

## Prologue

Clouds of hairspray and perfume hung in the air. Bobby pins littered the floor. A single white gown hung from the ceiling, its cathedral-length train draped across multiple chairs.

Women, though we still thought of ourselves as girls, raced around in various stages of dress armed with curling irons, mascara wands, and eyeliner pencils.

I sat near a window closing my eyes and pouting my lips, so my makeup artist friend could work her magic. Standing above me, Mom fiddled with a ringlet and rained down enough Aquanet to freeze my hair for a month.

Today was the day.

Faint music wafted through the walls cuing last minute searching and scrambling. Bridesmaids snatched lilac dresses from hangers and helped each other slide them on—pulling and tugging whatever way necessary to avoid messing up their delicate hairstyles.

With the last touches of makeup applied and every curl perfectly placed on top of my head, it was my turn. A collective effort, my friends gathered my dress, unzipped it, and held it so I could step in.

The satin touched my skin, and I became a little girl again. Six years old, with a blanket wrapped around my head. Dum Dum Da Dum. My gorgeous imaginary wedding dress trailed miles behind me as I glided around the living room.

But this time, it was real. Instead of blanket fuzz, lace and intricate beading adorned the yards of fabric spread behind me.

Today, I'd become Mrs. Randy White.

A knock on the door drew my attention.

Dad stepped in. "It's time."

He scanned the room, his eyes stopping when he saw me.

Walking over, he held out his arm and whispered, "You look beautiful."

My smile widened.

I felt beautiful.

One-by-one, my bridesmaids took their place at the front of the sanctuary. The door closed behind the last girl, and the music changed.

Tears filled my eyes.

Frantic, Dad dug out his handkerchief and handed it to me.

Dabbing at the tears in an attempt to save my makeup, I looked up at him and smiled.

"I don't know why I'm crying. I'm so happy."

#

Dear Twenty-Something Me,

That feels like forever ago. It's funny how years and experience change a person. We have the same name, social security number, and the same body (well, sort of) but we're so very, very different.

I've passed that "ancient" forty-year-old mark. Yep, over the hill. But don't worry. Forty's not old anymore. It's the new twenty (or so we're telling ourself.)

So much has happened since I walked down the aisle that day. That's why I'm writing you, to share some of what I've learned along the way.

You're now Mrs. Randy White. Congratulations. And, buckle up. This life we're living is wild, crazy, and unpredictable. But it's also absolutely amazing.

Now, for some advice...

You drink way too many Dr. Peppers. Throw in some tea. Or water. It won't kill you. I promise.

Grow your hair out. The short cut you're sporting because you don't think you can pull off long hair? It makes you look old, even older than I do!

Start exercising. Now. Yes, you hate it, but, believe it or not, you're going to enjoy it one day. I'm regretting that you didn't start sooner. And I'm paying for it.

Oh and enjoy your lack of stretch marks. Just saying.

Seriously though, I could go on and on with things I'd like to tell you, but what I really want to stick with you is these three things:

First, God is always there, and He's doing little, and sometimes big things, to show Himself to you. I call them God things, those little everyday miracles that we miss if we're not looking. Open your eyes and look for the God things.

Second, face your fears. Let's be honest, you're a scaredy cat. And you worry. About everything. Stop it. Don't let your imagination run wild and make you crazy. (It's very good at doing that.) Look your fears in the face and tell them God's got you. He's your safety net. Letting go and trusting God with your fears is the most difficult, but also the most freeing thing you'll ever do. And you'll have to do it over and over and over again.

Finally, pray crazy. One of the coolest things I've learned is God actually wants to answer our prayers. Most of the time, you don't see the answers because you pray generic, cookie-cutter prayers. But eventually, you'll start praying crazy. You get honest with God, vent your frustrations, and ask Him for things that seem impossible. And He answers. In a huge way. I can't wait for you to see. But please start that crazy praying earlier!

I'd like to tell you it will always be smooth sailing and that you'll never experience sadness or pain, but we both know

that's not true. I'd also like to tell you that you've got it all figured out and won't have any regrets. Nope. Can't tell you that either.

What I can tell you is this, it's worth it. The highs are made better because of the lows.

We'll talk more later. In the meantime, remember...

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 1

"A cop?" Panic and fear lodged in my stomach. My husband of six months leaned against our kitchen counter as if he'd told me the score of a football game instead of the crazy, insane, life-changing words that just came out of his mouth.

"I've always wanted to be a cop, Janet. You knew that."

Unconsciously, I grabbed the can opener, my hands needing something to do. *Open the handle. Close. Turn the knob. Repeat.*

I retreated to the living room. Randy's footsteps followed. The kitchen gadget clanked open and closed as I waved it like a paddle ball. "I never thought you were serious. It's dangerous."

He sank into our white leather couch and hung his head. "I could tell you didn't like the idea, so I never pressed it."

*So much for Supportive Wife of the Year.*

He raised his head and drew in a deep breath, determination written across his face. "Janet, I've prayed about this, and I really feel this is what God wants me to do."

*Ah, crud. He prayed. Supportive. Be supportive.*

"Oh..." I grabbed my purse. "Well, I guess we could look into it then."

With a glint of hope in his eyes, he launched into an explanation, "I've done some research on police academies—"

"Are you hungry?" *I need to get away.* "Forget cooking. Why don't I run get us something to eat, and you can tell me about it when I get back?"

I had to escape. Couldn't let him see my tears. I couldn't disappoint him. Again.

His face dropped. He shook his head and grabbed the remote. "Sure."

I ran to my car, jumped in, and slammed the door. My shaking hands fumbled the keys but

finally managed to crank the car and head out of our neighborhood.

*I didn't marry a cop. I would never have married a cop. What happened to an office job? A safe career?*

But I saw his eyes when he told me—nervous, almost fearful, but they danced.

Since I'd known him, all of his jobs had been just that, a job. This was different, more like a passion—and that scared me.

A good wife would cheer him on; encourage him to be all he could be.

*Well, maybe I don't want to be a good wife right now. This is my life too. What is he thinking, anyway?*

His words echoed in my head. "I've prayed about this..."

"C'mon, God, a police officer? That's dangerous. I need safety. I need my husband home every night. How are we supposed to have a good marriage if we never see each other? And what about when we have kids? They can't have a daddy working crazy hours at a dangerous job."

The voice from the drive-thru speaker startled me back to reality. "Place your order whenever you're ready."

*I'll take a safe, Monday through Friday career for my husband, please.*

"Two number ones with Dr. Peppers."

Not waiting for her to verify my order, I shoved the car in drive—the gearshift taking the brunt of my frustrations.

*People shoot cops. What if he gets killed?*

As I approached the window, I flung up a desperate prayer, "God, if you really want Randy to be a police officer, I'm gonna need some help here. I'm scared."

"Here's your drinks ma'am." The lady's voice broke through the fog as my arm robotically reached for the cups.

Pulling away from the drive-thru window, a strange sensation came over me.

Breathing steadied.

Heart slowed.

Tears stopped.

Peace.

Words that weren't audible, but instead written straight on my heart, "Janet, I'll take care of Randy, and if something happens to him, I'll take care of you."

#

Dear Newlywed Me,

If you haven't figured it out yet, you did marry a cop. A dang good one too. And contrary to what you're thinking, you can be a cop's wife. You'll kiss him before every shift and tell him to be careful. Then you'll toss up a quick prayer and go about your day.

I will warn you, Police Academy is gonna be tough. He'll work all day and go to school at night. You won't see much of each other, and you're going to feel like you're in school with him. Writing papers, making flash cards, and quizzing him over laws you don't understand.

He'll come home quoting things that worry you. Divorce and suicide rates are much higher for cops. So is drug and alcohol abuse. Listen to him, nod your head, and assure him that you guys aren't in those statistics.

Because you're not.

After academy, it's going to take him a little while to get a job. No worries. His first police job is only ten minutes from home. Yep. I said first, but more about that later. Just know it all works out.

Being a police officer will be hard on him. He'll see things he can't unsee. That big heart you fell in love with will ache when he has to deal with abused kids, dead babies, and all the other horrific things police officers face. When he comes home grumpy for no reason, more than likely something happened at work. Let him be quiet for a while, but then ask him about it. Most of the time, he doesn't even realize the reason for his mood.

Pretty soon you're going to see that God made your man for police work. He comes alive in that uniform, and he's going to touch so many people. Your job is to support him and pray for him.

In the meantime, quit worrying and love on your police officer. Focus on enjoying every moment. And always remember...

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 2

Beep. *Great, his voicemail.* "Hey, Babe. Looks like Jadyn's not gonna wait 'til tomorrow. I think I'm having contractions. Call me back when you have a sec."

Although scheduled to be induced the next day, Randy's day off, our daughter apparently

had other plans.

No point in getting all worked up yet. My Lamaze teacher's mantra resounded in my head. "First time pregnancies generally take a good long time. Don't rush to the hospital or you'll just be sent back home."

I glanced in the mirror. *Yikes. Better fix myself up. Don't want to scare our little girl the first time she sees her mommy.*

A few seconds later, another contraction hit. *Only two minutes apart. That can't be right.*

My breathing slowed to normal, and the phone rang. Randy.

"Are you okay? I'm on a traffic accident, but I'm trying to get somebody to cover, so I can leave." His voice was filled with fear and frustration.

"I'm fine, but my contractions are only two minutes apart."

Subdued panic replaced the fear. "I'll be home as soon as I can. Love you."

Over the next half-hour, I alternated between contractions every two minutes and Randy calling every five. He was worried and aggravated no one would relieve him. I was in pain and only wanting him.

*What if he doesn't make it home in time? I don't want to call anyone else.*

Finally, the garage door opened. Music to my ears.

*I'm not alone anymore. With Randy by my side, everything felt better.*

The door flung open, and a blur of black polyester flew past the bedroom door. "Janet?"

"I'm in the bedroom. Grab the bag out of the closet. I'll be there in a sec."

Before I could move, he appeared in the doorway, bag in hand. He switched his weight from one foot to the other. "Um. We'd better get you to the hospital."

Sitting on the side of the bed, hunched over as far as my belly would let me, I pleaded. "I know. But I don't want to stand up."

His mouth dropped open, but he quickly recovered. "Well, I don't want to deliver my own baby. Let's go."

He crossed the room, helped me off the bed and herded me to the car.

Merging onto the interstate, our rush met rush hour. We became ants marching in formation, all going to the same place. Through swishing windshield wipers, all we saw were three parallel lines of red brake lights.

"I'm sorry, Babe. I can't go any faster. People aren't paying attention to my flashers. I should've driven my patrol car home." He shook his head and gripped the steering wheel like he wanted to choke it.

This man, who was always in control and knew what to do, was helpless as I crushed his

hand and writhed in pain with every contraction.

The normal twenty-minute drive took forty-five. Randy wheeled our Expedition into a police parking spot in front of the hospital doors. I contemplated mentioning he wasn't actually in his police car. But, as another contraction hit, I decided we'd just pay a ticket if we had to.

Riding the elevator with Randy and a man in a suit, I faked a smile while attempting to stand through the next contraction—anything to prevent the stranger from seeing my pain.

After what seemed like an eternity, we arrived at the nurses station.

"My wife's in labor."

She cocked her head toward me. "You walked up here?"

Puzzled and afraid I might have done something wrong, I grunted through gritted teeth, "How else was I supposed to get up here?"

"Well, it's just that most women don't walk."

I glanced at Randy, who shrugged and rolled his eyes. I'd never been "most women."

She led us to a room and handed me a white folded square. "Put this on. Opening in the back. Someone will be with you in a minute."

Between contractions, we managed to get my clothes off and the gown on.

Another nurse walked in with a clipboard. "I just have a few questions to ask you. Name?"

"Janet White"

Apparently, I was doing too good of a job remaining calm because she continued to rattle off questions.

"Religious preference?"

*What does my religious preference matter when I'm having contractions every minute? Maybe if I hadn't walked myself up here, they wouldn't be asking these questions.*

"Baptist." I doubled over with another contraction. Randy rushed to my side and rubbed my back.

After the pain subsided, the nurse motioned me toward the table. "Maybe I should go ahead and check you."

*Ya think?*

I lay back on the table, and after a few seconds, the nurse shifted to warp speed. "We're gonna go ahead and get you to a delivery room."

*About time.*

Clipboard tossed aside, everything became a whirlwind of activity. The next thing I knew, a blonde nurse climbed on the stretcher with me. "Don't push. Do not push."

*What? You've got to be kidding me. She's holding my baby in.*

Doors flew by in a blur as another nurse sped my gurney down a hallway with Randy running to keep up. They wheeled me into a large room and parked my bed.

"Where's my doctor?" I pleaded.

"She's on her way. Luckily, she was still in the parking lot after finishing up a previous delivery."

Contraction after contraction racked my body. With each one, Blondie chanted, "Don't push. Just don't push"

*How am I supposed to do that?*

The whole room sighed as the doctor raced in. Before she could utter a word, I begged, "Can I please have an epidural?"

Standing across the room, holding up freshly washed hands, she laughed. "Oh, honey, it's way too late for that."

My mouth gaped but was soon filled with a scream loud enough every woman on the floor would be kissing her anesthesiologist.

Jadyn Leigh White came into this world at lightning speed a few minutes later—less than fifteen minutes after we arrived at the hospital.

They immediately put her under a heat lamp across the room. Randy walked over to look. My big police officer husband, in full uniform, gun still in his holster, smiled and looked at me with tears in his eyes. "She's beautiful."

He walked back, kissed my forehead, and whispered, "I love you. You did so good. Thank you."

Stroking my hair, he stared back at our little girl. Struggle shown in his eyes. I knew he wanted to comfort me, but also wanted to be with his brand new baby girl. "It's okay. I'm fine. Go be with Jadyn."

He spent the next few minutes like a ping-pong ball between his two girls. Once she was warm enough, the nurse handed Randy his newborn daughter. With awkward and unsure hands as big as her body, he held her close. As he walked toward me, tears dampening his cheeks, the picture etched in my memory—Jadyn's first bullet-proof-vest hug. He laid her in my arms, sat on the side of the bed, and leaned his head against mine.

As we admired our sweet baby, Randy noticed the nurses wiping their eyes. "Do you cry at every delivery?"

The nurse in the blue scrubs looked up from what she was doing and smiled, "No, it's just big police officers crying at the sight of their newborn babies that gets us."

Randy blushed as we all laughed. Even through the laughter, my love for him grew to a depth I never thought possible.

As I looked down at Jadyn, however, fear overwhelmed me. *I'm responsible for this child.*



*What am I gonna do now?*

The smell of Randy's cologne calmed my fears as he leaned down and kissed Jadyn on the head, nothing but pure love in his eyes.

After the doctor finished, she flipped a trashcan over, sat down, and rattled off a few instructions. Then she grinned. "You almost had that little girl in the car." She looked at Randy and pointed to me, "Next time, if she even farts and thinks it's a contraction, get her to the hospital."

#

Dear Terrified New Mommy Me,

Boy is your life about to change! You just had the most amazing little girl. She'll start out calm, sweet, and sleepy. It will actually take several weeks for you to get a picture of those pretty blue eyes because she simply refuses to open them.

But soon, her strong will and spunk emerge. She'll test your patience one minute and have you laughing at her wit and contagious grin the next.

But right now you're terrified. You've heard so many people talk about that instant love when they first lay eyes on their newborn. You don't feel it. And you're wondering if you ever will. So many questions are running through your mind. Is something wrong with me? Can I do this? Will I be a good mom?

Don't panic. Yeah, I know. Impossible for you, right? But here's the thing. It's your hormones. You're going to battle with postpartum depression. Crying, stress, feeling overwhelmed and totally inadequate. Things every new mom goes through, but after a few weeks, you still can't shake it.

It does get better though. Listen to Randy. Ask for help. And call your doctor sooner rather than later. You've gone through depression before. Admit your struggle and get help.

The good news? After some time, this mom thing will feel much more natural. I'd like to tell you that you'll quit worrying, but you won't. You're a mom now. It comes with the territory. There'll be a few times your only prayer will be begging God to not let you mess her up too bad. It won't be easy, and, to be honest, it's gonna get harder, but you can do it.

For now though, enjoy that beautiful little girl. Actually, try to remember to do that every day, even when you want to strangle her. And, yes, you will want to strangle her.

You're gonna be fine. Lean on God. He'll pull you through.

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

### Chapter 3

“Well, I bombed the interview.”

Randy’s voice echoed through the phone.

“Wait. How do you know? Is it already over?”

When he left this morning, I kissed him and wished him luck, praying his interview would go well.

Randy had now been with Alvarado PD for a couple of years, but we wanted to move to the country. Jadyn needed room to run and play, and we were tired of living in a neighborhood where we could reach out and touch our neighbors. Literally. We weren’t “reach out and touch” kind of people..

My parents had land we could build on, but that hinged on Randy getting a different job. Alvarado would be too far to drive. So, when he got the call from Bridgeport, we were excited. Only thirty minutes from where we wanted to live, and we’d heard good things about the department.

So, needless to say, this “bombed the interview” call from Randy disturbed me.

Frustration echoed in his voice. “I’m in my truck. We broke for lunch. The fitness test is next, but I don’t think I’m going back.”

“Like you’re gonna just leave?” *Probably not the most supportive tone, but he can’t just leave.*

“Janet, the interview was horrible. One of the sergeants was a total jerk, and I know I didn’t answer the questions the way they wanted.”

“You knew they would be tough on you. That’s how police interviews are. You’ve been through this before.” I bit my pen cap, and twirled the cord of my work phone. *God, please calm him down.*

“Not like this. Most of the interviewers were okay. It’s not like they were easy, but more what you expect. But this one guy. Ugh. I seriously wanted to choke him a couple of times. I can’t work with someone like that.”

*What do I do? I think he should go to the fitness test, but I don’t want to push him.*

“The worst is behind you. Why don’t you just go back and finish it out?”

“What’s the point? There’s no way I’ll get this job. I’m not even sure I want it.”

I rubbed my temples. *He doesn’t need to quit.* “Maybe you look at this as practice for the

next department.”

“I don’t know. I’ll let you go.”

Before I could think of what to say next, he hung up. I replaced the phone in the cradle and dropped my head in my hands.

*Ugh. That went well. I guess Bridgeport isn’t where God wants him after all.*

#

Dear Frustrated Me,

So wrong. So very, very wrong. Bridgeport is exactly where God wants him. Breathe easy. Randy decides to stay and take the fitness test. But he comes home and tells you he bombed that as well.

A few days later, Bridgeport calls and offers him the job, but only after they interview you. Yep, you heard me. They believe that an officer can’t do his job well if he doesn’t have support at home.

That’s just one of the many things you’ll come to love about Bridgeport PD. Those men and women will become part of your family one day.

But enough of the mushy stuff. As you both will soon find out, they loved Randy and thought he did great during the interview. He answered every question exactly the way they wanted.

In a few months, you’ll start building your house. That’s gonna seem like the longest eighteen months of your life, but it also ranks up there as some of your favorite times. You, Dad, and Randy will spend most weekends building while Mom entertains Jady. You’ll be labeled the electrician, a skill you will use many more times. Actually, you gain a lot of skills, as well as some wonderful memories. Cherish it.

Oh, a few other things. Even though you plan to turn this into a workshop when you build your dream home, it’s not going to happen. You and Randy decide to stay in this house instead of spending a ridiculous amount of money to build again across the driveway. So...I beg you, build as if this house is permanent instead of temporary. Because it is. For instance, save yourself tons of headaches, squash that penny-pinching voice in your head, and for Pete’s sake (and mine) put the stinkin’ studs closer together when you’re framing! Yes, it saves money, but it’s a pain when you hang shelves, pictures, TV’s, basically anything.

Even with the corners you cut to save money, you're gonna love that house and love living in the country.

Randy will thrive at Bridgeport. He'll earn Officer of the Year, and be promoted to Corporal and later Sergeant. In fact, in future interviews, he becomes the tough sergeant. I'm sure he was referred to as a jerk a few times. Turns out, that's the way they figure out how a person handles pressure and confrontation. Ironic and kind of funny, honestly.

Jadyn will become a true country girl. She and Randy love to go on treasure hunts for rocks and animal tracks. But she claims her favorite part of living in the country is getting to yell as loud as she wants because nobody can hear her. Crazy kid.

You enjoy the country as well, but...well, please remember I say this in love, but lighten up! Don't be such a party pooper. Tromp in the mud. Ride four-wheelers in the rain. Go on those treasure hunts with them. Don't make me regret you being a stick-in-the-mud.

You won't see it for years, but God's putting you exactly where you need to be and surrounding you with people who will become like family to you. Actually, some of them will become family, but more on that later.

Just know, God's working behind the scenes. He's got you.

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 4

"Mommy!"

Not two steps into the house, Jadyn barreled into me. Stress-induced knots in my neck from a problem-filled workday screamed as I hauled her into my arms. I wrapped her up in a bear hug as she covered my face with little girl kisses. With each peck, the day's problems and worries moved further from my mind.

Randy reclined in his chair, laptop balanced on his legs—his typical position for researching whatever product, gadget, or idea occupied his mind at the moment. Jadyn wriggled free to reposition one of her fifteen stuffed animals spread out on the living room floor. Cartoons served as white noise to their separate activities.

I sat on the arm of Randy's recliner and rubbed my hand over his prickly head.

He gave me a half-smile and leaned up to kiss me. “Hey, Babe.”

“Whatcha lookin at?”

“Insurance.”

Before I could open my mouth to ask what kind or why, his focus returned to the screen and Jadyn tugged on my arm. “Mommy, look at my farm.”

*Probably just some commercial he saw.*

“Your farm looks awesome, Sweetie.” Stepping over animal figurines and other toys on the way to our bedroom, the pile of laundry in the hall caught my eye. Gone all day, and the house looked the same as when I left—no laundry done and dirty dishes piled near the sink. Jadyn still had her pajamas on and her hair looked like Medusa with curls. Tension returned, knotting my neck.

Yanking a drawer open, I grabbed a T-shirt and comfy shorts. I shouldn’t be mad. If I had asked him to do laundry or pick up the house, he would have, but I didn’t ask. The problem was I didn’t usually have to ask.

On a normal day at home, Randy would’ve helped my dad with a project or taken Jadyn exploring on the four-wheeler. He’d have done a couple loads of laundry and loaded the dishwasher. Might’ve even cleaned the bathrooms if he had time. But the last few weeks, he’d done nothing but sit in his chair and watch TV. Didn’t go outside. Wasn’t working on any projects. Nothing. His ankle had healed. He was back on the streets where he liked to be, but his mood remained blah. It just didn’t make sense.

Rationalizing my frustrations, I resolved to have a good evening.

“So, what are we gonna do for dinner?” I yelled from our closet.

“I don’t know. Anything works for me.”

*So, I’ve got to figure out dinner too. Great.*

I rounded the corner back into the living room to find him still engrossed in the computer screen. “Why are you looking at insurance?”

A look I couldn’t read flitted across his face, but immediately vanished. He followed me into the kitchen, laptop in tow.

“I’ve been researching the insurance business.”

“The insurance business?”

He chewed his thumbnail. “I’ve just been thinking about finding something else to do. Thought I could start my own agency.”

“Like quit police work? Why?” Panic mixed with frustration. I had to choose my words carefully. In the past, he’d accused me of bursting all his idea bubbles. But this wasn’t his typical let’s-start-a-side-business idea. He was actually talking about changing careers.

“Yeah. With the hours and stuff, I’ve just been thinking we could have more family time if I

had a normal job.”

“More family time is always good, but you love being a police officer.”

His reasoning didn’t make sense. Yes, we hated the crazy hours, but we always made it work. And, lately, between me working from home and his hours improving, we were seeing a lot more of each other.

“Well, my ankle too. It’s never going to be a hundred percent.” He stared at the computer screen as he talked.

Puzzled, I tried to read his face. “Obviously, I’d love for you to be in a safer line of work, but you can’t just jump into something. We need your paycheck. Besides, I thought you loved police work?”

His lips pursed and annoyance clouded his face.

*Dang it. I did it again. Bubble burst.*

As he turned toward the living room, I exhaled and steadied my voice. “Why don’t you tell me more about what you’ve found?”

Relief relaxed his shoulders as he launched into his hours worth of research.

While we cooked and throughout dinner, he explained his plan between the interruptions of a four-year-old wanting attention. One of the large insurance companies had a training program where you’d get a salary while you built your business. They’d even help you set up your office and teach you how to get clients.

After dinner, we suspended our conversation long enough to play with Jadyne for a few minutes and get her to bed.

As I walked out of her room, Randy patted the couch beside him. “I wanna show you some more.”

I leaned on his shoulder while he navigated their website and rattled off the perks.

“All I have to do to get started is pay for this study guide and pass the test.”

“I admit it sounds like something we might be able to swing financially, but is this really something you can see yourself doing? In an office every day? Calling people to drum up business?”

“Well, I don’t like the cold-calling, but hopefully I’d only have to do that for a few months. Being in an office every day?” He paused as he thought about it. “At least it would get me normal hours and out of police work.”

This wasn’t adding up. Randy loved being a cop. It’s what he’d always wanted to do, and it’s what God made him to do. I’d seen it every time his eyes lit up when he told me about his day. There was more to this.

I snuggled closer and looked into his eyes. “I get all that, but if the insurance business isn’t what God wants you to do—what he made you to do—you’re not gonna be happy.”

*Then again, when was the last time I saw him happy?*

Silence. He picked at his fingernail.

“Babe, what’s going on?” I grabbed his hand and interlaced our fingers. “Why haven’t you been yourself lately? Why are you wanting out of police work?”

He stood and began pacing.

“You know how there are dreams that are just dreams and then there’s those that feel like they’re gonna come true?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve had the same dream three or four times now, and I can tell it’s one of those dreams that could come true.”

The look on his face told me I didn’t want to know what was coming next, but I had to ask. “Okay. What was the dream?”

“There’s a baby in the back bedroom—it’s a nursery...”

“Well, we are trying to have a baby...”

“But I’m not here.”

Puzzled, I stared at him. Waiting.

“I’m dead.”

“Dead?” Fear coursed down to my fingers. I’d heard stories of people in his family having dreams come true. I’d even had a couple, but they were silly ones. *Please, God, no. Let’s this really just be a dream.*

“I’m sure it’s nothing, but it just got me thinking.”

“Yeah.” I stammered trying to find the right words. “I mean the insurance business would be safer.”

He shrugged, sat down in his chair, and reclined. “It’s just something I’m looking into, but I’d like to buy the study guide and give it a try. Okay?”

*Now he’s all relaxed and it’s nothing?*

“Sure. Yeah. That’s fine.”

Seemingly satisfied and burden lifted, he settled in to watch TV.

But my mind reeled. *It’s stupid to get this worked up over a dream. Maybe he’s right and it’s nothing.* Then, I remembered a dream I had a few years before...

We lived in Crowley at the time. He’d only been working at Bridgeport for a year.

One morning, around 6:30, I bolted straight up in bed, sweating and terrified, crying before I was really awake. Unable to breathe through my sobs, I tried to calm myself. But nothing would stop my racing mind. I needed to hear his voice, make sure he was okay.

But he'd already be at work, and he wasn't allowed to carry his cell phone on duty. The only way to get in touch with him was to call dispatch, and I only bothered them if it was something important.

To avoid hyperventilating, I deemed this important and dialed the phone.

One ring. *This is ridiculous. You're being a baby.*

Two rings. *Randy's gonna think you're crazy.*

"Bridgeport Police Department. How may I help you?"

*Can't back out now. Say something without sounded like a crybaby.* "Um. Yeah. This is Janet White. I'm sorry to bother you, but.." Hiccup. "could I speak to Randy?"

"Oh, sure, Janet. He's actually right here. Hang on just a sec."

*What was I gonna tell him? I had a bad dream? Geez.*

"Hello?"

At the sound of his voice, what little composure I had vanished and I disintegrated into a blubbering mess.

"Randy? I..." My sobs wouldn't let me complete a sentence.

"Janet, what's wrong?"

"I know this... is stupid, but I.. I had a dream." Sucking in a gulp of air, my voice grew stronger. "I needed to hear your voice. Make sure you were okay."

"I'm fine. Just about to go out. What was the dream?"

"Jadyn and I were at a beach. I was watching her play with another little kid. The little boy asked where her daddy was and she said..." A knot formed in my throat blocking the words. I swallowed hard. He was busy and I needed to get it out so he could go back to work. "I don't have a daddy. He died...."

Even years later, the dream still caused a knot in my stomach. And now, his dream?

Tears threatened, so I ducked my head to hide my eyes and hurried to the restroom. Randy was engrossed in a crime show, so I escaped unnoticed.

Hands braced on the counter, I stared into the mirror. *Deep breaths. They're just dreams. Typical for a police family.*

But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake it. The fear remained.

*Maybe if I didn't get pregnant.*

As much as I wanted to believe I could stop something bad from happening, logic kept



creeping back in. We couldn't stop living life. Couldn't stop trying to grow our family because of a couple of bad dreams.

With each month that passed, though, I lived in hope and fear at the same time. We wanted another child. But what if?

#

Dear Panicked Me,

I wish I could tell you not to freak out. Oh, how I wish I could tell you that.

But what I will say is don't stop living. Instead of letting these dreams paralyze you with fear, use them as a wake-up call. Look around and fall in love with your life. Memorize each moment because one day you'll replay those memories over and over in your mind.

Randy will use his dream as a wake-up call, but a slightly different kind. He's going to share his dream and his fears with Assistant Chief Stanford. They're going to talk it out, and Randy will decide the dream is a reminder to be as safe as he can on the job.

That conversation is a turning point. Randy doesn't become an insurance agent. He would've been miserable behind a desk.

You'll get the old Randy back. You will see his smile and hear that unforgettable chuckle again. And his passion for police work returns. Your house will be back to normal, at least for a little while.

I'd like to tell you more, but I can't. Not right now.

Focus on living your life to the fullest and enjoy every moment. But mostly, love on Randy and Jady. Cuddle. Play. Hug. Kiss. Spend tons of time together and say "I love you" as much as possible.

We'll talk again. I promise. But in the meantime, remember...

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 5

My doctor's words from the week before rumbled in my head as the questions on the tell-us-your-life-story clipboard stared back at me.

*Probably nothing.*

*Family history.*

*Schedule a mammogram.*

After returning the clipboard to the receptionist, I sat by Randy in the waiting room. His fingers interlaced with mine. A few minutes later, I heard my name.

A nurse led me through a locked door to a private dressing area. It looked more like a locker room at an upscale fitness center—until they handed me the sexy pink hospital gown.

After I dressed, if you can call it that, a lady in blue scrubs led me into another waiting room. Magazines littered tables and plush teal chairs lined the walls. I was left to join the other pink-uniformed women dotting the room.

I adjusted the thin fabric in an attempt not only to remain decent, but also to block the draft sneaking up my new uniform. Keeping my head down, I glanced around the room--inmates awaiting booking.

Every few minutes, a door would open and a voice call a name. But it was only a voice. I refused to look up and make eye contact with the warden.

“Mrs. Smith.”

“Mrs. Waterfield.”

“Mrs. Hall.”

Each time a woman would grab the pink fabric of her gown, stand, and walk stiffly toward the room. *Click*. The door would close behind her.

With each click, I imagined what might in the secret room. A huge torture machine?

I'd heard the stories. Boobs flat as pancakes. Horrific pain. Laughing nurses. Torture. Plain and simple.

“Mrs. White.”

My head snapped up from the magazine I pretended to read. Slowly, I walked toward the voice, hands clasped in front of me, bunching the fabric together. My stomach flip-flopped trying to run away as I neared the chamber of horrors.

The lady in bright cheerful scrubs smiled as I walked past—effective tactics of a professional torturer. Luring the victim in with sweetness, calming her before the brutality starts.

In the center of the room stood a huge machine—the pancake maker. The seemingly nice

lady asked a few questions and described the process.

“Now, I need you to untie your robe and step up to the machine.”

Always the rule follower, I did as I was told. The machine whirred as she pushed buttons to move it up and down until it was strategically positioned at boob height.

Then, at her direction, I flopped my boob on the small metal shelf. Well, I really can't say flopped. You can't flop tiny. Maybe propped is a better word.

“Great. Now stand up straight and be very still.”

I stood up and stuck out my chest. *How do I stand up straight and keep it on the shelf?*

“Now, I'm going to need to position you.”

And with that, a perfect stranger made it to second base as she maneuvered me into position, whatever that meant.

The whirring sound started.

“This may cause a little temporary pressure.”

*Pressure? Is that code for excruciating pain?*

The clear flat piece of glass closed in on my not-flat-yet boobs. I forced my face to remain emotionless. After all, this lady probably enjoyed her job as chief torturer. She would not get the satisfaction of seeing me sweat.

As the machine closed in, images flashed through my mind of floppy socks hanging from my chest.

Then, I felt it.

The torture chamber compressed. I prepared to stifle a scream. I waited for the searing pain, but it didn't come.

Uncomfortable? Yes.

Painful? Not really.

The lady released the not-so-torturous machine, thanked me, and directed me out a different door. Another waiting room. More pink uniforms.

I took a seat and grabbed another magazine, head tucked, eyes diverted. It could've been GQ for all I knew, and I was probably holding it upside down. But my mind was on the torture machine.

It wasn't so tortuous after all. Why?

Only one logical explanation. They didn't have to squish little boobs as far...

“Mrs. White.”

I followed the nurse to a small room with a bed. A man in a white coat swooshed in. “Hello,

Mrs. White. I'm Dr. Jonathan. I've reviewed your results, and we saw a couple of spots. They could be nothing, but we want to get a better look. The nurse is going to do a sonogram. Then we'll go over the results."

*A couple of spots?* My heart raced. "Can my husband come back?"

"Sure. We'll get him."

The nurse directed me to lay back. She squirted the gel on my chest and maneuvered the wand around.

Sonograms were supposed to be for bellies—not boobs. Five years before I'd been excited to see my baby fluttering in my stomach. This time panic settled there.

Randy appeared as the nurse finished. As his eyes locked with mine, I exhaled the breath I'd inadvertently been holding. I redressed and recounted my conversation with the doctor. He sat beside me on the bed, and we waited. No sound in the room. There was nothing to say. After a few minutes, another nurse ushered us into the doctor's office.

Black & white grainy images hung against a light box.

"We'd like to do a needle biopsy on these spots. They could just be calcium deposits, but we want to get a better look."

Panic and worry flashed in Randy's eyes. I couldn't think.

We thanked the doctor, made the appointment for my biopsy, and left.

Hand in hand, we walked to the car in silence.

Everything the doctor said, forgotten. Everything, except one phrase.

Our brains latched onto one single word.

Six letters terrifying letters.

Cancer.

#

Dear Squished Boobs Me,

Well, that was interesting. Miss Modest flashing her boobs and getting them squished. Great day, huh? And that needle biopsy you'll be doing in a couple of days? I can't lie to you. It won't be pleasant. Funny thing is the worst part isn't the needle or pain. It's having to lay perfectly still in weird positions. Have fun with that!

In the middle of all of this, you'll also get the news that Randy's Uncle Raymond doesn't recover from the

heart surgery he had the day of your mammogram. His loss will be pretty tough on Randy, especially amidst worrying about you. They were close, as evidenced in the pictures you see at his funeral.

He loved you and Randy. And he sure loved Jady. She was like a granddaughter to him instead of a great-niece. I mean, he did keep her every day for the first year of her life.

Remember his smile. You never saw him without it. And remember his positive outlook on life. Hold onto that. You're going to need it over the next few months.

Now, enough sad stuff. Uncle Raymond wouldn't want you moping around. Smile. Then give Randy and Jady a big hug, just the way Raymond would've.

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 6

"Don't call. Don't call. Don't call." I repeated the day's mantra—willing my phone to remain silent. And it had worked. So far.

*"Knowledge is power?" Humph. No thank you. I'll go with "what I don't know can't hurt me." Not knowing is scary, but bad news is worse.*

The clock on my computer switched to 5:00, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

*Quitting time. Whew. Delayed until Monday. Procrastination is my friend.*

Closing my laptop, I shifted into weekend mode and grabbed the remote. The short commute was a definite perk of working from home. Turned sideways in the chair, I tucked my legs into my comfy movie-watching position.

Intent on calming my frazzled nerves, I searched for a chick flick. Randy left for work a few hours earlier, and Jady was in Oklahoma with my parents leaving me to a rare evening alone in sole possession of the remote.

After a big swig of Dr. Pepper, my stress-busting juice, tension eased from my shoulders. Engrossed in my chosen chick-flick, the musical ring of the phone startled me. I bolted out of my chair, stared at the clock, and froze.

*It's too late for them to call, right?*

I glanced at the caller ID and didn't recognize the number.

*Crud. What if it's them? I could just ignore it.*

The phone screamed again. My eyes locked on the red-encased iPhone—white knuckles attempting to choke it into submission.

*Oh, good grief, Janet, you're a big girl. Answer the dang phone.*

Scrunching my eyes, I took a deep breath and punched the green button. “Hello?”

“Hello, Mrs. White?”

*Formalities. It's either them or a salesperson. Nobody refers to me as Mrs. White.*

I cringed. Sat. Then stood.

“Yes?” *Please be a salesman.* My heart wanted to leap from my chest and race to another room.

“This is Dr. Jonathan at Solis Women’s Health Center. We just received the test results from your biopsy. I didn’t want you to have to wait until Monday.”

I almost laughed. He didn’t know me very well. I always wanted to wait.

My heart thudded against my ribs, but I forced myself to focus on the doctor’s words.

“I’m sorry to tell you this, especially over the phone, but the biopsy confirms it. The suspicious spots we saw on your mammogram are an early form of cancer.”

The pacing stopped. The “C” word. I needed to sit, but my legs refused to move.

*I have cancer?*

After a few seconds, my mind registered the doctor’s droning voice. How much did I miss? Randy needed to know details—I needed to know. I grabbed a pen and feverishly scribbled notes on the back of a receipt.

“Do you have any questions?”

Questions? I should have questions. Randy would have questions. I tried to think of some, but nothing came to mind. My brain twisted into a cyclone of “what ifs and whys” refusing to slow down long enough for a coherent thought. I politely thanked the doctor and punched “End.”.

In a daze, I switched to autopilot and did the only thing I knew to do. Call Randy.

His upbeat voice answered on the second ring. “Hey, Babe. Can I call you back? I’m on a stop.”

“Sure. But call me back as soon as you can.”

A stop for Randy could be anything from a minor traffic violation to a murder investigation. Knowing it could be a while, I tossed the phone on the couch and paced the floor. Fingernails gnawed shorter with every step. What next?

Research. That's it. I wouldn't get in to see a surgeon for days. I needed answers now.

Grabbing my almost illegible notes, I sat down at my laptop. The funny letters spelling "Google" mocked me as I typed "DCIS" in the little rectangular box. The doctor explained the acronym, but I hadn't understood the big words, much less how to spell it. As soon as I clicked the search button, the page filled with link after link of information on DCIS, or, in doctor-speak, Ductal Carcinoma In Situ.

Lost in medical mumbo jumbo, my ringing phone jarred me out of my research-induced trance. Relief flooded me as the caller ID identified the only voice I wanted to hear.

I swallowed and did my best to sound cheerful, "Hey, Babe."

"Hey, is everything okay?"

I wasn't sure how to tell him, so I did what I always did and just laid it out there.

"The doctor called. Said he got the results of my biopsy." Trying to soften the news, I cleared my throat. "It's an early form of cancer."

I paused to hear only the faint whoosh of his breathing.

"He said we caught it early." Wanting to reassure him, I repeated what the doctor said, or at least what I could remember.

My rock was speechless.

The expert at keeping it together and hiding emotions offered no words. And that was exactly what I needed. His silence said more than words ever could. He loved me so much he was terrified.

"He said the prognosis is good," I continued

Randy's soft voice finally came over the line, shaky, yet filling me with strength. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Gonna spend the evening doing some research to get a better understanding of this thing."

"We can look together when I get home. It's gonna be fine. I love you."

"I love you too. I'll see you after work. Be careful."

Disconnecting the call severed my support line—alone again.

I settled on the couch with my laptop, a notepad, and pen. I was on a mission to find out as much about DCIS as possible. With every article and fact, emotions flitted between comfort, terror, and determination.

Although it was considered very early stages, this type of cancer was known to "jump" around. Since it wasn't generally in one lump, recurrence was fairly common. Words like lumpectomy, mastectomy, radiation, and chemotherapy leapt off the page.

My thoughts wandered to my mother. Diagnosed with breast cancer when she was forty-two, she had a lumpectomy and was cancer-free for almost thirty years. Then, only two months

ago, she had a recurrence and underwent another lumpectomy.

Only thirty-two years old, I had a lot of life left to live, and I refused to live in constant fear of the evil C-word coming back. Alone in my house, just me and my laptop, I made a decision — I wanted a double mastectomy. Deal with it once and get it taken care of. I wasn't attached to my boobs. No point in keeping them around to cause more worry.

As I continued the research, Randy called every few minutes. An hour into my mission, I heard a car drive up. Puzzled, I looked out the window to see his police car pull into the carport.

I met him outside as he unfolded out of his cruiser. My emotions bounced from confusion over why he was here to guilt because he left work early. My heart finally landed on relief. He walked to me, wrapped me in his arms, and held me tight. With my face pressed against his bulletproof vest, tears flowed. In his arms was the one place this strong, independent, stubborn woman let down her guard.

"You didn't have to come home. I told you I was fine." My voice cracked belying the words I spoke.

"I wanted to be with you." He brushed my hair off my face and looked into my eyes. "Besides, I couldn't concentrate anyway. I called AC. He told me to go home."

Randy's Assistant Chief became my favorite person at that moment. He sent me the one person I needed.

Arm in arm, we walked into the house. "He even wanted me to come out to his house so he could pray with me, but I wanted to get home. He prayed for us over the phone, though."

The gesture touched me, but I wasn't surprised. That was the Bridgeport Police Department.

Settled on the couch together, his presence took the weight off my shoulders.

As is typical when I'm nervous, I rattled off everything I'd discovered at warp speed. With a solemn look, Randy processed the information with nods and an occasional question.

Then, he asked the one I'd been waiting for. "So, what's the treatment?"

Bracing myself, I took a deep breath, stood, and faced him. "I don't want to live the rest of our lives worrying about it coming back. We're too young for that. I just want to chop 'em off."

My announcement may not have been politically correct, but Randy understood what I meant and knew I was serious. And he agreed.

He pulled me onto his lap, kissed me and looked into my eyes. "Janet, as long as yours isn't like my dad's, I don't care what we do. I just want to keep you around."

His words, full of love, still startled me. Two years earlier, his dad had been diagnosed with terminal esophageal cancer, but this was different. Right?

This was just breast cancer. My mom underwent surgery. A little radiation the second time, but nothing major. Everything would be fine. Terminal? No. I wasn't worried about death.

Chemo, on the other hand, terrified me.



News traveled fast, and I was put on the prayer list at church. That Sunday, several people approached me with condolences—as if I'd already died or something. Others came with tears in their eyes, unable to speak words other than they'd pray for me. I hugged each one, thanked them and nonchalantly assured them everything would be fine.

It seemed as if everyone wanted to talk me out of mastectomies. The looks on their faces said, "Why on earth would you *want* to have them removed?" The baffled reactions unsettled me.

Later, I shared my confusion with Randy. "I guess most women are just way more attached to their boobs than I am."

He laughed, but then his smile faded slightly. "You don't need them to live. I don't understand why people would choose to risk the cancer coming back." Then, he got that quirky grin on his face. "Besides, I didn't marry you for you boobs!"

I stuck my chest out and walked toward him, "Well, that's pretty obvious! Not much here to fall for."

#

Dear "Chop em off" Me,

You've made up your mind. Eliminate future worries. Just chop them off.

Rest easy, your surgeon agrees. A double mastectomy (or bi-lateral, as she refers to it) is the recommended course of action. During your visit with her, she will explain the tests that will be run after surgery to determine if they got it all. Those results will determine whether chemo or radiation will be required.

Chemo and radiation. You've been diagnosed with cancer, but it's those two little words that terrify you. You've seen mom handle radiation, so that one's not as bad. But chemo?

Knots form in your stomach at the mere mention of the word. Sick all the time. Losing your hair. You've always considered yourself pretty tough, but can you endure that? What about Randy? Working a full-time

stressful job and nursing a sick wife too. And Jady? She shouldn't have to see her mom frail and bald.

Your way of coping? Just don't think about it. Stick your head in the sand. Not the most mature way to handle it, but it's what you do.

Honestly, I think your cancer is harder on Randy than you. Dying isn't on your radar, but it stays at the forefront of his mind. He knows cancer will take his dad. Naturally, he's terrified it will take you too.

Should you think more about the possibility of dying? You kind of feel guilty because you don't. Everyone else sure seems to be thinking about it. But it just doesn't seem like a possibility. Is it because you've never known anyone to die of cancer? Maybe.

Whatever it is, keep listening. There's no need to worry. You're gonna be fine. I'm here to write you this letter, aren't I?

Get ready for doctor's appointments, hospital gowns, and lots of talk about your boobs, but always remember...

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 7

"Take a picture."

Confused, I looked up from a magazine to see my husband grinning as he held a clear liquid-filled pouch near his face—a breast implant.

Forgetting my stress and worries, I broke into a fit of laughter. "What if the doctor comes in and sees you?"

"Ah. It's alright. We'll hear him coming." He handed me his phone to snap the photo. "I wanna email it to your brother."

Between giggles, I took a picture of his wide-eyed happy face next to the largest implant he could find.

"Once he sees what it is, he'll just delete it. You know how embarrassed he gets about stuff like that."

With a mischievous gleam in his eye, he winked. “Exactly.”

He fiddled with his phone a minute and then returned his focus to the two silver trays holding various sizes of implants. After inspecting several, he handed me one. “Feel this. It feels more real than the others.”

“Never in a million years would I have believed we'd be in a plastic surgeon's office feeling breast implants.” The silicone-filled pouch mushed between my fingers. “But I guess I didn't expect to have breast cancer either, especially at thirty-two.”

My smile drooped as I handed the rubbery pouch back to him and flipped pages of the magazine again.

*I'm too young for breast cancer.*

Blankly staring at the magazine pages, I became lost in my thoughts.

“What'd ya think? Double D's?” Randy, with an implant in each hand, held them to his chest. As usual, his antics brought a smile to my face. I shook my head and laughed.

A few seconds later, we heard footsteps coming toward the door. Like a kid caught with a dirty magazine, Randy pitched the implants back on the tray and slid into the guest chair as the door opened.

A slender man in his forties, wearing a suit and tie, walked in and shook my hand. “Mrs. White?”

Randy stood and introduced himself as he pumped the doctor's hand. “Randy White.”

“Nice to meet you both.”

The doctor sat on his stool and rolled toward me. “I understand you're having bilateral mastectomies and are considering reconstruction.”

I nodded. “Yes sir.”

“OK. I'll need to get some measurements and pictures. Please let the gown down to your waist.”

*Wow. Real friendly. Just straight to “show me your boobs.”*

I slid the pink gown off my shoulders and let it rest at my waist.

As his assistant handed him a tape measure, he nodded at me. “Sit up, please.”

Obediently, I straightened my back, and he touched the cold tip to my chest. Maneuvering the tape in every possible direction, he rattled off numbers for the nurse to record.

Finally, when no spot on my chest was left unmeasured, he grabbed a camera. Rolling backward, he snapped pictures from the center, then right, then left. With each click of the camera, I prayed he was cutting my head off.

“Some stretch marks and sagging.”

*Sagging? Stretch marks, yes, but...* Mortified, I looked down. *Sagging? How can flat sag?*

To my dismay, the nurse dutifully jotted down every word he said.

After a few more unsettling comments, he motioned for me to pull my gown back up and handed us a large photo album. Flipping through pages and pages of headless breasts, he showed us pictures of the various stages and explained the process.

*We're looking at topless women. All boobs. It's a photo-book of breasts.*

"Since you've opted for the bilateral mastectomies, the reconstruction process will leave you with a more uniform look."

"Well, I guess that's good," I stammered.

After finally managing to compose myself and get my brain to focus, I asked about scarring.

"Oh, it will fade with time and, eventually, you probably won't even see it. Like with any other cut, scars fade." He flipped through the book to an olive skinned woman. "This woman is about a year out. You can see her scar is barely visible."

"But I'm so fair-complected. Won't that have an impact on it?"

"It may take longer to fade, but it will lighten up eventually. Oh. One other thing, I'd like to use Alloderm in your surgery."

"Okay...? What's that?" I asked more out of curiosity than concern.

"It's cadaver skin."

He must have seen my jaw drop because he quickly explained, "Using it enables us to partially fill the expanders at the time of the surgery, thereby shortening the overall process by several weeks."

*I'm going to have a dead person's skin inside me?* Mortified, I stole a glance at Randy. He shrugged and looked as baffled as I was.

Feeling eyes on me, I turned my attention back to the doctor. "Uh, is it safe?"

"Yes. All of the actual cells have been removed, so your body won't even think of it as foreign. It's perfectly safe."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Okay. You know best. Whatever you think we need." *A dead person's skin? Yuck. Just don't think about it.*

"Great. Now, let's talk about size. Have you thought about that?"

The question I'd been dreading. I didn't have a clue what size I wanted to be. Why couldn't I just keep the one's God gave me.

"You mean like cup size?"

"Well, I can't really guarantee an actual cup size. Let me ask you this, do you want it to look like you have implants or look more natural?"

I stole another confused glance at Randy and then looked back at the doctor thinking he was crazy, “Well, natural of course. Who wouldn’t want them to look natural?”

“Oh you’d be surprised at the women who ask me to make sure its obvious they have implants.”

“Oh. Well, I guess I can see that. If you’re gonna spend the money, but I want mine to look and feel as natural as possible. Probably just the same size as my real ones.”

The look on his face almost made me laugh out loud. I might have been the first person to ever tell him they wanted their boobs to stay the same size.

“Well, OK. We’ll see what we can do. Any other questions?”

“No. That should do it. Thank you.”

Randy stood and shook the doctor’s hand.

“OK. We’ll see you in a few weeks. The nurse will show you to another room. We need you to fill out some paperwork.”

We followed the nurse to a back room where I read about the horror story possibilities and signed my name so many times it felt like I was buying another house. This time instead of a house, I was buying a body part.

Thirty minutes later, we were back in the car headed home. With the radio in the background and both of us too emotionally drained to chit-chat, I replayed the day in my head.

Randy grabbed my hand. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m just worried about how I’ll look.”

“After the reconstruction is complete, no one will even be able to tell you had surgery.”

“It’s the scar. I’m worried about the scar.”

He took his eyes off the road long enough to look at me. “But you and I are the only one’s who’ll ever see the scar.”

“I know.” He didn’t get it. He’s the one I was concerned about. I didn’t care about everyone else. I wanted him to see me as beautiful, not as a stitched up frankenstein.

At the next stoplight, he reached over and wrapped me in one of his big bear hugs. “Babe, I don’t care what they have to do or what you look like. All that matters is that you’re around when we’re old and gray to sit with me in our rocking chairs on the back porch watching sunsets.”

#

Dear Saggy Boobs Me,

Bet you never thought your picture would be in a boobie book, did you?

What a day.

Hearing “sagging” and “stretch marks” while sitting on a stool topless. How’s your self-esteem now?

And the photo album. You’ve seen so many breasts your eyes feel like they should be washed out with soap. Thank goodness those pictures were headless. Can you imagine running into one of the women in the waiting room? All you’d be able to think is, “I’ve seen your ta tas.”

I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but get used to it. You’ll be taking your top off for more people than you can count. You’ll even have one nurse who’ll show you hers to ease your mind. It helps, but it’s still weird. And awkward.

For Miss Private and Modest, this whole process is going to be a tad un-nerving. But you’ll adapt. Other women going through the same thing will cross your path. Answer their questions. Share your experience.

Ease their minds.

Now, let’s talk about the scar. I won’t lie. It’s not pretty. And it doesn’t fade in a year. But you’ll learn to accept it. Scars, seen and unseen, are reminders of the tough stuff God pulls us through. Remember that.

One last thing, when the surgeon asks again how big you want to be, go just a little bigger. Why not?

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 8

“Bowling.” I yelled across the house at Randy while stuffing Jadyn’s clothes in a suitcase.

He rounded the corner, a crooked grin plastered on his face. “What are you talking about?”

“I wanna do something fun tonight. There’s a bowling alley in Granbury. We could meet your mom and Hunter and all go bowling. Besides, I won’t be allowed lift anything heavier than a feather for a long time.” I flexed my bicep. “Better use these muscles tonight before they get

even flabbier.”

Jadyn ran into the room looking like a bouncing Tigger. “Bowling? I wanna go bowling. Please. Please. Please.” She wrapped herself around Randy’s leg and stared at him with her puppy dog eyes and pouty lip stuck out.

He didn’t stand a chance. With Jadyn sitting on his foot, he pulled me into his arms, “Sounds like fun. But are you sure you won’t be too tired for your surgery tomorrow?”

On tiptoes, I stretched and kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll get plenty of sleep after they knock me out. You, on the other hand, may need toothpicks for your eyelids.”

“Don’t worry about me. Alright, girls, load up. To the bowling alley it is.”

After spending the evening with Judy and Hunter, we left Jadyn to stay for the week.

Pulling into our driveway at 1:00 a.m., Randy winked at me. “Let’s get packed. I’m ready for bed.”

I grinned and stuck my chest out. “You’d better enjoy these while you can. They won’t be there tomorrow.” I teased him, but the reality stung.

Later that night, I laid in his arms, listening to him breathe as he slept with one hand protectively resting on my chest. *Will I ever have the confidence to take my shirt off again? Will he still like the way I look, or will my mangled body repulse him?*

Deep down, I knew the answer. He would love me and find me attractive no matter how I looked. What I wasn’t sure about, though, was me. How would I handle it?

A few short hours later, we walked into the pre-op room at the hospital. *These poor people. Who wants to work at this horrific hour?*

“Mrs. White.” A cheerful nurse peeked out from the door.

Randy and I both stood.

“We just need to speak with you right now. He can come back later.”

Randy sat back down, and I obediently followed the nurse in green scrubs. Being separated from Randy tightened the knot in my stomach.

After answering all the typical hospital questions, the nurse ushered me to a room smaller than my closet. She handed me the dreaded backless hospital gown, a pair of ugly blue socks, and heavy white panty hose. “Put these on. Then, lie down and get comfortable. Someone will take you back shortly.”

“Can my husband come back now?” I needed Randy with me.

“I’ll get him.”

She closed the door behind her and I quickly donned the gown and leggings. Randy came in a few minutes later. I pranced around modeling my sexy attire.

Our former pastor, Brother Ken, stopped by to pray with us. Almost immediately after he said

“amen,” a lady appeared in the doorway.

“I’m here to take you back. You’ll need to say your goodbyes now.”

As they wheeled my bed into the hallway, I questioned the stoic lady, “Can my husband go back with me?”

“No. You’ll have to say goodbye now.”

Tears sprang to my eyes.

Randy hugged and kissed me. “I love you, and I’ll be waiting for you when you get out.”

In a failed attempt to stop my tears, I hiccuped instead. “I love you.”

The cruel nurse wheeled me away from my rock. Tears streamed down my face. Randy stood at the end of the hallway staring at me, looking lost. And helpless.

My tears of fear changed to ones of anger. Anger at the nurse who wouldn’t let my husband stay with me. Anger at myself. The last thing Randy saw was me crying. Why did I do that to him? He was already worried about me. Then I had to go and make it even harder on him by being a crybaby.

My bed-driver, whom I affectionately named Hitler, wheeled me into a small cubicle space surrounded by curtains. The fluorescent light above me was covered with a beach scene.

*Seriously? They think a lame picture of a beach is going to calm me down. Come on. Here’s a thought, let my husband stay with me. That would’ve calmed me. Not some stupid beach scene.*

With that, Hitler locked my bed and left. Alone with nothing to look at but the clock in front of me and the cheap beach scene above me.

*Calm down. If they didn’t let Randy come back, that must mean you’re going into surgery soon.*

Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. I watched the sterile black and white clock for ninety minutes. With each minute that passed, I become more aggravated. Of course, I hadn’t told anyone I was mad. If it was a rule, I followed it. By the time they finally came to give me drugs, I was so agitated, I couldn’t tell they’d given me anything.

I chatted and talked to the new nurses driving my bed to the operating room. Then, I moved myself to the table, all the while still talking.

My anesthesiologist laid his hand on my shoulder. “Janet, we need to you stop talking and relax.” He inserted something else into my IV, and within seconds, my eyes became heavy. *Some beach, somewhere...*

###



“Randy made me cry.” Loren grinned, her eyes teasing as she fiddled with the hospital tray.

“What?” Not allowed to use my arms, I bootie-shuffled my way to a seated position in my hospital bed perch. “Why?”

Randy glared at her, a sheepish grin on his face.

Yet his fake warning didn’t stop her. “When we went to see you in recovery, you looked bad.”

“Gee thanks.” I feigned hurt.

“No. I’m serious. You were so white with tubes and stuff everywhere. You looked really bad.”

My parents nodded in agreement, but Randy stared at the floor. The light-hearted teasing from moments before replaced with straight serious faces as Loren continued. “You woke up long enough to tell Randy you loved him. I held back the tears then, but as we were leaving, I glanced back at him. He was crying. I lost it.”

He glanced up from the floor and smiled. “A couple of tears, but I wouldn’t say crying.” Another glare at Loren.

The revelation startled me. I’d looked bad enough to make Randy cry? He hated showing weakness. But he loved me, so much apparently that his eyes betrayed him and sprang a leak. My heart swelled.

One by one my family said their goodbyes and left.

As the door clicked, Randy’s shoulders slumped as if a soldier finally given the at-ease command after standing at attention all day. He let out a deep breath and rubbed his eyes. Weariness and stress written on his face, he came to my side and tenderly kissed me.

I grabbed his hand and intertwined his long fingers with mine. “I’m sorry I cried when they took me back.”

A puzzled look spread across his face, “Why are you sorry? There’s no reason to be.”

“But I wanted to be strong. Didn’t want to make it harder on you. And then you had to leave me blubbering like a baby.”

“You didn’t make it harder on me. I didn’t think they were going to take you so soon.”

He tidied up my bedside table, a helpless man of action needing something to do.

“After they took you back, I didn’t know what to do. Nobody was there. I didn’t even know where to go. Thank goodness Loren walked up about that time.”

“Didn’t they tell you where to go?”

He stopped midway to the sink. “Yeah. The waiting room. But this place is huge. Put me in the woods, I can find my way. In a hospital or mall, I get lost.”

The image of him standing in the hospital lobby, my St. Bernard turned into a little lost puppy, brought a smile to my lips.

After refilling my water cup, he returned it to the table. “And then, Loren and I went out to the

car so I could get a jacket. We were almost back to the elevator before she noticed I had left the lift-gate up.”

He shook his head and I laughed. My fierce protector doesn’t handle it well when he can’t take care of me.

“Do you need anything else?”

“Naw. I’m good.”

“Then get some rest. I’m gonna watch TV. If you need anything, let me know.”

He kissed me and spread his long legs out on the couch. He wasn’t going anywhere. Now, I could rest.

The next morning, we woke to a knock on the door followed by my plastic surgeon breezing in. “Mrs. White, how are you feeling this morning?”

He flipped on the fluorescent overhead lights, my eyelids battling the intrusion. “Pretty good, I guess.”

“Okay. Let’s have a look.” He sat on the edge of my bed and helped me sit up straight.

He pulled the tape, and a piercing pain shot through my left side, like he was ripping stitches. The room started spinning. “I think I might be sick.”

Randy grabbed a wet washcloth and held out a puke pan. The doctor continued to mess with the tape and examine the Frankenstein-like bumps on my chest.

With the room turning fuzzy, I knew blackness would soon follow. He finally put my bandage back on and let me lay down. “Everything looks fine. I’ll be by tomorrow to check you again.”

Randy’s glare drilled holes in his back. I was thankful it was his eyes and not his fist. Ten years ago, the doctor would’ve been looking for a surgeon.

“Are you okay?” Outrage and concern mixed on my sweet husband’s face as he rubbed my forehead with the cold washcloth.

“Well, the room has stopped spinning.”

“That was ridiculous. He didn’t even stop when you said you were gonna be sick. Just kept jerking the tape.” He paced the room. If it weren’t for the nausea, I would’ve giggled. My fierce protector had been riled up again.

The next three days were more of the same although the surgeon was a lot more gentle the next time he took off my bandage. Randy only left my side a couple times for vending machine or quick food runs. No one could convince him to stay gone long. He didn’t want to be away from me. And, with him by my side, I knew everything would be fine.

#

Dear Flat-Chested Me,

Aren't hospitals fun? Thankfully, you escape after a few days. But the fun's not over.

Your list of don'ts reads more like a manuscript. You can't sleep in the bed for days, so the recliner is your perch. Barely allowed to use your arms, those ab muscles get a good workout just trying to sit up. You can't open the refrigerator. And those new glass mugs you just bought? The ones you love because they'll hold lots of Dr. Pepper? Too heavy for you to lift.

Poor Randy has to wait on you hand and foot. Cooking. Cleaning. Washing. And he has to be nurse too. Stupid drain tubes. Yuck. But he religiously empties them for you every few hours.

Yep, you're in very good hands.

So here's what you have to look forward to. Those drain tubes will come out after a week or so. You'll feel like you've been released from prison. Even though you're still be limited in what you're allowed to do for several weeks, you don't care. You're free. The drain tubes are history. (At least for now. Sorry to say they return for your next surgery.)

Then there's your appearance. You're all too happy when you finally get out of the itchy girdle-like bandages, but then it's clear just how ultra tiny those bumps are. No worries. You don't stay flat-chested long. Over the next few months, you'll have regular doctor's visits for "filler-up jobs" as you affectionately refer to them. Your tissue expanders have to be injected with saline to, well, expand them.

Then comes the reconstructive surgery. Yay! You get normal shaped boobs again! This surgery's not nearly as big of an ordeal as the first one, but some of the freedom you had gotten back is stripped away again. Yippee.

The one thing you're going to realize through this is that you're a very lucky girl. Blessed is probably a better word. You see women having to endure torturous treatments after their surgeries, but not you. The mastectomies got all the cancer. No radiation. No chemo. Heck, you don't even have any pills to take.

Then there's the horror stories of husbands leaving their wives during treatments or women with absolutely no support. That's not you either. Randy's amazing and your family and friends rally to help in tons of ways.

You're thankful. And you should be.

Soon, life gets back to normal and your boobs... Well, I'm not going to lie. Normal is not a word you'll use to describe them. Ever. But, guess what? Saggy isn't either. They look bigger and perkier, so stick that chest out and walk proud.

I do want you to remember something. As weird as it sounds, enjoy this time. With Randy's crazy schedule and your long commute, you normally don't see a lot of each other. These surgeries give you some much needed time off and time together.

Pay attention to all the little things Randy does for you. Notice as he brings you a drink. Does the laundry. Bathes you. See it. Tell him you appreciate him. And remember it. Every tiny thing. Trust me. You'll thank me later.

Now, go love on your family. And give Randy an extra kiss for me.

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 9

*A police cruiser pulls up my driveway. Red and blue lights bounce off my kitchen window. Tears start falling. I know what this means...*

The red stop light jarred me back to the present. I dabbed at my wet cheeks.

*It's only a movie scene.*

But very personalized.

*No reason to worry. He's at home. Not even working yet.*

Just ten minutes before, I'd kissed my sleeping husband goodbye and, as usual, cranked up the car radio and settled in for my hour-long commute. I sang the familiar words as my mind wandered. Although still not allowed to lift or do anything strenuous, life had been slowly returning to normal. Back at work. Cancer-free. Happy.

Then, without warning, a single thought invaded. *Life is so good. I hope something bad isn't about to happen.*

My mind fixated on one thing and wouldn't budge. What if something happened to Randy?

My chest tightened as the scene continued to play out in my head. As if real, I heard a

knock. Watching on the big screen in my mind, I saw myself open the door to Chief, who stood with his hands folded and head hung low.

As I robotically maneuvered my car onto the highway, my shallow breathing quickened and tears threatened to spill over.

He wouldn't have to say a word. I'd know—I would know my biggest fear had become reality.

*Why am I doing this? Randy doesn't even go on-duty until six this evening.*

I slapped the buttons on the radio, begging it to find an upbeat song. Unlike in the past when I could shake these thoughts, the nightmare persisted.

How would I react? Would I collapse to my knees, screaming hysterically? Would I fall apart, refusing to face reality? Would I embarrass myself or would I maintain my composure and keep my dignity intact?

Tears spilled down my cheeks as I hiccupped a sob away. With the back of my hand, I patted my eyes to avoid smearing my mascara. Inhaling the cold air blowing from the air conditioner, I attempted to calm myself with happier thoughts. Instead, my logical side engaged and focused on the practical part of my nightmare.

Life insurance would pay off the house and cars. I would continue to work, so my salary would be sufficient. Two cars wouldn't be practical for one person, so I'd need to sell one. But which one? My Expedition got better gas mileage, but it had a lot of miles and probably wouldn't last much longer. Plus, could I get rid of his truck? So many memories. Besides, living in the country, I'd need a truck.

I punched the steering wheel. *Stop being so morbid. Randy's at home in bed.*

Feeling like a helpless crybaby and a worrywart, I glanced in the rearview mirror. Salt stains ran paths down my cheeks. I dabbed at the corners of my eyes to push back the tears, trying to preserve what minimal makeup remained.

Sitting at a light two miles from my work, I panicked. "Pull yourself together," I ordered my reflection while blotting my eyes. "You can't go in there looking like you've been crying."

Frantic, I dug through the console, looking for anything to get my focus off the horror film in my mind. Snatching up a gospel CD, I crammed it in the changer just as another thought invaded.

*If something happened to Randy, will I hate God? How will I react if my world comes crashing down?*

I had heard the question from the pulpit, "How will your faith hold up if it is tested?" In truth, I wasn't sure, and that truth terrified me.

*Janet, get it together. Deep breaths. This is ridiculous. Why do you let your imagination run wild?*

"God, I'm only a block from work. Please help me calm down."

I forced my scratchy voice to sing along with the music and was rewarded with dry eyes. Exhausted and still hiccupping, I pulled into the parking lot, checked the mirror, and threw up

one last prayer.

“God, please protect him and let us grow old together.”

#

Dear Worry-wart Me,

Your imagination can take you on some crazy rides, and this one was bad. I still remember it today. Emotions and logic at war. Your mind keeps thinking of the worst and automatically goes into planning mode. Preparing for something that hasn't happened, something you pray everyday won't happen. But you can't stop the thoughts. They just keep coming.

You feel so morbid. Who plans out the details and next steps if their husband dies? Apparently, you do.

Take a deep breath and calm down. That's just the way your brain works. The logical side of your brain constantly battles the emotional side. You constantly try to squash your emotions.

Be tough. No tears.

And, for the most part, you succeed in holding back and keeping your ugly emotions at bay.

But soon, you'll learn that's not always good. Sometimes you need to let your emotional side win. Otherwise, it becomes a mean bully and shoves its way through at the worst possible times.

It's okay to cry. Let yourself be sad. Frustrated. Confused. Angry. Don't try to rationalize your emotions. You can't.

Sometimes, just feel.

Even as I write you this, I'm talking to myself. (Yeah, yeah. I know. I'm talking to myself in every letter.) But this emotion thing, it's something I still struggle with.

To this day, I get irritated at my emotions if I can't make sense of them. Who am I kidding, I get mad even if I can explain them.

Do us both a favor, work on this. Start now. It's a war I'm sick of waging, but I continue to fight every single

time my emotions rear their ugly head.

So, newsflash, you're still not perfect. Far from it, actually.

Try to enjoy your day at work. Then, go home and play with Jady. She loves it when you get in the floor and play with her. You don't do that enough.

Linger in bed with Randy a little longer in the mornings. Work from home so you can see him when he wakes up. And, on his days off, have some fun. Be silly. Act like a kid again. You don't have to be a mature stick-in-the-mud.

Watch Randy and Jady playing together.

Take pictures.

Listen to the laughter in your home.

Enjoy your little family of three.

Love on your husband.

Slow down.

Take it all in.

Memorize.

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 10

Glaring light from the closet invaded my sleep. I shielded my eyes but forced them to open. Randy's silhouette stood in the door frame. He took off his shirt and draped it over a hanger. My eyes drifted closed again, back into lazy dreams, but the crackle of velcro startled me as

he unfastened his bullet-proof vest.

I rolled over and glanced at the clock. 7:45 a.m. Ugh. I needed to get up and start working.

As he rounded the corner of our bed, morning light from the window revealed dark circles under his eyes. His shoulders slumped from exhaustion.

“Hey, Babe.” I choked the words out around the gravel in my throat. “Why ya getting home so late?”

He crawled under the covers and leaned over to kiss me. “Busy night. Not gonna get much sleep either. Gotta be back for a meeting at three.”

I mentally calculated how much sleep he’d get. Five hours. And that was if he could fall asleep immediately which he never did.

On his side facing me, he cupped my hands. “I love you. More than you know.” His long fingers squeezed tighter as he pressed them against his bare chest. “I really need you to know how much I love you.”

My eyebrow raised, unseen in the dim light. I kissed him in return. “I love you too. Now, I’ve gotta get up and get to work.”

I moved to get out of bed, but he pulled me back to him. “Just stay here ‘til I fall asleep.”

Lying back down, I snuggled closer and rested my head on his chest. He let out a relaxing sigh.

Unease settled in my chest. “I love you” were common words in our house, but not like this. His tone. His words. Almost exactly what Jadyn has said a few days before.

She’d jumped on the bed and awakened Randy for work. Grabbing both of his cheeks in her two little fists, she pulled his face inches from hers. “I love you, Daddy. I need you to know I love you.” So cute, yet so out of the ordinary.

Alarms went off in my head. But why?

*We just haven’t been seeing enough of each other. That’s all it is.*

I pushed down the nagging in my stomach and dozed for a few more minutes.

The warm bed and the comfort of my loving husband’s arms begged me to stay, but responsibility won out. I lifted my head to see his eyes closed, but his breathing wasn’t as deep as when he was sleeping hard. I crawled out of bed around 8:15, hoping he was asleep. I tiptoed out and closed the bedroom door without a sound.

The house was quiet. Jadyn spent the night at Mom and Dad’s, so she’d be there for the day, playing with Jacie, John and Loren.

I grabbed my laptop, a brownie, and a Dr. Pepper. After logging into my computer, I flipped the TV on and started the day’s work.

Randy’s alarm blared at 1:00 p.m. And stopped. It went off several more times before I finally heard movement. A short time later, he emerged in uniform with his duty belt slung over his shoulder, under-eye bags protruding. He raised his hand in a half-wave as he rounded the



corner to the kitchen. I followed him to the carport.

After he tossed his duty belt in the car, I leaned up and kissed him. "Have a great day and be careful. I love you."

"I love you too."

As his tail lights trailed off, I tossed God my daily prayer.

*Lord, help him have a good day and not be too tired.*

*And please keep him safe.*

#

Dear Loved Me,

"I love you. I need you to know how much I love you." Those words will become your most cherished phrase. Memorize the way his face looks when he said it. Remember the faint smell of his cologne. Take it all in and tuck it away. You'll thank me later.

Now, let's take care of some business...

You're planning to go to a meeting in Wichita Falls in a little while. Get up now and start getting ready. Even though "chronically late" should be a sign around your neck, today is not the day to run late. Throw the sign across the room and get your butt in gear.

The low fuel light is on in the car. Stop in Jacksboro to get gas. Don't forget. And, when you do, check your tires. One of them is low. You'll be driving fast later today—not good on a low tire.

You know what? Just don't leave the house. The meeting isn't important. It's only for your little side venture selling candles. And we both know you're not really going to make any money doing that. Heck, Mom's the only one that buys any, and she's running out of places to put them. Just stay home.

No. Wait. That won't work. You definitely don't need to stay home.

Mexico. That's it. Stop what you're doing and pack some bags. Hurry. You and Jady go to the airport and take the next flight. You know what? Forget Mexico. Just take the next flight to anywhere. Pack Randy a bag too. Stop and pick him up on the way. He doesn't need to be a work today.

He definitely doesn't need to be at work today.

Just run away. Anywhere. Fast. You don't have much time. Grab your little family of three and run far, far away.

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 11

My favorite country station blared a love song while I bellowed off-key at a volume rivaling the best stereo. With the cruise control set a little above the speed limit, I relished my alone time in the car. Conversation-free. Cartoon-free. Just me and my radio.

A few miles into my trip, I felt a slight vibration in my steering wheel—the familiar trait of our Expedition with a low back tire. I made a mental note to add air the next time I stopped. Nothing deterred my in-car singing routine—nothing except the dreaded ding and a low-fuel light glaring at me.

*Dang it. I'm already running late for my meeting.*

The dashboard indicator showed fifty miles left until empty.

*Where am I? How far is Wichita Falls?*

A road sign answered. Forty-five miles. I'd gotten my car down to twelve miles to empty several times. Down to ten miles a couple of times, but this was pushing it, even for Miss Run-Her-Car-On-Fumes.

*No time to turn around and head back to Jacksboro. Maybe I can get gas in one of the little towns on the way.*

Determined to press on, I pushed the accelerator a tad closer to the floor and cranked the radio. Concert-for-one resumed.

Before I got through a full verse, my phone rang.

*Can't a girl get some quiet time?*

I grabbed the ringing offender from my purse and glanced at the screen. Dad.

*Why is he calling? I just left their house.*

“Hello?”

“Hey, Janet, where are you?”

A little perturbed because he knew the answer, I popped off, “On my way to Wichita Falls, remember?”

“I know, but where?”

*What does it matter? And why does he sound so... serious?*

I searched for a sign or something to tell me my location. Pastures dotted with cows and an occasional house told me nothing. “I don’t know. Somewhere in the middle-of-nowhere, between Jacksboro and Wichita Falls.”

“I need you to turn around and come back.”

His words were stern, yet gentle—no denying the urgency in his voice. My mind raced. “Is everything okay?”

“Not really. Just come back”

Without a “goodbye,” I flung the phone onto the passenger seat, whipped the car around, and pressed the accelerator to the floor. Dad never panicked, and he didn’t blow things out of proportion. “Not really” in Dad language meant something was terribly wrong.

*What if Jady’s hurt? I need to call Randy.*

I strained across the car to reach my phone, which had conveniently bounced to the far side of the passenger seat when I tossed it. With it finally back in my hands, I punched my dad’s name.

“Hello?”

“Do I need to call Randy and have him come home?”

“No. Just you.” He paused. “Just come home.”

The somber tone of his voice bothered me, but I breathed a small sigh of relief. If I didn’t need to call Randy, Jady must be fine.

“Is it Mom?”

“Janet, just come home.”

“Okay. I’m coming as fast as I can, but I have to stop in Jacksboro to get gas. I don’t have enough to make it home.”

My mind raced through every possible scenario and finally landed on one. Mom. She underwent gastric bypass surgery a few weeks earlier and must be having complications. My emotions battled between concern and anger. I hadn’t wanted her to have the surgery—too many horror stories.

*She probably didn’t follow the doctor’s orders, and now something’s gone wrong. Exactly*

*what I feared.*

A stab of guilt hit me.

*Geez. You're mom's in trouble and you're mad at her? What kind of daughter are you?*

But my mind wouldn't stop.

My anger turned inward as I watched my miles-to-empty drop to twenty. If I'd paid more attention and gotten gas and air when I should've, I wouldn't have to stop in the middle of an emergency.

The radio broke through my thoughts. "Highway 114 in Bridgeport has been shut down due to a major accident resulting from a police chase."

*Poor Randy. Running on hardly any sleep and now he's having to deal with...*

My phone rang.

Dad again.

"Where are you?" The urgency in his voice did little for my patience.

"I'm still somewhere between Jacksboro and Wichita Falls. I don't know where, but I'm driving as fast as I can." Frustration laced my words.

"I need you to pull over."

*Pull over? What could be so bad that I need to pull over?*

Panic slammed my chest as I stared at the radio. "Does this have anything to do with what I just heard on the radio?"

"Just pull over." His voice held no question. No plea. It was a gentle command—one I couldn't argue with.

I wanted to scream, "Tell me what was going on," but I trusted my dad. Obediently, I slowed, moving the car to the shoulder.

"Okay. I'm stopped."

But the voice I heard wasn't Dad's.

Chief Singleton, Randy's boss, spoke softly. "Janet, there's been an accident..."

My hands shook, and a chill of terror ran through my body. *Accident. So he's hurt. Okay. How...*

"...and Randy didn't make it."

*Didn't make it?*

Three tiny words. Eleven letters brought the walls to my perfect little world crashing down around me.

*No. It's not true.* Someone held my heart in their fist and squeezed. Uncontrollable sobs suffocated me, but I choked out my plea. "Please... Tell me you're joking."

"I wish I was." The pain in his voice crackled in my ears, but he kept his composure. "But I would never joke about something like this."

I knew he wouldn't, but this couldn't be real. Couldn't be happening.

"Janet, are you okay to drive?"

Before I answered, Dad's voiced carried from the background. "No. She doesn't need to drive. We'll go get her."

"It doesn't make sense for me to wait here. I can drive. Just meet me in Jacksboro."

I ended the call, leaving no room for argument. The phone fell.

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!" I screamed. Only the interior of my car heard.

I was alone.

No one to watch or see.

My emotions overtook me.

Unable to lift my head, I slumped against my car door. Tears splattered like rain and formed a puddle on the handle.

My body ached. Even my fingertips hurt. Pain shot down my arms with every beat of my shattered heart.

After a few minutes, my car shook as a truck sped by.

*Okay. It's time to pull it together. You can't just sit here. Drive.*

My arms hung, dead weights incapable of moving. I dug my palms into my eyes to clear my blurry vision, but each tear I wiped was replaced by another salty water droplet filled with images of Randy.

Forcing my arm to put the car in drive, I pulled back onto the highway and accelerated. The urgency from before gone—replaced with emptiness.

"It has to be a dream. God, please, just let it be a really really bad dream."

*Wake up. Just wake up.*

I pinched my left arm hard, hoping it wouldn't hurt—but it did.

"This isn't happening. It's not real. It can't be real."

Through tear-blurred eyes, I drove back to town, repeating, "It's just a dream. It can't be real."

#####

As I approached the edge of Jacksboro, impending dread filled my stomach.

*I didn't even tell them where to meet me. Where do I go?*

My cousin's feed store came into view.

*No. They'd wonder why I was crying. Can't form the words.*

Driving past one gas station, then another, I couldn't make myself stop. Reality lurked outside my car.

*Maybe if I just kept driving. Ran away.*

But I knew better. Nothing would make this go away.

Approaching the edge of town and running out of options, I knew if I didn't stop, they wouldn't find me. Weighted arms tugged the wheel to turn in at a convenience store and park facing the road.

My head fell against the steering wheel. Tears dotted my khaki slacks. "Please, God, let it be a joke."

I needed it to be another one of Randy's pranks. But as much as he loved a good laugh, he'd never do something this cruel.

*He's my rock. My world. How can I go on without him?*

Staring at the gas pedal, I launched a verbal attack against the floorboard. "Jadyn needs her daddy!" Fingernails dug into my palms as I clenched the steering wheel. "I need him!"

As I looked up and begged God to wake me from this horrible nightmare, my blurry vision caught my pastor's maroon SUV turning in. Dad sat in the passenger seat poised to bolt.

Fresh tears flooded my eyes. I launched from the car and ran to my daddy, one of only two men who made me feel safe, whose hugs brought out emotions easily hidden from others. The first man I ever loved wrapped me up, and we cried together over the loss of the second — my one true love and Dad's best friend. No words. Just tears.

Between sobs, I heard the muffled sound of car doors closing and footsteps approaching. A hand on my shoulder. Then another. I looked up at the crowd around me. Chief Singleton and Assistant Chief Stanford stood with their wives, the pain in their eyes belying the professionalism they attempted to maintain. Cindy, one of the dispatchers and a good friend of Randy's, swiped tears streaming down her cheeks. I pulled away from my dad; one-by-one they hugged me.

*All these people came. For me. For Randy.*

After the last hug, my pastor, Mark, rested his hand on my shoulder. "Janet, if it's okay, I'd like us to take a minute to pray."

We circled up and held hands. Leaning into my dad for strength, I closed my eyes, but couldn't focus on the words. He prayed for me. That was enough.

Mark's words mingled with the sound of cars pulling in and out of the parking lot.

*These people have no idea. My husband's dead, and they're going about their daily routines.*

The prayer ended. Heads nodded, and a few echoed "amen."

Then silence.

My trembling voice broke the quietness. "As miserable as I am, I have this strange peace. God's gonna take care of us." My voice strengthened as I looked around the circle. "Randy was doing exactly what God designed him to do. I know without a shadow of a doubt he's in heaven right now."

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught a head nodding outside the circle. My cousin, David.

*Guess I could've stopped at his store. They already knew.*

As our circle broke, Cindy approached me. "Janet, if you'll give me the keys, I'll drive your car home for you."

I handed her my keys, but remembered my low-gas predicament and started toward my car. "I've got to get gas. It's almost out."

From somewhere behind me, I heard "We'll take care of it. Don't worry about it."

With no fight left in me, Miss Independent didn't argue.

Dad ushered me to Mark's car, and we headed back home.

"Janet, I'm so sorry I wasn't there..." My dad's strong voice cracked. "I'm sorry I wasn't with you."

"Dad, it's fine. It's what I needed. I needed to be alone when I found out."

The bewildered look on his face showed he didn't believe me.

"If everyone was there when Chief told me, I would've had to hold myself together. Wouldn't have let myself scream and cry."

Unshed tears brimmed in his eyes. "I hated not being there with you, but Chief was worried you'd hear it on the radio."

"All they said on the radio was there had been a wreck."

"Some stations reported a police officer killed. They hadn't said a name yet, but Chief was worried. That's why I called you back and had you pull over."

Leaning back in my seat, I stared out the window. "It already hit the news?" *And all those people knew. Before me.*

My question hung in the air. No answer needed. I'd sat for hours in front of the TV in previous years, watching each time a Fort Worth or Dallas police officer died. I'd seen the media coverage. I knew. We all knew. To the world, it was breaking news. But this was my husband, my rock, my love. It was different. He was different.

My mind replayed the personalized movie scene I'd imagined so many times. The car crept up my gravel driveway. Chief and Steve got out, faces somber. They knocked on my door, but this time, no answer. I wasn't home to see them out the kitchen window.

"How'd they get to you? Because I wasn't home?"

Dad glanced at Mark with a questioning look. Apparently he didn't know those details either.

Mark spoke up. "Steve called me, told me what happened and asked if I would go with them. And, yes, we did go to your house first. When you weren't there, I took them to your parents."

"I was sitting playing with the girls and saw Mark walking up the back patio with a bunch of people. I met them outside. That's when Chief introduced himself and told me." Dad's voice broke again as he looked down and shook his head. "I just wanted to get to you."

Panic surged through me. Jadyn. Had she overheard their conversation?

"What about Jadyn? Does she know?"

"No. She doesn't know anything. We wanted to wait on you for that."

Relief they hadn't told her mixed with more panic. *My little girl just lost her daddy. And I have to tell her.*

As we turned onto the gravel road, only two miles separated me from having to face my sweet girl with the most devastating news of her life.

"How do you tell a five-year-old her daddy's dead?"

#

Dear Shell of Me,

You know, people always struggle with what to say in a situation like this. As weird as it sounds, I'm having that same problem. You just received the most devastating news of your life, and now you're faced with sharing it with your five-year-old daughter.

I'm sorry.

What else is there to say, right? That's the standard answer when people find out. And, honestly, it's probably the best answer. But it's so uncomfortable and odd. What do you say back? "It's okay"?

Yeah. That's what you say because it is. It's going to be okay. You're gonna make it.



Lots of tears.

Unbearable pain.

But you make it.

For now though, just be. Focus on surviving, getting through the day, the hour.

In a few minutes, as you take Jadyn aside to tell her, remember God's got her. He made her strong, and He's been preparing her for this just like He was preparing you and Randy.

What do you say? There are no right words. But I'll leave you with this...

It's okay to laugh. And it's okay to cry.

Give yourself permission to do both.

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 12

"Loren's dad died when she was little." The revelation tumbled out of my mouth as Mark finished praying for Jadyn. "Do John & Loren know?"

Dad nodded. "Yeah. They're on their way back from Fort Worth now."

They lived in Oklahoma, but were in town for a youth conference. Their car was already parked in the driveway when we approached my parent's gate. A nugget of comfort turned the corners of my mouth upward for a brief second. We just thought they were here for a conference. God knew Jadyn would need someone who could understand what she was feeling.

I mouthed a silent "thank you" as we pulled up. Jadyn roller-skated in front of the house with Jacie, Loren and John looking on. Mustering my best fake smile, I crawled out of the Expedition, all eyes on me.

Jadyn glided over and wrapped her arms around me. "Mommy!"

“Hey, Sweetie.” I swallowed the golf ball in my throat and forced my voice steady. “Will you take your skates off and come inside, so I can talk to you?”

Blue eyes, the color of Randy’s, looked up at me. My plaster smile couldn’t hide the dried tears and puffy eyes. Her happy, carefree face morphed into a puzzled, concerned look.

*Will I ever see that happy face again?*

Tears endangered my fragile facade—no time for my five-year-old’s slow gear. Hands shaking, I fumbled with her skates, but my fingers refused to cooperate.

*Stay calm. Don’t cry.*

A single roller skate threatened my demise. Giving up on the straps before I ended up a heap of rubble at my daughter’s feet, I tugged and yanked until her bare feet were freed.

Grasping her hand, we walked the short distance to the playroom. Every forced step led us closer to the awaiting gallows—the ones my little girl’s happiness would hang on as I delivered the blow of her daddy’s death.

My throat constricted. I sat down and pulled her to stand in front of me.

*God, please help me.*

I held out my palms and stared as she laid her tiny hands in them. Chipped pink polish contrasted the dirt under her nails, typical of my stylish, but rough-and-tumble little girl.

*She’s only five. Why?*

My thumbs rubbed circles over her soft skin as Randy’s laughter and her giggles mingled in my head.

*Will we ever laugh again?*

Gathering all the courage I could summon, I raised my head and looked at her innocent face. The news stuck on my lips poised to shatter that innocence forever.

*God, give me the words.*

“You know how Daddy goes to work to protect people from bad guys?”

She nodded, but her suspicious eyes stayed locked on mine.

“Well, today, a bad guy was running away from the police. Daddy was trying to get people out of the way so the bad guy wouldn’t hurt them.”

Fresh pain shot from my heart to my fingers as I remembered the words I begged Randy not to tell Jady, “Bad guys can’t hurt Daddy.” He only wanted to keep her from worrying, but a bad guy had hurt him. Killed him. And I had to tell her.

“The bad guy ran into the back of Daddy’s police car.” My voice cracked. The forced words barely audible, “Daddy went to heaven.”

Her face contorted and tears burst from her eyes. The Vise Grip on my heart clenched. Hot

tears scalded my cheeks as I watched her quivering lips form words.

“Daddy’s dead?”

The lump in my throat choked me, begging me not to answer the question no five-year-old should have to ask.

“Yes, baby. But he’s in heaven with God now.” I wiped a tear from her cheek.

“And Katy.” Her words came out a broken whisper.

“And Katy.” She was right. He’d be happy to see his beloved Rottweiler again. “And he’s getting to see Uncle Raymond too.”

She nodded and fell into my arms. Two girls, who rarely cried, held each other and sobbed.

I wanted to fix it. Needed to stop her pain. But this was one booboo a kiss from Mommy wouldn’t fix.

After a couple of minutes, she smeared her nose down my sleeve from shoulder to elbow. The snot stream glistened against my red sweater. A guilty grin spread across her face, and a simultaneous giggle escaped both our lips.

Was it possible to laugh even through the pain? Randy would want us to. He always reversed our moods by cracking a joke or being silly. But that was him. Not me. And this is different.

*God, how can I make it better for Jadyn?*

As the thought seeped in, I tilted my head and smirked at her. “You know what? I’ll bet Daddy’s up in heaven tooting and burping.”

A smile lit her face, and our giggles turned into full-fledged laughter through tears.

She crinkled her nose. “And no more yucky dipping.”

“I’m not so sure he’s happy about that.”

The thought of Randy in heaven without his Skoal brought another round of giggles.

Mere minutes after receiving the worst news of her life, my adult-like child wiped her face and stood erect. “I don’t wanna cry anymore.”

Taken aback but not surprised, I inhaled a deep breath. Her tear-glazed eyes showed determination. “Okay. Then we’ll stop crying right now.” I sucked back my unshed tears and turned off the faucet—anything for my girl.

#

Dear Brokenhearted-Mommy Me,

You're lost, scared, and feeling utterly alone right now. And you're questioning every move you make.

Did you do it right? Does she understand? Could you have told her in a better way?

Did you just break your baby girl?

Rest easy. She's not broken, and she understands. Was there a better way to tell her? Who knows. But you did the best you could at the time. Right now, that's all you need to ask of yourself.

Over the next several days, different people will step up to entertain Jadyn. You, being you, will feel guilty about it.

"You should be taking care of her."

"She needs her mom right now."

True statements, but, for now, squash the voices. God has surrounded you and Jadyn with a ton of friends and family. They are there for a reason.

The reality is you're in shock. You can't think straight. Your emotions are all over the place. You need help, and it's okay to accept it.

You'll soon notice, when you're upset, Jadyn wants to fix it. (Like mother, like daughter, I guess.) But this isn't fixable. So, for now, let others keep her distracted. Her little brain is processing in short bursts. She'll come and cuddle with you when she needs to. Then, she'll be off to play again.

There's no need to feel guilty. Let me repeat... You don't need to feel guilty. I'm here to tell you, nothing you're doing right now is destroying her.

She still loves you. She even thinks you're a pretty good mom (most days.)

I know what you're thinking right now. You're telling yourself that I don't really know if you messed Jadyn up because she's not grown yet.

You're right. I still worry whether I'm scarring her in some way.

The reality is, I (we) probably have, and I'm sure she'll tell us all about it one day. But doesn't every kid?

You aren't perfect, and I'm still not perfect. But right now, Jady's a pretty awesome thirteen-year-old, so things are looking good.

Give yourself a break. Don't beat yourself up for letting others help. You and Jady will make it. Life will be good again. I promise.

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

### Chapter 13

Sponge Bob's nasal whine and woodpecker laugh. The jangle of our German Shepherd's collar. Jady's giggle alternated with a stern, "No, Sig" as he licked her face. The sizzle of ground beef on the stove. The fizz and pop as I open another Dr. Pepper.

Sights and sounds of a typical Thursday night. But not tonight. This wasn't a typical Thursday.

We would never have another typical Thursday.

My ears heard nothing but white noise. Voices of family and friends a dull hum. My eyes drunkenly wandered from one thing to the next. Only the brown carpet held their focus. My brain? Mush.

But my inner control-freak screamed to be let loose. I ran down (more like stumbled through) the imaginary list in my head.

Dwayne and Judy were being located and notified.

John and Loren took Jady and Jacie to Chuck E Cheese. Pains of guilt stabbed me as I ticked that mental checkmark. A battle ensued.

*Your little girl just heard the most devastating news of her life and you sent her away?*

*She wanted to go. It'll be a good distraction.*

*Don't you think she needs her mother at a time like this?*

*Loren knows how she's feeling. She can help her. Besides, would it have been better for her to be here with everyone crying?*

*What kind of monster are you?*

“Janet?” The war in my mind ceased at the sound of my name. I turned to see the Steve, the assistant chief, walking toward me.

“I need to tell you something.” He moved closer, only inches separating us, and lowered his voice to barely a whisper. “This was intentional.”

“What do you mean?” I begged my brain to work. To understand the incomprehensible.

“The suspect admitted to the officers questioning him that he was trying to kill Randy.” Steve’s jaw set. Controlled anger and pain simmered beneath the professionalism he exuded.

“Randy, specifically?” My eyes widened. I heard the words, but they made no sense. Who would want to kill Randy?

“No. He saw the patrol car and intentionally rammed it, trying to kill the officer in it.”

My head nodded.

Wood cabinets, tan walls, and brown couches blurred as the living room whirled around me.

Intentional.

Kill.

Rammed.

Each word slammed like a sledge hammer.

“He’s being charged with capital murder.”

Murder?

That word, a wrecking ball.

#

Dear Wrecked Me,

“Murder.” It’s a TV word. They use it in the movies and on the crime reality shows Randy loved to watch. You should never hear it in real life.

But you just did.

It's a word your brain refuses to comprehend. And, sadly, it's the first of many crime words you'll hear associated with Randy's death.

In a few weeks, you'll be handed his death certificate. You'd never seen one, so you study it to burn it into your brain.

Date of birth. Height. Weight. Looks like a birth certificate.

But your eyes stop at "Cause of Death." A list of reasons people die with little boxes sitting beside each one.

Natural - empty box.

Accident - empty box.

Randy's little black "X" fills the box beside "Homicide."

Never thought you'd see that on your husband's death certificate. Who are we kidding? You didn't think you'd be looking at a death certificate until you were old and gray. Or an autopsy report. Or using that will you and Randy threw together a short time ago.

Surreal. Odd. Horrific.

There's no good word to describe these TV words becoming your reality.

You are at the beginning of a journey no one should have to travel. It's a long hard path with lots of pain, tears, and lonely nights.

But you will make it.

Your smile will return. You'll laugh again. And you'll come out a better person on the other side. Far from perfect, but definitely better.

I wish there was something I could tell you to make it hurt less. But there's not. You have to trudge through all the yuck to see the beauty on the other side. But it's there. I promise. Life will be beautiful again. Just remember...

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

## Chapter 14

The dark-stained wooden casket I'd chosen a few days before sat ten feet in front of me. One side of the lid open revealing the white satin interior.

My hands shook.

Pain shot to my fingertips.

*Calm down. It's just Randy. Yeah, he's not supposed to be in a box, but none of this is supposed to be happening. He'll look like he's sleeping. That's what dead people in caskets look like, right?*

After a deep breath, with Dad's hand on my back, I inched forward. My normal fast-paced, get-things-done walk replaced by a slow trudge of dread—my body unconsciously cowering from what my eyes were about to see.

Over the side of the wooden box, Randy's face came into view. A guttural cry escaped my lips. My knees buckled. Dad caught me and held me as I turned from the nightmare lying before me. My mind screamed to run, but my body wouldn't move.

Dad whispered words, but I couldn't hear. Nothing registered except how horrible Randy looked.

After a few seconds, I gathered the courage to turn back around. Somehow, I'd understood he only had a scratch on his face, that the rest of his injuries were internal. Instead, there was this man, this body not even resembling my husband lying before me.

It wasn't my Randy.

The man from the funeral home approached. "I'm terribly sorry. We did the best we could, but there was a lot of damage."

The lips that once kissed me tenderly were swollen and purple. Beautiful dark olive skin appeared jaundiced and pale. His nose so crooked it begged me to reach out and straighten it. And his left eye deformed to the point of unrecognizable. Yes, they may have done the best they could, but instead of seeing a sleeping Randy lying before me, I stared at a battered stranger.

"Mrs. White, the guy who normally does this has been out of town, but will be back tonight. I can get him to work on your husband some more and see what he can do."

The helpless look on the suited man's face added guilt to the mix of shock and distress flooding me. This sweet man had just witnessed my meltdown. They had done the best they could, and I was being an ungrateful baby. I swallowed a sob. "I'd really appreciate that. Even if you could just make his skin a little darker, that would probably help."



He nodded and assured us they would do their best. “Ma’am, I know he looks bad, but I feel certain he didn’t suffer. I don’t think he would’ve known what happened. The most he would’ve seen was the car coming in the rear view mirror.”

“Thank you.” New tears sprang to my eyes, but these were blended with the relief. Words I’d longed to hear, but didn’t dare ask.

*At least he didn’t suffer.*

He excused himself and left us alone with the stranger in the casket.

It was Randy’s uniform. Broad shoulders. Big hands folded across his stomach, just like... The image of him laying in his recliner flashed in my mind. I could hear his voice, “This is what I’m gonna look like when I’m dead.”

“He looks just like he said he would.” The anger I used to feel every time he demonstrated his dead man pose dissolved into disbelief. *He really was preparing me.*

I touched his chest. Flat. Randy was anything but flat. *Where was the solid, comforting chest I’d laid against at night?*

Like a scared kid, I reached to touch his hand. Stiff. Cold. I yanked my arm back. *Randy was never cold.*

I worked my way up to his head, avoiding the foreign face lying there. Prickly hairs tickled my hand as I rubbed back and forth, just the way he liked. It used to relax him. Now, the only normal-feeling place I could touch, it comforted me.

His uniform didn’t look right without his pins. His hand looked bare without the wedding ring he’d worn for eight years. Those things would be fixed. I’d given his badge, police pins, and ring to the funeral director, and he assured me they would be put on him.

But did he have his boots on? Were they polished and shined? They couldn’t be seen in the casket, but he never wore his uniform without his boots. As I analyzed the closed end of the wooden box, I reasoned those big size thirteens wouldn’t fit. Probably barefoot. His ankle would be cold. Ever since he broke it, he always wore socks to keep his ankle from hurting.

And what about his underwear? I knew it was ridiculous when I did it, but I’d sent a pair with his clothes the day before. Did they put his underwear on? Probably not. Why would they? Nobody would know. *Going commando to his own funeral. And he’d be fine with it.*

My thoughts were ridiculous, but I couldn’t help it. *Was the casket comfortable? He’d probably hate the satin pillow junk all around him....*

*Stop it. You can’t do this. Don’t think about things that don’t matter. Block it out.*

I pulled my focus away from the casket and stared at my dad. “I guess we should let the others come in.”

“Are you sure? You can take as much time as you need.” The strained look on Dad’s face showed his concern for me, and his own grief.

“Yeah. It’s fine.” I turned back to the casket that held the other half of my heart.

A few seconds after he walked away, I heard the door open, but didn’t look up. I continued to

rub Randy's head and let the tears stream down my face.

Judy walked up first. She stood at the head of the casket and cried. Shaking her head, she said, "That had to hurt. It just had to hurt real bad."

Anger fired in my chest. I didn't understand my reaction, but I quickly repeated what the funeral home worker had explained. "It was instant. He didn't feel it. Didn't know what happened." I felt desperate for her to take back what she'd said. I had to believe that he didn't hurt.

I couldn't stand it otherwise.

Even though I stepped back so she could have a moment with her son, I couldn't go far. The strange possessiveness was rising up again.

On some level, I was aware Mom and John were in the room as well, but my emotions wouldn't let me lift my head. The shock of the stranger lying in the casket instead of my husband. Suffocating sadness. Despair. And guilt that, once again, my internal thoughts betrayed what I knew to be proper and considerate.

After Mom and John each took their turns, we walked out of the little room together. My heart ached to stay. I wasn't supposed to be away from Randy. He didn't like to be alone. As long as I was in the room with him, he was happy.

But I was leaving him.

The image of the face lying in the casket etched in my mind. *Maybe I should have a closed casket funeral. Would he want people to seem him like that?*

A knot lodged in my throat. *Jadyn.*

*Is that the way he would want her to remember him?*

#

Dear Crazy-thinking Me,

Going commando to his own funeral? Makes me laugh. When those kind of thoughts pop in that crazy head of yours, you are so glad no one can read your mind. But you know what? It's those goofy little thoughts

that make me smile when I remember them.

You think of those things because you love him.

Notice I didn't say "loved." I, you, we still love him. That never changes. And it's that love that makes your relationship with Randy unique.

It's that love that is causing you to second-guess every decision you make. What would Randy want? That's all you care about. Relax. You've already seen he and God took care of that for you.

How often did he tell you that he'd die young? You'd tell him "young" better be defined as seventy or eighty-something. What about a few months ago, when he casually informed you his funeral wouldn't be at your church because it was too small? You got mad and told him you'd have his funeral anywhere you darn-well pleased.

He described every part of a police funeral to you, told you he wanted to be buried in his uniform with his cowboy hat. He even told you and Dad both that you'd be taken care of financially if something ever happened to him.

It wasn't a single conversation, so you didn't realize what was happening. Through little comments here and there, he was preparing you, making his wishes known because he loved you. He knew you well enough to know that you'd be stressing over it, so God gave him the insight to say and do all those things that infuriated you at the time. Those things that, now and forever, make you feel loved.

You and Randy had a unique relationship and a deep love. Don't beat yourself up for your crazy thoughts and don't stress over decisions. You know he was always happy with whatever made you happy. Go with that.

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

## Chapter 15

"Jadyn, we planned Daddy's funeral today. It's gonna be so cool."

*Cool? Did I really just say my husband's funeral is going to be cool?*

She climbed into my lap and leaned back, leaving me with a face full of curls. Spitting hair

out of my mouth, I turned her toward me so we could talk.

“The cemetery where Daddy will be buried is beautiful. He’s gonna get to be right beside a pond with ducks.”

Her eyes lit up. “Ooooh, Mommy, can I pet the ducks?”

“I’m not sure they’ll let you pet them, but you can definitely feed them. Know what else?”

Blue eyes stared at me as little hands twirled a piece of my hair.

“The mounted patrol’s gonna be there and helicopters are gonna fly over Daddy’s funeral.”

She bounced on my leg. “Can I ride the horse?”

“No. They’re going to be riding for Daddy.”

Head drooped. She fiddled with her shirt.

“But there’s a bridge really close to where Daddy will be buried. It goes over the pond. Policemen are gonna stand on the bridge during the funeral and shoot guns. Maybe we can go visit tomorrow, so you can see the ducks and run across the bridge. How does that sound?”

Her head bobbed. “Uh huh! Daddy’s funeral is gonna be cool!” The sing-song tone of her voice sounded as if she might start chanting the words. She jumped down and began twirling.

*This is not natural. My daughter is excited about her father’s funeral. I stared. A lump in my throat, not knowing whether to smile or cry. Was this a good reaction or had I utterly failed in my explanation? If only there was a “Telling Your Child About Her Daddy’s Funeral For Dummies” book.*

As abruptly as she started dancing, she stopped and looked at me. “I wanna color a picture.”

*Just go with it, Janet.*

“Okay. What kind of picture?” I grabbed a coloring book and absently thumbed through the pages.

“A happy picture cause Daddy’s funeral is gonna be awesome.”

*Happy’s good. Right?*

“Yeah, Baby, that’s the plan. Daddy deserves the best funeral ever.”

We found a satisfactory picture. She colored the page as she chatted about ducks and helicopters. I stared at her, but my mind couldn’t process her words.

*How is she going to react to seeing Randy? Do I take her to see him or let her remember him big and strong and alive? Will she be scared because he looks so bad? If I don’t take her, will she be mad at me when she gets older? Why do I have to make these decisions?*

“Mommy. Mommy?”

A little hand waving in front of my face jerked me out of my thoughts. “Uh. Sorry. I was staring. What’d you need?”

She held up her half-crayoned picture. “You like it?”

“Mmmm. Hmmm. You’re a very good colorer.”

Beaming another smile at me, she went back to work.

My hands shook as I leaned forward on my elbows. “Jadyn, I went to see Daddy today. Remember when you saw Ma Dee laying in that box?”

Hoping she would remember my grandmother’s funeral a year before, I waited for it to register.

Finally, recognition dawned in her eyes. “Yes ma’am.”

“Well, Daddy’s in a box like that. It’s called a casket.”

*Your dad’s in a wooden box that’s gonna be buried. In dirt. Yeah, that’s what you want to be telling a five-year-old.*

“Sweetie, he doesn’t really look the same ‘cuz of the wreck.” *Don’t scare her. Keep it as upbeat as possible.* “But, remember, Daddy’s not really in his body anymore. Where is he?”

Her crayon stopped moving, and she thought for a second. Then, as if she was telling me something as natural as the weather, she said, “in heaven,” and went right back to coloring.

“That’s right.” I nodded.

*Okay. What now?*

At a total loss for words, a predicament I rarely found myself in, I sat. No clue what to say next. My mind filled only with the swishing sound of her crayons. Finally, I remembered Loren telling me a way to explain heaven to kids.

*Can’t hurt. I got nothing else.*

“Do you remember sometimes when you would fall asleep in Daddy’s lap in his big chair, but you would wake up the next morning in your bed?”

“Mmm hmm. Daddy was soft and comfy.”

A lump formed in my throat as my daughter’s face fell. She laid her crayon down and leaned into me.

“Yeah, his lap was comfy. And you liked to sit with him in his chair, didn’t you?”

Her head rubbed against my chest as she nodded.

“So, when you fell asleep in Daddy’s lap and woke up in bed the next morning, how’d you get to your bed?”

She sat up and thought for a minute. “Daddy.”

“Daddy carried you to your bed and tucked you in while you were still asleep, right?”

“Uh huh.” Grabbing her crayon, she resumed coloring but with less passion.

“Well, that’s kind of how it was for Daddy to go to heaven. When he died in the wreck, Jesus picked him up and carried him. Then, he got to wake up in heaven. Does that make sense?”

“Mmmm hmm.” After applying the finishing touches to her picture, she held it up. “This picture is for Daddy.”

“It’s beautiful. Would you like to see Daddy tomorrow and maybe you could put it in the casket with him?”

*Is that even allowed? This is so messed up.*

The light returned to my little girl’s eyes. “Yeah. And I wanna go see the place with the ducks too. But I need to color more pictures.”

At that moment, it didn’t matter what was allowed and what wasn’t. If it made Jadyn happy to color pictures to put in her daddy’s casket, I’d make it happen.

Leaving her to look through the coloring book for her next Picasso, I wandered into the living room to look through gifts and cards. Each day, more would arrive. It comforted me to read the handwritten notes where people said they were praying for us. Prayers were going up for us all over and from so many people, some I knew and some I didn’t. After parsing through a few of the gifts, I came to one with Jadyn’s name on it.

“Jadyn, you have a present. Wanna come open it?”

The squeak of the chair and the slap of her bare feet on the tile floor preluded her appearance beside me. I handed her the sack stuffed to overflowing with tissue paper. She reached in, pulled out a teddy bear, and hugged it to her cheek.

“Oh, Mommy. I got another one. And this one is so soft.” She held it out for me to feel.

“Oooh. It is soft. Hey, I just had a thought. Do you want to spray it with cologne, so it’ll smell like Daddy?”

She jumped up and down, hugging her new bear. “Yes, yes yes.”

We hadn’t been home yet, but my dad and brother had retrieved a few things I needed. One of the items I’d requested was Randy’s cologne. If smelling it made me feel closer to him, then maybe it would help Jadyn too.

I grabbed it from the bedroom, sprayed the bear a couple times, and handed him back to Jadyn.

With her nose stuck in the bear’s belly, she sniffed. Then, she turned the animal and sniffed his back. “Mommy, he needs more here.”

I squirted his back. She smelled Mr. Bear again. Apparently, I missed his leg. Was it a game or did it help lessen her pain? I didn’t care.

With a smile to hold back tears, I sprayed and she sniffed until every inch of her bear smelled like Daddy. Then, she gathered up all the rest of her animals, and we repeated the

process until you couldn't smell a single bear's butt without getting a whiff of Curve cologne.

"Good now?"

Jadyn scooped up her animals. "Yes. Ma'am. They smell just like Daddy now."

The familiar scent lingered—a blanket of comfort lined with needles of pain.

Following behind the waddling animal carrier, I rescued the trail of stuffed friends her tiny arms couldn't hold.

"It's getting late. About bed time."

"No, Mommy. I gotta color another picture for Daddy."

*Can't say no to that.*

She ran back to the kitchen table and looked through the pages of her coloring book. "This one. I like this one."

I tore the page out as she picked her crayons.

"Mommy, I want some pictures too."

"You have pictures, Baby."

"No. Pictures of me and you and Daddy."

"Like you want me to print some?"

Her little head bobbed as she focused on her coloring.

My head hung. Exhausted. Numb.

*If it'll help Jadyn...*

I retrieved my laptop and scanned pictures. The last professional pictures we had taken. Jadyn was two at the time. Three smiles. A father, mother and daughter—a family.

*Not a family anymore. I'll never be able to have pictures made again. Two's not a family.*

Tears threatened. I pushed them down and showed Jadyn several pictures I thought she'd like.

"I want that one. That one." She used the arrow keys on my computer to flip past a few photos that were obviously not up to her standards. "And that one."

After printing the requested pictures, I held them up for her approval.

She shook her head. "This one needs to be bigger this way." Her fingers ran horizontally across the photo. "And this one is too big."

Making the necessary adjustments, I printed again. Still not right.

Back and forth, we repeated the process until I finally got the photos exactly how she

wanted. Sweeping away the piles of subpar photos, I cleared a space on the island and laid them out edge to edge, preparing to tape them together.

“No, Mommy. Not that way.” She grabbed the photos and her coloring pages and stacked them one behind the other. “Like this.”

*Obviously, I only thought I understood where this project was going.*

“That’s fine, but don’t you want people to see all the pages?”

“Mmmm. Hmmm.”

“They won’t see all the pages that way. They’ll be covered up.”

“But they can flip the pages.” She demonstrated her flip book idea.

“Sweetie, I don’t think people are going to flip the pages.”

“How come?”

*Because they’re going to be lying on top of your dead father in his casket.*

“People will only look. They won’t want to mess it up, so they won’t touch it.”

Nose crinkled and brows furrowed. After a few seconds, her face lit up. “Then, we’ll make a sign to tell them they can. You make it.”

She knew what she wanted. There was no changing her mind.

I rubbed my eyes and grabbed a Post-It. “What do you want it to say?”

“Please flip to look.”

We taped her pages together just how she wanted, added the Post-It on top, and stood back to look. I glanced at the microwave clock. 1:00 a.m.

“Well?” I waited for my little perfectionist’s answer.

“Yep. It’s good.”

“I think it’s beautiful. Daddy would love it.” Voice cracking, I pulled her into a hug. “We’ll take it with us when we go see him tomorrow. Let’s get to bed.”

As I lay down beside my baby girl, I realized I had seen myself in her tonight. She had an idea of what she wanted. It was her mission to get it done and nothing was going to stop her or change her mind.

It was her last present to her daddy, and she wouldn’t rest until it was perfect. But this time, she wouldn’t hear him say “It’s beautiful.”



#

Dear Confused-Mommy Me,

“Daddy’s funeral is going to be awesome.” Didn’t think you’d hear those words. Ever. But, let’s be honest. His funeral is going to be pretty awesome. For a funeral.

Nothing is normal with all that you’re hearing, seeing, and saying. I mean, death isn’t normal in general. Add Randy’s young age and murder to it, and we’re talking full-blown insane. There’s no handbook. It’s different for everyone. Personalities are different. Circumstances, relationships, beliefs.

Plus, that determined little girl is not your average five-year-old. You’ll be told at grief seminars that kids her age don’t understand the permanence of death. But she gets it. Maybe it’s maturity. Maybe it’s the fact that she’s had a ton of pets die. Whatever it is, she understands Randy’s gone and not coming back. Thankfully, that’s one question you won’t have to answer. But it still doesn’t stop your worrying.

Even now, I look back and wonder if we did it right. What could we have done better? I’m sure there are a lot of things, but you’re doing fine. So far, that little curly-headed girl is well-adjusted and a pretty amazing kid. No major issues. You aren’t going to break her. In fact, I just found out through an essay she wrote, she actually looks up to us. Think we’re strong and wants to be more like us. Imagine that!

Just breathe. Go with whatever your gut tells you. Focus on you and Jady and quit worrying about everyone else. God’s got you. Listen to His nudges, and you’ll both be fine.

One other thing, ditch that independent streak you’ve always been so proud of. Accepting help doesn’t make you a weak person. It doesn’t mean you’ve failed. Honestly, it means you’re smart enough to realize you can’t be everything to everyone. You don’t have to be super woman. It’s exhausting.

Even though it feels like it, you’re not alone. God’s surrounded you with a ton of love and support. You’ll be fine if you remember that and...

Look for God things, face your fears, & pray crazy!

The Future You

#

Loneliness chilled me to the core as I walked the aisles of the department store in a fog. I passed the men's department and reality slammed against my chest like a bowling ball almost knocking me over. I wasn't here to buy shirts for Randy—I was searching for a dress for his funeral.

Pressed for time, Loren, Mom and I had split up. Loren took Jadyn with her while I hunted for a funeral dress all on my own—probably not the smartest idea.

In search of the sign for women's clothing, I spotted a tanned shaved head in the distance.

*Randy? My heart lurched and then crashed. I'll never see his bald head across a store again.*

Tears sprang to my eyes. *Not here. Keep it together.*

I took a deep breath and pushed down my emotions, then held my head up and forced myself to focus. *Gotta find two black dresses.*

Through eyes like a camera lens forced to film in slow-motion, I saw people everywhere. Talking. Smiling. Laughing.

An angry tear slipped down my cheek. *Everyone's going about their normal lives like nothing is wrong. They have no clue my world has fallen apart.*

My shoulders slumped, but I kept going—searching for dresses. Instead, my eyes fixated on a man wearing a red baseball cap. Same build. Same height. My breath caught, but my heart crashed yet again when the man turned around and looked nothing like Randy.

*Since when do so many men shop at a department store in the middle of the day on a Monday? New plan. Eyes straight ahead. No looking around. Focus. Keep the tears away.*

Finally reaching the women's dresses with no more imaginary Randy sightings, I flipped through rack after rack. I lugged every stylish black dress I could find into the dressing room and tried on everything at least once, and a few items two or three times.

"Mommy?" Jadyn's high-pitched little-girl voice rang through the dressing room door.

"Right here." Throwing on the short-sleeve jacket to one of my final choices, I opened the door to Loren and Jadyn. "What'd you think of this one for the funeral?"

Loren nodded. "I like it."

As I twisted and turned, looking at every angle in the mirror, Jadyn piped up, "Mommy, that dress makes you look old. Don't wear the jacket."

She was right. The woman staring back at me in the mirror did look old – dark circles and bags underlining bloodshot eyes.

*But it doesn't seem appropriate for the wi... wid – I refuse to say that word – wife to wear a*

*sleeveless dress to her husband's funeral. Although I'm pretty sure there's no etiquette book for somebody my age becoming that word.*

Knowing we were out of time and there weren't any other decent options, I chose a black, sleeveless dress for the visitation and the old-lady dress and jacket for the funeral.

"Okay, Jadyn, let's find something for you."

She grabbed my hand and tugged me toward the girl's department. Rounding the corner, I flung my head skyward at what lay before me. Easter dresses.

"Ugh. I forgot Easter is this weekend."

Loren gave me a sympathetic nod.

Jadyn's eyes were wide as she took in all the bright colors. I led her to the first rack. "At least we'll have plenty to choose from."

She grabbed bright frilly dresses while I searched through the darker colored options. When my arms were piled high with possibilities, we headed to the little girls' fitting room.

"Mommy, I loooove this one." She twirled in the white dress with blue and pink flowers. "It spins the highest."

"It is pretty." Holding up two darker-colored choices, I asked, "But how about this polka-dotted one to wear to Daddy's funeral? It spins high too. And this one with pink leggings for the visitation tonight? It's comfy."

"What's a visitation?" Jadyn casually asked while staring at herself in the mirror.

"Do you remember when we went to that place and Ma Dee was lying in the box in a room and lots of people came to talk and stuff?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Well, that was a visitation. Tonight, lots of people will come to talk to us and..."

*Hold it together.*

"And Daddy's body will be in a box in the room too. But remember what we talked about? Where is Daddy?"

"He's already in heaven." Her smile faded for a brief second, but one twirl of her dress seemed to ease her mind.

Chatter arose from the stall next to ours where another little girl and her mom were trying on dresses as well. My heart sank. *They heard our whole conversation. They're buying Easter dresses. I'm buying my little girl a dress to wear to her daddy's funeral and explaining what a visitation is.*

Shaking the outfits still hanging from my hands, I bent in front of Jadyn. "We're gonna get these, okay?"

Jadyn crinkled her nose at my selections and rubbed her little hands down her skirt. "But I

want this one. It's prettier."

"Guess we might as well get you an Easter dress while we're here. How about you wear that one next Sunday for Easter and these for the funeral and tonight?"

She bobbed her head and pointed to the polka-dotted dress. "Mmm hmm. But can I get the pretty panty hose to go with that one?"

"Those were at another store, but we'll see if we can find some like them."

Satisfied she was getting the twirly dress, we made our way to the shoe department to meet up with Mom.

Knowing I needed new black pumps, I searched for something stylish yet comfortable. I weaved in and out among the shoe displays. The comfortable shoes screamed "grandma." Stylish seemed equivalent to crippling. I finally decided on a cute pair of black pumps that I wouldn't be embarrassed to wear, but that might not have me in a wheelchair after being on my feet for hours.

All the clothes and shoes were pitched into the cart, and Mom was in the check-out line when Jadyn tugged on my arm. "My pantyhose. I want those pretty ones."

We searched the nearby stand of hosiery, but only found plain black ones in her size.

Her face dropped. "But I wanted the ones with the dots on them."

"Jadyn, this is all they have. We don't have time to go to the other store. It's these or nothing."

Tears sprang to her eyes. "Nooooo! I want the other panty hose."

"Then, we won't get any."

My normally calm, happy little girl threw a tantrum in the middle of the store. My jaw dropped in disbelief. Picking her up despite her wailing and sobbing, I pitched the unwanted panty hose into the basket and turned to my mom. "Just leave those. She has some at home she can wear. I'm taking her to the car."

With Loren on my heels, I marched to the parking lot with a screaming blonde monster.

"But I neeeeed those panty hose!"

After buckling her in her seat, I closed the door and leaned against it. Still hearing her wailing, the dam holding back my own tears broke. Jadyn wasn't a fit-thrower. I'd never seen her like this.

*What am I supposed to do? She just lost her daddy. I can't do this.*

"But I have to." I crawled into the passenger seat, leaned my head back, and pleaded into the air, "Jadyn, you have got to calm down."

"No! We can't leave the panty hose in the cart. We have to go back in and buy them." She glared at me. Her look of hatred caused tears to pour down my face.

“We are not buying them. Not another word about it.”

She threw herself back into the seat. “Then we have to go back and put them up.”

“No. We’re not going back in the store. A salesperson will put them up.”

Her expression changed from anger to pain, but only for a brief instant. “We can’t just leave them in the basket. We can’t!”

*All I could do was stare. What is the big deal about leaving the panty hose in the basket? Is it somehow symbolic? God, how am I supposed to deal with this? Help me!*

Loren sat in the driver’s seat watching it all play out, her face unreadable. *She must think I’m a horrible mother for making her this upset over panty hose.*

Jadyn continued to scream and cry in the backseat. Upset or not, I couldn’t let her act like this.

With tears streaming down my face, I turned and yelled, “Enough.”

Startled quiet, she continued to glare at me, but I charged ahead. “We are not getting the panty hose and we are not going back in there. Enough is enough. Babies throw temper tantrums and you are not a baby. I know you’re hurting and missing Daddy. I am too. I love you very much, but you cannot act like this.”

Slowly, the anger drained from her face. Her sniffles tapered off. The tantrum had ceased. Cradling my head in my hands, I sobbed.

“I’m glad you finally got onto her.”

Confusion and relief flooded me at hearing my sister-in-laws words. “I figured you thought I was horrible mom for being so mean.”

“No. I wanted to step in and help, but didn’t think I should.”

When Mom arrived with the bags, I crawled in the backseat and quietly cried the entire way home.

*How am I going to do this alone?*

#

Barricaded inside the bathroom, finally alone, utter sadness overwhelmed me. Drained from the day’s shopping disaster, simply standing in the shower took every ounce of energy left in me. Tears rolled down my cheeks faster than the water could wash them away.

*I’ve got to pull it together.*

“God, I need your help. I want to greet each person and thank them for caring enough to come to Randy’s visitation, but that’s not going to happen if I fall apart.”

My internal clock tick-tocked in my head, and practicality won out over my desire to stay in the calming steam of the hot shower. I slid into my dress and pulled on my suck-in-your-gut black pantyhose. After unwrapping the towel from my head, I welcomed the hum of the blow dryer drowning out the voices of family, friends, and police officers outside my safe haven.

A knock at the door broke through my peaceful white noise.

“Yeah?”

“Janet, I think you have my shoes.”

Flipping the lid off of the shoebox confirmed she was right. With a quiet sigh and a quick wipe of my wet cheeks, I opened the door and handed the box to my frazzled sister-in-law. “Can you please bring me mine?”

“Um. We can’t find them.”

Taking a deep breath in an effort to compose myself, I stared directly into her eyes. “We *have* to find them.”

With a worried nod, she said nothing, but turned and walked back into the living room. Closing the door behind her, I drug out my arsenal of makeup and went to work hiding the puffiness and tear stains.

Beyond my little asylum, I heard hushed voices along with doors opening and closing. I knew they were searching for my shoes, but refused to think about the cute little size nine black pumps. They had to find them. There was no other option. I was barely holding it together as it was. Lost shoes could be my downfall.

A few minutes later, another knock. Expecting Loren with my shoes, I flung open the door. Instead of shoes, with empty hands, she bit her lip and looked at the floor.

“We’ve looked everywhere. They’re not here.” She glanced up with an apologetic look in her eyes. “We must’ve left them at the store. Don’t you have some other black shoes you can wear?”

Determined to remain pleasant even though I wanted to choke someone, I steadied my voice. “Yes, but I can’t wear those. Sig used the heel as his chew toy. They’re uncomfortable, and Randy said they were ugly.”

My mind set on one-track, the search for my shoes. I marched past Loren, out of the bathroom, through the laundry room and into the living room. As I passed family and the police officers that had just arrived to escort us, I had a fleeting thought. *They’re going to think I’m crazy, but I have to find those shoes.*

I raced into the bedroom at the back of the house, not stopping to look for anything. Panic set in. Lack of focus prevented me from developing the brilliant solution I desired.

My dad and Loren followed on my heels attempting to calm me down as I paced the floor. My uncontrollable sobs made it impossible to breathe, as I patted my tears in an attempt to

keep them from smudging my makeup.

Realizing I was on the verge of hyperventilating, I began breathing exercises that resembled those I learned in Lamaze classes five years earlier.

With a look of utter helplessness, Loren slipped one of her shoes off. “Why don’t you just wear mine? I have another pair.”

Although it wasn’t what I wanted, anything was better than my old ugly shoes. With all the appreciation I could muster, I thanked her and took them.

*Opened-toed sandals. Can’t wear panty hose with sandals.*

I ripped off my hose and slipped the shoes back on.

Looking down, I flung my hands in the air. Tears sprang to my eyes again. “I can’t wear these. My toes look disgusting. I haven’t had a pedicure.”

Although I knew I looked like a child throwing a temper-tantrum over a popped balloon, I was helpless to stop myself. I’d kept my emotions on such a tight rein that my lost shoes opened the floodgates.

With the realization I was out of time and options, I calmed myself down enough to talk. “I have to wear panty hose. Ugly shoes beats disgusting toes.”

My dad turned to me. “Where are they? I’ll get them.”

“There’s no time. We’re already late. Let’s just run to my house on the way out and I’ll grab them.”

After putting my pantyhose back on, I slipped on Mom’s house shoes. Walking back down the hall, I cringed as I thought about what I must look like in a dress and pink house shoes.

Everyone piled into their appointed car. Although my brother tried to explain the plan to the escort officers, a scene right out of *The Three Stooges* unfolded.

Jadyn and I climbed into the car with my parents and followed the black Bridgeport SUV down their gravel driveway toward the gate. The officer paused at the gate to open it; however, instead of going through it, my dad hung a hard right to head through the pasture to my house. My brother followed in his car, and opened the electric fence to let us through. The front and back escort police cars, who were now all in the back, followed through the pasture to my house.

That’s when it hit me. I was about to go into our house for the first time since Randy died.

As if readying my mind, Mom spoke up. “If you’ll tell me where your shoes are, I’ll go get them.”

Determined to be tough, I declined. “No thanks. It’ll be faster if I just do it.”

With another deep breath as Dad pulled the car to a stop, I hopped out and ran in, sliding my feet along to keep my house shoes on.

My breath caught as I walked in, but I refused to look right or left. *Focus on the task at hand*

*—find the ugly black shoes.*

Rounding the corner to our bedroom, I averted my gaze to the ground to avoid seeing the bed. As I opened the door to the closet, I turned to the right, so I wouldn't have to face the left side of the closet—his side. Frantically, I dug through my pile of shoes, grabbed the chewed up heels, and dashed back outside to the car.

Thinking he knew what we are doing, the front officer led us back down my driveway toward my gate. He stopped at the gate to open it, and I saw his jaw drop when my dad made a hard left to head back through the pasture, through the electric fence that my brother held open. Yet again, all officers followed us through the pasture.

Bouncing across the bumps, a grin came across my face and I chuckled. “What they don't know is Randy drove his police car across this pasture many times, and every time he figured Chief would strangle him if he saw him doing it. I think he's up there with that ornery smirk on his face watching the guys bottom out the police cruisers in his pasture.” I held up my shoe, aka Sig's chew toy. “And, I'll bet he's having a good laugh at me wearing these dang shoes.”

#

The wail of a police siren shot pain through my body. The first time I'd heard sirens since...

My mind flashed to a picture of Jadyn sitting in Randy's lap as he crept down our driveway in his cruiser, huge grins plastered on their faces. Jadyn reached to push buttons. Sirens blared and her voice echoed through the PA, “Freeze, Mommy. Put your hands up.”

A grin threatened to break through, but the red and blue lights of reality jolted me out of my memory and tears replaced the smile.

I'd never see Jadyn perched in her daddy's lap again. The quiet country nights would never again be brought to life by his horn and lights.

No, these sirens weren't playful and fun. Their duty was somber. They cleared a path for me—a path leading to my husband's casket.

My dad reached across the console and squeezed my hand, bringing my focus back inside the car. The corners of my mouth curved upward as much as my pain would allow. Then, I quickly released his hand to catch a tear in my tissue before it smeared my makeup.

As we neared downtown, the sight of people lining the streets overwhelmed me. Some bowed their heads. Others saluted. Many waved flags. With each person we passed, I gained strength and my heart swelled with pride.

A block from the funeral home, what I saw caused my heart to smile—my Bridgeport PD family stood in a perfect line saluting as we approached. Tears weaved down my face landing in black puddles on my arm. All thoughts of protecting my makeup vanished.

The door handle taunted. I wanted to jump out of the car, run to them and be surrounded by



those uniforms.

Trapped by the locked door and my desire to hold it together, I pressed my face and hands to the window, getting as close to them as possible without bolting from the car. In slow motion, as each of Randy's friends came into view, I mouthed "Thank you" over and over.

Leaving the lines of people behind, Dad wheeled into a small private parking lot at the back of the funeral home. After a face-check and mascara clean-up, with a newfound strength, I climbed out of the car and helped Jadyn down. The funeral home director met us outside, and issued a kind but solemn greeting. Armed with the photo collages and albums, we followed him into a large room overflowing with flowers.

While my dad and the director got busy with the photos, I knelt beside Jadyn. "Do you want me to take you to see Daddy and your pictures?"

Her little face fixated on the large wooden box at the front of the room. Sensing her hesitation, I hugged her for reassurance. "It's okay if you don't want to."

*I don't know how to do this. Do I make her see her daddy again or let her make the decision?*

Determination set in her eyes, and she tugged my hand. "I wanna check my pictures."

Exhaling the breath I had unknowingly been holding, I hoisted her onto my hip. A tingle shot through my chest, causing me to wonder yet again if I was doing any permanent damage so soon after surgery.

At the sight of her daddy lying in front of us, Jadyn tucked her head in my shoulder. Only one thing mattered anymore—the bundle of blonde curls cradled in my arms. Boobs were no longer important.

Jadyn lifted her head as I reached to straighten her artwork resting on Randy's chest. "Mommy, tell people they can look at my pictures. I want everyone to see them."

"I'll tell them, sweetie. Your pictures are beautiful."

*'The pictures you made to put in your Daddy's casket are beautiful.' I can't believe I'm saying these words.*

With damp eyes, desperate for a distraction, I forced my voice to sound upbeat. "Wanna see the flowers you got for Daddy?"

Her face brightened as I led her to the large floral easel beside the casket.

"We put Daddy's favorite black cowboy hat on the flowers you got him." A proud smile crept onto her face. "And look, pink and purple flowers with pink ribbons cause Daddy knew pink was your favorite color."

Her little fingers reached and touched the silver letters lining the ribbon. "What's it say?"

"It says Love & Miss You Daddy."

Loren walked up and Jadyn pointed to the flowers. "Those are from me, Sis."

“They’re very pretty.”

I set Jadyn back on the floor and knelt down to her eye-level. “Sis is going to take care of you tonight while Mommy talks to all the people. I told her you can stay as long as you want, but when you wanna leave, she’s gonna take you to the park to play.”

“Okay.” She looked at Loren. “Sis, I’na go play with Jacie.”

I kissed her cheek. “I love you. Go play.”

Even through tears clinging to my lashes, my eyes stayed glued on my little girl as she ran across the room in search of her cousin.

*God, please protect her heart.*

Needing to prevent the tears from falling, I zoomed my focus outward to take in the scene before me. Flower arrangements, sprays, wreaths, and potted plants lined the perimeter of the room. I wandered, plucking and reading random cards, amazed at the outpouring of love.

“Mrs. White, are you ready to begin?” The funeral director’s voice startled me.

“Oh. Well, I’d like to see the police department first if that’s okay.”

“Anything you’d like, ma’am. I’ll go see if I can find them.”

After a few minutes, his dark suit caught my eye again. “The police department is waiting outside. Would you like time with them alone?”

I hadn’t thought of it, but that was exactly what I needed. “Yes, sir. That’d be wonderful.”

Everyone shuffled out of the room at his direction.

For a brief instant, I was alone. My breath caught and pain shot to my fingertips. *I am alone. Forever alone.*

Thankfully, before I went into a panic attack, the door opened and familiar faces filed in two by two.

Chief and his wife walked up first. Taller than Randy, he leaned down and hugged me. “We love you. Whatever you need. We’re here.”

Nodding, I stared into his damp eyes filled with pain and regret. “Thank you.”

AC stepped up next and pulled me into a hug. I patted his back, but the thump of my hand hitting his bullet-proof vest caused my knees to go weak. “My bullet-proof vest hug.” My sobs filled the air. He tightened his grip, and we cried together.

Randy promised me he would do everything in his power to keep himself safe. As I would hug him each time he left for work, feeling that vest under his shirt comforted me. In the end, all the precautions he took couldn’t protect him.

One by one, I got to hug my police family. Each pat of a vest comforted me and stabbed my heart at the same time.

#

"Mrs. White, are you ready to let everyone else in?"

I nodded and took my place by Randy's head. Uniformed guards stood on either side of the casket. Randy's parents slipped in and joined me.

The officers and wives lined the wall to my left. Their presence comforted me and gave me strength. I felt safe.

As the doors at the back of the room opened and people filed in, someone whispered that the line wrapped around the block. I shook my head in awe.

Hand shakes. Hugs. Familiar faces. Total strangers. Sorrow and concern written on each face.

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you."

Some couldn't even form words.

After a few minutes, the people in line were asked to step back and I was ushered to a seat along with Randy's parents. I looked around, puzzled.

The room slowly quieted and two uniformed officers marched to the front to stand in front of the officers on either side of the casket.

*It's an actual changing of the guards.*

They went through the respectful ritual to exchange positions every fifteen minutes. Then, we were asked to take our places and people began filing through the line again.

At one point, a man walked up and shook my hand. "Mrs. White, I'd like to tell you something. One night I was planning on killing myself. My life was just bad. Sergeant White took the time to talk to me that night, and he made me realize that my life was worth living. I'm here today because he did that."

A tear slid down my cheek. That was my Randy. "Thank you so much for coming and sharing that with me."

He hugged me and made his way down the line.

I turned and rubbed my hand along Randy's prickly hair. People were watching, and I felt crazy. But I didn't care. I needed to touch him, and his head was the only place that felt normal.

After a few more people, I spotted two of my friends from work, Tracy and Jade. Jade hugged me. "I'm so sorry. I'm here for you. Anything you need."

Then Tracy stepped up. At work, we were a two-man team. Friends who argued and teased like brother and sister. One look at him and I lost it. He wasn't a hugger, but as my tears started to pour, he wrapped me in a hug. "It's gonna be okay. You're gonna make it."

I pulled away and wiped my eyes right as Jadyn walked up with Loren close behind. "Mommy, I wanna go to the park." Then she turned to Tracy and Jade, "Will you go play at the park with me?"

And they did. They did that for my little girl.

The rest of the night, I felt stronger than I ever had. I stood the entire time greeting every person that came through for the visitation, and I loved every minute of it.

#

My eyes slowly opened. The ache in my chest and knot in my stomach returned as reality hit again. Today was Randy's funeral. The words wouldn't even form in my head right, much less roll off my tongue.

Thankfully, the house was quiet, and Jadyn was still asleep beside me. I grabbed my bible and tiptoed out of the room, down the long hall and headed for the back door. Ever so slowly, I turned the handle and prayed for the door not to creak. I just wanted to be alone.

Once outside, I drug one of the heavy rot iron chairs to the east side of the patio, wrapped up in a blanket and perched on the cold metal. Slowly tears streamed down my face as I waited for the sunrise.

Randy's German Shepherd, Sig, came and sat beside me. Much calmer than usual, I stroked his head as I read verses out of my bible again searching for comfort.

A short time passed by, and I started hearing people milling around in the house. I hoped no one would bother me. About that time, I heard the Rhino crank up and my dad backed out of the garage. Sig took a couple of steps closer to watch him pull away. Then, he came back and laid down beside me. I looked down and smiled at him. He was worried about me. He always ran with any of the ATV's no matter what was going on or who was driving. A little while later, my dad came back and left again. Sig stood up, looked at me, and sat back down. "You can go, Sig." His response was to lay back down at my feet. This dog that was so devoted to Randy knew something was wrong and had already become solely devoted to me. If Randy wasn't here to take care of me, Sig would step up to the plate.

I knew several ladies from our church were bringing breakfast for us. As much as I loved each of them and appreciated what they were doing, I just wasn't ready to face anyone, so I retreated to the back of the house before they arrived.

I was in the bathroom when the ladies arrived. I could hear the subdued chatter mixed with my mom's thank you's as I diligently worked to apply my makeup. As futile as it was, I wanted my hair and makeup to look perfect. I was Randy's wife, and I wanted to make him

proud.

I dashed stealthily from the bathroom to the bedroom, still trying to avoid everyone. I slipped on the sleeveless black dress and contorted my body in various ways to zip it myself. Then, I pulled out the new pair of shoes that my friend, Kay, had so graciously gone searching for the day before. Size and style were correct. I slipped them on. But these shoes didn't fit like the ones I had tried on at the store. As I walked around, the heel flopped off and on. Determined to not have another meltdown over shoes, I stuffed tissue down in the toe. Solved the slipping problem, but killed my toes. I pulled out the tissue and walked around in them some more. After tripping and almost falling on my face, I laughed and kicked the shoes off. It would be better to wear the old ugly black ones with puppy teeth marks on them than to trip and fall in front of everyone. Randy was sure getting a good laugh out of these dang shoes.

#

Sunlight slapped my face as I walked out my parent's front door. Two black stretch-limos sat on the white gravel driveway, in stark contrast to the green pasture behind them. The city limos, covered in dust from five miles of gravel road, looked as odd and out of place as I felt.

The driver of the first limo held the door open as I climbed in as lady-like as possible. My graceful daughter barreled through the door next leaving my throbbing toes in her wake. The rest of my immediate family filed in after her. In addition, Judy and Hunter joined us in the front car while the remainder of Randy's family took the second limo.

I sank into my plush leather seat preparing for the hour-long commute to the church. The yellow glow of rope lights and the scent of leather replaced the brightness of the sun and the smell of grass. From this dark, gloomy cocoon, I could observe the rest of the world while still hiding behind the black tinted windows.

My dark cocoon was Jady's moving playroom, however. She and Hunter explored every inch, flipped every switch, and pushed each button. Once satisfied they'd seen and tried every gadget within their reach, they plopped on the floor. Jady, a flurry of black and white polka dots and blonde hair, rolled around among our feet.

"Jady," I half-heartily pleaded, "please calm down so you don't mess up your hair and pretty dress." As soon as the words came out of my mouth, guilt for saying them took over. *Do I make her sit still or let her have fun? She just lost her daddy.*

She obediently stopped moving and crawled up in the seat beside me. Looking at me with innocent eyes, she said, "Mommy, this is like that limo we rode in going to the cruise!"

Pain shot through my chest as I remembered Randy sitting in the back seat of that limo. He wore his white Oklahoma University cap crooked and made funny faces at Jacy, who stared at him with a bewildered look.

*Never again. No more limo rides or vacations with Daddy.*

Seeing no point in crushing a happy memory for Jady, I faked a smile and said, “Yep, it sure is.” I had to stay strong for her.

She bounced off the seat again, content that I had remembered, and focused her attention on Hunter.

I turned, leaned my head on the cool glass, and stared out the window at the cloud of white dust surrounding us. The crunch of the gravel beneath us, the voices of my family, and the laughter from the kids became background music. I was numb.

*Am I really in a limo going to my husband’s funeral? This can’t be real. Surely, I’ll wake up any minute.*

After what seemed like an eternity, we reached the end of the gravel road. Our caravan of limos and cars full of family and friends pulled onto the highway in the middle of twenty police motorcycles. Police lights blurred into splotches of blue and red as tears filled my eyes.

Wanting a better look, the kids jumped up in the seats and pressed their faces to the windows. They “oohed” and “aahed” at the long precisely parallel lines of black and white motorcycles stretched out in front of us.

Surrounded by officers, I felt safe and comforted, yet my heart still ached. I felt closer to Randy when I was around other officers, but seeing those boys in blue made me long for my big teddy bear protector to wrap me up in one of his bullet-proof vest hugs.

After a few minutes, the novelty of our escorts wore off and the kids crawled back on the floor. My thoughts swept me away to my own little world of missing Randy.

*How will I make it without him?*

Trees flew by, breaking up the blur of never-ending grass tinted red and blue from the motorcycle lights. Traveling down a road I drove every day to work, everything we passed was familiar—but nothing was the same. It would never be the same.

Ten minutes into our trip, my sweet daughter interrupted my pondering. “Mommy, I need to go potty.”

I stared at her in frustration and disbelief. *You’ve got to be kidding me.* “Can you hold it? There’s not a potty around.”

With an apologetic look on her face, she scrunched her nose and shrugged her shoulders. “I’ll try.” Then, she went back to playing.

I chastised myself. *Why didn’t I remember to make her go before we left?* It’s a no-brainer to make sure a five-year-old goes to the restroom before an hour-long car ride. My brain wasn’t functioning, however. I was in a fog, wishing it was a dream but knowing it wasn’t.

My dad gently spoke up a few minutes later. “Janet, we might need to get them to stop in Springtown for Jady. There’s nothing else after that until Decatur.”

Thirty miles to the next town and restroom. This was one of the pains of living in the country.

I turned to my daughter, “Jadyn, do you still need to go potty?”

Her blonde curls bounced as her head nodded up and down. “I need to go baaad.”

I sighed and looked helplessly at Dad. “How are we gonna get ‘em to stop?”

My dad turned to the driver, explained the situation, and asked if he had radio contact with our escort officers. The man shook his head.

I stared forward in disbelief. We’d already passed Springtown High School, and we were fast approaching our turn and the only restroom for thirty miles. *What are we gonna do now?*

HONK. HONK. HONK. I watched in embarrassment and horror as the driver whipped the limo on the shoulder, accelerated, and pulled up beside the two back motorcycles.

*Oh my gosh.* Fear raced through me when I saw how close he came. Covering my eyes, I prayed, “Please God, don’t let him hit the officers.”

With his window rolled down, flailing his arm, our driver yelled, “We’ve got a little one that needs a restroom.”

A huge grin broke out on the officer’s face as he began to speak into his radio. Our limo fell back into formation, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

My reprieve from embarrassment was short-lived, however. Our attention-drawing caravan came to the main intersection in town. Our escorts, lights still on, filed into a gravel parking lot beside a gas station. Right behind them, our driver parallel parked the limo in front of the store. All the other cars in our motorcade snaked in behind us.

Mortified, a thought hit me. My daughter often took up to twenty minutes chatting and taking care of business when a number two was involved. My stomach tightened. I put my “queen worrier” hat on and begged Jadyn, “Please tell me you don’t have to poop.”

“No, Mommy, just potty.”

*Whew. Dodged a bullet on that one.*

My very pregnant sister-in-law, volunteered to take her in. Relieved, I rattled off directions to the restroom. I could navigate this store in my sleep—it was my morning stop for a healthy breakfast of Dr. Pepper and peanut butter cookies.

Hand in hand, Loren waddled, and Jadyn potty-danced into the store. As I watched them disappear, I silently chided myself. *I really shouldn’t have let the pregnant lady take my daughter to the restroom.*

Then, all the things that could go wrong popped in my head. *What if there’s a line? What if Jadyn doesn’t make it to the restroom? What if she doesn’t pull her dress up enough and it falls in the toilet?*

“They’ve already got traffic blocked.” My dad’s comment interrupted my self-talk.

I looked left to where he was pointing. Cars backed up in four directions at the largest intersection in this small town. The officers stood in the middle, staring at us with their mouths gaped open, all the while still holding their hands up to stop traffic. Even service at the convenience store had come to a halt. With gas pumps and parking spaces blocked by

our train of cars and motorcycles, no customer could get to the store, even if they could have gotten through the intersection. Springtown was at stand-still, waiting for my little girl to take a potty break.

I shook my head and grinned. “Well, I guess Randy’s getting a good laugh out of this one.”

Five minutes later, our little center-of-attention emerged with her dress dry and in-tact. She and Loren crawled back into the car, and our convoy headed toward the intersection. As we filed past each patient officer and motorist, I waved in an attempt to say, “Thank you and I’m sorry.”

No longer a dark dungeon, the mood in the car had lightened ever so slightly, just the way Randy would have wanted it.

#

Our stretch limo rounded the corner and First Baptist Decatur came into view. I’d never even seen the church before. First time in attendance—my husband’s funeral.

The driver navigated our car through the parking lot maze and toward the back of the church. I stared out the window, mouth half-gaped open. Row upon row of police cars, motorcycles and SUV’s. Civilian cars only dotted the landscape like sprinkles on top of a cake.

My rolling cocoon stopped in front of a set of double glass doors. Movement to the left caught my eye. A brown horse ridden by a uniformed officer walked in between the cars.

A brief smile brushed my lips. “Jadyn, look. It’s the mounted patrol.”

She loved animals as much as Randy, so it was no surprise when she and Hunter jumped in their seats and stuck their noses to the glass.

Just as the horse moved out of our view, the limo door opened and sunlight stabbed my eyes. I hovered in the corner, letting everyone else crawl out of the car first. My entire body shook. Even though I hadn’t eaten in days, I wanted to puke.

The last person exited. Jadyn waited outside. I had to get out. But once I set my feet on the pavement, it meant I had arrived.

Arrived at Randy’s funeral.

My puppy-chewed heels clomped on the ground. I grabbed my dad’s waiting hand and stood. Surprisingly, my knees held.

Auto-pilot engaged and my legs followed the crowd into a room. As I entered, the subdued chatter stopped. I looked around. Family. Close friends. All people I knew.

People everywhere, but I was alone. I wandered, not knowing what to do, where to sit, who



to talk to.

All eyes were on me. In their faces, I saw worry, pity, concern. And love. They all loved me and cared about me. They wanted to help, but they couldn't.

I gave a few obligatory hugs. But I didn't want their sympathy. I didn't want their love. The only love I wanted at that moment was the love of life—the man lying in a wooden box that we'd put in the ground and cover with dirt in mere hours.

The room closed in on me. I searched for an exit and for an excuse when I heard a deep voice from near the door. "It's time."

Panic.

*Deep breath. Keep it together.*

I searched for Jadyn. Loren had her by the hand and was headed toward me just as we'd planned. She and John were to take care of Jadyn, but to stay close in case Jadyn needed me.

The crowd parted, clearing a path to the door. I sucked in air, let it out slowly and walked out, another step into a future I never dreamed of and didn't want.

*God, please help me. I need strength to do this.*

As I turned the corner, blue uniforms and black dresses lined the wall. Tears clung to my lower lids. Officers and wives, two by two, waiting to follow me into the church.

I felt a bond with these men and women, Randy's work family. He spent as much time with them as he did Jadyn and I. They supported him, and now, they were supporting us.

As I passed each member of my new PD family, I fought the urge to beg them to run away with me. Just us—the ones who did everyday life with Randy.

Instead, I grabbed a few bullet-proof-vest-hugs and, with a newfound strength, walked down the long hallway toward the sanctuary.

Dad held my arm. It was his way of supporting me. But my stubborn independent streak kicked in. I didn't want to look weak and frail. I wanted to be strong. I wanted to make Randy proud. And with God helping me, I would.

I pulled my arm out of Dad's grasp. "I wanna walk in on my own."

With a helpless look of understanding, he gave me a quick hug and stepped back.

Two men in suits opened the large wooden double-doors to a packed sanctuary four times the size of our small home church. A sea of heads turned.

*Okay, God. It's You and me now.*

#

Randy at the front of the church. Me walking down the aisle. I didn't hold a bouquet. No beautiful white gown with a long train.

Instead, a simple black dress, bags under my eyes, and tear streaks on my cheeks. And Randy didn't stand by the preacher with a smile on his face. He lay in a box, eyes closed and face deformed.

Little girls dream of walking down the aisle, but this walk was my worst nightmare.

Following the suited man's instruction, I filed into the pew with the felt cloth embroidered "Reserved."

Reserved seating. Prestigious. Normally exciting.

A VIP, I had the best seat. Front row center, in fact. Only a few feet from a casket holding the man I was supposed to grow old with.

Family filled my pew and the rows behind me. The Bridgeport officers and their families filed into the seats directly to my left.

I scanned the church. Four times the size of my home church and full. Officers everywhere. Family. Friends. Strangers. All there showing support for Randy. My husband. Pride swelled.

#

Would I ever get used to feeling alone in a room full of people?

Standing in my home church, surrounded by my family and the police department. Everyone eating a wonderful meal generously donated by a local restaurant. I was in my element. Should've been comfortable. But I felt awkward, out-of-place. And alone.

To satisfy the make-sure-Janet's-eating police, I filled a plate with food I knew I couldn't eat. Turned to face the lines of tables and felt like an insecure kid again. Where should I sit? I wanted to be close to the officers but worried I'd make them uncomfortable.

I finally settled in a seat and was soon surrounded by my family and friends.

After the meal, one-by-one, officers and friends stopped to say goodbye.

Corporal Schwartz hugged me. "Anything you need, Janet. We're here."

"Thanks. And, Ricky, thanks for being a pall bearer. I know what I asked you guys to do was hard, but it's what Randy would've wanted."

"I know. He told us."

My eyes widened. "He did what?"

"Remember when we were pall bearers at Steve's mom's funeral a couple months ago?"

I nodded, vaguely remembering.

"We were all standing around talking and Randy says 'If anything ever happens to me, you guys are carrying my fat ass to the grave.'"

A chill ran from my fingertips to my toes. "This may sound strange, but I really believe he knew."

I braced for a strange look, or for him to run far away from the crazy lady I felt I had become. But he didn't even blink. No shock. He didn't look for the door. He actually nodded.

"Yeah. A couple weeks ago, in one of his end-of-the-day sergeant logs, at the very end, he said that he hoped it never happened but he wanted to get together a fundraiser for the families of fallen officers."

My mouth dropped open. “Wow.”

He hugged me again, and we said our goodbyes.

A warmth flooded me. God had prepared us. And it sure looked like Randy had some sort of feeling about it. If he really felt like his time was short, how brave of him to go to work everyday.

#

Alone. In my car for the first time since the call that destroyed my happily-ever-after. Every muscle in my body tight with tension.

Eleven o'clock. It had taken too long to get Jadyn to sleep at Mom and Dad's. She knew I wasn't staying the night and didn't want me to leave.

But I had to do this.

I drove along my parent's driveway, turned into the pasture, and pointed the car toward my house. Our house. The house we built together. Now the place I'd raise Jadyn—alone.

What if I couldn't handle it? What if I couldn't live among all the memories? Would my home be a place of comfort or a torture chamber?

My throat closed as tears threatened. I stopped the car, pulled out my phone and typed out a text. “Headed home to stay the night for the first time. Please pray.” In the “To” box, I listed every name I could think of. Friends. Family. Officers. Co-workers.

I started the car creeping through the pasture again.

Ding. “Will do.”

Ding. “Praying.”

Ding. “We love you, Janet.”

The empty house loomed in the headlights. But with every chime of my phone, strength built inside me. They were praying, and God was answering.

The carport's bright fluorescent lights held my gaze. My foot applied the brake and the car rolled to a stop.

*Where do I park?*

My spot was on the left. But the gaping hole on the right taunted me. Randy's police car should've been parked there. Instead, white light bounced off the gravel like sound echoes in an empty room. An image of his crushed cruiser flashed in my mind. Never again would it sit under my carport.

I shook my head to clear the image and pulled in on the left. *I'll park the truck in his spot later.*

Exiting the car, I grabbed the few things I had brought with me. *Head up. Face forward. Just don't look to the right.* I refused to allow images of the wreck to enter my brain as I walked past where his cruiser should've been.

Deep breath. Door unlocked. Hand on the knob. *Please help me, God.*

I opened the door, stepped into my kitchen, and waited.

Waited for tears.

Waited to collapse.

Waited to run.

Instead, a calm peace.

Not what I'd expected.

With slow, reverent steps, I ran my hand along the worn spot at the top of Randy's recliner. The dark chocolate brown had faded to a lighter shade in that single spot, where his prickly head rested. His Oklahoma University spittoon sat on the table beside a book he'd been reading.

I grabbed the white ceramic spittoon, lifted it to my nose, and inhaled.

Skoal long-cut wintergreen.

It was sick and crazy to be sniffing a spit cup, but it was Randy. The smell that had once turned my stomach now hugged me. I gently set the spittoon back in the exact position he'd left it.

Then turned toward our bedroom. Cautious steps. My heart clenched with fear. Would this room be my breaking point?

Randy's dirty socks were scattered on the floor. A wrinkled uniform dropped in the closet. Change, bullets, and other random Randy items littered our dresser.

Calm familiarity.

The unmade king-size bed dominated the room, holding memories of lovemaking, long talks into the night, and wrestling with Jady. The covers on his side thrown back, his sheets ruffled. He'd been the last to lay in our bed.

I set my things down and moved into the bathroom to wash my face. The blue light from his razor caught my eye. His toothbrush sat by the sink. Evidence of Randy, my once-living breathing husband, called to me from every corner of my house.

As it should be.

Lying down on my side of our bed, I stretched my hand across the mattress. Nothing. Nothing but cold sheets. But that wasn't unusual. He'd been working late nights, so many days we slept opposite hours of each other. *Thanks, God. Yet another way you prepared me.*

I reached for his pillow and pressed my face into it. His faint smell surrounded me.

Tears dampened my cheeks, but they weren't hysterical tears like I had feared. They were cleansing, soothing tears.

Wide awake, I sat up and grabbed a bundle of cards from my backpack. The police department had been inundated with gifts, letters and emails from people offering their condolences. They'd passed them along to me.

Legs criss-crossed, I read card after card, amazed as people from the community, from other states and even other countries showed their support.

\*\*\*\* York Family letter? \*\*\*\*

The ding of my phone pulled my mind away from the cards. I glanced at the clock. 12:30. *Who could that be?*

A text from Chief Singleton. "Can't sleep..." We spent the next hour and a half reminiscing about Randy and talking about ways I could stay involved in the department. I thanked him for everything he'd done for us already. He assured me that Jadyn and I would always be part of the Bridgeport Police family.

After we quit talking, I flipped off the light and hugged Randy's pillow. The evening hadn't gone anything like I'd thought. Chief was the last person I would've expected to have talked to late into the night, but he was exactly who I needed. The memories in our house weren't suffocating me like I had feared. No hysterics. No torture chamber.

Just home. This house was home. And it always would be.

#

The red Oklahoma University shirt hung to my knees like a nightgown. I tried on three more. No luck.

*It would make more sense to wear your own clothes instead of Randy's.*

But I didn't own an Oklahoma shirt. I'd always joked that I wasn't a fan. But I was now, and I wanted to wear an OU shirt to the church Easter egg hunt to honor him. To remember him.

To feel closer to him.

I threw on a pair of khaki shorts and stuffed the red fabric inside. After losing ten pounds in the past week, there was a little extra room. I looked in the mirror. *Eh. Presentable.* Granted, the sleeves hung down to my elbows, but it looked less like sleepwear now. It would work.

With my new beaded Oklahoma bracelet around my wrist and Randy's wedding ring hanging from my neck, I joined Mom, Dad, John, Loren and the girls in the car.

My stomach knotted as we parked beside the church. The day before, we'd pulled up in the limo after the funeral.

*This is for Jadyn. You can do this. You have to.*

The loud diesel engine announced our late arrival and caused all eyes to turn to us as we crawled out. Shock written on every face—surprise that we were there so soon after the funeral. I held Jadyn's hand, took a deep breath and walked toward the crowd. Looks of pity followed me. Some smiles. A few hugs.

I could imagine their thoughts. What do you do? What do you say?

Even I didn't know.

Thankfully, Brother Mark began giving instructions for the hunt. Loren and John carried Jacie to the toddler zone. Jadyn and I walked to the normal starting line.

"Go!" Mark's voice sent kids racing past us.

Jadyn tugged on my hand and then let go to grab a pink plastic egg. Then a orange one.

"Jadyn, over there." I pointed to a cluster the bigger kids hadn't reached yet.

She ran ahead and piled them in her bucket. And when the bucket overflowed, I tugged the red fabric, and Daddy's oversized t-shirt became an egg holder.

I felt the start of a smile on my face as she raced left and right. For a few seconds, life seemed normal. Then, across the field, I saw a dad bend down to pick up his child. My smile faded. Reality returned. We would never again be normal.

When pastel colored plastic no longer dotted the green grass, everyone made their way to the carport area to extract candy and search for the prize eggs. Jadyn and I sat on the concrete beside Loren, John and Jacie.

No one sat near our little family huddle, but I could feel the eyes on us.

"Jesseca." Jadyn waved for her friend to come sit by us. They sorted through their eggs chomping on a few pieces of candy as they worked.

The little girl chatter became background noise. Men seemed to be everywhere. Dads. Standing around the edges talking. Chasing kids. Sneaking candy.

I could picture Randy tapping Jadyn on the shoulder then stealing a Butterfinger. She'd turn around, realize it, and punch him. He'd tickle her. I could almost hear it. Jadyn's little girl laughter. Randy's deep chuckle. Music.

No more. Jadyn no longer had a daddy to steal her candy or big strong arms to rough-house with.

“Mommy, I got a prize egg!” After repeated tugs on my shirt sleeve, I focused on the plastic egg Jadyn waved in front of my face.

“Yay. That’s great, sweetie. Hold on to that one and when Brother Mark calls your number, you can take it up to him.”

I was so excited she got a prize egg. *She deserves a little happiness at least.*

The instructions were to not open the special eggs, but her face beamed as she shook the yellow egg with the number twelve written on it.

“I can’t hear anything.” She squinted her eyes, twisted her mouth, and held it closer to her ear.

“It’s supposed to be a surprise anyway. Just wait until its your turn.”

With a sigh, she set the egg beside her and opened another piece of candy.

*How many pieces has she eaten? Oh who cares.*

A whistle pierced the chatter. Mark stood on a folding chair, and conversations gradually quieted.

“Who has prize egg number one?”

A little girl raced to the front and handed a blue egg to Mark. He opened the egg and asked what she saw.

“A donkey.”

He started the explanation of Jesus riding a donkey, but I couldn’t focus. I touched Randy’s ring hanging from my neck. Slid my finger inside the too-big circle. Pictured his giant hands with the ring on his long finger.

Then, like a punch in the gut, his face flashed into my mind. Not the face I loved. Instead pale and pasty. Crooked nose. Randy lying in the casket.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples, but the image became more vivid. Pictures of his wrecked patrol car alternated with his distorted face. I shook my head, trying to be discreet but desperately needing to see something else. To see Randy smiling. Alive.

Jadyn crawled over and sat in my lap. “When’s it gonna be my turn?”

A welcomed distraction. I ran my fingers through her curls and assured her that her turn was coming.

A few more eggs and a lot of wiggles later, we finally heard, “Who has egg number twelve.”

Jadyn jumped up, ran to Mark, and handed him her egg.

He shook it next to her ear. “What does it sound like?”



She shrugged her shoulders and ducked her head.

Popping the egg open, he held it for her to see. "What's in it?"

Confusion and worry flashed across her face. "Nothing."

*I wish Randy were here to see this.*

But I realized even if he were still alive, he'd probably be working. It was always frustrating when he had to miss events for work. A sad smile crept on my face as I realized that would actually make those same events easier now. His absence wouldn't be so glaring.

Mark was explaining that the tomb was empty. Jesus wasn't there because he was alive.

"How many of you think your daddy is really strong?"

Hands shot up.

My heart sank.

I looked at Jady. She nodded her head.

Was this bothering her? She seemed okay.

I wanted to throw up.

"Well, he is really strong, but he can't beat death..."

*And I'm out.*

I stepped over and around kids and adults.

*Can't let them see me cry.*

People, baskets, and candy seemed to block my escape as I raced around the corner of the building.

Tears poured. I bent over beside a truck trying to catch my breath between sobs.

A hand on my shoulder. I turned and fell into my dad's arms.

"I just couldn't. The daddy stuff..."

He wrapped me tighter and held me up.

When my sobs calmed to hiccups, I pulled away and leaned against the truck.

"I hate that I walked out. I don't want anyone to feel bad. That stuff needs to be said, but I just couldn't stay and listen."

"Everyone will understand..."

Dad's words were interrupted by my ringing phone.

“Hello?”

“Mrs. White, I’m from Channel 8 news.”

#

“I dreamed you were pregnant.” The five words stuck with me from the night before. Dinner with a couple of the officer’s wives, Emily and Randi, had turned into a girly gabfest resulting in Emily sharing those five little words. Then, Randi also voiced her opinion that she thought I could be too.

Now, with Jadyn sound asleep in the backseat, my mind had three hours to wander on the trip to take Jadyn to my brother’s in Oklahoma.

Is it possible that Randy’s dream could come true? We had been trying to have a second child. A baby in the back bedroom? Without him here?

Excitement and fear warred. What did I want?

It would be like a gift, a little piece of Randy left behind. But a child that never knew his daddy?

Even though I didn’t know what I wanted, I had to know the answer. Was I pregnant?

As I entered Ardmore, a search on my phone revealed a CVS a few miles off course. I pulled in and parked.

Deep breath.

“Jadyn, sweetie, I need to run in here for a second.”

Holding my little girl’s hand, I searched the aisles for the family planning section. And there it was, on the end of an aisle closest to the pharmacy. Heat crept up my cheeks. Even at thirty-two, this aisle still embarrassed me.

*I’m married. No reason to be embarrassed.*

A glance down at my wedding ring. Until death do us part... Was married. Was.

My throat tightened. About to lose the grip on my emotions, I shook my head and re-focused on the options in front of me.

Pink boxes. Blue. White.

“99% Accurate.”

“Rapid Results.”

Too many options. I had to make a decision, but how? I could barely decide what to wear for

the day, how was I supposed to trust myself to make this decision?

“Who cares?” I grabbed one that promised unmistakably clear results, and dragged Jadyn to the checkout.

With a ducked head, I tossed the box onto the counter.

*Geez. It's nothing to be ashamed of. Look up.*

I glanced at the young cashier and maneuvered my left hand so she'd see my wedding ring. She didn't care what my story was. This was routine for her. But I needed her to know I was married. Was. I wanted to still be married.

In a feeble attempt at a smile, I turned the corners of my mouth upward. But by the look on her face, I'm pretty sure I failed.

“Have a nice day.”

A nod. It's all I could manage. A nice day? Was that even possible anymore?

Back on the road, my mind wouldn't leave the sack sitting in the seat beside me—my next test. Would I pass or fail? But which would be failure? Not pregnant? Pregnant? What did I want?

Raising a child by myself that never knew his daddy—Fail.

Not having another little piece of Randy to watch grow—Fail.

A glance in the backseat at my spunky little Randy Jr. Head flopped to the right, mouth opened. A drop of drool on the arm of her carseat.

Another child?

Crying. Diapers. Late night feedings.

And the delivery room? Who would be with me? Mom? No. Loren? Nope. No one. If I couldn't have Randy, I'd manage by myself.

Could I do it? Could I raise Jadyn and a baby—alone?

I cranked the radio, needing a distraction. But the songs didn't penetrate my thoughts.

A baby. A little boy? I'd name him Randy. Or maybe another girl? I'd name her Randi too. Yep. Randy or Randi. Easiest decision yet.

After hellos and hugs at John and Loren's, I excused myself and snuck the bag into the bathroom.

With shaky hands, I tore open the box and pulled out the directions.

Step one. Pee on the stick.

Step two. Wait three minutes.

Plus sign equals pregnant. Minus equals no baby.

*Easy enough. Now, just don't miss. Only have two of these things.*

The seconds passed as fast as Jadyn moved—painstakingly slow.

The small bathroom left no room to pace, but I couldn't stay still. I sat on the counter. Then jumped down. I knelt. Then stood.

*Two minutes. Don't look yet.*

I prayed. Not for a specific result because I still didn't know what I wanted. I prayed for strength to handle whatever the test showed.

Three minutes. Didn't want to look.

My hands shook as I reached for the stick. Eyes closed as I pulled it closer.

What if I was? What if I wasn't? I didn't want to know.

The strange spark of hope that I felt as I held the white plastic in my hand surprised me. A little piece of Randy? It would be nice. Even as the thought crossed my mind, fear slammed my chest.

I opened my eyes and steadied my hand.

A minus sign.

Disappointment.

Relief.

Confusion.

No baby.

No more Randy.

#

#### **4 Years Later...**

"Who prays for a date on a specific date? That even sounds stupid."

"It's not stupid. Quit freaking out." Julia leaned back into the couch and crossed her arms, clearly enjoying my panic. "Pray specifically. That's what we've been reading about. Remember?"

I glared at her smug grin. "So for the next month, I'm supposed to pray for a date on February 23 or 24 with the man God wants me to marry? Just like that? Isn't that

sacrilegious or something?”

Why did I have to tell her about this? I could've just kept this crazy thing to myself, but instead I spilled it all to my best friend. And, of course, after hearing all the weird stuff I told her, she thinks praying specific is clearly what I'm supposed to do.

“It's not like you made this stuff up. Sometimes what seems like crazy coincidences is really God subtly trying to tell us something.”

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February 23. Date day with Mr. Right. Supposedly.

*Well, God, this is it.*

After pulling into an open space between two dually trucks, I checked my makeup. “Guess that's as good as it's gonna get.” I flipped the visor closed and crawled out of my car. Despite my efforts to think positive, the reasons why it wouldn't happen checked off in my head.

One. Sitting with other parents in a tiny town watching kids play basketball all day. Not exactly the single scene.

“Hurry up, Jady. We're late for Wyatt's game.” Too much time staring at my closet for the perfect outfit made us late for Julia's son's basketball game.

Two. Every Saturday, the same parents and grandparents. Potential dates? Never.

“Watch out for cars.” My daughter, in her red and white basketball uniform, ran ahead of me into the school.

Three. Julia's family, including her brother, had come into town for the games, so there would be a single guy there. But he's only thirty-one. Too young. Cute though. Nope. He lives two hours away. But he is nice. And wouldn't be interested in a widow with a kid. Too much baggage.

*Quit thinking about Jay. You're six years older than him. He's young and hot. He'd never ask you out.*

*But he is in town on the February 23...*

*Stop it.*

Knots in my stomach, emotions warring between excitement and doubt, I opened the gym doors and looked at the stands. The first person I saw? Jay. And he waved.

I climbed the steps analyzing the best place to sit. The only logical place, close to Julia and her family, was right beside Jay.

Look desperate? Or look like a total idiot sitting somewhere else?

I sat beside Jay.

Four hours and three basketball games later... A sore butt.

And no date.

Later that evening, Jadyn and I went to Julia's for dinner. The kids played while the four adults (Julia, her husband, Jay and I) battled through a long game of cards. Had fun.

But no date.

Finally home, I crawled in bed. Frustration and discouragement laced the text I sent Julia, "1:00 a.m. Feb. 24. No date."

"Still have 23 hrs. Plus you and Jay sure seemed cozy at the games today. He'll be at church with us tomorrow. Maybe he'll ask you out."

"Doubtful. I'm old, remember? See you tomorrow. Night." I tapped send and flipped my light off.

*God, I'm still asking, but the doubts are creeping in.*

The next day at church, no cute single guys—well, except Jay. He and I talked a little.

But no date.

After lunch, I plopped on the couch to study for the lesson I was supposed to teach our youth girls that evening.

*Maybe this will help my mood.*

But my head dropped as I read the title, "Unanswered Prayer: When God Says No or Not Yet."

"Seriously, God? That's just cruel."

After muddling through the Bible study, I tucked Jadyn in and went to bed. No need to text Julia. She knew.

No phone call. No knock on my door. No date. I'd prayed for something specific, even when I thought it was stupid, and God said, "No."

The next morning, I picked Julia up to go workout. Quiet discouragement hung in the air.

A few miles down the road, she broke the silence, "What if God's idea of a date isn't the same as yours?"

\*\*\*

Two years later, I thought of Julia's words. A smile spread across my freshly lined lips.

"This is what we prayed for." Julia gave me a quick hug and walked out leaving Jadyn and I alone—the way it had been for six years.

After a few minutes, the door opened. My heart raced.

*Am I dreaming?*

Hard stone under my feet. Jadyn and my dad on either side of me. The rock path that we

followed split the crowd staring at us. As “God Gave Me You” played through the speakers, I locked eyes with Mr. Right.

Once we reached the front, the music faded, and his strong hand enveloped mine.

*Nope. Not a dream.*

“Do you, Jay, take Janet to be your wedded wife?”