

Prologue

I have felt the cold steel of a gun in my mouth and against my temple. I have tasted warm blood on my lips and witnessed horrific scenes of mutilation, where nameless people took their last breaths. In my life, I have experienced poverty, met people who had plenty, and lived through fire, floods, and drought. I have befriended the intellectually challenged and physically impaired and have known the mentally ill and misfits who were geniuses. I also assumed anonymity with my mother and brothers without people realizing we had disappeared.

In my youth I was exposed to many facets of raw emotion.

I've seen a living heart, beating and pulsating for its last time; seen broken fingers tossed in the wind; and watched a severed head dance. Tormented by recurring memories, I have chosen to write this book and put these ghosts to rest.

I first contemplated suicide at the age of four.

I devised my death plan down to the very last detail but never had the courage to see it through to completion. Instead, my mother's face would keep interceding, begging me to stay alive. Faced with the fact that I could not inflict my death upon her, I'd pray for miraculous intervention. During hysterical bouts of entreaty, I would beg Jesus to strike us dead at exactly the same moment so that neither of us would feel the pain of enforced separation or the prolonged agony of death.

As a child, I dreamed of better things to come and lived in spiritualistic hope that one day my world would change. I thought my trauma was normal and didn't know what other families experienced. I thought fear, sadness, and horror were just the by-products of a barely tolerable childhood. My self-esteem was nonexistent, and after a while I sought approval through the creative arts. I loved to sing, and as my voice was strong, I sang to cover my feelings of inadequacy and desolation. To me, music represented true happiness, a make-believe world where I could cling to melodious sounds instead of the tortured screaming of my nightmares.

As an adult, I have felt exhilaration when audiences clapped and called my name. At the same time, I have felt myself torn in two, experiencing the immobilizing fear of personal exposure when not protected by the proscenium arch of a stage.

When I present myself without camouflage or without a scripted character to protect me, my gut wrenches itself into a catatonic knot, an all-enveloping state of fear. If I feel I am being examined on a personal level, my arms and legs become frozen, and I feel my soul moving toward automatic pilot. I smile and behave in the correct manner, but I'm mentally blank and devoid of all feeling.

I know what it's like to be branded, to be labeled, and to work within the confines of a title. As a child I was called brilliant, genius, a child prodigy, and a precocious little troublemaker. I was also called an actress, liar, and evil. My teachers admitted they didn't understand me and often left me to myself. As an adult, I experienced national fame as a children's TV personality. I have brought joy to thousands of children by teaching them the elements of performance.

It brings me great fulfillment to see children experiencing happiness. It puts my own life in perspective.

I cannot find the words to describe my childhood. Words such as "passionately naive," "emotionally lacerated," and "holistically experiential" all pale in significance, in the shadow of living itself. My childhood was so creatively textured that it carried into adulthood without allowing me to become consumed by the insanity playing havoc around me. I am sane and strong, and for that I am eternally grateful. I have felt and seen extreme emotion. I have smelled my own flesh burning. I know what it feels like to have baby snakes wriggle across my body, to smell decay, and to see an eyeball popped between someone's fingers. Alone, I have spent what seemed like hours in a blackened hole, a makeshift grave with a steel curtain, waiting for death.

Through all this, I stayed courageous and strong.

I treasure the power of love and the absurdity of shock, and I deal with these emotions on a day-to-day basis.

This is the story of my childhood.