no need went unmet. In all aspects of life, there was more than enough. So many wonderful things surrounded her—huge items like a bed to herself, nice linen sheets, a closet for her clothes, and electric washing machines. And, then there was learning strict protocols of etiquette.

Miss Carrie had been the beloved nanny to the Edwards' family, the manufacturing barons of Denison, Iowa. Now in her later years, ailing in her health, Miss Carrie needed assistance both personally and with her duties. Ann was used to hard work. That would not be a problem. New to her surroundings, she was cautious. Since her father died, living with extended family meant tight quarters and walking on eggshells. Tempers ran high while working the farm, clothing and feeding thirteen mouths, and just scraping by. Ann's new income helped for it would be a windfall for the family. Personally, she would be missed, but her financial assistance was welcome. What she did not expect was Miss Carrie's extension of herself towards her. She had been lonely. Now needing help, somewhat dependent, a relationship began right from the get-go. Her heart opened and took Ann in.

It was so odd for Tabitha to watch her mother's mother moving throughout her day. Everything seemed so real. Right there, seeing her every move as if she were an invisible person, yet hearing and feeling her grandmother's life in real time. She looked away from the wall and onto her companion.

Because of the experience of being there with him in this life/lineage, her life's showing room, a new depth crept into her mind. *Who is he? I am experiencing everything as if I am living it. But how? Some of what I have seen and experienced took place hundreds of years ago.*

Looking at him, squeezing her eyelids in scrutiny, she gave him an examination, and she came up empty. Looking to the wall and back towards him, she drilled into his eyes but not for long. She felt feedback in her soul, and it scared her. For him to see into her soul was so uncomfortable, she had to look away.

Then she heard, "I am not bound by time." *Who can fathom a statement like that? Surely not a human mind* she thought to herself.

Looking back at the images on the wall, she heard Miss Carrie speaking. “Rule number one, do not go into the family’s living area unless called. Go beyond the kitchen, pantry, utility rooms, and our quarters only when work requires it. Rule number two, you are to be seen and not heard. In other words, no noise, loud speaking, or loud music, and heaven forbid, no whistling.” Ann waited for rule number three. Instead, she was told, “You will learn the rest as we go.”

“Miss Carrie, may I ask a question?”

“Yes, sweetie.” Miss Carrie was already using terms of endearment, kind soft words she was not used to.

“You said, no loud music. How would I do that? I do not have an instrument. And I do not sing.”

A broad smile came upon Miss Carrie’s face, and she said, “Well, radios. Ann, that would be from the radio. We have one in the kitchen and in your room as well.”

The country girl in Ann came out. She had heard about the radios but never had seen one.

Miss Carrie told her, “We start at six in the morning. Before leaving your room, make the bed, then come and make up mine. Then see me in the kitchen. Now get yourself acquainted here in the kitchen. Look at the menu for breakfast. Wipe down all the counters, then retire to your room.”

Flipping the light switch on, Ann closed the door and looked for the radio. It looked like a wooden jewelry box. The top did not open. On the front were two round dials. On the left, the outer collar had numbers engraved on it. The inner knob spun. The pointer lined up with a number to tune in a station. On the right was the volume control. Twisting it to the right, it clicked on. Ann heard noise until she rotated the left knob and brought in a station. From one station after another, she listened to music, radio dramas, and the evening news. It was late into the night when the station signed off. She set her alarm and climbed into bed as her mind reeled in hearing about the outside world beyond the farm.

The alarm was loud; she thought it could wake the dead. Jumping up, she got herself dressed and cleaned and ready to begin her first day. Crossing the hall, she made Miss Carrie's bed, noticed what she had in her room and her radio. Entering the kitchen, she got a smile and heard, “Let us get to work. First order of business, making the breakfast rolls. I will show you how to make everything. Take notice. I will expect you to be able to make breakfast, per the menu, by the end of the week.”

All day, it was Miss Carrie and her new shadow. They worked in two-hour segments for each meal. In between, Ann asked questions about what stations on the radio she listened to and at what time. Watching Miss Carrie, Ann learned how to prepare the meals and serve the family, and she helped clear away the dishes. For the most part, the family was Mr. and Mrs. Edwards. Their children were grown now but visited often. Ann was a quick study and took note of the tasks expected of her.

“Ann, dear,” Miss Carrie said. “Down in the basement is the laundry area. There is a clothes shoot, and below it is a basket of clothing. Sort the mister’s whites. Wash them first. I will show you how to starch and iron them.”

Step by step Ann learned how to run the house. Ten o’clock sharp, she made the beds upstairs. Now she understood why Miss Carrie needed help. The stairs were hard on her. A surprise arrived on Friday afternoon. Miss Carrie handed her a white envelope—her pay envelope.

“Ann, dear,” she said, “We get paid every two weeks, less our board.” Inside was ten dollars, more money than she had seen at one time. “Now, sweetie, tomorrow let’s walk to town so you can do some shopping,” she said to Ann’s delight.

Tabitha watched as her grandmother spent the day moving from store to store buying her working attire. She needed a simple dress, a white apron, ankle socks, and black shoes. Ann bought new underwear, socks, soap, and to spoil herself, skin lotion. Then she heard Miss Carrie say, “Ann, dear, let us go over to the hotel. I want to take you into the tea room.”

So, carrying her bags, they entered the front door. Off to the left was the main dining room. Unaccompanied women were not allowed in there. The Tea Room was the place designed for ladies to socialize.

Miss Carrie wanted Ann to be seen and introduced. She said, “Soon, Ann dear, you are going to need a proper hat.” Looking around she understood why she said this. Tabitha noticed all the women were finely dressed, wearing hats and white gloves. Ann wondered if she were being thrown to the sharks or on the verge of being welcomed by the female community.

Once Miss Carrie and Ann were seated, the images became a wrap-around view, a 360° of the tea room. Tabitha saw that the tables were covered in fine linen, and China cups with grand designs were at every table. She watched Miss Carrie hand Ann a menu, another first in Ann’s life. Ann read her menu, but knowing what she was reading was another thing. “Now Ann, honey, pick any items you want,” Miss Carrie said.

Ann looked. The priciest meal was 70 cents—nearly a day’s wage. Too embarrassed to ask what each item was, she knew what to expect with cold beef, so that is what she ordered. Ann glanced around, whispering to Miss Carrie all sorts of questions, not wanting to look like a duck out of water, which she was now. However, the instant she walked through the door, all the ladies knew. By day’s end, everyone would know of Miss Carrie’s new assistant. New gossip spreads as fast as fire. When the clock on the wall chimed three times, Miss Carrie gasped. “We need to hustle our bustle, young lady, if we are going to feed the Edwards on time. *What is a bustle?* Ann thought.

Chapter Thirteen

It was a rag-to-riches story, even if it were not Ann's riches she was enjoying. It started with her twenty-some years of living at home where life was a constant struggle. She wore hand-me-down clothing most of her life, but now she had all new clothes and modern fashions. Trying on a new dress, she allowed herself a girlish twirl as she watched in the mirror. She felt pretty. From the once very negative atmosphere on the farm, she came into an affirming life with Miss Carrie. Of course, it did not hurt living a life Miss Carrie enjoyed encouraging. With the introduction to the radio, the world opened to Ann.

Tabitha watched intently. Then she asked, "Can you show me more of her life?" meaning her grandmother's.

The images on the walls built a portrait of Ann's living in Denison. Twice a month, Tabitha watched as Ann walked to the post office, sending half of her income home to her mother. On the day represented, Ann went into the shoe store weighing the purchase carefully. She picked out a comfortable pair of shoes, which must have leather soles. She cannot believe she was doing this and carrying out a plan. Friendships formed in the Tea Room have given her the courage she needed. The older women contrived it. Grouping their daughters together, forming a troupe, they walked through another door, changing Ann's life yet again.

It was the roaring twenties, and dance halls were popping up across America. Tabitha watched the four young women approach a long narrow building, not much to look at from the outside.

"You go first," they all said to Ann.

"Why not?" she told them. Lifting her head up like she owned the world, she led them in. Tabitha could not believe her boldness, but it should not have surprised her. Time and time again, Grandma Finley mentored her in life. Tabitha blushed, just a bit, seeing her grandmother's boldness of entering a new phase with men.

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The images on the wall moved to wrap-around mode. Tabitha could see the entire room. The music was lively, upbeat, and fast. Yes, Ann is like a fish out of water. Does it hold her back? No! There were not enough men to go around. The girls paired off and went out onto the dance floor. Ann immediately understood why they told her she would need leather soled shoes. With them, she could pivot on a dime. They cost her a month's pay and were worth every penny. The most expensive item she had ever bought, they enabled her to glide on the hardwood surface. It was awkward at first. No one knew how to dance, but they were not deterred. Watching others, they picked it up quickly. Laughter filled the air. What an escape from life! Inside the dance hall, life was suspended. She was in the moment, moving to music and the inner joy it held. By night's end, Ann knew this was meant to be. Really. She was born to dance!

Exhausted, filled with the love of life, Ann quietly crept through the servant's door, and threw herself onto the bed. Never in her wildest dreams would she have dreamed this life for herself. Morning came early. Once in the kitchen with Miss Carrie, she talked a mile a minute. The older woman was living vicariously through Ann and loving it. It was giving her a new purpose to live, invigorating her. True to form, Miss Carrie warned her it must not interfere with her duties to the Edwards. Her tone set it deep into Ann's mind to never violate her trust.

Each week Ann told Miss Carrie about the new dances she had learned. Tabitha moved closer to the wall, hanging on every word. The Charleston topped the list. Other dances Tabitha had never heard about, Ann described as being the Fox Trot, the Texas Tommy, the new rage, and the Black Bottom filled the air, and Ann even gave demonstrations, nearly violating rule number two. To their enjoyment, Ann's dancing became a way of life. Tabitha watched her grandmother having the time of her life, gathering social skills that she wished she had learned. Seeing her grandmother in her prime did bring tears to her eyes.

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Then there was a time jump of several years. Tabitha turned her head towards the side wall and saw a smoke-filled sky off in the distance. Focusing on it, the image zoomed in. It was the barn back on the farm, engulfed in flames. Panic set in her heart, fearing someone was hurt. When tragedy strikes, human beings want to place the blame on someone. Eventually everyone in the family was ruled out, and blame was assigned to the nearby railroad, but it was unprovable. Yet in their minds, they had witnessed it before, with sparks flying out of the steam engine's smoke stack. That must have been the cause.

Tabitha watched her Great-grandmother Margaret's reaction. It was the breaking point for her. She had invested her life into a farm she did not own. Fits of tears spontaneously erupted, and she was inconsolable. Looking fully into life's window, she felt regret. She made her decision only because most of the children had left home. Margaret made the move to Denison to be closer to her successful daughter, Ann.

Immediately Tabitha wondered, *What this will do to my grandmother's picturesque life?* Margaret and the boys moved to the edge of town, renting an apartment above a store. With Ann's money, they had a foothold, and by the grace of God, the boys got jobs. No additional burdens were placed on Ann. However, Ann's life and exposure to new things quickly spread to the rest of her siblings. It seemed to Tabitha that they all had talent in dance!

Ann was seated on the edge of her bed. Living in the Edwards' home had brought her new reflections on her family life on the farm. Yeah, there were times of ugliness on the farm, but there was nothing she could do about them. Tears rolled down Ann's face. In her mind, she saw her mother's bruised face and the hardships she had endured but kept them inside for the sake of the children. How memories seem to favor the fun times when dark realities are lived as well! She forged a mindset. Welling up within her she said to herself, *By golly, that is not my life any longer. I will not let it creep back.* As a result, she erected an emotional barrier to her family now that they were in Denison.

America was in its heyday. With this renewed relationship with her mother, Ann shared all the news. The front pages of the Denison paper read, “Women gain the right to vote,” which was heralded by all the ladies in the Tea Room. Like a wild fire, news of the Wall Street bombing seared the minds of Americans. Jobs soared for the working class. Prohibition swept the country, and a new market was born—the black market and bootleggers. Dance halls appeared nationwide, and the Big Band made its debut. Sin and shame reared its ugly head time after time.

Amid all this, Margaret hit her life’s reevaluation phase. Regrets sometimes fill the hearts of people in their older years. All the hard work, all the sacrifices Margaret had made in her life, and yet she saw how her children were following a life of sin and shame, except, that is, for Ann. She saw the positives in that her children had gotten an education, most of them had jobs, and sharecropping was in the past. Poverty came to an end in their family. It was the relationship destruction that carried on that was breaking Margaret’s heart.

Was it gossip Tabitha was hearing? Or was it truth? She was watching the women talk as she was trying to figure it out. What brought fun and joy to her grandmother’s life wound up bringing bondage and shame to her aunts and uncles. They visited the same dance halls. Ann steered clear of trouble that could always be found if you were looking for it. It was the women who had to have shotgun weddings, if they could get the men to marry them. Ragtime men boasted of their conquests of getting naive women pregnant and not caring. Despite prohibition, a common problem was alcoholism. It hit many in Ann’s family.

“Wait, pause, please,” Tabitha said.

Pacing the room, deep in thought, Tabitha examined the repeating cycle that had become so obvious she could no longer deny it. In her mind, Tabitha concluded it was not about ethics. No, it seemed to be based on a lack of morality. Was it because they had a sheltered life and were now living without the foundation of the church values they grew up with? Have they now thrown caution to the wind, living wild and carefree and furthering hardships that were avoidable? Is that why these years were called the Roaring Twenties? Prohibition seemed right in the eyes of a nation. Did it backfire? Questions and more questions filled her mind that she could not answer.

“Resume, please,” Tabitha finally said.

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A jump was made to late 1927. A good male friend of Ann’s generously offered to let her use his car. Tabitha watched as Ann brought her finger up and tapped it against her chin. She was thinking, thinking big. Rumor had it that a new dance hall was in Council Bluff, Iowa. It was billed as a dry hall, meaning no alcohol. But everyone knew, dance halls and booze were synonymous.

The building was brand new, built to train young men and women for gymnastics. On the weekends it was transformed into a dance hall, bringing in a quick cash flow. Chairs lined the walls. Ann saw that the women outnumbered the men once again. Music echoed against the hard surfaces, the beating drums thumping through their bodies. The whine of the clarinet sang its way through the song. Restraining herself before trying out the beautiful hardwood floor, Ann looked

to the opposite side, eyeing up the guys. They looked different—a bit more sophisticated. For Ann, it was her first time at Council Bluff. Right across the Missouri River was Omaha, Nebraska, a big city.

The girls huddled, glancing over at the other side and hoping to be asked to dance. Experience had taught them it was probably not going to happen so they just needed to get on the dance floor together. “Come on, girls,” one of them shouted, “the music is being wasted.” Skirts were flinging, smiles were flashing, and men were watching.

During the band’s break, several guys walked over. One of them said, “Hey baby” only to get a scornful glance. Quickly he saw that approach was not going to work. Another guy said, “How did you girls learn to dance like you are on fire?” Lively conversation began to flow. They asked questions like, what were their favorite dances and which halls they had been to. As they chatted, pairing took place through eye contact.

“It is the Doll Dance. Who doesn’t love a good Fox Trot?” one of the guys shouted.

The band was back, and quickly the floor filled. Ann felt her hand being grabbed and pulled towards the floor. If it were the right guy, she could be swept off her feet. The one, the chemistry man, was never too far away in her thoughts. Guy after guy wanted her to dance. Eight strangers became friends. No one wanted the night to end. Then came the Cinderella paradox—it was time to leave. They had a half hour ride back to Denison.

The attractions, the flirtation, and the chemistry had its grip on Ann. She was drawn to one of the men. Introductions were not Ann’s thing. Guys came and went in these dance halls. Their names were shared, never to be remembered. She felt she must learn his name. When they danced together, there was fire. The timing was perfect. He always knew where she was, reaching for her, swinging her, and matching her step for step. It was exhilarating. They danced as one, and she liked it. Reaching for a last gasp of the night, she asked him his name.

He said, “Conor, Conor Finley.”

Tabitha stood up straight and said, “Oh my God. It is him.”

Chapter 14

Tabitha was interested in what was happening. The walls were alive with a New Year's Eve bash. It was the last day of 1928, Conor and Ann's first year's end celebration together. Denison's new speakeasy, small in scale compared to other locations throughout the country, was alive tonight. It was arranged for them to meet inside the club. Money was tight. If they met inside, the guy only had to pay his way in, a common practice of the day. Ann watched the door for him. He was driving in from Omaha. Ann had on her New Year's Eve tiara, beads around her neck, and a new dress. Even her hair was perfect. Then her eyes brightened—he was at the door.

She rushed to meet him, and they had a warm embrace. She had waited for it, longed for it, and gave him a quick kiss on the lips. She had missed him. Then grabbing his hand, she pulled him over to the tables already filled with their friends. Almost before he could get his hat and coat off, she pulled him by the hand and onto the dance floor. Tabitha watched this new transition. Ann was so comfortable around Conor. With each turn and each spin, they made eye contact. You could see it; everyone could see it. Love.

The pinnacle of the night was reached. The countdown began. The crowd joined in with each number. "Four, Three, Two, One, Happy New Year..." The room went up in a roar. It was 1929. Everyone sang a round of "Auld Lang Syne," swaying together. The dance floor was full. Right after the last word was sung, Conor drew Ann close, body to body. Moving his mouth near her ear to make sure she heard him, he said, "Ann, will you marry me." Immediately she said YES! She wrapped her arms around his neck. Their first kiss in the New Year was their first kiss as an engaged couple.

It was magical for Tabitha to be caught up in seeing their love. Tabitha could not believe being able to witness it. Another, "How can this be?" look was directed at her companion.

Conor Finley and Ann Duff were riding high in life. Filled with love, they were planning their future, and all looked well. They both had jobs. Conor, like his father, now worked for Omaha Municipal Power. It was not always that way. Connor's father had humble beginnings in the stockyards. His family's destiny changed when his dad landed a new job. Rising above the poverty life to entering what they called, the middle class.

Miss Carrie cried when she heard the news of the engagement. She was very happy for Ann and sad at the same time because they had become very close. Really, Miss Carrie and the Edwards had changed Ann's life for the better. The deep and sad family cycle of poverty had been broken.

Ann and Conor were shielded from the rest of the nation in their small-town lives. They were almost unaware of newspaper headlines of the St. Valentine's Day massacre in Chicago even though it was the top news story for weeks. The modern marvel of a seven-mile toll bridge in the San Francisco Bay changed commerce in California but not for them. They were unaware of the big news for Catholics that the Vatican became its own country. For them, uppermost in their lives was the serious planning for their wedding that was underway. All important? Setting the date.

The day would be July 4^t, 1929, a national holiday, which fell on a Thursday. With taking just one day off work, they could have a four-day weekend.

In a surprise move, the Edwards had their seamstress make Ann's wedding gown. Discussions with Margret caused some tension. Her idea of a humble, modest wedding crept up and tainted Ann's plans. A shared spotlight with Miss Carrie did not sit well with Margret, but she had no choice. The plan coalesced into a two-event day—an early morning exchange of vows in Omaha and then a train ride to Denison for a celebration meal.

Life in America had been very good since the end of the Great War. No one took notice in March when the stock market had a serious dip and then recovered. Financial leveraging had no meaning to them now.

Tabitha watched her Finley grandparents. Tabitha was overjoyed to see all these events as if she were there. Her mind wandered back to why all this was happening.

The organ at St. Mary Magdalene's church played the wedding march, and the music filled the church and spilled out into the Little Italy community. Tabitha's eyes filled with tears. Her grandmother was beautiful on her wedding day. Conor and Ann stood before the priest. During their family's history, there had never been a marriage ceremony of this elegance. Two lives that were once separate were now joined together. The priest announced to those in the church, "I give you Mr. and Mrs. Finley!" Applause erupted. A receiving line was held in the foyer as people greeted them as a married couple.

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There was a jump. Tabitha saw them on the train. Ann insisted on them being seated on the right side of the car. There was no space between them from the moment they were joined at the hip. As they neared Denison station, Ann started pointing out the window. She said, "Conor, do you see that house and barn? That is where I grew up. My daddy died there. He worked himself to death." Tears filled Ann's eyes. Continuing she said, "When the old barn caught on fire, that is when my mom moved into Denison. Conor, I cannot believe that was my life. When I got the job working for the Edwards, my life changed. I never believed I would meet someone like you."

As they pulled into Denison, a crowd met them at the station. It was a whirlwind day. It was a new beginning for them. In a way, it was a collision of families and pasts. It became apparent during the meal. Ann's life was so different from her siblings. She loved them but was no longer like them. The hardest part for Ann was leaving Miss Carrie and the Edwards. How could she ever thank them for what they brought into her life? It was the best of times.

Everyone hopes for a roof over their heads, food on the table, and clothes to wear. Conor and Ann began to build a life together, but all of those hopes came into jeopardy on Black Friday, October 28, 1929 when the stock market fell thirteen percent, and fortunes were lost. The following Monday the stock market fell another twelve percent. Financial ruin hit many people. Fear and uncertainty ran rampant across America. It was like dominos falling one right after another. Tabitha watched as her grandparents weathered one storm at a time.

In the beginning of their married life, Sixteenth Street and Douglas was the thriving area of downtown Omaha. Ann and Conor found a small apartment for a song just a few blocks from there.

Walking north, just past Douglas, on the east side, a large sign hung off the front of the building. It had one word on it—Dance. Many a Saturday night they visited there. Ann found employment at a nearby Harding Ice Cream Parlor. She had met the owner in the dance studio. Things were going very well for them but not for everyone.

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The walls darkened as if there was a setting sun. Tabitha was confused, not knowing what to make of it until she saw the cause. It was one of those things in life with which you have no prior experience. You cannot foresee it coming. It began when a severe dust storm hit Omaha after the greater western plains had been hit with a drought. It was so bad that the strong winds carried off the topsoil. It was recorded that one storm traveled so far as to hit Washington DC. Farms failed; jobs were lost by hundreds of thousands of Americans.

Conor and Ann, however, continued to do well. Sadly, not all their families did as well. Conor's uncles split a job at a John Deere factory as their two families tried to survive on one wage. Even though the Stockyards are going strong, there are more people looking for work than there were jobs. The reality in life was that people had to work hard and long hours to keep their jobs. The advent of the great depression was spreading across America. One-third of the work force had no job.

New words become commonplace—Shantytowns, the Dust Bowl, and soup kitchens were the hard facts of life. South of the Yards, transient families built homes while they looked for work. A shanty was a crudely built shack. Pieces of wood and thrown-out doors were used as part of the walls. Sometimes a window was found and used to help build a one-room temporary home. All of people's worldly possessions fit in them. To live or die depended upon having a job.

Tabitha saw just how blessed her grandparents were. As with other discoveries in this room, the information of her lineage impacted her.

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A timeline jump occurred yet again. In December of 1933, there was devastating news. Ann had a large tumor in her stomach, sitting low in her abdomen, and was continually growing. Family members were told about it, and it was strongly suggested they visit Ann now. However, happily in January it was discovered it was not a tumor at all but a pregnancy. Because doctors had once told them that Ann could never get pregnant, the logical assumption had been that the growth was a cancerous tumor. It was totally a surprise and a great relief. Nessa Finley—the miracle baby—was born in February.

Tabitha yelled, "Wait-wait-wait." Now she was confounded. She looked at her companion and asked, "Are you showing me that my grandmother had a hard time conceiving my mother?"

“Yes”

“But you already showed me the difficulties my parents had in conceiving me.” She went on to say, “Is it the reason my mother was an only child?”

“Yes.”

She was hoping he would contribute more information, but he remained quiet.

Immediately, in Tabitha’s mind she realized this cycle did not happen in her life.

Chapter 15

“Zoom in,” Tabitha said. She wanted to see everything about this beautiful baby girl. There was a little dusting of brown hair on her head. She had pink skin, blue eyes, and all her fingers and toes. Nessa Finley came into the world in the usual way, with pain and labor.

Looking at the faces of this new mother and father, Tabitha could see their wonder and love. Off to the side wall, images of the nursery showed the proud Finley grandparents. Ann’s mother would be arriving by train the next day. It would be Margaret’s longest trip away from Denison and the farm since she arrived there at the age of ten. Making the trip to see her firstborn’s firstborn. It would be her fourth grandchild.

Tabitha listened in on Conor and Ann making plans for their daughter. A shift was taking place. Ann, once a child, then an adult, had just become a parent. Her maternal instincts emerged.

Ann said, “Conor, we need a home near a good church.”

Of course, he was wondering where this came from. Tabitha thought the expression on his face said a thousand words, and depicted his amazement as to how his wife had jumped to this idea. Right now, with his love for her, he would do anything. The Edwards and Miss Carrie were her inspiration. It was their lives of faith that Ann wanted to emulate and make sure that God was at the center of her family.

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A new jump took them into the apartment. It was the fourth of them for while Margaret was in town, she stayed with them. She found city life a bit intense with cars roaring up and down 16th street at all hours of the day and night. And the number of people in the shops and working in the office buildings was overwhelming for her.

“Like ant hills on the farm, coming and going all day long,” she said. It was a culture shock for Margaret.

Where once there were only two, now there were four. Ann felt squeezed. Add to that, the remembered feelings of living on the farm crept into her emotions, and she did not like it. Having her mother there, helping with the baby, was wonderful. But their lives were worlds apart. Margaret felt bites of jealousy. Having her own babies years earlier while working the farm had meant there were always things that needed to be done. Now, however, Conor had a very good job. The only thing needed was to take care of baby Nessa, so Margaret kept busy doing this and that. Was it nerves? Old habits? Or slipping into taking care of her little girl? Regardless, she felt renewed with a sense of purpose. She also envied her daughter's lack of demands on her life.

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The walls came alive in the dancing studio. Conor and Ann were taking advantage of a babysitter before Margaret returned home. Their transition from being a couple to now being parents was a subtle change, but Tabitha could see it. What would have been dancing until the last minute before closing, now ended early so they could return to the baby and mom. Dancing still felt good; it was what had brought them together and once was their center. But they were distracted now. Life did not revolve around just being in the moment dancing; they had a new center of life, Nessa. They left early because Ann needed to get back to her little girl.

The new parents hunted for a new place to live. Neighborhood after neighborhood, weekend after weekend, the hunt went on until they looked directly west from their present location. One mile to the west, on 28th street was a modest house that became their new home. Tabitha watched as Ann dreamed and visualized to see all the possibilities. Yes. She could make this a home. The selling point was living in the midst of a broad Catholic Community, besides having a collegiate and affluent feel there. Creighton University and St. John's Parish were just blocks to the east. It brought Ann reminiscent feelings to living with the Edwards—safe and comfortable.

Tabitha watched them take a backward step. The financial prosperity in this area brought about the building of St. John's Church. It was a big event. Four thousand people came to see the cornerstone being laid in 1888. The prestigious architect P. J. Creedon undertook the project. His design was based on an English Gothic Cathedral. It seemed like money was no object. They used the best tradesmen and materials. The high ceilings, marble floors, and ornate altar areas were beautiful. The pipe organ was installed in the balcony. The atmosphere during the Mass was paramount. The priest chanted, his words echoing towards the back. The organ's deeply spiritual music resonated in the souls of the parishioners. Sixty years later, the church was just as beautiful as the day it was finished. Living in this area, Ann wanted to leave the farm girl behind forever. She would make sure her baby would live the best life they could provide and give her a bright future.

Once they were settled in, a very comfortable routine befell them, except for church. Ann attended it without Conor. In her upbringing, there were always tensions, anger, and arguments. So, for Conor to spout off or make a fuss were acceptable traits. Compared to how she grew up, he was nearly saint material. All the men in her life were quick-tempered Irishmen and prone to violence after a Guinness or two. Ann moved on from that type of life.

The images on the walls became influenced by current events. Poverty soon increased as did food lines, shantytowns, dust storms, and the endless men looking for work. It was the haunting eyes of the children and the skin and bones of their mothers that drove Tabitha to tears. And yet! Her grandparents lived in a bubble. Life was good, and Ann was grateful and strove to live for God, which was a good decision. She had much to be grateful for during the Great Depression.

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“Oh, wait. Slow it down, please,” Tabitha said.

She was watching a little girl bounce off to school. Another first. Ann and Nessa were walking hand in hand. At the age of four, Nessa started a Catholic education at the hands of the Mercy Sisters. Dedicated nuns would be teaching and guiding the children in their care. Nessa, so small, so innocent, entered the doors into a world none of her family had ever experienced. It could be said for Conor as well. If not for his father landing a job in the Omaha Municipal Power Company, he may have had to find a job in the Yards as a laborer. Both of them have had a move up in their social level, even during a time when one-third of the country was in the Great Depression.

This idea dawned on Tabitha, as Ann's little girl entered school. The steps her grandparents had taken set a foundation for her life. St. John's Parish was the center of community life, a safe place to raise children. Nessa was learning about Jesus in school and during the Mass.

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The image on the wall changed. Ann and Nessa were now at St. John's for Sunday Mass wearing their best clothes.

Tabitha asked, "Can we be there? You know, like being right with them?"

Her companion said, "Yes," and with that, the walls expanded, and they were encompassed by the church. Tabitha smelled the beeswax candles, heard the pipe organ, and saw the priest and altar boys performing their parts. It was tradition for Ann and Nessa to hear the Mass said in Latin. Little Nessa repeated the words she did not understand.

Tabitha made a full turn around the room to take in all the sights and sounds of St. John's. She was impacted because it felt deeply spiritual. The church was beautiful, and everything was centered around worshipping Jesus. She watched how Nessa knelt during the consecration, her little hands together just like her mommy's—a breathtaking image. Her mind raced back to seeing Agatha Winslow kneeling in prayer for her future generation to know and serve the Lord. Here, mother and child were spending time celebrating the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

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Tabitha's surroundings suddenly collapsed back into the room. She felt a shaking and a vibration. A newspaper headline appeared on the front wall: Japan Attacks Pearl Harbor!

Images fast forward on all the walls. She watched her grandparents' life being shaken. She saw them using rationing coupon books. Food, gasoline, tires, and more were now bought only through having a coupon. Nessa had so wanted a bicycle on her birthday since all the neighborhood children had them. Now there was no available steel to build bikes, so she would have to wait.

Regardless of the world being at war, Ann praised God that her little girl could be free to have fun. When it rained and poured, Nessa and her friends got their bathing suits on and headed for the gutter. One of the benefits of living on a hill? Omaha was riddled with sweeping hills cascading down towards the Missouri River. With all the concrete sidewalks and paved roads, the water had nowhere to go but down. In the gutters, the rainwater ran over them in a torrent. Splashes,

laughs, and giggles filled the air. In a time where everything was in short supply during the war, there was an ample amount of fun. Gales of laughter filled the air as they enjoyed simple pleasures despite the difficult times.

Even though Tabitha's grandfather continued to work, life was changed. On the cusp of the nation recovering from the Great Depression, now they were at war. Sacrifices were being required, and Conor and Ann experienced some of them. Ann had to battle her childhood memories as the lack of goods felt to her like living in poverty again. It only made her more determined that Nessa would never have to see that side of her family history.

At this point, Conor would not be drafted. But Tabitha saw how work for him became more demanding. The trained workers were now going off to war so he needed to fill in and train up young men and women by working longer hours. Strain, fear, and sacrifice became part of their daily lives. St. John's was now doing several Masses on Sunday, and attendance was up for the daily morning Mass as well. People were seeking God, praying for the soldiers and for national protection. Ann praised God because for the most part, the Finley's life stayed the same. Often, Conor, Ann, and Nessa, huddled around the radio listening to the news. On Sundays they would go to Conor's parents' house for a meal. Grandpa Seamus would tell Nessa to warm up the Motorola, and her little legs would run into the living room up to the console and turn the knob just so it clicks on. Then they would all gather around the radio, hoping the best, fearing the worst.

Both Conor and his father volunteered for civil defense, feeling it was their civic duty. They took part in the Utility Repairmen division and practiced emergency repairs. Blackout drills became mandatory across the nation. Once the siren went off, no visible light was allowed to be seen outside. If enemy aircraft were to fly overhead, the light would become a beacon so heavy black curtains were placed over every window. The Finley men walked the streets in their neighborhoods during the air raid drills to see that their community was compliant.

The threat, however, came from balloons, not planes. In 1944, Japan attached bombs to balloons. The upper winds carried them across the Pacific and over American soil. The war reached home in February 2, 1945. Just one hundred and fifty miles from their home in Omaha a bomb reached Laurens, Iowa, but it did not explode.

Again, Tabitha watched VJ Day with the Finley's, and a celebration was held throughout the parish. Masses were taking place to thank God. Ann was kneeling in one of the front pews when a rare moment of clarity enveloped her. One thing Ann had come to know was the fickle fate of life and the provincial hand of God. Humbly Ann understood she could not take credit for her position in life. The goodness of God overwhelmed her as she wept.

Tabitha was watching Ann and wondered. She asked her companion, "Do you know what is happening here?"

"Yes. Your grandmother has witnessed women getting to vote. Now she has seen them enter the workforce across the land for the war effort. A status change has taken place, and Ann saw it. Women do not need to stay trapped in loveless, abusive marriages like her mother did. She

saw with the help of God and a good education, they could work and take care of themselves if need be.”

An image flashed on the front wall. Ann and Nessa were seated at the kitchen table playing a game. Nessa was ten, the age Ann was when they moved on the farm. It was a different time then. Ann reached over and brushed her hand on Nessa’s cheek, pushing back her hair. In her heart, if she had anything to say about it, Nessa would get an education, and if needed, be able to take care of herself. It was a new day for women.

Chapter Sixteen

Each day Sister Rose Mary greeted numerous children as they entered school. Passing through the portal of learning, Sister smiled, waved to the parents, and guided the children with her all-seeing eyes. Order and procedures were strictly adhered to. Often you would hear her shush some of them, saying, “Be quiet, please.” The children lined the hallway waiting for the bell to ring and their classroom door to be opened. Sister was a formidable force to be reckoned with. Standing in her black habit and veil, the pure white stiff headdress, plus the cincture tied around her waist, she was gentle and strict. Tabitha watched as her mother thrived in this safe, religious environment. Attending this school, surrounded by St. John’s Church and Creighton University, she was in a spiritual island in the city of Omaha. Occasionally, when Sister was in the mood, she would talk against the wiles of the world and the saloons down by the Yards. She would ever be warning the children to steer clear of alcohol, the work of the devil. Then she admonished them towards the ministry—to enter the priesthood or become a nun—and live pure and holy lives.

On the front wall, time-stamped pictures advanced. Each image represented a year. There, standing in the school hallway, Tabitha watched her mother age. It was too swift. Tabitha asked for the images to be slowed down, not wanting to miss a thing. What became evident was that Nessa had a stable life. As she grew, her hairstyle changed, and its color darkened over time. Her facial features matured. Occasionally there were additional images like when she had her first communion and her confirmation. Then there was her graduation from elementary school, and her body filled out. The dress code changed in high school, and it was very modest as shown in the images. Watching Nessa growing up brought a sweet smile on Tabitha’s face.

When Nessa became a junior, Ann took on a new role—preparing her mentally to enter college. She was going against social norms. Men still dominated the universities. Most women did not enter higher education. If they did, it was often thought to be taking jobs from men. There were three main categories for women in college—nurses, secretaries, and teachers. Ann and Nessa had many conversations about what direction she would choose. Most teachers were in the public schools. Secretaries worked in a worldly environment. Omaha had many Catholic hospitals, and Nessa felt drawn to nursing. Ann knew her daughter. Nessa was easygoing and strong-willed. She showed good common sense and made mature decisions—helpful skill sets when working with people.

To foster Nessa’s independence, Ann would send her downtown on a shopping spree. Her favorite stores were Kilpatrick’s and Goldstein’s department stores. When the hunt was on to find a new dress for Easter or another occasion, she shopped frugally, passing by the extravagant and high-priced clothes. She had the savvy to know if she found two or maybe three cute dresses at a decent price, Mom would be okay with it. As Tabitha watched her mother shopping, she would periodically look over at her companion, right arm across her chest, left hand over her mouth, brandishing a hidden smile.

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Unexpectedly the images on the wall changed. Really changed. A montage of people ran past her quickly. It was easy to see what was happening. Ann's nieces and nephews' lives were a mess with many relationship failures. Some were living in shantytowns. Why? Ann felt it was because of bad, godless choices, and she chose to not tell Nessa about them.

Now, the front wall showed that a letter came in the mail addressed to Nessa. When Ann saw the letter and held it in her hand, a strong flashback hit her. She had received a letter that changed her life. Now she was holding a letter that would change her daughter's. Ann did not open it but waited until after dinner. She and Conor looked like the Cheshire Cat in one of Nessa's favorite books, *Alice in Wonderland*. They handed her the envelope with the return address from St. Catherine's College. Nessa tore into it, her hands shaking, and read out loud, "Congratulations! It is our great joy, here at St. Catherine's School of Nursing, that you, Nessa Finley, have been accepted." Nessa pushed her chair back and jumped up and down in excitement. Ann hugged her hard, Conor smiled and got up to give her a kiss on the forehead. It was another first for Nessa—the first person in her family to go to college.

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A jump was made to Nessa's Orientation Day at St. Catherine's. The head nun, Sister Kevin, was serious and did not tolerate nonsense, which she said during her presentation. "Rules are rules. Violate the rules, and you are gone." She made it abundantly clear, and she scared Nessa. Sr. Kevin paused for effect, then said, "Academics are set high. Your work ethic must be high as well if you are going to succeed in graduating from our school." Nessa knew she could not fail. It would devastate her parents.

Classes were slated to be on two different campuses. Math, biology, and other classes were over at Creighton University, and the Nursing studies would be held at St. Catherine's. Two things were very clear from the get-go. This was not high school anymore. The teachers threw twice as much information at them, and completing after-school studies was paramount in keeping up.

The world opened to Nessa. The fun-loving, wild side that Nessa showed from time to time, was now under the thumb of Sr. Kevin. Attending St. Catherine's was expensive, an investment in her life. She could not afford to fail or let her parents down.

In most cases, the continuity with the images kept the people's identity clearly obvious. But Tabitha suddenly asked, "Who is that woman standing next to my mother?"

"Betty. She was your mother's best friend," her companion said.

Tabitha came to learn of their friendship that had been forged during the first two years of college. Because of the girls' focus on gaining a nursing degree, their hormones were put on hold. However, in their junior year of college, their discretion was weakened. Betty finally got Nessa to agree to a blind date. All did not go as planned.

It was a bash on St. Patrick's Day in Omaha. One-quarter of the population was Irish. However, on this day, everyone was Irish. It was a big deal, and Nessa was already, dressed to impress. Henri and his pal Steve were both attending the University of Nebraska on the GI Bill.

As part of this legislation, the students received checks with spending money that was expected to arrive on the fifteenth of each month. It was late this month. They held out until the last minute, hoping the check would arrive, but it did not. They had no gas money, so Omaha might as well have been a million miles away even though it was only sixty. The call was made; Nessa was stood up. *Well at least he had an excuse—a real one*, she thought. When it came to dating, the sisters had strict protocols. The fear of God was instilled in all the girls. Knowing that has been a deterrent. A second date was arranged, and because it would be late evening, it would simply be a quick ride for ice cream. All went well; no rules were violated, and curfews were upheld. Nessa felt the obvious chemistry and liked it. Nessa and Betty talked about it well into the night, regretting it in the morning when they had to attend their early classes.

Tabitha looked on, watching her mother's sweet and sheltered innocence and her father's worldly experience as he was an older man, traveled and educated. There was something Nessa was drawn to, yet to be understood. The talk of a non-proper date got her excitement juices going. It was the first time Nessa was defiantly breaking the rules. Dressed in jeans and a blouse, she had to roll up the jeans, hidden by her coat, to have it appear she was wearing a dress and going out to dinner. A ruse was in play, and the guys had it all perfectly planned. They brought beer and food to a beach on a nearby lake. One minor detail was that it was on private property, which was known by all the young people. Nessa and Betty found it enthralling. The atmosphere was intoxicating even without the beer. Sister Kevin was out of sight, out of mind. The restraints of living with the Mercy Sisters were willfully being suspended, and caution was thrown to the wind. The guys lit a small fire on the beach. Romance was in the air.

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The scene changed, and Tabitha looked at her companion with questioning eyes. There on the surrounding walls were images of the inside of a home she did not recognize. In the room with Tabitha and her companion, a man appeared as if summoned, and now there were three. It was just like what happened with Harry Winslow. The wall nearest the man turned to liquid. He stepped through and was in the house. Contrary to before, when Grandfather Winslow talked with him on the road, this time he was invisible to the homeowner. He walked over to the man, placed his hand upon the shoulder, and raised his face towards the ceiling. Suddenly, the homeowner looked out the window, grabbed the binoculars, and saw a red glow off in the distance. He became angry.

Tabitha heard him mumble to himself, "Those darn kids." He went to the phone on the wall, dialed a number from memory, and waited. Intently listening in, she heard him say, "Sheriff, I have trespassers." She realized that an intervention just took place—a divine appointment.

Tabitha asked, "Why?"

Her companion only looked towards the wall. Rebellion was having its sweet rewards. It was Nessa's first male-female interaction, and she was loving it. When infatuation is in the air, time flies.

Conversation filled the air and time passed until terror grabbed Nessa and Betty's hearts. Flashing lights from the sheriff's car told of his approach. At all costs, it could not be known that alcohol was involved. It was bad enough to be trespassing, but beer was the end all. Frantic, the girls dug a hole in the sand, and the bottles of beer, full or empty, went into it.

Now it was all about damage control. Sweet rebellion had turned into terrifying fear. Tabitha watched her parents, horrified that things could go wrong. But she knew things would work out, despite the fact that she had never heard this story from her mother or father. Steve and Henri connect with the sheriff's soft spot—military service. The sheriff gave them a wink and a stern warning, telling them to leave the property.

Driving away, everyone was laughing at their near miss. But the girls knew, they still had to get past Sr. Kevin. As officers at basic training were to Henri, Sr. Kevin was to Nessa. It was one of those nights with blooming love that ended too early. Reaching down, Betty and Nessa rolled up their jeans. Nessa gave Henri a quick kiss and got out of the car. She was wobbly.

Betty said, "Nessa Finley, girl, you only had two beers, and you can't walk straight." They locked arms and walked up to the door. In the parlor, off to the right, Sr. Kevin was watching. They waved to her as they went to their room. Once inside Betty burst into laughter, and Nessa shushed her out of fear, saying, "That nun can hear through walls, Betty." The question did arise. The girls asked themselves if it was worth risking it all. They loved the bad boy excitement, but Nessa was sick to her stomach. Just thinking of being sent home was terrifying. It was wonderfully fun, but they agreed that this was their first and last time pushing past the rules. This decision might have something to do with them coming in ten minutes before curfew started.

Someone was shouting in the dorm hallway. Nessa was called to the payphone across from the parlor. It was Henri. Everyone who heard her tone and saw her body language could tell Nessa liked this guy. For Henri, she was the first woman he ever talked to. He let her into his protected life and was the most vulnerable ever. First, they talked about his classes, and then Nessa spoke coded words about their beach time, glancing over to see if the nun was taking notice. Henri continued talking about his major and his being a future provider. His ultimate goal was a degree in electrical engineering. If it were not for the GI Bill, college would not be possible for him, a perk of being in the military. He was the first in his family to have a higher education, something they both had in common. He told Nessa all about how the Navy brought out his learning abilities and opened all sorts of possibilities for him, although he did leave out the drinking, fighting, and gambling part.

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Nessa looked proud wearing her nurse's cap. St Catherine's College had its own style of cap made with stiff white material and swept back sides with a horizontal black strip down the center. Her senior year of college included on-the-job training that put into practice what the students had learned. Nessa stepped up to the challenge as Tabitha watched her mother juggle classes, studies, training, plus finding time for Henri. She was impressed.

Mr. and Mrs. Finley and Henri Winslow were seated in the auditorium for Nessa's graduation. All three of them were very proud of her accomplishment. St. Catherine's College was known for producing top-rated nurses. To have a degree from there went far with employers. It was the first time a Finley had earned a college degree. It was a big deal for Ann to see her dreams realized for her daughter. Over the P.A. came the name, Nessa Finley. She stepped up the stairs and walked across the platform. She gave the presenter a handshake with one hand while he placed the degree in the other. Ann choked back a sob, Conor eyes teared up, and Henri knew it was time.

Chapter 17

She knew what was coming next. Or did she? When it came to college, students often traveled to other campuses, causing an intermingling of the collegians. It fit right into Henri's life. But it was not that way for Nessa. The nuns were hardliners. The harsh environment and the push to excel and achieve kept the student's attention. Nessa was living the lifelong dream of her mother. It was a relief and a thrill at the same time. Having graduated, she began practicing nursing, earning good money.

Henri, on the other hand, was driven to establish a life and a family. Meaning? At every opportunity, he made the drive to see Nessa. He would get put off when her hours at the hospital conflicted with that. Although he wanted to say something, it was not something he wanted to reveal. It was just one of his rough edges.

Tabitha was given a bird's-eye view of the surrounding walls of the land between Lincoln and Omaha. With only a few roads, they looked like ribbons from her perspective, traversing the landscape. Henri had heard talk of an interstate expressway road system that would shorten his time for his weekly trips to Omaha. For now, it was only a pipe dream. By the time it would be constructed, he would be out of college and working. The concept of the road system came about during the second world war. Because of their road system, the German military quickly moved equipment where needed. The President saw the benefits to national defense through roads. Now in the post-war heyday, a bill was working its way through Congress. For now, Henri would be using the local routes to spend time with the love of his life.

Early one Saturday afternoon, Henri arrived at Nessa's home, parking just outside her door. He washed, waxed, and cleaned the car. There his pride and joy rested, glistening in the afternoon sunlight. It was the spoils of his time in his military service. What money he did not send home or lost playing poker, he saved for this beauty. The other love of his life was waiting for him, sitting on the front steps. Before he even finished parking, she was leaning in the window to talk with him.

Back in the viewing room, Tabitha watched her mother in sheer delight. So young, with an hourglass figure, she was full of energy and the love of life.

"Henri, can we walk over to Harding's for ice cream instead of driving?" Tabitha heard her mother ask.

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The wall filled with images of Creighton Campus. The church bells rang once for one o'clock. Together, hand in hand, they strolled along. In their bubble, time seemed suspended for these two Nebraska cornhuskers, on the march to becoming one. At least that was Henri's hope. Nessa pulled out of the bubble of oneness as they reached 16th street.

She said, “My parents loved living on this street.” Pointing ahead she said, “You see that building mid-block? There used to be a sign hanging out front that read, Dance. My parents spent a lot of time there. They told me so many stories that I felt like I was right in the dance hall with them.” Nessa continued relaying other family history until they reached Douglas Street. Harding’s Ice cream shop came into view when they rounded the corner of Douglas. Every time Nessa stepped inside the Ice Cream Shop, it gave her a rush of fond memories.

Ice cream cones in hand, they chose a table near the door. Everyone else disappeared as they entered their couple’s bubble once again.

“You see,” she told Henri, “Right there behind the counter is where my mother thought she would be spending some of her last days on earth.”

“What?” Henri said.

“Yes, she had been told by her doctors that she had a cancerous tumor in her abdomen. Her family was told they needed to see her right away before she died.” Nessa got a funny grin on her face, then said, “It was only me.” She placed her hands up to help her pronouncement. “My mom was pregnant with me.”

Tabitha turned to her companion and asked, “She really said that?” Pointing her finger and wagging it at the image, she said, “Interesting.” She saw them transition from the attraction phase to wanting to be deeply known by the other. Tabitha watched her mother open up and be vulnerable. At that point, it was all about them becoming “us.” No studies or nursing rounds interfered now.

Henri reached over to wipe a bit of ice cream off Nessa’s lip, which she allowed. Then he said, “Let’s walk over to riverfront park.”

Tabitha said, “I am a bit jealous. I would have loved it if my mom was open with me.”

Tabitha chuckled when she saw the few park benches and a dirt path that was the park. The Missouri River flowed by in its relentless run to the Mississippi, mostly unnoticed by them. Sitting on the bench, Henri put his arm around Nessa, and she snuggled in.

Tabitha asked to see images both front and back so she could grasp the view. If Tabitha was looking at them, the skyline of downtown Omaha was in the backdrop. From behind, the muddy waters of the Missouri were lazily going by. Either way, it was a beautiful sight. Then she noticed Nessa looked comfortable, sheltered, and protected. Her father looked uptight, nervous like the proverbial cat that ate the canary. Somehow it did not fit the moment.

Tabitha had seen him fight fires on the tarmac, squeeze into planes to fix radios where any other human being would be claustrophobic, stand at attention before superior officers while being dressed down for some breach in procedure. She had even seen him standing ten feet away from an Alaskan grizzly bear. And now he looked vulnerable and timid.

He took a deep breath, and Tabitha heard him say, “Ya know, Nessa, we should get married someday.”

“What a dope!” Tabitha said. From the time he parked the car, they had been romantic all the way. It looked like he was about to go down in flames until Nessa said, “Let us not talk about it for now, Henri. School is what you need to focus on. You need to finish your degree.”

Henri would not be deterred. He would bring it up every so often in the same manner, but saying it as a suggestion instead of a question.

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All the walls darkened. The image zoomed to St. Catherine’s hospital. Nessa was finishing up her shift as Sr. Joan of Arc approached her. She did not look good. She said, “Nessa, your father has been admitted to the hospital. He has had a heart attack.”

Tabitha eyes filled with tears, she knew the story and yet felt the pain and loss as if she knew him. Nessa nearly ran to his room. Seated at his bedside, Ann was already there, being strong for her. She grabbed her father’s hand, leaned over, kissed his forehead, and whispered, “Daddy, I’m here.” He ever so slightly acknowledged her.

She said, “Mom, has the priest been here to pray with him?” wanting him to be anointed and have prayer for her father’s healing.

Ann said gently, “Honey, let’s step into the hall.”

Tabitha choked back the sobs.

Then Ann said, “Your father has had a serious heart attack and has lost most of his heart function.”

In utter disbelief, Nessa did not want to accept what she had heard. Then she fell into her mother’s arms and cried.

Tabitha’s unrestrained emotions bubbled up, and she began to wail. Feeling their pain was too much.

No one knew. Ann barely held it together. Everything rushed back. Her father died of a heart attack. Images on the wall flashed to Ann’s father lying face down in the dirt, so Tabitha could see the cycle, something Ann had hoped her daughter would not experience. Yet there they were.

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Another image came on the wall of Conor, Ann, and a man in a business suit. They were all seated at the dining room table signing papers. Never again did Ann want her or her daughter to experience poverty. When they had moved into the house, down the block from St. John’s Church, they also planned for the future. Just in case. It was the day they began Conor’s life insurance policy with Prudential insurance company. The hope was that the policy would be used in retirement.

One image jumped to another. The funeral mass was performed at St. John's Church, and then came the graveside finality. Nothing would have stopped Henri from being there to support and be loving toward his future wife. Nessa leaned over to Henri and said, "I can't leave my mother now." He understood and knew he would have to be patient. Nessa moving home after graduation had been timely.

On all walls, life was fast-forwarded. Eighteen months passed by. The worst of the grieving had gone. Then one night while on a date, Nessa said, "Henri, ya know we should get married someday."

Chapter Eighteen

Life! It can be fickle. It had been a hard eighteen months for Henri. After three years in college, focused on becoming an electrical engineer, he had his dream dashed away. In the Navy, he had excelled. His schooling and training were conducted in a manner tailor-made for him with visual and hands-on work. But math was an issue. That part of his brain did not seem to function well.

Before Tabitha's eyes, she watched.

"Winslow," the professor said. "Stay back please; we need to talk." The room emptied as he walked forward feeling like a superior officer is about to get in his face. His gut feared he failed the math test. Tabitha saw the frozen look on his face. He knew his future was being held in the balance. "Look" the professor said, "I know you are a Vet. You have had military training and did well. That is why I am going to give you another chance with this test." He handed him new test papers and said, "Have this back to me by our next class."

The scene jumped, and Henri was standing in his dorm hallway. He needed to lean on Nessa for support and guidance. He picked up the receiver on the pay phone and called Nessa. Tabitha heard him say, "Honey, I'm thinking of dropping out."

"Henri Winslow, you are not a quitter," Nessa told him. And she was right. They came up with a plan for emergency math tutoring like military ops, they connected with a fellow Vet for tutoring.

Tabitha saw the image jump to the library. Sitting side by side, books spread out on the table, Henri's tutor constructed word bridges he could understand. Progress was being made although Henri's head hurt. You could tell by the way he kept wiping his hand across his forehead. But there was a brick wall. It came down to a wrong application. Drilled into him in the service was knowledge that was not applicable to the current college math class. An epiphany happened just as the tutor was about to wash his hands with Henri when he saw it.

A new jump, Henri is doing his retake of the math test. All his efforts were paying off. He knew he did well on it and handed it to his professor for grading. His heart's desire was to work for McDonald Douglas Corporation in St. Louis, Missouri. His wildest dreams? To work on fighter jets. Then a nuclear bomb fell when he received his test back. The professor was furious with him and said so in no uncertain terms.

"Winslow, I gave you a second chance. Do you think I was born yesterday? No one, I mean no one improves this much in a few days." Yelling in his face he said, "You cheated, Winslow." He would receive a failing grade. His hope for an electrical engineering career burst like a pin to a balloon.

Next, Tabitha watched her parents sitting on the lawn of Creighton Campus. Putting it mildly, Henri was devastated. Nessa had earned a way in his heart, and he trusted her and listened to her. Together they came up with a new major for Henri's education. With Nessa's loving, encouraging support, Henri signed up for the needed classes to become a teacher. It never occurred to him to find a way around the math professor by seeking that credit elsewhere. An electrical engineering degree was switched to education. Nessa saw him over the hump to becoming the first person, ever, in his family line to gain a college degree. Another first for the Winslow's, not that his father would ever acknowledge it.

Mid-semester of Henri's senior year, they both knew, but Henri brought it up by saying "Ya know, we should get married someday."

Nessa went deaf—a new tactic in their love was her letting him hang out there till he figured it out. *Hmm*, he thinks, *radio waves are not being received*. He did not like being out on a limb. He was a big, burly guy with a bleeding heart for her. So, he asked a few buddies for advice.

"Winslow, you dope. You must make it a memory, an event she can hold on to all her life." Then, it happened! Henri finally got around to changing his suggestion into a question. The light switch turned on, and Henri could not turn it off. Tabitha watched him in the dorm hallway, pacing back and forth with the phone in his hand.

"Hello," he heard.

"Nessa, it's me," he said. Then he went on to make arrangements to see her on Wednesday evening. Her work schedule was good. That night, they walked through the doorway to their beloved little Italy Bohemian Café as friends and left as an engaged couple. Tabitha stepped back. The walls went blank, and her companion looked at her as she was now coming back full circle.

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"It is a lot to take in," Tabitha said, speaking to her companion.

"There is more," he told her.

A look of awe came on her face. Time in this room and this place had taught her that anything was possible.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

The front wall came alive with Grandma Finley's kitchen. Seated at the table, her mother and grandmother were having a very serious discussion. In a raised voice, Grandma Finley said, "He is not Catholic, Nessa. His folks are Protestant. And they do not attend their church. They are CNE people, that is what they are," she said. This was understood to be Christmas, New Year's, and Easter Church goers. They agreed on a fix.

Then the walls came alive with images of Henri seated in a classroom. The priest was instructing him through the steps needed to become a Catholic. The images changed again as Tabitha saw her father being baptized. At that moment there was a hush and reverence. Henri

submitted to the priest's instructions and leaned over the baptismal fountain. The priest sprinkled the holy water over his head as he stated the baptismal rites.

Tabitha took a step back. Her companion heard her say, "What went wrong?" A rhetorical question for she knew that in just over a decade from this image, she would not be seeing the same man.

She heard the story, only later in life, just twelve weeks before this image, that Henri was arrested. The walls responded to Tabitha's memory. There were four of them standing in the kitchen. Talk about things going wrong. He and Nessa had gotten in a spat, their first fight, and Henri was drunk. That is how the Winslow's handled things. The argument escalated until Nessa insisted that he leave. What could he do? He was surrounded by three women—Nessa, Ann, and her sister Mary from Chicago. When women band together, they are a strong force to be dealt with. Henri left but did not go far. He could not leave. Their bond was broken. He felt alone, something he did not like feeling. So, out on the front stoop, he sat down and began to cry. Nessa saw the softness, and Ann talked to him abruptly. The neighbors came out to see what the ruckus was about.

Nessa was humiliated and began crying. However, Ann had lived life. She knew. Two immovable forces collided right there and then—the life Ann envisioned for her daughter and the generational disastrous habits of the Winslow's. Something had to give. An agreement was reached. He was told that things could be healed if he would become Catholic. Two police cars came racing towards the house with their lights and siren on. Mary, in Chicago fashion, dealt with a drunk in a manner she was used to—she called the police. Henri was hauled away to the hoosegow. It was a sight.

"Oh, my God!" Tabitha said. "The drama. If only they knew it was a glimpse into the future. Would she have gone through with it?"

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The insides of St. John's Church filled all the screens in the room. Its beauty was breathtaking. Frozen in time, the front wall was focused on the couple and priest in the middle of a marriage ceremony.

Tabitha stepped forward to see their faces better. "Can we zoom in on their faces?" she asked.

Standing, facing each other and holding hands, they were in the middle of saying their vows. It was their look that captured Tabitha. Truly they were in love.

Tabitha looked over at her companion. *It was as plain as the nose on her face*, she thought. The wonderful heartfelt highs and the disastrous lows. There was Ann, sitting in the front pew. Was she having misgivings? Was she having flashbacks of her life on the farm? Yes! But this was her daughter's wedding day. Henri was her choice, and she would fully support her in all ways.

Everyone was looking their best on the most important day of their lives. Nessa's wedding dress was stunning. Henri, in his tuxedo, was handsome. The bridesmaids were wearing blue tea dresses with elegant hats to match.

"Can you put things into motion for me?" Tabitha asked. The sound of multiple fans could be heard. It was August in Omaha, and it was hot with a breeze gently moving the women's dresses.

The priest turned to Nessa and said, "Nessa, do you take Henri to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do!"

He continued saying to Henri, "Henri, do you take Nessa to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do!"

The priest joined their hands and said, "I now present to you, Mr. and Mrs. Winslow. Applause was heard by all the family, friends, and out-of-town visitors and guests.

The newlyweds began to exit when Tabitha said, "Pause, please."

She was all emotional, stifling back a cry. Her mother was so beautiful on her day. Seeing her father like this was wonderful—a highlight, a moment in time, a rare event. And she was cherishing it.

• • •

The walls came alive again in a fast-forward motion. The wedding breakfast and the reception in the evening. Then came the dinner, cutting the cake, and photographs of the proud parents and the new couple. Harry and Ruby, Henri's parents, were filled with joy, although the years of hard work were etched in their smiles.

"Stop, please," Tabitha said again. Retrospect was filling her mind. She observed her mother's parents' lives and witnessed her father's parents' lives. They were complete opposites.

"I see it!" she said. "In the blending of the two families, there was more of the Winslow's influence than the Finley's. It seemed to me, the blessings of the Finley's are more like loving damage control in a counterbalance to the day-in day-out destructive life with my father. Except with those rare occasions in life, when it was right as rain."

Her companion chimed in, "Watch them, Tabitha, in their carefree moments of life. It is one of the few times they escaped the weight and baggage of their past lives and current responsibilities."

Tabitha watched their honeymoon at Niagara Falls. She watched her mother wanting to be chased after and wanting to be caught.

Chapter Nineteen

Water. Crystal clear water filled all the screens one-third of the way up from the bottom. Tabitha could see both below the waterline and above it. A mallard duck appeared in all his beautiful colors. She watched him intently. She was used to messages and information coming through people in her life, past and present.

“Marvelous, isn’t it?” she said, “how the mallard floats on top of the water.” Her first impression was that he was buoyant. Stepping back for a better look, she watched how his webbed feet maneuvered him. Droplets of water began to fall upon him, first slowly, then harder. It did not deter him one bit. Really, he seemed happier.

Her companion said to her, “Watch how the water acts when it falls upon him, especially his back.”

Kneeling on the floor, right in front of the image, Tabitha watched. “It beads up and rolls off him,” she said.

He went on to say, “This was God’s gift to you.”

“Please explain.”

“The spirit of a child can easily be crushed. There are too many ways this can happen. However, God’s gift to you, after your initial bruising, was that hurtful things rolled off your spirit like water rolls off the duck’s back.”

• • •

She knew what the picture was right away. Even though it was taken from an aerial point of view, Laurie Circle was unmistakable. It was a new subdivision, so the trees were all small. On the curve was her childhood home—the raised ranch-style home, with a half basement and half garage beneath the living space. Henri was never crazy about cutting the grass. The front of the house was all hilly. The incline began at the sidewalk and increased to meet the bottom of the front door of the house. A driveway was carved out of the hill to access the garage. Home. It was where people should be safe, at least most of the time. The image on the walls surrounding Tabitha changed to an interior view of the kitchen. The frozen image was of her seated at the table. Her inner reflection reminded her of how she spent endless hours there. She loved crafting, coloring, and making cards by drawings them for her parents and Grandmother Finley. Made with love.

• • •

Tabitha took a quick step back and gasped. “No,” she said. “Is it that day?” A Saturday, late afternoon. Nessa was gone, spending the day with friends from work. Henri did not like them or to have Nessa spending time with them. It was a rising contention in his mind. He was seething. In the kitchen at the table, little Gracie was coloring away, her heart filled with anticipated joy for

the gift she would give her father. Down in the garage, Henri started the lawnmower, cussing under his breath. Cutting one swatch of grass after another, he ran resenting thoughts through his mind. It bugged him that he could not control his wife according to his way of thinking. Nessa was raised to never be under the thumb of any person, Ann saw to that in case she needed to live life alone and be able to care for herself.

The back door burst open, startling Gracie. It was only her father. He walked right over to the refrigerator and grabbed a Falstaff. He leaned against the counter, popped the top of the bottle, took several long pulls, and began mumbling under his breath.

Gracie shielded her labor of love so he would not see it. She heard the bottle thrown into the trash can, and the door burst open again as he walked out as quickly as he walked in.

Panic rose in Gracie's heart; the garage door was closing, and she was not done yet. Hurrying to add the finishing touches, she was finally ready and standing at the top of the stairway, holding something behind her back when Henri came up the stairs.

"Here, Daddy, I made this for you," she said. Grabbing it out of her hand, unopened, he walked over to the fridge and started pulling out a beer. Sitting down at the table with an ugly expression, he gruffly asked, "What's this?"

"I made it for you."

He opened it up. Tabitha knew what was coming, and she started weeping. She placed her hands over her face to hide, and all the emotions rushed back. She could not watch. She heard it.

"This drawing is a mess, Gracie! You have jagged lines; you have misspelt words; the colors are all wrong. Anything worth doing is worth doing right."

He crumbled it up into a ball. Then he threw it in the garbage can and went out the back door.

Her little heart was broken. She had worked on the card for an hour. Hoping to get his love, she got his anger instead. Leaning into the garbage can, she retrieved her card. Placing it on the table, she smoothed it out. A stream of endless tears came out of her eyes. She ran into her bedroom and climbed into her bed, clutching her masterpiece. She cried herself to sleep, wondering why her father hated her.

• • •

Tabitha looked once more at the screen. Watching herself asleep on the bed, she relived the pain, rejection, and the barrage of hurtful words in her mind. Then, unexpectedly, a man came into her bedroom by walking through the wall, not the door. He was dressed all white and stepped up to her bed. Leaning over, he rested his hand just over her back. Water fell like raindrops onto her. Tabitha watched as the water rolled off her back and disappeared. He then shifted his hands, and a warm glow became visible. Then he left the same way he came in.

"Please explain," she said.

“It is about destiny” he said. “God’s hand is upon your life. He has plans for you, not to harm you, for your hope and future.”

“Again, please explain.”

“This was the beginning of his anger being poured out on you. God sent one of his angels to release a shield over your heart, soul, and mind so as to not crush you.”

Tabitha let it go for now. She was still reeling from the eruption of emotions she just went through. Her heart was broken that day. In this room she was being soothed with this new knowledge that God cared. It was incomprehensible that God should intervene in her life.

Tabitha understood from that day onward, her father’s anger rolled off her. Happily, she continued to make cards, did her crafts, and played games.

• • •

The images on the walls got ugly again when Nessa figured out what had happened. Gracie could hear them in the kitchen fighting over her. Again, the images changed. Henri, Nessa, and Gracie stood independently, each under their own glass dome. The interconnection of hearts and souls had been severed. A jump took place to Grandma Finley’s house, her kitchen. Gracie discovered a new place of safety where she could be a child.

“I need a minute,” Tabitha said. “Is there a reason why I am being shown all of this?” she asked.

“Yes” is all he said.

Too mentally and emotionally exhausted, she sat down on the chair, now in the corner of the room. Her heart spoke more than her mind. All these were answers to questions she has had in her life.

• • •

Before she would have liked it to begin, the walls were again alive with images and sounds. Her mother and grandmother had just finished a phone call. Nessa had told her everything. Ann got up out of the chair by the phone. She took off her apron and hung it on the peg. Walking over to the front door, she grabbed a hat and left the house. She was not moving aimlessly. St. John’s was her destination. Deep in thought, she walked up the nine stairs and stopped. They always felt like a protecting fortress. The ten-foot-high wooden doors were fine qualities, the exquisite workmanship used to build this house of God.

Ann did not notice them today. No, she had an inward vision right now, and she wanted to feel close to God to ask Him questions. On the right-side aisle, Ann walked until she was by the station of the cross where Christ suffered. She slid into the pew, lowered down the kneeler, rested her elbows on the pew in front of her, and began to sob, quietly. The conversation began.

Haven't I served you faithfully, Lord? From being with Miss Carrie until now, I have kept your Ten Commandments. I have used confession to be forgiven of my sins. I have taken communion in honor of you. I have raised my girl and trained her up in the Word of God. She has been in your schools, Lord.

Ann stopped to blow her nose and remained quiet. The tears did not stop. The wound she carried did not want to feel again now cries for her granddaughter.

Mom, me, and now Nessa and little Gracie are following the generational lines I have tried so hard to end. Forgive me, Lord, I did not mean to include Conor in there, you know. He was a good man.

More sobs rose from her heart, in this softened, hurtful spot, feeling the loss of Conor again blended into the boiling pot of pain she was feeling.

Lord, I never wanted this for my little girl, to say the least, little Gracie. I worked so hard, gave up so much to protect Nessa. From where I am right now, Lord, it sure does seem like it did not work. Where are you in all of this?

Feeling safe in the shelter of St. John's, Ann sat until the sunlight no longer shone through the stained-glass windows.

Seeing this helped Tabitha to know how much she was loved by her grandmother. Clearly, right now she was overwhelmed. Then she blurted out, loudly and in her pain, "Why are there so many secrets in life? Why is there so much pain?"

"Divorce" is all he said.

"Please explain," she said.

"God does not like divorce. It hurts everyone involved. No one wins."

"Go on."

"Divorce can bring more harm than intended. Praying and weighing the options are very important. At times, shouldering the pain, walking out the storm while holding onto Jesus is what is the best choice. That is what you have just seen your grandmother do. It is what is happening every time your mother goes into the bedroom to pray. Secrets are the result of trying to keep things intact."

"It seems to me like there was a lot of triggering of bad memories going on in my family."

"What was the good that came of out your mother and father keeping their marriage together?" he asked. Then the room filled with the sound of a baby crying.

"My brother," Tabitha said.

Chapter Twenty

It was a big deal. Cars lined the curb outside the house. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles came over to see the baby. Presents, food trays, and cakes all came in the front door. Harry brought the beer.

Tabitha watched it with mixed emotions. Without deviation, Grandmother Finley always made a beeline right for her. Love and hugs. It hurt just a little as she cooed over her brother. For eight years, she was the center of attention. Henri and Nessa were told they would be a one-child couple, and that Nessa would not bear another child. And yet, there he was, little Conor Harry Winslow.

Tabitha walked over to her companion as that Sunday afternoon played on. She went into a dialog and eventually asked him, “What is happening here?” because in her memories, it led to the best of times and to the worst of times.

• • •

He gave no reply as the images on the walls jumped months at a time. As a family they had wonderful vacations and periods of very dark days. Tabitha’s companion knew the outcome and directed her back to the images on the wall. Nessa and Ann were in the kitchen. She listened in on their conversation. “He is going to destroy her, Mom,” she heard Nessa say. “When he is not drinking, he is a good man. But when he is, he is the devil himself.”

Again the images jumped, and Tabitha needed help in understanding them. Aunt Dotty, and other Winslow’s called around to see who might have Ruby stay with them for a while. It was a foreknowledge that on the days Harry was drunk, he would beat his wife blue.

“What?” Tabitha said. “I did not know it was that bad.”

Reverting to Nessa and Ann, they postured an idea. Ann said, “You need to arrange for Gracie to spend time away from home as often as possible. My doors are always open. I can keep her busy with arts and craft projects she loves doing.”

“No, no, no,” Tabitha said.

“Brace yourself,” her companion said.

It was a marathon drinking Saturday for Henri. Nessa was at work. Tabitha was seated at the kitchen table, cutting construction paper into designs and pasting them on a full sheet to make a picture. In his drunken stupor he said to her, “I should have killed you years ago.”

It was not the first time nor the last time he would say words like this to her. However, they rolled off her back but were not forgotten. They would resurface as she got older in life when these things emerged from the recesses of her mind. But for now, she tuned him out. He was her daddy, and she loved him just the same.

Then it hit Tabitha like a Mack truck how horrible those words were. Like an epiphany, Tabitha understood why she was at other people's homes so often—her aunt's home, her Grandma Finley's home, and then later in high school, her Aunt Bonnie's home. In the room, the pain was excruciating as her eyes welled up with burning tears.

She broke. A major tear ripped through her emotional heart. Unyielding cries of pain came gushing out. The walls faded to white, and her cries intensified as she cried it all out. Taking a deep breath, she said, "How could I have not seen it?" The room stood still while she needed time.

Unspoken obligations are interned into the hearts of children. They are to be loved, protected, and cared for by those who bring them into this world. When abuse and mistreatment happen, it is contrary to the heart and mind. Conflict surfaces without validation from the adults, making it confusing. A natural outcome is disrespect and a lack of trust. The hierarchy eats away at the relationships, not that it is understood. It is automatically generated when those who are to love and protect you become monsters and hurt you way beyond the scary world outside of your home. Then a life of carrying family secrets has begun.

Right now, Tabitha's screaming cry drifts off to soft sobs. All the pain was being felt. The knowledge was too much to bear. Here in this room, she was being forced to address what in life she had to deny and shield herself from but played out the backdoor of her life. All the while pretended all was good and connecting with the familiar spirits we cannot see that hide the ugliness in people.

Chapter Twenty-One

Baby Conor had two moms: Nessa and little Grace. Having a baby brother was like having a living doll. She spent hours taking care of him to Nessa's delight, although it did come with a cost and revelation.

The room came alive with images of Tabitha's mothering her little brother. The sights and sounds brought Tabitha's heart relief. As her companion handed her a handkerchief to wipe her eyes and blow her nose, she looked up at the walls with delight. She loved Conor, especially in the early years.

"Pause, please," Tabitha said "The constant highs and lows are hard. They are taking their toll on me. I hated them as a child, and I am not enjoying them right now. How much more of this do we have to do?"

He walked over to her and placed his hand on the top of her head, not in compassion but to impart something. She felt it. A rush of something spiritual entered her mind. She was a bit different and not sure she liked it until the chronological orders were understood. She needed to gauge the causes and effects of what she had experienced thus far in the room.

She had a sudden inspiration and looked into his eyes in astonishment. "Let's continue please," she said.

"Grace, get in here now," she heard coming from the kitchen.

"What is this?" Henri asked her as he was standing in front of the refrigerator with the freezer door opened.

"That is my experiment, Dad. I wanted to see how much the water rose in the container when it freezes."

"Well, your hair-brained experiment is a failure." Pulling a chair over so she could see that the water had expanded so much that it flowed out the top of the container, freezing everything to the shelf.

Henri yanked her to see his face. "You clean up this mess right now."

While she chipped away at all the frozen things, she watched as Nessa prepared to feed Conor. Leaving the kitchen, she would have liked to feed him, but it was safer for her in her room. Anyway, Tabitha watched the scenes and knew what would happen next. Henri began yelling at Conor because he would not eat. Henri was three sheets in the wind and unpredictable by now. Conor was only three months old.

Terror rose in her heart when she heard skin-on-skin sounds. She thought, *Is he spanking my brother?* Running into the kitchen, she confronted him. Never in her child's mind could she have seen it coming. He picked her up, turned her around, and hit her bottom several times, sometimes missing her butt and making contact higher up.

Tabitha grimly remembered the pain she felt. He placed her down hard, told her to mind her own business, and go to her room.

Tabitha loudly said, “Stop, please.” She was pacing in the room. Her companion could tell by looking in her face that she was trying to connect the memory dots.

She turned and looked at her companion and asked, “You know, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

Tabitha learned real fear of her father that night. He was so much stronger than she was. There was no one to stop him, so he did whatever he wanted. For months her butt hurt her. Slowly, over time, it got better. But right then, the dots were connected.

• • •

The walls flashed; Grace was much older. She was in an exam room with her chiropractor. He asked her about the accident she sustained that broke her tailbone. Anger rose in her heart all over again.

“What’s next?” Tabitha asked. *I do not want another emotional outburst. I am hoping he will just move on*, she thought.

• • •

The walls came alive to when Conor was three, four, and five. It was the visible double standard—how they treated Conor compared to the restrictive life she led. Conor could do no wrong; she could do no right. He was their favorite.

“Stop, I understand this phase.”

“Do you?” he asked.

Thinking for a second, she asked, “Is there a lesson here I am not seeing?”

He simply said, “Agatha, Margaret, and Ann understood it, and that is why they prayed. They prayed to stop the generational scapegoating where the sins or misguided ill feelings are placed on an innocent person, and they were being punished for things they had not done.”

Tabitha was speechless. The truth of what he said hit her hard. Silence. She was thinking. “You mean, the way I was treated was never my fault?” she asked.

He walked over and placed his hand upon her forehead. In her mind she saw the rope anchored to the wall she had seen in the beginning of this experience. She saw her birthday ribbon tied to the rope. The wave began, rolling forward, the peak reached her birthday and rolled forward in her timeline. He said to her, “That image represents one of the generational cycles—the dysfunction of scapegoating.”

“I need to sit down.” She was silent again. Her hands and arms were making gestures, her body language speaking for her with no words being spoken. “You mean, everything I was treated wrongly for, was really not my fault at all?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know how much I hated myself because they conveyed to me that I was bad?”

“Yes.”

“I do not know how to process this right now. I am having emotional swings—relieved to see I was not the bad person they made me out to be and angry and enraged at them for not loving me for the person I was. They brought me into a world filled with hate messages and limited love given to me.”

Quietly he stood there, waiting.

She stewed on it for a while. “Really, I do feel so much better about myself at this new knowledge,” Tabitha said to him. “Where is the breaking of this pain?”

“It is coming” is all he said.

• • •

The room filled with darkened images of Tabitha's home during the night. Seeing this, Tabitha became nervous without knowing why. Her sleep habits had been troubling most of her adolescent life, starting off with a shallow sleep but diving into a deep sleep later in the night. Hearing the house's night sounds could send her into a frenzy.

Ann was staying with them, sleeping on the couch because the household had the flu. It hit them bad enough that no one was working or going to school. One night, Henri got up and walked into Grace's room. After a while, he left. Ann knew. Days later, in a private conversation with her, Nessa said, “Well, Henri sleepwalks some nights.” They used this term when both Nessa and Grace could not mentally handle his actions. They labeled it sleepwalking to ease their minds.

Ann had the strength to act. It was arranged for Gracie to stay with Ann as much as possible. “What is the message here?” Tabitha asked.

• • •

The walls went blank. The room went almost pitch black. Then she heard sounds. They were exactly like the night sounds of her home as a teenager with the floor creaking and the sounds of the fridge turning on and off. When she heard the sounds of someone walking, she froze. Fear rose in her heart; her breathing went shallow. Then came the unexpected. It sounded like her father's skill saw. The sound was multiplied in her head; it was so loud. Then she had the strangest sensation. Her whole body went numb. She could not feel it.

“What is happening here?” she asked.

“It is a mental safeguard,” he said.

“I do not understand,” she said.

“The human mind can only handle so much trauma before it will malfunction—sometimes for a while or forever or until healing comes,” he replied.

“The sound and numbness are a safeguard from what?” she asked.

It was the only time he hesitated. “Your father's sexual abuse,” he finally answered.

“Oh my Lord, please please please do not show it,” she pleaded.

Tabitha placed her hand to her chin in her thinking mode. She said out loud, “I do not like this. I do not like how I feel. Let us just circle back to this later, please,” she asked as if pieces of a puzzle, the puzzle of her life, started falling into place to see a picture.

This has everything to do with my first real boyfriend. I know we got too close too fast. It felt familiar. The love it brought me was life-changing. Euphoric. At that time in my life, losing my dad's parents in a car crash allowed me to be vulnerable. Oh Lord, I know now why boundaries were not in place that day. And thank you for helping me through to the birth of my baby. You helped me to stand against all the suggestions of ending my baby's life. She was my beautiful baby girl. I will love her always. Oh Lord, all the insults, all the comments, all of my father's drunken verbal abuse was all his fault.

Another image of the rope line appeared in her mind. A bit stunned, she looked up at her companion with questioning eyes.

He simply said, “Another generational cycle.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

There are too many holes in my heart, Tabitha thought. The horror of getting the father to release his parental rights was sickening. The guilt and shame I endured. The awkward looks. Giving the baby to a loving home was the right thing to do. I held onto faith and walked it through, but the hole in my heart remained. It felt like someone died. I know a part of me died.

Sitting in the room she continued to talk with herself in her mind. *I know it was by God's grace I made it through my junior year of high school. Did he know new pathways would open for me in my senior year?*

Her companion's head nodded, making a yes motion.

She had gotten over the oddity of him hearing her thoughts. So, she continued her dialog. *I cannot figure out how my dad got away with all he had done, even when he threatened my boyfriend and his parents. He said he would kill them. When he shot the gun in our house, putting a hole through walls, nothing happened to him. Then Grandma Ann retired from one job and got another. Father God, what a blessing project 708 was to me. I do not know what I may have become.*

"May we continue?" she asked.

• • •

The first image on the wall was Nessa sitting on the edge of her bed in tears. Tabitha looked at her companion in surprise. Turning back, she watched as her mother fell onto the bed in convulsive sobs. She suffered in constant pain for her daughter and constant pain from headaches, migraines she called them. At times they were so severe that the room was darkened so as not to hurt her eyes. Henri's sleepwalking was tearing her apart. She knew. Henri's violent side scared her into silence. When she examined their lives, the choice she made was to side with Henri, keep her mouth closed, and maybe, just maybe she and Grace would live to be old. For now, she would cry it out, numb her emotions, and pray.

A beautiful wooden bridge was now on the front wall. The room was filled with the song, "Bridge over Troubled Waters."

Tabitha said, "I love this song."

One edge of the bridge was now anchored in front of her home. The other was at the Creighton College campus and office of the Oblate Fathers. She became flooded with good memories as images jumped on the walls around her. They were Grandma Finley's new employer. Grandma's new job opened the door to a whole new world. Project 708. The Senior Citizen's home needed volunteers, and it was located in Mid-Town. From her first visit to see her grandmother's new job, the thrill of being on campus and volunteering on weekends meant she could stay at her grandmother's apartment often. Being a senior at school brought more freedom to her and was the perfect plan for limiting her time at home and reducing Henri's sleepwalking incidents.

Watching her life pass before her eyes had been a difficult road to walk. But this portion was good if not wonderful times. Watching herself working in the kitchen at 708 and dishing up food to feed the elderly felt good. It also helped being under the loving eye of her grandmother, who was never far away.

“Can we go back, please?” she asked. “I want to see me dishing up food.”

Instantly the picture returned to that point and played forward again.

“Stop!” she said frantically.

Turning to look into his face, she was blushing. “Did I really do that?” she asked. Of course, it was a rhetorical question. Warmth washed over her. She submerged herself in the moment. It felt so good in that flashback. In this new world where no one knew her, she was free. Chemistry was flashing through her bloodstream. She might be dishing up food, but she also was responding to the good-looking male college students around her. In this environment of good people, she wanted to trust them and fit in.

Mollie, a volunteer from Creighton came up alongside her whispering, “You are putting too much food on one plate and not enough on another. Pay attention to what you are doing. Do not worry, they will be around,” she said.

Pause, please,” Tabitha said. She began thinking, *This is one of the best times in life, hands down. The love, caring, and affections of this group of people changed my life. I see it. It was the beginning of the end of my home life. Honestly, if I had not accepted this bridge into life beyond my home, it may have killed me. George, Gary, Mollie, and others welcomed me into their world. They were safe. It felt so good. If only? If only I could go back there for just a few days to relive life with all of them.*

And then it happened. The wall went to liquid. Tabitha left the room and merged into the image, standing in the food line at 708. She was frozen. Everything around her was in motion. The spoon fell to the floor at the realization she was living this. How? She did not know, but at this moment she was not going to question it. In a dead run, she raced towards her. Colliding into her grandmother, she wrapped her arms around her, sobbing.

“Oh, Grandma. I love you. I love you. I love you. I did not know how much you have done for me—how you loved me, protected me, and guided me all throughout my life. If not for you...” she stopped because sobs overtook her as she pressed her face into her grandmother's neck. With tear-filled eyes, she looked into her face and was barely able to say, “Thank you.”

With that, she felt the transition back into the room as she slipped from one place in time to another. Turning to her companion, she choked up and then said, “I never knew just how much I wanted to tell her those two things.” Her composure was wrecked.

• • •

The images started again, but Tabitha was not the same. She watched sweet times with Mollie on campus, in her dorm room on the weekends, going to midnight Mass with the group.

George brought her to the Senior homecoming. Gary danced with her in group outings. Mollie became her best friend. Everyone was encouraging her to build a better life. That life required higher education. With their support, Ann had her fill out entry forms to Creighton. Tabitha wanted to be a nurse. Then, her acceptance letter came. Nessa was keeping it hidden, trying to find the right time to bring it up. Tabitha knew she would have to cross the bridge of troubled waters again. Dread filled her heart. Nessa had gotten the letter, and it changed her life. Grace had gotten a letter.

• • •

Images on the wall changed to that fateful day. Tabitha cringed. It was the worst-case scenario; Mom was not at home when it went down. Living in the household, Tabitha knew she needed every i dotted and t crossed before she took action. Everything was okay, and she was allowed to go to the movies with friends. It was a fun time. But she was caught off guard. While she was gone, Henri found the acceptance letter. He downed beer after beer and was loaded for bear, waiting for her arrival.

Tabitha walked to the back of the room to get as far away from her reality. Right there on the wall, Henri exploded at her. She did not even have time to think. She heard him say, “You are not going to Creighton. You will go to Nebraska University here in Omaha and live at home.”

She watched herself. Three things happened all at once. His words rolled off her back, his hypocrisy brought out her rebellion, and she defied his command saying she would not go to Nebraska.

“You have ten minutes to change your mind. If you do not change your mind, then get OUT!”

Tabitha already knew what came next. She did not need ten minutes. She went into her room, gathered up some of her things, and walked out the front door three months before graduating high school. She stepped up to the bridge and crossed it to a better place.

Keith lived a mile away. She had met her college friends in his home there several times for campus Bible study. It was the first time she had read the Bible, and so she studied it. Grace did not know what to make of it. Quickly she concluded her new friends were the way they were from living the life laid out before them in the Bible. As she began to live out the ways of Jesus, it riled her mother. Her grandmother, her college friends, and the people at 708 lived what they believed. She took notice and saw the difference between the light and the dark—living for Jesus or living for self-indulgence.

When Keith opened the door, he saw her pale, concerned face. She looked like she had gone ten rounds of a prize fight. Inviting her in, he went right to the phone and made a call to Mollie. Grace stayed with Mollie in her dorm room for a few days. From there she moved in with her grandmother. Plans were made for her to finish school. It took time to get over the shock of leaving home, but it felt good to be gone from the control, hatred, anger, and abuse.

However, Tabitha knew the rest of the story. Her dreams of college died that night when her father killed her dreams. With haunting eyes, she looked to her companion.

“Why?” is all she asked.

• • •

The images on the walls began again. She was living a fractured life. Loss after loss had besieged her. She was determined and moved forward in life despite it.

In all the chaos of her life, Tabitha knew at this juncture she wanted to pull back and seek God. Her life was topsy turvy. From the chronological order flowing before her eyes on all the walls, a turn was right ahead.

“It was stupid, I know it now, and I felt it then but did not stop myself.” She wanted to go to the prom. Kelly, a friend from high school, did a little matchmaking and Grace was introduced to Bill who worked at the local bowling alley. He was a handsome, good-looking guy, Kelly told her. It was not a blind date but more like an arranged meeting at a neutral spot to test the waters and see how things would go. They met at his work.

Tabitha blurted out, “Oh my God. He was so needy. I was needy, and the chemistry was hot. I should have run. Stop! I know the rest. I graduated high school, discovered I was pregnant by June, Dad threatened to kill us both, and we were married by August.

Walking around the room, throwing her arms up and down in the air, she said, “I wish to God it never happened!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“It is the story of my life. Euphoria runs into devastation. That is the long and short of it,” she said to her companion. “Have you noticed that every time my life was going well, either my father, family, or who knows what, hit me like a Mac truck leaving a path of destruction,” she said. “What is it about this room anyway? In life the veil of deniability seemed to serve a purpose. In here there is only truth that, at times, is too hard to bear. I know why it happened now that I am in here. I needed an escape route from my violent and authoritarian father's influence. I could not be a burden on my grandmother forever. Sure, I can see it for what it was. I was infatuated with Bill, and he offered me an out. Anything had to be better than living with them.”

Tabitha paced about the room. A beautiful garden appeared on the walls, drawing her out of her thoughts. Her companion stepped over to her with a smile and reached out for her hand. Together, they stepped through the walls, and immediately Tabitha smelled the flowers. She went from one flower bed to another, enjoying them all. Her companion sat down on a wooden bench in the shade of an oak tree and observed from there.

Tabitha, at times, did some of her best thinking while being distracted. “Ya know,” she said looking back at him, “we did come to love each other. The bonding saw to that. I figured living anywhere, with anyone, was better than home.” She stopped to take a breath because she felt the conflict. Looking in his direction again, as she flittered from one flower to another, she said, “Why wasn’t Grandma’s love, protection, and provisions enough for me?”

In a rush, she felt words of knowledge rise in her heart and mind. Tabitha’s face elongated and her mouth was in an O shape. She was feeling shock, sadness, and shame, and on the flip of those strong emotions was love. “It was the void, wasn’t it—my father’s love. The paradox, the cutting off to feeling my body during dad’s sleepwalking, to the back door of my mind recognizing that was how I felt loved. Bill was not filling my longing to feel the love of my father. Trying to fill that void was totally dysfunctional. I see it now. But I desired to feel love in the making, but the unquenchable compulsion of lust separated me from safety. A sexual fire had been lit during my teen years, a fire my grandmother did not know how to extinguish. It was another rope, wasn’t it?” Looking over at him, she was asking if it was another curse running in the bloodline.

“Well, anyway, living with Bill’s parents was a cakewalk compared to the day-in and day-out drama at home. But his mom lived and breathed bingo. She craved endorphins. The highs of winning lifted her up emotionally, and she was addicted. Oh, you could tell just by the way she yelled BINGO.”

Tabitha drifted over to the bench and sat down. “I have always loved the aroma of any flower. And I do love the smell of oak trees. They remind me of fishing and vacations, of the good times. Aromas do bring up memories, but I am not sure how all this works. However, in that rush of knowledge, I understood something else. Darkness. Contrary to my upbringing and the spiritual walk of my mother and all the hours my mother spent in prayer, our house existed in darkness. And it was the same darkness in Bill’s family, just different.”

Every now and then, Tabitha would glance into her companion's face for assurance. She continued, "I really did not understand it all, but Bill's family was of a different religion. His folks pressured us to join. When they brought us to a gathering in Oklahoma City, my intuition went on alert. Just the fact that men were in one group and women in another, well that did not fit well with me. It was a deeper level of darkness I had not experienced. I know now, it was God. He protected me. We did not join. Silly me, you know all this already."

Tabitha got up and walked around. "It feels good," she said. "Talking with you. It is as if each word coming out of my mouth lightens my soul. As you already know, I had a new learning experience with Bill whose perversions caught me totally by surprise. Having just come home from working at the nursing home, which by the way resurrected my longing to be a nurse, it was because Bill could not hold a job. He just kept getting fired, and with a baby on the way, someone had to earn money. It was that chip he had on his shoulder that sent things off the rails. Well, I was tired, my feet were hurting, my back ached, and I walked into our bedroom, and there he was dressed up looking like me. Wig and all. I did not know he liked to cross dress."

Fire rose in her eyes as she went on. "I lit into him. It was the Winslow Navy heritage bursting out of my mouth. I did confess later that I was not being ladylike at all. I regret it now. I did not care then. Denial I knew; my coping skills were nil. If it were not for the baby, I am sure things would have turned out differently." Turning back towards her companion she said, "Thank you. Thank you for allowing me to talk this out and not watching it. But now, you know what happens next. I want to see it. Can we go back now?" she asked. With that he rose, held her hand, and with two steps they were back in the viewing room.

"It is a beautiful baby boy!" she heard the nurse say just as she presented him to his mother. Tabitha watched herself gasp and say he had beautiful blue eyes and fair skin. She crooned over his full head of blonde hair. The nurse laid him in such a way that she could look into those eyes as they viewed the world for the first time.

Turning her head from the front wall, she looked with soft loving eyes, saying, "He was eight pounds, twelve ounces, and nineteen inches long. Healthy in every way. Oh, the love that lumped in my throat when I looked at him. We called him Little Bill." The rush of déjà vu swept over her. It was one of the best moments in her life. A thrill came on her as she relived that moment.

"Why?" she asked looking at her companion. "Why does each moment of life intersect with life lived in the past? It has never been so evident to me as right now. I had a huge hole in my heart and life created by giving my daughter up for adoption. But little Bill. He filled part of that hole."

Tears rolled down Tabitha's cheeks. Tears of love and joy, sorrow and loss. She was also feeling that her expectation did not always come true. Watching on the wall, she saw Big Bill holding his son. Instead of the family unit forging into oneness, Bill had a look in his eyes that scared her and was not what she had expected. She had just brought their son into the world to begin a family. In that moment, she got a glimpse of the unexpected.

“I didn’t see it then,” she said to her companion. “He was not ready; he was only twenty-two and was now a husband and a father. I wanted to be a momma so badly. Little Bill brought us to a fork in the road. I took the high road, taking on a job for money by working in the nursing home. I loved it there. The nurses were always so supportive and encouraging me to become a nurse and go back to school. Bill went another way on a road that followed a downward slope. He walked out of our lives and to his old drinking friends and old girlfriend with benefits, losing one job after another. Well, you know, Grandma willingly helped with Little Bill while I worked. That woman...” she stopped in mid-sentence.

She brought her left hand up to her forehead and held it there. Her head tilted slightly down; she was thinking that something was happening.

Wait a minute. There is something different about Grandma Finley. The women before her were married to sharecroppers for generations—strong woman who had limited choices. I saw it. I watched it. Hard times; hard marriages. But she was different and raised my mother to be different but fell into the same cycle as the others. Now, I am seeing I was in one of those cycles. But! Grandma Finley was always there for me. She was my rock. No matter what, she was there for me. She helped when my own parents would not, she thought.

The images on the wall showed a dark bar room with neon signs, tiffany lights hanging over the pool table, loud music being played, and a lot of inebriated adults all sharing their primary relationship—their love affair with alcohol. Bill spent most of his free time there. Planned schedules for the baby become optional when he was drinking. At first, Bill showed up a little late to pick up his son, then it became hours late, and then not at all. Watching this tore up Tabitha’s heart. Parallel lives, walked together with vows now stretched to the max. Words! They were yelled back and forth across the baggage they both brought with them. It interfered and prevented them from living as one.

There was no fixing this problem. He was not going to change. The solution? She would work on the weekends when he was home. It was the two tics without a dog scenario. Each had emotional needs, and nothing was coming in to have a healthy relationship. When a man no longer can control a woman with words or yelling, it leads to physical abuse.

“Stop,” she said. “Why didn’t I do something the first time he hit me? It was hard having people see me with a black eye and dark bruises. I made excuses,” she told him. “

“Tabitha, you did make a choice.” She looked at him confused.

Chapter 24

Work ethics. Employers notice if you do or if you don't have this quality. However, when the call came to come into the office at work, it was a bit nerve-racking.

Tabitha's companion spoke up, "Watch right here." On the front wall, Tabitha saw herself seated before the director of nursing for the nursing home.

He said, "Grace, during our staff meeting, your name came up. After a discussion, we all agreed that we would like you to take the Care Staff Members class. If you pass, you will be able to administer meds and do treatments for the residents."

The companion spoke, "Pause."

Tabitha gave him a confused look, widened her eyes with a slight shake of her head stating a nonverbal question. So what?

"How did you answer him, Tabitha?"

"I said yes."

"Did you say yes knowing Bill would be a force to be reckoned with?"

"Yes."

"Do you see, you chose the better portion for you and Little Bill going against confining efforts of your husband to restrain you?"

"I didn't see it at the time."

"You were at a crossroads. One path was to stay stranded in an abusive relationship and the other path was leading to a better life."

"Grandma Finley's influence?"

"Yes."

"What was your score on the test?"

"Highest in the class," she said proudly.

"And the response of your co-workers?"

"To go to college. But I did not go."

"The response of your husband?"

"I'm going to fail, so don't try it."

"Anyone else ever say things like that to you?"

With a gasp she said, “My father.” Hit with this realization of reoccurring scenarios. “No, I didn’t let him stop me.”

“Tell me, why didn’t you go to college?”

“I don’t know.” Now it was his turn to make a nonverbal statement conveying, *Are you sure?*

Tabitha walked to the back of the room, turned, and put a finger on the screen wall as she walked forward thinking. “Is it I chose my battles and hoped for the best?”

“Yes,” he said with a pleased look. “Tabitha, when did hope arrive?” he asked.

Pacing to the back wall, returning to the front, she said, “Trinity Church.”

“Yes. And how do you think that happened?”

“Please show me the answer on the wall.”

• • •

With that the walls came alive again, showing daily life in the nursing home. Tabitha watched. Then nurse Nancy walked out of a room and stood in front of her med’s cart. She was an LPN, Licensed Practical Nurse. “She saw you coming down the hall and called you over. Do you remember what happened next?” her companion asked.

“It was when she invited me to her church, Trinity Church.”

“Here is what you didn’t see.” An image on the wall showed Nancy in her car on the way home, and then Nancy sitting at the kitchen table, her Bible opened.

“These are just two of the times Nancy prayed for you.”

The image on the wall changed back to Nancy standing in front of her cart. But this time, an angel became visible right behind her and whispered in her ear.

“That is when she called you over with the invitation.”

Tabitha had a dumbfounded look on her face. “Why then? Why then did she ask me?”

“God’s divine timing” is all he said. “Tabitha, what happened next?” he asked her.

“Bill and I went that Sunday. There was something there, a positive feeling. It encouraged the both of us to try and work things out. It brought us to stability as a family.”

“You and Bill were right on the verge of ending things. You both knew it. Neither of you was ready to let it go. That is when God brought you a way out.”

“It was the best five years of our marriage. So much so, we had two more children.”

• • •

With that the walls came alive in the birthing room where Denny was born and again, where Jill was born. The scene shifted to show Bill working two jobs. He had lost the chip on his shoulder at Trinity Church. Sunday School, Bible studies, and counseling all seemed to be working toward a better life for them.

Tabitha blurted out, “Bill was living a double life,” she said.

The images on the wall showed Bill’s life unraveling. Then the police cars were in front of his old family friend’s house. Charges of molesting boys were brought against him. She did not see it yet. She discussed with the pastor wife a course of needed actions. She was a more experienced woman, and gave Tabitha direction in which to go. She was encouraged to bring this up with her children and ask them about it because Bill was one of the victims. As hard as it was to talk with them, Grace was relieved when the boys told her nothing was happening. But with Jill, the horrible truth was revealed.

Tabitha sat down on the chair in the middle of the room. Right now, there in that room, she felt the feelings she did not allow herself to previously feel. Anger! Yes, of course, there was anger towards Bill. And there was anger towards herself for not seeing it, not noticing the changes in her daughter. The signs were all there.

“Learned denial” is all he said.

Everyone was changing then and drawing inward. There were signs, but she thought the past five or six years were without drama and trauma. But she was wrong. Then the goals were to get the children through this with as little damage as possible. She divorced Bill.

Tabitha was grateful to move past life during the divorce. She felt relief from all the heaviness of ending a marriage, legally and spiritually. If not for the life lessons she had learned early to take care of herself, things might have taken a different path.

She experienced a new fork in the road. It was the right time. America was a prosperous nation. No other time in the history of America could a single mom get a grant to return to school and have the funds provided for her. Despite the social worker’s opposition, assigned to her because of the divorce, she forged forward. The only hitch was a food allowance she needed, so she applied for State assistance and received food stamps.

“We need to return to an item during the divorce,” her companion said to Tabitha.

In a courtroom scene. Bill’s lawyer spoke up. “Your Honor, my client has something he would like to say.”

When he was given permission, Bill began to speak and was immediately scolded for not acknowledging the judge as Your Honor. He began again, with plenty of emotion and useless authority. “Your Honor, Grace should not be allowed to go to college. She will only fail. She will never finish it, Your Honor.”

It happened in the past in her family, and it was happening again with Grace. Fire rose in Tabitha. She was told she would fail all her life. Where would she be if she had listened to the

naysayers in her life? With intense righteous indignation, she said, “How dare he!” Echoing in the room, it felt good to say it out loud. In this room, everything mattered. She also knew it mattered to her companion.

The images flashed by quickly. They showed the stable life she provided for the children, and all the work she did for them and for their future. Books were on the kitchen table, papers on the counters, dishes in the sink, laundry needed to be done, and food to buy—a picture of their family life. Plus she began watching out for Jill. Her brothers were making sure she grew up tough.

Tabitha smiled. She was watching the fun times during her schooling. The study clubs, having her friends over for dinner, desserts, and good conversation. She felt pride when she made the Dean’s list. Life was good.

The interior of the Air Force base Officers Club was front and center. June, one of her friends in the study group worked there as a bartender. Oh, how she loved the attention she got as soon as she walked through the door. Emotionally, she was flying high with not just one interested man, but two. What was she to do? Date them both. The choice was made when one of the airman mustered out of the Air Force and went home. Now her main squeeze was Rob. The kids liked him. He passed the boyfriend test, lived the Christian life, attended church, and he took the next step by proposing to her.

Then came the cautions. Close friends told her about his primary religion and said it would be hard for her to live with. Tabitha’s hand rose to her face as she felt their concerns. She wondered why she separated herself from them since they were only wanting the best for her.

“Allegiance” is what her companion said. He was answering her unspoken question.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Here is when you transferred your allegiance from your friends to Rob. He became your primary relationship. He had won you over,” he said.

She went back to watching events in her life. Rob agreed to take classes to become a Catholic after Henri and Nessa approved of him. Attending Trinity Church was a weekly event. All was well until they visited the church of his upbringing. When Tabitha listened to the Elders there say a wife needed to ask their husband’s permission to attend Sunday School or other activities, the blinders came off. Grace knew it was not going to work for them. They could only be Catholics, and Rob agreed.

Tabitha became nostalgic seeing her children dressed for their wedding. In her heart, everything that went wrong the first time would go right this time. They exchanged vows, and she was now a military wife. She relived the celebration as she watched the walls. Good memories. The children were growing. The news came that they were pregnant.

Tabitha said out loud, “How did I do it?” A rhetorical question. She continued, “There was so much to do raising the children, being a full-time student, a wife, and going through the pregnancy. Then there were six of us. Rob took on a second job. If things were not hectic enough,

baby number five was on its way. There were now three boys and two girls in the fold—three children fathered by Bill and two children with Rob. And I did not give any of it a thought.

“Stop, please,” she said. “There is something missing.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Time” she blurted out. “My mother, grandmother, and aunts all gave me their time. Of course,” she mused. “They did not work and had few children to raise. But I got the best of their time. I had been driven to succeed, not to prove anyone wrong, but to complete the need for self-fulfillment. It felt like a calling to be reached. The children had everything they needed except more time from us. We were godly people trying to raise them where dysfunction reigned,” she finished thinking out loud. Now she was hoping her companion would chime in. He did not. “Okay, maybe I did feel like I had something to prove. Let’s move forward,” she said.

The move to live on Base turned out to be good for many reasons. Tabitha watched, in precise detail, all hands on the tarmac for moving day. Furniture was bumped, bruised, and scraped, all common events on move-out and move-in day. Grumbling teenagers were being uprooted and unhappy. Toddlers were getting underfoot. Tempers were rising, and then she was not able to reign in her tongue.

She turned to her companion and asked, “Can you bleep the curse words out?” She felt ashamed.

The neighborhood comradery was not what she had expected—it was better. There was a strong need to establish a surrogate family structure for people who lived far from their families. Cookouts, parties, and gatherings in family settings became the norm. Tabitha watched as in a movie theater. It was like seeing a movie twice. The second time you know the plot. However, you notice things you did not see the first time around.

The day came. Tabitha watched as she graduated from college, Magna Cum Laude. What a glorious day! When many prominent people in her life said she could not do it, she did and with high distinction. She had worked hard against every barrier and stumbling block to reach her goal. Now she had letters to place on all resumes, B.S.Ed. Bachelor of Science Degree in Education. She had chosen her father’s legacy.

“Pause, please,” she said. “Why did I not follow my heart and become a nurse?” she asked him.

“It cost you everything, Tabitha.”

“What do you mean by that?”

In his hand appeared a letter. It was from St. Catherine’s College. He handed it to her. She looked at it like it had just arrived in the mail. It was still sealed. Looking at it brought back horrible memories and deep, deep pain.

“Rather than fighting these demons, you chose a path you knew would gain his support,” he said.

She gazed upon the walls once again and saw herself standing on the first day of teaching sixth grade. She recalled the sights, sounds, and smells. She took time to savor this moment before moving on.

Family life was going upward in ways and downward in others at the same time. Their social life went upward, but quality of family life went down. They began to live separate lives. The older kids hung out with others in this military family as they switched houses often. Parents and couples gathered for games while the younger children scampered about. The first fracture to the surface was with Jill. She still held the princess status, but it was really gone and created a void. It showed in many ways.

The images stopped and she looked at her companion with a look of surprise, asking why. All he said was, “Blood.” Another fork in the journey of life.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He then said, “Watch the attention.”

The images moved forward, and Tabitha watched them intently. Days, weeks, and months went by. She watched. Then a year had passed when she noticed something. Tempers rose and anger was exhibited. Back door actions led to bad behavior. It was a household of seven where four lived as a unit, and three were joined together. It all had to do with Rob. The total sum of his affection was laid upon his blood children, and the others knew it and felt it.

Tabitha said, “I see it. Oh, my Lord. I was even on the other side.”

Then came the brawl. Bill had had enough. He was no longer Little Bill but had a man’s body. He watched his sister die inwardly and feel inferior. He and his brother felt abandoned. It started with loud words, shouting, and then physical shoving. Rob was no match for the stronger male, and Bill had pinned his head against the couch pillow. Threats from Grace about going to the CO got Rob into counseling. They both read books on parenting teenagers. Then things took a turn for the worse. Jill got into drugs and sex and ran away. The boys were hostile continually. Drama, drama, drama.

“If there is nothing to learn, can we skip the next part?” she asked.

Infidelity! She was the last to know. Neighbors came to her after she had walked in on them. Despite it, she tried to get things to work.

“Can we skip to the next part?” she asked again.

They continued. The images moved forward. Rob was working delivering pizzas, not for the money, but to be out of the house. Tabitha watched. Rob was all alone at home. He was sneaking around, making sure no one was there. Tabitha got tense, grinding her teeth. He went out to the car and grabbed something out of the trunk and entered the girl’s room. Looking around he grabbed Jill’s Boom Box. He opened the battery cover, took them out, and put a plastic bag of white powder in it.

At that moment Tabitha let out a loud scream. “How could he be such a monster?” she yelled. She walked up to the wall and started beating on his image. Crying and sobbing she slid down to the floor. There she cried for a long time.

The gentle touch of her companion’s hand helped her up and over to the chair as she wiped her eyes.

“Betrayal in his infidelity was the hardest emotion I have ever experienced. It was everything I put up with my dad. All that Bill put me and the kids through was nothing to Rob’s betrayal. The pain ran very deep. I let my defenses down. I let him into my heart. But!” She paused to gather herself and continued, “For that man, to take actions to destroy my daughter’s life. Well, I had to protect them at all costs.”

An old image flashed on the wall. It was Nessa and Ann sitting at the kitchen table where Nessa asked, “Mom, is he going to destroy her?”

Together they watched the family move into Tabitha’s childhood home. Eight lives and one bathroom. It was chaotic. “Going home was a choice I would have rather not made,” she said. “It was so weird. They were distant and disapproving of my accomplishments, but in my failures they came to my aid, never really saying, ‘I told you so,’ but it was understood. I appreciated their help, but it came with an emotional overtone that felt lousy.”

She took a breath and went silent. Watching the days go by, the sleepless nights, lack of proper eating, and the compulsion for a place of her own drove her to the point of exhaustion. Her child’s heart loved her parents; she felt no love from them.

The images took big jumps now—the new rented house and the children enrolled in high school and middle school. Her meeting with attorneys finally came to an end. Taking steps to get the children rooted in the Catholic faith with RICA classes, teaching CCD to sixth graders, Mass weekly, trips to the confessional, and praying the rosary became routine.

Tabitha said, “I kept thinking the more I did for God, the closer I would get to Him. Inside I knew in my heart there was more to know about God than just the Mass. It was that nagging feeling I could not shake of not being forgiven by God. I was carrying guilt and shame, and the crushing burden took its toll. For Pete’s sake, I gave my own flesh and blood away. I sinned; I failed; I hurt others; I cursed without remorse. But as my mother did, I held on to Christ.”

Tabitha watched as the years went on. God provided for all their needs—a roof over their heads, food on the table, and utilities that were on most of the time except for occasionally missed bills. Providing clothing was hard. The children grew with their endless needs. The family jived together with their endless scheduling for school, work, and visits to their father’s house on the weekends.

She drifted off to her own thoughts. *Being a single parent was the hardest thing I have ever done. Things I would not do for me, I would do out of love for them, pushing myself further than I ever expected. But when I was by myself on the weekends, the panic attacks would set in. I hated*

them. There would be a rush of anxiety, not knowing what may come out of the abyss of my soul. Lord knows it was filled with horrors.”

• • •

Two of her friends were in the image in front of her bringing her out of self-thinking before she went into condemnation. It was Sister Helen and Beth, two of her best friends at the time. She heard them say, “Grace, you need to get out more. Take care of yourself when the kids are gone.” *It was too scary to even consider dating.*

Tabitha said, “Plan B is what we called my life.” Even though it was most likely Plan D. On the wall, lumped together, were the times she spent with Beth in girl time—Friday night dinners at the house, then Saturday morning window shopping at the mall, and the traditional beeline to the Chinese counter in the mall food court for lunch. Once the entree was selected, they split it as they talked endlessly.

Tabitha looked over at her companion and said, “I never acknowledged just how wonderful her friendship was to me.” Then Lent began with Ash Wednesday changing Plan B into Lenten Plan B. Friday night it was dinner at the Knights of Columbus Hall for fish, then over to the church for stations of the cross. It was a solemn time of remembering the costs, pain, and suffering Jesus did for humanity. The smell of beeswax candles filled the church. People quietly moved to each station, stopped, and prayed in order to remember Christ’s path to the cross.

“Why is it that I felt the presence of God, but it was always fleeting?” That night, while stepping out of the church and getting into the car, it occurred to Tabitha, “I had come full circle. Church was the center of everything. Then I drifted off. Things went wrong. Now I was here, Church was again the center, and life was good.”

The ride to the movie theater was quieter than usual. An ache in Tabitha's heart rose. She felt the unspoken question as she watched her life. It was, *there has to be more.*

Chapter Twenty-Six

Her classroom filled all the walls. It felt like she was there. Oh, how she loved teaching! That is, second best to being a mother, which was the best thing ever. There was her church family, striving to be a good Catholic, enjoying wonderful friends, and yet... When the house was still, she fought her old demons. Doubt, guilt, shame, and failures filled a revolving litany. Even while she fought the battles in her mind, it was there.

She suddenly heard the radio and looked at the front wall. Tabitha watched the moment she accepted the fact and acknowledged her deep longing—she was lonely for companionship. The walls flashed. It took her back to Sister Ellen. “You need to go on dates,” she had said. Back then there was no way she would open herself up to dating after two disastrous marriages.

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A jump took Tabitha back to that empty house. She never lived alone or been by herself.

“I did not like feeling this. It was not like being abused or mistreatment. This ache for male/female interaction hurt. The walls of my home closed in, and I felt the need to act,” she said. “What was a forty-something woman to do in this day and age? Darn Beth and her “Sleepless in Seattle” movie marathons,” she said. “You know, I wouldn’t have done it if the ache wasn’t unbearable,” she told her companion. On the radio was the singles call-in program. Tabitha watched herself pick up the phone and dial the station. It felt like her heart was going to beat out of chest.

When they answered, she responded to all their questions, it was entered into the computer, then she waited. Turning to him she said, “Two strikes and I hit a home run,” meaning the walls had shown two guys who did not work out. Then her Tom Selleck romance began. Sitting on the chair, she took a breath. He was tall with a thin, muscular frame, and she swooned. He had laughing blue eyes with eyebrows like Tom’s that told her what he was feeling. She loved his boyish charm. There was just one drawback to Tom—the man chosen by the dating profile, Jim, was bald.

Tabitha laughed. “I know the ending now. But then when he called it off after just two weeks, I just about died...” she said. .”

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The walls came alive. With two of her children in the back seat, she and Jim were in the front of a Cessna plane he had rented and flying high. It could have gone badly if Tabitha had handled it another way.

Jim said, “Now the hard part—I’m not good at landings.”

They watched as the landing was uneventful. He had been teasing. Then came the line, “I think I would like to date other women. Let’s take a break.”

Back to Plan B. Knights of Columbus for dinner, church, and then a movie. “Grease” was playing again. The duo expanded to a trio—three friends, letting loose, having fun, they sang all the songs to the movie out loud and did not care. They were the only ones in the theater. Tabitha said, “That was one of the best nights of my life.”

The light on the message machine was blinking. She was tired and did not listen to the recording. In the morning, with hot coffee, she pushed the play button. It was Jim. He said, “Hello Grace, it’s Jim. I would like to take you out to dinner. Call me.” Her heart fluttered and tightened at the same instant. Fluttered because she liked him and tightened because she wondered if he could be trusted not to go the other way again. Tabitha watched as she accepted his offer to dinner. Then the walls came alive with the low lighting and the romantic ambiance of the restaurant. He had picked this one for this reason.

She looked at her companion and said, “Oh, I love this part.”

“Grace, I made a mistake,” he began. “You are the woman I feel I can fall in love with.” That is all she needed to hear. Then came scene after scene of the two of them spending time together in an effortless companionship. Then came the blended family vacation. Tabitha’s eyes widened, brightened, and then also were sad. Her oldest son had joined the Marines and was leaving home.

Within days, the family headed to Gulf Shores where Jim had rented a beach house. Turning to her companion, she said, “My heart was filled with joy on multiple levels that week. I watched Jim being kind to my children, his family. My heart felt a release to be me when I was with him. He accepted me for who I am. The children had a wonderful time. I had a wonderful time. I felt safe to lower the walls around my heart and let him in.”

Then the rug got pulled out from under her. It was an intervention—a bleak time in her life. Those closest to her, Henri and Nessa, came over. They needed to talk. They did not like Jim and thought he was totally wrong for her, was a terrible man, and was using her. When they could not deter her and move her away from him, they cut her off. In no uncertain terms, they said, “We are finished with you, Grace.” It reverberated off the walls of the room.

“Please, tell me, why does this roller coaster cycle keep happening to me?”

“Control” is all he said.

“But who is being controlled? Me? Jim? Who?”

“Pain.”

Tabitha began to pace, seeing it was one of those learning-a-lesson times to enable her to see something being revealed. Looking inwardly, she examined the clues, trying to put the pieces together.

“Give me a clue,” she said to him as if playing a game of hide and seek in her mind.

“Comfort,” he said to her.

Yeah, not much help, but she worked on it. She wondered, *whose comfort are we talking about here? It's obviously not my comfort. They came over to set me straight. What is the old adage? Hurt people hurt people?*

Tabitha looked at him, and he said, "Freedom."

Oh boy. This is getting complicated.

Then he said, "Growth."

Is it woundedness, he is talking about? Their unresolved, unforgiven emotional pain in their lives. That my life, my freedom, and my joy challenges their pain. It is a hard lesson to bear. But if I did not take care of myself, no one was going to do it for me. It came at a high cost. Eight years they were out of my life. Nine for my brother. Did they ever see that Jim was the best man I have ever known?

Movement on the front wall brought her back into the moment. It was moving day again, and Tabitha flinched as she watched. Blending the two families and not being married yet compromised her faith. As much as it hurt her, she knew they could not get married in the Catholic Church. On the front wall were all the children in their best. Some family and friends came together to be part of this union of souls. The southside Christian Church performed the ceremony asking God to be part of their marriage.

Tabitha motioned for her companion to come over and sit by her. Together they took in the scenes of her life playing before them. She leaned over and said to him, "These were the best years of my life. I was happy, and the children were happy. Right as rain, they say."

He turned and said to her, "Love."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Jim was the first male to give you selfless love in marriage."

She had never given it a thought until this moment in the room. Then they approached her new challenge. Jim's paycheck began to bounce. His employer had hit hard times, and the business folded, meaning, as one door closes, another door opens.

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The new door manifested in Oklahoma City. Jim, a well-seasoned diesel truck mechanic could work just about anywhere. It was time. With Jim's talent, they forged ahead in opening their own business. The walls came alive with all sorts of changes, both good and bad, unfortunately. They watched as the new home was chosen. The business location was chosen. Getting a new teaching job took place. Then the hard news, the youngest son, did not want to leave his life in Omaha. A court battle could have happened. Ultimately, she saw he needed to be with his dad. He was allowed to leave, and it broke her heart. It brought about a time of reflection and reevaluation. It happens as people get older. She had not yet entered the window of regrets. That was to happen in the years ahead.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Brace yourself” is what she heard him say, but did not understand. On the front screen stood all six of her children arranged by age.

Tabitha gasped. “What is this?” she asked.

“Watch closely,” he said. Her firstborn stepped forward. She looked right at Tabitha as if she could see her.

Shocked, she turned to her companion with a questioning look. Standing together, he took her hand and stepped through the wall and into another place, another time outside of time.

Overcome with emotions, Tabitha rushed to her daughter, wrapping her arms around her, and deep sobs conveying just how much she loved and missed her. Her daughter, in love and forgiveness, embraced her. She allowed her mother to smother her with kisses.

The companion separated them. Then a rope appeared, one end from afar off. The first string tied on it was Tabitha’s birthday. The next was her daughter’s. Just after that string, another rope began—the lineage of her adopted parents. A bloodline rope and her adopted parent’s lineage. Tabitha had now come to understand the ropes showed the flow of the bloodlines, good and bad.

A confused look swept across her face. “What is this about?” she asked.

Next to her daughter appeared the first suitcase. The word “abandonment” was on it. Then a second suitcase, marked “rejection.” It took Tabitha a second to realize that she had a hand in those suitcases. The hard suitcase to see was the one labeled “Born out of wedlock.” She understood, it was the baggage her daughter carried in life. She began to tremble. Other suitcases appeared. Some she contributed to while others she did not. Heaviness hit her heart. Her daughter stepped back in line with her siblings. Panic struck Tabitha; she did not realize the time with each child would be limited.

Next Little Bill came forward, and again Tabitha smothered him with hugs and kisses. She held onto him longer and looked into his eyes deeper, committed to memory his face and features and smile. Then came the rope with his birthday on it, and she realized what he had inherited from her. The baggage continued to appear, too many for her liking and hard to see. With remorse she read the titles on each bag. They finally separated, and tears filled her eyes. She mouthed to him, I’m sorry. In her heart of hearts, she never wanted this to happen. Tears rolled down her cheek. She had to brace herself because she understood. Having the chance to reunite with each child was a very precious gift and yet devastating. Every parent wants a better life for their child than they had. Honestly, she did the best with what she was given. The truth be told, this moment showed her the children were comparably dysfunctional as she was.

Taking her hand, they stepped back into the room, all the time she was looking over her shoulder and into their eyes once more. Tabitha mouthed to them, “I am sorry! I love you!”

Composure did not come easy. After a while she had the frame of mind to ask, “Why were they so burdened with issues?”

She was silent for a long time. Then she asked, “Isn’t religion supposed to help us? Is not following Jesus supposed to bring us spiritual freedom? Healing?” Her question went unanswered.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

A sense of frustration rested on Tabitha. She tried to decide if she liked this room. It was getting old now that she saw a pattern. Looking into her own pain was one thing, but seeing how her unresolved pain flowed into her children was another. Of course, it was not all bad. The fun side of her flowed into all her children. But she knew what is yet to come.

Liquor runs were now common. Their drinking hit new highs. The neighbors embraced this as well. Alcohol lowered inhibitions and laughter happened. It felt right, it felt good, and no one seemed to be bothered with the drunken sailor's mouth. Except for a few skirmishes with the children, she lived a good life.

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A six-year jump took place on the front wall, and Tabitha recognized it immediately. It was the Walk to Emmaus Retreat weekend. Two of Margarita's lady friends in this group invited her to go. Tabitha was now in her late forties and couldn't come up with a good reason to say no. Anyway, the purpose was to learn new ways to live out Christian actions. She was up for that. Turning to her companion, she said, "It was so wonderful."

With nostalgic feelings, she watched as she stepped out of a negative world and into the loving presence of God. Warmth, caring, loving expressions, and sincere people surrounded her. She thought *I had never felt so accepted and loved as I was there. The difference was striking.* The walk of Emmaus journeys are about two of Jesus' disciples who were full of despair after his death. While walking towards Jerusalem, a man joined them. They told him all about the death of their beloved teacher. It was during the nighttime meal, and when the man broke bread, their eyes were opened, and they knew it was Jesus.

For three days, with times of worship, hearing messages, and teachings, the seed was sown in her heart. Meals and conversation encouraged openness, the opposite of keeping family secrets. Testimonies conveyed how people walked their pathway from knowing about Jesus to having a relationship with him. If not for the loving atmosphere and trusted friends, Tabitha may have blown them off and resisted. However, the love helped her hardened heart to become soft. During the weekend's final hours, scriptures were shared showing the way to salvation. The Holy Spirit's presence surrounded them all. Those wanting to have a relationship with Jesus were encouraged to come forward to pray. Grace was drawn to it. There was no stopping the call she felt upon her heart. She heard, "Repeat after me. Dear Father God. I thank you for your Son Jesus and the work he did on the cross. He paid the price for humanity's sins. I tell you, Father, I am a sinner. I am sorry for the pain my sins have caused you. Please forgive me. Now I invite Jesus to come into my heart and life, and I want to live for you. In Jesus' name, amen."

While Tabitha was watching herself cry in the past and now in the present, a rope appeared on the wall—her timeline rope. A scarlet string was tied on it to represent her spiritual birthday.

“I didn’t know it then,” she said. “I felt it, though. I was washed in the blood of Jesus! I felt as clean as snow and like a newborn baby. My spirit/soul soared. I felt light. The world was new. I saw things of God I never saw before. Wow. My sins were forgiven!” Tabitha laughed out loud. She went on to say, “Oh, I was born again and became a new creation in Christ Jesus, but I dug my heels into the dirt like a stubborn old mule.”

A broad smile on her face, she looked at her companion and said, “I am sure it looked comical from God’s perspective. He was trying to bring me into freedom from sins the whole time I was wanting the freedom he was calling me towards and yet I was fighting him.”

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There was a jump on the wall. Tabitha knew. Jim questioned it and wondered about his wife’s new behavior. He had known her for nearly a decade. He had not known her to do selfless acts of kindness outside of family and friends, so her working in a prison ministry was totally unexpected.

Tabitha placed her hands on her hips and stepped back to get a good look at the women. “The lifers. They were the ones set free. What joy! It filled me. When one of those women in jail accepted Jesus’ gift of salvation, joy overwhelmed me. I saw it. They were transformed by the power of God.”

Turning to look into her companion’s eyes with delight, she said, “Ya know, it makes sense. Jesus set me free from the sins that imprisoned me so I could minister to women who were imprisoned to help them gain their new freedom.” She was catching on to how things worked in this room.

Drama, more drama. Jim did not like his wife drifting away from the Catholic Church. She took up her son’s Marine mantra—adapt to all circumstances and overcome. She adapted to save her marriage. Jim told her if she left the Church, he would divorce her. With a smile on her face, watching how it played out, she was pleased at her approach. Ever sensitive to the new boundary, she went to the new church during the week and Mass with Jim on Sunday. The new spiritual road guided her to Bethany, Oklahoma. Turning to her companion, she said, “Ya know, going to Bethany was preordained?” .”

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From smiles to frowns, the ugly head of recurring cycles, indisputable cycles appeared again. Tabitha’s granddaughter had a baby out of wedlock at the age of seventeen.

“I was not going to let it happen again,” she said out loud, “She had that baby, and she kept it with our help. No way were we going to repeat that cycle.”

Two paths diverged quickly—a girl too young to be a full-time parent and a church too rude to embrace a sinner’s fall.

On the walls played out the fiasco of having the baby baptized in the Catholic church. The looks, the comments, the sidestepping of the priest to have a deacon do the baptism. All of this got Tabitha's Bohemian ire up. With fire in her eyes, she looked at her companion. It was the direct opposite of the churches she visited during the week. This marked the end of her life as a Catholic.

Images appeared on the wall of fond memories of the grandbaby being held in her arms. They were sweet memories but not without the struggles. Hearts strings were used and control maneuvers didn't feel right, but they went along with it.

Tabitha said, "In a way, I was a surrogate mom to my great grandbaby. It filled a hole I had in my heart, while creating other troubles. However, it was like a slap in the face to see the seventeen-year-old girl's pregnancy happening again."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“It seemed too good to be true,” she said. “Jim signed up for an Emmaus walk.” She was very excited and struggled to fight old messages in her head that reminded her that her father did not change. Bill and Rob were hard-hearted and hard-headed. Grace knew having Jim sign up was all God’s doing. Then a miracle happened on Sunday during the altar call. Jim went forward to invite Jesus into his heart and life. Tabitha took in a breath as she watched. She knew her husband’s spirit was washed in the blood of Jesus Christ, but his soul was another whole thing. On the front wall, Tabitha watched the slow progress of his moving from the old nature into the new man in Christ Jesus. And yet he followed the leading of the Holy Spirit. The seed had fallen on good soil in his heart. Jim grew spiritually.

The liquor runs dropped off dramatically. Grace’s sailor’s mouth disappeared. The change in their lives happened slowly but continually.

“Stop,” Tabitha said. “I want to think about this part.” Then she asked, “I had my behavior ingrained in me. My choices and responses were set—some good and some bad. How did I change?” she asked.

“Love and esteem coming from God,” he replied.

“Explain it to me, please.”

“Love brings out a desire for a betterment in people. Esteem stimulates the desire for them to be their best because they are valued. Value is understood when someone is willing to sacrifice for them, and it brings worth to them. Now add in God’s grace, and it moves a believer to want to be Christ-like. Jesus, being the picture of pure healthiness, reduces drama brought on by sin and dysfunction. A culmination of all this flows in the river of wanting to please our heavenly Father. His heart responds with more blessings. Spiritual freedom and liberty are experienced, bringing about a desire to know God more. In this atmosphere, you and Jim flourished,” he finished.

“Wow” is all she could say. Now she understood these were things God had brought into her life through her relationship with Jesus.

The images resumed. All of them were attending the new church and attending Sunday School too. Like a dry sponge, they soaked up the spiritual life they were learning in the Bible. A new flood of images came on the wall. Home life. There was a divergence between the children and the parents. The children, those who have left home and the two remaining, still lived life according to their old heritage. An aching in Grace and Jim’s hearts was for their children to know Jesus as they did. On all the wall were images of Grace kneeling at their bedside, pouring out her heart for the children to know Jesus. A major generational change was taking place right there. Nessa and Ann spent time praying the rosary while Grace was petitioning Father God for his help.

The walls went blank. Then a loud masculine voice said, “I am your God. It is time for you to answer my call.”

The reverbing sound of His voice brought about fear and humility to her and a glimpse of the bigness of God. It shattered her learned view of him while living in the world so she now knew it was way too small.

“I do not ever remember hearing God’s voice, however, his call to enter ministry burned in my heart,” she said. Their current church home, pictured on the front wall, was an Assembly of God church. Morgan, a woman she admired, walked into view. The images followed her into the Sunday School class. Tabitha watched herself as Morgan turned to her, bringing her updates on what was happening in her life. She said, “My brain is exhausted. I was up late reading to learn about the synoptic gospels.”

“Learn what?” she asked.

“It is one of the classes I need to pass to become a minister in the Assembly of God. I mean, there are three categories. Completing the first ten out of thirty classes will allow a person to begin ministry. It’s called Certification. Then there is becoming licensed and finishing with ordination. The synoptic gospels is just one of the lessons I must pass.” On the front wall, a fiery spark flew out of the image and straight into Tabitha’s heart. She staggered back, the spark igniting a fire that was dormant in her for so long. It was her call into ministry.

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Images of their living room were surrounding her where they were seated across from each other. Then she heard herself say, “Jim, we need to talk.” These are four words no man wants to hear. The conversation took on a serious tone.

He listened to Grace reveal a desire in her heart for a new direction in life. “Jim” she said. “I want to become a minister.” Unlike any of Grace’s previous relationships, they talked it out. Together, they decided she would enter school to become a credentialed minister in this denomination.

“Pause, please” she said.

Tabitha tried something new. She took her companion's hand, stepped up to the front wall, and they stepped through the image and into the living room. “This is so weird. I am looking at myself some ten years ago. I look so young.”

Tabitha's companion stayed stationary while she walked up to Jim. “He is my strength. He is a strong man,” she said.

Tabitha knelt right down beside his chair, looking into his face. “Jim was a God-send. Ya know, he really listened. Somehow this man saw that God was doing a miracle in me,” she said.

Her companion listened to her story with delight. Then he said one word to her, “Destiny.” Standing up he reached out for her hand.

She knew they would be going back into the room. Quickly, she leaned over, kissed Jim on the cheek, and whispered, “I love you” as they joined hands and returned.

She needed to find out what he meant. She asked him, "Please explain."

• • •

The room filled with images of her childhood bedroom, frozen in time. The walls, flooring, and ceiling all allowed her to feel as if she were in it, looking at all the things she had treasured. It was all there. Everything. Her eyes teared up as she was swept up in this moment.

She gazed over at him. Her soft eyes and smile on her face told the story. Then off to her left, a little girl wearing pajamas walked in the room followed by her mother. It was the night time ritual for this seven-year-old.

Tabitha choked back the tears and said, "It's me." Off in the corner of her room a light began to shine, taking on the shape of a man. He just stood there while Nessa kissed her goodnight.

With the bedroom lights off and the door pulled nearly closed, he waited. As little Gracie entered deep sleep, he stepped up alongside her bed. Leaning over, he placed his hand above her heart, and a glow emanated as a gift was released. He whispered, "Here is your destiny in Christ Jesus." Standing erect, in a flash he went out of the room but was never too far away.

Turning to her companion, her mouth open, stunned, she said, "I never knew."

"Didn't you?"

"I'm sure."

Then on the front wall was Grace playing and performing a Mass, having bread and grape juice and giving her dolls communion.

Then she made the connection. "But why didn't it happen sooner?" she asked.

"You were not in a position to activate the gift," he responded.

Tabitha started talking out loud, having just connected several dots, she said, "Ya know, it was a lot—moving to Oklahoma City and starting up a new business with Jim and all that goes with that. When you run your own business, your business then runs you. We had two children with us, my teaching job, and getting connected with people at the Yukon, Oklahoma church. They were not all random acts, were they?" she asked with a question in her voice.

He only smiled.

For the first time she was grasping the intent and meaning of destiny.

"Is this answering part of Agatha's prayer for me as well?"

He only smiled.

The walls transformed into images of the Assembly of God church in Yukon. Her companion said, "Here is when you meet my dearest friend."

It dawned on her. The sermon was fiery hot. The words hitting on target. Drifting off into her thoughts she began to remember.

I wanted the Holy Spirit. To know Him like the pastor was talked about. I was driven and pulled all at the same time. I had to answer the altar call. I heard him say all those who want to be filled with the Holy Spirit come forward. I felt so compelled, I rushed forward. Pushing Jim out of the way. I felt the fear of the unknown. I had both a reluctance and a desire at the same time. Then the pastor placed his hand on my head and power flowed into me, invisible to the eye, fully aware to the spirit. I felt my spirit be flooded with water. I felt intense love overwhelming me, and then, my tongue went wild. Once it was used like a drunken sailor but now I was overjoyed to be speaking in a heavenly language. I see it now. It was good that we moved from Omaha. People knew me there. Here in Oklahoma City, I have a new beginning. In Omaha, too many people knew me as I was in the past. My life changed yet again that day.

“Glory to glory!” he said.

Turning the tables. Tabitha asked him, “What came next?”

He responded, “Your season to forgive and to be forgiven.”

“Wait. That is not how I remember it. I remember feeling guilty and that I needed to go to my parents, brother, and friends and ask them to forgive me for actions I did that caused them pain. Then I worked to forgive those who had hurt me, my dad being the hardest to do. Isn’t that how it works?” she asked.

“In the world, on the horizontal level, human-to-human forgiveness, yes. When this is accomplished, then the vertical forgiveness can be gained where God then forgives his children when they have forgiven others.”

“I don’t see it.”

At that moment a flash filled the room. The words of Isaiah 6 came on the wall. “Woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips.” The purity of God and his holiness filled the room, and Tabitha fell to the floor as if dead.

Her companion came over, touched her on the shoulder, and said, “Rise Tabitha.”

In humility she said, “I am sorry for the pain my sins have caused God. Please forgive me.”

Her companion told her, “Human-to-human forgiveness is hard. To be forgiven by God is beyond comprehension. And yet, He forgives.”

Now she understood that it was a spiritual act.

Chapter Thirty

A furious man stood over a cowering woman.

“STOP!” she yelled. “Please do not make me see this.”

Seeing this generational cycle moving through and down the bloodline was too hard for her mother’s heart to bear. Her son was behaving in such a hurtful manner.

“Where am I anyway?” Again, she was questioning this room, this place, knowing an answer would come eventually.

Going into her own thoughts she thought, *I do not like this. There are no safeguards to dampen my emotions. These feelings are so intense. I worked so hard to end these scenes of drama. And yet, as I glimpse at the frozen image on the wall, I know what happened and part of it was because of me.*

“You had a roll in limiting the horrible dysfunctions, Tabitha” he said pulling her out of despair.

“Please explain,” she said.

“It has everything to do with doors,” he told her.

“Doors!” she exclaimed.

“Doors, yes, spiritual doors. Most of your life, you adhered to the teachings of Jesus. You were living by them, not allowing yourself to willfully commit sins, thus keeping closed those doors to the effects of sin. But when you opened a door, for example, by living with your future husband before marriage, it opened a door into the bloodline that only repentance could close. If repentance does not happen, it will be attached to the family until someone does. However, doors that have been opened before you, not by your choices, will run on until someone stands in the gap. But it matters when this takes place.

When your children are young, the door is closed, and the effects end. If they are older, as with your children, now they must deal with closing the door spiritually. Until they are born again, the door stays opened. Now, getting back to you. Because you chose to adhere to godly principles, you limited the exposure to sin’s effects on your children. All of this changed when you became a believer in Jesus, and the goodness of God entered your heart and soul.”

The new knowledge helped a bit. If she were in the world and heard this, she would have said, “What?” But, here in this room, she understood the principle of how doors to evil are opened by sins, and how forgiveness and repentance of sins close them.

Tabitha had to get a grip. There was no stopping the advancement of the bad influence that had taken place in her children’s lives. At that moment, the images took her back to her first-born

girl. A sweet baby girl. Then there was a fast forward. Her now grown baby girl was having a baby out of wedlock.

Her companion waited.

Tabitha looked at him with a puzzled look, in part because she knew. Having not raised her or never having direct contributions and influences on her life, the cycle went on.

“How?” is all she said.

Child after child, image after image, Tabitha’s heart sank. There before her were the regrets—the lineage of a family living out the pain of dysfunction and pretending it did not happen. Secrets. They were secrets she could not avoid in this room. “It wasn’t all bad,” she said to him. She tried to balance out the rhythm to what was being played out in front of her.

“Denial” is all he said.

In her mind she thought *Another rabbit trail and lesson to be exposed, I am sure.* Frustration built up within, and she burst out saying, “Can’t you give me a break here? It was not all bad.”

“That is true. It does not answer the question.”

“What question is that again?”

“That will come later, right now is the time for you to see how pain, pretending, and denial go hand in hand.”

With that she let it go. On the walls came a collage of good family times—parties, outings, fishing, and vacations that warmed Tabitha’s heart. They were a well-received break from bad news. Then came images of when Tabitha went to her parents seeking reconciliation.

“Why are we coming back to this?” she asked.

“It is about lost time.”

“Connect the dots for me, please,” she said.

“What prompted you to go to your parents in the first place?” he asked.

“I felt guilt. I did not realize how heavy it was upon my heart until we reunited.”

“The Apostle Paul taught people to seek peace in their hearts. When you received this lesson, you were drawn to follow through.” As he was saying this, the walls went right to the anointed sermon she had heard.

Remembering it, she said, “It was as if he were talking right to me. I felt it.”

“Yes, and you chose to follow through regardless of the outcome.” In her heart she felt the warmth of love. “You modeled good health and good living to your children as an example. As you forgave them, God forgave you, and a door was closed. It brought about a new pathway, a

new choice for others. It was the beginning of breaking that cycle of people stopping relationships.”

• • •

Images swept by, slowly enough for her to grab onto why she was seeing them. Person after person appeared—those walking in the life of God, filled with the Holy Spirit, living out the ways of Christ were coming into her life and leaving deposits.

“Your journey of sanctification, Tabitha,” is what he said.

“Please explain,” she said, a common question for her.

“You were born and raised in the world and in the good and bad. You came up in the world.” An image of the red string on her timeline flashed across the wall. “Now, you have chosen to follow Jesus. As you grow, learn, and become mature, no longer feeding on the milk of God’s Word but eating the meat of it, you are maturing. This journey is called sanctification, becoming more like Jesus every day. Then there are your glory experiences that change the way you are and the way you think because you have experienced God.”

She looked at him with a puzzled look and in amazement at the depth of his knowledge. *Who is this man?* she thought. On the front wall was the moment she was filled with the Holy Spirit.

“This was a glory experience,” he said, answering her question before it was asked. “You are making the transition from how you were in the world to how you are living in the heavenly life. Tabitha, you have dual citizenship—born into the world and born into God,” he said.

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The wall changed yet again. It was the beginning of the end for her father. With the first heart attack, she rallied around him, loving and supporting him. She was there for him even though in his heart, he knew he did not deserve it because of things he had done that were so bad, he could not utter a word of them. But his loving daughter, God-loving daughter, touched his unbroken heart, his emotional heart. And he changed. Grace’s church family prayed for him for the undeserved grace of God to fill his life and heart.

She suspected it brought about a miracle. Those around him saw an inner peace in him that was not there before. The father Tabitha knew died during the heart attack. During his recovery and his regaining strength, his new life continued for a season, allowing wonderful times for father and daughter. The father she longed for in her youth now lived. It was a gift from God, but not the gift.

His time ended as the walls surrounding her portrayed the hospital room where he lived his last. Prayers for him flowed to the heart of God, and answers were released. It was something she had not witnessed before. When a person takes their last breath, it is evident that only the body remains. As she watched that moment, here in the room and in her heart, she heard what was only

a whisper then. “To be apart from the body is to be with the Lord.” She could only wonder what took place during the time her father could only hear what was happening around him in his hospital bed and the time he was unconscious. Her personal message was that he enter eternity in the house of God.

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For the first time, the room darkened. No images were on the walls for a little while, until the front wall began to illuminate as did the rest of the room. On the front wall stood a man. Slowly Tabitha recognized him. It was her dad looking his best. He stood strong with a full head of hair and in his prime. Tabitha’s heart skipped a beat. She could not breathe.

“It is him,” she asked. Then, he walked up to the wall and stepped into the room right in front of her and paused. He smiled. As he reached out his arms, she embraced him. His warmth and his love felt wonderful.

Henri whispered into her ear, “Daughter, I am sorry.”

Tabitha’s knees went weak. He held her until she supported her weight again.

“I love you, and I am waiting for you.” Henri kissed her on the forehead with tenderness. They separated as he stepped back beyond the wall and disappeared.

Tabitha looked for the chair, her hands covering her mouth for the longest time.

Then she said, “I never knew how much hearing those words would affect me. Being with him is one of the best gifts yet.”

Chapter Thirty-One

At the start of a new message being shown on all the walls, Tabitha's companion said, "Community."

Grace and Jim's new church encompassed them as their new family. One of God's creatures brought their household to a standstill, then panic erupted. A gopher chewed through the water line under the house slab, and water was soon everywhere. A call was put out, and a dozen people from the church rushed over to help with damage control.

Tabitha laughed and cried. She cried because of the damage and laughed at how everyone bumped into each other in their efforts to help, sloshing around in the water.

As life continued to move upward for her, it got busy. Jim, the good man that he was, helped almost every needy soul. Whatever it was, he was willing to help. The business had demands. Raising their remaining two children had demands. The time came when there was not enough energy in them to go around. Something had to give.

Tabitha watched as she savored her last day of teaching, allowing the sounds and smells to linger in her mind—the smell of books, the voices of children, the sound of the bell calling for class to begin or end. She loved her time, being a teacher, of impacting and influencing children. She soon made the transition from teaching to being taught, and finishing her accreditation was her focus.

On the front wall, Jim stood front and center. Tabitha took in a deep breath, and tears immediately flowed. She turned to her companion and said, "I have never loved anyone like I have loved that man!"

He stood there just like he always did—arms across his chest with his wonderful smile, looking tall handsome and resembling Mr. Clean with his bald head. She took a breath and said, "I miss him" as she cried.

Her companion took her hand as they step through the wall and into the scene. She quickly embraced Jim so hard it took his breath away. She pressed so hard there was no space between them. With her face against his chest, his shirt got wet from her tears.

Jim looked at her companion and saw the look on his face—one of joy but also one telling him time was short for this moment.

Jim said to her, "Honey, I know you are going to minister to the world, sharing the love of God. I have seen it in your eyes; I have felt it from your heart. Know I am there with you in it all." And with that, they exited back into the room.

"Why is it always so quick?" she said.

If life and living could be stopped, Tabitha would have chosen this time to be with her husband—the mountain top of life. After each mountain experience was the next valley. The front wall transformed into a segment of rocky roads for her third child. Tabitha looked away.

He stood there front and center. Alongside of him were five suitcases. His baggage was flaring up, causing drama. Not wanting to watch and feeling her broken heart for the path being taken, she cried.

The room shook with the sound of his voice. He said, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

Again, she recognized a message from her heavenly Father. “That is one of my favorite verses. I know it to be true. It is amazing. Even though the Trinity loved me first, as I love them, they give back in ways unimaginable,” she told him.

Images of a rendezvous appear. “No” is all she said. Sobs filled her throat. Her chest rose and fell as she cried. “Are you saying he did this for me? For us?” An answer was not expected because she knew.

“I was so excited, I got there a half hour early.” She referred to the coffee shop on the surrounding walls, where she met her baby girl, now a woman. Tabitha’s heart bubbled over with recounting their first-time meeting. Turning every now and then towards her companion, she told him about this monumental day. “There was an instant connection, ya know,” she said. “Then we discovered we both knew Jesus—no wonder we had a feeling of unity. The burden I carried all those years ended on that day.”

“How did this happen?” she asked him. “From the beginning of my life until I found Jesus, well, it was filled with loss after loss. I mean, I never went without of meal. I had a roof over my head, clothes, and a good education, and yet my relationships were a disaster. I looked and wanted love and received instead heartache, pain, and horrible abuse. Except of course from my grandmother.”

“The thief comes to seek, steal, and kill, but Jesus came that you might have life abundantly,” he said to her.

Tabitha placed her left hand to her chin and looked within herself, thinking about all she had seen and experienced and the correlation of time before Christ and the time since accepting him into her heart and life.

Then she saw it. “There was a lot of negativities directed towards me. All those negative people took from me, but now, knowing Jesus, positive influences and loving gifts come my way. Wait, I feel it, but I do not see it yet.” She continued to pace.

Bloodline keeps coming up. Something about the bloodline. Earthly father after earthly father. None of them knew Jesus. But, when I was saved, I inherited God’s bloodline, and his goodness blesses me she thought.

“I had no idea!” she said to her companion. “I did not know what I was missing, and what was available. Why not?” she asked him.

“Veil” is all he said.

“You’re going to have to show me what you mean.”

“Exactly. Right now, you are trying to understand and comprehend the concept of the veil in a spiritual sense. It is an unknowing to knowing application.”

“How can someone unknow something?”

“It is how each person is born.”

Tabitha was looking befuddled.

He went on, “The veil of unknowing rests upon each person’s mind. It is like a light bulb when no electricity is applied to it. Then the switch is turned on, and it glows.”

She put her hands up, shook her head and raised her shoulders using body language to ask, “So?”

“Tabitha, you attended church most of your life. You heard about Jesus and His ministry. You extended your heart, loved Him, and practiced His ways.” She was nodding her head in agreement to what he was saying. “When you attended the Emmaus Walk Retreat, you heard testimonies of those making the commitment to Jesus.”

“Yes.”

“On Sunday, during the call to come forward, you responded. Why?”

“I suppose the answer is I believed in what they were saying. I understood in a new way about God’s plan of salvation through Jesus’ sacrifice.”

“You believed. Then what did you do?”

“I recited the prayer they shared with me.”

“Why?”

Almost, but not connecting the dots of his leading, she looked to him for help. “You activated your FAITH. At that moment the Holy Spirit entered your spirit, and you became a new creation. It is precisely then when the veil was removed from your mind, the scales from your eyes, and the wax from your ears. You were alive to the invisible kingdom of God. You were born again alive in Christ Jesus.”

She had to absorb this knowledge. Again, she was thinking. *I will tell anyone. From that moment on, after I prayed the prayer, I knew I was different. Like I was imprisoned and suddenly set free.* A smile came over her face.

“The prison ministry” is all she said.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Beautiful trees appeared on the front and side walls. Looking behind her, the pathway showed no clue to where she was.

“What is this?” she asked her companion.

“You are seeing a segment of your spiritual journey, your walk of faith, your pathway to your destiny.” Looking forward she saw the movement of swaying leaves and branches, and then she felt the wind enter their room. The sweet smell of the trees filled her senses.

“Oak trees stand the test of time. Strong, they hold their ground in the most difficult storms. They become mature,” he told her.

“I feel sheltered under their canopy,” she said. Slowly she watched as the images moved forward. Like a boundary had been crossed, the trees changed as well as the aroma. Silver maple trees now surrounded them.

“Tell me about these trees,” she asked.

“They are pleasant to the eye, especially in the fall when the leaves turn yellow and red. Silver maple trees are fast-growing; their wood is soft. In storms, branches will break and their trunks can split,” he told her.

A divergence in the path appeared. It split and became two. On the left path were the oak trees. On the right, the silver maples. In the middle of the path, just before the fork was a white marble bench with statues of five-foot angels at each end. They are all five feet tall. Tabitha's companion took her hand as they stepped into this scene. Together they walked up to the bench and sat down.

Tabitha asked, “What is this, why are we sitting here?”

“To contemplate” is all he said.

She was somewhat excited about this scenario—something new and thrilling and not dramatic or heavy. “And what are we contemplating?” she asked.

“Your choice,” he said and then continued, “Sometimes in life, there is a need to enjoy the place where you have arrived.”

“What do you mean, here in the woods?”

“In your life, marriage, and relationship with your Savior, friends, and family. You have been swept up in the winds of change released by the Holy Spirit. You have weathered the tornados of growth from your birth inheritance into your heavenly inheritance. You are experiencing spiritual freedoms and liberty. You have chosen to follow your calling and strived onward against all oppositions,” he said.

Taking her hand, in a flash they were together standing on a plateau. “Take a look around. See how far you have come.” Walking up to the edge, off in the distance was Omaha. She could see Lincoln and the university. Her eyes darted around to other landmarks. Down below was a trail winding like a ribbon working its way upward. Turning to look north and then south she said, “I do not see any landmarks in either direction.

He pointed to the west.

Walking over there she saw a valley below, and in the distance, a mountain covered in a dusting of snow.

“What does this mean?” she asked.

“There is always another mountain to climb. Here on the plateau, it has been a hard journey, and here you are. I want you to know that some of the called chose to end here.”

“What about the north and the south?”

“They lead to alignment problems.” Being the teacher, she could not just allow herself to say, “Huh?” Rather she again said, “Please explain.”

“Gaze back at the mountain. Notice the snow?”

“Yes.”

“When you were washed in the blood of Jesus, you were clean and white and pure as snow. Climbing the mountain means purging sin out of your life, even those seemingly harmless sins.”

“There must be benefits in it?”

“Closeness and power.”

“And the north and south views?”

“They are the worldly distractions, the innermost held secrets in the mind that a person wants not to revisit. They are accepted pathways away from going up the mountain.”

“Why is that a problem?”

“To reach the mountain top, to become the calling intended for you, and walk in the gifting and power of the Holy Spirit, one must give up one’s rights to self. If they have the ministry God intends, He is out in front, leading. However, if a person deviates to the north or the south, they begin to lose the hedge of protection needed to climb the mountain. Spiritual warfare and demonic attacks will become part of your life. They will either bring the correction needed to continue or result in returning to this plateau.”

Tabitha was silent. She walked back to gaze at Omaha. Looking over the plain, the pathway upward, she knew the cost there. Then walking to the western edge to look at the mountain, the cost was unknown. What was known is that God would be with her.

He walked over to her, and taking her hand, they returned to the bench. This time she was seated on his left side. Now she could contemplate the choice set before her. She began thinking, *To my right, I can walk the path and position I saw on top of the plateau, but I will be stunted in all that there is for me in Jesus. Hard choices. Loving and living with the two men in my life. Jesus and Jim. I am not a quitter. I have always made the hard choices.*

“Calculate the costs,” she hears him say. Then he said, “What is gained spiritually can be given freely.”

“What do you mean?”

“What you have gained in climbing higher can be applied to others so they can get ahead too and gain freedoms they didn’t have to climb to achieve by you praying for them.”

“But how?”

“Jesus paid the price for your sins because you could not. As a child of God, you can gain a position and pray for others. It is called Intercession. Jesus gained the right to intercede for all of humanity.” He let that sink in.

“Are you saying, if I climb the mountain, I can help people to get to a higher level?”

“Yes, you will be entering into the power gifts, co-laboring with the Holy Spirit and God’s angels.”

Tabitha jumped up off the bench, took three strides, and said, “Let’s go.”

He did not move but remained seated. “The reason we are at the point of contemplation is for God to give you time to choose. It is not good to make a snap decision. The choice you make will affect everyone around you. Think about it and consider your options.”

Raising her left hand up to cover her mouth, she paced back and forth, from one path to another. She was feeling it now. *I am just a woman, a human being vying between two powerful spiritual forces, good and evil. Evil’s goal is to seek, steal, and destroy. I have lived the destruction. Lived with the pain. If I could use that for the good of others and to the glory of my Savior, it is turning around the pain and seeing others gain. If he is going through all of this to get me to contemplate my choice, it must be very serious, and that scares me.*

He got up, walked over to Tabitha, and took her hand. Together they reentered the room.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Tabitha saw herself seated at the kitchen table with Jim. Together, they weighed the cost of her entering ministry. She had been there and remembered it all. However, she did not notice the shift until just now. Being in the Pentecostal church opened their hearts to new possibilities in the Holy Spirit. They saw there is more. They both understood the starting point is salvation. And together they saw they needed help with all the baggage with which they entered the kingdom of God.

Jim spoke up, “Grace, I am not like you. You will throw yourself headlong into things. It does seem to me, that when you pray, you move heaven and earth in your walk with God. If you want to become a pastor, I am fully behind you.”

Tears welled up in her eyes. He and Grandma Finley were the only people who supported her. It only brought her to love him more. Together they prayed, asking God to open the doors before them according to His plans for their lives.

Tabitha watched as five men and two women climbed into the church van for the trip to Edmond, Oklahoma, twenty-eight miles away. Their destination was to attend the Oklahoma School of Ministry. The instructor for this class was Pastor Arielle Holmes, a soft-spoken woman filled with knowledge. She was meticulous in her presentations, very detailed, and she laid out the information in a linear way so that it was easy to grasp. Like a thirsty sponge, Grace took it in. Arielle noticed.

What impressed Grace was the way she explained scripture and connected it to ministry, using concrete examples for points of illustrations. With each defined class, Pastor Arielle taught what it meant to be an Assembly of God pastor. Grace was awe-struck upon hearing of the woman’s time in ministry overseas. She told about when she prayed with vast groups of people in Africa, and during a crusade, saw people instantly healed. Arielle presented a spiritual depth that Grace had no exposure to. In the off times after class, she peppered Pastor Ari with personal questions. Then it came to her mind to research the name Arielle, having never known a person with that name. She discovered the Hebrew meaning of the name is “Lion of God.” She thought it suited her.

In one-on-one time, Arielle opened up and told her about her plans to start a new healing ministry. Because of what she experienced in Africa, she wanted to see that level of healings take place in America. This intrigued Grace. Having received spiritual and emotional healing, she knew more was needed to be learned but did not run from this idea. She ran to it. What better place to use all she had experienced in life than for the good of others. One day she was introduced to Pastor Jessalyn. The two of them were forging ahead in beginning this new ministry. They invited her and Jim to be part of it once she became a licensed pastor.

Week after week she gained the knowledge necessary to pass the tests. That was not the hard part. She had graduated college with Summa Magna Cum Laude. She was confident she would pass the Assembly of God requirements. The Board of Divorce review was an entirely

different matter. Tabitha watched as she tested the waters with Jim. Stunned, his support ended right there. No way was he going to appear before them to defend the reason his first marriage failed. But by the grace of God, when the time came, he did an about-face and went when needed. When other applicants were denied continuance, Jim and Grace were approved by the board—totally a God thing. In November of 2012 it was finalized. She was now a pastor in the Assembly of God denomination—a transformation only God could have fashioned. Jim and Grace had a small celebration upon her graduation, but not everyone was excited about it.

Images flooded the walls with images of Arielle, Jessalyn, and Grace. They began to meet and discuss the formation of the Healing Ministry. The coffee shop just down from the host church of Oklahoma School of Ministry classes was where the drawing boards and the blueprint design for the ministry took place. With the rough draft in mind, they knew the beginning point would be in prayer. God must lead if this was to succeed. Their first step was to set up meeting times for intercessory prayer meetings.

Tabitha said, “I had to ask them what that was. I had already lived it but did not know how to define spiritual warfare. Most of my life I was on the receiving end of destruction. Now, they are going to be teaching the offensive side. I remember, in the beginning things went fine. However, out of nowhere, problems would rise sending me into chaos. It felt like reliving life at home as a child. Then they helped me learn and identify the flaming arrows from the enemy.”

Images on the walls were where Grace ministered. In an intercessory prayer group was where she learned any Christian moving in the Holy Spirit would have a target on their back—easy targets for anyone not walking in the full armor of God. Images showed Grace serving in a food line, dishing up food, going out on the street to reach the homeless, and preaching in Jesus’ house for two years. Image after image flashed before her eyes.

Tabitha’s companion placed his hand on his chin, shaking his head up and down, agreeing with all he was seeing. Every once in a while, he glanced over at her.

Tabitha said, “My favorite thing to do was praying with people. Because I knew what Jesus has done for me, I knew he could do it for them.” In all aspects of her life, there were God’s blessings.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The Fourth of July was the big family gathering. Tabitha placed her hands on her hips, looked over at her companion, and said, “It was a lot of work and worth it!” She beamed with joy. Right there, in these images, she and Jim were in the center of it all, the best place to be. Food, games, and conversation with family abounded. This was the year to remember. Life was at its best. Tabitha’s head was on a swivel, taking in all the images on the walls surrounding her. “Sweet memories,” she said.

“I didn’t know,” she stated. “It was the best of times.” Panning around, wanting to not miss anything, she thought, *it was such a great day. Our children surrounded us. My marriage was wonderful. Jim’s business was flourishing. My teaching job was going well. All our children and grandchildren were all healthy. And no drama. How on God’s green earth did that happen?* Something Tabitha observed brought her back to reality. She remembered. She saw it coming at day’s end. Casually Jim walked up to her and whispered a question in her ear, “Who is that man?” At first, she did not understand the gravity of the question. She asked Jim to clarify which person he was asking about, to make sure they were on the same page. Tabitha became introspective there in the room. She became choked up and crying. She turned to her companion and said, “It is Jim’s oldest son.”

She had to sit down. She watched. She asked herself, *why did I not see it before? Were the clues there but I did not want to see them?*

It was happening again. Her two ex-husbands were moral failures that brought about a dramatic course change in her life.

At this moment, it could not be overlooked. Jim was having a medical issue, and if Grace wanted to see it, it was right there as sure as the light of day. No one, no one stays on the mountain top.

Tabitha said to her companion, “Seeing it right here, I knew in my heart but was unwilling to grasp it in my head, I hoped and prayed it was not true. Jim was in the beginning stage of dementia.

Chapter Thirty-Five

A time stream played out before Tabitha with a continuous river of decline. She had to sit down. At times it was all she could do but cover her face with her hands. She had lived it once, and frankly, was not willing to relive it again but there was no escaping. Jim, a genius when it came to mechanical things slipped into being competent and then into incompetent. Watching him in a state of fog, trying to figure out how to fix the truck, or trailer, or just about anything, was a slow agonizing process.

“Where is the pneumatic drill?” he yelled at the top of his voice, echoing off the shop walls and sending shockwaves through his employees. His violent eruptions of anger were new ground for everyone working with Jim. Being a hulk of a man, two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle, was enough to make anyone fearful. The more he lost his mind, the more he became angry.

Everything began to fail—not all at once but month after month, and year after year. Repairs took longer, tools were lost, bills went unpaid, collections were in arrears.

“I did not know what to do,” Tabitha said. “If I questioned him, I ran the risk of his anger. But it changed when the utilities were turned off at work and at home. He missed mortgage payments, and notices arrived in the mail. I had to do something. We were bankrupt and on the verge of homelessness.”

“John 10:10,” her companion said.

The images paused. A conversation was needed. “I know that verse; it was brought up before. How does it apply here?” she asked.

“Your walk to Emmaus,” he said.

“So,” Tabitha responded.

“It is the demarcation point before Jesus and after Jesus.”

“You have my attention.”

“Before Jesus, the season of decline, drama, and emotional challenges took its toll on your energy and strength and wore you down. After Jesus, the events in your life zapped your energy and strength but built up your character and made you stronger.”

“I do not understand. The events seem the same to me.”

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An image appeared on the front wall of Tabitha kneeling alongside her bed. Next to her was an outline of a man with his hand on her shoulder.

“You were not alone. Instead of decline, provisions were released to build character, a mystery of God how one cycle can destroy a person, but in the hands of God, it can rebuild a soul. Tabitha, when someone told you that you could not do something, what happened?” he asked.

“I dug in and took action to show them they were wrong,” she responded. The images started again, except this time, they were images of Tabitha taking action. Yes, Jim was almost two feet taller than she was. Against all his opposition, she got involved in everything—bill payments for their home and business, getting Jim under doctor’s care, and dealing with legal issues for work, home, and medical. No matter what came against her, she met it head on.

Tabitha turned her head away from the images flowing toward her. “Getting medical power of attorney for my husband was hard,” she said. “I had to ignore all the family who did not understand and push past the children.” She burst into tears. “My godly husband and leader of our home now needed to be led.”

Snapshots appeared on the wall. They were flashbacks to what they have just seen. However, in every conflict and every challenge, Tabitha saw the image of a man with her. “I always felt him with me, ya know. I knew I was not alone, and I knew then I could not have met all the challenges without him,” she said. “His presence was so tangible at times, it brought me comfort during the storms. I used to say, ‘Jesus, hold onto my hand because at times I feel it slipping.’ When I cried all the tears for the night, I heard his soft voice say, ‘I love you.’ He carried me through.”

“Brace yourself, Tabitha,” he said to Grace.

“Do we really have to do this? We both know what happened.” A ploy to stall or maybe even avoid what came next.

“It is where we began, and we need to finish,” he said.

Turning to look him right in the eye, she asked, “What do you mean by that statement?” The images on the wall began to run. “Can we wait, just a minute more?” she asked. But they kept moving relentlessly forward.

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“Jim, do you have to start this project tonight? Mom is coming tomorrow. It would be better to have the bathroom floor as it is and do the work after she leaves.” Just minutes ago he was sitting in front of the TV in a mindless fog.

“I can get it done, no problem.” Hammering noise began. Jim was on his hands and knees breaking up the ceramic tile. Pieces were scattered around the room. When the room was cleared, the mud for the tile was laid, then the tiles. That was when it hit her. Reaching for the mud container, it looked different. It was not quick set, and it would not harden in time. Grace grabbed the hammer to stop Jim.

“I need that hammer, Grace.”

“No, Jim, you need to stop now.” No was not a word you would say to him. Jim’s face went red. He got up as fast as he could. “I need that hammer; I am not kidding around here, Grace.”

Tabitha watched as she stepped into the hallway with the hammer behind her back. In one step, Jim pushed her up against the wall while she was still holding the hammer.

“Give me the hammer, Grace,” but she did not budge.

Turning to her companion she said, “I was afraid he was going to kill me.”

Then it struck her. Pieces of the puzzle came into her mind in rapid fire. The instant she saw his hand around her throat, she felt it reactively reach up to her neck. The scene continued. Nathan, their youngest son, was staying with them. When he heard the shouting, he came into the hallway. He started hitting Jim, trying to wrestle him off his mother.

In this room, with her companion, a questioning voice said loudly, “How is this happening again?” It was her own voice she was hearing.

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All walls went to translucent white. The door at the rear of the room opened. Tabitha was confused.

“Your question has been answered. The gift is now complete. Give it to others generously.” He went over to her and affectionately placed his hand on her cheek. He smiled then took one step back. In his hands appeared a loaf of bread. He broke it and said, “Take this and eat it,” and instantly her eyes were opened.

She whispered, “Jesus.” Spontaneously she embraced him. Sobbing, she buried her face in his chest.

“Am I in heaven?” she asked. There was no response, but rather she felt a pull she did not want nor could she stop in the direction of the door. Then she felt her back slam into something. Then blackness.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Voices. Quiet and distant; then closer and louder. Sensory awareness. Someone was holding each hand. She heard prayers.

Grace shouted, “Jesus, don’t leave me. I want to stay with you.” She was back in her earthly body and within she was feeling a torrent of emotion. Her eyes were filled with tears and then overwhelmed by the ceiling light.

“No, no, no,” she repeated over and over, as she sobbed.

Nessa had been seated in the chair by the outer window while Arielle and Jessalyn held her hands. They were doing their thing and praying. But from the first sound coming from her little girl, she bolted up and over to Grace, pushing Jessalyn out of the way.

“Gracie, Gracie, everything is going to be okay,” Nessa said in her reassuring mothering tone. Suddenly she was crying. For her, it had been three frantic days of wondering—the worst three days of her life.

“Mom” is all Grace could say. Nessa leaned over, kissing her cheek and forehead.

The saturating love was gone, and the reality of the world was back. With extreme effort Grace asked, “Where am I?”

Arielle replied, “You are in the hospital. You passed out and hit your head on the floor. You have a concussion.” They thought it best to leave out her being choked to unconsciousness for right now.

“How long have I been here?” Grace asked.

Nessa told her, “Three days, honey.”

With all the commotion, nurses came running in and checked her vitals. Then Grace drifted back into sleep.

“Nessa,” Arielle said, “Are there plans to take care of Grace when she gets home?”

“Yes and no. We are not sure what Grace’s medical needs are going to be. Nathan and I will be with her when she comes home.”

“What about Jim?” Jessalyn asked. “The police brought him to the hospital’s mental division for evaluation and got him on medication for the dementia and the anger thing.”

“This problem needs to be resolved before we can take him home,” Nessa told them.

Arielle spoke up, “We have them on the prayer list. Our intercessors have been praying for her. I will let them know she woke up. And we will work on a help list—food, cleaning, and any other assistance they will need.”

Nessa took notice of their kindness, they're not being family and all.

Arielle and Jessalyn excused themselves, leaving Nessa alone with Grace.

Making their way down to the cafeteria, getting coffee and a snack, they settled in. They needed to talk.

"Okay, Ari, what do you think is going on? The first word she says is about Jesus? What do you make of it?"

"Personally, I think something happened. The tears were not because of the pain. She was not fully alert yet to feel any pain. I think we can rule that out. In all my years of nursing, I have seen a few patients display what we just witnessed. Usually, they had a God experience. You saw the loving expression on her face change and disappear.

"I'm telling you; it looked like she was leaving someone. Do you think she saw the Lord?" Because both of them have had supernatural experiences and saw similarities, they wondered.

"Oh, there has got to be a story here." Now that they had seen her wake up and talk, the first hurdle was over. What will recovery look like and how do they help Grace rebuild a life with a sick husband? Their unanswered questions floated around in their minds with great curiosity and interest. Then they moved onto their plans for the Zoe Healing Ministry and who was going to call the prayer team with the praise report.

Grace returned home a few days later. Nathan and Nessa took care of her every need. They doted on her to the point where she felt self-conscious. Then, with the family having mixed emotions, plans were being made for Jim to return home. For now, they were tweaking his meds at the hospital. A repeating cycle ran through Grace's mind—fear, panic, and love were the predominant emotions she needed to get under control. She feared it could happen again. The panic attacks surfaced when she least expected them. Then there was her love for her husband, the man who treated her better than any other man in her life. She vowed to love him, and that is what she expected to do.

It worked out better than she thought. Jim had memory swings, but the anger seemed to be under control. This afforded Grace time to participate in the forming of the new ministry. Nathan's help with Jim bought her time to get away.

Arielle and Jessalyn wanted to talk to her about why she said Jesus' name when she woke up but let it lie for now, even though it was killing them to know. They thought if it was important, and if she wanted to share it, she would. What was clear, she was different, meaning that something about her spiritually had changed. They could hear it in the way she prayed, what she prayed about, and the confidence in her voice.

The team began to form into three parts. Arielle had the administrative lead as well as her gift of faith for supernatural healing. Jessalyn saw into the spiritual realm and understood the discernment of spirits. Now Grace saw the generational details running in the family lines. She saw the pain of dysfunctional relationships with precise boundaries. But then, Jim's health took a bad turn.

The time came when Nessa and Nathan returned home. Grace became the fulltime caretaker for her husband. Quickly it became all-consuming. It seemed all her life's experiences prepared her for this new role. Scriptures came to mind as needed. She would repeat, "Not by might, not by power but by my spirit says the Lord" over and over again. "All things work together for those who love the Lord" was her go-to verse during the times when it was harder than she could handle, which soon was nearly every day.

Doctors' visits became a routine. Keeping appointment were challenging because sometimes Jim refused to go. Then the nuclear bomb dropped. During a meeting for what Grace thought was to adjust his medication, the doctor said, "There is nothing else I can do for your husband, and the hospital cannot help you anymore." Well, this set off a chain reaction she had not counted on.

Grace got Jim settled in front of the television and began making phone calls. "Hello, this is the blankety blank, law firm. How can I help direct your call?" The chat with the lawyer was short. Next, "Hello, this is the hospital president's office. No, he does not take calls. You need to go to the assistant director's office. You have what attorney on retainer? Just a minute please." Grace had become a formidable force. Surprise, surprise. Suddenly Jim had a new doctor and full hospital support.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Lord, I need you. I am tired. My mind is exhausted. My back hurts. And I never knew a human being could throw up so far as I just witness my husband do. I am holding on, believing you will have healing for Jim. Please, give him the presence of mind and the sharpness of mind. Fill him and us with your love and compassion. Thank you for all those who come to our aid. Bless them as well. And Lord, I could not endure if it were not for you.

Noise was coming from the living room. Jim was awake and needed help getting up from the chair.

“Grace” came the call from the living room. “Do you have any lemonade?” he asked. Turning off the stove, she was in the midst of cooking a meal. In total disbelief, she pulled a chair over to him and looked into his eyes. It was him—he was back. She started to cry.

Reaching up he tenderly wiped the tears away. He sniffed the air and asked, “What is for dinner?”

“Pot roast, your favorite.”

“You're too good to me.”

“The kids have called and want you to know they send their love.”

He looked a bit confused as to why they would do that, but he let it pass.

Time was the question in Grace's mind. How much time do they have? She began to tell him what the kids and grandkids were doing. He asked question about each of them. Then he laid it on her, without notice.

“Gracie, dear, you are the best thing that has ever happened to me. I have never loved anyone as deeply as I love you.” Her facial expression widened and stretched to the side. Tears flowed. They were connected again, one heart to another. But all too soon, the time was up. His eyes became blurry, and his thoughts disappeared as he stared aimlessly ahead. She walked directly to her room, knelt beside the bed, and praised God for this precious gift, then cried because it was so short.

It was inevitable. Hospice was arranged. Jim was now bedbound, and a nurse was assigned to him. Her visitations were on certain days unless they were suddenly needed. It brought Grace reassurance knowing a call could be placed any time, night or day. The morphine shot meant Jim would sleep most of the day. Grace learned about maintaining his catheter and how to give shots. She cleaned him up as needed, a humbling task. Then came the day when a call was placed to the nurse. Grace told her, “His urine is very dark.”

“When did this start?”

“I noticed it this morning.”

“I will be right over.” The call ended. An hour later, the doorbell rang. Jim’s vitals were taken, and then the nurse went into the kitchen for a conversation with Grace. “Grace, you need to call the family to come and see him now. His body is beginning to shut down.” Stunned, she did not think it would be happening so fast.

The calls were made, but not everyone was willing to see him because of old baggage. If watching her husband dying before her eyes were not enough, enduring the family’s drama and troubles would have to wait for another day. It was too much for her to process. Divorce was so very hard. Seeing a loved one dying, the worst. Inside she knew she was supported by God. There was no doubt in her mind and no way she could handle all of this without Him.

It was like hearing, “Last Call” when a place is about to close for the night. Grace, Nessa, and Nathan kept the final vigil. Jim’s breathing was shallow and random until his chest rose, but no breath was taken in. Grace held his hand and talked to him about what a good husband and father he had been and how she loved him totally. Nessa prayed and Nathan watched. Then the chest stopped moving. Peace.

In the instant you see the soul and body part, what is left is a body, a lifeless shell. The person was gone.

Grace kept her composure. “Nessa, Nathan, could I have time with Jim alone?” she asked.

They stepped out of the room and gently closed the door. She stood at the foot of the bed to see all of Jim. She took time to savor their life together. Although he was gone, she felt his presence and did not want it to end. Moreover, she had her own taste of life behind the veil and understood Jim’s journey and meeting Jesus. Moving over to the side of the bed, she laid her head on his chest one more time. Brushing his face with her hand, she said one more time, “I love you, Jim” and walked over to the door.

It was time to make the call. It was going to be busy. Grace made the call to the hospice nurse—the first step of many. Nessa and Nathan entered the room to say their goodbyes to Jim. The three of them took time to pray, giving thanks to God for Jim and the life he had lived. He had moved on to his heavenly reward. Everyone else? Life goes on regardless of how much you feel the world should stop for this loss.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Jim had touched many lives, and it was reflected during the wake and funeral. Flowers, cards, food, songs, pictures, everything needed for a final tribute took place. For Grace, there was no time to feel, even if she could. It was all about function now. Exhaustion was a blessing. It was at night when the pain of loss sets in. But for now, Grace was too tired, and as soon as her head hit the pillow, she fell right to sleep.

Business was a mixed blessing. Separating two lives was work. Grace did not dive into it; it was more like being catapulted. The financial duties needed to be taken care of—copies of the death certificate were needed, life insurance filed, and medical bills attended to. Grace felt surrounded and supported until people drifted off to their lives to deal with their own loss. Ari and Jessalyn were as close as sisters to her and were never far away. They were always there. Even so, the house felt void and empty.

No one ever tells you about the details, the lifelessness you feel by enduring a loved one's final journey. In essence, two lives were declining. Grace was exhausted beyond words, and emotional exhaustion resulted in numbness. Always. Every hour. Numb. Devoid of feelings, her commitment to the Lord guided her. Living for him set out a path. Building a new life and working at school helped. Someone once said that the road to the normal life is like taking a half step a day in a mile-long journey. Throwing herself into things she knew mattered, she filled her time waiting for the day when she would feel like herself again. Until then, teaching and ministry helped occupy her time.

At school one day she was asked, "Grace. Can you help me with this problem?"

The person asking her was unable to confront a parent who was personally not strong enough. Relaying the details, Grace saw the boundary violations and the dysfunction. A meeting was arranged where Grace, in no uncertain terms, spelled it out to the parent. She spoke the truth. Truth usually cost a person something. And Grace had been there. Her strength cost a doctor his position at a hospital. It was needed for change. But this was different. Grace spoke the truth, but she was not alone. The Holy Spirit flowed with her words and her presence, helping this parent see there was another choice to be considered.

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"I think it is time. Don't you?" Ari asked Jessalyn. "Do you think she is ready?"

"I feel she needs a new beginning and a redirection. It has been six months now. I think she is ready for the transition."

We need to talk with her first. Have you seen the difference in her since she woke up at the hospital? Personally, I want to know more about it, don't you?"

"I agree, but let us talk with her here at church rather than our usual meetings at the coffee shop. It will be private so if she wants to open up to us, it happens behind closed doors."

Grace might have thought it strange to meet with them at church if she was back to normal. The general rule for the trio was coffee shop talks about forming the healing ministry. Grace went with the flow and walked in to Ari's office.

"Close the door please, Grace," she heard and wondered what was going on. Coffee was on the table, and Jessalyn poured. Small talk filled the air with questions on how she was doing, does she need help with anything, and then Ari began, "Grace, we wanted to talk to you about your hospital experience. Jessalyn and I feel you have a story to tell. Do you?"

Silence. Clearly Grace was uncomfortable. She shifted in the chair a few times and looked at the door, her way of escape. But they kept their gaze on her.

"It is too intimate. I am not sure I can share it. At least not yet."

"Grace, we can see you are different since you woke up at the hospital. Praise God you came through it. We and the prayer team prayed for you around the clock. We are wondering if the changes in you are because of your horrible experience?" Ari asked.

Tears flowed down Grace's cheek at the reemergence of the viewing room. In her mind, she felt all the changes she had gone through in the last year. If it were not for the fact that these women truly loved her, she might have gotten up and exited. But they truly cared for her and prayed with her.

Grace took a breath. "I am not ready for the world to know." She decided to trust them. Her eyes went blank as she looked inward toward horrible memories. "I could have gouged his eyes. I could have hit him in the ears. I could have kneed him. But I could not do it." She paused. Silence; waiting. Her heart was tender, something she had not felt in a long time. Vulnerable. Then she went on. "My mind became fogged, my eyes went blurry. Then I asked God, 'How can this be happening again?' then blackness. Until..."

This was not what Ari and Jessalyn were expecting. They gave Grace their full attention.

She began, "I am telling you right now. I can only tell you a small part of the story. It is too personal. Too intimate."

Now they looked at each other, having no clue.

"I heard a voice calling Tabitha. He used my middle name. He said, 'Tabitha, open your eyes.' Ya know, Tabitha is a girl in the Bible who was raised from the dead? Anyway. A hand grabbed my hand, pulling me upward. It was so bright, it blinded me at first. The atmosphere was intense. I was in a world of love so thick it was like water. He gave me strength to get up and walk. Together we entered a room of translucent white walls, ceiling, and floor." Choking back the tears she continued, "My companion showed me my whole life. Listen! If you have ever wondered about the details of our lives, they are all recorded. Everything! He explained it all to me. I saw it as if I was living it again in real time. Great great-grandparents were right there on the living walls of images. It was my life in review." She began to cry heavily. "The hardest part? Seeing how I had contributed to my children's lives in dysfunctional ways."

“Grace, are you telling us you had an out-of-body experience while you were unconscious?”

“Yes, he woke me up in the spiritual dimension. Everything I experienced in my life took place in that room or from that room. Really, I thought I had died, and I was being shown the life that I had lived while on the earth. But I was wrong. He was showing me, teaching me about generational bloodlines and spiritual inheritances. At times he allowed me to make my own way through the information conveyed by what I was seeing. Other times he explained it.”

“Explained what, Grace?”

“The difference between life without Jesus’ influence and life with it. When I look at a person now, I can tell how things went wrong in their life and what needs to happen to undo it.”

“Undo what?” Ari asked. “You read in John 10:10, ‘The thief comes to seek, steal, and destroy.’ I witnessed it played out before my eyes.”

“Can you tell us what your companion looked like?”

“Not for now, maybe another time. But let me tell you how it ended. It was like the Bible story of the walk to Emmaus. At the very end, just before I woke up, my companion had a loaf of bread appear in his hands. He broke a piece of it off and offered it to me. At that moment my eyes were opened, my mind opened, and I knew it was Jesus.”

“We heard you calling his name as you woke up.”

“In that instant, there was so much I wanted to talk about with Him. Then I was back in the world. Now I know. I will spend the rest of my life serving Jesus. In the viewing room, He took time to answer my question. ‘How is this happening again.’ These were the last words I thought before I passed out.”

Chapter Thirty-Nine

God began to bring one provision after another to form the new healing ministry through their humble beginnings. Pastor Ari had seen the miraculous happen. In her time ministering in Africa, people were instantly healed as she prayed for them. This experience had forever changed her life. Pastor Jessalyn saw into the spiritual realm and the strongholds and spiritual warfare happening there. She had witnessed miracles in the outlying areas of Mexico while on mission trips. And Grace understood generational cycles and what went wrong in families. In her intercessory prayers, people were set free.

Worship leaders joined the ministry. Administrative people planned events. Expanding networks forged this supernatural ministry. These people had experienced the power of God outside of the country. Now their plan was to see it happen in America. Then came the email thru Linkedin to Pastor Ari. It offered her books to see the supernatural power of God come to their ministry. The books arrived, and a meeting was scheduled. An alliance was formed with Pastor Bill from Texas. For years he had a revival and healing ministry. An author friend of his often accompanied him. His name was Jesse. He was the one who sent the books to Ari through God's divine appointment.

Oklahoma City revival services came into being. Pastors Arielle, Jessalyn, Grace, Bill, and Jesse came together as a team in hopes of gaining an intersection of heaven and earth, hoping God would show up in power and strength. From the first service, people were healed. Sermons on the supernatural side of God were shared with the people. And, God showed up in each service. It is hard to explain. Sickness and injuries have a way of limiting life to where the person wonders if they will ever have their life back again. God brought healing, and life was restored time and time again. The love and appreciation for Him in those lives were paramount.

Jesse invited the ladies for coffee between services. When they had all arrived, Ari told him, "Right here is where we formed Zoe. We hashed out the details; we prayed for it to become real." Then Jesse asked each lady pastor to share a bit of their supernatural stories with him. He was blown away. That is when he knew. These ladies would be the subjects for his next few novels. A memory flashed back into Jesse's mind. Just a few months ago, while seeking God on Prayer Mountain in Moravian Falls, NC, a woman prophesied to him, "You are going to write a series of books."

Other books by Tom Donnan

Healing the Nation

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Pastors and the Presence of God

7:14 Angels on Assignment

One Door Between Us

Jessalyn